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„Every Man for Himself“: Individualism as a  
cornerstone of American culture, as represented in  
Lost

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## Preface

I was inspired to write this paper by discussions my father and I had with my uncle, who left Greece to go to university in the Southern United States during the 1970s. After he finished his studies, he settled down in Birmingham, Alabama, bought a restaurant and started a family there. After the 2008 presidential election, European media enthusiastically reported Barack Obama's victory, and so my father called my uncle, expecting him to be happy about the result. As it turned out, he was furious: He feared that Obama would run down the economy and claimed that this could mean the end for his business. My father had a hard time understanding how he – coming from a European background – could support Obama's rival candidate John McCain, whose strongly individualist policies seemed unacceptable for many people on this side of the Atlantic.

Even before that phone call, conversations with my uncle had revealed opinions which could be considered atypical for someone born and raised in Europe. I noticed small differences, such as the fact that he rejects the use of public transportation, claiming he does not want to be dependent on another driver, and that his own car is more reliable than buses. He insists on making every decision concerning his business himself, and does not want to hire assistants even though this means exposing himself to much more pressure. He raises his children to be more competitive than most of my family members, having them enter soccer tournaments and other competitions, and proudly shows off their trophies whenever we visit.

As I have been thinking about these anecdotes, I have come to the realization that – seen from my European point of view – all of these attitudes seem to have in common a very 'American' mind-set. They value success highly, and seem to place the individual above society as a whole. They touch upon both public and private life, informing the way my uncle conducts business, makes political decisions, and educates his children: From my perspective, it appears that his entire life is influenced by an overarching individualist ideology he has acquired after his move to the United States.

Therefore, in this paper I intend to find out how individualism shapes American life, investigate its place within American history, and find examples of how it is expressed today.

## Introduction

Few things are common to all citizens of the United States of America: Being a nation composed of people whose origins can be traced back to every part of the world, the United States comprise a wide range of cultures and ethnicities. One important shared aspect, though, is the cultural imaginary which has brought people together since its inception: the ideal of the *American Dream*. This idea, and the meaning it encompasses, serves as a common reference point which informs opinions and actions taken in all parts of daily American life.

The notion of individualism is represented very strongly throughout this set of concepts. Ever since the founding of the nation, the belief in the power and potential of the individual has been one of its central values, and its importance has led to the establishment of many myths and practices perceived as ‘typically American’. In this paper, I will argue that individualism, canonized as an American ideal through the Founding Documents, in particular the clear statement given by the Declaration of Independence, forms the basis for many of the opinions present in today’s America, and has been an important shaping factor of the cultural imaginary, told and retold in stories throughout the country’s history. These narratives, formulated and presented within the American cultural hegemony, still carry with them this world-view, and therefore are themselves reflexive of it.

To analyze this phenomenon, I will trace the narrative of individualism and the changes it has gone through since before the composition of the Founding Documents of the United States from a Cultural Studies perspective. Furthermore, in order to represent the concept within a cultural context, I will examine texts created throughout American history which represent this narrative. The Founding Documents themselves represent an important source in this regard, as they lay the groundwork upon which the American national identity is built. Among these documents, the Declaration of Independence stands out as a clear statement of American values due to its intent of creating a coherent vision of America as an independent entity claiming sovereignty as a nation. In order to achieve this, the Declaration spells out the country’s prevalent world-view at the time, explaining the rights of its citizens and the reasoning behind it in clear terms.

Further texts will be chosen with an emphasis on a contemporary source representing the understanding and expression of individualism today. In order to select fitting texts to analyze, I will follow John Fiske’s theories on popular culture. He states that “popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry” (Fiske 1989, 24), assuming that a text becomes popular because it resonates well with its audience. Following this theory, an individualist culture will be more

likely to choose texts with strong individualist overtones than those which do not feature this idea, or even oppose it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay on *Self-Reliance* marks an important and prominent examination of the individualist ideal; its lasting influence cannot be overlooked. Published in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century it represents the middle phase of the history of individualism in America, connecting its beginning in the Founding Documents and the application of these ideas in the contemporary United States.

As a particularly successful, comprehensive and, at times, subversive recent example, the television series *Lost* will be studied in detail.<sup>1</sup> It tells an epic narrative and features a highly diverse cast, leading to a wide range of possible situations to analyze. Being an expensively-produced television series, it can be expected that, in an inversion of Fiske's theory, the show tries, at least to some extent, to fulfill audience expectations. Therefore, with the American television audience in mind as its primary market and considering the success it met with, the series can be assumed to exhibit individualist traits. A reading of the series as a retelling of the "epic of America", as Adams (1932) refers to the narrative of the country's history, is intended to reveal parallels and tie together its fictional plot with reality, and point out the individualist features present in its storytelling.

Within this text, the character of John Locke stands out as particularly individualist; the choices he makes and the conflicts he gets involved in can be interpreted as a representation of that ideology and the place it has within the contemporary American narrative. His interactions with group leader Jack Shephard are of particular interest, as his individualist tendencies become clear when contrasted with society as a whole.

In this essay, I will argue that individualism as it is practiced in America is reflected in the texts produced and promoted by its culture. I will examine the elements of this ideology present in *Lost* as a representative example of American fiction. A close reading of a representative scene will provide a sampling of aspects of individualism which will be looked into more closely in the course of the paper. There have been numerous studies of American individualism in the past, but few of them have made the connection with storytelling in popular culture. *Lost* in particular, having been aired only recently, has not yet been examined from an individualist perspective. Its study will provide insights into the way individualist thinking influences American fiction on a fundamental level, and even has an effect on the manner in which stories can be told.

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<sup>1</sup> Although complete knowledge of the series' plot is not required to understand this paper, I recommend getting acquainted at least with the first season, which introduces most of the main characters and concepts discussed.

## **1. The role of individualism in the American cultural imaginary**

This introductory chapter will provide an overview of relevant approaches and concepts which will be explored more deeply in the course of this paper, and present a first glance at the story and mythology of *Lost*.

### **1.1. Cultural Studies approaches to the American cultural imaginary**

Campbell and Kean open their study of American culture with the cautionary note that the narrative of American exceptionalism should not be viewed as the one true, or even the only, interpretation of the country's history. It has been shaped by a white male perspective, and provides a "limited and 'closed' text through a controlling meta-narrative or 'master-story'" (Campbell/Kean 1997, 23). Indeed, the hegemonially dominant view of American history focuses on the achievements of the colonists and, later, the Founding Fathers and followers of presidents who have almost without exception conformed to that demographic.

However, even though boiling down American culture to a unified world-view is a problematic endeavor – especially considering the 'melting pot' metaphor which has been criticized as being an unfitting description of American society, with contemporary analyses preferring the term 'salad bowl' – "America's concern with beginnings and the 'dream'" (ibid.) is of noticeable significance in many different stories.

As the 'salad bowl' metaphor illustrates, the citizens of America do not share a common cultural background. Even several generations after arriving in the country, many families still hold up traditions imported from their original culture; the only thing which can with certainty be said to be common to all citizens of the United States is this very fact: They are all citizens of the same country. Citizenship, therefore, is an important part of American identity; a unifying factor leading to a common understanding of the world.

Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding explains the importance of such commonality in communication, pointing out that "the degrees of 'understanding' and 'misunderstanding' in the communicative exchange [...] depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry" (Hall 2006, 166) between speakers. With a people this diverse, the potential for asymmetry in the encoding and decoding models between speaker and listener, and therefore misunderstanding, should be very high – however, the world-view which comprises American identity can be said to work as a 'code sheet', enabling and facilitating communication across individuals and communities within the framework of American culture.

Hall's theory builds upon the observation of denotation and connotation on the level of cultural elements made by Roland Barthes: Differing from the level of language, he asserts, the denotative and connotative content of visual signs must be viewed on a sliding scale, with the ideological discourse surrounding them representing aspects of connotation (cf. *ibid.*, 168).

For this purpose, he analyzes the "televisual sign" (*ibid.*, 166). The two-dimensional images on the screen cannot be, or replicate, the real world; they can merely represent it, taking the role of the signifier. As much as the characters on film look like real persons, even the way they are represented on screen is culturally determined: Such fundamentals of televisual representations as camera angles, screen time, and post-production done on the images and sound are culture-specific; the fast and shrill cutting style of music videos, for example, is very different from the lush visuals and gripping music common in romantic movies, and both are again easily distinguishable from the matter-of-fact yet dramatic way newscasts are framed. These styles of presentation are all intended to be watched by audiences with different expectations, each of which can be seen as a sub-culture within the entirety of a country's television audience.

## **1.2. A land of opportunity: The shared ideal of the American Dream**

In order to understand the central role which individualism plays within the context of the world-view shaping American society and politics today, it is important to first get an understanding of the element which has influenced the country and all of its citizens since its inception: the American Dream, a meta-narrative informing many aspects of American life.

James T. Adams argues that, had the New World not from the beginning offered a unique proposition to its prospective settlers and immigrants, "America would have made no distinctive and unique gift to mankind" (Adams 1932, 404). In his comprehensive overview of the country's history, he describes this set of ideas and ideals as

[...] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position (Adams 1932, 404).

Adams presents the American Dream as a strongly idealist concept. Its narrative of being a free land of opportunities has lured settlers and immigrants for centuries,



believing that the potential for self-realization is open for everyone in the New World – even though events such as the great depression of the 1930s or the enormous economic damage caused by recent natural disasters and market crashes have served to show that the accumulation of wealth is not the ‘necessary’ path life in the United States will take.

Ironically, the book containing Adams’ description of the American Dream was published just during said depression, which, the author claims in a typically American optimist fashion, “will pass in a year or two” (Adams 1932, 405). Even though history has invalidated that prediction, the paragraph contains all of the important elements making up the American Dream as it is still perceived today, describing the vision of a country where each citizen is regarded as equal and judged on account of who they are, determined by their current actions, rather than where they came from. Adams also observes that this narrative is applicable not just on an economic level, but can be said to pervade all of society.

In a Gramscian sense, this overarching ideology constitutes a *cultural hegemony*: According to Antonio Gramsci, society shapes the consciousness. In his *Prison Notebooks*, despite only delivering vague and fragmented approaches to the idea, he describes *hegemony* as a world-view based on “an active and voluntary (free) consent” (Gramsci 2007, 9) of the population. This means that the powerful, all-encompassing nature of the American Dream is rooted in its unifying power; it is prevalent in American thinking because it is a world-view all Americans can agree upon. Gramsci also notes that, even though an ideology of this sort might be perceived to be the “necessary” (ibid., 21) state of affairs within a culture, it differs between cultures, being of a “purely historical or contingent” (ibid.) nature.

Growing up in a society which believes a value system such as the concept of the American Dream to be true, the apparently indubitable correctness of “how things work for all practical purposes in this culture” (Hall 2006, 168) will seem self-evident based on that set of beliefs. Basic tenets upon which society is built, such as the high value American culture ascribes to the individual, tend to be taken for granted, appearing too fundamental to be questioned – Hall calls the sum of these beliefs the *dominant cultural order*. He explains that, while forming a closed representational system, this set of values is indeed open to reinterpretation and challenge – however, the dominant reading is usually the ‘preferred’ one, representing the institutionalized view of the world which is automatically assumed to be valid unless drawn into scrutiny and consciously analyzed.

Accordingly, ever since the American myth has emerged as a stable, consistent narrative, it has sustained itself through the telling and retelling of the country’s

historic narrative according to this enduring system of beliefs. It is a choice to be made by every citizen to believe in its individualist and exceptionalist values, but opposing this cultural imperative would constitute a breach of its own rules: As this world-view constitutes American identity, it is ‘un-American’ to speak out against its values. The system reinforces itself in a circular fashion.

### 1.3. The Pursuit of Happiness

With its emphasis on achievement rather than inheritance, value in a society governed by the ideal of the American Dream pertains to, and is created mainly by its individual members. Out-performing others is rewarded, and the ability to succeed by oneself, without having to rely on the help of others, is essential in order to reach that goal. This competitive notion was prominently described in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Self-Reliance*.

Going one step further, this way of thinking not only gives all individual members of society the right to pursue their own aims, but also to set them according to their wishes and interests (cf. Bellah et al. 1985, 75): One of the defining elements of the meta-narrative of the American Dream is the possibility of achieving absolute self-realization by determining, pursuing and accomplishing one’s own goals in life.

Therefore, defining one’s own values, and balancing them with those of others is an integral part of life according to that world-view. Of course, this can lead to situations in which one individual’s interests directly oppose another’s. The challenge of living in accordance with this value system, then, is the avoidance, and, in case of a clash of interests, resolution of such moral disagreements in a way that minimizes personal damage or loss.

While this course of action may seem selfish or anti-social, it should be noted that, in an individualist society, there is an unspoken agreement between all members of individualist societies to look after themselves in this manner. It can be reasoned that, if all individual members fend for themselves to the best of their ability, they each have the same chance to succeed in achieving their goals, and the penalty for entering conflict will be more or less significant according to their performance. Therefore, in this type of system, the decision whether or not to risk taking part in conflict is made depending on the balance between each participant’s abilities, and the expected gain and cost of the conflict. Bellah, speaking from this American perspective, states that “all we can appeal to in relationships with others is their self-interest [...] or their intuitive sympathies” (ibid., 76).

This philosophy is evident even in the United States Declaration of Independence, one of the documents playing a central role in the founding of the nation, and, with it,

serving to further perpetuate the mythic properties of the Dream. Its most-widely cited passage asserts that

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed [...] (United States Declaration of Independence).<sup>2</sup>

Not only does the Declaration stress the equality and liberty of all people, which have already been identified as being central to the American myth; it also asserts, in the same sentence as *life* and *liberty*, the fundamental right to *pursue one's happiness*, placing it on the same level of importance as the former two. This concept encapsulates the idea of setting and achieving one's own goals, since the ultimate purpose of this type of freedom can sensibly be assumed to mean the attainment of a state of personal satisfaction.

The "Creator" referred to in the text, it should be noted, does not refer to the god of any specific religion; rather, the Declaration of Independence and other documents written by the Founding Fathers rest on a deist world-view, which assumes the existence of a higher power without making assumptions about its exact nature. At the core of this philosophy is the belief that humanity was created, by whichever means, and thus is subject to rules independent from, and superordinate to, any man-made laws. This concept of *natural law* derives from John Locke's humanist theories and is used to attest the universal validity of these rights (cf. Kmiec 2005, 41). Indeed, Thomas Jefferson, who can probably be credited with the main authorship of the Declaration, called this concept "nature's God" (cf. Appleby 1992, 426).

#### **1.4. The rules of individualism and its place in the political spectrum**

The universal, merit-based value system as described above forms the basis of many ideologies perceived as typically American. It is evident that a society guided by these beliefs not only relays important decision-making processes to its individual members, but also concedes them the ability to deal with this increased responsibility. This duality of being granted the right to achieve self-determination and allowing others to do the same forms the basis of an individualist society.

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from the Founding Documents in this paper are taken from [www.archives.gov](http://www.archives.gov), the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration's website, which offers scans of the original documents as well as transcripts, and is probably the most 'official' source for these texts.

Triandis contrasts individualist and collectivist societies in his 1995 book. He explains that the latter place emphasis on groups of people supporting each other, while describing the former as such:

[...] individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contacts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others (Triandis 1995, 2).

Even though Lukes (1973) chronicles various branches of individualism which have developed over time, distinguishing, among others, the meanings the term has acquired in the French, German, and American cultures, Triandis' definition captures the core of these world-views; those elements which are common to most, if not all, forms of this ideology. Still, Lukes notes that "'Individualism' is a word that has come to be used with an unusual lack of precision" (1973, ix), having taken on a "range of meanings [...] in western thought" (ibid., x). The history of this philosophy, as well as the many different contexts American individualism has appeared in over the years, will be explored in greater detail in the course of this paper.

Elaborating on American individualism and its most noticeable implementations, Lukes (1973, 26) cites the popular opinion in which "capitalism and liberal democracy" are held among the population as noticeable examples of the importance placed on individualist thought. Indeed, both of these systems place power on individual members of society, bringing about a system which favors the ideas of "equal individual rights, limited government, [and] *laissez-faire*" (ibid.).

This leads to a world-view which is very liberal in nature, while forming an ideological counter-point to *sozialstaat* measures such as the welfare state as it exists in various central and northern European countries, where the state has the power to intervene and help individual citizens in need at the cost of those tax-payers who do not receive these benefits (but can expect the same treatment should the need arise). The lack of sympathy for this type of political practice, he observes, is "in part a consequence of the very pervasiveness of individualism" (ibid., 28) in the United States.

Having examined the aspects which make up individualist acting, it can be concluded that the actions of the members of a society guided by this ideology are governed by a set of rules which must be agreed upon by all in order to ensure each individual's liberty and well-being. These traits can be said to be common to all members of American society, and therefore part of the construct of American identity:

- 1) All citizens share the right to self-realization, but also the responsibility to achieve it by themselves.
- 2) Pursuing self-realization includes setting one's own goals, regardless whether they do or do not further society as a whole, as long as they benefit the individual.
- 3) Within the limits of the law, citizens have the right to achieve these goals at minimum cost for the individual.

These three rules separate individualist from collectivist acting. Following these guidelines encourages competition rather than collaboration, and sets up a broad framework that can be applied to any situation, working as a pointer in all walks of life.

The system of values and rules at the core of individualism can be observed throughout the history of American society, starting at the myth of the land of opportunity, which promises self-fulfillment to each new arrival to the country. It can be traced through the narrative of capitalism, Adams' "dream of motor cars and high wages", where work and earnings share a closer connection than in any other American story, and competition is a motivation to push oneself further and further. The same values are still clearly visible in the contemporary system of media and popular culture where additional emphasis is put on fame, which is treated as a resource to be earned just like goods or money in previous narratives (Andy Warhol's promise of "fifteen minutes of fame" can now be interpreted as an individualist right to be earned and defended as well).

### **1.5. Telling and re-telling the American cultural narrative**

As society changes, so does the way in which values are justified and passed on. Even though the American Dream narrative and the idea of individualism it entails have remained relatively unchanged at their core, their particular hegemonic meaning as it is communicated among the population has been subject to change according to the specific dominant culture of the time.

One such notable reinterpretation can be observed during the era of expansionist politics in the 1840s, when John L. O'Sullivan coined the term "Manifest Destiny" to imply that the expansion of the country's borders was predetermined, ordered by the same divine forces who had decreed the Dream itself (cf. Merk 1963, 27).

After president John Quincy Adams' more rational calls for expansionism had failed to rally the public, O'Sullivan's idea of tying the concept into the bigger idea of individualism struck a chord: He argued in a 1845 New York Morning News article that the same right perceived to be valid for each individual member of society – that

is, “the full expansion of [one’s] principle and destiny of growth” (O’Sullivan 1845 cited Merk 1963, 32) – could also be applied to the country as a whole, implying that this expansion was not only justified, but imperative according to the predominant world-view, and to be carried out by the citizens (being the ‘executing’ power of the country itself).

O’Sullivan’s argument follows the idea of American exceptionalism. After the discovery of the New World, the continent was a blank slate to its European discoverers. Since all the land of the known world had been claimed by its nations, and all nations were governed by legal systems and already influenced by society and culture, discovering a new continent where the state of nature was intact, and no claims had yet been made concerning the use of its land, provided fertile ground for the thinkers of the Old World to read meaning into. Since the passage by ship was slow and dangerous, few Europeans had actually visited the place, which heightened its sense of mystery. As early as during the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan settlement, the idea that “America was a unique nation with a unique mission” (Reynolds 2009, 33) found followers quickly, adding to America’s myth-like status. Manifest Destiny is represented in John Gast’s painting *American Progress* by Columbia, the personification of the United States, leading people westward (cf. fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Columbia leading her people westward in John Gast’s *American Progress*.

In similar ways, the elements making up the American mythos have been discussed and renegotiated countless times, for reasons political and philosophical – not only on the level of matter-of-fact academic and political discussion, but also in fiction.

Many influential works of American literature can be read as a commentary on the country's value system, testing the limits of the socially acceptable. An individualist character taking his own value system – however well-intentioned it might be – to its extreme will unavoidably come to odds with society at some point, making many popular individualist archetypes loners, living apart from society (cf. Bellah 1985, 144). Furthermore, it is a common literary device in American fiction to confront the reader with an anti-hero whose past is obscure or initially paints him as a criminal or villain. The actions the character takes throughout the story make him seem more heroic than his initial expression might allow, earning him the reader's sympathy. This type of narrative asks the reader to judge the character by his actions rather than his past – a deeply individualist notion.

The *cowboy* or *lone ranger* archetype, for example, has become one of the most iconic characters of the American mythscape: The typical narrative of a stranger arriving in a Wild West town, accomplishing a heroic deed, and riding off into the sunset has been played out in countless instances of Western pulp fiction and movies. Notably, this mysterious man is above the law: His secret identity and affinity for violence typically place him at odds with the bandits he fights as well as the town sheriff. He has enemies on both sides of the law, yet is loved by those he saves (cf. Marovitz 1981, 99).

This type of story has developed out of the unique position of the American West as a mythical place: Due to its vast emptiness, it is easily possible for an individual to drift in and out of existence, merging with the unexplored wilderness between heroic endeavors.

Similar narratives of characters acting outside the law, asserting their own way of delivering justice and protecting the innocent, have gained popularity during the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction of *masked vigilante* and *superhero* narratives; looking at the current landscape of televised fiction, popular series such as *Dexter* or *Breaking Bad* perpetuate the American fascination for individualist anti-heroes: Their protagonists are, at their core, outlaws committing crime in pursuit of their own self-interest, yet they are portrayed as sympathetic, though flawed, characters.

Other authors have explored aspects of individualist society in general, offering their views on the political and societal implications of individualist behavior in the form of novels. One notable example is Ayn Rand, referred to by Lukes (1973, 31) as

a “novelist-‘philosopher’”: In her works *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, she relates her radically individualist theory of objectivism as an industrial allegory, creating characters who represent ideas. Their interactions can be seen as the waging of one value system against another, with her objectivist heroes winning out by the end.

Writing from a more critical point of view, the works of John Grisham frequently deal with the dilemmas posed by individualist interpretations of the law. His novel *A View to a Kill* poses the question whether murder can be justified by self-interest, even before the court, when a vengeful father kills the man who abused his daughter, unable to bear the thought of him remaining alive, even if that life would be spent in jail. While one might assume that the legal system dictates a clear mode of punishment for a case like this, the jury ultimately acquits him, having been carried through the trial by a lawyer sympathetic to his cause on the basis of his more or less ‘well-intentioned’ motive. Again, vigilantism is not inherently seen as morally wrong in this individualist society.

Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* takes the dangers of ill-applied individualism even further. Captain Ahab follows the same individualist ideals established previously: He chooses and follows his personal goal of killing the whale who bit off his leg; while he makes use of his ship’s crew in order to attain this goal, he pays little mind to their well-being. The book demonstrates the danger of misjudging the balance between gain and loss at the core of individualist acting. Bellah (1985, 145) considers Ahab’s story to be a “flight from society”: His quest is of almost purely destructive motivation, with little potential of doing good to society at large. His motives are bound to clash with any attempt of doing so, resulting in a “completely asocial individualism” (ibid.). His conviction to catch Moby Dick ends up causing the loss of his own life as well as that of most of the crew, and the destruction of his boat which could be seen as the foundation of the society Ahab was part of, bringing down the entire system with him.

