THESIS

HOW DREAMING DISPLACES DUTY: INDIVIDUALISM, THE AMERICAN DREAM,

AND PERCEPTIONS OF HOUSELESS INDIVIDUALS

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis project analyses the rhetoric of the American Dream myth as it appears within discussions about houseless populations. The American Dream myth has been shown to promote individualistic values, though it has never been studied as a tool for citizens to deliberate houselessness United States. Data for this study was obtained in Fort Collins, Colorado from Facebook comments on articles posted by a local news outlet. *The Coloradoan* published articles from 2014 to 2016 regarding the community's attitudes about a local park where many houseless individuals congregated. In these comments, three analyses themes became apparent: agency and voice of those debating, representations of those residing in the park, and a rhetoric of blame within the discussion. The resulting analysis indicated that the citizens of Fort Collins wielded the American Dream myth in ways that promoted individualistic culture. These arguments silenced those impacted by houselessness, framed the houseless people as inhuman, and blamed them for their life's circumstances. The research project aims to enlighten rhetorical and intercultural scholarship to the immense influence of the national myths and individualistic culture. It also argues the importance of social awareness of intersectional socioeconomic inequalities within the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION: DRAWING A CURTAIN ON THE DISENFRANCHISED

The American Dream is foundational to the ethos of the United States of America – the idea that every citizen of the country can—through individual effort—create his or her own ideal life (Fisher, 1973; Bineham, 2015). Rooted in revolutionary transcendentalist thinking and defining, to a large extent, the American way of life and being in the world; the American Dream has continued to inspire U.S. citizens over time (Rus, 2013). It was initially inspired by the groundbreaking ideas of the Great French Revolution (Toth, 1989), and later defined by James Truslow Adams (1941) as, "that dream of a land which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man [and woman], with opportunity for each according to his [or her] ability or achievement" (p.404). The phenomenon of the American Dream has been redefined, rethought, and re-lived by different generations of U.S. American citizens, gaining new definitions and new salience in every decade.

For today's U.S. citizen, the American Dream constitutes a key concept because of its continued influence on culture through the manifestation of the cultural taxonomy of individualism (Bineham, 2015; Huntington, 2016; Allen, 2010). Individualism refers to societies that value individual achievement and choice over family unity and community, combined with the absence of an overall responsibility for the collective "we" and the success of a group. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Jandt, 2010; Lustig & Koester, 2006). Thus, understanding the utility and influence of the American Dream and its ties to the core American value of individualism, allows one to understand U.S. culture and national rhetoric.

The concept of the American Dream has also been central to communication studies because of its salience in the different subdisciplines of communication. And indeed since

Fisher's (1973) piece about the rhetoric of the Dream promoting dichotomous interpretations (one material, one moral), a great amount of scholarship in communication emerged around the American Dream. This writing suggested that through constant retellings of the Dream, equal opportunity for every citizen is assumed to be reality (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013), despite the fact that systemic problems remain relevant for much of the U.S.'s populace (Goldstein, 2001; Allen, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). Even more importantly, the scholarship points out that the idea of the American Dream is synonymous with an unattainable, almost utopian concept – the myth, not the reality (Ono, 2010, Rowland & Jones, 2011). The individualistic quality serves to make U.S. history mythic as well. The myth's historical representations espouse messages of past inequalities as necessary and tragic bumps in the road to an even playing field that has been produced and sustained with absolutely no imperfections (Madison, 1999). Myths serve to create culture and its norms, and thus the reiteration of the myth maintains the societal rules that dictate a person should individualistically overcome any difficulties in their path to success; as those hurdles are always conquerable with effort if you live in the U.S. (Bineham, 2015). This beloved myth, and its widespread influence on U.S. culture, continues to be a pertinent subject of study for communication scholars.

Because of the understanding that the myth of the American Dream communicates a set of cultural norms that govern how people within the country make sense of their lives, the myth has been a popular rhetorical and cultural scholarship topic for almost half a century (Fisher, 1973). These works have ranged from representations in films (Bineham, 2015), to narratives of job loss (Pederson, 2013) and even to mimetic representations (Huntington, 2016). The findings of these studies have become especially relevant today for U.S. citizens, who – albeit being inspired by the great myth of the American Dream – live in a reality that is drastically different

from demographical equal opportunity across the country. The fact remains that U.S. society is starkly divided into the haves and have-nots. As Allen (2011) acknowledges, "The U.S. has the most unequally distributed wealth and income in the world" (p. 99). Therefore, the disparity complicates the believable quality to the American Dream myth, because the dimension of social class alone can hinder a person from attaining their goals. The realities of socioeconomic inconsistencies have become more striking in recent years for citizens.

Although the very concept of American Dream contains promises of equal opportunity and social travel ("from rugs to riches" mentality) for all; the American Reality demonstrates how racial injustice, economic disparity, and, ultimately, the struggles of social class contribute to the intersectional matrix of oppression (Collins 2000), inseparable from the lives of the vulnerable demographics under consideration. A vivid example of such intersectional lack of privilege occurred during the Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Giroux, 2006). The affected populations ended up being double-victims – not only to the natural disaster *per se* but also to the pre-existing social inequalities that resulted into their initial poor housing situation, as well as a badly handled governmental and societal response to the crisis. As Hartman and Squires (2006) provide, "the areas damaged were 45.8% black…" (p. 5) compared to the U.S. national average of many types of people of color only accounting for 11% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). Disproportionally, black people were affected in the poorer area of New Orleans, demonstrating the lack of agency they specifically had throughout the disaster. Issues regarding equal opportunity and safety have become more widely communicated since in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. This event served as one where the nation turned its attention to the stark visual representation of the vulnerability of those in poverty.

As Giroux (2006) explains:

> The bodies of the Katrina victims laid bare the racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy and revealed the emergence of a new kind of politics, one in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves. (p. 174).

With this tragedy, unimaginable poverty within the nation's boarders became more noticeable to wealthier people in the United States. Upper and middle class citizens could see for themselves the reality of life for their lower-income counterparts; and it did not look like the tough but attainable Dream of the U.S.A. In fact, Katrina's destruction gave a strong example of how people of color make up a large portion of those in poverty. Despite this stark evidence of race and class difference, movements for social change were not started – already suggesting the lack of voice and agency by the affected demographics – and the American Dream myth continued to be a powerful rhetorical force.

Another powerful example about the existing – and largely unchallenged – inequality dates back to the most recent American recession years in 2008and 2009. The situation for poorer individuals then became further complicated after the collapse of the housing market. The fall not only hurt the U.S. economy, but many people who subsequently lost homes (Baker, 2008). With loans being harder to obtain, possibilities of owning a home became slim without a large income; especially as low-income housing in the U.S. was renovated. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2017), "An estimated 12 million renter and homeowner households now pay more than 50 percent of their annual incomes for housing. A family with one full-time worker earning the minimum wage cannot afford the local fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States." As the "fair-market" rent gets higher, people in the U.S. need to make more money to sustain permanent living spaces.

Relevant to the house market dilemma, the process of gentrification adds another layer of complexity to the already marginal positionality of the houseless individuals. The process of gentrification, or the phenomenon characterized by lower-income housing being replaced with more visually pleasing housing, can lead to fewer places of residency for low-income people (Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2016). It continues today with rapid growth in urban areas (Maciag, 2015). Gentrification and the increasing difficulty of obtaining housing in the nation one again demonstrate the socioeconomic disparity within the United States. Though the American Dream myth provides rhetoric that depicts people in poverty as those who will eventually rise to the top, examples like Katrina and the collapse of the housing market provide evidence that there are systemic problems that cannot be overcome through an individual's effort. These continual tragedies also explain why the influence of the myth should be discussed; as complex issues surrounding social class remain unresolved, and they remain intersectionally inseparable from the issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and other identities.

Although on the surface, the discussion about American Dream focuses on social class and social mobility, the *status quo* of race relations serves as powerful reminder that those identities are inseparable. To be more specific, in the growing neoliberal political climate, "…hope is packaged as the promise of neoliberal capitalism, substituting the celebration of wealth, privilege, and greed for notions of hope grounded in an opposition to economic injustice, racism, domination, and diverse forms of oppression" (Giroux, 2001, p. 229). That opposition however is far from truth. In the U.S., structural inequalities exist in ways that hinder children of color from thriving as much as their white classmates; thus segregating the way they become adults, and ultimately creating a difference in possibilities for their future. Hare (1987) explains this structural inequality when describing how youth of color are more likely to grow up in

poverty, with one parent or guardian, and are not set up for success in schools. As students grow, their learned skills determine how far up the economic ladder they can climb, thus perpetuating a cycle of achievement in the U.S. that is dependent on race or ethnicity.

Finally, the issues of social class, race, ethnicity, and belonging became extremely salient and worth studying in the most recent periods of US history – after the 2016 presidential election. In 2016, a new president was elected, and according to Pew Research Center (2016), the most important issue of the election was economy. After the most recent recession, poverty rates within the U.S. soared to 13.5%, or about 43 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015b). Poverty naturally leads to houselessness, and as of January of 2015, more than 500,000 people in the U.S. did not have a place to sleep in a night (The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). These events contributed to the public's heightened awareness of the vulnerability of the U.S. economy. For voters, a president who could help the country economically thrive was a key.

The newly elected president, Donald Trump, is a real estate mogul turned politician in a country, where economic struggles were (and still are) a particular worry for U.S. citizens, as become evident during his presidential campaign. Predictably, for many Americans, Trump offered a reassuring approach to solving economic problems within the U.S. because of his heavily stressed success turning spaces into income (Trump, D. J. & McIver, M., 2010). The astounding popularity he had garnered in the election despite his lack of experience on the political arena demonstrated that the American Dream myth and its influences remain pertinent. General acceptance of President Trump' political inexperience, combined with his lack of understanding of socioeconomic barriers affecting people of color and those in poverty, demonstrate that the public still subscribes to the myth; and Trump's previous achievement of the

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Dream as a business tycoon was more important to voters than his attitudes toward minority groups. Taken together, Trump's credibility derived from financial success, and the recent increase in income disparity and housing costs validate the idea that the American Dream myth still holds power today despite the reality that the attainment of that Dream is in fact impossible for many people in the United States.

The collapse of the housing market, continued demolition of low-income housing, high economic disparity and a large voter interest in the country's economic welfare in the upcoming election indicates the need for a strategically new look at the emotionally charged and provocative topic of U.S. American social class. If, according to the most recent scholarship by Bineham (2015), Smith (2009), Pederson (2013), and Sowards & Pineda (2013), the American Dream myth and individualistic values promote the idea that the American Dream is equally achievable by every citizen; How do citizens understand and discuss the reality of issues of income-inequality and houselessness, if there are indeed real differences between the richest and the poorest citizens? Coming from the perspective that there are existing walls in front of people of lower socioeconomic status in the U.S., it becomes pertinent to discover the rhetorical and cultural framing of discussions between citizens about class struggles. Especially if U.S. citizens want to achieve the Dream of equal attainability through initiative, scholarship needs to examine if the belief that the myth has already been accomplished hinders the possibility that Dream's success. Do debates about these issues between citizens strengthen the myth by perpetuating messages privileging individual achievement? If the myth is so strong that it completely overshadows the existence of socioeconomic inequality in the U.S., how do higher-income citizens view lower-income citizens? Does the belief in the existence of the American Dream

myth perpetuate ideas about poorer people as idle freeloaders instead of people left behind by lack of opportunity?

In order to discern how the American Dream myth influences U.S. citizens and their perspectives of socioeconomic class, I intend to examine online debates between citizens about houseless people frequenting public spaces. By looking at these debates, communication studies researchers may be enlightened to the current citizen impressions of visible socioeconomic inequality within the nation. As the American Dream myth is generally accepted as a force that overshadows the realities of lower-income life in the U.S., it is beneficial to inspect if and how debates about houselessness include instances of those realities or of individualistic accountability. By studying these debates, the communication studies discipline can more accurately pinpoint how the framing of the American Dream myth exists within messages from U.S. citizens and not just in retellings of the myth itself. As well as how that discourse affects their lives and continuously shapes the culture of the United States – an extremely individualistic culture that is united, however, in its belief in the American Dream myth.

Though there is a sufficient and growing amount of scholarship on how individualism espoused in American Dream myth rhetoric hinders the public's awareness of inequalities within the country (Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001), the general public use of the myth– especially with regard to social class – has not been inspected fully. If scholars generally agree that individualistic cultural tones within the American Dream myth tend to downplay the population's access to economic success, do conversations about impoverished citizens within the U.S. reflect a growing knowledge of existing systemic inequalities, or do they simply parrot back ideals of individualism based on the American Dream myth? This lack of analysis in the

scholarship suggests that studies about the use of the American Dream myth within citizen's debates about houseless populations may be beneficial to communication studies. I believe by studying these arguments, the understanding of socioeconomic disparity and its manifestation within the U.S. will become more comprehensible. Therefore, the scholarly focus of this master's thesis will encompass the representation of social class within citizens' communication. More specifically, it will examine debates about houseless populations within the U.S.—with the special focus on the role of the dominant U.S. American value of individualism—and how that cultural taxonomy functions in those debates. I argue that the American Dream myth's individualistically oriented arguments naturally occur in debates about houseless populations within the U.S., thus reifying individualistic culture and its influence on how citizens believe communities can overcome poverty.

In order to study debates about houseless individuals, I study the city of Fort Collins, Colorado. Fort Collins currently provides an example of a population that remains disproportionately white, with people of color accounting for only about 11% of the population versus the rest of the country's 22% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). The town also has a 5% statistically higher amount of citizens in poverty than the rest of the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015c). This income disparity also indicates that there is a higher cost of living within the city, which has led to "…8,425 homeowners (28% of all owners) in Fort Collins that cannot afford their monthly housing costs... Renters wanting to buy have very few options in the market until they earn around $75,000 and can afford homes priced around $250,000" (BBC Research and Consulting, 2014). The higher price of housing and greater poverty rates unfortunately depict a population of people who do not have a stable place to sleep at night in the city. A study conducted by BBC Research and Consulting for the City of Fort Collins in 2014 found that 1/3

of the houseless population in Fort Collins is made up of youths under the age of 24, and another 35% is made up of domestic abuse survivors. Disabled people and Hispanic or Latino people were also more likely to be chronically houseless—meaning they have less of cahnce of securing permanent residencies if they overcome houselessness (Homeward 2020, 2015). The larger presence of young, abused, disabled, and houseless people of color in the city designate a unique populace for study, especially considering recent changes in Fort Collins to become a more marketable living space. The city has grown by 11.7% (or almost 20,000 people) from 2011 to 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015a). This increase in population has spurred online debates between Fort Collins residents about limited public space and those who frequent those spaces. These commenting residents use their internet access and Facebook accounts to comment on the issues, thus providing a productive ground for studying voluntarily, uncensored, open, and authentic communication from the local community.

More specifically, the debates carried out by these residents act as communicative texts that represent reactions to articles about visible houseless populations in residential areas. The debates take place in comments sections for articles on the website Facebook. The comments focus on Jefferson Park, an infamous site in Fort Collins because houseless people frequent the space. It also has a history of protests and stabbing incidents in the last two years. The articles about the park were repeatedly posted by *The Coloradoan*; a branch of *USA Today* covering the Northern Colorado area. The comments, typically left by residents of Fort Collins, discuss the houseless and transient (or people who travel from city to city frequently) population in Fort Collins. Over the summer of 2016, the debates became more common, as restaurant owners in town were planning to add a new building in the park. Jefferson Park sits across from Fort Collins Rescue Mission, a local shelter, which is why many houseless people gather there. While

the articles themselves (*Coloradoan* editorial board, 2016; *Coloradoan* Staff, 2016; de la Rosa, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Ferrier, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; Pohl, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; Kyle, 2015, 2016), did not receive many comments on *The Coloradoan* website, the same articles were posted to Facebook by the news outlet. The Facebook posts garnered much reaction from residents. These posts by *The Coloradoan* allowed me to assume that regardless the newspaper's presence in multiple formats, the most productive conversations appear on the social media – and therefore are worth exploring further.

Additionally, I chose the aforementioned online discussions because of the great variety of individualistic arguments made by the residents of Fort Collins. These online opinions were either for or against helping houseless people within the park, thus offering a strong polarization of the views and a great platform for discourse analysis. Paradoxically, although the views were polarized, they both referred to the American Dream myth. For example, one commenter replies to another by name and says, "They [houseless and transient people] don't want to be rehabbed. And [sic] we do have a low income place on the other side of town for them. The catch to it is you have to go out and get a job" (Holzwarth, 2016). This comment demonstrates that in order to even get a low-income house, a person must have a job. The tone of the comment reveals that the commenter assumes that the houseless people either do not want to obtain jobs or do not know they are necessary to obtain a home. Comments such as this one point to the individualistic nature of such debates, and reveal certain specificities of representation of the affected population. There is more than scholarly communication relevance in these comments. With the ease of access to arguments about the houseless population in Fort Collins and the very nature of those open, uncensored, voluntarily, and authentic online debates, the comments provide an abundance of data (Weber, 2014; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015), rhetorical relevancy (Habermas,

Lennox, & Lennox, 1974; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015), ethical treatment of participants (Whitehouse, 2010), relativity of equal access for U.S. citizens (Perrin & Duggan, 2015), and arguments based in individualistic appeals (Freelon, 2015). These relevant, telling, and fascinating debates provide one the most representative examples of how citizens talk about houselessness in cities with larger socioeconomic divides.

I organize this project as follows. First, it refers the reader to the relevant scholarly literature in the field, interconnecting scholarship on American Dream Myth and individualism with invisibility of systemic inequalities within the country and the role of intersectionality in the creation of the inequalities. More specifically, I will consult the literature on the evolution of the myth, the scholarship that explains the cultural and rhetorical manifestation of the Dream today (through film, survey, narratives and more), and finally, how representation and online media debates can be used as rhetorical artifacts. This section will explain the foundations of American Dream research and identify in more depth the need for studies that inspect citizens' use the American Dream myth appeals.

