Dropouts on the Frontier: T.C. Boyle's *Drop City*

Verena Adamik

Abstract: This essay will explore the depiction of the hippie movement in the novel *Drop City* by T.C. Boyle. Drawing on the theoretical background of the 1960s counterculture formulated by Stuart Hall, I will trace how the novel depicts the development of the dropout community from their members' initial desire to move outside of society to a movement back towards the very system that was rejected beforehand by reading the counterculture against the paradigm of the frontier.

Keywords: counterculture, frontier, 1960s, wilderness, T.C. Boyle, *Drop City*

The novel *Drop City* (2003) by T.C. Boyle depicts independent communities as unsustainable concepts. The initially established space in which 'mainstream' society is supposed to be avoided confronts the members of the commune with the hardship of rural life. In the beginning of the novel, the protagonists appear to create their own world. These illusions are shattered through the introduction of impotence, dearth and death. Thus, leaving 'civilization' is portrayed as dangerous. Instead, the two communities depicted in the novel end up recreating what they strove to abandon. This re-civilization of the dropouts is reminiscent of the frontier myth, in which the confrontation with the wilderness leads ultimately to an expansion of 'civilized' territory. In the following, I will look at the depictions of the two different dropout communities in *Drop City*, and their quick fall from their ideals which reveals an incapability to deal with issues such as boredom, loneliness, disease, hunger, violence, and crime. The illusion of an initially established 'new' world and the desired transition from an 'inside' to an 'outside' of society does not persist. I will argue that the dissenters in Boyle's novel are presented as behaving in a way that can be related to the myth of the frontier, and that this ultimately hinders their attempt at contesting 'civilization.'

Drop City starts out by describing life in a hippie commune in California through the eyes of a young woman called Star. She came to the commune with her friend and lover Ronnie, also called Pan, whose perspective is given in other chapters. The third focalizer in the commune is Marco, a newcomer to Drop City. In the course of the novel, Star and Marco

begin a relationship, and Star distances herself from Ronnie/Pan. Meanwhile, the commune encounters various problems with law enforcement in California, and therefore its "guru" (Boyle 183)[1] Norm decides to move to a remote piece of land in Alaska, close to the fictional city of Boynton. When the hippies arrive in Boynton, the loosely organized community there initially rejects them.

The second storyline is situated in Boynton's scattered community in Alaska. Focalization alternates between Sess and Pamela. Sess is a man who has decided to live in a self-built cabin, running a trap line to earn the little money he needs to purchase goods that he cannot produce himself. Pamela wishes to live a similarly secluded life. Having advertised for a husband in the paper, she meets Sess, marries him, and joins him in his cabin.

Over the course of the novel the two communities change. Some members of the commune leave, while others establish better relations with the people in Boynton, and learn from them how to survive in the Alaskan wilderness. However, the enmity between Marco and Ronnie/Pan, and the violent conflict between Sess and Bosky, another member of the Alaskan community, escalate. This leads to a final showdown in which Ronnie/Pan and Bosky die. The novel ends on Christmas, with the new commune celebrating together with Pamela, who is expecting her first child.

Hippies and the Frontier

For the following reading, Stuart Hall's 1968 publication *The Hippies: An American Moment* and his approach towards the hippie counterculture as dropouts will be considered. Hall argues that the use of 'drop out' in Timothy Leary's famous slogan "Tune in, Turn On, Drop Out" illustrates and promotes the association of the 1960s counterculture with social rejects as "the symbolic gesture of withdrawal from the commonplace routines of their generation" (4-5). This link between the voluntary outsiders and those struggling to meet the requirements of the educational system is then developed to include an association with poverty, exoticism, mysticism, withdrawal, rural traditions, drug addicts etc. (Hall 5-13; for a

[1] *Drop City* will be cited as *DC* in subsequent references.

more complete list cf. Hall 22). Hall argues that the hippies choose knowingly and actively in a "symbolic gesture" (4) lifestyles that are considered marginal, such as those of the "dispossessed" (25), and are therefore "deviant" (6).[2] He calls this strategy "staged deviance" (6) and argues that it is a testing of a "new value system" (22) that counters that of the middle class. Their "identification with groups of the deprived or disadvantaged" (Hall 4), not the fact that they are deprived or disadvantaged themselves, marks their movement to the outside.