As has been shown, the central values of the American individualist society are a common theme throughout the country’s literature. The core myth has stayed remarkably consistent throughout history: The significance of self-interest over fitting in with society is a core theme in all the examples given, and writers like O’Sullivan and Grisham tie their stories into the greater American narrative of opportunity and personal freedom.

Readers of American fiction are expected to judge characters by their actions; the fascination of the anti-hero might stem from the fact that the reader himself has to make the choice of showing sympathy toward the character, which is a concession the text has to work hard to earn. Accomplishing this task is therefore all the more



appreciated. Individualist personality traits contribute to this sense of ambiguity of choice, since the typically individualist way of choosing to serve self-interest rather than helping others does not always place characters in a positive light.

### **1.6. The story and mythology of *Lost***

Running for six seasons and 121 hour-long episodes from 2004 to 2010, *Lost* was one of the most critically acclaimed and publically successful television drama series of the last decade (cf. Krukowski 2008).

“Live together, die alone” is not just the title of a climactic episode, but also an important rule to follow for the survivors of a plane crash as they find themselves stranded on an island in the Pacific, forced to live off the resources they can gather from the jungle and scraps saved from the fuselage. Conflicts crop up as the survivors’ individual needs turn out to contradict each other from time to time, but ultimately they all work together to survive until rescue comes to take them home. Rather than having a clear-cut main character, the show relies on a constantly-changing ensemble cast, although there is an audience surrogate in Jack Shephard, who is seen on screen in most episodes, and, due to his position of a de-facto leader and decision-maker for the survivors, has access to an amount of information similar to the viewer.

In the course of time, it becomes clear to the viewer that the island has supernatural properties (the mysteries of which the majority of the series’ running time is spent exploring), and that most, if not all, of the characters are holding back secrets of their own – some trying to hide their criminal past, others having experienced supernatural events before.

An individualist reading of *Lost* must focus, at least partly, on character dynamics: Over time, the survivors take on roles according to their talents and professions before the crash. Jack, a spinal surgeon, soon emerges as the leader and healer of the group; John Locke hunts for food, spending most of his time alone in the jungle; Michael puts his experience as a construction worker to practice and builds makeshift houses and rafts out of the airplane wreckage. Unexpected outside influences frequently break up these established dynamics, leading to conflict between the characters, whose resolution often depends on a decision between accepting personal loss and damaging the well-being of society as a whole. One such situation occurs in the episode “...In Translation”: Sun, who so far had been seen speaking only Korean by most of the survivors, including her husband, reveals her ability to speak English in order to protect him – confirming his suspicions that she had planned to leave him. Here, she pays the price of personal loss for the greater good; in similar situations

throughout the series, characters' choices alternate between the collectivist and the self-serving path.

Most episodes, especially during early seasons, follow a similar structure: While the survivors on the island are faced with a problem to overcome or a mystery to solve, these 'present-time' scenes are periodically intercut with flashbacks to a period of a character's life before the crash, often leading the viewer to understand a new facet of that character's personality, and giving possible reasons for seemingly malevolent or irrational decisions he or she has made.

The island itself is consistently presented as an enigmatic place where unexpected events can happen at any time. Rescue fails to arrive, and the viewer soon finds out that the island is almost impossible to reach by conventional means, leading the characters to look for alternate ways home. Later, the viewer meets the "Others", native inhabitants of the island, and toward the end of the series, their good and evil deities (who turn out to be living on the island as well). The entirety of these mysteries is usually, by the show creators as well as secondary sources, referred to as the "mythology" of the series (cf. Drangsholt 2009, 217) – a fitting term, considering the story shares many elements with older, 'classical' mythologies, such as the Native American or Greek mythological corpora, featuring the spirits of the dead as well as demi-gods wandering the island, stories of heroes and villains, and even encounters with monstrous creatures.

From the beginning, the series establishes an idiosyncratic audiovisual language to help viewers find their way through its non-linear storytelling and the at times surreal world it creates: Flashbacks are usually bookended by a distinctive low rumbling sound and a close-up shot of the character who experiences the memory shown. This way, it is easily comprehensible for the viewer that the following scene takes place at some point in the character's past, and can adapt quickly to the fact that a known character is now depicted within a new setting, surrounded by people previously unseen. Since it is difficult to keep track of all the information presented in the series, the revelation of previously unknown facts, especially if an important piece of information is concerned, is punctuated by a discordant dropping trombone chord. This distinctive sound signals to the viewer that the subject of the revelation shown on screen is important to the overall plot, and should be kept in mind. Musical clues of this type work as a subtle way of relaying these meta-fictional aids to orientation. They help to make the viewer more self-reliant, eliminating the need of explaining these storytelling techniques in more explicit terms.

### 1.7. Locating *Lost*: Contextual connections to philosophy and literature

The series makes extensive use of intertextual references. Episode titles frequently allude to literary works whose plots or core message they resemble, and characters are seen reading books which fit the context of their current situation or reveal some information about their personality. Knowledge of these texts is at no point required to understand the plot, but reveals additional layers not discussed directly in the series.

Most characters' names are aptronymic: they reflect personality traits or foreshadow the role they will take within the society of survivors, taking their meanings from a multitude of sources. Some of the names are easy to decipher, such as Jack Shephard's, who reluctantly takes command in situations of crisis, 'herding' the survivors to safety; the name also works on a religious level, referring to the 'Good Shepherd' Jesus Christ (a connection enforced by the name of Jack's father, Christian). Unlike him, however, Jack does not act from the perspective of a "man of faith" for most of the series, creating a tension between his name, which could be taken as an indicator of fate, and his actions.

Literary references are used to frame characters from the moment they appear, and play with those expectations, such as in the case of Southerner James 'Sawyer' Ford, whose name can not only be read as a reference to actor Harrison Ford, who is well-known for his portrayal of characters conforming to the 'lovable rogue' archetype (a reference lent plausibility by the constant references the character makes to *Star Wars*, which features Harrison Ford in one of his most iconic such roles as Han Solo), but also connotes with Mark Twain's southern boy Tom Sawyer, is only over time revealed to be more than just the aggressive, egotistical 'redneck' stereotype he appears to be. As his character development allows him to experience love, his actions become more social and group-oriented. Interestingly, he sheds his nickname concurrent to that process: the connotation which comes with the name Sawyer gradually loses its validity; as he himself turns from a self-serving capitalist into a 'loveable rogue', characters start referring to him as James Ford.

An unusual number of names references humanist philosophers; for the most part, these characters mirror an aspect of their namesake's theories. Probably the most notable member of this group of characters is John Locke, who can in many ways be seen as the epitome of the individualist: He is frequently seen wandering the island on his own; his hunter mentality shows the typical individualist features of competitiveness and self-reliance, as he, at first, accepts no assistance on his hunting expeditions. On his lone travels, he also encounters many of the island's secrets

before his fellow survivors do, giving him a knowledge advantage and making him appear more competent in front of the group – a fact he frequently utilizes to rally others to his cause.

Other characters named after philosophers include Desmond Hume (after David Hume), and Danielle Rousseau, whose many years spent on the island after being shipwrecked there have made her paranoid and dangerous, yet sympathetic to the survivors' cause; she can be said to represent her namesake philosopher's idea of the noble savage. John Locke, however, is the only character to share his first as well as last name with his real-life counterpart; his connection can be said to be particularly strong.

The naming conventions used for the characters in *Lost* suggest connections to the archetypes they represent, placing the series firmly in the realm of allegory. Many characters can also be seen as stand-ins for an ideology or a world-view, and interactions between them can be interpreted as meditations on the relationships of those ideas.

Having examined the basic rules of individualist acting and their foundation in American culture, the guidelines of individualism observed in this chapter will be referred to regularly in the course of this paper, as they provide the motivation for many idiosyncratic aspects of the American individualist society. Taking much of its theoretical foundation from the humanist ideas concerning natural law and property as described by 17<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher John Locke, the connection between American individualism and the philosophy of *Lost* is evident. The following chapter will highlight some of the prevalent individualist ideas discussed in the series' narrative, which will be investigated individually in subsequent chapters.

## 2. “Each one of us was brought here for a reason”: A juxtaposition of *Lost* and American individualist beliefs

In this chapter, a scene from *Lost* will be examined from an individualist perspective. The relationship between John Locke, who shares some personality traits with the loner archetype, and Jack, who speaks for the survivors’ society as a whole, will be investigated. The two characters share a dialog scene shortly before the climactic end of the first season finale, “Exodus”, in which they discuss their contrasting world-views, touching upon several important elements of the individualist system of morality and beliefs. The scene is deliberately selected not to include explicit commentary on individualism: Rather, a close reading will reveal the individualist philosophy guiding Locke’s actions which is always present even without being explicitly spelled out. Furthermore, its significance within the overarching message of the series will be examined, and it will be located in the context of American individualism.

The scene takes place in the jungle at night, and shows a discussion between Jack and Locke on their hike across the island. Having just escaped an attack by an unseen enemy, Jack and Locke are carrying sticks of highly volatile dynamite through the jungle in order to blow open the entrance to a bunker discovered by Locke which could provide shelter and safety for the survivors.

LOCKE: We shouldn't be this close to each other, Jack.

JACK: If we blow up, we blow up. What the hell was all that about back there, John?

LOCKE: What was what about?

JACK: You asked me to let you go.

LOCKE: That's right.

JACK: That thing was taking you down the hole and you asked me to let you go.

LOCKE: It wasn't going to hurt me.

JACK: No, John, it was going to kill you.

LOCKE: I seriously doubt that.

JACK: Look, I need for you to ... I need for you to explain to me what the hell's going on inside your head, John. I need to know why you believe that that thing wasn't gonna-

LOCKE: I believe that I was being tested.

JACK: Tested?

LOCKE: Yeah, tested. I think that's why you and I don't see eye-to-eye sometimes, Jack -- because you're a man of science.

JACK: Yeah, and what does that make you?

LOCKE: Me, well, I'm a man of faith. Do you really think all this is an accident – that we, a group of strangers, survived, many of us with just superficial injuries? Do you think we crashed on this place by coincidence – especially this place? We were brought here for a purpose, for a reason. All of us. Each one of us was brought here for a reason.

JACK: Brought here? And who brought us here, John?

LOCKE: The island. The island brought us here. This is no ordinary place, you've seen that, I know you have. But the island chose you too, Jack. It's destiny.

JACK: Did you talk with Boone about destiny, John?

LOCKE: Boone was a sacrifice that the island demanded. What happened to him at that plane was a part of a chain of events that led us here – that led us down a path – that led you and me to this day, to right now.

JACK: And where does that path end, John?

LOCKE: The path ends at the hatch. The hatch, Jack, all of it – all of it happened so that we could open the hatch.

JACK: No. No, we're opening the Hatch so that we can survive.

LOCKE: Survival is all relative, Jack.

JACK: I don't believe in destiny.

LOCKE: Yes, you do. You just don't know it yet. (*Lost*, “Exodus, Part 3”, 15:40)

## 2.1. Description of the scene

Visually, this scene is very minimalist. Its only discernible elements are two men bearing torches and backpacks, presented against a featureless backdrop of jungle flora. Even though there are other characters on the way with them, they do not appear, being shown in the previous scene to have fallen behind over time. Jack and Locke are alone, symbolically isolated from the rest of the world, having only each other to sort out their differences. This feeling of isolation and remoteness is enforced through the properties of the setting: The jungle through which the characters are moving is very dense, forming a solid boundary to the outside. The torchlight encompasses only the characters and their immediate surroundings and leaves most of the environment in darkness, thus making the sense of placelessness and abstraction even stronger.

Due to the sparse visual content of the scene, most of its meaning is conveyed through dialog and body language. A sense of *mise-en-abyme* is invoked through Locke's references to the plane crash and opening the hatch, the first and final events shown during this season of *Lost*. These events are connected by Locke's story of

guidance-by-destiny, forming a ‘miniature version’ of the narrative from his point of view.

The characters’ movement reflects the delicate subject matter of their discussion: They walk slowly and deliberately due to the unstable dynamite they are carrying, repeatedly stopping to physically stress their points. While their conversation touches deeply onto each other’s backgrounds, with Jack accusing Locke of careless murder and Locke criticizing Jack’s reluctance to see his point of view, their tempers stay remarkably composed throughout. Neither character raises their voice; in fact, both characters’ way of speaking turns more and more into a whisper as the dialog becomes more intense. By lowering their voices, they force each other to listen more closely to what they are saying, lending more weight to their arguments.

The camerawork reflects this build-up of tension. As the scene starts, the characters are shown approaching the camera in full to medium shot. Jack and Locke walk alongside each other, with both on screen at the same time. The camera moves with them in one long shot, until Locke comes to a final stop at the line “I believe that I was being tested” and turns around to face Jack (cf. fig. 2). As he interrupts Jack’s line of questions, the initial shot is similarly disrupted, changing to a view behind Jack, so that Locke turns toward the watcher as he begins to explain himself. From this line onwards, the view changes to alternating over-the-shoulder shots, slowly zooming in on the characters’ faces as they talk, coming to a stop at close-up distance.



Fig. 2: Locke turns around to face Jack.

As the zooming motion ceases at the line “The island brought us here”, the presentation of the scene changes again. Up to this point, the only sound heard other than the characters’ voices has been the ambient background noise of the jungle, represented by the chirping of crickets, strengthening the sense of isolation which has enabled a ‘clean’ confrontation undisturbed by outside factors. As Locke speaks the line, a musical element is introduced to the scene, drowning out the background noise. The musical cue in question has been previously introduced as Locke’s theme and accentuates the ‘mysterious hunter’ aspect of his personality. First heard in the episode “Walkabout”, it is usually low-pitched and subtle, making use of percussion instruments. Here, a higher-pitched version featuring a string section is presented, giving the theme a more dramatic effect and making it more noticeable.

The use of Locke’s musical theme serves to mark this scene as centered around him and his ideology rather than Jack’s. Locke has a noticeably greater amount of dialog lines than Jack, who is mostly asking questions, prompting Locke to share his view of the island and the implications he draws from the observations he has made there so far. Within the context of the conventionalized visual language of film and television, he exhibits several traits which lend him credibility as a wise and experienced person by the time this scene takes place: Being among the oldest characters of the group, he is from the beginning assumed to know more than the younger survivors. A scar runs down his right eye and he has a bruise on his forehead, stressing how much he has gone through to get to this point in the narrative – in comparison, Jack looks much cleaner and less, as Locke puts it, ‘tested’.

## 2.2. Analysis

This scene is an example of the aforementioned practice commonly used in *Lost* of contrasting philosophies by showing an argument between the characters representing them. Jack appears curious at first but increasingly casts doubt on Locke’s world-view as the scene develops, acting as a foil for Locke to spell out the conclusion he has come to through his experiences. As the difference in their philosophies becomes more and more apparent, their degree of separation is reflected in the camerawork: While they share the screen in the first, non-confrontational part of the sequence, they are shot separately as their opinion diverges, with the camera zooming in over their shoulders, moving in closer until the other disappears from the frame.

This scene occurs near the climax of the arc of suspense built throughout the first season. The dialog harkens back to important events which have shaped the path the narrative has taken up to this point, putting the climactic final scenes to follow in



context. The plane crash which brought the survivors to the island is mentioned and Boone's death is brought up, implied by Jack to have happened as a consequence of Locke's actions. The scene also serves as a quick recapitulation of the story so far, and offers two conflicting interpretations.

Jack, who does not "believe in destiny", takes a pragmatic view. He speaks from his point of view as the leader of the group, demanding justification for Locke's seemingly rash actions which have, over the course of their stay on the island, endangered not only himself, but also others who spent time with him. Jack is concerned with the well-being of the group he leads; he sees the danger in Locke's conviction. Being a "man of science", he thinks that Locke's search for answers, driven by faith, is futile and will only continue to cause harm – shortly after this conversation he warns others that "we're going to have a Locke problem". Jack wants to open the hatch in the hope of getting access to a fortified, safe hideout for the group in the face of the imminent threat of being attacked by the Others.

Locke, on the other hand, believes in a greater purpose. His fellow survivors are of little importance to him; he is interested in the island itself. While claiming to be hunting boars for the group, he has spent much of his time on the island following his own interests, exploring its secrets and looking for answers. He explains that the loss of Boone, who died while retrieving information for Locke, was a "sacrifice that the island demanded" – having been shown to feel personally responsible for his death in previous episodes, however, it is not clear whether he really thinks this to be the case, or if he has merely talked himself into believing it as a means of coming to terms with his actions. Locke's motivation for opening the hatch is not the security it potentially offers for him and the group, but his curiosity: His aim is to find out what it contains. Ultimately, Boone's death serves to strengthen his resolve, as opening the hatch would give his "sacrifice" meaning, whether it was dictated by fate or not.

Jack and Locke's conflicting belief systems are a main focus of the series, and have been discussed multiple times in earlier episodes: Jack's collectivist principles are spelled out in a speech he gives in "White Rabbit" when he stands up as the group's voice of reason for the first time, drafting a set of rules in order to ensure peaceful coexistence within the group. This also marks the story of the survivors as paralleling American history, as the country's colonists agreed on a series of similar contracts ensuring a functioning society. Locke represents the competitive aspect of the American world-view, asserting his right to make demands from society by impressing with actions rather than words. His desire to hunt, which is discussed several times in the episodes leading up to "Exodus", as well as his conviction to open the hatch, stem from this way of thinking. Locke can be said to be in

competition with himself, constantly trying to prove he is not a failure and challenging his own doubts. On the island, Locke is the embodiment of the American dream – his journey there from America mirrors that of European immigrants *to* America: Coming from a life in which his freedom was severely restrained, the island gives him the liberty to start anew and achieve self-realization (cf. Adams 1932, 405).

The over-the-shoulder camera angles invite the viewer to take the perspective of the characters and to see them from each other's point of view. In Locke's opinion, Jack's skepticism is wrong. He is convinced that his strong faith is justified and tries to explain his reasons for this, believing that Jack, over time, will see things his way as well – he just does not "know it yet". Locke, to Jack, is enigmatic, his motivation shrouded in mystery. Most of his lines here are questions concerning his intentions; Jack essentially acts as a foil to Locke's statements, encouraging him to share his thoughts.

Locke shares a number of traits with the previously discussed cowboy archetype. Like this prototypical individualist hero, he "can never fit into" (Bellah et al. 1985, 144) society, made clear in this scene by the fact that his and Jack's world-views seem irreconcilable. For the moment, they share the same goal of opening the hatch; their reasons for wanting to do that, however, differ greatly. The opacity of Locke's intentions makes his actions unpredictable to others. He is surrounded by mystery, a fact which in itself makes him appear powerful and, in light of the consequences of his actions, dangerous in the eyes of the group as represented by Jack. Yet, by choosing to follow what he perceives to be his destiny, his actions are determined by what is right and good according to his moral compass.

Rather than being involved with society, Locke feels a deep connection to nature as symbolized by the island. During the attack preceding this scene, Jack barely saved him from an unseen force trying to pull him into a hole in the ground; Locke insists that "it wasn't going to hurt" him. He is confident that the island is a benevolent force, and that coming into close contact with the island would have benefited, rather than harmed, him. This idea has been proven to be true in previous episodes: Confined to a wheelchair before the plane crash, it is revealed in "Walkabout" that he has regained his ability to walk after his arrival on the island. This supernatural event has created a bond between the character and the location, leading him to become interested in and investigate the nature of the island. By the time his conversation with Jack takes place, he has experienced clairvoyant dreams and witnessed the healing power of the island multiple times. He seems to be the favored 'target' of these unexplainable events. This puts him into the position of a 'spokesperson' for the island. The conversation can, therefore, also be read as a dialog between the survivors (Jack) and the island (Locke), or, in even broader terms, between man and nature.

At this point, it is important to remember the character's connection to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century English philosopher John Locke, whose theories touch upon this relationship. According to Bellah et al. (1985, 143), he is, among the philosophers of that region and time, "the key figure and one enormously influential in America" as regards the philosophical understanding of individualism. The humanist strand of philosophy which his works are part of derives individual rights from the needs of the "biological individual in a 'state of nature'" (ibid.). According to Locke, "[t]he individual is prior to society, which comes into existence only through the voluntary contract of individuals trying to maximize their own self-interest" (ibid.). *Lost*'s Locke acts very much according to this principle: He is mostly concerned with the island itself rather than interaction with the group, but enters society in order to acquire assistance for his own needs. His manner of 'utilizing' fellow survivors is what led to Boone's death, but this modus operandi has also proven useful to Locke's personal cause as Boone's help has yielded some answers over time.

Locke believes that the survivors' fate on the island has been predestined, with the events leading up to the flight that brought them there, as well as everything since, happening "for a purpose, for a reason". Following this belief, he assumes that the next predetermined step for him to take is entering the hatch. This mirrors the myth of Manifest Destiny, which similarly inscribed a meaning to the history of American settlement and used that narrative as a pretense to justify the further colonization of the continent. Like the proponents of that myth, Locke has no concrete reason to believe that his goal is the only correct course of action; however, his reasoning is compelling enough to make a strong case – at least strong enough to convince himself, if not others. The hatch could be considered his personal *Moby Dick*: Like Captain Ahab wanting to kill the white whale in that story, Locke is determined to open the hatch door; he is shown to take great risks and makes sacrifices in order to achieve this goal. His conclusion that "the path ends at the hatch" shows that he does not care what happens after his goal is accomplished: He expects his search to end, and his questions to be answered.

The idea of destiny guiding one's actions is an inherently idealist concept. By imagining a "path" and a "purpose" guiding his actions, Locke interprets the outcome of adhering to his destiny to be something desirable. He "believes [he] was being tested", implying he expects a reward for passing the island's trials. It is apparent that he bears Jack a grudge for interrupting his perceived "test". Despite not knowing the exact nature of the reward at the end of his ordeal, he sees it as an opportunity; he makes the conscious decision to follow his path.

The question of destiny comes up in an earlier scene of the same episode, where two unrelated characters discuss a different side of the concept:

SUN: Do you think all this – all we've been through – do you think we're being punished?

SHANNON: Punished for what?

SUN: Things we did before. The secrets we kept. The lies we told.

SHANNON: Who do you think is punishing us?

SUN: Fate. (Lost, “Exodus, Part 2”, 35:27)

Like Locke, Sun reads a meaning into the survivors’ stay on the island. Unlike his view of it, however, her concept of fate neither involves choice, nor is it benevolent in nature. In contrast, Locke’s idea of destiny is more optimistic, but at the same time demands more effort in order to come true. Fate as punishment is enforced, with no way of avoiding it; it has to be accepted. Fate as opportunity must be earned: Locke chooses to follow his destiny and must pass “tests” in order to achieve it. His need to be proactive and prove his capabilities is strongly individualist in nature. It is consistent with the behavior he has shown up to this point in the series, such as his wish to demonstrate his skills as a hunter, and the defiance he shows toward his lack of freedom while paralyzed.