Then, the thesis provides a brief summary of online debates surrounding the houseless and transient populations in Fort Collins with a special emphasis on individualistic arguments as representative of U.S. citizen's attitudes towards systemic inequalities within the nation. Then a critical cultural analysis will begin. Chapter three will examine the tone of the debate and from whose perspectives it is being famed from. Whose voices are expressed, and whose are not even mentioned? Who is granted the agency to speak up about the use of Jefferson Park? Next, chapter four will explore the politics of the omission: who is rhetorically or strategically not mentioned in the debate. Bolstered by statistics about the Fort Collins houseless population, this section enlightens the most prominent features of Fort Collins houseless and transient people and

if those features are ever mentioned in the online debates. Finally, chapter five will enlighten how American Dream appeals in the arguments are used to create a rhetoric of blame either for lack of individualistic ambition, or for unfortunate systemic problems based on one's circumstances. The result of the analysis and implications of the findings will be discussed in their relation to communication about poor people residing within the U.S., and in debates between citizens who do not identify as houseless, and the correlation of those results with the ongoing scholarship on the identity politics in the United States.

The aim of this master thesis is to examine if American Dream myth's ideals are used to reestablish individualistic values in debates about poverty between citizens of the U.S. It also intends to contribute to communication scholarship regarding the American Dream by identifying how communication regarding houseless populations is conducted. It may also enlighten how citizens view the causes of houselessness within their country. Finally, it strives to add to scholarship regarding public debate's transition from in person conversation to online media in the 21st century. It may allow us as communication scholars to better understand the importance of investigating new and emerging media as important and popularly utilized spaces of communicative platforms or public arenas of deliberative democracy.

CHAPTER TWO - LITERATURE REVIEW: A HISTORY OF DREAMING UP SUCCESS

Houselessness and Intersectionality of Identity

Prior to conceptualizing various intercultural constructs as well as the American Dream myth per se, I must clarify the use certain terms used in this project. First, the term houseless— which has recently replaced the term homeless for many—replaces the term homeless in this project. The reasoning behind this choice comes from Kidd & Evans (2011), who found a "…theme that resonated with the descriptions of [houseless] adults was the degree of divergence from home as a physical structure and, particularly for those on the streets for longer periods, home experienced as a largely internalized construct" (p.766). Their study revealed that people without houses still had significant pieces of traditional homes—such as companionship and love—that they did not want to leave out by using the term homeless. Thus, the term homeless will not be used in this thesis from this point forward. In keeping with the theme of understanding, it is important to note that houseless and poor individuals often do not face oppression from just this one aspect of their identities. There are typically intertwining disenfranchised identities for minorities of all types.

Many studies surrounding poverty in the U.S. accurately point out the inseparable nature of race and class struggles, as well as other identities. The scholarly community terms this as "intersectionality" and refers to the model that acknowledges that, "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power" (Collins, 2005, p.11). What Collins means here is that identities often compound upon each other in ways that further disenfranchise those who identify as more than one non-dominant identity. By giving salience to intersectionality, scholars recognize that in examining one marginalized identity, other

intertwined identities most likely also play a role in the study. Power is a fundamental concept in understanding intersectionality, and intersectionality is seminal for any analysis of minority cultures. To explore issues of houselessness is Fort Collins the intersectional nature of class struggle within the U.S. needs to be understood in terms of the power that influences the human experience. One of the most prominent scholars to write about power was Michel Foucault.

Power, the phenomena that guides our social structures and our lives, influences the reality of socioeconomic class—and thus other marginal identities according to intersectionality. Foucault's explanation of that power remains one of the most enlightening and complicated of concepts to unravel. For Foucault, to maintain a status quo would be entirely impossible for an institution to accomplish. Instead, power manifests as a sort of tireless, self-running, and supervising force. Power exists as a panopticon of discipline where we ascribe to the hegemonic norms of society and thus monitor ourselves and others (Foucault, 1984a). Power is the reason we pride ourselves on propriety and civility. Through our schooling, jobs, news stations, personal conversations,—Anzaldúa (2012) gives a poignant account of this, "How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them…" (p.38)—we learn and relearn how to act. In Foucault's chapter about power over sexual experiences, some relevant advice arises. He reminds us to "…account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said"(Foucault, 1984b, p. 299). Though he speaks about sex acts here, his advice rings true for anything involving power: those without power need to examine how it manifests and exists within our world if they are ever to understand how to change it. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) teaches us that oppression in the U.S. happens because, "society itself is saturated with

the relations of warfare against selected members of society itself" (p.50-51). By looking at the societal warfare in more depth, the debates about houseless populations within Fort Collins have more context.

Though there are a great many brilliant scholars who have explained at length the importance of looking at the intersection of different identities when examining power, only a few can be referenced in this brief overview. First, although this project focuses on the U.S. in particular, Mohanty (2013) rightly points out that the history of western colonization requires us to examine power in third world places as well. For scope reasons, this paper will remain within the U.S. because the country still has progression to achieve in regards to human equality. However, this paper still recognizes the privilege afforded to people residing within the U.S. that has stemmed from the oppression of other cultures around the world.

As many have written (Collins, 2000, 2005; hooks, 1996; Alcoff, 2006; Anzaldúa, 2012; Rowe, 2008), power is for those with identities that are more privileged and it especially works to silence those who have more than one identity of the oppressed. Lorde (1984) identifies control within U.S. culture by explaining that there are "those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie" (p.114). Lorde points out that although this form of domination is seemingly un-noticeable in the neoliberal U.S. for some people, many see it clearly every day. It is clearest to those who experience intersectional forms of oppression. For example, Johnson (2013) wrote about a transwoman who, "…in particular faced interpersonal and state terror based on the intersectional interplay of white supremacy, gender conformity, and heteronormativity" (p.140). Again these sources of domination within culture are not humans who actively seek out to oppress people, but are rather a systematic phenomenon that compounds with each minority identity one possess. This unfortunate reality is one to be kept in forefront of analysis of the

debates in Fort Collins. Intersectionality plays a role in every situation of power. Much of the scholarship regarding the American Dream will further prove the salience of intersectionality of identity. However, before the American Dream can be elaborated upon, U.S. culture should further be explored in terms of its most prominent cultural taxonomy: individualism.

Individualism and the American Dream Myth

Central to the present research questions about U.S. citizen's attitudes towards socioeconomically disadvantaged populations within the U.S. lies the concept of individualism. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), individualism is one of the least popular taxonomies across the globe. In fact, most cultures around the world value collectivism. Despite the rareness of this taxonomy within cultures, the U.S. provides the most individualistic culture case study in the world (Hofstede & Hoftsede, 2005; Lustig & Koester, 2006). Individualistic culture can best be described as, "a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family only" (Hofstede & Hoftsede, 2005, p. 401). People in the U.S. and other individualistic cultures are defined by their actions, and only their actions, instead of their family or group (Jandt, 2010). Individualism tends to coincide with how much wealth a country has, thus promoting individual economic gain (Lustig & Koester, 2006). On the same vein, U.S. Citizens are "less likely to vote on the basis of economic class. U.S. Citizens are less likely to favor government redistributing income from rich to poor or providing jobs for all" (Jandt, 2010 p. 205). Part of the reason for this lack of interest coincides with the ideology of "culture of poverty" (Allen, 2010, p. 103), where economically advantaged populations ignore that they have inherited means to secure affluent lifestyles and view poorer populations as accountable for their situations. The deeply rooted nature of individualism in the U.S. may also connect the fact that the American Dream myth (because of

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its individualistic values) is espoused throughout the country. In order to understand the full extension of the myth's influence on U.S. cultural identity, it is pertinent to remember individualism's importance, its ties to economy, effort, and tendency to ignore collective efforts to help others. Those cultural tendencies coincide better with the American Dream myth while it is explained in more detail. To start on the description of the myth, I will first explore its presence through U.S. foundational history, change for equality, and its roots in individual struggle.

The formation of the country and its unique 'Birth of a Nation' story help explain where the myth originated. The U.S. heroes (the Founding Fathers) are different from other national origin protagonists in that they start out as ordinary people who tactfully persevere against tyranny. Most national origin stories feature champions chosen by the gods who then bestow greatness upon a chosen one or few (Rowland & Jones, 2011). The U.S.'s uniquely ordinary founding heroes became exemplars for U.S. citizens, so that those citizens are motivated to work hard and attain their goals, just like the Founding Fathers (2011). Their model is intended to be followed by citizens who want to obtain success. The reason for the Founding Father's tenacity for change lies in transcendentalist thinking. As Rus (2013) describes, the transcendentalist mindset of powerful colonists as well as the possibilities lying in a newly conquerable land served to create a confidence in oneself at the time. For those more influential members of society, "the concept of the New World [w]as a place to start over and affirm one's capacities to the fullest" (2013, p.248). Therefore, even before the nation was formed, an idea that one could achieve much without help from others was starting to become more popular. As the nation developed, the ideas were accessible to people of multiple demographics, which kept the Dream alive, even while the core of its idea: equality, had yet to be achieved (Palmer, 1989). As

conditions for citizens started to improve, the American Dream myth's influence got stronger too. The American Dream myth appeared behind the abolition of slavery (McPhearson, 1988), as well as rhetoric used to give legitimacy to hard working women during the suffragette era (Lewis, 2011), and to people of color during the civil rights movement (Vail, 2006). The importance of this history lies in the myth's growing persuasiveness over time. The idea of equal opportunity within the U.S. became more real because people in the U.S. actually had been working hard to attain equality throughout history. They had also done so with the American Dream myth motivating them. The myth's strengthened influence comes from this history of citizens overcoming inequalities faced in their lives and achieving a better, more equal life. As conditions get better for everyone, the myth becomes truer, and thus more inspiring and powerful. Unfortunately, the American Dream myth is still exactly that: only a myth.

As Rowland & Jones (2011) point out, most establishing nation stories feature a powerful, divinely chosen hero as a cultural exemplar. The American Dream myth does not implant ideas of an impeccable future without struggle, but rather that life will improve slightly with each generation of dedicated citizens, just as the Founding Fathers and other historical icons did (2011). The Dream then works for citizens of the U.S. as a "societal myth" (2011, p. 147), that motivates residents to work for their destinies, simultaneously teaching them not to expect an immediate return. Of course, inherently, struggling for one's own destiny indicates individualism and today these rhetorical messages can have an even greater individual interpretation.

Fisher (1973) discovered a more individualistic take on the Dream. He explained that there is a more materialistic lens to the Dream. This lens emphasized the individualistic values of the culture by stressing the importance of a person's effort and resulting achievement (Fisher,

1973). He also explained the more moralistic approach, which preferred to acknowledge the values of equality for all and rights that protect everyone who lived within the borders (1973). The persuasiveness of each of these appeals lied in whichever value the speaker's audience held most dear (Fisher, 1973). Once again, these historical looks at the myth reveal the power behind it. The mythic part of the American Dream fades away when it includes struggles that seem normal to everyday life. Its different interpretations also allow receivers of the message to privilege individualistic or collectivistic appeals at their discretion. Today's American Dream scholarship utilizes Fisher's initial ideas about the myth while pointing out even more effects of the Dream as the country's culture becomes more influenced by media.

How Dreams Can Change Reality

The American Dream myth's presence in discussions about houselessness is best understood through the framework of previous scholarship about the myth. Contemporary scholars have found repercussions of the Dream ranging from creating self-entitlement that drives citizens to committing large-scale fraudulence, to normalizing 'white knight' narratives, and creating an apathetic mindset towards helping one another (Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Jandt, 2010). Choo and Tan (2007) discovered that the dream ensures that "emphasis is placed on the goal of monetary success in American society" (p. 201). So much that it drives people to commit crimes to succeed. This stress on materialism and fierce individual competition coincides with scholarly conversations in film and media studies surrounding the American Dream myth.

The ideal of class travel, communicating "from rags to riches at any cost" is the focal point of many historical tales as well as a great number of film and media texts, such as, *The Pursuit of Happyness, Wolf of Wall Street, Wall Street, The Social Network, October Sky* and

countless others. As bell hooks (1996) explains in *Reel to Real*, "…cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people" (p. 2). She elaborates that while movies seem like real life, they are simply depictions of reality chosen by the creators of said films, but that those films have a lasting and real impact on audiences. From her analysis, it becomes clearer how media texts like these inspiring films prepare U.S. audiences for expectations of success if they put in some effort. As scholars have shown in analysis of the myth, by repeating portrayals of individuals succeeding in achieving the Dream, and never properly depicting those struggles low-income people face in the country, the myth's message continues to be strengthened (Sowards & Pineda, 2013; Bineham, 2015). As the history of the American Dream myth demonstrates, its power to persuade has grown over time (Palmer, 1989; McPhearson, 1988; Lewis, 2011; Vail, 2006). So these contemporary media representations that include the Dream certainly have the influence to perpetuate philosophies about the attainability of the Dream for citizens today. U.S. culture is not the only one to be impacted by media. As Jandt (2010) reveals, "The single largest export industry in the United States is not aircraft. It is entertainment" (p. 266). Wilson II, Gutiérrez, and Chao (2003) indicate that media serves to strengthen the economic system, as those who create and share media make money off how many people view their content. This monetary goal makes media an extremely important thing to focus on when examining the American Dream, its materialistic appeals, and its influences on culture.

When it comes to media scholarship, it often identifies the inseparability of media from cultural production, because "both the messages and the media affect culture, which is a diffused collection of behaviors, practices, beliefs, and values that are particular to a group, organization, or institution. Culture and media exert influence on each other in subtle, complex ways" (*Understanding media and culture*, 2016, p. 6). One of the ways that scholars have been able to

identify media influencing culture comes from Sowards and Pineda (2013). They describe the

American Dream myth's constant reinterpretations in various media texts and how they can be

dangerous, "because audiences see that these individuals are capable of solving their own

problems, these portrayals erode and absolve a sense of collective responsibility and reduce the

need for discussion at the policy level (global, federal, state, and/or local)" (p. 84). If citizens

observe repeatedly (through media representations) that anyone can achieve their Dream on their

own, U.S. Americans will not believe there is a reason to assist such populations. From these

messages, poverty and houselessness seem to be outdated because the U.S. gives the opportunity

to succeed to anyone.

As the emphasis in media is placed on individuals who have become exceptional – or,

rather, exceptionally successful as a result of a fierce individualistic competition – there is not

much room for viewing the contrastive reality within the country: that some people are hindered

by factors outside of their own control or means (Allen, 2010). This finding was further

strengthened by Bineham's (2015) piece on *The Blindside*, which explained that the film

"provides important symbolic resources for privileged audiences: the opportunity to identify with

the hero and thereby to ignore responsibility for systemic injustices, and the opportunity to locate

racism in ignorant individuals rather than social and economic inequalities" (p.233). This work

expertly points at a problem that effects people of color, and those of lower socioeconomic class

(Allen, 2010). Media messages portray problems faced by lower-income people and people of

color as ambiguities that only happen occasionally and can be overcome in a country where

anything is possible with a little elbow grease (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013). As the

scholarship of media and rhetoric intertwine, there are suggestions that these narratives of the

Dream ensure continued ignorance about systemic inequalities within the country. This is

especially furthered by examining the omission of the representation of any real social or economic inequality that people face within the country (Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). Although scholarship in media and rhetorical studies have identified the American Dream myth's influences over our culture, and especially those representations of people of color; further research can be conducted in order to examine some of what is understood about citizen's ideas towards the American Dream. Therefore, in addition to these representations of the American Dream myth in films, debates between citizens within the U.S. can better demonstrate the pervasive influence of the Dream over the U.S.

Recent scholarship has acknowledged the public use of the concept of American Dream as well as controversies surrounding its real-life manifestation in personal narratives and survey responses. Joblessness is a grave tragedy for U.S. citizens because those citizens often feel their job is a part of their identity and so losing their job is like losing one's identity. As Pederson (2013) discovered in his examination of online stories of people's job loss, each account given by citizens who have been laid off in the U.S. "…ruptures the master narrative of the American Dream by saying that education and hard work are not enough to succeed anymore" (p. 314). After a life of productivity and subsequent job loss, people can feel that, " [their] only options are to become hopeless, or work to (re)story the master narrative in ways that are not built on hard work, monetary success, and stability for future generations" (2013, p. 315). The citizen's identities are so dependent on their professional status that they must reimagine their own lives in order to feel restored.

Scholarship suggests that when people realize the Dream is simply not true, and that there are problems outside of their control that can arise in their life that hinder them from achieving

their goals, their reality becomes fragmented. Instead of understanding that U.S. life may actually be unequal, they may reframe the Dream narrative to justify their situation to themselves. Unfortunately, for those people trying to re-negotiate the reality of their lives in the U.S., this task can seem monumental, and they may receive no sympathy for their situation. As Chen, Simmons, & Kang (2015) report, a new mindset exists in U.S. citizens. The mindset, which they discovered in responses to a survey, "…relies on and reifies the myth of meritocracy that assumes an American society with level playing fields… in which sheer hard work is the key to living the American dream"(p. 175). Integral to their findings on the mindset are "myths of hard work, individuality, and abstract equality for all [which] interweave to mask the reproduction of the unequal racial status quo" (p. 181). Even though the authors refer to racial inequality here, as the discussion of intersectionality pointed out, the obstacles faced by low-income people can intersect with those placed in front of people of color as well. These studies about students' impressions of opportunity within the U.S., people who have been laid off, and media representations of individual struggle demonstrate that the myth's influence pervades across the country's citizens. Its various representations intertwine and connect in ways that point to the myth's power in influencing civilian receivers in the United States. Examining the similarities between these studies of the myth may once more may help reveal the need to continue to examine the American Dream in relation to citizen's debates about houselessness. These similarities work well with Fisher's (1973) ideas about the materialistic and moralistic frames of the American Dream myth.