The countercultural movement of the 1960s is often viewed in this way as 'staging deviance' while originating from "middle-class suburbia" (Hall 6). Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, editors of *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s* (2002)*,* argue along those lines:

> Of course, the postscarcity orientation of many so-called hippies betrayed the white middle-class constituency of the counterculture. […] only white Americans who unthinkingly took material comfort and security for granted would engage in such symbolic actions. (12)

In a similar vein, Anselm Franke and Diederich Diederichsen have argued that especially the communal movement of the 1960s "remained largely confined to an affluent white middle class" (9). The hippie dropouts can therefore be understood as 'insiders' who migrate to the margins. Hence, opposing categories such as 'privileged' and 'deprived' come into direct opposition and interaction through 'staged deviance.'

Another aspect of the 1960s counterculture, especially of its communal movement, has been observed by Colin Hutchinson in his essay "Cult Fiction" (2008): "The flight […]from hostility and corruption has, since the time of the Founding Fathers, through Brigham Young and up until the millennial cults of more recent years, marked a secessionist reflex within the American psyche" (35). For Hutchinson, communalism is part of the historical narrative of the United States:[3] "A frequent alternative to apocalypse in terms of the dynamics of

[2] Or, as Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter have phrased it: "One way of articulating the central idea of the counterculture is simply to say that it collapsed the distinction between deviance and dissent" (83).

[3] Hutchinson argues that seeing independent communities as an American tradition, as well as a means to express dissent, has recently been reconsidered, and led to a popularity of the topic of the commune. "This tendency towards withdrawal from, rather than participation within, the social, political and cultural mainstream has become an important topic within contemporary American fiction, as writers

secessionist communities is the myth of a return to an 'authentic' or 'original' American order that has been superseded by a nation in the grip of hostile, treacherous conspiracies" (44). Thus the dropouts' "repertoire of ways of confronting and contesting society" (Hall 21) can be understood to be connected to an "idealized pioneer age" (Hutchinson 45) and to the frontier myth. Richard Slotkin has argued that this myth is connected to an inevitable longing "to create a unified and compelling vision of the total American experience" (19). This longing leads to a repeated evocation of certain "instances of experience" (Slotkin 20) in American literature. Primary among these often-evoked instances is the (mythical) frontier experience, as Hutchinson, Slotkin, William Cronon and most famously Frederick Jackson Turner (amongst others) have argued. Paradoxically, the confrontations with and contestations of society can thus be constructed to be part of a 'unified' American experience.

The frontier provides the space for "rugged individualism" (Cronon 77). This individualism is connected to the idea of "unlimited opportunity for the strong" (Slotkin 5) for re-invention, and

> [t]he flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness [which] represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. (Cronon 80; cf. also Slotkin 3)

Thus, the wilderness is imagined to provide a space outside of 'history,' a place to start anew, which ties into "the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (Lewis 5), the 'American Adam' that R.W.B. Lewis describes. Hall attributes a similarly re-inventive spirit to the hippies. He argues that,

> in part Hippie individualism is also rooted in the same soil as the American Constitution and the manifold myths of the free enterprise, every-man-his-own-President society. From these roots many wild and contradictory variants have flowered—populism, agrarian utopianism, frontierism […]. The hippies are yet

---

have come to re-assess the individualistic and libertarian discourses of both the counter-culture of the 1960s and the ascendancy of the New Right during the 1980s" (35).

> another, even wilder, blossoming of the same secret ideal: the essential American dream of innocence. (17)

However, as the reading below will illustrate, this connection to the 'roots' of U.S. national identity is problematic. It partially negates the possibilities for divarication from society, because the frontier at the wilderness is a place "of national renewal" (Cronon 76), and the presumed 'innocence' leads to an "unconscious repetition […] [of] the old conflicts, programs and discoveries" (Lewis 9). While "at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man" (Turner 4), eventually the wilderness is subdued and the territory, in this case American territory, is enlarged. The frontier provides "the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be an American" (Cronon 76), and "prepares the way for civilization" (Cronon 77). The frontier is therefore always temporary, as wilderness is "mastered" (Slotkin 4) in order to establish civilization. Thus, the problematic connection between dropouts and the frontier myth lies in illusions concerning the 'outside' (be it poverty, as exemplified above, or the wilderness):

> the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. […] The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living—urban folk for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field. (Cronon 80)

Consequently, those who seek this 'exterior' space are bound to establish there the 'inside' they meant to leave.

Such connections between the hippie dropouts and the frontiersmen mean that dropping out is temporary, and that eventually the liminal space will become affirmative of 'civilized' structures. In the following, I will argue that Boyle establishes similarities between dropping out and the frontier myth, and that the last chapters of the novel imply that 'civilization' is being re-established after it has been perceived to be in crisis. *Drop City* therefore suggests that any escape from the 'inside' of civilization, even if it is to Alaska, "the last frontier" (Kollin 331), is futile. Instead of providing "a model of future possibilities" (Hall 23), the commune's original formation is portrayed as resolving itself, and in its place the two communities merge into one community that aligns with 'traditional' American identity.