Locke’s inquiries also serve an important purpose to the viewer: As most characters are preoccupied with the group’s survival, Locke’s constant search for destiny provides the most answers concerning the mysteries of the island during the first season. Billed as a “mystery-drama” (Krukowski 2008), the mythological elements of *Lost* make up much of the fascination surrounding the series. The narrative assumes the viewer to be interested in the reasons behind the seemingly unexplainable events shown on screen, as evidenced by the dramatic build-up preceding important revelations (the scene between Locke and Jack, for example, is part of the rising tension leading up to the opening of the hatch). On the level of storytelling, therefore, Locke represents the viewer’s curiosity; the viewer shares his satisfaction upon finding answers. Jack, likewise, stands for the sympathy viewers feel towards the characters. His happiness is determined by the well-being of the group he is in charge of; this connection to society makes him the collectivist counterpart to ‘individualist hero’ Locke.

In conclusion, it can be said that individualist ideas mark most elements of Locke’s personal belief system. Putting his personal interest before that of the group, he acts according to the individualist observations made by his namesake philosopher. This philosophy of self-governance clashes with the more collectivist ideals held by Jack, as well as the group as a whole. The island makes achieving self-realization

possible for him, a privilege which was denied to him due to adverse circumstances throughout his life before the plane crash, despite his perceived entitlement to it as an American citizen. Similar to the concept of Manifest Destiny, Locke now considers the acquisition of knowledge about the new world he finds himself in to be his mission; his destructive and at times unscrupulous methods to achieve this goal mirror the equally ruthless settlement of the American West. His deep connection to the wilderness of the island corresponds to the cowboy archetype found in the mythology surrounding these historical events. He is a self-described “man of faith”, deriving a belief system from a combination of the individualist stance he held even before his arrival on the island, and the religious experiences he has made since.

All of these personality traits mark elements which make up Locke’s personal ‘brand’ of individualism. They mirror the American narrative, from the conception of its philosophical ideals to the way they were acted out, and their mythical retelling. The following chapters will examine these fundamental aspects of individualism: Starting with John Locke’s namesake philosopher, the humanist ideas which led up to the foundation of the United States will be discussed. The acts of nation-building in America and *Lost* will be compared, as will the mythical narrative preceding, and caused by, the founding of these nations. Similarities between the settlement of the West and the conquest of the island will be sought out. More general aspects of individualist society, and how they relate to *Lost*, will be examined as well: Locke’s faith, which acts as the catalyst for many events shown in the story, exhibits parallels to the practice of religion in America’s individualist culture. His handling of information and resources as determined by his personal needs mirrors the capitalist economy which acts as an American driving force. Lastly, his rejection of Jack’s centralized way of leadership can be seen as a reflection of the American disdain for governmental power.

### 3. Before the United States: Early individualist thinkers

This chapter will provide an outline of individualist thought expressed before the foundation of the United States of America. Keeping in mind the sympathy *Lost* seems to have for the ideas of humanist philosophy, some central humanist ideas – particularly those of English thinker John Locke – will be presented, and the influence they had on the foundation of the American nation will be shown. If, as Hall (2006, 163) writes, culture adheres to the rules of language, then individual ideas such as these can be equated to the signs making up a culture's units of meaning. They must, therefore, be examined in context with the overarching system in order to get an understanding of the bigger picture.

Lukes (1973, 40) gives a number of possible starting points for various authors' definitions of 'individualism'; his examples include primitive Christianity, the Italian renaissance, Protestantism, some of his sources even going as far back as ancient Greece: Epicurus' ideas, he mentions, share many aspects with later individualist philosophies. However, most of these schools of thought seem guided by religious beliefs; they follow various interpretations of the moral system perceived to have been imposed by the word of god. They do not take into consideration the innate value of the individual – one, if not *the*, central idea of American individualism.

Epicureanism, however, should not be cast aside so easily. Buss (2000, 5) explains: "Epicurus started from the atomistic assumption that individuals first exist by and for themselves and then enter voluntarily and with design into societal relationships". This mirrors observations made by the English humanists centuries later. His relationship with the divine was more problematic than that of the others mentioned above, claiming that a god-like, fulfilled state of being was achievable for humans – essentially depriving divinity of its superior status. "[Where] the Christian said, 'We shall be like him', the Epicurean would have said, 'We can be like them here and now'" (DeWitt 1954, 283). Furthermore, this school of thought, like American individualism and its focus on the pursuit of happiness, places heavy emphasis on the attainment of bliss in order to reach that state of fulfillment; however, Epicurus believed that this highest state of being should be achieved through a life in friendship with others (cf. *ibid.*, 218), which is in direct opposition to the more competitive American approach.

As stated earlier, some of the more direct predecessors to individualism as it is practiced in the United States today can be found in 17<sup>th</sup> century England. Even though the concept was not yet known by its name at the time, Macpherson, like Lukes, locates the theoretical basis of modern individualist theories in the humanist school of thought. The interregnum era brought with it "a protracted struggle in

parliament, [...] a series of republican experiments, [...] and a final constitutional revolution” (Macpherson 1962, 1), providing fertile breeding ground for theories concerning the role of the individual in relation to the state, and meditations on the relationship between citizens.

### 3.1. Thomas Hobbes and the Leviathan

According to Macpherson, Thomas Hobbes’ works can be seen as a cornerstone of what would later become individualist thinking. As England’s form of government and legal situation changed multiple times during his life, he was compelled to question the legitimacy of laws and government in general. Hobbes argued from the point of view of a prospective individual member of society, discussing the concepts of interest and will and the role they play for members of a *state of nature*, a hypothetical society not influenced by man-made laws (cf. Macpherson 1962, 1).

This state of *natural law* is used by political philosophers to refer to an assumed “universal” system of coexistence – the state of nature “in which all human beings were at the beginning of history, or will be at its end” (Bobbio 1993, 41). The precondition of natural law, Hobbes attests in his 1651 publication *Leviathan*, is every man’s right to live, to take actions which ensure his own survival, and therefore,

to use his power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own Nature; that is to say, of his own Life; and consequently, of doing any thing, which in his own Judgement, and Reason, hee shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto. (Hobbes 1651, 64).

Laws of nature, Hobbes argues, are “general rule[s], found out by Reason” (ibid.): All rational individuals are able to make judgments on the level of natural law to the same degree, limited only by their varying abilities (such as coming up with ‘survival plans’ of different quality and effectiveness). *Lost*’s Locke is presented to the watcher as a master of this realm: His talent for hunting, his collection of knives, and his desire to prove himself in the wild are introduced in the early episode “Walkabout”. Having been kept from doing so prior to the crash, he is all the quicker to make the conscious decision to leave society and survive on his own. Having studied survivalist skills and learned to hunt with his father, he has little difficulty surviving on his own in the state of nature represented by the island’s jungle. Subsequently, he constructs his own body of rules based on reasoned assumptions about life on the island, in keeping with the course of action observed by Hobbes. Due to the supernatural properties of the island, they seem idiosyncratic and hard to grasp for the viewer and his fellow survivors alike, but they make empirical sense based on Locke’s own experience. His observations concerning destiny, for example, derive from his prophetic dreams which turn out to be too accurate to be ascribed to luck,

making the concept of predetermination feasible to him. Locke's passive behavior in the face of danger in "Exodus", which is criticized by Jack as being irrational, can similarly be justified by the fact that he has survived a similar encounter before – also shown in "Walkabout" – by assuming a nonviolent stance rather than fighting.

Some of Locke's more controversial actions are also notably in line with the extent of freedom Hobbes' ideas grant individuals in order to assert their right to live. It is apparent that Locke considers himself to be more 'alive' on the island than before. His goal to stay on the island is almost as important to him as bare survival. Much of his dedication to the island's mysteries comes from the fact that he wants it to become his new home, a 'second nature'. His resolve to stay on the island – and therefore his desire to stay 'alive' in a symbolic sense – becomes a problem for the others when his behavior becomes harmful to his fellow survivors, such as an instance in "The Moth" in which he physically hinders others from establishing radio contact with the outside world, knocking another survivor unconscious. He does this in order to prevent his own rescue, which would mean an end to his life on the island. It is, from his point of view, the way of action he considers "the aptest means" to reach his goal "in his own Judgement, and Reason", in Hobbes' (1651, 64) terms. Natural law, the philosopher explains further, includes "a Right to every thing; even to one anothers [sic!] body" (ibid.). This chain of reasoning leads him to state two basic natural laws: Since physical conflict is sure to harm one or both parties involved, it is the first law of nature "to seek Peace, and follow it" (ibid.). Should this first imperative fail, the second law demands "By all means we can, to defend our selves" (ibid.). No other moral compass but reason is needed within such a system; considering peace is seen as more favorable than conflict, the latter should be considered a last-resort measure rather than the norm.

If a society were stripped of all culturally derived rules and rituals, it would enter this hypothetical state of nature; being independent of cultural differences, this system would be equally valid for every human being, no matter their origin or history. In such a situation, "during the time men live without a common Power to keep the all in awe" (ibid., 62), Hobbes argues, there is a constant condition of war, defined not necessarily by the occurrence of physical fighting, but rather by the ubiquitous fear of battle breaking out; a time of war implies a lack of security. Specific situations for which Hobbes assumes natural law to become relevant include primitive societies, civil war, and intercultural contact (cf. Bobbio 1993, 41.). Individualism holds a similar view of constant competition, though less martial in concept: Hobbes' first and second laws mirror the individualist pursuit of happiness and the right to place one's own well-being before that of others. Like Hobbes' hypothetical state of nature,



individualism guarantees equality for all members of society, with individual success determined by the ability to assert oneself.

The New World offered a clean slate for the foundation of a set of laws built on ideas which supported individualist values. Hobbes' ideas concerning natural law grant the natural individual a large amount of freedom of action. While Hobbes used this model as a basis upon which he built his arguments concerning civil society, his fears that the actual enactment of natural law would be closely connected to the outbreak of destructive anarchism are apparent in his reasoning (cf. Bobbio 1993, xii). Still, the idea influenced the composition of the founding documents. "We hold these truths to be self-evident", the Declaration of Independence proclaims. This justification-by-reason of the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness suggests that the Founding Fathers, too, saw some natural rights present in humans *a priori*. They are made out to be undeniably true for all citizens, before any further discussion even begins concerning the peculiarities of how the emerging country's legal system should be structured.

Hobbes' theory of contract is another idea which shaped American individualism. It concerns the power relations between a state and its citizens, stating that a mutual agreement exists between these two entities. In *Leviathan*, he defines "contract" as a "mutual transferring of right" (Hobbes 1651, 66), describing it as a voluntary agreement from which both sides profit (otherwise the terms of the contract would not be accepted by one or both of the parties): This can, in principle, be regarded as a description of the basic mechanics of an individualist society, where self-interest governs every individual's interaction with others. A contract is valid on the basis that both parties trust each other to fulfill the matters agreed upon; since both participants' interests depend on the successful execution of the contract, failure to do so will harm the party responsible as well.

Contracts can also be made with entities other than citizens: The recognition of one's own government, for example, constitutes a social contract, as citizens agree to follow its laws, but also receive the benefits provided by the state. Contracts between governments represent agreement between the citizens of one country and those of another. In a sense, contracts form the basis of laws, as their recognition is what binds citizens to observing them. A breach of law is at the same time a breach of the contract between citizen and government, and, in extension, the contract between citizen and society. *Lost* deals with the concept of social contracts on several levels. The society of survivors is remarkable in this respect: Even though a number of them are over the course of the narrative revealed to be former criminals and misfits, they are ignorant of each others' pasts. They share a common goal, and utilize their

isolation from the society they were part of before to start a new life. To form a functioning society on the island, they must agree to enter contracts with each other on no other basis than mutual trust. If the individual characters' past actions were better known to their fellow survivors, some of the agreements shown would not be made, as the status of a criminal implies that he or she has broken a contract with society before. Locke, who interacts little with the group, enters a different kind of contract: He expects answers from the island, and goes to great lengths to fulfill what he perceives to be its demands. The amount of trust he puts into this contract is so large that the system of answers, questions and demands becomes an entire belief system for him – the island never explicitly communicates any of this; he creates a chain of meanings based on his experience. This shows that the significance of contracts can vary between the participants, with some 'contractable' entities (like the *Lost* island, government, or a company) being unable to communicate terms and agreement, or even to be a conscious participant in a contractual relationship; rather, they emerge from a social system as a consequence of, and motivation for, interaction between its members.

By making and fulfilling contracts, both parties gain responsibility and respect in each others' eyes. The opposite is true in the case of a breach of contract, as symbolized in *Lost* by Locke's reaction to Boone's death. Perceiving it to be a "sacrifice", he is highly disappointed in the island's perceived failure to return this service. The episode "Deus Ex Machina" is concerned with such issues of trust, as even this "sacrifice" does not cause the hatch to open. The episode culminates in an emotional outburst directed toward the island, as Locke collapses on the hatch door:

LOCKE: I've done everything you wanted me to do, so why did you do this to me?  
(*Lost*, "Deus Ex Machina", 39:46)

Coincidentally, a light is turned on inside just as he says this. Again, by reasoning that his plea is what 'changed the island's mind' (based on the assumption that the contract Locke perceives between them existed), his belief in both the island and their contract is reaffirmed. As the audience later finds out, the light, and many other events experienced by Locke, are merely accidental. Still, the contract – even though it exists only in his mind – shapes his actions and dictates his line of thought, demonstrating the power which contracts can exert on social acting.

Hobbes' *Leviathan* itself is a model of sovereignty, pictured as a huge humanoid-looking creature made up of the many citizens of a nation (cf. fig. 3). According to Lukes' interpretation, it represents "the sovereign power, [...] an artificial contrivance constructed to satisfy the requirements of the component elements of society" (Lukes 1973, 76). Going by that reading, government, in Hobbes' opinion, is to be seen as a

machine; a tool; a means to an end. This is very much in line with the purpose the Declaration of Independence would later assign its county's prospective government, which states that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed". Again, this wording can be read in such a way that government should serve as a facilitator to execute the will of the people; an instrument rather than a thing of itself. In a contractual exchange, as Hobbes would call it, the citizens defer some of their power to their representatives in government, receiving in turn some relief concerning the extent of their duties as decision-makers for the nation – however, it is still *the people* which govern the country; those elected



Fig. 3: Hobbes' Leviathan, a visual metaphor for the state not being an entity of itself, but rather made up of the entirety of its citizens.

to represent the citizens are merely to be seen as "first among equals".

This argument is often used by those American groups in favor of a small-government policy, an issue which has recently experienced an upsurge due to being a central plea of the 'Tea Party' movement. Other well-known proponents of a small American government are the libertarian party and Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy, both strongly founded on individualist values. In her book *The Virtue of*

*Selfishness*, Rand asserts that the Declaration's requirement of "the consent of the governed" defines both a purpose and limits for the government, meaning it should be sufficiently strong to protect the laws enacted by the people, but not strong enough to be able to reverse the roles as they have been assigned and act as the "ruler" (cf. Rand 1964, 78).

Hobbes' concern with the individual laid the groundwork for further humanist theories, inspiring other authors of his time to express their own ideas about its value and responsibilities within society. Amongst others, "individualism had a large, if ambiguous, place in [John] Locke's political theory" (Macpherson 1962,2).

### 3.2. John Locke and the concept of property

Four decades after Hobbes' *Leviathan*, another important text was published which pondered the moral worth of the individual. John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* makes a strong case for personal liberty. The first of these essays serves as a rebuttal to a previously published book, Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, and condemns inherited power and the concept of a patriarchal society (cf. Locke 1970, 159), an opinion which would later be very strongly present in early colonial America.

The second treatise, titled *Of Civil Government*, forms a counter-proposal to the system refuted in the first, that is, monarchy as it existed after the end of the interregnum. Like Hobbes before him, Locke observes that "we are born free, as we are born rational" (Locke 1970, 326), and interprets the state of nature as a "state [...] of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal" (ibid., 287), establishing the basic human condition, like Hobbes before him, as a state in which all are equal. His view of nature is notably less malevolent: He sees it as a truly neutral state of being in which no being is favored over another.

Beyond its mere assumption, he argues that such a state exists at the time of publication: "Thus in the beginning all the world was America, and more so than it is now" (ibid., 228), Locke argues, equating the New World with the concept of the state of nature itself. At the time of publication in 1698, this was certainly true: Most of the land on the American continent had not been claimed, and there was seemingly infinite space for each settler to live in peace.

John Locke is the only character in *Lost* to share his full name – first and last – with a real-world counterpart. Most other referential names in the series are accomplished through characters having a meaningful last name only, with the first name differing from that of its original bearer. This implies a particularly close connection between the character and the philosopher whose ideology he represents.

Locke's characterization and behavior have already been shown to display elements of humanist, individual-centric thought in general. Considering the connection the philosopher makes between the myth of America and his theory concerning the state of nature, the name of the character seems to be a deliberate reference to Locke's theories in particular.

Locke's most important contribution to the American narrative is his concept of *property*. He constructs, on the basis of natural law, a system intended to justly allocate goods. Starting with the assertion that "every man has a property in his own person" (ibid., 305) (using the same reasoning by which Hobbes guarantees every man's right to his own life), he continues with the argument that "the Labour of his body and the Work of his hands", and any goods that may derive from it, are to be considered that person's property as well. Labor worked even on natural objects – for example, picking up acorns in the forest to eat them at home –

put[s] a distinction between them and common: That added something to them more than Nature, the common Mother of all, had done; and so they became [the picker's] private right (Locke 1970, 306).

Having argued that all men are born free, that freedom is a basic human right, and how goods are to be appropriated on the basis of natural law, he concludes that these three elements make up property: It is, therefore, one's natural right to protect one's "*Life, Liberty and Estate*" – that is, the sum of one's possessions according to Locke's reasoning – "and punish the breaches of that law in others" (ibid., 341).

The execution of these laws of nature is "put into every mans [sic!] hands" (ibid., 289), meaning that it is each individual's responsibility to not just exert, but also defend these rights. This idea is the driving force behind small-government movements in modern America, who argue that a decentralized society of "empower[ed] citizens" (Bellah et al. 1985, 269) might be advantageous to economic and political efficiency, as each individual knows best what course of action yields favorable results for themselves. In *Lost*, the character Locke definitely represents such an "empowered citizen". He takes very little advice from his fellow survivors, frequently ignoring or contradicting their suggestions. He is aware of the value of the information he possesses and treats it as property in the Lockean sense, exercising his right to defend the exclusivity of his knowledge. As a man governed by the law of nature living outside of society, he takes action when his rights of property are infringed, even against his fellow survivors. This notion is even more prevalent in the character of Sawyer, whose decision to collect and hoard potentially important items after the crash puts him into a position of material wealth early on. Like Locke, his behavior is strongly guided by self-interest, evident by his unwillingness to give his possessions away without being traded something in return. Both characters have

better access than others to different kinds of resources, and make use of this advantage in order to gain the opportunity of asserting their authority over others.

The philosopher Locke also stresses the importance of free will in achieving liberty. He argues that freedom is not the complete independence from laws, but the right “to follow my own Will in all things, where the Rule prescribes not” (ibid., 302). This implies that liberty is always defined by the system of laws in effect, leading to different types of freedom. Locke cites “Freedom of Men under Government” and “Freedom of Nature” as examples, stressing that the latter form of liberty is not completely ungoverned, but the laws of nature are still in effect. While they grant a large amount of choice, an individual living in such a system

has not Liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any Creature in his Possession, but where some nobler use, than its bare Preservation calls for it. [...] Every one as he is *bound to preserve himself*, and not to quit his Station wilfully; so by the like reason when his own Preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to *preserve the rest of Mankind*, and may not [...] impair the life [...] or Goods of another. (Locke 1970, 289).

This reasoning is in keeping with Hobbes’ stated preference of peace over conflict, going even further – rather than being passive toward the rest of society, it is advantageous for the individual to preserve it, as the structures and services it provides might be of use later. Locke’s analysis still allows for a broad range of choices, the restrictions he suggests being dictated by reason.

*Lost*, and Locke’s story arc in particular within the series, frequently contrast the concepts of free will and destiny. While the latter, when taken literally, is a metaphysical idea irrelevant to humanist reasoning, it can be equated to a higher power or authority. Thus, this aspect of the story can be analyzed from a Lockean perspective. Within the narrative, important decisions are often framed as a choice to follow one’s (perceived) destiny or act according to free will – the conflict between Locke and Jack is driven by this debate, as Jack does not believe in fate, but Locke’s personal goals and his destiny match up, meaning he has no problem following this doctrine. It has been noted previously that their confrontation on the way to the hatch in “Exodus” remains very calm and levelheaded. It is their ability to reason, “which is that measure God has set to the actions of Men, for their mutual security” (Locke 1970, 290), that keeps their conflict of opinion from escalating and prevents a physical fight from breaking out, which would be detrimental to both of their goals. The main difference in their motivation is the fact that Jack’s desire to save as many people as possible comes from ‘below’, that is, the body of the group, while Locke received his orders from ‘above’, submitting himself to the god-like authority he ascribes to the island in its function as nature, which causes him to act as its ‘agent’, representative of its state and laws.

Both characters act and argue according to their place within the moral system they place themselves in, with neither character able to truly act freely: They have chosen their place in relation to society, and their actions are now informed by this choice, with little *liberty* in the philosopher's sense of the word, as this scene serves an expression of the values they have committed themselves to. In this specific situation, neither Jack nor Locke can grasp the other's perspective, as their conviction to their own cause is too strong. This is reminiscent of individualism-taken-too-far, as observed by Bellah et al. (1985, 145) in *Moby-Dick*'s Ahab, who can similarly not deviate from the path he has chosen for himself. Ultimately, Jack and Locke agree to disagree on the matter of whose system is the correct one (though Locke makes it clear that he thinks Jack will eventually come to see things his way) – like their actions, their perception of 'right' and 'wrong' is dictated by the belief system they chose. The fact that these values are radically different between them implies the importance of personal values and interest within an individualist text. The viewer is clearly expected to take a side watching this scene: Locke's assignment of the attributes "man of science" and "man of faith" facilitates the classification of their actions, and serves to clarify the dichotomy between the characters.

The works of John Locke contain ideas concerning the acquisition and defense of property which can be seen as the theoretical groundwork for individualist acting, as his philosophy guarantees freedom governed by the reason of individuals (cf. Laslett 1970, 44). Locke's ideas were highly influential on political thinking in America during the time preceding the founding of the nation, with the colonies importing large numbers of his books almost a century after their publication (cf. *ibid.*, 14). His reasoning can be applied to the actions of both characters in *Lost*'s "Exodus" scene, meaning that the individualist notion of that text goes deeper than just applying to individual characters – the storytelling itself is influenced by his theories.

### **3.3. Enacting individualism: The Puritan migration**

Macpherson (1962, 2) mentions the Puritans as a third central source of 17<sup>th</sup>-century individualist ideas. Given that this religious group formed an important part of the culture of early American settlement, their significance should not be underestimated.

While their teachings are not primarily of a political nature, it is their historical actions which show how individualist thinking shaped their role in the American myth. Rather than giving up or changing their value system, they repeatedly went to great lengths in order to be able to live as their religion dictated. After fleeing from England to Leyden in the Netherlands in order to avoid persecution, the group of

Puritans which would later set sail on the *Mayflower* lived there in peace for more than a decade. It was only after the resident authorities started to force their own beliefs upon them that they chose to leave for America (cf. Abrams 1999, 25). This decision was by no means the obvious one for them to make – the Atlantic crossing was long and dangerous, and, indeed, only a minority of the group's members went on this journey. The individualist sentiment in resolving to leave a comparatively safe place to be able to live a life according to one's own beliefs is evident; the self-reliance they showed when founding and governing a new colony exemplary for the American myth.

