America as a "Proper Receptacle": Nathanael West's *A Cool Million: or, the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin*

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Summary

While Nathanael West's novellas, such as *Miss Lonely Hearts* (1933) and *The Day of Locust* (1939), have been evaluated and discussed considerably, little attention has been paid to *A Cool Million: or, the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* (1934). Because the novel is seen as too direct a parody of Horatio Alger's novels, critics have largely ignored it. This paper re-examines *A Cool Million* in terms of its historical and cultural context, focusing on the thematic employment of commodifications of the image of America and the "dismantling" of the main character, "our American hero," Lemuel Pitkin.

In the late consumer society through the 1920s to 1960s, as Baudrillard expounded, the sign-value, which is the implied value added to its use-value, became a hinge between the commodity and consumption. *A Cool Million* describes the production and consumption of sign-value in a surge of collective desires to seek and define the nature of America. Commodification of America in this novel culminates in the description of Wu Fong's brothel, which is renovated as "an hundred per centum American place," a brothel suggestive of Disneyland. The discussion of commodification also explains the incessant dismantling of an American boy's body, which is eventually consumed as a proper receptacle of the American Fascist ideology. The process of making Lemuel, just a boy from Ottsville, into "the American boy" symbolizes the attempt to make America into "America" in the 1930s.

Nathanael West's third novel, which he had tentatively titled *America, America*,[1] was published as *A Cool Million: or, the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* in 1934.[2] This short novel is a parody of the Horatio Alger novels. The main character attempts to make his fortune in New York but slowly loses his body parts, and eventually his life, instead. This novel describes not only the nightmarish outcome of the unfulfilled American Dream but also the chaotic political situation in 1930s America, including the ominous foreshadowing of fascism. Mainly because of the apparent contradictions between the light, blunt, and mock-heroic narrative tone and the serious situation depicted, early

[1] Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Carroll & Craf Publishers, 1970), 203–4.

[2] Nathanael West, *A Cool Million: or, the Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin, in Two Novels by Nathanael West: The Dream Life of Balso Snell and A Cool Million* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1963), 63–179. Hereafter, I use the abbreviation, *A Cool Million*. Unless noted otherwise, all page numbers in the text refer to this edition of *A Cool Million*.

critics almost dismissed *A Cool Million*, claiming that it was too direct to be a funny parody, and too light to be a serious critique of political issues in the 1930s.[3)]

However, I suggest that what matters in *Cool Million* is not just the exposure of the trap of the American Dream or critique of political issues in America at the time, but also an investigation of the structural aspects behind both of them. Although in the past twenty years several articles have been devoted to the study of *A Cool Million* with regard to its cultural and historical aspects, the system of commodification as a whole in this novel has not yet been fully discussed.[4)] The novel's plot and repeated motifs consistently reveal a system of commodification based on consumption-oriented values, which tend to deform and diminish the commodified objects' inherent values. In this sense, the utilized things can be treated merely as vehicles of consumption-oriented values. In terms of the treatment of the things as such vehicles, the range which *A Cool Million* investigates is not limited to an economic aspect. It includes an ideological aspect, focusing on the use of the word "America." This word is also utilized as a vehicle of various concepts on demand. West observes an underlying structure both in the system of commodification and the use of the word "America," which makes *A Cool Million* not only a critique of consumerism in general but also a critique of a social condition peculiar to America.

1. Commodifying "America": Wu Fong's Brothel

Jean Baudrillard focuses on one characteristic of consumer society from the 1920s to the 1960s, the phenomenon of "creating needs for new prestigious goods, thus producing the regime of sign-value."[5)] Douglas Kellner briefly clarifies Baudrillard's early writings on consumer society by noting Baudrillard's claim that:

> [C] commodities are not merely to be characterized by use-value and exchange value, as in Marx's theory of the commodity, but sign-value—the expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury, power, and so on—becomes an increasingly important part of the commodity and consumption. That is, commodities were allegedly bought and displayed as much for their sign-value as their use-value, and the phenomenon of sign-value became an essential constituent of the

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[3)] Martin. 246–47.