Dropping Out

The novel introduces all of its protagonists as dropouts. As the following paragraphs will show, their rural lifestyle is described as being outside of conventions such as the precise tracking of dates and times or fixed identities. Both the commune in California and the forest dwellers in Alaska are modifying and playing with these conventions, which indicates the attempt to create "scenes" (Hall 26), in which "counter-values […] are defined as available" (Hall 25). They can be understood as trying to "actualise and dramatise in microcosm fragments" (Hall 27) of an alternative society. In other words, the two communities are portrayed as testing out, on a small scale, concepts that can be considered to be 'outside' of 'civilization.'

Star and Marco both come from fairly comfortable backgrounds. Star is a former teacher (*DC* 40) and Marco attended college as well (*DC* 59). Yet they chose a life in which they wear unwashed clothes (*DC* 17, 47), live off food stamps (*DC* 27), and sometimes stolen goods (*DC* 276), and spend their days digging latrines (*DC* 56, 156), building (*DC* 25, 360), tending to animals (*DC* 5, 14, 360) and, in Star's case, cooking for the commune (*DC* 143), while the toilets are clogged and the property is littered with human feces (*DC* 57). Describing Star's impression of the beginning of the day in the Californian commune, the opening sentence of the novel reads: "The morning was a fish in a net, glistening and wriggling at the dead black border of her consciousness" (*DC* 3). However, Star has "never caught a fish in a net or on a hook either" (*DC* 3), which indicates that her points of reference, which are meant to set a 'rural' atmosphere, are imaginary. The narrative begins with pastoral activities, such as fishing, milking goats, and cutting weeds. "[L]iving off the land" (*DC* 14) is "what she always wanted" (*DC* 14; cf. also 38). This agrarian ideal informs Marco's first thoughts when entering the commune as well:

> when he saw the standing grass flecked with mustard and the oaks drinking up the earth, when he saw the million dogs, goats, chickens, the longhaired men so attuned to what they were doing they barely glanced up, and the women—*the women!*—he felt something being born inside him all over again. (*DC* 22; emphasis in original)

The core structure of the commune revolves around the thought that "the *straight* world is banned" (*DC* 23; emphasis in original), which includes the attempt to start anew through "[v]oluntary Primitivism" (*DC* 21). In her essay "North to Alaska and Other Bad Trips in T.C.

Boyle's *Drop City*" (2012), Susan Kollin argues that "[c]ountercultural efforts at achieving authenticity or escape with a 'beautiful soul' likewise fail in Boyle's novel" (345) because the hippies never manage to provide for themselves, and rely on welfare, charity, and shoplifting. However, dropping out is not synonymous with a self-sustenance via agriculture. By engaging in a 'symbolic association' with poverty, by experimenting with drugs and free love, and general 'deviance,' the "world they were making […] the new age, free and enlightened" (*DC* 162) is only partially founded on the idea of 'living off the land,' and additionally based on the counter-values discussed above.[4]

Precise dates are of no importance in Drop City, CA, and only measured in vague guesses. Star estimates the time to be "something like ten o'clock or ten-thirty" (*DC* 3) and reckons that she has been in the commune for "something like three weeks" (*DC* 4). Marco has lost his sense of time as well. When Norm tells him that they have arrived in time "for the holidays" (*DC* 22), Marco is able to estimate which month, but not which date it is. Instead of keeping time, members of Drop City play with romanticized notions of the past. Shortly before Star meets Marco, she imagines herself to be a Victorian milkmaid, "Star of the D'Urbervilles" (*DC* 14). In their first conversation, Marco draws on ancient myths by asking her whether she intended to propitiate the gods (cf. *DC* 15) with the milk she spilled, and telling her that his tree-house is Mount Olympus (cf. *DC* 16). Another example of a fantastic mixture of time-periods is the design of the farmhouse, as described when Marco sees it for the first time:

> a two-story frame house with a sprawl of outbuildings, not different from what you'd see in Kansas or Missouri or any other place where farmers tilled the earth, except that somebody had painted the trim in Day-Glo orange and the rest a checkerboard pattern of green and pink. (*DC* 22)

[4] Another set of conventions that the commune members are shown to reject are traditional ideas of parenthood, which, in the novel, leads to the neglect of the children in the commune. This has been discussed by Kollin (cf. 333-35) as a criticism of the idea of "the deep natural bonds that are believed to inherently and authentically exist between mother and child" (333). In "Cracks in the System: Children in Contemporary Narratives about the 1960s in America" (2013) Maureen Ryan argues that the neglected children reveal the "cracks in the system" (15) and are used to "demonize" (14) members of the counterculture. Both have convincingly made the case that through the evoked image of neglected children, the hippie dropouts are heavily criticized.