The aforementioned American Dream myth messages in film and personal narratives become more striking when reviewed with the two dueling values behind the American Dream myth (Fisher, 1973). The Dream myth's moralistic appeal (that we all should be able to do what

we want) remains intact when systemic inequalities are overshadowed by fantasies of individual journeys through television, film, and personal narratives (1973). When thinking about the moralistic myth, however: why would the nation need to fight for equality in a time when, according to the American Dream narratives espoused throughout the U.S., every citizen has equal access to their own dream (Chen, Simmons, & Kang, 2015; Bineham, 2015; Sowards and Pineda, 2013; Pederson, 2013)? The scholarship would suggest that the moralistic myth, the one that requires us to look out for one another and fight to ensure equality for all, becomes unnecessary. It is then difficult to point out failings in the system as the culture become more materialistic and individualistic because of the messages that implore to citizens repeatedly that no systemic problems currently exist (Chen, Simmons, & Kang, 2015; Bineham, 2015). As this over-portrayal of the myth continues, and those who are influenced by lower-income inequalities try to explain their own situations, economically privileged citizens (who have viewed multiple media representations of citizens attaining their American Dream with hard work) may see this as a ploy for the lower classes to gain superiority over them, as Allen (2010) has explained. She reveals that the American Dream myth messages promote a "culture of poverty" where poor people are seen as "responsible for their circumstances and ignores the fact that many wealthy people have inherited their wealth and resources or that they were better positioned to attain the American dream" (2010, p. 103). This mindset has more consequences than simply having more judgmental citizens. When combined with the American Dream myth, that judgement has lasting consequences.

To reiterate Allen's point, poor people can be seen as individually accountable for their own despair. They may feel upset about their situation, but from the individualistic cultural standard in the U.S., they should not dwell on their circumstances, and overcome them by

working to make money. To those who believe the American Dream is attainable for everyone with no exceptions (based on the repeated messages about the Dream being attained as long as one fights for it), arguing that lower-income citizens need collective help goes directly against the moralistic myth. It would mean taking away the struggle to attain one's own Dream, which is an integral part to the Dream. The Dream is something that has to be earned and not given (Rowland & Jones, 2011). By collectively helping poor U.S. citizens, it would seem to undo in the progress the country has made to create an equally attainable future for all by giving advantage to some people over others (Allen, 2010). Since these findings point to such a dilemma/controversy, I further argue that there is a necessity for research into citizens' use of individualistically-oriented American Dream rhetoric in debates about poor and houseless citizens, and that the most pertinent way to do so is to examine the online debates as representative of the respective rhetoric.

Tools to Examine the Dream

Online debate can be especially enlightening for this American Dream myth study because "…posting comments on news articles is currently one of the most popular forms of user participation in online-content generation" (Weber, 2014, p. 951). Additionally, the most commented upon sources tend to be those featuring "political/social issues… news consumers favor public affairs content over non-public affairs stories" (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015, p. 212). Such debates are being held in the comments sections about *The Coloradoan's* news articles. The abundance of communication of this manner is not the only reason to examine such online spaces, as these spaces prove to be rhetorical data as well.

The rhetorical relevancy of virtual debates begins with Habermas's Public Sphere, or "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is

guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974). In more recent Public Sphere scholarship, scholars have identified that online comment sections "…are ideally configured—in terms of their specifics in relation to the three criteria of *communicative space*, *participants*, and *discursive patterns*— for powerful subcounterpublic spheres to emerge…" (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 482). Therefore, the comments sections on Facebook are model spaces where the Master Narrative of the American Dream may not permeate as deeply as other media texts. Not only might these debates provide sufficient information about if citizens' frame houseless populations based on individualistic values, but they will allow the study to take place without harming individuals, as part of the job of a researcher is to ensure the mental and physical health of participants are maintained during study (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Peck Richmond, & McCroskey, 2013). Thus, these comments sections provide data that remains less politically biased or funded by corporations, and provide a platform that ethically takes the opinions of citizens without harming them.

The study will also cover a wider range of participants because, "the internet has become an integral part of everyday life across diverse parts of society…and those living in lower-income households, adoption has historically been lower but rising steadily" (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). Therefore, even people of lower socio economic status may be able to participate in the comments sections, giving a better spread of perspectives. Rahman, Fung and Yeo (2016) indicate that "by representing a range of public voices, online posted comments can play a valuable role in understanding current issues" (p. 220). In this manner, participants have had relatively equal access to online debates, and more specifically the online debate about the Fort Collins houseless population. This equal access to comments sections provides a unique dialogue space. Freelon (2015) explains that deliberation (a more civil form of debate) and liberal

individualism (an overly combative and non-relenting style of voicing opinion) "coexist, sometimes within the same message… a curious juxtaposition that might be called 'deliberative individualism'" (p. 785-6). Therefore, debates like the one online about Fort Collins might allow a richer study into the individualistic appeals made in deliberative debates. They provide a fruitful scholarly terrain for studying intersection of the American Dream myth and individualism as well as correlations between representation and voice. They may also shed light on how houseless people within the U.S. are perceived, however, conflicting research would say that there may be certain voices privileged above others.

Though the initial review of internet comments section access may sound promising, Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson (2016) found, "that individuals [online] may self-censor out of fear of being perceived negatively by others who support different points of view" (p. 887). This piece of self-censoring may not be the only factor hindering comments sections from being exemplary public spheres. Weber (2014) found that in many ways, controversy made it harder for comments sections to behave like public spheres. After hearing about this and other studies claiming that the internet can create echochambers where people only view media that reinforces their own opinions, Flaxman, Goel, and Rao (2016) and Garrett (2009) found that although this seemed mostly true, people were at least still exposed to other opinions. Unfortunately, their studies found that people did not then go read about those differing opinions further. Thus, online comments sections may contain more power that initially thought.

Yet more studies have shown that conservative participants seem to create the echochamber effect more than other groups. Most of the comments provided by such groups tend to be more inflammatory and group-identity affirming than productive for political understanding (Morin & Flynn, 2014; Warner, 2010). With these results in mind, as well as the initial idea of

online comments sections being relatively open to everyone, it becomes important to examine who gets to express their views online despite the perceived "equality" of the space. This study aims to analyze if Facebook's online comments sections empower multiple types of people, or if one perspective is repeated continuously.

Having provided the necessary context for a complete examination of comments sections about houselessness and having located the reader in the current communicative understanding of the power of the American Dream myth within the U.S. I can now analyze the comments sections of *The Coloradoan* articles on Facebook. In order to analyze the citizen's use of individualistic arguments, I will proceed with the analysis of the comments with the focus on the following analytic categories: agency and voice, or whose perspectives shape the nature of the debates; representation, or which people get attention within the debates and who is ignored, misrepresented, spoken for, or underrepresented; and affect and message, or how a rhetoric of blame manifests within these arguments, and what affect it has on the concept of American Dream in particular, and the US culture in general.

CHAPTER THREE – AGENCY AND VOICE: MAJORITY SPEAKS THE LOUDEST

Introduction

> *"Where are their stories? I would like to see a report from someone who has interviewed 100's of homeless and where they come from..where [sic] are there voices?" (*Geiger, 2014).

A popularly utilized part of U.S. amendments is the freedom to speak. The country guarantees and even invites citizens' voices through the right to speak about the nation, even if they have something negative to say about it. Although this freedom to speak is part of the law, that does not mean people feel as though they have a right to speak about their opinions all the time. In communication studies, there are many theories about feeling comfortable speaking, for example, invitational rhetoric (Foss & Griffin, 1995). Another example comes from Spiral of Silence theory, which informs how the majority opinion in a culture receives the most media attention. When people with minority views feel as though their opinions are not as popular, they will self-regulate what they say. They do this in order to avoid seeming irregular and to evade being excluded (West & Turner, 2014). Theories like this one center on one thing: power, which is not a conscious force that humans enact over one another (Foucault, 1984a). In the context of houseless individuals, once more, of power plays a large role in one of the U.S.'s most foundational rights the first amendment.

The present chapter will focus on the power to speak, and more specifically agency and voice. In the debates about houselessness in Fort Collins, the power to express one's views provides an interesting insight about the American Dream myth and individualism. To fully understand how the agency to speak freely affects the debates about houselessness, the American Dream and individualistic culture, this chapter will first clarify the context of the Fort Collins houselessness debate, then illuminate who has the most agency in those online debates, and

finally it will inspect the agency (or lack thereof) of those spoken about: the houseless individuals.

The Context Surrounding Houselessness in Fort Collins

> *"A total of 301 individuals, staying outside in unsheltered areas, in emergency shelters, or in transitional housing, were counted on a single night in January"* (Homeward 2020, 2015).

Jefferson Park's fate has been changed multiple times. Union Pacific Railroad owned the park for ten years, which barred construction on the site. The railroad sold the property to Blue Ocean Enterprises after the city of Fort Collins declined to buy it. Blue Ocean planned to use the space as a parking lot to assuage a growing parking problem in the downtown area. However, a nearby parking garage was built shortly after the plans were made. Blue Ocean then sold the park to a pair of downtown restaurant owners. As of 2016, the park's future entails being renovated into a restaurant (Ferrier, 2016b). The ever-changing nature of the park was not the only thing that *The Coloradoan* wrote about from 2014-2016. In fact, the articles about the park invite still more attention for the visibility of the houseless individuals who have frequented the park over time.

Many of the articles from *The Coloradoan* between 2014 and 2016 covered events that occurred within the park itself. These events do not include community events, or family gatherings. Rather, the stories highlighted poorly received protest movements, stabbings, and assaults on police officers. Several articles cover local business owners and their growing displeasure of the park's proximity to their stores (*Coloradoan* editorial board, 2016; *Coloradoan* Staff, 2016; de la Rosa, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Ferrier, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; Pohl, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; Kyle, 2015, 2016). Each article brings another piece of the puzzle that shapes this park as exclusively one that provides a (potentially dangerous) space for people without houses in Fort Collins. Overall, the articles

from *The Coloradoan* offer information that the park does not serve a purpose for anyone in the community beside those who do not own homes. Perhaps because of this seemingly singular use, vocal inhabitants of Fort Collins have proposed changing the park into other spaces. With each of the articles, whether they cover protests or construction plans, a multitude of community comments and debates arise.

The text in this analysis come from the comments sections on Facebooks posts from *The Coloradoan,* a local news outlet in Fort Collins, Colorado. The posts chosen for the project were selected from 17 *Coloradoan* articles from 2014-2016 centered on Jefferson Park, which lies in downtown Fort Collins (often referred to as Old Town). These articles incite debate between local community members with each post. Parallel to the progression of this thesis, *The Coloradoan* continued to publish still more Jefferson Park articles that continue to garner local attention. The salience of the debates remains pertinent, even after the Park's demolition. The local interest demonstrates how the Park serves as a site for public deliberation; thus providing a rich source of examination through the lens of the American Dream myth.

The comments (totaling 731 between 17 articles) were provided by people with a Facebook profile. Each comment counted could be a comment on the article or a reply to a previous comment. It is most likely that those commenting were residents of Northern Colorado who also follow *The Coloradoan's* Facebook page. If a person "likes" a news organization on Facebook, they are alerted to newly posted articles from that organization directly. Interestingly, of the 731 comments, 356 come from Facebook profiles that identified as female and 357 from those identified as male—the rest were from *The Coloradoan* or other non-gender-identified accounts. However, because of the nature of Facebook, profiles are not verified to be real identities. Motivations for creating fake profiles or information are slim, but it should be noted

that profiles might not represent those they depict in any concrete way. Other information about

demographics of the commenters can only reliably come from the posts these users make

themselves. Facebook users have to option to give out their birthday and occupation for example,

but rarely do. Users also often make up jobs or ages as jokes. Therefore, any speculation about

occupational identities, race or ethnicity, age, socioeconomic class, ability, sexual orientation, or

any other identifiers were gleaned only from the information given by each poster freely in their

comments. This method leaves most information about each poster ambiguous. Therefore

content of posts played a much larger role in selection of themes within the comments. The

identities revealed in each comment played a large role in the discussion about agency in the

debates.

Popularity, Agency, and Individualism as Evidence

> *"I love how we can all agree that turning a park into a parking lot is a great idea. What a weird situation"* (Ingram, 2014).

In order to determine which voices had the agency to be present, Facebook provided a

unique platform to determine public opinion. When *The Coloradoan* posts on Facebook,

"Facebook provides two ways to respond to a post: by adding a text comment and by clicking a

'thumbs up' symbol to indicate one 'likes' a post." (Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, & Bellotti,

2010, p. 208). These choices change which comments each new user can see on the post from

that point on. For example, if someone comments and receives 40 "likes" that post will appear

above a post with 30 "likes." This "like" system changes not only what users see first, but also

reveals which opinion most users agree with. Therefore, readers can quickly determine the

majority opinion about the article. In this case, people with similar opinions to the highest

"liked" post can feel they are part of the majority and thus feel more agency to comment or

speak. Therefore, out of the 17 articles *The Coloradoan* posted from 2014-2016, the comment

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with the highest amount of likes should reveal the majority opinion of those people viewing the articles.

The highest rated comment —with 66 likes— by Knutson (2016) appeared on the first article to discuss the plan to change the park into a restaurant. It was one of the most commented upon articles, and was one of the most recent. Although the article was largely about a restaurant moving into the park, it did mention the fact that the park had been debated about for some time because of the visible houseless population at the park. The highest rated comment did not mention the restaurant, but instead clarified information about the houseless individuals. A commenter wrote:

> I get what y'all are saying about affordable housing and helping the homeless but I think a lot of the people gathering there are traveling transients ..[sic] There's a difference between someone who is homeless and someone who is a transient (Knutson, 2016)[1].

This post echoes the sentiments of most of the comments made on articles about Jefferson Park over the two-year span. Many commenters want to clarify the terms used to describe the people who frequent the park. These terms will be discussed in the next chapter about representation. When speaking about agency and voice, however, this most liked comment reveals more about what type of voice gets the most support, and thus has the most agency. That agency—and public opinion—demonstrate that many Fort Collins residents maybe feel as though they should help those less fortunate. The first part of the quote points to a feeling of guilt and shared responsibility. However, that guilt melts away when the commenter re-identifies the houseless in Fort Collins. Once the commenters have framed the people at Jefferson Park in a new way, they avoid feeling of guilt by implying they thus do not deserve help. Some reasons

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[1] The publicly accepted term of homeless refers to a person who does not have a place of residence, which differs from transient people who do not live in one area, and travel to different places frequently. More specifications on these terms will be provided in chapter 4.

they do this could be because of the individualistic values inherently existing in the American Dream myth.

When viewed from the context of the American Dream myth—and thus individualism—the quote with 66 likes becomes complex. From the lens of Fisher (1973), this commenter communicates moralistic American Dream values. First, they talk about helping the homeless, and how that can be important. In fact, they even mention "affordable housing" (Ferrier, 2016b), which refers to gentrification—a systemic problem that hinders people who make lower incomes from affording a place to live. Their nod to changes in systemic problems implies a moralistic change in Fisher's (1973) context. It communicates that there may not be a system in place in Fort Collins that ensures that every person has an equal opportunity at attaining their American Dream. In this case, the commenter is revealing that they could be in favor of some collectivistic policies to help others (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). However, the commenter takes a turn to devalue the moralistic American Dream in the next sentence.

The commenters begin to change their values when they add, "but I think a lot of the people gathering there are traveling transients .. [sic] There's a difference between someone who is homeless and someone who is a transient" (Ferrier, 2016b). In this section, the distinction between the two identifying terms implies something important. Apparently, the variance is enough that the first part of the commenter's statement about changing systemic problems no longer applies to the transient population at Jefferson Park. This commenter is implying that there are people in the U.S. that do not deserve equal opportunity in the U.S. To this commenter, those people are not as worthy as everyone else in the United States. Therefore, from this perspective, the moralistic, equality-promoting and collectivistic side of the American Dream should not be pursued. The unfortunate reality of this majority opinion and the commenters with

the most agency is that it involves classifying some individuals as less important than others.

This argument clarifies that most people reading the comments feel that the moralistic myth should not apply, and thus individuals should rely on themselves. Though largely, this was the majority sentiment, it should be noted there were people who were more sympathetic to houseless and transient people. This group will be discussed in chapter 5. However, the trend of devaluing the moralistic Dream and privileging the materialistic Dream continued when examining agency in the debates about houselessness in Fort Collins in more depth. Even when people who could benefit from collectivistic help are the commenters themselves.

Individual Experience Informs Individualism

> *"Have you actually been to this park or around it? Have you had experiences with these people? Because I have. They are rude, aggressive, theives, [sic] alcoholics, and drug addicts" (Martin, 2015).*

Most of the comments from this research are from people who do not identify themselves in any way. Interestingly, commenters bring up the fact that no one identifies himself or herself as houseless frequently. It seems that some commenters do realize that they are not hearing houseless voices on this platform. However, it also reveals that commenters assume everyone who does not identify as houseless has a place to sleep at night. Perhaps houseless people comment and simply do not identify themselves, though no one in the comments raises this idea. A lot of commenters thus seemed frustrated because no one in the comments seems to have spoken to one of the people they are debating about; houseless individuals. Out of 731 comments, only 12 commenters actually did identify as houseless or formerly houseless or jobless. These numbers alone tell a lot about who in these public debates has the agency to have their voice heard. Only 12—1.64 percent—had their voice heard on this platform. Despite all of the previous data explaining that online comments sections can be open for everyone (Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Rahman, et al., 2016), something about this debate removes the possibility of

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having the agency from most houseless individuals in Fort Collins. Therefore, the comments that were posted by self-identified houseless or formerly houseless individuals reveal a lot about the agency of those who did comment.