[4)] For articles which point out *A Cool Million's* or West's work's concerns about the transition of the economic system in America, see Jan Gorak's "The Art of Significant Disorder: The Fiction of Nathanael West," in *God the Artist: American Novelists in a Post-Realist Age* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 37–58; Rita Barnard's "A Surfeit of Shoddy: West and the Spectacle of Culture," in *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 135–65.

[5)] Douglas Kellner, "Introduction: Jean Baudrillard in the Fin-de-millennium," in *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 3.

commodity and consumption in the consumer society.[6)]

As this passage suggests, Baudrillard assumes that a shift in values appeared during the period between the 1920s and the 1960s. The important transition in consumer society was the shifting from use-value or exchange value to sign-value, which consequently leads Baudrillard to his later discussion of "hyperreal" society. People began to buy items not only to satisfy their needs, but also to buy the implied value added to the commodity through their consumerist behavior. In other words, another dimension of value began to be produced and consumed. Correspondingly, things that had not previously been treated as commodities started to be commodified by gaining or being invested with sign-value.

Over and over, *A Cool Million* describes the production and consumption of sign-value. An obvious reflection of this phenomenon is Wu Fong's brothel where the kidnapped heroine Betty is sold off. Although the institution is significantly renovated from a "House of All Nations" to "an hundred per centum American place" (126) in the middle of the novel, the basic strategy stays the same. Wu Fong's manipulation of his business shows the process exactly: his main concern is to create sign value. As Randall Reid astutely points out, "Wu Fong knows that he should sell the sizzle not the steak, the package not the product. Sexual gratification has little to do with Wu Fong's business; like other retailers, he panders fundamentally to the lust for novelty and illusion."[7)] For example, Wu Fong collects "a girl from every country" in his "House of All Nations" (93). When he purchases Betty, an American girl, from the kidnappers for a "big price," he is confident that his payment will pay off quickly, because he knows "many of his clients were from non-Aryan countries and would appreciate the service of a genuine American" (93). However, he also knows that his customers appreciate not only her actual nationality but the concept of "genuine American." He gives each female a "tiny two-room suite for her own use, furnished and decorated in the style of the country from which she comes" with "excellent taste and real historical knowledge" in all of "some fifty-odd apartments" (93). He sells these decorations, the "sizzle" of his establishment, the sign-value for his brothel, rather than the girls themselves, the use-value of it.

Throughout the novel, the descriptions used to depict the women's apartments are remarkably detailed, in contrast to the narrator's usual concise and flat narrative style. The narrator describes the style of their clothes, and even the food that is to be provided in their rooms. For example, Betty is settled as "a real American girl" in "a perfect colonial interior" room: "Antimacassars, ships in bottles, carved whalebone,

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6) Ibid., 4.

7) Randall Reid, *The Fiction of Nathanael West: No Redeemer, No Promised Land* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 113.

hooked rugs—all were there. It was Mr. Goldstein's boast that even Governor Windsor himself could not have found anything wrong with the design or furnishing" (94). The interior decorator Asa Goldstein consummates the sign-value of this apartment to commodify the atmosphere of the colonial era. Then an American girl, Betty, whose "costume that was made to wear had been especially designed to go with her surroundings" (94), becomes one of the furnishings of the room. She is removed from her original place, Vermont, and is installed in Wu Fong's brothel, clothed in sign-value.

2. "America" as a Vehicle of Concepts

Although sign-value connotes the product's original meaning and value to some extent, the range of sign-value mainly extends outside of the product. Thus, in order to establish sign-value of any product, there must be a collective connotation, a shared code, beyond the products. For example, in order to make Wu Fong's "House of All Nations" valuable, there must be a consensus about what is expected in a French, Spanish, or American room. In other words, the collective connotation enables one to appreciate and consume the sign-value of Wu Fong's elaborate rooms. Without this code, it is impossible to consume their sign-value.