As these passages show, the hippies not only drop out from 'modern' society but also play with ideas of time and traditions, creating not simply a place of historical regression, but almost a sense of timelessness, and out of 'history.'

To signify the beginning of their new life in the commune, some of the members renamed themselves or have been renamed: Star and Pan, Tom Krishna, Harmony, Weird George, and Mendocino Bill. These names contribute to the impression that they are trying to create their own, fantastic world, and break the ties to their former lives. Yet, when the commune members are disagreeing with each other, they quickly quit using each other's pseudonyms. For instance, Ronnie/Pan tries to question Star's commitment to the new lifestyle by using her birth name when attempting to persuade her to participate in a three-way (cf. *DC* 11). Star reacts with anger and tells him not to call her "that" (*DC* 11) again. Marco also acknowledges the importance of such names. When angry at a fellow commune member, he reminds himself to think of his opponent not as 'Sky Dog' but as "Bruce, that was his name, *Bruce,* and to know it was to know the shibboleth that would cut him down to size" (*DC* 63; emphasis in original). Ronnie/Pan despises the vegetarian cuisine (cf. *DC* 28), struggles with the acceptance of "anybody who showed up, even bums and winos and the spade cats" (*DC* 28), and feels that his brothers and sisters are "maybe just a wee bit starry-eyed and *lame*" (*DC* 29; emphasis in original). Accordingly, he is the only one whose name never quite sticks, and throughout the novel, he is referred to and addressed as alternately one or the other. The renaming expresses the longing for the ability to reinvent their identities at will. In Boyle's novel, the hippies in the California commune drop out also through this attempt at creating their own identities.

The other alternative lifestyle in *Drop City* is exemplified by the newlyweds Sess and Pamela in their cabin in Alaska. Seclusion and 'living off the land' are their primary concerns, but not in the way it is practiced in Drop City. "[G]etting away from everything" (109) is not only the hippies' but also Sess's inspiration for choosing voluntary primitivism, and he sees Boynton as a place to escape "what was wrong with the world" (*DC* 94). Pamela, who has a college degree (cf. *DC* 134) and earned good money (cf. *DC* 228), moves into the wilderness because she is convinced that civilization is coming to an end. Remarkably, she identifies the hippie movement as the very sign that contemporary society is degenerating: "if nobody

worked and they all just sat around using drugs and having promiscuous sex all day, then who was going to grow the food […] and what would they eat? […] they'd eat your food, and when they were done with that, they'd eat you" (*DC* 104). Pamela enters the 'outside' of civilization by marrying a "dominant male, she'd chosen out of a whole pack of lesser males" (*DC* 252), and thus partly returns to traditional gender roles. Paul William Gleason observes in *Understanding T.C. Boyle* (2009) that "the two divide their labor according to traditional gender roles" (122), but nevertheless "work together on many tasks" (123). Her new life is partially reminiscent of the hippie dropouts' in its 'voluntary primitivism': she lives in a cabin "caked with dirt" (*DC* 97) that they can only reach by boat, where she can only occasionally get fresh fruits and vegetables (cf. *DC* 225) and other conveniences, or medical support (cf. *DC* 102). By describing the newlyweds as dropouts, Boyle thus aligns Sess and Pam with the hippies before the two storylines begin to merge. Even though Sess in the beginning differs from the hippies in "his work ethic and respect for tradition" (Gleason 123), the commonalities are already plainly to be seen before the two groups encounter each other.

Just like the hippies, Sess and Pamela also convey a spirit of reinvention. "Everything looked new to her, every leaf, every turning, the river that resisted her paddle and re-created itself moment by moment" (*DC* 139). They act as if they were the only people on the planet. Their life together initially consists only of themselves, working in the woods, and then making love "as if they'd invented the whole idea of sex" (*DC* 236). They behave as if they were and always will be the first couple on earth, Adam and Eve: "That was her life, spinning out into the future, and it was as fixed and certain as anything on this earth can ever be" (*DC* 138). Various descriptions suggest that conventional schedules are modified by the Alaskan seasons: "the sun propped back up in the sky and the night as still as dead man's dream" (*DC* 99; cf. also 95, 118). Consequently, Sess cannot understand why Pamela brings an alarm clock with her (cf. *DC* 228), and why she insists on keeping check on the time, on dates, temperatures etc. (cf. *DC* 480). Not only the hippies, but also the Alaskan forest dwellers qualify as dropouts. Additionally, they are united in their creative treatment of identities and their rejection of traditional observations of time. Despite the fact that the hippies disagree with the Alaskans on diet (cf. *DC* 406), welfare and work ethic (cf. *DC* 232; Gleason 123), both groups are portrayed to have the "secessionist reflex" (Hutchinson 35) in common.