This early community is also notable for its agreement on a contract governing its structure as a political entity: In the *Mayflower Compact*, the colonists decided to “covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid”, grounding the “first colony” in the humanist thought of government by the people from the start. Furthermore, the agreement to “frame [...] equal laws” anticipated the fundamental individualist assumption of equality among all people, which would later be established for good in the Declaration of Independence.

In the years following the arrival of the *Mayflower*, large numbers of Puritans arrived on the shores of America in what has become known as the Great Migration. Among them was John Winthrop, whose sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity* introduced the idea of the “City Upon a Hill” (Winthrop 2002, 304) to the American narrative, stating that the world was looking to the settlers as an example. He urged his fellow travelers to “exercise [...] mutual love [of] a divine, spirituall nature” (ibid., 301) as they built their plantation in the New World, encouraging the creation of a Christian-utopian society free from the influences of the old world. This example of American exceptionalism shows that the New World's narrative of opportunity and self-realization already existed by the time of Winthrop's arrival. He merely instructed his fellow arrivals to seize this situation – the myth itself was already in place by that time (cf. Reynolds 2009, 33).



#### **4. “Men of Science, Men of Faith”: Building the foundations of society**

The previous two chapters have introduced concepts which have shaped the American cultural imaginary from the beginning: The myths which made the New World seem exceptional even before the founding of the nation, and the humanist philosophers whose theories laid the groundwork for what would later become the American strand of individualism, and who cited America as it was seen in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – cautiously and admiringly in equal parts – as an example of a pre-structured state of nature. This chapter will trace the influence these ideas had on the writing of the Founding Documents of the United States as well as on the society of survivors in *Lost*, compare the processes leading up to the creation of a body of laws in fiction and reality, and demonstrate the similarity in the significance of mythical narratives in American history and *Lost*.

According to Said (1994, xiii), “nations themselves are narrations”. The representation of history serves to make a point; an objective retelling of historical events would by necessity involve recounting everything that happened within a given time frame, and even the selection of a time frame by itself has an editorializing effect on the matter. Whenever history is retold, events are selected, ordered, and related in a way intended to form a specific narrative.

The history of the United States in particular is steeped in this type of mythology. Being connected to the overarching narrative of the New World as a land of opportunity as it existed in European minds before its colonization even began, it is easy to read a purpose into the nation, leading to an abundance of stories of American exceptionalism and of the country being ‘destined’ for greatness, such as the previously mentioned Manifest Destiny narrative. The Founding Fathers and their presidential successors have been built up into allegorical paragons of intellect and godliness, uniting the dichotomy Locke asserts in “Exodus, Part 3” of science and faith.

The storytelling of *Lost*, similarly, treats its group of survivors as a nation deserving of an exceptionalist narrative. While this higher purpose is spelled out on a metaphysical level later in the story, the first season presents the early stages of nation-building in a similar language to that commonly used in retelling the American colonialist myth – the difference being that, while the historical events of American settlement and colonization did happen and are merely reinterpreted and connected using the means of mythology and narration, the ‘fictional reality’ of *Lost* is inseparable from the way its story is told, as there are no actual historical events upon which its narrative is based.

## 4.1. Building a nation

The ideas presented in the works of Locke and Hobbes suggest that a civil society must agree upon a set of laws in order to ensure a peaceful coexistence; in the absence of such man-made rules, the law of nature comes into effect. Therefore, when the American colonies rejected the British rule to become independent states in 1776, they implicitly, at the same time, committed themselves to the formation of a new system which would ensure their continued existence as organized societies, rather than facing their own structural collapse due to the removal of the supporting functions which British government had provided (however unwelcome they had appeared). In order to legitimate their claim to sovereignty, and strengthen their political and economic power, this group of young states decided on the formation of a central government (cf. Adams 1932, 96).

The first season of *Lost* also features nation-building as a central part of its storyline. Since the sovereignty of the society of survivors in the eyes of the world is not an issue here, the creation of government and the establishment of various leadership styles (which could be seen as a simplified party system) is less formal and the result of a much more subtle development. Since the stories of the founding of the American nation and the establishment of the island society are superficially similar, but focus on vastly different themes, they will be discussed in separate chapters, rather than side by side.

### 4.1.1. Uniting the States: The foundation of the American nation

Adams makes several observations on the state of society in America during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the founding of the nation: A major difference to the structure of European society was the absence of a class system. There was no nobility, and “no peasant class in the European sense [...] almost every farmer, however poor and oppressed with debt, owned his own farm” (Adams 1932, 99). The Declaration of Independence clearly states that “all men are created equal”, and nowhere in the world did that statement hold more truth at the time than in the future United States.

Leading political thinkers were influenced by the English humanists, whose writings had been published a century before: “There was nothing novel in their theory” (ibid., 100). What was unprecedented, however, was the opportunity to put humanist thought into practice: Due to their secession from European monarchist structures, the founders of the nation could create the form of government they saw as ideal from scratch, unhindered by previously existing structures, according to the

“self-evident” truths they had previously listed in the Declaration of Independence: “All men are created equal; all men have the same political rights; government derives its powers solely from the consent of the governed” (ibid).

The *consent of the governed*, it should be noted, is another concept taken from Locke’s writings. Building upon Hobbes’ concept of the Leviathan, he asserts that, since government is to be representation of the will of the people, it has to make decisions according to the consent of society. The people of a nation “make one Body Politick, wherein the Majority have a Right to act” (Locke 1970, 349). Macpherson observes that in such a system “individuals [...] can only be rightfully subjected to the jurisdiction of others by their own consent” (Macpherson 1962, 255).

Again, the rights assumed to be granted by nature according to the Declaration exhibit a strong individualist bent, delegating individual citizens the authority to govern themselves to a large extent, and severely limiting the government’s own ability to limit the citizens’ individual freedom.

This desire for an absence of government authority can also be explained on a historical basis: Coming from authoritarian European monarchies, many immigrants during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century had taken the journey to America precisely because they had wanted to be free from dependence. Farmers and workers had escaped life in poverty and oppression hoping to “become their own masters” (Greene 1993, 75). The general unpopularity of nobility also led to a society averse to hereditary entitlement, so, apart from the respect they had earned over the years, no special privileges were granted to older colony families. All inhabitants of the colonies, no matter how long they had lived there and how much land they owned, possessed equal rights (cf. ibid., 109).

Politicians were well aware of this sentiment among the population when a convention was called together in Philadelphia in 1787 to compose a constitution intended to institutionalize the rights asserted in the Declaration of Independence (cf. ibid., 177). In fact, the large gap of time which elapsed between the publication of the Declaration and the ratification of the Constitution stems from the fact that most states opened up their political systems to the public after the British colonial governors had left, creating a loose political structure which was hard to control; Reynolds (2009, 74) cites early forms of lobbying and favoritism, as well as the mishandling of financial authority as common problems during this early phase of independence. The system of checks and balances was developed to limit this “anarchic tendency of competitive individual and local self-interest” (Bellah et al. 1985, 255). Thus, while making sure that the states themselves kept their individual freedom within the union, the citizens’ freedom from wrongful government authority

was guaranteed as well. Bellah (ibid.) credits James Madison with the main authorship of the Constitution and as the inventor of this fundamental mechanic of limiting government.

It has to be pointed out that the constitution did not guarantee the freedom of all people living in the United States: For the time being, the Constitutional Convention avoided the issue of race equality. Although some states interpreted the rights granted in the Declaration of Independence as applying to all people living within their borders, black freedom was still a distant prospect. “Because slaves had been economic assets”, Reynolds explains, “their owners were given time to adjust” (Reynolds 2009, 107): Pennsylvania, for example, though the first state to abolish slavery on paper, granted its slave-owners a 28-year time frame from the implementation of the law onward before enforcing it. Slave labor would not be abolished altogether until Abraham Lincoln’s presidency almost a century later. Full political rights and social acceptance would not be granted to blacks for another century, until the civil rights movement.

Native Americans would not receive equal treatment for a long time to come either, having had a long history of conflict with the colonists. After the founding of the nation, attempts were made to negotiate trade and land treaties; during these developments, the term ‘nation’ was introduced in reference to Native American peoples, marking a major change in the way they were perceived by colonists. Still, “many frontiersmen [...] believed that the ‘savages’ were incorrigible (Reynolds 2009, 104), with Thomas Jefferson forming an exception as he proposed to “civilize” these peoples into “citizens of the United States” – which would consequently mean the destruction of their individual traditions and identity. Since no peaceful solution was found, armed conflict flared up again and would carry on until late into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Women were largely left out of the political sphere as well. Voters’ rights in most states were tied to possession, and wives’ belongings were legally owned by their husbands. Widows and spinsters, therefore, could gain some reputation among their male peers, but were still limited by the low esteem women had in general. Wives were practically invisible on a political level. Reynolds (2009, 111) relates the story of a group of 75 women in Elizabeth, New Jersey, who, widowed after the revolutionary war, rallied against the election of a conservative candidate in an effort to further their rights – carrying out their act of resistance publically and “easily susceptible to intimidation”, Reynolds calls this a feat of “considerable courage” (ibid.). It would, however, take another century of struggle until women’s suffrage was widely implemented, with sex-related restrictions on a federal level removed only in 1920.

These instances of inequality illustrate the powerful influence which hegemony exerts on thought processes: Even though the Declaration of Independence argues that “all men are created equal”, the definition of “all men” has changed over the years, being transformed from its original ‘white male’ meaning into a more encompassing term.

Despite the inequalities in the social reality of the history of their application (which have been shown to be products of their time, and have since been gradually removed), the Founding Documents can be said to represent a universalist stance – by avoiding the issue of race and relaying much of the decisive power to the people, they do not impose any views on race and ethnicity, neither positive, nor negative.

The subject of property was, in different ways, a much greater obstacle for both blacks and women to overcome. This fact highlights the connection between power and material wealth which has existed in American culture from the beginning, where property has significant influence on social standing. Although equality exists as a social principle, individuals can still distinguish themselves by displaying the wealth they have amassed by means of their skills. The source of power according to this moral system is, then, not the material value of the property itself, but society’s recognition of the individual’s ability. An example for this phenomenon in contemporary popular culture is the exhibition of wealth as it is practiced in hip-hop culture: By exhibiting luxurious accessories, cars and other signs of a rich life-style, hip-hop artists show that they have ‘made it’, demanding respect not for their possessions in and of themselves, but for the fact that they have earned the means to afford them by following their personal goals.

It has already been stated that it is a central belief of individualism that, if every individual member of society strives for the achievement of their own self-interest, society as a whole will thrive. This line of thought relates to the basic concept of *public virtue*, an idea introduced to American political thought by Founding Father James Madison to justify handing over political power to the “great body of the people” (Bellah et al., 253). The overall behavior of a society governed by its individual members is defined by the sum of its members’ actions. Given the fact that even in a ‘selfish’ system like individualism, in order to achieve their social goals, its members must enter and interact with society at large, it is everyone’s common interest to keep it at an agreeable state. Madison (cited Bellah et al. 1985, 253) called this the “great republican principle”, and wrote that “it is just observation that the people commonly intend the public good”.

Madison’s trust in this system, however, was not unlimited. As the main author of the Constitution, he “organized a machinery of national government consciously

adapted to the social reality of expanding capitalism and the attendant culture of philosophic liberalism” (ibid., 254), intended to make sure governmental power could not be misused due to personal interest in the name of these ideologies.

The system of checks and balances represents the cautious side of individualism: While Madison put a large amount of trust in the public, he knew that this belief was unfounded and had to be secured. In order to achieve this, the functions of government – executive, legislative, and judiciary – were separated, and their decisions required to be approved by each other (cf. Reynolds 2009, 78). This system, while commonly used in governments all over the world today, was, at the time, a statement reaffirming the status of government as an institution intended to serve the people, rather than a superordinate power. Its implementation represents an individualist act by the people as a whole, following their self-interest in moving from one set of rules to another more to their liking, still reasoning that some form of government is needed in order to organize a country. A small radical anarchist movement trying to abandon the concept of government authority altogether emerged over a century later, in the aftermath of the First World War; however, their aims were met with hostility by the general populace, and their violent attempts to change the then-established political systems were not successful (cf. ibid., 323).

The constitution itself is for the most part a formalization of the ideals described in the Declaration of Independence, establishing the organization of the government of the United States on a technical level, assigning rights and powers to its individual institutions. As such, it contains mostly the same individualist views which the Founding Fathers had already established by the point of its ratification. It is designed to grant each citizen as much individual freedom as possible within its system of laws – defining the structure of government on a federal level, the text is not concerned with individuals and their rights for the most part (such laws being the concern of state governments), but several paragraphs do mention citizens’ rights: According to the constitution, for example, “Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying War against them, or in adhering to their Enemies, giving them Aid and Comfort”. This is a notably specific definition of treason, allowing the country’s citizens to speak against it, or denounce it in ways which were seen as unacceptable in the rest of the world at the time.

Shortly after the implementation of the constitution, a set of amendments was ratified which has become known as the Bill of Rights. It is concerned more directly with citizens’ rights than the Constitution proper, and has become just as important to American history (cf. Reynolds 2009, 83): The various amendments are so relevant to daily life that they have since become part of speech in America – the phrase ‘second amendment rights’, for example, is commonly understood as shorthand for the

discussion of gun ownership; the phrase ‘to take the fifth’ has even changed its colloquial meaning from the original statement “No person shall be held to answer for a [...] crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury” to the more general refusal to answer a question. If the Declaration of Independence can be understood as a representation of what the Founding Fathers thought to be basic human rights, then the Bill of Rights is a list of privileges more closely tailored to the specific needs and desires of the citizens of the young American nation. It is clearly shaped by the events surrounding the war for American independence, the best example of this being the third amendment, which states that “No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner [...]”, thereby essentially repealing the earlier British-imposed Quartering Act which allowed British soldiers to do just that (cf. Horwitz 1991, 210), and has had little relevance after its implementation.

Many of the rights granted by these initial amendments to the constitution lay the groundwork for an individualist society. The first amendment commands that “no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibit the free exercise thereof” shall be made. Its wording bars the government from interfering in any way – positively as well as negatively – separating state and church completely, and its place at the top of the list is an indicator of the significance this decision carried at the time. Its historical importance is evident: European countries at the time tended to have state religions, persecuting those who did not follow them. This was the main motivation for the puritans to migrate to America, and therefore can be said to be an important factor contributing to the founding of the nation. The value of choosing one’s own value system in an individualist society has already been discussed: With immigrants from different cultures, even at the time of the founding of the nation, it could not be justified to grant privileges to individual religions, as this would interfere with the principle of the pursuit of happiness, which grants each individual the equal right to act according to their personal beliefs.

Special care is also taken to ensure each citizen’s right to protect their own property, which, in Locke’s sense, comprises life, liberty and estate. Of particular note in this context are the second and fourth amendments. The latter guarantees the “right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures [...] but upon probable cause”, which very unambiguously describes this Lockean concept of property and shields it from interference. The second amendment, in this context, while not offering as direct a form of protection, makes an even more individualist statement: The “right of the people to keep and bear Arms” enables a fundamentally individualist way of

enforcing one's rights to one's own property at the cost of another's: Giving every citizen the right to defend themselves using armed force puts this responsibility into the hands of every individual; on the other hand, it is up to the perpetrator's own reasoning to decide whether the risk of being assaulted with a weapon outweighs the prospective gain in unlawfully seizing another's property.

It should be evident that the Bill of Rights represents a strong final individualist statement within the textual corpus of the Founding Documents. Based on this system of rules and regulations, which derives from historical developments and philosophical considerations shown to have been bound to arrive at an individualist stance, the 'Land of the Free' rests on a foundation shaped by the era of its building, but still holding up today: The self-regulation of government and the power granted to individual citizens was motivated by previous experiences of the American people, and has shaped those who live under these laws. The universal rights observed in the Declaration of Independence resemble the modern conception of human rights, and the organization of government and people as arranged by the Constitution and its amendments has become the universally accepted system of rules legislating American politics and, in extension, life.

#### **4.1.2. Uniting the people: Nation-building in *Lost***

As a 'surviving on an island' scenario, comparing *Lost* to the most popular such narrative, *Robinson Crusoe*, seems necessary. Said (1994, 70) refers to the latter as "a work whose protagonist is the founder of a new world, which he rules and reclaims for Christianity and England", drawing the obvious parallel to the myth of the discovery, settlement and colonization of America. A similar *Robinsonade* narrative can be found in *Lost*; the difference according to Said's perspective being that, while Crusoe soon accepts his fate, and begins to actively claim his "Island of Despair" as a colony for himself by "making laws and giving names to places and things on the island" (McInelly 2003, 5), the characters of *Lost* never give up their hope for rescue, trying to escape their oceanic prison until the final chapters of the series. They do, however, take control of strategic places on the island as part of their struggle for survival and rescue; these colonial aspects of the narrative will be examined more closely in a later chapter of this paper.

Like Robinson Crusoe, the characters of *Lost* arrive on the island involuntarily: In their case, it is a plane crash which pins them to the "new world" of the narrative. When rescue fails to arrive by nightfall, the survivors use parts they take from the airplane fuselage to build a camp on the beach, committing to an extended stay on the island – though it is impossible for them to tell at this point how long they will have



to wait, they soon accept that they will have to live off the salvaged resources, of which there is enough to sustain them for several days.

The steps the group takes in order to ensure everyone's survival during the initial episodes are not motivated by the individual characters' world-views and convictions, but rather emerge out of the necessity dictated by the situation. The two characters who are defined over time as the most motivated by individualist motives form notable exceptions to this collectivist behavior, following their own self-centered agendas from the beginning while the others work together: Locke discovers that he has regained his ability to walk and starts exploring the island on his own. Sawyer introduces a capitalist element to the society of survivors by hoarding resources in order to trade them once they are needed; one of the first additions to his collection is a gun, which he then uses to enforce his material authority among the survivors and protect the rest of his stash. His interactions with others during this early phase of the narrative consist for the most part of a series of contracts in a Hobbesian sense: He is in possession of key resources, and willing to exchange them for whatever suits his current situation most. If he cannot get what he wants, he will not agree to the deal.

As the survivors settle down, and their individual roles within society start becoming more pronounced, conflict starts flaring up. In the episode "Confidence Man", Sawyer, who has meanwhile become known among the survivors for his stash, is accused of holding back an inhaler which could save an asthma patient's life. When he – truthfully – claims that he does not have it, those accusing him of lying constrain and torture him. This is a clear example of the *law of nature* in effect according to Hobbes, where any means necessary can be taken to ensure survival, which is, after the stripping away of any other values, each person's highest good to protect (cf. Hobbes 1651, 64).

As described above, the basis of a civil society according to humanist thought is a system of rules which prevents such acts of violence from occurring. After an altercation involving the distribution of water, the survivors' most important resource, Jack, having just found a source of fresh water, steps in and gives a speech which stands out as one of the most iconic scenes of the series:

JACK: It's been six days and we're all still waiting. Waiting for someone to come. But what if they don't? We have to stop waiting. We need to start figuring things out. A woman died this morning just going for a swim and he tried to save her, and now you're about to crucify him? We can't do this. Every man for himself is not going to work. It's time to start organizing. We need to figure out how we're going to survive here. Now, I found water. Fresh water, up in the valley. I'll take a group in at first light. If you don't want to go, then find another way to contribute. Last week most of us were strangers. But we're all here now. And God knows how long we're going to be here. But if we can't live together, we're going to die alone. (*Lost*, "White Rabbit", 36:29)

Jack's speech seems to favor a collectivist ideal; based on recent experience, he claims that living and working together will ensure the group's survival, while "every man for himself", implying the individualist way of taking action on one's own, is condemned in this 'first draft' of the survivors' contract of coexistence.

The scene plays a central part in the philosophy of *Lost*. Throughout the series, individual lines are used as episode titles, and characters quote parts of it when the situation is fitting. "Live together, die alone" becomes a catchphrase, conveying the importance of working together and the consequences of not doing so in a nutshell.

Life in the camp, by this stage, bears some parallels to early American colony life: The survivors put their skills to practice, starting to fish, hunt; even planting a small garden to grow herbs and vegetables. Therefore, Jack's speech, aimed to prevent future conflict and suggesting a rudimentary political structure of government-by-consent (by pointing out the possible consequences of failing to achieve this), can be said to mirror the *Mayflower Compact*, as the Puritans agreed upon a political structure before forming their own colony. Had the survivors agreed to follow such a set of civil laws from the beginning, as the travelers on the *Mayflower* had, violence might have been prevented from breaking out altogether.

Furthermore, Jack imbues all group members with a high degree of responsibility by encouraging them to "find another way to contribute" if they are not up to the task at hand. By assigning every survivor a function, he also makes sure that everyone rightfully earns their share of the product of work done by others. After this scene, conflicts such as the one which prompted Jack's speech in the first place cease for the most part.

However, like so many elements of the series, the ideas expressed in this speech are subject to subversion. Over time, Jack's preferred course of action causes the efforts of the group to find rescue to stagnate. "Living together" ensures the continued survival of the colony but keeps them confined to the beach camp, limiting their efforts to find rescue by more active means. Jack himself embodies this reluctance as well, acting heroically when prompted but remaining passive as an agent, rarely taking action by himself.

It is Locke the individualist who drives the story forward, discovering new information as he explores the island's interior on his own rather than hunt in the vicinity of the camp as he is told to do. He does not wait for the group's consent to ratify his decisions but acts on impulse, doing what he thinks to be right. He is curious, and places the importance of collecting information over his own well-being as well as his duties to society. He does not issue clear orders to others, preferring to trick them into acting according to his needs. His speeches, while as rousing as Jack's, are often deceiving as they do not always serve the purpose he makes them

out to, such as in the episode “...In Translation”, where he blames the raft being burned on the Others despite his (justified) suspicion that Walt did it – with this deception, he stops the survivors from accusing each other, but resorts to a lie in order to accomplish this. Over the course of the first season, his actions, which involve climbing a cliff to salvage a small airplane and building siege machinery to break open a steel door, cause injury to himself and end up making him directly responsible for Boone’s death, but his active search for answers is ultimately rewarded when he gains entrance to a bunker hidden in the jungle, providing shelter and supplies for the group.

The episode “Walkabout” presents Locke’s story leading up to his arrival on the island. It can be read as a historic parallel to the narrative of early settlers from monarchic Europe who escaped from oppression to live a free life in America: Confined to a wheelchair after an accident, Locke intends to register for a walkabout tour in Australia; he is repeatedly discouraged or disallowed from taking that tour due to his disability. His constant answer to these dismissals shows his conviction and his absolute faith in his own abilities:

“You don’t know who you’re dealing with! Don’t ever tell me what I can’t do, ever!”  
(*Lost*, “Walkabout”, 38:33)

The sentence “Don’t tell me what I can’t do” becomes a catch phrase for the character over the course of the series, conveying with only a few words the belief in his own ability, his commitment to the realization of his own interests, and his dismissal of the help of others – it can be read as a very strong individualist statement. Like the speech given by Jack, this line is adopted by other characters over time, who sometimes utter it when their actions go against generally accepted behavior, or can potentially hurt society as a whole. It represents the opposite of “live together, die alone” in that context. Ironically, this statement seems so compelling that even Jack is seen repeating this phrase later during the narrative.