As for the collective connotation, in the 1930s a cultural upsurge tried to produce a collective idea of America. In *Culture as History*, Warren Susman stresses that the effort to seek and define the nature of American culture was more widespread and central in the 1930s than in any previous period.[8] He points out that in this decade "Americans then began thinking in terms of patterns of behavior and belief, values and life-styles, symbols and meanings,"[9] saying, "[i]t was during this period that we find, for the first time, frequent reference to an 'American Way of Life.' The phrase 'The American Dream' came into common use; it meant something shared collectively by all Americans."[10] For instance, Americans in the 1930s were searching for what Van Wyck Brooks calls the "usable past." In "On Creating a Usable Past," written in 1918, Brooks deplores the lack of a collective idea among Americans, saying, "We have had no cumulative culture."[11] According to Brooks, "vital criticism" must "[d]iscover, [and] invent a usable past." His own efforts to meet this goal resulted in his five volumes of American literary history, beginning with *The Flowering of New England*, published in 1936. In addition, there were forces "operating to shape that culture into a heightened sensitivity of itself as a culture."[12] For example, George Gallup established the

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[8] Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 153.

[9] Ibid., 154.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," in *Critics of Culture: Literature and Society in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New York: Wiley, 1976), 166.

[12] Susman, 158.

American Institute of Public Opinion in 1935, which made it easier "to find the core of values and opinions that united Americans, the symbols that tied them together, that helped define the American."[13] In this period, the code of America started to be articulated and shared by all people—not just the intellectuals.

In *A Cool Million*, the character that represents this mood in a satiric way is Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, a former President of the United States and owner of a bank in Lemuel's hometown, and who later becomes the leader of the fascist "National Revolutionary Party." He always interprets situations in terms of the word "America." His remarks are full of aphorisms and clichés about America, such as "This is the land of opportunity and the world is an oyster" (73) or "The American mind is noted for its ingenuity" (97). While anything that supports him is "American," anything that hinders him is "un-American." On the one hand, for example, when his bank goes into bankruptcy, he remarks that "The bankers broke me, and the Communists circulated lying rumors about my bank in Doc Slack's Barber shop. I was the victim of an un-American conspiracy" (96). On the other hand, when the cows he owns serve his interest as mortgage in his bankruptcy, he calls them "good American cows" (97). Although the way Whipple adds the adjective "American" in a self-interested and impromptu manner is quite exaggerated, his use of the word articulates the characteristic of the word: its original meaning is uncertain enough to accept arbitrary meanings.

Behind Whipple's absurd verbosity, a specific condition concerning America may be suggested. It is difficult to specify the original connotation of the word America. From the beginning, "America" has been an ideological receptacle for the investment of American ideals. In *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, Seymour Martin Lipset considers America's "starting" as one of its exceptional aspects, arguing that America "has defined its raison d'être ideologically."[14] In other words, "[t]he ex-Soviet Union apart, other countries define themselves by a common history as birthright communities, not by ideology."[15] Referring to historian Richard Hofstadter's remark, he also argues, "becoming American was a religious, that is, ideological act."[16] This is the mind-set Whipple preaches when Lemuel first sees him. He describes the "American heart" (71):

> "America," he said with great seriousness, "is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them as long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop

[13] Ibid.

[14] Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996), 18.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

believing it, on that day will America be lost." (74)

While Whipple strongly affirms his idea "with great seriousness," his remark unexpectedly displays the fragility of sign-value. The phrase, "it is one of faith," implies that the sign-value, "America is the land of opportunity," is made up in the minds of people, and in their collective connotations. The last sentence, "[o]n the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day will America be lost," reveals that the idea of "America" is formed on an uncertain foundation, which can "be lost." Even though Whipple's sermons sound like sophistries in some sense, his words encouraged Lemuel "just as similar ones have heartened the youth of this country ever since it was freed from the irksome British yoke" (75). With this "heartened" American mind, Lemuel pushes on with his life until he is shot in the "heart."