On the Frontier

As discussed above, this "withdrawal from, rather than participation within, the social, political and cultural mainstream" (Hutchinson 35), can be aligned with the myth of the frontier as "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (Turner 3-4). This connection is also made in *Drop City.* Boyle's hippies refer to themselves as pioneers, and their life in Alaska is reminiscent of the 'traditional' American wilderness as described by Turner and, earlier, by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur.

The moment Norm introduces the idea of moving to Alaska to his hippie commune, he marks his plan as filled with frontier-spirit. "You can live like Daniel Boone, live like the original hippies, like our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers—off the land man, doing your own thing, no apologies" (*DC* 198). At another point Star compares Ronnie/Pan and herself to "Lewis and Clark" (*DC* 4). However, despite these references, the hippies do not know much about 'living off the land' in Alaska. When they first encounter their new dwelling place, they struggle with flora, fauna, the climate and the lack of medical supplies. Their domesticated goats and their dog are attacked and killed by a wolverine (cf. *DC* 360), and their plants wither. "In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish" (Turner 4). Both Pan and Marco are portrayed as initially not fit for survival, as betrayed by their failure to hunt big game (cf. *DC* 343, 460). Many members of the original commune, including its leader Norm, decide to leave (cf. *DC* 472). Furthermore, social contact, modern medicine, and law enforcement are missing. The lack of a medic when they encounter an unpleasant parasite ends in widespread discomfort: "everybody itched" (*DC* 459). The commune is portrayed as struggling with the lack of such tools in their new environment, to which they would have access within the civilization that they rejected.

Sess and Pam, on the other hand, appear in many instances well-prepared for their life in the Alaskan wilderness. After initial challenges, such as learning to run a trap line and dealing with loneliness, they have adapted. Sess hunts a bear successfully, and Pamela then skins it (*DC* 404). Their lifestyle recalls that of Turner's pioneers: life in a simple cabin, animal

skins for clothing (cf. *DC* 98) and tools of the natives[5] (cf. *DC* 404) place them in a traditional setting of the frontier: "It arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick" (Turner 4). 'Living off the land' also changes their diet in the way that de Crèvecoeur has described: "living on the flesh of wild animals when they can catch them" (609). Sess and Pam follow this dietary provision, even if the flesh they can catch is muskrat (cf. *DC* 108). Sess's appearance suggests this state of adaption to 'wilderness,' while he simultaneously resembles the hippies in his rugged, unwashed outfit. When Marco sees him for the first time, he thinks Sess might even be "the Scholar Gipsy himself" (*DC* 337), and his sweat-stained shirt looks to Marco "as if it had been tie-dyed" (*DC* 337).

Boynton is portrayed as a space without legal restrictions, a "freedom […] itself both promising and threatful" (Slotkin 34), and thus can be read as the frontier of a legal system. In Boynton, the commune will live in an anarchic space, at least according to Norm, who assures his followers: "'No rules,' he shouted, 'no zoning laws, no taxes, no county dicks and ordinances'" (*DC* 197; cf. also Kollin 343). As "the straight world is moving in" (*DC* 195) on their Californian territory, they migrate, to put it in the words of de Crèvecoeur, "still farther beyond the reach of government, which in some measure leaves them to themselves" (de Crèvecoeur 609). There are, as Norm tries to promote it, no rules for them, neither for the length of days nor for the size of fruit: "strawberries the size of apples, […] tomatoes like watermelons and zucchini you could hollow out and live in" (*DC* 198). In their enthusiasm, they feel anarchy to be the most desirable state to be accomplished. However, people in Boynton have had their own experience with "the law of the jungle" (*DC* 250). Lynette, a new arrival, even carries a gun for fear of the human 'beasts' she might encounter (cf. *DC* 85). Although Sess dismisses such "Technicolor Fantasies of the Wild West" (*DC* 85), the idea of justice executed by the individual runs strong through the narrative. When Bosky, Sess's