When Locke awakens after the plane crash with a renewed ability to walk, the island, to him, becomes a land of opportunity in the same sense America was perceived by the settlers, providing him with a degree of personal freedom he did not have before. Soon after this recovery he repeats the phrase when his abilities are being questioned again, this time by his fellow survivors doubting his skill at hunting. While his plea while confined to the wheelchair before the crash comes across as a stubborn expression of his rebellion against the helplessness his disability imposes on him, the same answer on the island represents his newfound self-confidence. The experience of getting the use of his legs back reaffirms Locke’s faith not only in his

own strength, but also creates a bond of belief between him and the mythical properties of the island.

To conclude this examination of leadership styles, it can be said that Jack's collectivist approach provides a stable, safe environment; his low-risk rules, such as staying near fresh water and not straying too far from the camp unless necessary, represent a conservative way of dealing with the situation the survivors find themselves in. He is viewed by the community as a leader because his actions provide safety, a notion exemplified by his secondary function as the camp doctor. However, Jack's actions do not improve the situation; they merely keep it from changing for the worse.

Locke, on the other hand, is his own guide – his behavioral patterns match the mythical lone ranger of the American West. He does not expect others to follow him, nor does he require them to most of the time. When he does need help in order to achieve the goals he has set for himself, he manipulates them, telling them what he thinks they need to hear to convince them. He deceives, turns his back on his community, and takes large risks, but his individualist actions pay off for the whole group in the end, providing the survivors with a benefit greater than the sum of Jack's actions.

## **4.2. Building a myth**

In his book *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes analyzes the creation of myths, their representation within the perceptible world, and their significance for society as reflections of value systems. He asserts that myth, like languages, forms “a system of communication, that it is a message” (Barthes 1972, 107). Barthes disassembles the structural framing of myths, deconstructing them into their separate elements of meaning-making. He assigns these individual parts the role of signifiers in the Saussurean sense, and analyzes their signified meaning (cf. *ibid.*, 113).

Following Barthes' approach, the dominant myth of the American Dream, emphasizing the country's place in the world as a land of opportunity, can be interpreted as a narrative with the function of showing the accumulated significance of American values in contemporary society. Considering Hall's thoughts on the importance of a shared identity, a common cultural “language” of myths is as important for the functioning of civil society as its political foundation. America's historical narrative serves as a unifying “communal mythology that all [can] share and that provide[s] a cluster of beliefs through which the nation [can] be articulated, both to itself and the world” (Campbell/Kean 1997, 24). The historic events

themselves, when told within the narrative frame of the myth, recede into the background and become imbued with a new symbolic level of meaning.

An example of this utilization of history is the annual Thanksgiving play in American kindergartens and elementary schools, where children dress up as pilgrims and Native Americans and reenact the early interactions between the peoples, as the pilgrims are taught the skills necessary to survive their first winter by the Indians and show their gratitude by giving a feast (cf. fig. 4). Accurate historic representation is not the aim of this cultural practice: its actual function is to teach children the value of hard work, sharing, cross-cultural understanding, and the role these values play within the context of the celebration of Thanksgiving itself<sup>3</sup>.



Fig. 4: The kindergarten thanksgiving play as a mythological representation of history.

While Barthes' comparison of myths to the semiological meaning-making process of language explains the way in which they convey signification by binding a signified meaning to cultural and historical contexts, he himself points out that, unlike in the development of language, this connection is never arbitrary in the creation of myths. Their telling is always accompanied by a motivation, and the relationship of context and meaning is the result of a conscious choice made by the speaker (cf. Barthes 1972, 124).

The events related in the Thanksgiving play, therefore, have been chosen because they are particularly well-suited for teaching the values it reinforces. The aspects of sharing and gratitude surrounding the events of the first Thanksgiving are played up in order to make them stand out to the children. Other, more problematic, aspects of

<sup>3</sup> For an example of a kindergarten Thanksgiving play, see "Andrew's Thanksgiving play", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8TJ8i9TITM>.

these early stages of interaction between settlers and Native Americans could be addressed as well, but are intentionally left out because they would only complicate the narrative presented, and not contribute to the lesson intended to be taught by the performance of the play.

The arrival of the Puritan colonists, however, does not constitute the beginning of the American myth. As has been noted, the “land of opportunity” narrative was already well-established by the time John Winthrop held his “City Upon a Hill” speech. Its origin can be traced back to an even earlier point in history: The “traditional mythology” (Campbell/Kean 1997, 25), as it formed in European minds and is still dominant in both continents’ discourses of the country, begins with Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the New World – this event is credited in the “imagined communal mythology” (ibid.) as the origin of the path ultimately leading “to the republican and democratic values embedded in the history of the United States” (ibid.). This narrative, presenting Columbus as a foresightful, adventurous explorer, reached its height of popularity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the introduction of Columbus Day and the 1893 world’s fair themed the ‘Columbian Exhibition’ marking his significance to the dominant view of history at the time.

However, Campbell/Kean also mention contesting narratives brought forth during the 20<sup>th</sup> century by minority groups, accusing him to be the root of all the problems European colonization has brought to America, among them “genocide, slavery and the reckless exploitation of the environment” (ibid.).

Interestingly, they observe, “one myth is discredited only to be replaced by another” (ibid.): The narrative has changed, but, even in its modified form, it is still treated as a coherent story. Columbus himself, of course, had very little to do with the events proposed by either narrative, as the founding of the nation as well as the colonization of the continent were carried out long after his death. His discovery of America is neither the singular reason for, nor the cause of the occurrence of these events. Both narratives ascribe a level of intentionality into Columbus’ discovery which cannot be proven. In fact, the reason for Columbus’ journey across the Atlantic was to find a direct sea route to East Asia; an entirely different narrative exists according to which Columbus never even realized that the land mass he had reached was not Asia, changing the narratively inscribed motivation for his actions during his voyages completely (cf. Laufer 1931, 90).

A similar situation occurs in *Lost*, where narratives are twisted in an early encounter with the original inhabitants of the island during the episode “The Hunting Party”. The survivors of the plane crash are accused of interfering with the natives’ lives, but, like Columbus, did not do so intentionally, merely having been trying to survive under adverse circumstances. In this situation, however, the accusers are the

ones in power: They threaten the survivors with guns and take their weapons, making them feel even more helpless than they were in the first place. They possess the authority to shape the narrative in a way that makes the survivors appear as the aggressors, who end up accepting this allegation in defeat. This scene demonstrates the way in which the rulers within a social system have the power to control hegemony: Just like it took the American minorities until late last century to establish their views on the dominant narrative, the survivors of *Lost* have no chance during this phase of their relationship with the natives to make their side of the story heard.

The next important stage of the American myth is the story of the unsettled country. The discovery of America shook some of Europe's longest-held beliefs to its foundations. Greene (1993, 1) notes that "the idea of America as a place distinct from Europe, Africa, and Asia" caused entire cosmologies in the Old World to change, as the three known continents form a large landmass whose approximate extent was known at the time. Moreover, the entire known world was home to local cultures and divided up into nations – there was very little unclaimed territory. The discovery of a new continent, larger than any nation and unshaped by the hands of European culture, was unprecedented. The New World, to its discoverers, was a blank slate; the purposes and opportunities it held open to speculation. Greene (*ibid.*, 8) refers to the 16<sup>th</sup> century as an era of "expectations", describing "the European fabrication of America" happening during that time.

Indeed, Greene's use of the word "fabrication" is rather apt. Many of those who wrote about America in the years after its discovery had never been there, speculating about an alien continent from the perspective of a world they knew. The returning explorers, when reporting their findings to Europe's rulers and scholars, had to resort to "analogies and comparisons with the familiar" (*ibid.*, 15) to make themselves understood. Through this filter of describing the New World with the vocabulary of the Old, America was soon perceived as an extension of Europe; a large unplowed field to be cultivated with European civilization and beliefs.

*Lost* presents its setting similarly, towards its characters and viewers alike: From the first episode, the mystical aspects of the island are central to the plot, confronting the survivors with unexpected obstacles, and emphasized by the dramatic presentation of the series, the music, camera movements and *mise-en-scène* drawing the viewer's attention to these elements. Like America in the early days after its discovery, the specific properties of the location are unknown; the island is not yet mapped. It, likewise, represents a blank slate to the characters, a theme which is picked up in the title of the second episode: "Tabula Rasa" refers not only to the fact that the plane crash offers a chance for a new beginning to the survivors, but also to the island itself,

which, over the course of the series, is subject to the meaning-making of the characters, who interpret it to mean destiny, purgatory, a test, or apply a variety of other ‘fabricated’ possible meanings.

The lack of a fixed ‘purpose’ for a mass of land as large as the newly-discovered America led to the emergence of a variety of utopian expectations for its prospective colonists, “ranging from pastoral arcadias to perfect commonwealths to millennial kingdoms of God” where “all of the problems of decadent Europe had either been resolved or had not yet been permitted to develop” (cf. Greene 1993, 28). These visions had little in common: The only element they all shared was the wish for self-realization, as the New World represented an opportunity to bring these imagined communities into existence – this concept later developed into the individualist world-view as it was applied not only to thinkers and group leaders, but to every individual arrival. Having acquired this myth-like status even before its settlement, the idea of America as a land of opportunity is the direct result of this conjecture of ideas adding up to an optimist enterprise, carried out by those who left Europe for various reasons and resolved to make these utopian ideas reality.

After the initial success of the Puritan colonies, the presence of the colonial powers – most of all Britain, from whom many of the early settlers had wanted to dissociate themselves in the first place – came to be seen as restrictive to the individual liberty promised by the myth. The Revolutionary War has since become an allegorical struggle for independence within the American narrative: Adams (1932, 75), providing a noticeably romanticized history of the country, describes the war as the result of America “becoming more self-conscious and sure of herself”. Not only does the way Adams phrases his observations personify the country into becoming the protagonist of a story; citing events “as early as 1701” as examples, it also shows that the historian perceives the colonies to have developed a common national identity by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, meaning that the country itself, and the people who fought for it, are the ‘heroes’ of this myth.

After the end of the war, the story of America could ‘truly’ begin. The Founding Fathers, given their significance before, during, and after the founding of the nation, can be seen as the faces of this part of the narrative. The significance given to them within the historical process as it is commonly told (in Adams’ (1932) *Epic of America*, which focuses on storytelling, as well as Reynolds’ (2009) and Greene’s (1993) more analytical approaches) marks the beginning of the mythologization of America’s presidents and leaders. It can be assumed that the lack of both a common religious belief and a rooted-in-tradition connection to the place, which are typical sources of myths in other cultures, caused the emergence of stories focusing on individuals and their deeds. These typically American myths range from the treatment



of presidential terms as historical epics to the seemingly mundane – such as an anecdote told by Donald Smith:

I grew up in the “Land of Lincoln,” so stories about the 16th U.S. President, “Honest Abe” as we called him, were unavoidable in my youth. In particular, we learned that Abraham Lincoln never told a lie. (Smith 2010, 321)

The entirety of such tales forms a body of myths covering all presidents and aspects of their lives, such as their personalities, election and presidency, and even the circumstances of their death – Sarah Vowell’s *Assassination Vacation*, for example, concerns itself entirely with successful as well as attempted presidential assassinations. Indeed, the position of President of the United States connotes not only the office, but also the power and significance which comes with it. Those who have held it have become well-known historical figures for it, and there are similarly mythical narratives about most, if not all, of them.

When seen as lessons intended to convey possible ways of expressing individualism and showing the consequences of these decisions, individualist myths gain significance when confined to the story of one person and one life. This narrative restriction helps to point out the subjectivity of choosing one’s own values and emphasizes the importance of the individual over the whole of society. The personal connection to historical figures which this type of story creates in the context of the American presidents also mirrors the tendency of American literature to revolve around individualist protagonists, focusing on their thoughts, feelings and actions more than the world surrounding them. American writer William Faulkner similarly expressed this notion in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “The human heart in conflict with itself [...] alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat” (Faulkner 1950). He honors the complexity of the individual, and implies the potential for good and bad in every person, its realization depending on a well-reasoned application of abilities and character. The presidents, in their narratives, are presented as strong, singular personalities shaping their country rather than being subject to the restrictions placed upon them by their political environment. They represent elements of the human ideal – Lincoln stands for honesty, Adams for inventiveness, Roosevelt for the spirit of adventure. There are presidential myths for every occasion, forming a well-rounded textual corpus.

Another aspect of the American identity which has taken on mythological aspects is the country’s world-view itself: Having been part of the cultural imaginary of the New World since its discovery, individualism was formally implemented into American culture through its (at the time) innovative body of laws, and came to be studied by members of American society as well as outsiders. The social structures

created by this system were the subject of social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville's book *Democracy in America*, published in 1830, which, as Bellah (1985, vii) notes, analyzed American society by a time when the young country's society had settled and the structures generated by its laws had stabilized. He was "one of the first to call [the American character] 'individualism'", and warned that this behavioral pattern "might eventually isolate Americans one from another and thereby undermine the conditions of freedom" (ibid.). According to Lukes (1973, 13), Tocqueville saw individualism as "the natural product of democracy", providing "a framework for the individual and protection against the state" (ibid., 14).

Rather than creating a theory of individualism based on previously written texts, his descriptions are mostly influenced by the observations he made during his journey through the United States. His book appears as a commentary on American life, constantly weighing the advantages of the country's individualist society against the dangers that might come with the ideology. In a key passage, he distinguishes the individualist principle from the more negatively connoted concept of egotism:

Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with egotism. Egotism is a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer himself to everything in the world. Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself. Egotism originates in blind instinct: individualism proceeds from erroneous judgment more than from depraved feelings; it originates as much in the deficiencies of the mind as in the perversity of the heart. (Tocqueville 2002, 574)

Tocqueville's ambivalence toward individualism becomes apparent in this paragraph: He perceives it to be nobler than blind egoism, being based in reason and free will, but still considers it to be the result of "erroneous judgment", marking it as a non-ideal life-style. Of course, it can be argued that his European perspective and the expectations which come with it color his impression of American individualism, but it is certain that the same concept, seen from an American point-of-view, would not be seen as problematic: The very behavioral patterns condemned by Tocqueville, like "severing [oneself] from the mass of [...] fellow-creatures" or "willingly [leaving] society at large to itself", are seen within the individualist society as expressions of self-reliance and concessions to its existence in others, and therefore inherently positive.

A decade later, the concept of individualism found its ultimate expression in Ralph Waldo Emerson's work, in particular his speech *The American Scholar* and his essay *Self-Reliance*, the former having become known as "America's intellectual declaration of independence" (Reynolds 2009, 129). The American philosopher

similarly offers an analysis of the concept, focusing on the tensions between the individual and society. His work seems to take the opposite route of Tocqueville's, describing the risks of entering society rather than accomplishing work on one's own. This variance in the perception of the positive and negative sides of individualist (and, in contrast, collectivist) acting might be indicative of the difference in perspectives between the two authors and their heritage: Their texts lend themselves well to illustrate the wide range of qualities, good or bad, ascribed to the American individualist life-style.

*The American Scholar*, a speech given in 1837 to a student society at Cambridge, advocates the emergence of "Man Thinking" (Emerson 1901, 5): He believes "every man" to be "a student" (ibid., 6), and encourages openness towards one's surroundings. Rather than merely playing one's part in society, every individual should be aware of what they are capable of, and aspire to move away from the fixed functions dictated by others. Of particular interest to the telling of American values as a myth is the passage in which he first explains this idea:

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man, — present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the divided or social state, these functions are parcelled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. The fable implies, that the individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. (Emerson 1901, 3)

Emerson tells his theory of the position of the individual in relation to society as a mythical "fable", the point being that all paths life can take are contained within each person; it is the result of a conscious decision on the part of the individual which parts of this whole are put to use. Again, a mythical narrative is used as a metaphor to convey a lesson: Since it is part of the purpose of this story to teach listeners to make up their own mind, this lesson has to be delivered in such a way that following it is still the result of a decision made by the individual and not an imposed doctrine. The narrative frame of a story places the lesson taught in a fictional frame. Applying the moral of a story to real life involves the choice on the listener's side to consider it 'true enough' to follow it. Therefore, it becomes clear why mythical narratives are such a highly significant and popular method of teaching individualism: By removing the concept in question from reality, following it becomes a deliberate act of connecting the real world and the lesson taught, rather than merely obeying an order. Rational thinking being an important part of individualism, teaching-by-storytelling encourages learners to distinguish between more and less useful lessons, and shows the consequences of choices without having to spell them out condescendingly. The

‘narrativization’ of the lives of presidents, when taught at school, as described by Smith (2010), similarly provides children with idealized concepts of life to which they can look up and aspire to without forcing them to follow these ideals.

Four years after his speech, Emerson published *Self-Reliance*. Here, he argues even more staunchly in defense of the value of the individual over the miniscule part one plays in society. He advises the reader to “trust thyself” (Emerson 2007, 15) and makes a case for the strength of character inherent to everybody from even a young age, obstructed by conformity as individuals grows into adults and pressure put on by society increases. He urges the reader to reject the desire to please others at one’s own cost:

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. (Emerson 2007, 17)

Emerson summarizes in his essay the essence of individualism: The mind, and therefore the ability to reason without, is “sacred”. He advocates that it must remain free from being influenced by outside forces and encourages individuals to question their surroundings, reach their own conclusions and bring them into agreement with their wishes and ideals. The “suffrage of the world” – the ability to freely choose one’s actions and make one’s own decisions – is the result and reward of this process of self-liberation. Accordingly, the philosopher is dismissive of authority figures and role models. He argues that there is nothing to be gained by following precedence, and points out the power in creating something new on one’s own: “when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other” (ibid., 33). However, recognizing this self-worth is not possible within the confines of society. “We are a mob” (ibid., 35), he laments, which prevents individuals from achieving greatness. His final argument is to “work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men” to reach “a greater self-reliance” (ibid., 40).

The essay is written in a language invoking biblical and other mythical images in order to convey its message. Emerson uses allegorical personifications like Fortune and the Devil, and other narrative devices taken from previously existing mythologies. The picture he paints of individualism in *The American Scholar* and *Self-Reliance* can be seen as a myth in itself: A fictional ideal which can never truly be reached in the real world but its achievement can be aspired to.

Emerson’s and Tocqueville’s observations mark the end of the formative era of American individualism. Starting with visions of an ideal country which offered self-realization to everyone who was to settle there, the idea transformed into the

groundwork of a legal system which made this concession to every individual citizen. The Founding Documents reinforced these individualist values, and Emerson and Tocqueville provided a legend for the society thus created. Throughout its development, this ideology exhibits traits of a myth, such as its narrativity and the repetition of a consistent set of core virtues in different contexts. It has been shown that these particular values are best conveyed in fictional narratives, and many works of American literature feature their treatment as a central theme – in *Lost*, for example, Jack can be said to represent the conformist finding fulfillment in the group, while Locke has become Emerson's "One Man", completely self-sufficient and able to make decisions by himself. With the basic ideas of individualism defined and given a vocabulary, the myth of America was open to expansion. At the same time, America's move toward the West began, and with it a new era of opportunity and self-realization.

## **5. Colonization as an expression of individualism**

One of the most noticeable parallels between the narratives of American history and *Lost* is revealed upon a postcolonial reading. Despite the difference in the way the series' plane crash survivors and Robinson Crusoe deal with being marooned on an island, Edward Said's view upon the latter as a parallel to colonial England can be applied to *Lost* as well. In its case, unlike Crusoe the Briton, many of the characters are Americans; having arrived on the shore of an unknown land, they work their way further and further across the island in a way that parallels the expansionist course of action demonstrated during America's 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonization of the West.

The competitive 'rules' of the American individualist society make it acceptable to seize unclaimed property if it furthers one's own interest, even at the expense of the needs of others. Especially in situations where resources are limited, a 'race' for property can develop, as it did when the lands of the western territories were distributed to private ownership: Those who had the means bought vast amounts of property fast, while a literal race for land commenced for the less financially endowed settlers, as physical presence on the plot they intended to buy lowered the buying price (cf. Reynolds 2009, 147). Land ownership and the benefits that come with it remained an important driving force for the expansion of America's borders as the steady influx of immigrants to the country demanded the acquisition or seizure of more and more land, a process which came at great cost to the native peoples.

Even after America's borders had advanced to the west coast, forcing a stop to the colonization of the American continent, the idea of occupying territory in order to

receive benefits stayed prevalent. Said sees the idea of dominion as an underlying part of “the American experience”, observing that the nation’s expectations to grow in population and, therefore, territory, led to an expansionist predisposition from the beginning, so deeply ingrained into American politics that it became the nation’s natural course of action:

There were claims for North American territory to be made and fought over (with astonishing success); there were native peoples to be dominated, variously exterminated, variously dislodged; and then, as the republic increased in age and hemispheric power, there were distant lands to be designated vital to American interests, to be intervened in and fought over – e.g. the Philippines, the Caribbean, Central America, the ‘Barbary Coast’, parts of Europe and the Middle East, Vietnam, Korea. (Said 1994, 8)

Again, this type of colonization dictated by self-interest is an example of the nation as a whole acting individualist, motivated by the prospect of economic gain. As Said notes, America has intervened on all continents with the possible exception of Australia (whose history of settlement resembles that of America, and with whom American economic interests have been negotiated on a non-military basis). American troops are still present in many parts of the world, marking a continued desire to exercise control.

### **5.1. The island as West: The American Frontier and the significance of location**

The myth of the West stands out as one of the most iconic individualist narratives found within the American cultural imaginary. Said (1994, 314) makes it out to be a “national origin story” whose telling has been embellished, simplified and distorted over time to fit the need for a depiction of the country’s ideals “free from taint” and “unified around one iron-clad major narrative of innocent triumph”, noting that this uncritical view was starting to be questioned only around the time of his book’s publication in the early 1990s. He cites the example of an exhibition named “America as West”, which put the well-known narrative into a postcolonial context, offering a new, critical perspective to its American visitors, dispelling the “heroic meliorist” (ibid.) view as it was prevalent in the discourse of the time and pointing out the “destruction of both native Americans and the environment” (ibid.), an uncomfortable truth which was often left out of retellings of the story. The perceived “unpatriotic or un-American slant” (ibid.) of this deconstruction of established narratives angered politicians and politicians alike.

The “original” story as criticized by Said originated with the Manifest Destiny myth, a reinterpretation of the expansionist policy which had been proposed before. “Its appeal to the public”, Merk (1963, 24) notes, “was greater than its counterpart

had been in the days of Adams's vision", providing an "opportunity [...] to reach self-realization". This vision offered to future settlers a seemingly guaranteed way of achieving the American Dream, depicting the West as a promised land. The classical Western narrative itself emerged concurrently to the historical process it depicts; events like the 1876 battle of Little Big Horn, Reynolds (2009, 289) observes, were very quickly incorporated into the story, with each new 'chapter' reinforcing the overall narrative. Another iconic representation of the myth was "Buffalo Bill's Wild West", a traveling circus which "confirmed the romanticized image of the West" (ibid., 290) and provided the basis for the visual language which would later be used in the 'classic era' of Western films such as the works of John Ford.