We may be able to add another notable movement in the increasing attention paid to "America" in the 1930s: the Buy American campaign, which "swept the country in the early years of the Great Depression of the 1930s."[17] This movement, which newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst strongly promoted, spread across the country, gained strong support from the nation's industries, and culminated "in the Buy American Act of 1933, which President Herbert Hoover signed on his last day in office."[18] Dana Frank argues that "[a]t its core," this movement "offered an answer to the enormous crisis of the Depression: 'foreigners' and their economic incursions were the cause. An inward-looking protection of 'Americans' was the solution."[19]

The desire to define "America" and the Buy American campaign were two different movements that had similar causes. We can say that the former movement was derived from the people themselves, and the latter campaign was imposed on people as pressure from the outside. However, when we think about the Buy American campaign in the context of producing sign-value, this movement had a similar structure to the defining America movement. For example, in the Buy American campaign, oranges were no longer just oranges: they were either "American" or "foreign" oranges, even when their use-values were the same. When people chose "American" oranges, intending to avoid "foreign" products, their choice was based on the sign-value of "American." That is, the Buy American campaign articulated the sign-value of "America" by contrasting "America" to "foreigners." Although these two rising phenomena in the 1930s, which we might call the cult of "America," took different directions, both of them contributed significantly to producing sign-values of America by articulating what was to be America.

In *A Cool Million*, Wu Fong, who the narrator describes as "a very shrewd man

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17) Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 57.
18) Ibid., 56.
19) Ibid., 57.

and a student of fashions," quickly perceives the mood of the period as the cause of his "over-stock," and changes his brothel from a "House of All Nations" to "an hundred per centum American place" (126). The narrator explains, "[Wu Fong] saw that the trend was in the direction of home industry and home talent, and when the Hearst papers began their 'Buy American' campaign he decided to get rid of all the foreigners in his employ and turn his establishment into an hundred per centum American Place" (126).

The very point that reveals Wu Fong's "shrewdness," however, is not that he replaces foreign girls with American girls as the product he offers, but that he does not forget to add sign-value to the product. He remodels his apartments from the previous exotic foreign styles into "American" styles: "He engaged Mr. Asa Goldstein to redecorate the house and that worthy designed a Pennsylvania Dutch, Old South, Log Cabin Pioneer, Victorian New York, Western Cattle Days, California Monterey, Indian, and Modern Girl series of interiors" (126). Although this is the "America" that Wu Fong and Asa Goldstein create for the brothel in 1930, their "America," which is derived from different places and different time periods in America, and collected and displayed in one place as "America," bears a startling similarity to Disneyland, which was built in 1955: they produced "America" in America through actualizing the images of, and utilizing sign-values of, "America."

The renovation of Wu Fong's brothel not only corresponds to the contemporary movements to discover, define, and commodify "America," but it also criticizes their movements through parodying their procedures. Moreover, it shows a subtle indication of the postmodern situation that Baudrillard discusses: the start of "substituting signs of the real for the real itself."[20] One of the rooms that the narrator details, "the California Monterey," discloses the possibility of the disappearance of "the real" as well as other arbitrary aspects of the sign-value:

> Dolores O'Riely from Alta Vista, California. In order to save money, Wu Fong had moved her into the suite that had been occupied by Conchita, the Spanish girl. He merely substituted a Mission chair for the horsehide one with the steer-horn arms and called it "Monterey." Asa Goldstein was very angry when he found out, but Wu Fong refused to do anything more about it, because he felt that she was bound to be a losing proposition. The style, he said, was not obviously enough American even in its most authentic forms. (127)

To begin with, we can reconfirm that what Wu Fong sells and what men buy is not the girl but "America," by the fact that he considers that Dolores will be a "losing proposition" because "the style" of the room is not "obviously enough American." More

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[20] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 170.

importantly, Wu Fong's attitude toward this room displays arbitrary aspects of sign-value in many ways. First, the sign-value of Spain and the sign-value of Monterey can easily be replaced with a subtle manipulation of the furniture. Second, the room becomes "Monterey" when Wu Fong "call[s]" it, or articulates it, as "Monterey." Third, Monterey cannot be "obviously enough American" even though this is a "real" American city. The first two implications show how arbitrary and how manageable sign-value is. The third implication suggests that the sign-value, the collective imagery of "America," may disregard the reality.