[5] The strikingly short passages concerning the indigenous inhabitants of Alaska add an image of what the life of the actually 'dispossessed' looks like: at "the end of the world" (*DC* 431), living in extreme poverty, these passages only briefly show the harsh realities, devoid of romantic aspects, close to the liminal space of Boynton. Thus, the novel contrasts the romantic notions that the hippies act on by 'playing Indian' with the actual situation of native populations on U.S. American territory (cf. Kolin 342-43).

personal enemy, disrupts the wedding, neighbors intervene and are "taking care" (*DC* 129) of him by dragging him off the premises. Bosky reciprocates by killing Sess's sled dogs (cf. *DC* 140), Sess then drowns Bosky's car (cf. *DC* 259), Bosky in retaliation tries to shoot Sess twice (cf. *DC* 425, 508), and dies in the second attempt. Similarly, the hippies' 'outside' is also not regulated by law: a girl is raped, yet the commune fails to reconstruct what happened and to penalize the culprits (cf. *DC* 38-55). Even the debate over who has the right to carry the communal gun is not resolved by the commune, but by Marco simply taking it (cf. *DC* 455-56). It appears as if the hippies have migrated into a dangerous space where the survival of the fittest is the law, and where violence plays a crucial role. Law enforcement by the disdained "pigs" (*DC* 181), "the man" (*DC* 184), "the establishment" (*DC* 166) might have intervened in "the law of the jungle" (*DC* 250) and thus might have mediated in the conflict between Sess and Bosky, and ultimately could have saved Bosky and Ronnie/Pan from their deaths in the cold. These incidents indicate that neither the wilderness-trained Sess nor the hippies are fully capable of dealing with the implications of anarchy on the 'outside' of civilization, even though this is a condition that they sought.

On the Way to Civilization

The fact that in the end of *Drop City* eighteen hippies remain in the Alaskan commune, in harmony with Sess and Pamela, should not be misunderstood as a celebration of the dropout lifestyle. While both communities operate under the assumption of a chasm between 'civilization' and 'voluntary primitivism,' or 'living off the land,' as the basis for different lifestyles, they are in constant interaction with civilization (cf. Kollin 341). Their daily routines are slowly modified both by the demands of the wilderness around them *and* their personal comfort, as the narrative reproduces the frontier myth. Gradually the new settlement comes to represent an outpost of civilization. The 'frontier hardships' discussed above drive away many of the commune's members, and the remaining ones have altered their lifestyle significantly. Contrary to Kollin, who concludes that *Drop City* "offers [...] a critical postfrontier approach" (348), I argue that the connection between the frontier myth and dropping out, as drawn in Boyle's novel, leads to the resolution of the "uneasy solution" of "breakaway communities" (Hutchinson 36). Pamela, Sess and the commune perceive

living withdrawn from society as offering the cure for whatever disease society is suffering from, as "the best antidote to our human selves" (Cronon 69). Yet the ending of the novel suggests that the wilderness as a cure for the perceived ills of society does not work the way the hippies and the forest dwellers had imagined. This 'outside' instead "quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject" (Cronon 80). Independence from the 'mainstream' is and possibly can never be fully executed as the patterns and values of the 'inside' of 'civilization' keep reasserting themselves in the members of the new community.

Drop City negotiates (and complicates) naïve notions of dropping out through its portrayal of hippies, the Alaskans, wilderness, and very distant glimpses of indigenous people. The Alaskans assume the role of the first segment of pioneers, which has adapted to nature, and has begun to manipulate it. Now they have to deal with a new wave of settlement by the hippies. Yet the shared hardships in the wilderness eventually unite the different 'outsiders' into one community, moving them all further towards 'civilization.'

Initially, the newcomers are not welcome in Boynton. The first neighbor is complaining in the fashion of Turner's pioneers that "he lacks elbow room" (Peck in Turner 20), as he can see and hear them from his property. He tells Sess that "'they are making a three-ring circus out of my yard'" (*DC* 417), referring to the loud music sounding from their stranded bus. Additionally, the inhabitants in Boynton are indignant over the hippies' drug use, their begging, their loud music, and over two of them being black (cf. *DC* 416-19).[6] For Pamela, hippies are part of the rejected "war-crazed society" (*DC* 104). Sess perceives Bosky as "what people came into the country to escape" (*DC* 94) and the arrival of the hippies as

[6] The situation of African Americans is probably one of the most complex constructs within this narrative, and it cannot be discussed at length at this point. On the one hand, their treatment exposes the latent racism of the commune members. When someone in the commune allegedly commits rape, the black members are the ones who are blamed, even though other members are initially suspected to be (co-)perpetrators (cf. also Kollin 340). Since no one ever investigates, this incident also points to the drawbacks of anarchic structures. Furthermore, in Alaska, the appearance of the black communal members stresses that some places in the USA have never been settled by African Americans before; Sess had never before seen a black person in his life (cf. *DC* 415). They thus stand for a growing ethnic diversity and for change in society, but also for a revival of an old frontier dream when they go sieving for gold (*DC* 414). Due to the unreliable perspectives provided by the different focalizers, racist prejudices are accompanying all the descriptions of the small community of African Americans in the commune, making the depiction highly politically charged.