Like the Thanksgiving play discussed earlier, the myth of the West is marked by the simplification and selection of historical events in order to convey a clear-cut narrative of fundamental American values, representing the "American spirit" of idealism and opportunity in action. Its telling is usually confined to the settlers' point of view, depicting them as brave men and women who set out for the West in the hope of being rewarded for their courage, working toward what Said (1994, 315) calls an "innocent triumph". This clear definition of the settlers and their intentions as 'good' is necessary to justify the individualist elements of the American belief system, presenting the expansion of a culture driven by free will and the optimism that any goal can be achieved as a story of success and heroism. At the same time, however, all other cultures they meet on the way are marked as strangers and enemies to be fought. Subscribing to this view in postcolonial times, Said argues, "disaffiliates the country from its relationship with other societies and peoples, thereby reinforcing its remoteness and insularity" (ibid.).

Indeed, this perspective endorses the idea of America as an "exceptional" nation, but in a postcolonial context it becomes apparent that this is not necessarily a positive quality. While the United States, for a long time, was regarded as a land of opportunity for all people, within its own cultural discourse as well as by other nations – Galema (1997, 91), for example, describes the "alluring" image which America had in turn-of-the-century Europe – competing narratives have emerged over time calling the practices used to achieve this state of liberty in the West into question. The constant war against indigenous peoples made the settlers, and the nation they represented, the lone party in a one-against-all scenario. Then considering themselves to be on the 'righteous' side, but over time proven to pursue their desires in a destructive and needlessly cruel manner, they used their technological advantage to violently make their way into the West. Again, this situation is paralleled in *Lost*. Following the pattern of the title of the exhibition Said writes about, a reading of the

“Island as West” reveals new narratives not explicitly commented upon in the story. Having established their settlement on the island, and having had several encounters with the Others which ended in violence, the survivors take control of a well-equipped bunker and find the motivation to search the island for more places like it, starting a story thread depicting the exploration of the island, and the takeover (or ‘colonization’) of locations held by the Others. One situation mirroring the destructive path of the settlers in the Western myth occurs in the episode “Enter 77”: The survivors invade a station similar to the one they found previously but held by the Others, make use of its facilities and detonate it, as they have received all the information they need and this decision prevents the Others from taking advantage of it in the future. Having accomplished this, they move back into the wilderness.

The West as it is presented in this narrative is not bound to be a specific place or area: It represents the reaches of the undiscovered land beyond the Frontier, an equally formalized concept understood as the outer edge of civilization, defined by “its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society” (Reynolds 2009, 147) and representing a threshold which must be passed to reach the West, marking the point at which the decision to ‘be a settler’ is made. One of the powerful individualist motives of the West is the unmarkedness invoked by its vast size, making its purpose and what it stands for open to interpretation. Many Western films are set in a frontier town or fort, representing a clearly demarcated, safe, ‘civilized’ point of departure and return for the heroes, with the bulk of the action playing out in the wilderness surrounding it. In this clear dichotomy, the town represents what is familiar to the audience and characters, while the areas outside it – the manifestation of the concept of the ‘West’ – stand for the unknown, the strange. While the setting of the frontier town brings a number of expected comforts in most tellings of the narrative – there never fails to exist a saloon, a sheriff’s office, and an inn in representations of this type of town – the wilderness cannot be anticipated in the same way. Of course there are stock elements, like Indian villages, abandoned mines, or bandit hideouts, but these elements and, more importantly, their nature, change from story to story; they represent the element of surprise and the adventure connected to it.

Apart from these fixed points, scenes in the West frequently play out far away from any such specified locations. With nothing but rocks and sparse scrubland surrounding the characters, the element of place recedes completely to make way for conversations or confrontations between the characters, the final showdown of Western movies often playing out this way. With no signs of human influence in sight, this setting allows the story to focus completely on the characters and their actions. They are alone, removed from any civil laws, left to settle their conflict confined by no other rules than those of nature. This can be seen as the ultimate



fulfillment of individualist behavior, as the hero as well as the villain are willing and able to do whatever it takes to reach their goal. The clichéd ‘cavalry saving the day’ ending common to this type of story represents civilization taking over again, resuming the previously disrupted order.

Some episodes of *Lost* feature a very similar structure and symbolic vocabulary, with the survivors’ camp representing the frontier town, the reinforced hatch with its gun vault standing for a fort, and the jungle offering the same motif of freedom of action as the unchecked wilderness of the West. One exemplary treatment of this Western plot is the previously mentioned episode “The Hunting Party”. The narrative follows three of the survivors as they follow Michael into the wilderness of the jungle in order to keep him from getting harmed. The episode touches on many of the typical scenes commonly seen in Western stories: The characters are seen gathering weapons and supplies before leaving for the jungle. They must use their tracking skills as they follow their fellow survivor’s trail through the otherwise unmarked wild. The climax of the episode occurs when they meet one of the Others at a clearing; rather than engaging in conflict, he invites them to sit down at a fire and talk. As he reveals that the survivors are surrounded, and the Others have captured one of them, the law of nature comes into effect as the group’s survival is suddenly at stake. The survivors draw their weapons, resulting in a stand-off in which even Jack’s Hippocratic oath and highest maxim to do no harm is momentarily suspended and he almost allows the Others’ captive to be killed in order to gain a tactical advantage.

## **5.2. “Just like the rest of them”: Individualism as superiority over the Other**

In a reading of the *Lost* island as the West, the Others, being its native inhabitants, appear to serve as the story’s equivalent of the ‘savage Indian’ stereotype in the Western genre. During their initial appearances, they seem to fit many of the tropes connected with that concept defending their territory upon perceiving the survivors as a threat, and sharing a spiritual connection with the land. After a series of kidnappings, Michael scouts them out and presents the information he has gathered to his fellow survivors:

MICHAEL: I found them. After I left, I hiked north back to where we were. I hiked to the beach – followed the shore line. A day later I saw one.

LOCKE: What did he look like?

MICHAEL: He was dirty. Worn clothing, no shoes, simple. Just like the rest of them.

JACK: Like the rest of them?

MICHAEL: Yeah, his people – the Others. I followed him back to his camp. They live in tents – canvas tents and teepees. They eat dried fish. They're worse off than we are.

[...]

MICHAEL: And two guns is all I saw. They're barely armed. Most of them are old and half of them are women. [...] As soon as I get my strength back, I will take us back there. (*Lost*, “Two for the Road”, 24:49)



Fig. 5: The Others in their decoy village, as they present themselves to Michael.

As it turns out, the Others deliberately invoke this view of being primitive and poor, built on the prejudice perpetuated by narratives dealing with the Other such as the Western or *Robinson Crusoe*, by dressing up with fake beards and tattered clothes, putting on rural American accents, and even building a decoy village out of huts and tents in order to appear less civilized (cf. fig. 5). This has two effects on the way they are perceived by the survivors not immediately revealed in the narrative, meaning that the watcher might be deceived as well: Firstly, they seem less threatening. By faking technological and cultural inferiority, they dupe the survivors into launching an armed attack, only to surprise them with unexpectedly big numbers and a superior arsenal, leading to the attacking survivors' capture. Secondly, by establishing a connection to the spiritual aspect of the Indian stereotype, they manage to appear more knowledgeable than they really are – this is the same technique Locke used earlier for similar purposes; in an ironic twist, he is susceptible to the Others' pretenses even more than his fellow survivors, as he is actively looking for a way to communicate with the island. This aspect of the Others' deception works so well that, even long after their initial encounter, the survivors still ascribe them power based on their knowledge (spelled out in the third-season episode “Par Avion”, in which their

influence is challenged for the first time, with Sayid raising the point that “you're not as omniscient as you'd have us believe”).

For the duration of their deception, the narrative portrays the Others in the same way the survivors perceive them, showing only subtle hints implying they might not be who they appear. The way the story is presented anticipates the fact that the watcher is, therefore, susceptible to the same presumptions of superiority which bring about the characters' capture. This becomes apparent in another prominent instance of subversion: The opening scene of “A Tale of Two Cities” shows a group of previously unseen characters in a ‘perfectly civilized’ small-town scenario, with only subtle clues suggesting that something about the scene is unusual. Only several minutes later does it become apparent that it takes place on the island, the townsfolk being composed of Others, whose life on the island is revealed to be a deceptively real-looking reconstruction of a typical American suburban idyll, and who are shown cooking, tending gardens, and even having weekly book club meetings. The music and direction make clear that this is treated as an unexpected revelation: The picture zooms out in several quick cuts to more and more clearly indicate that the village is situated in the middle of the island, with each of these cuts being accompanied by the dissonant chord which has by this time in the series' progression been established as a signifier of important and previously unknown information. The significance with which this new piece of information is treated can be inferred to convey that this is indeed meant to be a twist of major significance and ‘shock value’, subverting the expectations built up by the Others' self-made rugged and primitive image.

Reading the Others as ‘Westernized’ Indians reveals another aspect of the relationship between them and the survivors. As noted before, most of them appear to be of American origin, as life in their village reflects that country's lifestyle, and a large number of them speak English with a strong American accent. They re-appropriate elements of rural American life to mask their identity. Overall, they seem much more American than the survivors, whose members form a diverse group coming from all parts of the world. This reflects classic representations of the American West in which the settlers constitute the invading force from outside, being made up of people having arrived in America from the Old World looking to make their own luck; the Indians, on the other hand, can be seen to be merely defending their territory. Still, like the survivors in *Lost*, the simplified narrative of the Western presents the invading force as the heroes and the defenders as the villains. The show itself comments on this, as characters belonging to different factions claim that “We're the good guys” throughout the narrative (*Lost*, “Live Together, Die Alone,

Part 2", 34:36). This again points out the subjectivity of values, as each individual sees themselves as good, trying to do the right thing.

The last, and probably most important, element of the representation of the Others to consider within the context of the Western myth is their name: Even though, at first, they are merely referred to as "others" by the survivors due to being the only other known group of the island's inhabitants, the label sticks throughout the series. In line with the meaningful philosophical and literary names shared by many characters of the series, it can therefore be assumed that this labeling is to be interpreted on a similar level of meaning, referring to the postcolonial concept of the Other. Nodelman (1992, 29) describes this concept as "the opposite of the person doing the talking or thinking or studying". It comprises everything which is not considered to be part of the Self: the strange, the unknown.

This idea is noticeably in line with the characterization of wilderness in the mythologies of the West and, in *Lost*, the island. These places represent the state of nature described in humanist theory: The wilderness itself is inherently free from cultural influences, and also provides a clean slate – a new beginning – to those who enter it. This is what enables the outlaw to become a hero, and Locke to become a hunter. The lack of distinct locations prevents those who wander the lands from acquiring complete knowledge of these places, lending them an intrinsic element of mystery. The sides depicted in both narratives have different ways of dealing with this problem: The settlers and the survivors colonize the wilderness, making it their own; mirroring Robinson Crusoe's behavior as observed by Said (cf. 1994, 70), they create a sense of place by naming recognizable locations, thereby claiming them. The Others, as well as the Indians in the Western narrative, are connected to the location on a more spiritual level. They do not need to name or claim these places as they can be seen as being a part of it from the beginning: The imaginary of the West includes its original inhabitants as well.

It is also possible within the context of this narrative to become part of this mythological whole as an outsider: The archetypical cowboy is an iconic representation of the West as well, but in most of his appearances he is depicted as a white man. He does not claim the place, as his fellow settlers do, but instead chooses to merge with it, submitting himself to be taken over by the mystical power of the location – the Other – rather than forcing a connection. Locke, by accepting the island's tests and letting himself literally be 'pulled in' to a hole in the jungle (which can be seen as an act of union in the Freudian sense), is shown to go through the same process.

By letting the Other take over, the cowboy acquires some of its traits himself, such as the mystery and the rule of nature. In exchange, he undergoes a loss of

culture: He cannot go back to become part of society again, but, not originally being part of the natural state of the wilderness, he can never become fully absorbed in it either. His existence as a loner between these worlds is inevitable within the rules of the Western narrative. Slotkin (2000, 471) refers to this “conflict between ‘society’ and ‘solitude’” as “the political and psychological problem of individualism”. In the context of the archetypes represented in *Lost*, Locke represents a prototypical cowboy: He leaves his society not long after the crash but does not find satisfaction in the answers the island gives him, repeatedly venting his frustration in bursts of futile violence and anger. He ends up taking the position of a mediator between the island and the survivors, but belongs to neither side himself.

The concept of the Other is a generalization of Said’s theory of Orientalism, which describes the views of western society toward the cultures of the east and their reimagination as the ‘Orient’. The Other, in Nodelman’s (1992, 29) sense of the term, has nothing to do with the subject it refers to, but, as it “is always conceived by those who study it to be unable to study itself, to see or speak for itself”, it is to be analyzed as an expression of the observer: By defining an imaginary “Other”, an image of the Self is created alongside. Since the Other constitutes everything which cannot be found in the Self, the reverse must be true as well. This creates a clear dichotomy in the perceived relationship of power: Since one tends to see oneself as “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 1995, 40), the Other represents the opposite of these positive values, becoming “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’” (ibid.). By acting the ‘right’ way, the Self represents the strong partner in this power relationship, while the Other, whose actions seem to oppose the observer’s values, is seen as inherently weak.

This condescending view on others seems to contradict the American individualist belief according to which each individual should be judged by their abilities, not by who they are. However, it is important to note that this implicit agreement is only valid amongst those who have consented to accept it – this view of others as equal is part of the social contract which binds all Americans citizens. Non-Americans are not expected to adhere to this belief system, and, in turn, are not subject to the rules which would grant them this privilege. The Indians, in the narrative of the Western, are defined by traits of the Other: Their culture and rituals are frequently represented as enigmatic and unknowable; their representation oscillates between the hostile and the spiritually metaphysical. They are subject to the settlers’ imperialist tendencies, depicted as outlaws in their own native land and confined to reservations.

The one-sided treatment of Indians in myth as well as history has to do with the desire to rule over the Other, brought about at least in part by the fear of the reverse

becoming the case otherwise. Said, in his *Orientalism*, has this to say about the British occupation of Egypt:

To have such knowledge of [a civilization] is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it” [...] since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it. (Said 1995, 32)

Said’s observation on the relationship of the Self and the Other translates to the American colonization of the West, as the motivation of the invading countries as well as their perception of the colonized peoples were similar. The simplified representation of Native Americans as enemies in the way the story of the West was told constituted a conveniently simple-to-depict conflict of good versus evil. This uncritical mythological narrative motivated by the construction of a villainized, inferior Other provided a reason for their suppression and gave the expansionist United States the authority to claim their lands. The story had to be maintained as a justification for doing so, obscuring the more complex reality of the relationship between them and the settlers. In *Lost*, this dynamic is turned around, with the Others providing a very similar, deceptively simple narrative themselves. The survivors are compelled to follow the knowledge available to them; what causes them to act is the individualist line of thinking according to which it is acceptable for them to inflict suffering on the Others in order to reach their goal of rescuing those who were kidnapped, and which assumes a superiority leading them to believe that armed conflict will result in minimal loss, as they do not expect much resistance. However, their hubris and underestimation of the Others’ capabilities lead to their capture.

Domination through knowledge also applies to Locke’s continuing claim to the island itself, motivated by his personal belief in destiny: By uncovering the island’s secrets, he is similarly assuming possession of its mystical properties and hidden locations. Whether that is actually the case is not relevant, as his faith alone motivates him to act more recklessly than he would otherwise. His course of action over the first three seasons is not bound to one side in the conflict between the survivors and the Others; he acts, again, as a personification of nature, benefitting as well as damaging both factions as he follows his own goals – culminating in his takeover of the Others as their new leader, with his fellow survivors joining the group he commands. Ultimately he helps cease the conflict which has driven the story so far; however, in typical cowboy-like fashion, he cannot be part of this new-found peace for long, as this union comes at the cost of his life: In order to convince the last remaining survivors to join his side as well, he must kill himself in a last display of conviction and faith in the power of the island. Just as he manages to unite man and nature, this victory is taken from his hands, as it seems to be the cowboy’s destiny to never be able to truly enjoy his success.

The colonization of the West fulfilled a deeply individualist American desire. Drawing upon the image of the New World as a blank slate, the seemingly unlimited territory it provided was perceived as an opportunity for the settlers to shape the land according to each individual's wishes. "Taming the wilderness", Reynolds (2009, 144) states, is a "recurring theme of America's national mythology – technology applied to nature in the name of progress". To Reynolds, this also symbolizes the spreading of American values: The axe, previously seen as a symbol of destruction, becomes within this new context "the instrument and herald of a democracy" (ibid., 145). Once again, the principle of judging individuals by their actions rather than their past can be observed. Upon its adoption by the American narrative, the purpose it has served before is forgotten to make way for a new, more respectful image dictated by the benevolent function it fulfills here: The individualist ideal is shown to be applicable even to a symbol as simple as an axe, changing its meaning from a herald of destruction into an icon of renewal, defined not by its shape or intended purpose, but how it is used.

The mystical West constitutes the environment which enables the cowboy, the prototypical individualist hero, to exist. Its size and pristine state allow for an almost unlimited degree of personal freedom, and the cowboy demonstrates how this individualist desire can be put into practice: Although he complies with the expectations of society to no more than to a modicum, his ability to assert his rights by reason alone places him on the side of moral good within his own, and probably the watcher's, scope. Depending on how clear-cut the narrative presents the line dividing good and evil, his actions can be more or less justifiable. Ultimately, however, he fulfills the function of the myth as a body of lessons as he represents a possible heroic interpretation of individualist thought, showing the importance of acting on the basis of a moral foundation governed by reason.

The narrative of the cowboy as an unquestionably good character, however, has been challenged during recent decades; particularly the uncritical portrayal of his enemies as unambiguously evil can be seen as problematic. This black-and-white view on morality is part of the Western narrative criticized by Said (cf. 1994, 314), the same story which paints the West as wilderness which is to be colonized, and its inhabitants as representations of the Other. The Western film *Dances with Wolves* came out shortly before Said's book, and marks an early step away from that myth which had solidified over the decades preceding it. *Lost*, which premiered over a decade later, offers a more reflected look, playing with expectations such as its portrayal of the Others and how they present themselves, and never defining Locke as an unambiguously heroic figure: With this character in particular, the narrative

accentuates the unpredictability derived from him acting according to his own principles, his actions serving no one other than himself consistently. Locke's role in the story, therefore, alternates between that of the hero, the anti-hero and the villain, changing not only with his behavior, but also based on the perspective the story takes.

*Lost* consciously plays with the fact that actions can have varying effects on different people, sometimes showing the same event from multiple perspectives: The first two episodes of the second season, "Man of Science, Man of Faith" and "Adrift", take place at the same time. Both show the aftermath of blasting open the hatch door, one focusing on the survivors' point of view (to whom it represents shelter), and the other from its occupant's perspective, who perceives them as intruders and a threat, acting cautiously toward them upon their arrival. This, again, illustrates how one's individual concept of the Other is reflective of one's own identity. By defining the relationship between oneself and the 'outside world', a system of rules governing interaction is created, leading to a construct of morality. Especially if the individual is not backed by a group and has to face the world at large alone, the chance of these morals encouraging individualist, competitive behavior increases (cf. Triandis 1995, 183). In an individualist society, the Self extends only as far as Locke's definition of property – one's own body, freedom, and possessions. The Other in its function as 'that which is not the Self' is seen as a challenge to overcome; its constant presence serves as a benchmark to prove one's ability to assert oneself in a hostile environment. Success is defined as the victory of the individual, that is, the Self.

### **5.3. An empire of liberty: Modern colonialism and the diversification of individualism**

America's colonization of the West occurred simultaneously with the height of British imperialism, and ceased in its 'classic' form when the West was conquered and there was no more territory to be gained on the North American continent. Decolonization set in after the Second World War, leading to the "dismantling of the classical empires" (Said 1994, 283), but Said suggests that the "triumph of the United States as the last superpower" (ibid.) placed the country in a unique position enabling it to exert a new type of colonization, this time of a more culturally-oriented nature.

The prevalence of American culture in the age of cultural imperialism which took place during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be explained by the individualist ideas motivating the country's producers of texts which spread across the world, with movies, television series and music reaching the largest audiences. The globalization occurring in the post-war period made it possible for distributors to make content widely available, and American media took advantage of this potential more than others: In accordance with the aforementioned competitive individualist principles,



the cultural market is as much perceived as warfare as any other area of society, the parties of the conflict competing in this case for the largest share of the money the audience is willing to spend on the pleasures of entertainment. Rothkopf (1997, 46) calls America an “information superpower” and argues that “America's emphasis on the individual ensures that American innovation will continue to outstrip that of other nations” (ibid., 51), as the ongoing competition between individuals ensures a steady output of texts which compete for the position as the best-selling, and therefore the most-popular product.

The diversity of America's population also enables its culture to adapt very quickly to ‘fit’ any type of desired audience, which “gives the United States resources and potential links with virtually every market and every major power in the world” (ibid.). The transition which has taken place over the two decades since the publication of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, in which he criticized the lack of alternative perspectives within the myth of the West, was facilitated by this fact. With the turn of the Western narrative away from the naïve black-and-white heroism of its classic era toward a more differentiated representation of its characters also arrived a new mind-set casting doubt on the status of American values as the one ‘normatively correct’ world-view. While the core values of individualism have been preserved in recent treatments of the narrative – most notably, the cowboy archetype continues to exist unchanged in this new type of Western – the way in which the story is told has changed, giving all sides the chance to be heard.

This is also true for other types of stories which have gone through a similar diversification of perspectives. Individualism, previously perceived to be an exclusively white male right, has become universally applicable. The opening up of the concept does not just give every individual American citizen the right to self-realization, but has also changed to allow non-Americans to partake in the freedom it grants. Superman, who is probably the most iconic comic-book superhero (and therefore, as mentioned previously, a paragon example of the individualist hero, whose powers represent the ultimate potential for self-realization) was commonly quoted to be fighting for ‘truth, justice and the American way’ for decades. After the paradigm shift motivated by globalization, this assertion of American values being propagated by a superhero whose aim it is to benefit all of mankind rather than a single country was challenged. While the character and his optimistic individualist nature stayed the same, his motto was changed to the more pragmatic and informal “truth, justice, all that stuff” in his most recent movie, *Superman Returns*, marking a conscious abandonment of America's exclusive ‘claim’ to the character: This change, despite its move away from the country most commonly associated with that

ideology, increases Superman's inherent individualism, as he is no longer bound to adhere to the ideals of a specific nation, giving him more freedom to choose which society he wants to partake in.

*Lost* also shows how individualism has overcome its association with the white male demographic: Its cast is one of the most ethnically diverse in television (cf. Sepinwall 2012), with many of the characters not being American citizens. Most of the survivors choose to make individualist decisions frequently throughout the series' narrative, showing that the privileges – and consequences – that come with following this ideology have become open to everyone who chooses to partake in this system. Still, the two most noticeably individualist characters are Locke and Sawyer, both white American males, illustrating that the idea is still closely connected to that demographic.

While the success of America's cultural dominance can be attributed to the culture's acceptance by audiences across the world as much as the individualist desire to surpass the success of other cultures, the "last superpower" has also exerted military influence on foreign territories even after other colonial powers ceased their activities in the wake of the Second World War. The colonization of the West has found a successor in the United States' attempted 'colonization of the East': Most conflicts in which America has participated since the end of the Second World War took place in Asia, with the Vietnam and Korea wars, the Gulf war and, most recently, the 'war on terror' in the Middle East as examples. Reynolds (2009, 578) sees the reason for this in America's self-image as an "empire of liberty". In line with the cultural spreading of individualist values, it is also in the country's interest to expand its values to those regions which are not as accepting toward individualism – many Asian countries, Triandis (1995, 13) notes, are collectivist societies, sharing few elements with American values.