The narrator apologizes before he starts to list the details of Wu Fong's renovation, saying "[t]hese changes seem significant to me, and while their bearing on this story may not be obvious, still I believe it does exist" (126). This remark seems unusual when compared with the narrator's mock-heroic style. In his concern about the gap between the readers and himself, we may notice the narrator's astonishment or discomfort at seeing the quite easily successful process of commodifying "America."

3. The "American Boy" as a "Proper Receptacle"

We can now extend the observation of the production and consumption of sign-value to "our hero" Lemuel Pitkin. The influence of consumer society and the growth of the new values sneak up on Lemuel's small hometown, Ottsville, Vermont. In a consumer society, things become commodities through the addition of a new value. The first thing that is commodified in *A Cool Million* is Lemuel's house. In the first chapter, Asa Goldstein, who happens to be the same person engaged in the renovation of Wu Fong's brothel, is "struck by the appearance" of the house, and makes preparations to "take the house apart and set it again in the window of his Fifth Avenue shop" (69). The house, which used to be just the "home of Mrs. Pitkin," is taken apart in Ottsville, moved to New York, and displayed as "the architecture of New England" in the window of Asa's "Fifth Avenue shop" (69). As the narrator says, "[t]he name of this tragedy was Asa Goldstein, his business, 'Colonial Exteriors and Interiors'" (69), this commodification is the starting point of this novel. At Goldstein's suggestion, the landlord forecloses on Lemuel's mother, which gives Lemuel no choice but to leave for New York to make money.

The scene where Lemuel sees his house in Asa's office, like the description of Wu Fong's brothel, reveals the arbitrariness of sign-value. The clerk in the office asks Lemuel for advice about the placement of a chest of drawers, saying, "[w]here would your mother have put such a piece of furniture had she owned it?" In response to this:

> Lem's first thought on inspecting the article in question was to say that she would have kept it in the woodshed, but he thought better of this when he saw how highly the clerk valued it. After a little thought, he pointed to a space next to the fireplace and said, "I think she would have set it there."

> "What did I tell you!" exclaimed the delighted clerk to his colleagues, who had gathered around to hear Lem's answer. "That's just the spot I picked for it." (102-3)

Here again, we can find the fragility of the real when it is confronted with the sign-value. Even though Lemuel can imagine what his mother's opinion would be, he could not say it because he noticed that "the clerk valued" the furniture "highly" as a piece of "the architecture of New England." Lemuel catered to the clerk's evaluation. When the clerk reports Lemuel's answer to his colleagues, the clerk's opinion becomes the consensus among them. This shows the process of how the sign-value is valued, disregarding the possible facts. While leaving the office, Lemuel was handed "a two-dollar note" by the clerk (103). In a sense, Lemuel gained two dollars on account of his authorization for the sign-value of his house.

As the subtitle *The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* implies, the dismemberment of Lemuel's body is one of the recurring events in this novel. This motif is usually read as a symbol of the broken American Dream during the Depression. Although I basically agree with this interpretation, I would like to discuss this point in the context of the commodification of the body. In *A Cool Million*, we see that Lemuel begins to be treated as a commodity. The process of making Lemuel, just a boy from Ottsville, into "the American boy" in the last scene of the novel symbolizes the process of defining America in the 1930s.

In *A Cool Million*, dismantlement is almost always paired with assemblage. Because it is grotesque and shocking that Lemuel's body parts are taken violently and almost meaninglessly, we may tend to give significance only to his "dismantling." However, *A Cool Million* focuses on the assemblage of Lemuel's body rather than the dismantling itself: Lemuel is not just dismantled, but he is re-assembled with false body parts. As critics have pointed out, the word "dismantle," rather than "dismember," connotes the mechanical aspect in the treatment of Lemuel's body.[21] For example, when he loses his right eye, the narrator describes it in an indifferent tone, saying, "Lem was dismissed from the hospital minus his right eye" (108). Then almost every time he loses a body part, as if replacing the missing parts in a piece of machinery, Lemuel gains an artificial body part: a set of false teeth, a glass eye, a wooden leg, or a toupee.