"another strike against" the community (*DC* 321). Paradoxically, the dropout hippies are therefore seen as part of the society that the Alaskans have moved away from.

The frontier is not stable, and 'civilization' is on its way to Boynton. Already, some of the Alaskans own various vehicles and other commodities (cf. *DC* 136, 430), which shows that not everyone lives the 'primitive' way that Sess does. When Pamela moves in with Sess (cf. *DC* 228), her alarm clock introduces 'civilized' time into his cabin. In the end, Sess even promises Pamela to be back in time for Christmas from checking the trap line, and therefore submits to her ideas of time (cf. *DC* 525). The final words of the novel underline his status as a pioneer who has adopted for himself the 'civilized' value of family: "He was heading home, […] a man clothed in fur […] in a hard wild place, going home to his wife" (*DC* 528). Pamela's pregnancy ends the progression of the heritage from one lonely 'coot' to the next: while Sess 'inherited' the trap line from an elderly forest dweller (cf. *DC* 225), Sess is not going to become an old bachelor who will hand his knowledge down to another recluse. Instead, he and Marco form a new sled-team and become part of the larger community in Boynton (cf. also Gleason 127).

The newcomers not only transform the life of the 'pioneers,' but the wilderness also transforms the newcomers. On the frontier, "prosperity will polish some, vice and the law will drive off the rest, who uniting again with others like themselves will recede still farther" (de Crèvecoeur 609). The hippies who remain, especially those in the log-house commune up the river, have to give up their idle lifestyle: the women have run out of make-up (cf. *DC* 470), and all of them are, in the short Alaskan summer, working hard from dawn to dusk (cf. *DC* 325, 354). Star initially claims 'free love' principles for herself (cf. *DC* 150), even though she is sensitive to the risks of exploitation that accommodate such ideas (cf. Kollin 340). With Marco, however, she engages in a monogamous relationship (cf. Gleason 127). Monogamy appears to be another value that the hippies re-embrace at the frontier. Kolin comments, despite her claim that *Drop City* does away with the idea of "the last frontier" (331), that in California the entire commune was presented as a case of "arrested development, a refusal to mature beyond the stage of adulthood" (338), and that in Alaska they learn to work, and to accept their dependency on civilization (cf. Kollins 334)—in other words, they do grow up. Their shrinking community then, on Christmas, instead of celebrating excessively with acid as

on Druid's Day in California (cf. *DC* 147), has a tame evening with turkeys, eggnog, lasagna and cookies, and only some meat that was hunted, not store-bought (cf. *DC* 520-21). They neither retain their Californian habits nor do they adapt the dropout version of the Alaskans, but they are slowly re-adapting to 'civilized' American life, in which holidays are Christian, and food is being paid for.

With Ronnie/Pan's death, Star's last connection to home is cut. Yet, it is also the end of the extremes of 'hip,' of the abdication of too many conventional values and rules. Ronnie/Pan stands in many ways for the negative sides of dropping out: he is obsessed with style (cf. *DC* 302), takes advantage of the drugged Star (cf. *DC* 206), steals from his fellow commune members (cf. *DC* 449), and hurts the relationship to Sess and Pamela, who are crucial for the hippie's survival, by stealing from them as well (cf. *DC* 352). Gleason observes that he lacks the work ethic of the other protagonists, and his attempts at living polygamously set him further apart from them (cf. Gleason 129). Kollin notes that Ronnie/Pan leads a "life of adventure and play in faraway lands [which] ensures that he will never grow up," and that "his lack of restraint" (336) endangers the commune more than once. He stands for the 'arrested development' of the commune. His death therefore signifies the end of the indulgence in such counter-values, and the repudiation of the anarchic, hedonistic structures of the commune. This is symbolized by Star choosing to use his commune name instead of his birth name (which is how she usually refers to him) when she sees his corpse (cf. *DC* 520). It becomes even clearer that Ronnie/Pan has become a symbol for the hippie dropout life when she is running her hand through his hair, which she clearly acknowledges as a symbol for his countercultural identity: it has "grown out finally to its maximum length, hip, very hip, as hip as anybody could ever have wished or dreamed" (*DC* 520). The 'staged deviance' of 'hip' has been played out to its maximum but, ultimately, it is killed off on the frontier. His passing can be understood as 'cleansing' the commune from a member who was obstructing the progress to civilization. On the same line, Bosky, who exploits the environment and his neighbors (cf. Gleason 130), initially steals from Sess (cf. *DC* 256-57) and tries to kill him twice (cf. *DC* 424, 494), stands for a form of the 'law of the jungle' that needs to be eradicated in order for the community to function. Boyle's novel thus ends with a reintroduction of the hippie commune and the wood dwellers, not without the "acts of violence" (22) that Slotkin has identified as a crucial part of the frontier