These houseless commenters have a voice and attempt to make it heard. That can sound surprising because theories like Spiral of Silence imply people with marginal opinions can feel pressure not to speak about their experiences (West & Turner, 2014). These voices overcame pressures to remain silent. The reason for their agency may come the fact that out of 12 self-identified houseless commenters, only two of them identified themselves as *currently* houseless. Most of the self-identified formerly houseless or jobless commenters expressed materialistic and individualistic values in their comments much more so than collectivistic and moralistic. In one case, a person wrote, "I've been homeless [sic] it isn't what someone else is done for me it's what I've done for myself to change" (Cooley, 2015). Here, the commenter communicates that when they were houseless, they themselves had to change. This comment give no indication if they had received assistance from others while they were houseless. By privileging their own effort, and describing their journey as an individual one, they speak about the American Dream myth. They are using their personal experience as evidence to support an idea that people in the U.S. must work for their dreams on their own as directed by the American Dream myth (Fisher, 1973; Adams, 1941; Bineham, 2015). This person was not the only commenter to frame their experience in this manner. Rather, it was a repetitive pattern.

Other accounts gave similar stories as evidence. They related, "I know exactly what is like. Which is why I chose to change my life and get out of the gutter"; "I was once homeless and some of my friends were homeless here. Today we all have homes and jobs and we didn't get those things by sittin [sic] in that park waiting for somebody to help. It takes integrity, time and

sobriety"; and even, "It's a choice to live that way…" (Urton, 2015; Riley, 2014c; Ballard, 2014).

These comments derive their credibility from their former houseless status. By saying they understand the situations of the houseless people in Fort Collins, they imply that their lived experience was exactly the same as those who are currently houseless. They imply that their understanding explains precisely what each of the currently houseless people are going through without exception. This individual's post essentially communicates that the houseless people in Fort Collins have agency, but they are not using it. They express multiple times that houselessness is a choice. This suggests that class travel in the U.S. is attainable as long as a person decides to do try to move up. This comment frames the choices of the currently houseless people as wrong—ones that goes against the American Dream myth. The comments suggest that *all* of the houseless people are choosing to live without a place to sleep.

One very lengthy response gives even more insight:

> [sic]I have been homeless for almost a year and there are MANY MANY jobs you can GET and KEEP and yes the housing is completely ridiculous but it's possible! A person CAN get the help they need to turn their life Around. There are many places that WILL help but you have to have a JOB, GOALS, DISCIPLINE and DEDICATION. I have lived in the shelter, been working my ass off, saved money and after being homeless in Loveland and Fort Collins for the past year exactly I just moved into a beautiful home for my son and I. It IS POSSIBLE...... But can't be on drugs or alcohol and have to work for it!!! JUST LIKE everyone else has to do for what they have!!! [sic] (Down, 2016).

These commenters all present similar personal evidence to support the American Dream myth, and in doing so, argue that not having a house or a job is a choice in the United States. These accounts simply add yet more personal narratives of the American Dream myth; like those shown in mainstream media (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013). The previous commenter mentions personal experience being houseless while emphasizing that their own effort was the reason they could succeed. They say that they have received help in the past from others (a collectivistic notion) but that without their own drive, they would not have succeeded.

This person thus implies that there are already collectivistic opportunities for houseless people, and that if the houseless people are not succeeding, it is because the second piece of the formula –their own hard work—is missing. This insistence that obtaining a place to sleep at night is not a problem as long as a person decides to do try to look for one is clear from this collection of comments. These continual insistences that homelessness in Fort Collins is something that must be individually overcome, and can only be done on one's own is actually quite complicated when we revisit the data about the actual population of houseless people—as many of them have intersectional identities.

A third of people in Fort Collins without houses in 2014 were domestic abuse survivors and another third were of people under the age of 24 (BBC Research and Consulting, 2014). Most people that identified as houseless or chronically houseless also identified as disabled and Hispanic or Latino (Homeward 2020, 2015). These statistics relate to intersectionality—the theory that a person with more than one non-dominant identities will experience more oppression because those identities compound upon one another—thus it can help explain why self-identified former houseless Fort Collins residents perhaps should not feel their experience merits criticizing all current houseless people. Every person's experience is different, and that is especially dependent on his or her relationship to intersectionality.

The theory of intersectionality compounds silencing in the United States. The theory expanded the understanding of how people typically feel multiple sources of oppression based on minority identities (Collins, 2000, 2005; hooks, 1996; Alcoff, 2006; Anzaldúa, 2012; Rowe, 2008). If someone is poor, often, they may also have another factor in their lives that disenfranchises them from succeeding financially, such as ability, ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender, etc., creating an even more challenging situation for some people to

overcome (Allen, 2010). None of the commenters who described their situation as previously houseless also identified with any other less privileged identity. They also largely identify as previously houseless, which allows them to experience agency and voice in two ways. For one, they may not experience multiple forms of oppression, and do not feel societal pressure to remain quiet. They also may feel credible to speak, as they are not *currently* seen as a minority; they only used to be houseless. The reason that most people who have the agency to comment and identify as houseless was because they could qualify that identifier with past tense verbiage, effectively distancing themselves from the undesirable and socially stigmatized former identity (Rayburn and Guittar, 2013; Paulo Freire, 2005). Their personal narratives fit with the majority's narrative—mitigating the chance that they would be criticized for writing about it. Unfortunately, that does not entitle them to speak as experts about every person's houseless experience, even if they seem to align with the partial and selective "truth" about houselessness.

These commenters see their situations as representative of others because of the narrow representation of the American Dream myth and the subsequent ignorance of citizens to the struggles of citizens who are systemically oppressed (Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). Pederson's (2013) study also helps explain these commenter's opinions. He describes how U.S. Americans who lost their jobs still try to re-frame their own experience to fit the American Dream myth instead of reflecting on the truth of the myth. This inclination to support individualistic arguments in debates about houseless individuals even when the commenter had houselessness themselves seemed to appear again in this debate. That idea had me reflecting still more on agency. Were there any *currently* houseless people who had commented on *The Coloradoan*'s articles? Yes, and their voices continued to inform agency.

Speaking Against the Majority

> *"I urge you all to walk a mile in a homeless persons shoes. I bet you wouldnt [sic] last a week"* (M. Johnson, 2016).

The two people who identified as currently houseless appealed to those with majority opinion, while imploring a bit of collectivism as well. The first currently houseless person's experience should be read while thinking of the American Dream. The response reads:

> Homeless people are not rats.We are people who need help finding a home.We are willing to work and most of us have not commited any crimes or been diagnosed with a mental illness.Most are not addicts and those who are are sober.Could you be more cold? [sic]" (Gallipeau, 2016).

This emotional account gives us a severely different narrative and argument than the comments detailed in the thesis so far. The person requests the compassion of the other commenters at large and tries to vouch for themselves and their fellow houseless counterparts. In this quote, the person continually uses the pronoun "we" without once referring to themselves individualistically. They are implying the houseless people are a community of support, a collective group that works together. They appeal to readers by relating themselves to other people; humanizing themselves. They acknowledge that most of the comments depict them as dirty, unwanted "rats", recognizing the existent bias and social stigma surrounding houseless individuals (Gallipeau, 2016). They then attempt to connect themselves—and in addition their community—to readers of the comments.

The person also states that they need help finding a home, which inherently implies institutional collectivistic solutions to their situation. They cannot achieve this on their own, and are pleading with the readers—who they have attempted to identify themselves with—to help them (Burke, 1989). As Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) discuss, collective cultures care for the members of their societies in exchange for loyalty to the group. This person calls for support, arguing that houseless people do want to work, and that they are not the people that they are

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portrayed to be. They claim that individually, these people are doing their part for their dreams, but that there are problems beyond their own abilities or effort that is hindering them. According to Fisher (1973), this person is utilizing the moralistic dream to argue that not everyone has equal opportunity to achieve their goals, as they individually have done their part. So, one of the only commenters to self-identify as houseless took a dissimilar take on the American Dream myth than the majority and most popular of comments.

As far as agency goes, there is a reason there are few houseless people who comment. In fact, if I had not been detailing every response, I would have missed the previously discussed post. It had only 5 likes and two replies. Not only that, but one of the replies immediately devalued the original poster's point. Unfortunately, this kind of reply works directly against minority voices to make them feel inferior and as though their opinions and experiences do not have a place. Ultimately, to shame them in into even more silence. Spiral of Silence theory explains that this reply adds to the pressure on people with marginalized identities, essentially influencing them not to speak out against majority ideologies (Gramsci, 2000; West & Turner, 2015). As it occurs in these debates, they will barely be recognized and if they are, they will be challenged. That theme continued with the only other voice that came from a currently houseless person, which wrote:

> "I'm a 54 year old man with custody of my 16 year old daughter. We've recently became homeless because Fort Collins rent is too damn expensive and they lack affordable housing! Fort Collins could give a rat's ass about the locals! But they make sure that college students have everything they need! Quit trying to sweep crap under the rug Fort Collins!!! PATHETIC!! [sic]" (Holden, 2016).

The commenter provides another expressive and telling quote. The person explains the severity of their situation and then go to explain how it stems from high housing costs in the city of Fort Collins. This person once again highlights systemic problems instead of their own inability to work hard for their dream, thus valuing the moralistic American Dream myth. Their

language indicates frustration with the housing options within the city, and thus they feel individually they do not have the resources to obtain it. For this person, the materialistic dream has become unobtainable because equal access to opportunity is not available to them (Fisher, 1973). In fact, they shed light on another population that may be treated with more respect because of how lucrative they are to the community: college students. For the city of Fort Collins, college students provide financial stability in the form of tuition payments and research grants (Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce, 2017). Not only do they pay large sums of money to the local colleges, they also spend money around town. Interestingly, this population also has access to affordable housing to ensure their stay in the city. This was the only comment referring to college students and their status within the city. Once again, the only presently houseless individual provides a minority opinion in the debate about houseless populations, and once again, the poster was met with opposition from other voices.

The commenter wrote post, thus demonstrating agency, however, it turned into one of the most controversial posts on that article. According to Tsagkias, Weerkamp and de Rijke (2009), "Shocking, touching, or in other ways surprising articles often generate more comments than can be expected from the article's content" (p. 1768). Though their research speak of articles, it also applies to replies to comments on those articles. In this case, this man's comment generated a lot of questioning. Had he really proven himself as a hard working individual? Had he tried all of the necessary means of securing housing before posting his frustrations online? This person received opposition and interrogation, continuing the practice of silencing this minority opinion. The commenter attacked the education system; a pillar of the American Dream myth. Through education, people in the U.S. seen as actively working on the Dream. Through continual effort, they gain more expertise, and thus more ability to benefit the country. By questioning this deeply

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rooted value, the commenter incited the majority's scrutiny. The majority continued to overwhelmingly speak over voices of the oppressed, and drive home their values. Values that promote individualism in the U.S.

Agency, Voice, Materialistic American Dreams and Individualism

"This is fuckin [sic] America. There are going to be homeless people."(Anderson, 2014).

After examining agency and voice within the comments about Jefferson Park, previous American Dream research was supported. The majority and most liked comments continued to express the hegemonic ideal of individualism. The strongest voices reaffirmed that the American Dream can be achieved without additional collective help. Even voices of people who had been affected by houselessness used individual experience to prove the truth of the American Dream myth. The only two commenters, who voiced their experience of being currently houseless, felt their experience did not align with the American Dream. However, those people were met with opposition, questioning, and were even ignored. This evidence shows that citizens within the U.S. communicate messages about American Dream myth as truth. People even use the American Dream to argue that individualistically, people should be working against their houselessness, and must do so in order to overcome it. In fact, the argument is almost immediately conceded because of how uncontested the American Dream myth is. Arguing for collectivism becomes almost ridiculous, despite it being a valid strategy in many other countries. This revelation helps support previous communication scholarship, which also pointed to the hegemonic nature of the myth.

By examining this debate with regard to agency and voice, the strength of the American Dream myth and its privileging of individualistic values receives support. In previous research, the myth dominates ideology, media representations, and personal thought (Choo & Tan, 2007;

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Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). This chapter revealed that the myth even appears in citizen's discussions and arguments about social class. Not only does it appear, it influences who feels they can speak on the issues or not.

The analysis also aligned with Alcoff's (1991-1992) work in speaking for others. According to Alcoff, "Thus, how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated, which will in turn affect its perceived significance (for specific hearers)" (p.13). Alcoff suggests that the positionality of speakers greatly influences the way these messages are perceived. It should be noted that while almost no houseless people weighed in on the debates, their voices were almost universally unheard. One comment was completely ignored, and the other incited criticism. Alcoff's (1991-1992) analysis shows that those voices of lower privilege are not taken as seriously. Even if they might be, the ways which those people write may have them appear less credible, and thus less worthy of consideration. Meanwhile, the comments, which repeat widely, held individualistic ideals receive more support and credence because of their apparent value. Therefore, the hegemonic cultural value of individualism reifies further into an unquestionable asset of the U.S. culture.

As the American Dream myth scholarship is informed by the agency of who speaks in these debates, it becomes imperative to see who is spoken about and how. If most people speaking are not currently houseless, are their comments largely about their own experience or are they speaking for those who do not have agency? In continuing this line of analysis, the next chapter will examine representation. It will provide information about individualism in the U.S., and will enlighten the state of citizen awareness about systemic social economic inequality.

CHAPTER FOUR – REPRESENTATIONS OF THE OTHER: THE REPUGNANT, THE

HAZARDOUS AND THE UNGRATEFUL

Introduction

While investigating the comments for more major themes, three analytical categories

relating to representation immediately appeared as the most obvious, repetitive and most

frequently used. The first category, the desire to remove the houseless, manifested when

commenters frequently described houseless people as dirty, lazy degenerates who are so

repulsive that the public should not have to view them. The second category of comments, the

criminalization of the houseless, arose when the commenters continually dehumanized the

homeless individuals and even insinuated that they were a danger to society. The third and final

repetitive theme in the comments, the worthiness of houseless people based on temporality,

explicitly made the distinction between transient and houseless people. Focusing especially on

which of those groups deserved more help than the other. Taken together, each portrayal

demonstrates the power of speaking for others in our country. To fully understand and analyze

that power, I will present the comments reflecting the first perspective of the houseless

individuals at Jefferson Park.

Representation of the Repugnant

"They are sleeping all over no matter where [sic]. It is disgusting" (Greenwood, 2014).

A common narrative of U.S. citizens when speaking about houseless individuals involves

avoiding or ignoring them. Even if people may not want to look at houseless people, "…many

homeless individuals continually inhabit public space, a powerfully socially discrediting force.

Due to homeless individuals inhabiting public space, their stigma is very visible to the public"

(Rayburn & Guittar, 2013, p. 160). In the comments about Jefferson Park, themes of visibility of houseless individuals, and what their presence does to Fort Collins, were frequent. An abundance of comments pointed out what the visible houseless people looked like to them, and the image they expressed was less than ideal. In 2015, a protest was held in the park largely by houseless and transient individuals, which referenced the Occupy Wall Street protests (Kyle & Pohl, 2015). One commenter, speaking about the protest in the park succinctly put, "It would be a less dirty protest, if it was on a parking lot [sic]" (Paz, 2015). The commenter suggests that even protesters in the park seem more unsightly than concrete and asphalt; effectively dehumanizing houseless people as even lesser objects than the ground humans walk on. They imply that the houseless individuals do not deserve to be visible because of their apparent visually unpleasant presence. Going further, they would rather pave over the park with a parking lot, as Blue Ocean Enterprises had planned (Ferrier, 2015b).

Similar feelings were expressed about the protest movement:

Filling what is supposed to be a public space of peace and beauty with pipes and needles and piles of trash is unsupportable. If they want to "occupy" it, then they should demonstrate that they deserve to - keep it clean and welcoming, and no-one would have a problem with them. But that sort of ethical choice is not in their arsenal (Windwalker, 2015).

According to this commenter, the houseless people have a choice—as afforded to them by the country and its promise through the American Dream—and they are not making the right ones. They believe that given the choice, the houseless people have consciously spoiled public property. The quotes above paint houseless individuals with one broad stroke as unclean. The commenters are quick to portray the people in the protest as those who put their garbage— including drug paraphernalia—in the park rather than in a landfill. Again, the commenters believe that the park must be one where they can view pleasant sights, and for this commenter, houseless people and protesters are from pleasant; in fact, they are spreading dangerous

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substances. Their representation alludes to the idea that anyone who goes to the protest—with no

exception—will not clean up after himself or herself and even permanently taint the park.

Effectively, these quotes imply that the protesters are unethical and irresponsible, and not model

citizens exercising their rights to protest. This harkens back to the American Dream myth, where

we must individually work hard, and keeping public areas clean certainly falls under that

requirement. By suggesting that the protesters will not clean up after themselves, the commenter

not only implies their apparent lack of effort, but also that they do not "deserve" to even exist

there (Windwalker, 2015). This commenter does not want to see the protesters (or houseless

individuals) at all; as their visage is too unclean.

In the case of each of these comments, the representation of the people in the park comes

from an outsider's perspective as neither comment identifies as someone who went to the protest.

Alcoff (1991-1992) teases out the positives and negatives of speaking for others, and the

previous comments fall under her criticisms. These type of responses ignore the positionality of

the speaker. The comments about the people at Jefferson Park during the protest both represent

others, and do not speak about themselves. This judgement can be a tricky endeavor, as

evidenced in more detail by Alcoff (1991-1992):

> In both the practice of speaking for as well as the practice of speaking about others, I am
> engaging in the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who
> they are*. I am representing them *as* such and such, or in post-structuralist terms, I am
> participating in the construction of their subject-positions [emphasis original] (p.9).

In other words, when we speak for and about other people, we construct their identities.

Witnesses to our representation are influenced by the process, and may change their perspectives

of the people we represent for better or for worse. That influence places responsibility squarely

on the shoulders of those speaking for and about others. It may not be a responsibility the

speakers are consciously aware of. These commenting speakers in particular constructed the

protesters as dirty and intolerable; a criticism rooted in an individualistic value relating to the

American Dream that promotes success for those who try. Embedded within the aforementioned

quotes lies an American Dream myth value that is clear during the following part of the previous

comment, "If they want to 'occupy' it, then they should demonstrate that they deserve to - keep it

clean and welcoming, and no-one would have a problem with them" (Windwalker, 2015). This

commenter suggests that the public park should be for people who work hard enough to keep it

clean, but that the people they have seen simply do not do that. A similar comment states:

> I work downtown off Jefferson and we are constantly cleaning up needles.. I've seen
> people smoking crack and passed out drunk on Jefferson in the middle of the day! If they
> want help and respect they haven't earned it into book [sic] (Ingram, 2015).