Its actions have earned the United States the title of a 'world police', and the value system at its base is the same which constitutes the national identity. The wars fought by the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be seen as an application of the lessons taught by the classic Western narrative, focusing on the victory over the Other, signified by military prowess. The Cold War, which overshadowed many of these conflicts, similarly represents this confrontation of the Self and the Other, with the United States and Russia representing these concepts when seen from the American point of view.

The combined forces of American cultural and military dominance have led to a global awareness of the country's individualist ideology. Even though this influx of new perspectives has created a discourse critically examining its basic values and redefining the benefits and problems which come with individualist acting, the

philosophy at its core has remained the same: Looking at the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Western narratives as a literary example of this shift in perception, the cowboy archetype as the personification of individualism is largely unchanged, but the world around him has transformed. The distinction between good and bad has been blurred, and the Other has gained the ability to speak for itself. *Lost*, as a modern example, clearly assumes that the picture painted by the classic Western is still lingering in the audience’s minds, playing with the expectations that come with the knowledge of the genre’s tropes.

## 6. *Lost* in context: America's contemporary individualist society

The previous chapters have discussed the underlying principles and origins of the system of values which has led to the emergence of American individualism, and the reasons for its successful implementation into the country's national identity. This chapter will examine several aspects of American life, and illustrate the ways in which the individualist principles laid out in this paper are inseparably built into the thought behind various aspects of its society. As it is not within the scope of this thesis to offer a full analysis of life in America, this chapter will give an overview of what can be said to be the central pillars of American society: Politics, economy and religion in particular, and how these aspects of society are represented in *Lost*, will be examined. More detailed discussions of individualism as it is experienced and exercised by individual American citizens, rather than the study of its expression in literature, have been conducted previously, such as in Robert N. Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, which contains a number of extensive case studies based on interviews with "white, middle-class Americans" (Bellah et al. 1985, viii), and presents an elaborate picture of individualism in daily American life.

### 6.1. Taking sides: Politics and independence

An important concept in American society is the clear distinction between private and public life. The former, in this context, refers to "an area in which the individual is or should be left alone by others and able to do and think whatever he chooses – to pursue his own good in his own way" (Lukes 1973, 59). The public sphere, on the other hand, is where individuals come together to work as a society, performing activities which require the participation of more than one person. In America's individualist society, the private sphere is highly valued as the location of personal success and the point of origin of self-interest. The desire to keep one's private life, thoughts and property free from outside influence, which Lukes describes as "public interference" (ibid., 62), is understandable within this value system, as these concepts are intrinsically linked to the person they originate from, and mirrors Emerson's claim that "the integrity of your own mind" (Emerson 2007, 17) is sacred.

In *Lost*, Locke's constant plea, "Don't tell me what I can't do!", reflects this rejection of the opinion of others. The character has a clear idea of what his abilities might encompass; conflict is created by the fact that he does not get to see whether his imagination actually conforms to reality: In "Walkabout", while in his wheelchair, he claims to be fit to take a walkabout tour through the Australian outback. Neither he nor the audience get to see if this would actually be the case, as he, despite having ignored the advice given to him by his co-worker as well as his partner against

leaving, is still denied participation by the tour operator due to his “condition”. This experience might even be what triggers his pronounced display of individualist behavior as he gains the ability to assert his will freely on the island by regaining full use of his body, having exhibited a rather meek and conformist personality before the plane crash. Looking again back to Emerson, who claims that “power ceases in the instant of repose” (Emerson 2007, 34), creating a connection between physical health and the assertiveness of the mind, the change in Locke’s outlook can be seen as a response to his restored body. Individualism is, according to this line of thought, an expression of power.

Throughout the history of the United States, various political movements have been trying to implement the power perceived to be inherent to the individual into the legal system in a more direct way. The ‘big versus small government’ debate, which is nowadays spearheaded by the libertarian party, can be seen as the weighing of the individual against society; the less influence government is able to exert on its citizens, it is argued, the more free they become. This view has historically been closely connected to radicalism, with the anarchist movement representing the most notorious example for crossing that line through the assassination of President McKinley (cf. Adams 1932, 341), even though the official doctrine of the movement was opposition to such acts, with its then-current leader Emma Goldman (cf. 2012, 7) having to refute the reputation of anarchism as a violent philosophy repeatedly in her (often aggressively worded) speeches.

The call for a smaller government has become louder over the years, yet at the same time more moderate. Its proponents today are more mainstream and mostly conservative, with decreased government influence being one of the goals of the Republican Party. Aside from libertarianism, a vocal group in recent years has been the Tea Party movement, which can be said to represent the ‘radically conservative’ side of America: Their individualism is notable for being anchored in the ‘old view’ as discussed in connection with Said’s works, which becomes clear in the fact that, as a report on the movement observes, “theirs is an American nationalism that does not always include all Americans” (Burghart/Zeskind 2010, 11). Their views are deeply conservative, while the aggressive methods they use to push their agenda and their “unstated racism” (ibid., 73) have shades of the same radical egoism that drives many more progressive campaigns. These ideologies are, though growing in popularity, not shared by the majority of people, but indicate that individualism can be constructed to have vastly different political implications – this is also evidenced by *Lost*, where the individualist characters Locke and Sawyer are shown to change sides frequently,

according to their current needs and interests. Their philosophy can be applied to different courses of actions, as long as it is advantageous to them.

Taking sides is an overarching theme in *Lost*: Not just the conflict between the survivors and the Others requires some characters to make the decision whom to follow, but conflicts even within the groups sometimes lead to splits into factions. Usually there are reasons given for the actions and intentions of each side, creating an environment where there is no definite ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather each party pursues a different path to reach the common goal of survival. One such conflict arises early on in the episode “House of the Rising Sun”, when Jack finds a cave on the island and each individual survivor is faced with the decision whether to move to the shelter of the caves or remain at the beach where they are more likely to be spotted by searching parties. There is no ‘right’ decision, and different self-interests among the group lead to this first split, with roughly half the group deciding to move.

America’s primarily bipartisan political system seemingly encourages a similar discourse in which taking sides is part of political culture; as a decision determined by one’s own reasoning, party membership is often kept private. However, federal party politics are relatively far removed from the individual, with the focus in daily life being on local government, or “the politics of community” (Bellah et al. 1985, 200). Here, the party system moves into the background, and individual decisions matter more strongly. In the context of this more direct system of participation, the personal value system trumps thinking in terms of political parties, as “in individualistic cultures the political system is designed to satisfy individual needs” (Triandis 1995, 139). Decisions are made more freely, with less regard to the party line than those made on the federal level. In fact, as Bellah (1985, 202) notes, the number of independent voters with no ties to a particular party rises with the degree of patriotism observed in studies, indicating that to those who ascribe high value to the country, society as a whole matters more than supporting a particular party and freeing themselves from partisanship (and therefore removing themselves from society to a degree) is beneficial to finding the best possible decision.

In *Lost*, Locke can be seen as the ‘ultimate patriot’, as his degree of connectedness to the island exceeds the feelings he has towards any of the groups forming around him. He frequently takes the role of an outside observer, which is essentially that of the island itself. During the aforementioned dispute whether to move to the caves or stay at the beach, a symbolic scene occurs in which another character steps on a beehive, prompting Locke to advise him to stay still: “If he moves, he’ll split the hive.” (*Lost*, “House of the Rising Sun”, 8:25) This quote, when appropriated to refer to Jack’s decision, comes true later during the same episode. Again, Locke does not judge whether this decision is good or bad; he accepts Jack’s

reasoning, but secretly follows his own: He joins that group since it is his interest to stay and survive on the island and not to be rescued, but tells his true motivation to no one until questioned much later, illustrating once more how his individualist attitude allows him to utilize society for his own purposes while remaining free from its influence.

## **6.2. The lure of the challenge: Capitalism as an expression of American identity**

The right to act according to one's perception of right and wrong – which is in turn influenced by one's personal system of morals and beliefs – is at the core of individualist behavior. In the case of conflicting interests, such a system may lead to individuals taking actions which oppose each other. In these situations, it is in each party's interest to accomplish their own set task at the least possible cost. This type of scenario has already been mentioned to feature frequently in *Lost*, but it also forms the basic principle of economic systems which revolve around the concept of dealing with limited resources.

Economy, described by Robbins (1932, 15) as “human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have alternative uses”, includes by definition a competitive element. In a non-collectivist society in which no favors are granted out of affection but on the basis of rational decisions, it is seen as a loss to give value away without receiving anything back; therefore, social interactions in an individualist system usually comprise trade in some form. Such actions do not necessarily have to include physical objects – rather, Robbins uses the term “Individualist Exchange Economy” (ibid., 17) to refer to the entirety of social behavior exhibited by those living by the rules of that ideology.

The first season of *Lost* shows the emergence of various economies, with resources being scarce and many characters' highest goal being survival, there is bound to occur an overlap of interests. The non-American survivors tend to act less profit-oriented than those who grew up in the individualist society of the United States: Jin and Sun, the couple from Korea, fish and plant a garden respectively, and are frequently shown to share their yield with others without asking for payment in return. Sayid utilizes his skills as a soldier for the benefit of the group, even if there is no immediate gain to be expected for himself, such as in “Confidence Man”, when he risks incurring the group's hatred by torturing Sawyer, trying to make him return Shannon's inhaler. These actions signify a sense of community, showing that the characters perceive themselves to be part of a group of “individuals about whose welfare [they are] concerned, with whom [they are] willing to cooperate without

demanding equitable returns” (Triandis 1995, 9), which is typical of collectivist behavior. Sawyer, in the same scene, thinks in “individualist exchange economical” terms, to use Robbins’ terminology. By the time this scene occurs, he has consciously avoided entering this group so he can continue to demand “equitable returns”, making it more acceptable in the eyes of the rest of the group for Sayid to abuse him, since he has remained an outsider. In the same sense, though, it seems advantageous for profit-oriented characters such as Sawyer and Locke to remain independent from the group, as it enables them to compete with, rather than be part of, the rest of society, and profit from this relationship. Locke’s brokering for information has already been discussed, but Sawyer is more distinctly individualist in his actions regarding economics. He is the first survivor to realize the value of material resources, leading him to create a stash out of the objects he salvages from the airplane wreckage while others are still recovering from the crash, which essentially gives him the monopoly over such important items as medicine, water and, later, weapons. This puts him in a position where he can freely choose to demand whatever payment best fits his current interests, as there is no other way for the other survivors to acquire the items he possesses. In accordance with Robbins’ description of “scarce means with alternative uses”, Sawyer’s resources are meaningful to others, but as long as they are in his stash, they represent currency: The specific purpose of the individual items is irrelevant; they are abstracted into mere representations of value. Competition arises from the fact that Sawyer wants to increase his wealth, while others need his possessions for various specific purposes. Interestingly, since the rest of the group does not use a monetary system, Sawyer’s stash is essentially worthless when seen as a whole. He seems to collect out of habit bordering on compulsion; the capitalist system which treats money and material wealth with paramount importance seems so deeply ingrained in him that, even though it places him outside of society and makes him the target of the group’s hatred, he cannot keep himself from trying to amass resources. The episode “The Long Con” shows that this behavior is symptomatic, as, in a flashback, despite having entered a romantic relationship with his mark, he still cons her out of a large sum of money, despite showing clear signs of regret even while he does so.

While Sawyer’s behavior seems exaggerated at times to an almost comical degree, there is certainly some truth to be found in the close link between his individualist personality and the capitalist thinking which he is prone to succumb to. Capitalism in America is carried by the economic doctrine of *laissez-faire* (cf. Lukes 1973, 26), meaning that the federal administration grants a large amount of liberty to the participants of the country’s economic system and their actions. The idea that an economic market, left to regulate itself, can thrive and becomes an evolutionary



system in which the fittest survive, provides an ideal playing field for individualist competition: Well-reasoned decisions in such an environment are rewarded, and money represents a clear measure of success. With little regulation from above and no help to be expected from others, survival in a capitalist system becomes an exercise in free will and persistence.

In fact, the lure of the challenge can be a strong motivation for individualist contenders: The bigger the obstacle which an individual can overcome, the more respect will be earned by that achievement – whether approval comes from oneself or others makes no matter. Ahab, for example, makes the killing of Moby Dick his personal goal; no one can keep him from it, and he is willing to pay the ultimate price – his life – to attain it: “he is obsessed, compelling, unstoppable” (Said 1994, 288). In the context of American individualism, these attributes are not necessarily negatively connoted. Likewise, the ‘underdog’ narrative is a popular narrative device particularly in American sports films, such the story of an underprivileged baseball team in *Angels in the Outfield*, whose hard-earned victory by the end of the movie is made much more powerful by the fact that the audience is first made to watch the struggle the team goes through. It is this challenge which draws the viewer in. In a collectivist culture, the team would receive help from family members or other affiliates; here, even the guardian angels sent to aid the team leave for the final game, arguing that “championships have to be won on their own”. However, the team proves it has earned its respect when the game is won even without this ‘help from above’.

The value of achievement without the need for external help is visible in many aspects of American culture, most notably in various symbols standing for the country itself and its states. As the American states settled territorially as well as culturally, they took on identities connected with their individual history and the circumstances surrounding their foundation. This is still evident in their state symbols, which function as an ‘officially sanctioned’ display of traits perceived to be unique or strongly associated with them. Of particular interest in this context are state mottos and nicknames. As written text, rather than visual or auditory signs (such as flags, anthems, or even birds and minerals), they spell out an idea clearly, making them explicitly stated representations of their state’s ideology. They are frequently seen printed on car license plates, becoming ubiquitous symbols which assert their presence wherever the states’ inhabitants go. Texas’ nickname, “Lone Star State” (cf. Cotter 2001, 56), is indicative of the state’s particularly individualist culture; New Hampshire’s motto, “Live Free or Die” (ibid.), makes a similarly strong case for the significance of freedom, without which life apparently would not be worth living.

The appeal for individual freedom is also realized in the right to choose one's line of work. With labor and its fruits representing a significant part of the individualist way of life, it is clear that each individual's choice of work, and how much effort is put into it, forms a large part of one's identity (cf. Bellah et al. 1985, 66). Choosing a career not only determines how a large span of one's life is spent, but is also a statement regarding individual values and interests. Therefore, Bellah considers the choice of a workplace a "calling":

Work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life. It subsumes the self into a community of disciplined practice and sound judgment whose activity has meaning and value in itself, not just in the output or profit that results from it. (Bellah et al. 1985, 66)

The inherent value ascribed to work means that the individual who performs it is connected to this effort, and is therefore entitled to the merits that come with it. Work itself becomes a resource within the greater economic system. By delivering a stronger performance, the individual can raise his or her value in the eyes of others.

In *Lost*, as soon as Sawyer has secured his position as the 'keeper of the stash', he is frequently shown reading, sleeping or otherwise idling. As he is in possession of material wealth, he does not require the value created by performing work himself. In "A Tale of Two Cities" and the episodes following it, he is captured, locked in a cage and, being unable to trade, has to work for food for the first time since his arrival on the island (and, considering his life as a confidence man, presumably even before that event). Interestingly, despite the animosity he shows toward the abuse he is subjected to during his imprisonment, he seems to accept the trade of working for food with reasonable ease, as it fits in with his previous experience of capitalism on as well as off the island.

### **6.3. "Don't tell me what I can't do": Faith and free will**

The significance of religion in the context of society has been one of the first, as well as one of the most recent subjects to be negotiated in nation-wide discussions within the discourse of American culture. Religious freedom in the United States is a right granted by the first amendment; it is a "private and diverse" (Bellah et al. 1985, 220) matter. *Religion*, here, refers to a personal set of beliefs explaining the unknown; that which each individual chooses to believe beyond the realm of knowledge. In this sense, the individualist principle to choose one's own beliefs not only suggests that the free choice of a religious denomination should be a given, but also encourages individuals to create their own faith system: No two religions have to be the same, and there is indeed a broad spectrum of beliefs. Bellah even mentions that "one person we interviewed has actually named her religion (she calls it her "faith") after

herself”, suggesting “the logical possibility of over 220 million American religions” (ibid.).

Chaves (2011, 1) introduces his study of religion in the United States by stating that “almost all Americans say they believe in God”, adding, however, that “many people believe in a God that is quite untraditional”. ‘God’ in this sense refers to the abstract principle of divine influence which is interpreted differently by different religions. That said, it appears that the existence of a higher power is quietly accepted as a fact by the vast majority of Americans. This reflects the concept of deism which was popular among the Founding Fathers: The constitution guarantees that the specific nature of an individual’s religion is private and not to be imposed by authority, yet the Declaration of Independence mentions a “creator”.

This secular treatment of religion stems from the Founding Fathers’ humanist beliefs. Benjamin Franklin describes in his autobiography (1892, 79) his pursuit of “moral perfection”, in the course of which he proposes a list of virtues which “occur’d to me as necessary or desirable”: Rather than drawing his ideas from religious precedent, his aim is to create a canon of virtues based on rational thought. Starting with the need for *temperance*, he demonstrates his reasoning behind the 13 qualities he nominates:

I gave *Silence* the second place. This and the next, *Order*, I expected would allow me more time for attending to my project and my studies. *Resolution*, once become habitual, would keep me firm in my endeavors to obtain all the subsequent virtues ; *Frugality* and industry freeing me from my remaining debt, and producing affluence and independence, would make more easy the practice of Sincerity and Justice, etc., etc. (Franklin 1892, 81)

Having postulated these virtues, Franklin proceeds to describe how they can be included in daily life, and describes his success in doing so himself – he also provides a “scheme of employment” detailing how a typical day could be spent according to his personal faith (cf. fig. 6).

It seems that, irrespective of the

The morning question, What good shall I do this day?	5	Rise, wash, and address <i>Powerful Goodness</i> ; contrive day's business and take the resolution of the day; prosecute the present study; and breakfast.
	6	
	7	
	8	
	9	Work.
	10	
	11	
	12	Read or overlook my accounts, and dine.
	1	
	2	
	3	Work.
	4	
Evening question, What good have I done today?	5	
	6	
	7	Put things in their places, supper, music, or diversion, or conversation; examination of the day.
	8	
	9	
	10	
	11	
	12	
	1	Sleep.
	2	
	3	
	4	

Fig. 6: Benjamin Franklin’s “scheme of employment“, as appropriated by blogger Zach Ward, showing that Franklin’s ideal is still being followed.

separation of church and state and the strong case for religious freedom made in the Founding Documents, religious faith is a defining part of the American cultural imaginary. The rules and commandments laid out in religious mythologies act as a conveniently available moral compass to many people, and “some doctrines, such as the Calvinist notion of predestination, are excellent motivators toward becoming rich [...] and are thus extremely compatible with individualism” (Triandis 1995, 139). A benefit of the personal nature of religion in America is the fact that it can at any time be adjusted to accord with beliefs and interests, and therefore has an amplifying effect on the willpower needed to achieve personal goals. Religion is created by the individual, unlike in cultures with a dominant religion such as it exists in many European countries, where the belief of the majority may or may not fit the individual’s needs and wishes and is therefore more likely to be rejected. In America, there is no ‘one true faith’, which facilitates the appropriation of religious elements to individual needs and therefore the acceptance of religion in general. While the United States may be founded on Christian ideals, according to Chaves (2011, 26), the belief that Christianity is the “one true religion” has dropped to less than a quarter of Americans, the diversification of faith systems and their acceptance being an ongoing process. It should be noted that the question of Chaves’ survey used to explain this fact asks interviewees whether “there is any religion other than their own that offers a true path to God” (ibid., 27), implying that there *is* a “path to God” no matter the answer: The existence of a divine presence is assumed by the questionnaire from the outset. Again, this highlights the pervasiveness of religion in the American cultural imaginary.

Faith and the truth which may lie underneath it is a major theme in *Lost*. Locke in particular is a very faithful character; he illustrates that faith can be personal and does not have to follow an established religious dogma by constructing his very own belief system based solely on his experiences on the island. The conclusions at which he has arrived by the time he tells Jack about his belief that he is “being tested” by the island are the result of his search for answers: By inscribing the hatch special significance he creates an incentive for himself to open it. Taking into consideration Triandis’ view of religion as a motivator, Locke’s faith can be said to be an individualist assertion of authority in the eyes of himself and others, imbuing him with the permission and the power to reach his goal of finding out what is inside the hatch. By enforcing this right toward Jack by means of an argument based only on assumption, Locke also illustrates an inherent weakness of acting guided by faith: It is, by definition, not supported by fact. While it is not clear whether Locke actually believes what he tells Jack to be true, it later turns out that it is not the case, or at least not as Locke seems to understand it. Opening the hatch does not bring him the answers he desires, and the

events occurring inside the bunker over the course of the following story arc prove destructive to the group and Locke's health alike, almost leading him to the point of turning away from his faith in the island.

With Americans being "more pious than people in any Western country" (Chaves 2011, 1), religion plays an important role in the public discourse of the United States. Only about half of Americans would vote for an atheist president; interestingly, the particular confession would not matter as long as the candidate believes in a god (cf. *ibid.*, 26). It seems that the mere acknowledgment of a form of personal faith makes members of the American society appear more trustworthy in the eyes of others. The same is true for religiously-motivated myths, which are in some contexts treated as equal to scientific theories: The prevalence of creationism in America, a belief which equates the scientific theory of evolution and the biblical story of the creation of man, treats these two narratives as exclusive, and favors the latter (cf. Numbers 1993, ix), shows the power which religious belief holds even in the face of overwhelming evidence for the scientific truth of Darwin's propositions concerning the origin of the species.

The narrative of *Lost* ultimately makes the case for faith as well. Even though Locke's belief in the significance of the hatch may not be vindicated immediately, his faith eventually turns out to be justified, when over the course of the latter half of the story more and more of the fantastical properties of the island present themselves to the survivors as well as the viewer. It is revealed that there is indeed a reason for their arrival; they were brought there by the island's supernatural protector whose intention it is, just like Locke assumes, to test their capabilities as his successor. He keeps his faith even when his peers manage to find rescue and return home, turning away from their destiny (which, in the context of the story, is more than just a motivation or suggestion). By the end of his personal story, his unwavering faith is treated as a virtue as he gives his life to bring the others back together and make them return to the island, which can be interpreted to mark a hard-earned victory of faith over science (especially considering that Jack is a doctor, and therefore a very clear representative of scientific, rational thought). Of course, this has to be seen in the context of a world in which a higher power actually exists, but the value given to the power of faith is clear. By the end, Locke's spiritual connection to the island is so strong that he immediately knows what he can or "can't do", and uses all the power it can give him in order to make his end meaningful.

Emerson, in *Self-Reliance*, frequently mentions religion in conjunction with such fields as education and art as formative elements of identity (cf. 2007, 46). Even if proponents of seemingly irrational views like creationism are not treated as part of the

“mainstream scientific community” (Numbers 1993, 104), the influence which religious views and faith have on the decision-making process of American citizens cannot be denied. In individualism, where influence from other members of society is seen as negative and inhibitive, faith as a belief system forming inside the individual based on experience and preference represents a moral reference point which it is socially acceptable to adhere to.