paradigm, into a space in which conventional time exists, and in which the small communities learn to compromise, and to function together. Their renunciation from society ends with them being integrated back into a continuously expanding 'civilization.'

The original 'backwooders' are also transformed, and warm up to the idea of neighbors. Sess, for example, teaches Marco to hunt. Sess's friend Iron Steve already bonds with the hippies by starting a relationship with one of the girls and teaching her his way of living off the land by hunting rabbits (cf. *DC* 394). Pamela not only gossips with them, but also engages in their ritual of "sisterhood," smoking weed (*DC* 408), and begins to fit in as "a hippie *chick*" (*DC* 522; emphasis in original). Everyone who remains (alive) in Alaska by the end of the novel has therefore re-evaluated some of his/her initial dropout fantasies. The novel ends with the suggestion "that there might be a way for some members of the group to achieve a socially, politically, and environmentally satisfying life in the Far North" (Kollin 331), which no longer incorporates the counter-values which made them leave the 'mainstream' in the first place. After they dropped out they now loop back into society, and thus the 'outside' of dropping out is in the novel subsumed under the frontier paradigm. Boyle therefore suggests that the communal movement is consistent with American identity instead of contradicting it.

It is possible to read *Drop City* as a celebration not of cultural revolution but of the return to conventional values through the regenerating power of life in the wilderness as it has been proposed by de Crèvecoeur, Turner, Slotkin, and others. Thus, instead of creating a 'new world,' the dropouts are reconciled with history and American 'civilization.' *Drop City* embeds the dropout into a national narrative of the rebirth of society via the frontier, through the cleansing power of hardship and violence. The liminal space in which these communes are presented contains rebellion and dreams of the 'outside' and shapes these countercultural attempts to become an affirmation of the status quo. Boyle's novel ultimately suggests that dropouts are initiated into society through the very outside that they sought. Such a presentation of "the outer limits/inner spaces of revolutionary and post-revolutionary praxis" (Hall 27) disregards dropping out as a challenge to 'mainstream' American society. It also speaks of yet another attempt to unify a possibly conflicting moment, in this case the 1960s, with a 'compelling vision' of American experience.

Works Cited

Boyle, Tom C. *Drop City*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.

Braunstein, Peter, and Michael W. Doyle. "Historicizing the American Counter Culture of the 1960s and 70s." *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*. Ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael W. Doyle. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002. 5-14. Print.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Ed. William Cronon. New York, NY: Norton, 1995. 69-90. Print.

de Crèvecoeur, Jean Hector St. John. "Letters from an American Farmer: Letter III. What is an American." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym, et al. 8. ed. New York, NY: Norton, 2012. 604-18. Print.

Diederichsen, Diedrich, and Anselm Franke. "The Whole Earth. California and the Disappearance of the Outside." *The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside*. Ed. Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013. 8-9. Print.

Gleason, Paul W. *Understanding T.C. Boyle*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P, 2009. Print.

Hall, Stuart. *The Hippies: An American 'Moment.'* Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, U of Birmingham, 1968. Print.

Heath, Joseph, and Andrew Potter. *The Rebel Sell: How the Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*. West Sussex: Capstone, 2006. Print.

Hutchinson, Colin. "Cult Fiction: 'Good' and 'Bad' Communities in the Contemporary American Novel." *Journal of American Studies* 24.1 (20th century American Literature) (2008): 35-50. Print.

Kollin, Susan. "North to Alaska and Other Bad Trips in T. C. Boyle's Drop City." *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 45.2 (2012): 329-50. Print.

Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1955. Print.

Roszak, Theodore. *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969. Print.

Ryan, Maureen. "Cracks in the System: Children in Contemporary Narratives about the 1960s in America." *War, Literature, and the Arts* 25 (2013): 16 pages. Web. 01. Apr. 2014.

Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860.* New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1996. 1-38. Print.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." *The Frontier in American History.* 1920. New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1996.