Here, the comment communicates that houseless people are consuming drugs and alcohol

too often; houseless people abuse substances. By harming themselves, the commenter feels that

they harm the fabric of U.S. society: where people are afforded anything they want—provided

they work for it—and they choose the moral high ground. The previous comments also portray

the houseless individuals as though they rely on public property because they are too lazy to

clean up after themselves. This representation follows the materialistic American Dream myth,

where everyone is entitled to their *own*–not public—version of success as long as they work hard

for it (Fisher, 1973). In this view, those who do not work hard enough do not deserve the benefits

associated with the American Dream like homes or even places on public property. This

perspective yet again ignores the moralistic side of the American Dream myth in that everyone in

the U.S. should have equal access to their dreams (Fisher, 1973). U.S. citizens have a duty to

help each other attain that equality. According to the previous commenters' posts, the people at

Jefferson Park do not deserve to have equal access to assistance because of their alleged inaction.

Here, those who are not directly involved in the goings-on of the park believe the people at

Jefferson Park have invalidated their entitlement to assistance, and even a place in the public eye.

Rendering People Invisible

"Its [sic] awful... so awful. Absolutely ruining this city, and an incredible annoyance when anywhere near that area. Time to do something about it" (Weissmann, 2015a).

With each criticism of the houseless Fort Collins residents, it seemed not only did the park's inhabitants not deserve the fulfillment of the American Dream; they did not deserve to exist in the public eye. As one commenter put it, "They should all be arrested for loitering they are making this town look bad and when we get tourists in town they see how crappy our streets look because of the lazy homeless people [sic]" (N. Johnson, 2016). In this person's eyes, the houseless are not simply unsightly, they are *embarrassing,* and even *criminal.* The implication of the comment mirrors many claims like this before it: the unknown is dangerous. As Ahmed (2001) describes, for most people, familiarity is safe and strangeness or otherness is dangerous. The commenter says that the houseless citizens should be arrested for a crime—loitering. Loitering, or being in one place for too long, hardly conjures up images of danger. However, for this commenter, the very presence of these people is unfamiliar. The commenter sees the houseless people as others rather than fellow humans, and so they fear them and their potential to be criminal. Similarly, the commenter expresses that the presence of these strange and dangerous others portrays Fort Collins in a bad light. For this commenter, the city should not include homeless people, or people from outside might view the city as unkempt or lazy.

Another commenter echoes the previous view by saying, "So it sounds like diners [at the restaurant that will replace the park] will have a nice view of the Mission [a local center for houseless people] and it's [sic] patrons. How appetizing" (Anderson, 2016). This person asserts that the houseless people make the city look bad and according to this commenter: so unpleasant that people will not be able to eat near them. Statements like this one portray the houseless people as disgusting, and lesser. The sight of these people is so repulsive to this commenter, that

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the comment they wrote further dehumanizes the houseless individuals. Typically, most people can eat around each other in restaurants. However, this person implies that the houseless people in Jefferson Park have become so unsightly that they are beneath being looked at. Effectively, this person wishes that houseless people were invisible to them as well as other people in Fort Collins. Their presence prevents them from freely doing what they choose—apparently having an appetite—and so their rights are infringed upon simply because the houseless individuals are near them.

The call to remove the houseless people from the public eye continues in statements like, "They are INCREDIBLY annoying, and they ARE ruining this city. My problem is that the city I currently live in is turning into a passerby's wasteland…" (Weissman, 2015b). The last three quotes do not tiptoe around the demand that the houseless people in Fort Collins should not be able to inhabit the public park, a place for *any* person. The quotes represent the houseless people as so incredibly revolting that they are like pieces of trash to be thrown away; not humans. Further dehumanizing the people in Jefferson Park implies that they should not be visible to those who own houses. This trend is not a new one, unfortunately. Houseless individuals are consistently rendered invisible in the U.S., which is extremely damaging. These actions of "…hiding homeless individuals, trying to make them invisible, consequently is thought to further stigmatize homelessness" (Rayburn & Guittar, 2013, p.162). Part of that disgust comes from the American Dream Myth. These representations indicate that the only way the houseless people cannot afford to have a place to live is because they do not work hard to achieve their goals, and rely too much on other people. The assertion continues that because of their lack of effort, they are forced into the public eye, which, for these commenters, in turn portrays Fort Collins as a city with inhabitants that do not individually pursue their Dream.

According to the people debating, the houseless seem unappealing, embarrassing, inhuman, criminal and so unsightly they should not be seen within the city. Despite the fact that many people who do not have a place to sleep at night suffer from systemic problems outside of their own control, they are still regarded as representations of failures of the American Dream myth (Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). Since the American Dream myth's constant repetition—utilizing protagonists of various types—the myth seems to be reality. As Chen, Simmons, and Kang (2015) had discovered, some citizens viewed the myth as truth, and thus assumed that people of a lower class did not live in prosperity of their own accord. The comments about dirty and embarrassing houseless people follows that line of thinking, as those portrayals are accompanied by terms like "lazy" and "disgusting". This assumption about houseless people remains dangerous when the reality of poverty within the U.S. is revisited.

The systemic socioeconomic inequality within the U.S. remains prevalent whether it relates to wage disparity, minority identities, or difficulty obtaining homes as a product of rapid gentrification (Allen, 2010; Baker, 2008; Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2016; Maciag, 2015). Fort Collins houseless individuals specifically face systemic inequality as most of them identify as disabled or as people of color (Homeward 2020, 2015). On a similar vein, houseless people in general are effected intersectionally more often than not. Although the vast majority of houseless individuals in Fort Collins are white (BBC Research and Consulting, 2014), those who are homeless and nonwhite face more extreme conditions. According to a poll conducted in 2015, houseless people who identified as ethnic minorities had a much harder time securing a place to sleep than houseless white people (Homeward 2020, 2015). Despite this telling and thought-provoking statistic, none of the 731 comments mentioned ethnicity when speaking about houseless people.

These statistics demonstrate the reality of houseless life in Fort Collins. People with multiple marginalized identities (such as being persons of color) meant they were much more likely to be houseless and unsheltered.

However, the commenters conveniently ignored the intersectional marginalization of the houseless—involuntary or not. This tendency to ignore or forget confirms the selectivity of identity-based privilege is inseparable from the American Dream. By taking a post-racial stance on houselessness, these debates ignore a real and unfortunate reality of people who are houseless in Fort Collins. This post-racialism aligns well with the American Dream myth in that the myth describes opportunity in the U.S. as something anyone (with no exceptions, not even for marginalized people) can obtain. That alignment makes it easier for commenters to ignore the influence of multiple marginalized identities on houselessness. Even with the nature of houselessness in Fort Collins remaining systemic, the comments about houseless people in Jefferson Park rhetorically constructed a different reality. Most commenters communicated messages that implied houseless people do not have houses because of their own choices. The American Dream myth still holds a steady grip on these commenters' view of poverty, despite statistics showing the systemic nature of houselessness in Fort Collins. The visibility of the houseless people even made some respondents uncomfortable:

> That place is straight up creepy. I don't feel bad for some of those people. Half of them are messed up on something. It's [sic] triple the size if homeless people since I can remember. Something should be done. It's disturbing" (Wadley, 2014a).

This last quote furthers the representation of houseless individuals as masters of their own fate, but it adds something more. This comment distances the houseless people from everyone else. The fear of the other continues to be communicated in comments like this one that depict people as something to be feared (Ahmed, 2001). They are, once again, inhuman monstrosities that multiply at an alarming rate. These comments–continuing to portray houseless

people as lesser and dangerous beings—feed in to an even more dire sentiment. A popular idea in many of the responses about Jefferson Park appeared when commenters depicted the houseless people as not just eyesores, but indiscriminately dangerous.

Representation of the Hazardous

"It is not known as 'needle park' for no reason" (Schmidt, 2015).

Jefferson Park sits right next to Fort Collins Rescue Mission, a shelter that provides food and beds for houseless individuals. The park offers those same people a place to rest, gather, and even though it is against the law: sleep. For some people, Jefferson Park is the place where loved ones come together; it is their home. To others, however, the image of Jefferson Park exudes something else. The park seems dirty, small, and crowded. In fact, it seems unsafe, and too close for other people to comfortably inhabit the city. In the debates about Jefferson Park, the representations of the houseless people as dangerous are imbued with individualistic themes stemming from the American Dream myth.

Many of the comments about Jefferson Park portray it—and by extension, its people—as though it is a ticking time bomb waiting to harm people passing by. Comments resound this theme of danger with messages like, "Just visited Rapid City SD this weekend. It was so nice to walk around their old town and feel safe. Haven't felt safe in Fort Collins Old Town in years. Really sad [sic]" (Diodati, 2016), and "I won't walk by there alone..." (Fitts, 2014). For these people, even the presence of houseless others makes them feel in danger. This sentiment of threat is resounded in many of the articles' comments; stressing the different risks of allowing the people in the park to be so close to the city. Again, the idea of safety is put into question here; at least for those doing the speaking. On Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, safety is the second most influential motivator for humans to act. For those with the agency to speak in the debates,

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their own safety—keeping in mind how important that is on Maslow's pyramid—is at stake. This heightens the emotions of the comments, helping along the tendency to dehumanize the people that ironically have a much more dire need on their hands. Houseless individuals must worry about their "physiological" needs, which happen to rank number one (above safety) of basic necessities. For the houseless individuals, their first priority is to attain the most basic of human needs. Unfortunately, the importance of this need does not leave them the time to participate in online debates about whether or not they should be allowed to stay in a public park. Similarly, to those commenting online, their safety still seems to be at risk, and so they continue to espouse messages that stress their fear and need for change. However, their most basic needs are met, and their safety is simply questioned rather than openly in danger. So while they vilify the houseless people, the houseless try and secure their physiological needs.

Even the safety of children in downtown is put into question. For example, "Im [sic] sick of all the needles laying around old town...i [sic] dread the day a toddler pricks itself with a hep-c [sic] infected needle" (Schifferdecker, 2016). This comment, along with the others, bring up a couple of themes surrounding the representation of homeless individuals. The themes include that they are dangerous, unclean, disease ridden, and a threat to children. Similarly, notions of drug abuse come into play. Drug users are unpredictable because of addiction. Unpredictability is another unknown factor that instills fear. By portraying houseless people as unpredictable drug addicts, the houseless people become degenerates who may forget to keep their drugs away from children. Their visibility is also a danger because they could serve as role models to those children. The commenters see the houseless individuals as generalized individuals; uncontrollable, infected, and hazardous pests of society. These pests especially do not conform to the American Dream myth, further making them strange to the residents of Fort Collins.

Representations like these further the individualistic and materialistic culture promoted

by the American Dream myth. Most people in Fort Collins believe that the houseless are not

working hard enough to live somewhere, and their laziness is even harmful to society because of

the danger they pose to the population. The following comment from the online debates

represents those individualistic thought processes:

> My kids love to ride bikes to old town and because of some of the stuff that I have seen
> going on, I am very reluctant to let them. Drug use, drinking, trash everywhere in that
> Park, people using less then [sic] stellar language, out right disregard for other people,
> transients harassing people and bussiness [sic] owners for hand outs[sic]. Panhandling on
> the corners. I would never allow my kids to use the bathroom in the square because it was
> nasty, empty booze bottles, I even found condoms and a syringe one time. This is all stuff
> my kids do not need to be around even where they are with me. I have been without
> work. I understand how it is to be broke, to wonder how you will feed your kids or how
> you will pay bills, but if you work hard you can change your circumstances. I busted my
> ass when we about lost everything because my husband had been injured. Asking for
> handouts is not going to fix anything, hard work does (Morgan, 2015).

Here, the comment alludes to the consequences of what the commenter believe is laziness

on the part of the houseless people. Again, the American Dream myth's promotion of individual

struggle for positive outcomes can be identified in this comment criticizing others. This person's

words insinuate that because the houseless people chose to be lazy, they have fallen into bad

habits. To not have a home, or to not work is to be un-American, and by extension, inhuman. To

portray them as further inhuman, the commenter mentions drug abuse, public intoxication, not

picking up their waste, using expletives, acting aggressively towards others, and sexual deviance.

All of those categories not only dehumanize, but also demonize the houseless individuals. They

have become something even worse than unwanted pests; they have turned into plagues that are

a blight on society. The comment depicts these individuals as dangerously greedy, because they

terrorize the city, and have the audacity to ask other people to work for them under the guise of

'help.' This commenter believes the reality to be that the houseless are capable of obtaining

whatever they need, but they choose to prey off unsuspecting citizens instead.

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The commenter also highlights that "asking for help" will not help houseless people obtain shelter (Morgan, 2015). This sort of statement yet again implies that collectivistic strategies are inadequate, while individual effort is the only way out of a dire situation in the U.S. (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). The commenter then goes on to give evidence of their own individual effort—and resulting success—to back up their claim that individual work is the only way out of poverty. This tactic of using one narrative as proof of the American Dream myth is not new (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013). Especially in regards to houseless people.

Unfortunately, when people identify as houseless, they understand the stigma that comes along with that identity, and they try to distance themselves from it. Rayburn and Guittar (2013) found after extensive interviews that "homeless individuals are evaluated negatively, so they often create distinctions between themselves and other homeless individuals" (p.161). In order to avoid being seen as just another lazy houseless person, an individual may depict everyone else who does not have a house as lesser than themselves. This phenomenon has been explored before by Paulo Freire (2005) who writes, "But almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors, or 'sub-oppressors'" (p. 45). In the case of many of the people who have experienced poverty in the past, they prove their credibility through prior involvement and then they criticize those currently in poverty without knowing anything about them. From their own example, they feel that they were able to work hard on their own and overcome obstacles, and so anyone else should be able to as well. This argument is hard to argue against, especially when it has the backing of the American Dream myth and its immense influence over U.S. citizens to believe that individualism is the only way to become successful. In fact, the stigma goes so deep that people portray houseless individuals as unspeakable entities.

Representing the Unspeakable

> *"These are not your average homeless..they drink and drug together..[sic] it has turned into a huge gang!! Yes..a [sic] gang of thugs!!!" (Holloway, 2015).*

Over the course of the debates about the houseless people in Fort Collins, many words were used to refer them that dehumanized them. From something as simple as "the homeless" to "them," and even "it," the individuals residing in Jefferson Park lost humanity in most of the terms used to describe them. Whether intentional or unintentional, the terms used by commenters to represent houseless people in Fort Collins dehumanized them in ways related to individualism and the American Dream myth.

The process of dehumanizing and criminalizing the homeless starts simply with the language that is used to describe them. Many of the quotes from the debates about Jefferson Park included derogatory terms when referencing the people in Jefferson Park. For example the park was referred to as, "...hobo park…" (Zebley, 2016). This moniker reflects that the people in the park are such a stain that the park should be renamed for their unwanted presence. Similarly, when speaking about the debates, a commenter simply says that people need to, "get rid of the homeless problem" (Nix, 2016). The people in Jefferson Park are no longer humans, but a problem, and therefore not just dirty, unwanted, and dangerous anymore. This person implies that the people of Jefferson Park are not human, and a problem that needs to be rid of. These people have lost their humanity because of the stigma of being houseless.

Being houseless is one of the most openly despised identities in the U.S. (Rayburn & Guittar, 2013). While the houseless individuals in the debates about Fort Collins certainly seemed to be reviled, there was actually another group of people that received an even worse representation. The distinction between houseless people and those who travel around the country without a house was constantly reiterated in each article about Jefferson Park. Before

looking at the commenter's perspective of houseless and transient individuals, the Oxford

English Dictionary (Transient, 2017) provides a definition for transient people. It states that the

term transient is a U.S. colloquialism referring to, "a person who passes through a place, or stays

in it only for a short time" (Transient, 2017). So a transient person moves around, while a

houseless person does not have a house. Houseless people can be transient, while not all transient

people are houseless. The commenters express their ideas of transient people in the following

quotes:

> …if you look at my main comment you will see where I see a difference between
> homeless and transients. I consider transients to be trash because they don't try and
> homeless are like you, down on your luck but trying and deserve help. (Brown, 2016)

> I'm so glad those transients are finally going to be pushed out of there . [sic] They're
> everywhere and I'm sorry but most of them can go back to the other cities they came
> from. They aren't our local homeless people. They're drug addicted people who are
> polluting the town with nonsense we don't need. Let's take care of our homeless veterans
> and disabled people . [sic] Not trash crackheads from other states. (Wadley, 2014b)

In these comments, a distinction is being made. First, for the commenters, houseless

people at times can be deserving of help, while transient people never can. Second, transient

people move from place to place in order to avoid individual work. These comments clearly

strive to educate others of these two themes, and by extension, to represent the people of

Jefferson Park in the way the commenter's see them: undeserving and cheating. Alcoff (1991-

1992) once again can remind us the dangers of this type of education, "…if one's immediate

impulse is to teach rather than listen to a less-privileged speaker, one should resist that impulse

long enough to interrogate it carefully" (p. 24). Those coming from less privileged positions

inevitably have less of a chance to speak for themselves in society. That being the case, transient

and houseless people should be the ones representing themselves, and explaining their lifestyles.

However, they may not feel as though they have the agency to speak out. With their lack of

voice, the rest of the commenters are free to represent houseless and transient people however they wish. In doing so, they add more stigmas associated with the people they speak about. They dehumanize and demonize, and portray transient people as those that are not pursuing the American Dream, and thus unworthy of attention.