In the process of the "assembling," room for commodifying exists. It is these attached body parts that give Lemuel value in the labor market. The employers hire him because of his false body parts. The false body parts open a new range of value for him. First, he is hired by a con man who pretends to be the owner of a glass eye factory. He needs a person with a glass eye for his fraudulent scheme. By having lost

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[21] For example, for the mechanical quality of Lemuel's body, see Jan Gorak, "The Art of Significant Disorder" 52; Martin, 127; Alistair Wisker, *The Writing of Nathanael West* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1990), 84.

his eye, Lemuel gains the opportunity to be attached to a new value. The con man tells Lemuel that he will give Lemuel a job if he can wear the glass eye:

> "Here, let me help you," said the owner of the eye kindly. With a few deft motions he soon had it fixed in its proper receptacle.
> "Perfect!" exclaimed the man, standing back and admiring his handiwork. "Perfect! You're hired!" (116)

Thus, Lemuel is hired for the first time in his life thanks to his empty eye socket which can hold the glass eye. The point is that the glass eye already has its own purpose to be fulfilled regardless of who wears it. It is Lemuel's empty eye socket that is hired as a "proper receptacle" suited to the con man's scheme.

Second, Lemuel is employed as a spectacle in a show tent. He reveals his skull, which an "Indian" has scalped. It is Whipple who thinks of the commodification of Lemuel, or his lack of hair: "Why not get a tent and his young friend as the last man to have been scalped by the Indians and the sole survivor of the Yuba River massacre?" (159). Thus Lemuel's "freshly scalped skull" becomes a commodity attached to the sign-value of "the sole survivor of the Yuba River massacre" (160).

Third, Lemuel is employed as a "stooge" for a comedy show. When a team of comedians, Riley and Robbins, ask an employment agency for "a one-eyed man" (171) for their show, the proprietor tells Riley about Lemuel. The proprietor says to Lemuel, "I told Riley that you also had a wooden leg, wore a toupee and store teeth, and he wouldn't think of hiring anybody but you" (172). As the narrator says, "[h]is role was a simple one, with no spoken lines" (173); the employer does not need Lemuel for his personality or for his talent as an actor. On the stage, the actors violently beat Lemuel over the head and body "with their rolled-up newspapers" to "knock off his toupee or to knock out his teeth and eye," and finally his wooden leg is knocked off into the audience (173-4). He is not supposed to talk on the stage. The employer needs only his body with the detachable false parts. The dismantled body, which can be set up as a "proper receptacle," makes him valuable. When "[a]t the sight of the wooden leg," the audience "laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for some time afterwards" (174), the value attached to Lemuel is consumed by the audience.

As we have seen, the sequence of dismantling Lemuel Pitkin reveals the process of assembling "Lemuel Pitkin" as a commodity. This process is predicted in the first chapter, when we return to Asa Goldstein's idea about Lemuel's house: "take the house apart and set it again in the window of his Fifth Avenue shop" (69). Just as his house is taken apart, Lemuel is dismantled. As the house is rebuilt under a new sign-value, "the architecture of New England," Lemuel is assembled with the false body parts of value as a commodity.

When we think that Lemuel's body, the naive all-American boy's body, represents

a "real" America, *A Cool Million* shows a grave projection of America. The figure of Lemuel, whose value is measured only by his attached false body parts, may project a structurally arbitrary aspect of America, whose sign-values precede the "real." The replicability of Lemuel's false body parts, which is highlighted especially in his third job, implies the arbitrariness of sign-values attached to America. Just as Lemuel's false body parts are easily stolen, smashed, lost, and then replaced again, sign-values can easily be replaced. When the Maharajah of Kanurani sees Lemuel's false teeth and glass eye pop out, he says disgustedly, "What kind of a pretty boy was this that came apart so horribly?" (132) The Maharajah's abhorrence is the response to seeing Lemuel without the added values, which represents America without sign-values. The Maharajah, a foreigner, seeing the real state of Lemuel's body, and finds it horrible. Compared with the Maharajah's disgust, the American audience's response to Lemuel's dismantling show is even more ominous. They are far from disgusted. They "laughed heartily until the curtain came down, and for some time afterwards" (174).