In the comments, one of the most striking themes is how often the transient people are represented as though they do not contribute to society because they do not live in one place. The commenters assert that transient people do not have the desire to work. This goes directly against the individualistic values espoused in the American Dream myth. According to the myth, people in the U.S. must work for their dreams if they are to attain them (Adams, 1941). The commenters depict transient people as unwilling to work for anything, even their own dreams. This stigma also had been applied to houseless individuals. However, when houseless people are mentioned in the same comments as transient people, the representation of houseless people changes from significantly accountable to perhaps unaccountable under the right circumstances.

The previous four comments illustrate a distinction between houseless and transient people that comes down to effort and desire. For some, houseless people are simply in an unfortunate situation. For example:

> These aren't " homeless " [sic] people hanging out in the park , they are transient bums who do not want help , who do not want to better themselves . They don't want to work , [sic] or contribute to society , [sic] or to have the responsibilities of having a house . They want a free handout . [sic] They want to buy their drugs and alcohol . [sic] Nothing more. (Opdyke, 2016b)

This change in heart is significant as it harkens back to Fisher's (1973) version of the collectivistic and moralistic side of the American Dream myth. Suddenly, when compared with transient people, those who are houseless seem as though they are upholding their end of the materialistic dream. For the commenters, houseless people are locals who were working hard, but had a drastic event happen, and thus are deserving of sympathy and help. However, the

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transient people are not from their city and so have not proven their worth. The transient people (in choosing to travel) are not following the materialistic dream in pursuit of a house (Fisher, 1973). According to the moralistic American Dream myth, everyone is deserving of help towards their goal, and each person in the U.S. should have equal access to their dream.

However, this distinction of houseless and transient implies that for the commenters, transient people are a portion of U.S. citizens who do not deserve the American Dream myth and its promises. The way the transient people are framed makes them seem especially undeserving. The commenter implies that the transient people enjoy not working to the extreme; that they will actively try to cheat people into giving them money or objects. For the commenters, this is a way to get around the journey of the United States; one must go through if they are to attain their Dreams. A person must prove themselves through toil, like the founding fathers, in order to achieve the success that the nation promises (Rowland & Jones, 2011). By choosing not to work, and asking for help from others, the houseless are portrayed as thieves or cheats who have found a way to get to the reward, without proving themselves. Unfortunately, not much data has been collected about transient people in Fort Collins, or even the United States. They travel frequently, and so are hard to gather numerical data on. Despite this lack of data, transient people are still people. For the commenters though, transient people represent an extreme version of a houseless person, who has already been shown to be like a demon that preys on the population. If the houseless are demonized, then the transient people received even more negative connotation.

Representation, Dehumanization, Criminalization, and American Dreams

"Crazy ass people" (Marine, 2016).

In the representation of the other, the houseless and transient people, commenters depicted images of unclean, unsafe, and ungrateful things that did not deserve to be treated as

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human, nor remain in the public eye. These depictions created an argument that houseless people are not people. Through these representations, houseless people seemed to be portrayed as more unclean, more dangerous, and more volatile as the comments persisted. The houseless individuals were stripped of their humanity and were transformed into demonized others with no regard for people. Part of the reason these people could be dehumanized so easily stems from their physical representations of failures in the American Dream myth. Though the reasons for people in Fort Collins becoming houseless have not been fully explored, the comments assumed that their houselessness was because of their own lack of effort, and by extension, turning their back on their responsibility as U.S. citizens.

These depictions further related to the American Dream myth through the constant connection to individualism. The people in Jefferson Park were continually shown as masters of their own fate, and as masters, they had failed in working hard enough towards their goals. The perceived lack of effort allowed the commenters to pass judgement and remain devoid of responsibility to help their fellow citizens. As Alcoff (1991-1992) relates, "Yet, to replace both 'I' and 'we' with a passive voice that erases agency results in an erasure of responsibility and accountability for one's speech…" (p.11). For Alcoff, speaking for others, and not accounting for your own involvement means you are minimizing your ability to change the world based on what you communicate. The comments in this chapter strengthened the American Dream myth as they continued to promote an individualistic culture while remaining devoid of sympathy for others'.

These comments also provided support that most online comments sections create an echochamber. The over-prevalence of the same themes, all relating to conservative views regarding houseless individuals, supports previous research about the over prevalence of conservative views and their inflammatory nature online (Morin & Flynn, 2014; Warner, 2010).

Many of these comments dehumanized the houseless and attacked any other commenter that depicted them as deserving of help. Thus, studies should continue to investigate this phenomena of online conservative hostility. Other studies should include how online echochambers represent cultural others to see if they were also represented negatively. In the following chapter, these echochambers will play a role in how the rhetoric of blame continually deflected responsibility away from the commenters themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE – AFFECT AND MESSAGE: BLAMING THE CONCEITED, THE

IGNORANT, AND THE COMPLICIT

Introduction

It can be easy to forget that the online discussions about Jefferson Park are typically

about actual solutions to the problem. In the case of the debates about houselessness in Fort

Collins, categories regarding blame started to materialize as commenters wrote about how to

help houseless people. While commenters in general agreed that there were ways to overcome

the community issue of houselessness in Fort Collins, those solutions were overshadowed by

hypotheses about the source of the problem. As the messages continued to be repeated, it became

pertinent to inspect the reoccurrence and resulting themes within the category of blame. Three

nuanced subcategories of blame also exhibited as foci. The first subsection to emerge centered on

factors working directly against houseless individuals. While this first subcategory absolved the

houseless people of guilt, the following theme implied equal blame on houseless people as well

as on factors allowing them to remain unproductive. The last subsection of blame centered

directly on the houseless individuals and nothing else. As each of these subgroups of blame

became more prominent, the American Dream's individualistic influence remained present. The

following chapter examines how those individualistic American Dream ideals permeated the

rhetoric of blame in debates about houseless individuals.

Blaming the Conceited

> *"Everybody thinks, 'It's not my problem, let someone else fix it.' But the last time I checked, we all live in this community together, and homelessness affects us all"* (Kovach, 2016).

Despite many of the themes from the comments focusing on the houseless people's

shortcomings, there were advocates for the people residing in Jefferson Park. To the commenters

who spoke for the houseless, other factors regarding the lack of housing needed to be given salience. According to these commenters, the houseless individuals were hindered from factors outside of their control. Whether the lack of resources hindered them, others' perceptions stunted them, or the affluent nature of the town shunned them, there were influences they could not take control of. These sympathetic commenters, though numbered smaller than those who did not want houseless people in Jefferson Park, had a loud voice. They tended to stay in the conversation and reply to multiple comments. In the following section, I will examine these reoccurring themes while integrating analysis about the American Dream myth.

To some commenters, the houseless people in Jefferson Park should be treated with compassion. These commenters did not view the houseless people as demons or trash; they viewed the houseless people's situations as caused by extenuating circumstances, at least offering them sympathy. The first of these conditions appeared to be lack of public services. As one commenter expresses, "We need more community centers and programs for people" (Maddux, 2014a). This comment provides a depiction of the houseless individuals as humans rather than unsightly problems. The commenter implies that there needs to be more options for people who do not have places to sleep in Fort Collins. The solutions they provide also harken back to Fisher's (1973) moralistic take on the American Dream myth. Community centers are run typically by community members or local government. Either provider is composed of a group of people working together to better the area for everyone, which remains a collectivistic tendency (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Collectivistic solutions started to be popular for those commenters who view the houseless people in Fort Collins as products of society.

After the proposal to build a parking lot over Jefferson Park, many commenters expressed their disappointment with the idea. For them, a parking lot did not seem to solve the problem, but

rather displace it. One commenter offered a different suggestion by saying, "Or build a another [sic] homeless shelter... Seems more helpful [sic]" (Charon, 2014). Mirroring the previous commenter, this person identifies a need for reform around the city in order to help people of lower socioeconomic class. Their comment implies that the blame should not fall on the houseless individuals, but the community and the system. The community chose to change the refuge into a consumerist's modern day horse's stable. In regards to the American Dream, the moralistic duties of the community are not being met (Fisher, 1973). In order for the moralistic Dream to be achieved, each person needs to have equal access to accomplishing their goals. In this commenter's eyes, the community must collectivistically come together to aid those who do not have their basic needs met. The blame for this community involvement gets deeper as it shifts from the community as a whole to the culture of Fort Collins.

When certain commenters identified factors outside of the houseless people's control as the contributors to their unfortunate situations, another theme of blame manifested, pointing to the higher average socioeconomic class of Fort Collins compared to other U.S. cities. To reflect its economic prowess and its often favorable living conditions such as pleasant weather, closeness to National Parks, and abundance of craft breweries, Fort Collins is sometimes referred to as Choice City. Even though there are many reasons the people of the city view it as a paradise, *The Coloradoan* explains that the name "Choice City" was given primarily for its prosperous economy (Kyle, 2014). The irony of the nickname of a city with a large income gap does not fail to occur to some commenters in the debates about houselessness. For example, "this town has money, make a decent shelter instead of bitching about a problem you created in part [sic]" (Downing, 2014). The commenter calls out the affluence of the town as a reason that houselessness should not be a problem within the city. This commenter indicates that if a city has

a thriving enough economy to be called, "Choice City" it should be able to fund community resources to help those who cannot make ends meet. Yet it chooses to deliver to those who have instead of to those who have not. The commenter also notes that other people in the discussion complain about a societal problem while simultaneously placing blame on those commenters rather than think about their own involvement. Again, although the blame is not placed on houseless individuals, it is still placed away from the actual commenter. The following quote represents a number of comments pointing to the residents with higher incomes as those who should be blamed:

> Maybe we should consider another reason for homelessness [sic] in Fort Collins: The greedy, feeding frenzy, price of homes and rent in this community! A person can have a job, and STILL [sic] end up homeless. Sure, there are phony panhandlers out there, always will be; but if the affluent happen to feel a little guilt, F#ckin A [sic]! But most of them don't, and would soil themselves in a panic if rent controls were implemented in this 'Choice' city. (Woodruff, 2016).

This person points out that the upper-class people who have already achieved the American Dream are to blame. Essentially, if they have gotten what they strived for, they should help those who are still struggling. In addition to this point, the comment points to the extremely high cost of living in Fort Collins. Many people cannot afford homes in Fort Collins, as one must earn about $75,000 a year in order to be able to afford one (BBC Research and Consulting, 2014). The commenter acknowledges this problem, by explaining that people who hold jobs in the city can still be at risk for losing their homes at any time. The commenter then turns their attention to who they identify as higher-income. These people, the commenter implies, do not want rent control within the city because that would mean people with lower-incomes would be able to afford housing as well. Rent control would imply equality and collective good, which is the opposite of the values of the American Dream myth. The comment stresses this desire to keep the status quo is caused by the fact that more-affluent people are terrified of having their spaces

invaded by people with more modest incomes. To this commenter, rent control may solve the problem, but they blame the lack of empathy from those residents who might be able to make a change. They finish their comment with a line about the city's nickname of Choice City. This brings up an interesting notion about the name. Though it was originally chosen for its reference to economic growth, it has taken on other notions as time goes on. According to this commenter, the name refers to a sort of selection of the elite. They imply that some city-dwellers believe the city is of the highest quality, and lived in by people who know how high-quality it is—i.e.: clean air and water, employments and educational opportunities, or multiple outdoor recreational activities. Unfortunately, the commenter feels that some citizens act as though the city does not have room for people who do not contribute to that excellent quality. The next section indeed delineates the idea of how to get rid of houseless individuals within the city.

Blaming the Ignorant

> *"…Transients rely on the good hearted and gullible so they can lay around drink and do drugs" (Lloyd, 2014).*

Though the last section highlighted factors outside of the houseless people's control, many people in Fort Collins expressed ideas that the houseless people are in control of their fates and in fact, coerce other residents to aid them. The commenters often reiterated that other residents were supporting the houseless people so that they could continue reside in Fort Collins; if only other Fort Collins residents understood the toll on the city. This theme included larger messages about fellow citizen enabling, other inhabitant's lack of investigation into how much an individual houseless person deserved help, and houseless people's collective lack of intelligence to take help when they are offered it. To begin, as I read many of the comments, residents blamed other home owning residents for the abundant number of houseless individuals within the city because of their charity. These sentiments were echoed across articles, from many

different commenters, and so became a prevailing theme within the research project. Blaming those who gave support to those less fortunate.

The criticism directed toward other citizens ranged from not condemning the implied dangerous behavior of the houseless individuals all the way to suggesting some people were wasting money on the houseless people. The first comment I would like to examine suggests that there are too many ways for houseless people to get assistance in the town, which directly opposes the last section's commenters—who communicated that there were not enough assistance programs. The person writes, "The more shelters built and more programs offered the more homeless will flock to this area" (Riley, 2014a). First, the words in this comment suggest that this person does not want houseless individuals residing in Fort Collins. For this person, giving more places for people to sleep entices other houseless people (who have been represented as cheating, freeloading leeches) to come and take advantage of the people within the city. This is undesirable to the commenter, as they do not want houseless people taking further advantage of the community, as (in their eyes) they already receive enough help. The houseless are seen as taking advantage of the community's resources. Even though collectivistic solutions can be viable, socialism, communism, and other collective government types are fundamentally at odds with the American Dream myth. The reasons (though complicated) can stem from the individualistic morals espoused by the American Dream myth.

For this commenter, community outreach programs do not help lift the downtrodden out of a tough situation. This person's comment proposes that they believe that the moralistic American Dream myth (that states everyone should have an equal chanced at achieving their dream) has been realized (Fisher, 1973). This comment implies that assistance programs only hinder people from going through their individual struggle to achieve their dreams, because

without the struggle, they are not actually fulfilling the American Dream myth. If they use assistance programs, they are simply unfairly getting ahead of others, or even taking advantage of other people in order to get what they want. For this person, wellbeing can only be earned from hard, individual struggle.

Other resident's echo this idea with even more explicit language. For example, one committer succinctly puts it, "Quit enabling them and giving them money. Make them be responsible people and work for what they want" (Risacher, 2015). In this statement, the resident heavily implies the virtues of individualism. If the houseless people are ever to better their situation, it can only come from their own efforts. For this person, if another inhabitant of Fort Collins helps a houseless person, they are essentially teaching them bad habits. A person in the U.S. must go through their own journey of improving their life to truly achieve their goals. Otherwise, this commenter implies, they will become irresponsible and unable to handle problems in the future, or simply expect help again. This sentiment once again generalizes and blames the houseless individuals as if their avaricious experiences are universally the same.

The comment, though small, still generalizes both the residents who assist houseless people and the houseless people themselves. For this person, houseless people are naive, or uneducated, and need to be taught how life really is. For this commenter, if a person receives assistance, they will not be able to sustain themselves later on. Simply helping them without asking for anything in return essentially teaches the houseless individuals (who all universally act the same) that if they run into a problem, someone else will solve it for them. This person then places blame on those citizens who decide to help the houseless people.

The command to other people within the city to stop providing for the houseless came up repeatedly. In order to stop houseless people from learning that others will help them, people

need to stop believing that they need help. According to his commenter, other residents are being swindled into thinking that houseless people have different opportunities from any other person. If someone decides to help a houseless person, that person is too kind, too giving, or too unintelligent to see the houseless people as what they are: lying swindlers. The residents who provide help for the houseless are in fact so trusting that they will not even recognize the "true" evil nature of houseless people when they are harmed by them. For example, as one commenter relates:

> Haro, Why [sic] in the world would you not press charges for a felony crime that was committed against you?? Many transients at that park commit crime after crime and continue to get away with it because gullible people don't hold them accountable for their bad behavior (Curtis, 2014).

This quote references a previous comment, which detailed an incident someone had with a person in Jefferson Park. In this quote, the writer believes that by not punishing the undesirable behavior of the person at Jefferson Park, that person will act similarly in the future, perhaps with even more dire consequences. The person treats houseless individuals as misbehaving children who need to be taught lessons through positive and negative feedback. They believe that other residents are teaching the houseless people bad habits because they are not providing the punishment the houseless people apparently deserve or need. This commenter sees other residents as bleeding hearts who do not understand that giving help, or not punishing bad behavior, simply reinforces behavior that the commenter does not think the houseless people should be able to enact. Many commenters expressed frustrations to the effect that others in the community were too caring, and thus prolonged the stay of houseless individuals in Fort Collins because they were provided for. These continued sentiments tried to derive more credibility by citing individual instances where the houseless people had miscalculated and subtly revealed what many commenters believe to be their true nature: cheating liars who prey on the kindness of

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others. The comment below gives an example of this line of thinking, wherein the houseless people are seen as cheats:

> Something that opened my eyes awhile back, I had job openings for $15.00 per hour. One person after another passed, with comments to the effect of: "I make more than that on unemployment." Or I make more from the government (welfare, food stamps, etc.). Some were willing to work off the books, but did not want to loose [sic] their free ride. I will never give cash to a panhandler - just is enabling poor lifestyle choices (Hirt, 2016)

According to this commenter, they were also once blind to the cheating nature of the houseless people, and in order to help them, did the smart thing and offered them a long time solution instead of giving them a small bit of help. This commenter goes on to tell a story of how their help was refused because the houseless people knew they could receive similar benefits without putting in any work. The benefits stemmed from collectivistic community help that enabled them to be lazy without teaching them how to improve themselves. This moment enlightened the commenter that every houseless person must act the same, because most houseless people will take advantage of kind people who help them. The commenter ends their story with advice to other residents not to help the houseless people. The commenter acts as though they unknowingly tested the houseless people by offering a way to work towards their goals. When the work was declined, they knew not to help the houseless people. They discovered that anyone could determine which houseless people are trying to take advantage of others by simply not offering them free handouts, but rather ways to earn rewards. This person demands that from now on, people can help, but only if they do not give the houseless individuals something for free. Houseless people must prove they are truly desperate and willing to work in order to receive help. After reading comments like this one, another theme within the comments appeared that instructed others on how to spot a person in need from a devious, lazy scoundrel.

Another commenter suggests judging every person in need before deciding if they are worthy for help; a neoliberal take on individualism. Their instructions:

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The simple way to test if "homeless" people are free loaders or not. Is [sic] don't give them money offer a cup of coffee or some food[sic]. If they don't take it they aren't truly and the ends of it all [sic] and only there to get cash. There are plenty of jobs for everyone, the question is are you willing to do any job[sic]?... (Bennett, 2015).

This commenter gives a literal test to determine who is worthy of help and who is not.

Those who are picky and lazy will not pass the test and thus should not receive help. According to the moralistic American Dream myth, everyone needs to have equal opportunity at achieving their goals. However, this person privileges the materialistic dream by saying that the only people who deserve help getting to the equal playing field are those who pass this test (Fisher, 1973). The implication of this test is that if a houseless person takes money, they will spend it on unnecessary items that do not help them further their goals. They also might waste the money on their implied deviant lifestyle choices. For this and other commenters, a houseless person is not allowed to spend money on anything that might give them pleasure, as they are only permitted to spend it to help them work towards a sustainable lifestyle.

For this commenter, if a houseless person does not take food from a stranger for any reason, they do not want to work hard to attain a stable life. If they refuse food or coffee, they are revealing that they will let others work hard so they can be lazy or spend their money on recreational activities or objects. This is unacceptable in U.S. culture, because self-sustaining individual lifestyles are privileged, especially through the reiteration of the American Dream myth. However, these assumptions are much deeper than believing people are not doing their duty to work hard. They assume that the houseless people are also using other people's hard work to allow them to partake in deviant hobbies. The following quote represents a popular opinion that follows the same themes as the test the previous commenter suggested:

If they go to the shelters they can't take their hooch... They don't want shelters they just want to squat wherever they choose and to make all the productive citizens feel sorry for their plight and give them free money for more drugs or booze. Fell a strong need to help, give em [sic] a bottle of water or food.... NEVER $$$ (Hanley, 2014).

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The word productivity offers some insight into the mindset of the commenter. Productivity is a cornerstone of the American Dream myth; you provide for the country, the country provides for you. Therefore, productivity is a common sense benefit for everyone involved. Those who are productive, according to this person, have done their duty. They are not responsible for those who are not fulfilling their end of the deal. This does not keep in mind the mindset of the houseless people who may feel defeated in the drive to continue. This commenter tries to argue that collective community solutions to helping houseless people do not work because the houseless people do not want a place to sleep at night if it means they have to give up bad habits like drinking alcohol. For this commenter, all houseless people are addicted to drugs or alcohol and thus are undeserving of help in any way; be it through community programs or through individual benevolence. This commenter stresses that if someone cannot help their feelings and must be kind to the undeserving houseless people, they should do so in the least enabling way possible; by giving them something that keeps them alive and cannot be traded for the deviant choices like alcohol drinking or drug use.

This theme continues as other commenters suggest that when offering work to houseless people, the houseless individuals never seem to accept. In their eyes, all houseless people are naturally, and willingly lazy and that has been proved in these distinct encounters. Many writers give individual examples as a way to argue that houseless people do not like to work. The following person gives an account of why houseless people should not be trusted with money:

> Jenn, I too have offered to give someone a job in exchange for a shower, meal, laundry and a few bucks. Have had no takers. Offered to take them and pay for them to go to a rec center for a shower and offered to buy a meal. Still no takers… Those who refuse help unless it is cash don't want to change their lives. By giving them money we only enable them to continue that lifestyle. They probably make more an hour panhandling then most middle-class Americans earn. I will continue to offer help but I will not offer or give cash (Weber, 2016).

The commenter above cites many different times that they had offered help to someone, only to have them refuse it because the commenter assumes the houseless people did not want to work. They then go on to generalize that most houseless people enjoy relying on others kindness in order to get by. Importantly, the commenter never asked the houseless why they would not take help. The commenter theorized the answer (on multiple attempts) without letting the people answer for themselves; rendering them voiceless. Individualistic culture in the U.S. dictates that this lifestyle is not acceptable, and so this commenter believes that by giving houseless people cash, others teach them that living off benevolence is acceptable. This person believes that by relying on others, houseless people could make more money than even if they followed societies rules of securing a full time job. This option is seen as cheating the system because other people are seen as working harder in the way U.S. culture dictates they should than those asking for help. This commenter believes that the only way to live a happy life is to live the way U.S. citizens are supposed to; by securing a stable job. If the houseless people do not wish to have jobs, then they do not deserve to have a house, or even a voice to participate. This sentiment was echoed often by other commenters, who believe there were ample opportunities for work in Fort Collins that were not being taken advantage of:

> We are almost in desperate need for people to work at the Timnath Walmart, all shifts [sic]! I wish they would come get a job! But we do not have very many applicants. Blows my mind how many people do not want to work! (Carlson, 2016).

This commenter has a job, would like assistance, and also sees that many people in the community need jobs. The person is flabbergasted that there are many houseless people in the community without jobs, but there are not enough people applying for the jobs at Walmart. This person does not take into consideration the transportation required of people to get to Timnath (a town to the East of Fort Collins). Nor do they consider that the houseless people may already have jobs. The assumption—once again concluded without having a dialogue or feedback from

those actually affected—the person comes to is that the houseless people know the jobs in

Timnath are needed, but that they do not want the jobs, and are happy asking for handouts on the

street. For this and the other commenters of this section, the houseless people are unaware of

how much better off they would be if they had a job. In other words, they feel houseless people

are not particularly intelligent. They do not understand that living without a house is not only

culturally unacceptable, but also not as rewarding as living in the American Dream. This

sentiment of representing houseless people as unaware of their bad decisions continues in the

next section, in which commenters largely assume people are houseless in Fort Collins by

uneducated and un-intelligent choice.

Blaming the Complicit

> *"The majority of those 'people' are transients that shun the basic responsibility of caring for one's self and being a productive member of society" (Miech, 2014).*

Yet another theme in the comments blamed the abundance of houseless people in Fort

Collins on the actual houseless people themselves. The following section provides comments

that once again assumed that the houseless people were fully responsible for their situations.

Some commenters argued that houseless people had negative attributes like lack of work ethic, or

being complicit with relying on others, or even not having the mental capacity to make self-

serving decisions. In every case, the commenters tried to make these apparently obvious truths

about all houseless individuals by citing individual instances of houseless people embodying

these attributes, or giving simple statements that other people apparently did not want to accept

as truth. For example, one commenter succinctly states, "Most of the ones who gather there don't

want to work or better themselves [sic] (Opdyke, 2016a). This person assumes that no one in

Jefferson Park wants to work, do not have a job, and need to improve their lives. The commenter

does not take into account systemic problems within the United States. Other commenters agree,

with similar comments. Comments that overgeneralize houseless people as a whole, or that provide one-sided assumptions without contacting the actual affected population.

For example, someone proposes that not being houseless is as simple as getting a job. This commenter suggests, "How bout get a job... And then u don't have to be homeless...." (Gramma, 2015). For this person, anyone can easily secure a job. It seems as though applying for a job does not entail much work, and then houselessness can be overcome in this one simple step. This person does not take into account systemic problems that may prevent houseless people from obtaining a job like transportation, desirable appearances, work experience or expertise. They assume anyone can go out and get a job as long as they try. They go on to propose that the houseless people in Fort Collins do not desire to obtain a job. Houselessness to the commenter is a choice that the people of Jefferson Park are making. Choice was another theme that many commenters felt described the people in Jefferson Park.

For many commenters, houselessness seemed to be a conscious decision, and so did other aspects of the lives they saw the people in Jefferson Park having. For example, after others had commented that perhaps houseless people were suffering from addiction, someone replied with, "They are not forced into drug use and alcoholism!! [sic]" (Holloway, 2014). This sentiment was repeated whenever a commenter suggested how drug dependency might hinder houseless people; dependency was seen as free choice. Another commenter offered this message, "Well we have to live with our life choices. If you can't afford it maybe you shouldn't do it. I don't give a shit if they get sick we all deal with our own demons it's [sic] how you handle them. I'm pretty sure their addiction was a choice" (Eles, 2016). This person implies—similarly to the previous commenter and many others—that drug addiction was something that houseless people in Fort Collins decided was an acceptable problem to have. To this commenter, trying drugs in the first

place—or continuing to use them—stems only from personal choice. If someone wanted to stop their addiction, they could simply stop buying drugs or alcohol and end being addicted. Choice to be addicted, choice to try drugs, and even choice to remain houseless are all assumed to be real, conscious decisions of those residing in Jefferson Park. This sentiment leaves no room for sympathy for those who might need assistance. In fact, it perpetuates a rhetoric of blame, wherein the commenters continue to judge the houseless people and even tell them to leave the city.

After repeatedly blaming the houseless people for their supposed choices to remain houseless, many commenters go on to condemn them to leaving the community. For example, the commenter below writes:

> Born and raised in [Fort Collins]. Agree with mike [sic]. Every word [sic]. Oh no! They have to get a job and start contributing! And get sober?? Thats [sic] just asking too much.... Lmao [sic] you people who disagree and cant [sic] afford the prices can always go somewhere else. Its [sic] a fact. Fort Collins has become an expensive place to live. Deal with it. Cant [sic] afford it? Go somewhere else (Ryan, 2016).

The comment above weighs heavy with sarcasm as the commenter communicates that asking houseless people to get a job or overcome addiction seems to be too much for them. The person writes as though it is absurd that houseless people might have a hard time accomplishing either of those things. This person believes that everyone in the U.S. has equal access to the same opportunity as long as they put in work (Fisher, 1973). In their opinion, the more work you put in, the better your living situation is. Therefore, in order to live in Fort Collins (a place with high rent and housing prices) a person must have worked exceptionally hard. This person implies that anyone who cannot afford to live in Fort Collins is undeserving, did not work hard enough, or made choices that exempt them from living in the exclusive city. Part of the exclusion comes from the value of hard work in the U.S.'s individualistic culture (Fisher, 1973). In order for a person to prove himself or herself, they must demonstrate that they contribute to society or do

their part to help the economy. Strangely, that does not involve helping the houseless people in Fort Collins, because that would be enabling people instead of making society better. The focus on improving the city through individual work ethic was the final themes of blame espoused within the discussions about Jefferson Park.

Although the American Dream myth's influence was present in the discussion about Jefferson Park, it was most noticeable when commenter has used it specifically to argue why houseless people deserved to be without homes. Commenters frequently communicated that by working hard, you were improving society, and therefore helping the collective. However, these commenters felt as though the houseless people were avoiding this "duty" to the nation, and therefore deserved to be without a home.

The following quote reflected this growing sentiment among the commenters, "Individualism is a dream and an American right but being a productive member of the society you live in is an obligation for all" (Riley, 2014b). This statement literally uses the word individualism and declares it a right of people within the United States. This commenter believes that people in the U.S. should have the right to decide how their lives should be lived. They believe that people have choices, and can individually decide what is best for them. However, this person also views individualism as an exchange a person makes with the country. It is almost as if the U.S. (capitalistically) makes a transaction with each citizen. The transaction this person refers to is an agreement that if a citizen "is a productive member of society" meaning they boost the economy by contributing their own efforts, they will then have the freedom to determine their own individual path. This commenter implies further that each person is aware of this mutual exchange. Therefore, if the people of Jefferson Park do not have places to sleep, it is because they did not hold up their end of the obvious and well-known exchange. This commenter

believes that the people of Jefferson Park know they need to work traditional jobs, but choose not to, and still think they deserve to achieve whatever life they wish for. This person argues that these individuals choose to ignore the universal truth of the American Dream, and so live a less-desirable life because of their own poor life choice.

This work exchange is assumed through many of the other comments as well. Universally, it seems to be accepted by many that there exists an equivalent American Dream exchange, but that the houseless people do not want to hold up their end of the bargain. For example, this person tries to teach readers that:

> No one is responsible for your happiness or your way of life-except you. If you choose to be a druggie, drunk or bum - then that's what you get. If you are truly mentally ill there are plenty of services out there for you to access. People are not going to pay for you to sit on your ass in the park all day while they go and earn a paycheck - Taxpayers already pay enough. Life isn't free...it's YOUR responsibility to take care of yourself and your family if you have one (Arzt, 2014).

This person attempts to explain that the key to happiness in the U.S. stems from work ethic, a prominent value in U.S. culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). For the commenter, a joyful life comes at the cost of the level of work put towards your goals. They do not believe in collectivistic solutions to helping some people over others, as that would be unfair. Anyone who pays taxes already gives too much money for collective structures designed to help others, and that houseless people do not deserve further assistance. The commenter also implies that houseless people choose to be lazy, to drink alcohol or to use drugs, and therefore those people should exempt from receiving help from anyone. They reiterate once again that a person's wellbeing within the U.S. is an individual responsibility that each person should understand. Again, the commenter implies that in the U.S., everyone effectively signs an agreement that they will live a desirable life as long as they work hard for their own dreams. The commenters repeat this seemingly obvious exchange between the country and its citizens often.

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While wielding the American Dream myth as their evidence, the commenters at times go on to blame the houseless individuals for their situations because they are too lazy to hold up their end of the Dream myth or have a mindset that they deserve their dreams when they have not worked hard enough. One person says, "Personal responsibility makes for happy individuals - not a self-indulgent entitlement mentality. It's not someone else's job to make others 'happy' by spending and spending" (Arzt, 2015). This commenter, as many others have echoed, explains that because of their entitled attitudes, people who have less desirable lives have only themselves to blame. If the houseless people did not buy excessive or unnecessary items, they might be able to afford a house. If the houseless people did not feel as though they deserved a stable life, they might have one. If they only realized that it was their responsibility to help themselves, and not rely on others, their lives would be exactly as steady as everyone else's. This person assumes that all houseless individuals either do not want to take responsibility for their situations, or enjoy living off the work of other people. In this person's eyes, houseless people will never achieve happiness unless they follow the materialistic American Dream myth (Fisher, 1973), obtain a job, put in effort, and hold up their end of the bargain that the U.S. offers. For the commenters, the houseless individuals have no one to blame but themselves, they simply do not understand the opportunity they are afforded in the great country of the United States.

Conclusion

This chapter explored of the rhetoric of blame manifested within the discussions about houseless people in Fort Collins. While the blame varied from being given to the entitled higher-income citizens, the citizens who were too caring, or the houseless people, the commenters placed responsibility on other people to better the situation. The commenters never wrote about how the situation motivated themselves to act, or how they individually could make a difference.

Solutions never seemed to be agreed upon. As these threads started to weave together, the reason for lack of productive discussion appeared over and over again. While commenters in general agreed that there were ways to overcome houselessness in Fort Collins, those solutions were overshadowed by hypotheses about the source of the problem. Discussion largely speculated about the contributing factors of houselessness without giving probable solutions. If a solution was proposed, it never included concrete steps the commenter themselves could take.

In particular, the first part, which actually shifted the blame away from the houseless people still did not afford them any self- respect, agency or self-representation. The commenters, while advocating for the houseless people, did not actively get statements for them; nor did they accept any personal responsibility in the situation. By shifting blame rather than offering solutions, the commenters are avoiding having to work to change the situation either. Shifting the blame was consistent through the analysis process, and the first section's commenters were not the only ones to avoid responsibility. Each theme within the rhetoric of blame allowed commenters to place responsibility on other people to change the plights of the houseless people in Fort Collins. For some, the responsibility still lied with the houseless people themselves.

As many of the commenters saw the houseless people as trying to cheat the capitalistic system of the United States, the American Dream myth was especially pertinent in the rhetoric of blame. Most commenters believed without question that a person should work hard for materialistic goals. This sentiment again, supported previous American Dream myth scholarship that identifies the unquestioned faith U.S. citizens have in the validity of the myth(Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). This analysis adds that a U.S. citizen is obligated to work a typical job, to pay taxes, to buy materialistic items, and to understand that some people simply

do not wish to follow the Dream, and therefore should be left behind. These ideals can be traced within U.S. culture and more explicitly through the Neoliberal turn the U.S. took in the late 1970's. In the conclusion chapter, the connections between this analysis and previous scholarship will become clearer.

CHAPTER SIX – THEORETICAL CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Review of Analysis

The purpose of this thesis was to understand and analyze how the American Dream myth—and its promotion of individualistic culture—manifests within debates among local U.S. citizens on the subject of houselessness. The previous chapters offered a comprehensive, multi-layered analysis of a U.S. community's conversation and debates about houseless people, and examined themes that were focal in those conversations and debates. In this final chapter, I aim to unravel the implications and conclusions that citizens in general and scholars in particular can gain from this project. First, I will examine the larger repercussions of each of the three themes within the discussions about Fort Collins houseless people. In order to understand the full impact of this analysis, I will first review the suggestions of the themes found in the analysis chapters.

As demonstrated in chapter 3, agency and voice are problematic phenomena in the debates because the houseless people do not have agency nor voice. Since people in the U.S. have a legal right to speak freely, those who take advantage of the right to speak provide examples of who has agency in the country. The chapter revealed that those who had the agency to add their voice to the discussions about houseless people in Fort Collins were not the affected and therefore not the actual houseless people who were directly affected by the debates. These commenters largely provided individualistic arguments that heavily implied the American Dream myth's unquestioning existence. This argument was the most represented as well the most "liked" (Barash, et. all, 2010) throughout the discussions. As the most represented and agreed with arguments, those who held individualistic beliefs held the most agency. In contrast, people whose lifestyles were being discussed within the debates—the houseless people in Fort Collins—

did not have agency; as there were only two currently houseless people who had agency to raise their voices in these discussions. These two comments also added appeals to the larger audience to consider moralistic (Fisher, 1973), or collectivistic solutions to houselessness. Unfortunately, as it happens with many voices that hold little agency, both of these comments received hardly any support. Many marginalized commenters do not raise their voices for fear of criticism (Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson, 2016). Despite these two commenters braving the stigma, one comment by a houseless person was completely ignored, and the other was questioned and condemned.