The last thing to be commodified in *A Cool Million* is the death of Lemuel. He is shot by an assassin's bullet on the stage at the very moment he begins his speech for "the National Revolutionary Party." It is fitting that he is killed before he gives the speech because he is regarded only as a proper receptacle, not a speaker. Soon afterwards, Whipple makes use of Lemuel's death. He enshrines Lemuel as a "Martyr" to his party's cause. The very last scene of the novel is the parade for "Pitkin's Birthday," which has become a national holiday. The parade to celebrate the holiday is held along Fifth Avenue. Here again we see the parallel between Lemuel's birth house and his body: Fifth Avenue is where his house was reinstalled as "the architecture of New England," and also where his death was enshrined as martyrdom.

In Whipple's last speech, Lemuel's life and death is summarized and again exploited. He asks, "Why is Lemuel Pitkin great?" Then he answers his own question: "Because, although dead, yet he speaks" (179). However, it is Whipple who speaks for him:

> [H]is teeth were pulled out. His eye was gouged from his head. His thumb was removed. His scalp was torn away. His leg was cut off. And, finally, he was shot through the heart...But he did not live or die in vain. Through his martyrdom the National Revolutionary Party triumphed...Through the National Revolution its people were purged of alien diseases and America became again American. (179)

With his death, Lemuel completely fulfills his role as receptacle. It is suggestive that the last body part that Lemuel loses is his heart. The importance of an "American heart" was one of Whipple's favorite topics in his sermon, which sustained Lemuel's motivation throughout his suffering. When Whipple's long speech to honor "Lemuel Pit-

kin" ends, his youthful audience roars with celebration for the "Martyrdom." What they are roaring for in unison is their collective connotation, the sign value of Lemuel Pitkin. They shout: "Hail the Martyrdom in the Bijou Theater!" "Hail, Lemuel Pitkin!" "All hail, the American boy!" (179) With these shouts, *A Cool Million* closes. Lemuel Pitkin, who is completely dismantled by a bullet through the heart, is finally assembled into "the American boy" as a sign-value in a mass connotation.

Conclusion

In Whipple's speech, we reconfirm the arbitrariness of sign-value. When we compare Whipple's phrase "America became again American" with Langston Hughes' poem "Let America Be America Again" (1936), the word "America" can be used with a totally different connotation from Whipple's.[22] For Whipple, "America" means a fascist country. For Hughes, "America" is supposed to be a country full of dreams, which have never come true for oppressed people. When Hughes writes "America never was America to me," he astutely identifies the gap between America and "America." More recently, U.S. Senator John Kerry adopted the phrase "Let America Be America Again" as the campaign slogan for his 2004 presidential campaign. Each "America" has a connotation according to each person's objective. This significant difference of usage clearly suggests that "America" becomes a "proper receptacle," which can be used in many ways.

A Cool Million describes America in the 1930s, when sign-value began to count for more than a "reality" in a consumer society. In a sense, *A Cool Million* may exhibit West's fear and bewilderment on observing the transition in the values system. The emphasis on the external value of things inevitably entails the reinforcement of the shallowness and superficiality of the world, sometimes disregarding realities. The narrator's mock-heroic tone, which may sound indifferent to the serious situation or the characters' suffering, never goes deeply into any subject, reflecting the shallowness of the world in which they are consumed as commodities. The narrator's repeated reference to "our hero" makes the reader uneasy because of the gap between Lemuel's meaningless suffering and the use of that expression. However, the uneasiness makes us recognize how much we anticipate being fulfilled by the sign-value expected in the phrase "our/American hero." The reader, also, is a consumer of "America."

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[22] Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," in *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 515–17.