The agency chapter unfortunately revealed that those who have the privilege to speak systematically reinforced the most popular arguments—or those individualistic arguments— through repetition and elaboration. Meanwhile, the arguments that offered new or competing ideals—or collectivistic arguments—were further devalued. Despite this echochamber effect, it can be noted that perhaps some people still saw those comments arguing against the majority and were at least exposed to them (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Garrett, 2009). Part of the devaluation occurred because of the poor standing that houseless people have in the community. After understanding how houseless people continued to have little to no agency, even in public online space, the ways in which houseless people were represented shed more light on attitudes in the community about houseless individuals.

In the chapter covering the representation of houseless individuals in Fort Collins, the debates revealed how lower-income people in Fort Collins were constructed. At first, trends revealed houseless people to be seen universally as dirty or unclean, and devoid of individual experience. Houseless people were seen as one entity rather than many different people with a range of characteristics. As analysis continued, that representation devolved into depicting

houseless people as unhuman. The houseless residents were constructed as wasteful and unwanted objects that crowded the town. These sentiments grew into demonizing the houseless people. Testimony was provided—that went largely uncontested—wherein houseless people were seen as destructive and who will take advantage of other citizens. These representations furthered ideas that the houseless people as individuals were deviant and thus undeserving of community help. By representing these people as unworthy and even dangerous, commenters could focus on blame instead of resolution.

The fifth chapter examined how the discussions focused on blaming others for the root of the large houseless population within the city rather than discussing how to ease the situation. Though some commenters believed that there were systemic factors hindering some residents from having places to sleep, they still placed blame away from themselves. The trend was significant because they were thus absolved of any guilt or need to take action. Often, this rhetoric of blame relied on the inherent and accepted "truth" of the American Dream myth, as most reasons the blame was placed on others was because they were not following the myth. Mostly, commenters saw the individuals as not working hard towards their goals. They also believed the houseless people were given unfair advantages from other residents, thus invalidating the houseless people's participation in the journey for their dreams. Again, whether the blame was placed on other residents in the city, systemic problems, or the houseless people, the shifting of blame allowed the commenters to feel liberated of responsibility or need to act.

Illuminations about the Rhetors and Comments Sections as Rhetorical Artifacts

From this analysis, we have learned more about those who have spoken in these debates and what the online comment sections offer those who participate and view them. Overall, the most boisterous commenters tended to espouse messages that supported the American Dream

myth—and thus individualistic ideals—while condemning collectivistic solutions and houseless individuals. These commenters had the most agency and power to frame others and when using that power, they framed people with lower incomes as failures of the American Dream and thus deserving of houselessness. The rhetors made arguments that depicted houseless people as demonic and intrusive; almost as though they were an invasive species in the commenters' prized ecosystem. Unfortunately, these representations went largely uncontested within the online space, which helps teach scholars more about online comments sections and echochambers.

As rhetorical artifacts, comments sections on the internet seemed to provide a fruitful place to explore public spheres. Though this space was initially thought to be inclusive for all types of citizens, a small minority of people had enough agency to participate in the discussions. The reason for this dominance of one particular mindset can be hypothesized. So though houseless people within Fort Collins may have access to the internet through public services like libraries, it is important to note the immediacy of their hierarchy of needs. As Maslow (1942) explained, when our most basic of needs are not being met, our motivation spurs us to obtain those needs above everything else. Seeing as houseless people do not have stable places to sleep, they do not have the luxury of speaking about their situations when the time for debate arises. Even if they are present in the discussion, Spiral of Silence theory explains how their opinions would contradict majority opinions and so they may feel as though they should not speak (West & Turner, 2014). Finally, some public sphere scholarship has hinted that the controversial nature of online comments sections can hinder their applicability as public spheres (Jacobson, Myung, and Johnson, 2016; Weber, 2014; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, 2016; Garrett, 2009). Online comments sections should thus be reexamined to evaluate how inclusive they are for people with different opinions or marginalized identities.

Houseless and Transient People

This project has also elaborated upon the wealth of literature about houselessness. Its unique contribution came from the fact that it was conducted on the edge of a new political reality, which significantly shifted the balance between market economy or business activism and humanitarian activism. It also brought the idea of equality and American myth to a completely new level with different priorities among those who have and have not. What it did not elaborate on however, was scholarship regarding transient people.

This case study was unique in that it offered a perspective on transient people. During this project, learning about transient people from previous scholarship was nearly impossible. Even finding statistics on people with travelling lifestyles were not accessible, pointing to the difficulty in surveying people who travel. Scholarship has covered migrant people, placelessness, and modern nomadic people, but transient people seemed invisible to the scholarly community. This lack of research makes me wonder if we are underserving this community. Scholarship needs to begin to address the representation of transient people in multiple avenues.

The Rhetoric of the Dream and Socioeconomic Inequality

Previous scholarship had suggested that U.S. citizens might not fully understand the large socioeconomic disparities in the country because of the continual reinterpretation of the American Dream myth implying that everyone has an equal chance at success (Choo & Tan, 2007; Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013, Pederson, 2013; Goldstein, 2001; Jandt, 2010; Kingfisher, 2001; Goode, 2001). Some of this scholarship in particular had shown that the continual mediated representations of all types of people accomplishing their goals seemed like proof that the American Dream myth was a tangible part of being in the country (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013). Others studied citizens and found that people in the U.S. see the need

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to value materialism, and even blame those of lower-classes for their situations because of their belief in the American Dream myth (Chen, Simmons, & Kang, 2015; Choo & Tan, 2007). Largely, my analysis of the discussions surrounding houseless people in Fort Collins echoed similar attitudes, and it seems the general population has not yet received the previous scholarship. Citizens of the U.S. need to understand the reality of life within the country without the rose-colored glasses of the American Dream. Without the understanding of systemic socioeconomic inequality, there is not motivation to change those systems. With greater understanding of the actual impediments for people with lower-incomes, citizens can begin to actualize the values of the American Dream myth: to ensure every person has equal opportunity.

Most commenters used the rhetoric of blame, as well as poor representations of houseless individuals to argue that houseless people do not have shelter because of their choices or inherent characteristics. In fact, the American Dream myth was typically utilized as evidence to support these ideas. The debaters insinuated that everyone in the U.S. has opportunity for stable lives as long as they put in effort. The commenters even mirrored previous research in retelling individual or token stories of former houseless people as examples of those who had secured housing because they had followed the American Dream myth's example (Cloud, 1996). In this project's analysis, the comments showed the hegemonic nature of the rhetoric behind the American Dream myth remains powerful. Citizens believe it to be a fact of life in America, and therefore, the myth is shaping the way the residents of the U.S. view lower-income citizens. The insistent truth of the American Dream myth allowed people to demonize lower-income people without much contest. Though this study clarified these attitudes, it did not enlighten scholarship regarding citizen's views of intersectional class issues. More questions need to be pointed in that direction.

Some scholarship regarding the American Dream myth has pointed to how important the intersection of race and class is when discussing the American Dream myth (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013). Smith's (2009) statement that the American Dream myth "minimizes, even ignores, the ongoing political and economic issues of racism and class struggle in American society" (p. 236) provides similar sentiments. As Allen (2010) has also pointed out, race and class are inseparable influences when speaking about socioeconomic inequality. In this study, Fort Collins provided a site that remained disproportionately white, with poverty rates soaring highest for Black residents and the lowest for White residents (BBC Research and Consulting, 2014). People of color also were more at risk for chronic houselessness (Homeward 2020, 2015). These statistics imply that the overall population of houseless people in Fort Collins does not align with the general population of the town; most people who are houseless are people of color. The information reveals that marginalized identities play a role in who most often becomes houseless and who does not. This reality does not align with how comments framed houseless people, who ignored race and ethnicity entirely.

Despite the statistics of houselessness in Fort Collins showing intersectionality, race was never mentioned within the debates. As if completely ignorant to it, none of the commenters mentioned this relationship between poverty in Fort Collins and race. The lack of discussion surrounding this fact supported the previous research that the rhetoric of the American Dream myth perpetuates post-racist ideas. Commenters did not see race as a factor in the situation despite its very apparent influence. I argue that this relationship and awareness should be studied further. Since the goal of this project did not focus on race specifically—a significant limitation of this study—its findings in that area were unsubstantial. Nevertheless, the lack of discussion about race within the debates presents an alarming question about if post-racism is continually

perpetuated through American Dream myth rhetoric in everyday situations. Media and rhetorical scholarship surrounding the American Dream myth specifically addressed how ethnicity was inherently tied to the American Dream myth narratives (Bineham, 2015; Sowards & Pineda, 2013; Chen, Simmons, & Kang, 2015). In the repeated American Dream myth representations, equality is depicted as historically fought for and won; almost proof racial equality has been attained (Sowards & Pineda, 2013). This is a strategic invisibility of whiteness; a socially accepted privilege. It is not talked about because it is the norm. Houselessness overrides the discussion of race, even though the two are inherently tied. These conclusions, combined with the lack of comments in this project about ethnicity and houselessness indicate that the U.S. population may indeed have no idea how inexcusably tied race and social class are within our country. This revelation is frightening, because once again, if the majority of citizens are unaware of the systemic barriers impeding people with marginalized identities, there is no reason for us to change the way the system functions. In order to achieve the equality that the American Dream myth so promises, there must be awareness that there is currently inequality between people of different ethnicities. Otherwise, citizens hear cries for help as cries for unfair advantage over others; silencing them from adding their voices.

Race was not the only identity to be ignored within these debates however; youth, survivors of domestic abuse, and people with mental disabilities also make up a large part of the houseless population in Fort Collins (BBC Research and Consulting, 2014; Homeward 2020, 2015). While some commenters mentioned substance addiction and others blamed houseless youth for their situations (Kyle, 2016), these ideas were never discussed at length or repeated enough to justify themes worthy of exploration in this project; demonstrating once again the ignorance of commenters to the connection between houselessness and other marginalized

identities. Similarly to the limitation regarding the exploration into the influences of the American Dream myth rhetoric on race, this study was constrained to examining representations of class, and thus did not focus on the lack of citizen awareness of intersection of class and other identities. This leaves room for future scholars to focus on disability, gender, age, and mental health in future American Dream myth studies. The discipline would benefit greatly from data examining how citizens view these intersections and if the American Dream myth similarly masks systemic inequalities related to such identities. This analysis brings up comparable lines of questioning for future studies.

Future Questions and Studies

The surprising lack of discussion surrounding intersectional identities relating to class was not the only question that deserves elaboration by academia. The largest contribution to scholarship of this analysis was that in general, commenters believed the American Dream myth to be a true phenomenon within the U.S.; this analysis however does not prove that the American Dream myth is blindly accepted by all citizens, and in all capacities. In this analysis, Fisher's (1973) moralistic and materialistic versions of the dream both received support from commenters. The moralistic side (which reminds citizens that they should all *equally* be able to attain their goals) values freedom as it allows everyone to be unrestricted by law. The materialistic side (which indicates we all should work hard for our own *individual* goals) values freedom and ability as they allow each person to accomplish what they please. In the analysis from this project, though both the moralistic and materialistic versions of the myth were represented, one side was particularly respected.

In the analysis, citizens largely believed and supported the idea that each person residing in the U.S. is afforded the same rights and opportunities. If the moralistic Dream has been

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accomplished in the country, essentially there is no need for collective solutions anymore.

Coming together as one is seen as an outdated practice that was necessary in the past to grant

certain people (ie: people of color, the LGBTQIA community, people with disabilities, women,

etc) the same rights as everyone else. Since most commenters communicated that equal

opportunity seemed to be provided for all, the moralistic side of the American Dream myth

inherently seems to be accepted as achieved. Meanwhile, support for the materialistic American

Dream myth seems to be in need of continual reaffirmation.

If the moralistic Dream seems to have been achieved, the materialistic side of the Dream

myth remains a continual piece of U.S. culture that must be achieved by each person. This

privileging was seen throughout the discussions about homelessness in Fort Collins. Future

studies need to examine this mindset further. Was this discussion an isolated incident where the

community seemed to privilege the materialistic Dream? Does the culture at large only tend to

emphasize the materialistic Dream, or are there instances where the moralistic Dream has been

privileged as well? If the citizens of the U.S. truly believe the moralistic Dream has been

achieved, are there ways to use the American Dream myth to point out systemic inequalities?

Would utilizing the moralistic Dream myth as a rhetorical device ever provide enough support to

promote collectivistic solutions within the U.S.? These questions become even more pertinent

when proposed in the current political climate.

Long Term Political and Social Consequences

During the process of constructing this thesis, I could not help but be struck by the

connection between the analysis of these debates, the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and the

U.S.'s cultural ties to Neoliberal idealism. The analysis suggests that when speaking about

houseless people in Fort Collins, citizens tend to view economic stability as the responsibility of

the individual in the United States. They did not view socioeconomic inequality as a systemic problem, and the American Dream myth informed their ideas that the opportunities afforded to everyone in the country was equal with no exceptions. To the commenters, houseless people were simply too lazy or too unintelligent to be able to afford a house. Suggestions to create more collective institutions to help people of lower class were seen as naïve, and even enabling decisions. These ideas further strengthen the U.S.'s relationship with Neoliberalism. In neoliberalist states, "individuals are supposedly free to choose, they are not supposed to choose to construct strong collective institutions" (Harvey, 2005, p. 69). In this manner, the large majority of the population views their individual freedoms as truths, while not having an awareness of how those freedoms are decided upon by the economic elite.

For many citizens, because the American Dream myth is seen as a reality, and thus the reason we have free communication and election, giving a certain amount of power to the authorities to protect our grand bargain seems a small price to pay. It is this unquestioned belief in the American Dream myth that allows the perpetual shadowing of, "…the grim realities of the restoration or reconstruction of naked class power…" (Harvey, 2005, p. 119). The election of Donald Trump, the real estate tycoon, reflects the growing acceptance of Neoliberal ideology within the nation. The president, without any previous legal or governmental experience, was elected largely upon the basis of his knowledge of business. In his election, the country expressed its value for those who can seemingly dominate the American Dream journey, gaining excessive amount of money and power. While economic elites like the president are venerated for their success, people of lower classes are portrayed as failures of the American Dream myth.

In this analysis, it became clearer that U.S. citizens believe that every resident is afforded the same amount of opportunity. Most believed those who had not achieved stable lives had

simply not lived up to the expectations of the myth. Scholarship in the past had pointed to the immense stigma that lower-income and houseless individuals faced in the U.S. (Rayburn & Guittar, 2013). The analysis furthered these ideas, as houseless individuals were repeatedly made to seem inferior in many ways and for multiple reasons. As the representation and blame for these individuals continues to be vehemently similar, the discrimination against houseless people within the U.S. becomes clearer. Almost without exception, houseless people are largely depicted as dangerous, lazy, and even inhuman.

Because economic inequality is in fact a systemic problem (Allen, 2010), this representation is not only unfair, but has real consequences. If the lack of house or income is seen as the fault of an individual, there is no motivation for communities to come together and address the systemic problems influencing the growing number of houseless citizens in the country. There is also no need to discuss collective solutions, and even individuals who choose to help the less fortunate are seen as weak, naïve or enabling. Those suffering from class inequality will continue to be stigmatized, and awareness of the way class manifests within the country will continue to be ignored. People will be left behind at no fault of their own.

Importance to Communication Studies

In the field of communication, communication between different cultures remains pertinent, especially in our increasingly globalized world. In this research project, intercultural communication was enlightened to some of the effects of extreme individualistic culture within the United States. When the country as a whole values the needs of individuals—to the extreme—over the responsibility of the collective, some people are going to be less privileged. In the case of the United States, individualism is used as evidence to portray the situations of those who do not own homes as their own choice or fault. United States citizens privilege

individualism so dearly that it is even used as proof to argue that providing assistance to others is detrimental to the helper *and* the receiver. This extreme favoring of individualism changes the way we communicate, challenge ideas, and rectify situations like houselessness. With this knowledge, communication scholars should keep in mind the extent of the American Dream and individualism on communication within the United States in order to discern if it plays a role in the communication phenomena they study.

Societal Needs

This study provides information about how U.S. culture negatively frames people who make lower-incomes, as well as those who do not have places to sleep. As people in the U.S., it is our responsibility to understand this information as we navigate the realities of American life. We must remain aware of the systemic socioeconomic inequality that the American Dream myth perpetuates in media, history, and even local debates. We must be prepared to acknowledge the consequences and unequal distributions of our freedoms. Citizens who utilize this knowledge can be better prepared to combat arguments utilizing the American Dream myth as evidence for blaming lower-income citizens. Through discussion of the myth, residents can dampen the harm of its influence on already marginalized populations. Taking knowledge from this project, we also have to remember the lack of agency of other people.

The analysis on agency teaches us that houseless individuals do not get to speak for themselves. Understanding others' experiences can better tell us about their struggles and their needs from the community. We should take time to hear their voices, and help them obtain agency within our community. As we learn more from them, we can better navigate our own lives and the society we live in. This knowledge alone does not fully equip us however, and we should be prepared to take further steps.

As shown within the analysis, even those citizens who were aware of the unequal access to opportunity between people in the U.S. often placed blame away from themselves. In this manner, they were absolved of guilt and felt no need to take concrete steps to help others. Knowing the tendency to blame others and not take action gives us a renewed responsibility. We should not just remain aware of inequality, but also use our privilege to help those in need. Sign up to volunteer in your community, donate to your shelters, and make calls to your representatives to tell them how much change still needs to be made. Only through education and action can improvement truly be made.

Though these steps take time, it is a continual privilege as citizens of a country with ideals of equality to remind each other that the battle is not yet won. It is an opportunity to put in the work for a better life. However, it should not just be for ourselves; it needs to be for our fellow and future U.S. residents as well. We should demonstrate that humanity is kind, even if it is slow to change.[2]

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[2] My own personal gain as an author of a thesis on houselessness is not lost on me. In studying how people frame houseless people in Fort Collins, I will have obtained a master's degree, thus furthering my own economic stability in the United States. In the hope to give thanks for this opportunity, as well as to inspire others of the importance of community outreach, I will be volunteering with Fort Collins Rescue Mission after the thesis defense. I invite readers of this thesis to take similar action by learning how you can help at: https://www.fortcollinsrescuemission.org/

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