Faith as a formative part of individualist identity, capitalism as its playing field and the ability to freely choose sides in a conflict as a core mechanic are important parts of the American individualist society, and are all derived from its historical development. Their depiction in literature is a result of the American tradition of using myth as a tool of education. While this chapter has not covered all aspects of individualism by far, it has shown the continuing relevance of these concepts in contemporary American life. It is possible that part of the reason for *Lost*’s success was the way it connected to the audience through the universality of these values among American watchers.

## 7. Hyperrealism and individualist storytelling

Having argued for the significance of myth in the teaching of individualist values, the concluding chapter will extend this concept from the content of stories to encompass storytelling itself through an examination of *Lost* in the context of its narrative form, as a television series with interactive multimedia elements. The way in which this narrative is presented demands from the viewer an exercise in individualist acting, and can therefore in itself be seen as an individualist lesson. How this is accomplished, and other factors which influenced the reception of the series when it was originally aired, will be examined in this concluding look at individualist storytelling

### 7.1. The monopoly on knowledge: Storytelling in *Lost*

Concerning the authorship of television series, it can prove difficult to determine who is to be credited with the creation of individual aspects of the narrative. In this regard, Roland Barthes' post-structuralist view proclaiming the "death of the author", as he made clear in his essay of the same name, cannot be ignored: Rarely does that statement hold more truth than for the process involved in the creation of filmed media, as the reality of producing this type of narrative is often unpredictable and forces changes from the author's original intent. Different from books, which are (usually) written by the author, proof-read and revised by an editor, and then finished for publication by the writer himself, the production of a televisual program involves a process comparable to a factory line, where everyone involved adds a little to the final product.

Television series, even more than movies, are very difficult to trace back to a single author: Screenwriters Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse are assigned the function of 'executive producers' in the credits of all *Lost* episodes; they are, in making-of materials as well as by outside sources – including an article written by Cuse (2012) himself for the New York Magazine's *Vulture* blog – referred to as "showrunners", implying they control the overarching production and narrative of the series. They are also notably credited as screenplay writers for those episodes which further the plot the most or feature important dramatic developments, clearly asserting their position as head writers. However, they can hardly be referred to as the only authors of *Lost*, as many episodes feature writers' credits other than Lindelof and Cuse. Lindelof explains in an interview that "*Lost* was written by a whole roomful of people" (Hibberd 2011), as the volume of the series' over 120 episodes proved too much for the showrunner duo to write on their own.

Another important fact to consider is the transition of written text to film. The author of a screenplay has almost no role of importance in the actual filming process, which is supervised by the director and influenced by the performance of individual actors and technicians, such as camera and lighting operators. External factors, such as weather, budget and the fact that television series are usually filmed on a strict time schedule, can cause the filmed material to deviate from the screenplay even further, leading to scenes being changed or even remaining unfilmed. The filmed material is then processed by the editor, who might excise or change it to conform to restrictions concerning running time and narrative flow, with the finished product differing tremendously from what the screenplay outlined at the start of the process. In the face of these technical reasons alone, it is evident that a television series like *Lost* is the product of so many peoples' work that it is almost impossible for the watcher to trace back individual ideas to a particular person involved in its making.

During the final stage of the writing of this thesis, an excerpt from a new book was published on the internet detailing the early stages of the production of *Lost*. Alan Sepinwall's (2012) *The Revolution was Televised* confirms the difficulty of its development process, with even the script for the pilot being rewritten several times and project leads changing until filming began. Lindelof entered the production when the concept of a story set on an island had already been developed, and "asked Cuse to come on as a co-showrunner" only after "producing the early episodes on his own" (ibid.). Therefore, it is evident that even the lead writers were not the originators of some of the ideas in the finished product. The uncertainty of the authorship of individual aspects of the narrative adds itself an almost mythological element to the story.

Barthes (1967) provides a different approach to the problem of authorship: Apart from the purely technical issues as explained, he also questions the relevance of the author to the understanding of the work itself. "The author", he points out, "is a modern figure, produced no doubt by our society insofar as, at the end of the middle ages, [...] it discovered the prestige of the individual". With the rise of postmodernism, the importance of the author decreased again, as texts came to be seen in context of each other, and in connection with the reader, rather than as a product of the author's mind alone:

The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a *before* and an *after* [...] the modern writer (scriptor) is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now. (Barthes 1967)



As a product of the “here and now”, Barthes takes into account the act of reading, making the viewer of *Lost* as much a part of the process of understanding as its writers. Indeed, watching the series can convey the feeling of work at times, owing to the mysteries which make up the narrative. As a self-contained story, the enigmatic events occurring on the island raise questions whose answers cannot be found in the real world, outside the series. Only the authors are in possession of the entire picture, being the ones who created it in the first place – they have the monopoly on information, and are therefore able to decide exactly how much they are willing to tell the viewer at any given point during the series. The narrative is presented in a fractured, non-chronological manner and clues are given only reluctantly. It is the viewer’s task to make sense of the content provided by the writers.

Fiske (2011, 157) refers to the “privileged information-giver” in this type of situation as the “author-god”, and to readers as “decipherers”. He argues that “popular texts can ensure their popularity only by making themselves inviting terrains for [the struggle for meanings]” (ibid., 4): The success of *Lost* can be traced to the fact that watchers wanted answers; the mystery was interesting enough to keep viewers returning in the hope to learn more. If the nature of the island’s properties had been explained too soon during the series’ initial run, the viewers’ fascination would have dropped. The interest in answers can also be said to be empirically supported, as “Man of Science, Man of Faith”, the episode in which the characters enter the hatch for the first time, was the most-watched episode of the entire series upon its initial broadcast; it reveals what is arguably the most well-known mystery among general audiences surrounding the island.

The scarcity of knowledge regarding the mysteries of *Lost* invokes the individualist principle of competition: It is an individualist desire to know as much as possible about the events of the series at any given time, taking into account the value of information in an economic system. The storytelling is clearly aimed to capitalize on this need; with each week’s episode, a trade is conducted in which answers are exchanged for viewership. Watching the series attentively is rewarded, as some hints are hidden in the background or only mentioned in passing. Thus, a hierarchy of information emerges, with the author-gods at the top, casual viewers at the bottom, and those viewers who put work into the process of watching, carefully examining scenes and participating in discussions, in the middle. These ‘loyal’ viewers have some degree of authority over those who are less informed.

This style of conveying a narrative could be termed *individualist storytelling*. It conforms to the rules of individualism by enabling viewers to experience the series in different ways according to their interest. The more they want to know, the more they

can learn if they are willing to put the necessary effort into watching the series. By hiding clues well enough so they can easily be missed, it can be assured that only those who are actively looking for them will notice. An example for this is hidden in the early second-season episode “Adrift”, when, for a short moment in an underwater shot, a shark is visible with the burn mark of a location which does not feature until the third season, more than twenty episodes later. Attentive watchers can catch this clue and draw conclusions from it, meaning that they have a more complete picture earlier than casual viewers at the same point of watching the series.

## 7.2. The reality of fiction

Television culture during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was often criticized for ‘force-feeding’ its audience cheaply-produced entertainment with little value. One of the most prominent critics arguing from an academic standpoint was Jean Baudrillard (2007, 55), who made television viewers out to be “at the controls of a micro-satellite, in orbit, living no longer as an actor or a dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks” when his essay *The Ecstasy of Communication* was first published in 1987. What is interesting about this observation is the fact that in the American society, which takes pride in its individualism – and therefore its active individuals – the stereotypical television viewer was commonly pictured as a passive watcher, easily receptive to any content appearing on the screen.

The individualist storytelling practiced by *Lost* seems to be in opposition to this passivity: In both narrative strands presented, on and off the island, the series is notable for its use of the narrative technique of the story twist. Mysteries are often solved at the end of an episode, their resolution marking a cliffhanger as the answer given to the viewer is often unexpected and raises even more questions. This style of narration led to vivid discussion on the internet during the initial broadcast of the series, with watchers getting together on a large number of fansites<sup>4</sup> to discuss their personal theories and speculate about the questions raised in the course of the narrative. In a 2011 interview, Damon Lindelof remarks that “our “brand” was that we really cared what the fans had to say about the show” (Hibberd 2011), making *Lost* one of the earliest television series to respond to the wishes and criticisms of the audience to a degree. One notable example of this interaction occurs in the episode “Exposé”, in which two characters introduced shortly before, and whose presentation was panned by critics and fans alike, were written out of the show in such a way that the writers noticeably acknowledged the negative audience reaction.

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<sup>4</sup> Notable fansites included [www.lost-tv.com](http://www.lost-tv.com) and [www.thetailsection.com](http://www.thetailsection.com), which have both gone offline since the end of the show; the latter can still be visited via the “wayback machine” feature of the Internet Archive at [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).

Baudrillard (2007, 54) also describes the idea of *hyperrealism*, a simulation of reality so realistic that it replaces that which it imitates. *Lost* ‘invaded’ the real world at several points, blurring the line between fiction and reality: Websites were set up for Oceanic Airlines, the fictional company whose airplane crashes in the first episode, and several other brands which feature in the series, where dedicated fans could find information pertaining to the *Lost* universe which went beyond the scope of the television episodes’ narrative. Going even further, *The Lost Experience* was an *alternate reality game* running between television seasons, which spanned not only a network of websites, but also featured the appearance of “hieroglyphics which were hidden across the world in on- and offline locations” (The Lost Experience – Channel 4 and HiReS! Reel) and a special line of chocolate bars which contained exclusive information about the back-story behind fictional organizations which were mentioned in the television series, but never expanded upon. Thus, a rich fictional universe was created which expanded on the story told in the series and affirmed its connection with reality. Again, viewers were able to participate directly in the world of *Lost*, this time in much more meaningful ways than what would have been possible if the show’s universe had not embraced the possibilities of multimedia storytelling.

By letting the audience be part of this experience, the position of the author was diminished even more; the narrative was appropriated by fans, who were free to tell their own exclusive part of the story based on information only they had access to, such as codes printed on the chocolate bars’ wrappers. While the origins of the story could still be traced back to the team of writers, the retelling of the narrative took on elements of popular myth, being perpetuated by individuals. This development was probably engineered by design in order to give participants the impression of being valuable as an individual part of the game, consciously invoking this individualist desire, thereby increasing observers’ motivation to participate.

*Lost* presents itself as a sprawling mythical narrative, touching upon many important aspects of American individualism. Locke is the cowboy following his personal faith to achieve his goals, a loner shunning society in order to achieve self-realization without the help of others. Sawyer represents capitalism and the individualist tendency to improve his own standing against that of the rest of the group. The Others bring out the negative side of the story’s individualist characters, revealing them to be rash and aggressive, showing little regard toward the needs of others. In this sense, *Lost* shares the tradition in American fiction of illustrating individualist approaches and ideas in order to show the viewer the consequences of different individualist life-styles. With its large cast of characters, the series seizes the opportunity to present a variety of such concepts. By its method of individualist

storytelling, *Lost* also manages to turn the tables on its viewers, forcing them to exhibit individualist behavior themselves in order to fully understand the show, thereby rewarding them in the same way which can be expected from America's society at large.

## Conclusion

In my paper, I have demonstrated that the nature of an individualist society requires its members to form their own value systems, shaped by their personal needs and interests. Within such a society, an agreement exists that its members have the right to achieve self-realization, while also being obliged to achieve it by themselves without the help of others, at minimum cost and with no obligation to further the well-being of society as a whole.

The United States has arrived at this form of social organization through its history as a land of opportunity. With each new arrival to the New World possessing a different understanding of that term, the only way to accommodate this entire spectrum of ideas and desires was to guarantee the liberty of self-realization by granting every citizen the highest possible degree of personal freedom. Shaped by the humanist ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, the Founding Fathers of the United States created one of the first democracies, with government taking on a subdued role, serving, rather than reigning over, the people. This led to a society in which individual citizens experience little influence from government, but have to take on a higher degree of responsibility for themselves compared to nations following a social welfare system.

The rejection of authority extends into most areas of life, with the freedom of economy and religion being among the most-valued rights. There also exists an animosity toward being made to oblige social norms and rules; it is, therefore, preferred to teach lessons in a less-direct way: A running theme in American literature is the meditation on the effects which various approaches to individualist acting have on the individual as well as society as a whole. In the spirit of Barthes' observations on myths, these tales focusing on individualist protagonists serve as lessons: They are 'what-ifs' and 'could-bes', enabling the readers or watchers of these stories to picture the possibilities of different ways of asserting individualism without having to take the risks connected with these at times socially questionable behavior patterns.

Therefore, American fiction is prone to feature characters asserting their individualist outlook in a prominent manner. Ahab, the Lone Ranger, Han Solo and Indiana Jones are popular examples of this tendency. *Lost*'s Locke and Sawyer fit this role well, but there are characters in the series showing further sides of individualism who this paper could not take into account. Benjamin Linus, for example, whose hunger for power leads to his downfall during the latter half of the story, learns the value of humility and ultimately accepts the position of the right hand to the island's protector. His story arc, even more than Locke's, shows the subjectivity of good and

evil in the eyes of the individual, as he represents the enemy to the survivors for a long time, all the while considering himself to be “the good guy”. Kate, similarly, has not been mentioned in this thesis: Her past as a criminal and transformation into a heroine after the plane crash can be seen as an example of the momentariness of morality in individualism, as she is able to stay true to her beliefs while leaving her opportunist personality behind and taking on responsibility.

To me, the most interesting discovery of this paper is the application of individualism to narrativity itself. Individualist storytelling has, to my knowledge, not been analyzed before, and found its way into this thesis at a much too late point during the writing process. I encourage the further investigation of narratives in terms of the effort they demand and the reward they offer in return; facilitated by multimedia technology, most importantly the internet, this seems to be a fairly recent development in storytelling. It remains to be seen what the possibilities can amount to of involving readers and challenging them, but it can surely be said that this type of audience participation fits in well with the idea of American individualism.

## Appendix

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- "Confidence Man." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 8. Directed by Tucker Gates; written by Damon Lindelof. Cast: Josh Holloway (*James "Sawyer" Ford*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/Touchstone, 2004.
- "Deus Ex Machina." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 19. Directed by Robert Mandel; written by Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/Touchstone, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Time signatures in citations from *Lost* are taken from the "*Lost: Die komplette Serie*" DVD set.

- "Enter 77." *LOST*, Season 3, Episode 11. Directed by Stephen Williams; written by Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2006.
- "Exodus, Part 3." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 25. Directed by Jack Bender; written by Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/Touchstone, 2004.
- "Exposé." *LOST*, Season 3, Episode 14. Directed by Stephen Williams; written by Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2006.
- "Hearts and Minds." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 13. Directed by Rod Holcomb; written by Carlton Cuse and Javier Grillo-Marxuach. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/Touchstone, 2004.
- "House of the Rising Sun." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 6. Directed by Michael Zinberg; written by Javier Grillo-Marxuach. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/Touchstone, 2004.
- "The Hunting Party." *LOST*, Season 2, Episode 11. Directed by Stephen Williams; written by Elizabeth Smirnoff and Christina M. Kim. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2005.
- "...In Translation." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 17. Directed by Tucker Gates; written by Javier Grillo-Marxuach and Leonard Dick. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Yunjin Kim (*Sun-Hwa Kwon*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2004.
- "Live Together, Die Alone, Part 2." *LOST*, Season 2, Episode 23. Directed by Jack Bender; written by Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2005.
- "The Long Con." *LOST*, Season 2, Episode 13. Directed by Roxann Dawson; written by Leonard Dick and Steven Maeda. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Josh Holloway (James 'Sawyer' Ford). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2005.
- "Par Avion." *LOST*, Season 3, Episode 12. Directed by Paul Edwards; written by Christina M. Kim and Jordan Rosenberg. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Naveen Andrews (*Sayid Jarrah*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2006.
- "Pilot." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 1. Directed by J.J. Abrams; written by J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Evangeline Lilly (*Kate Austen*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2004.
- Superman Returns*. Produced by Jon Peters, Bryan Singer and Gilbert Adler; directed by Bryan Singer; screenplay by Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris, based on the works of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Cast: Brandon Routh (*Clark Kent/ Superman*), Kate Bosworth (*Lois Lane*), Kevin Spacey (*Lex Luthor*), James Marsden (*Richard White*). Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006.
- "Tabula Rasa." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 3. Directed by Jack Bender; written by Damon Lindelof and Jennifer Johnson. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Evangeline Lilly (*Kate Austen*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2004.
- "A Tale of Two Cities." *LOST*, Season 3, Episode 1. Directed by Jack Bender; written by J.J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Michael Emerson (*Benjamin Linus*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2006.
- "Three Minutes." *LOST*, Season 2, Episode 22. Directed by Stephen Williams; written by Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Harold Perrineau (*Michael Dawson*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2005.
- "Two for the Road." *LOST*, Season 2, Episode 4. Directed by Paul Edwards; written by Elizabeth Sarnoff and Christina M. Kim. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2005.
- "Walkabout." *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 4. Directed by Jack Bender; written by David Fury. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O'Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/ Touchstone, 2004.

“White Rabbit.” *LOST*, Season 1, Episode 5. Directed by Kevin Hook; written by Christian Taylor. Cast: Matthew Fox (*Jack Shephard*), Terry O’Quinn (*John Locke*). Bad Robot/Touchstone, 2004.

## Images and figures

Fig. 1: *John Gast's quintessential image of Manifest Destiny*.  
<http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/ccManager/clips/american-progress-and-manifest-destiny> (30.9.2012)

Fig. 2: *Lost*, “Exodus, Part 3“, 16:03.

Fig. 3: Hobbes 1651, title page.

Fig. 4: Andrew’s Thanksgiving play – YouTube. 0:23.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8TJ8i9TITM>. 9.8.2010 (9.12.2012).

Fig. 5: *Lost*, “Three Minutes”, 23:01.

Fig. 6: *Social Responsibility* / ZACH WARD. <http://zachward.com/tag/social-responsibility/>. 12.4.2012 (9.12.2012).

## Deutschsprachige Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Ursprünge des amerikanischen Individualismus sowie dessen Anwendung und Ausdruck im gesellschaftlichen Leben des Landes. Dieser Blick auf eine der grundlegenden Ideen, die Handeln und Denken nach dem amerikanischen Ideal beeinflussen, erfolgt aus der Perspektive der Cultural-Studies-Theorie. Der Zugang zum Thema wird auf der Ebene von amerikanischen Texten gefunden, die aufgrund ihrer Natur als Produkte der amerikanischen Kultur ihrerseits dieses Wertesystem reflektieren. Insbesondere werden die amerikanischen Gründungsdokumente (mit Hauptaugenmerk auf die Unabhängigkeitserklärung) und die Fernsehserie *Lost* untersucht: Erstere nicht nur in ihrer Funktion als grundlegende Regelwerke, auf welchen die amerikanische Nation erbaut ist, sondern auch aufgrund ihres Inhalts, der selbst als starke individualistische Stellungnahme zu sehen ist. *Lost* wird gegenüber diesen den Individualismus fördernden Texten als Produkt der so hervorgebrachten individualistischen Kultur gesehen; als mehrere Staffeln umspannende Fernsehserie bietet sie genügend Material, um verschiedenste Aspekte der Anwendung des dieser Einstellung entsprechenden Handelns aufzuzeigen.

Zur Themenfindung bedient sich die Arbeit der Technik des *Close Reading*, wobei eine Szene aus *Lost* auf verschiedene Ausdrucksweisen des Individualismus untersucht wird. Innerhalb der Serie sticht der Charakter John Locke als starker Vertreter dieser Weltanschauung heraus; sein Handeln und sein Glaube liefert die Vorlage für große Teile der Arbeit. Die Geschichte von *Lost* an sich zeigt starke Parallelen mit der Besiedlung Amerikas.

Als Vorgänger des amerikanischen Individualismus wird der britische Humanismus des 17. Jahrhunderts untersucht, insbesondere die Theorien von Thomas Hobbes und John Locke (dessen Name für die Figur in *Lost* direkt übernommen wurde, ein Zeugnis für seine Bedeutungshaftigkeit für die Serie wie auch die Kultur, die sie produzierte), die sich mit der Rolle des Individuums in der Gesellschaft befassen und damit den Gründern der Vereinigten Staaten wichtige Impulse zu dessen Stellung im Verhältnis zu Staat und Regierung gaben.

Die Arbeit behandelt die Bedeutung von Mythen für die Entwicklung der amerikanischen Geschichte und Identität: Da in einer individualistisch eingestellten Gesellschaft das Setzen persönlicher Werte große Wichtigkeit besitzt, kann deren Lehre nur schwer durch Erklärung und Lehre übermittelt werden. Daher ist es eine beliebte Technik, Wertvorstellungen und die Folgen des danach gerichteten Handelns anhand von Charakteren in Geschichten aufzuzeigen, so dass der Leser seine eigenen Schlüsse ziehen kann. Dies führt zu einer ‚mythologisierten‘ Sichtweise auf die Geschichte des Landes sowie zum Vorhandensein einer Vielzahl von Texten, die sich

mit individualistisch eingestellten Charakteren befassen; *Lost* selbst ist ein gutes Beispiel davon. Auf diese Art hat sich die Zeit von der Besiedlung Amerikas durch die Puritaner bis zur Gründung der Vereinigten Staaten mit der Zeit zu der Erzählung einer Kette von Ereignissen gewandelt, deren Abfolge die Entstehung und Verbreitung des Individualismus in der Gesellschaft bedingt; durch die ständige Wiederholung dieses Mythos wird er selbst gestärkt, so dass seine Stellung als ‚Wahrheit‘ als unangefochtene Tatsache im Raum steht.

Mit der Erkenntnis der Bedeutung von Mythen in der amerikanischen Kultur wird in der Arbeit die erzählerische Konstruktion des amerikanischen Westens genauer untersucht. Hier bildete sich eine Mythe, welche die Siedler als heroische Boten der Zivilisation den Stereotyp der ‚wilden Indianer‘ gegenüberstellte. Dieser Erzählstrang geriet in den letzten Jahrzehnten zugunsten einer ausgeglichenen, alle Seiten gerecht behandelnden Sichtweise ins Hintertreffen, ist jedoch immer noch unterschwellig vorhanden. *Lost* untergräbt die so geschaffenen Erwartungen dadurch, dass die entsprechende Gruppe in dieser Geschichte erst dem Stereotyp entsprechend dargestellt wird, sich dies allerdings später als bewusst erzeugte Täuschung herausstellt.

Weitere in dieser Diplomarbeit angesprochene Themen beinhalten die in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft praktizierte Politik, Wirtschaft und Religion, in welchen sich der Individualismus, der das gesellschaftliche Leben durchdringt, widerspiegelt. Dies wird anhand von Charakterentwicklungen und Szenen aus *Lost* illustriert. Der bis zum heutigen Tage bestehende – und in weiten Teilen seit der Gründung der Nation unveränderte – Kern des Glaubens an die innewohnende Macht des Individuums wird herausgehoben.

Abschließend wird die Art und Weise, auf welche die Geschichte von *Lost* erzählt wird, genauer untersucht. Das Argument wird erbracht, dass die Erzählart selbst individualistische Werte vermittelt, da beim Verfolgen der Fernsehserie größere Aufmerksamkeit und Recherche, die über die Sendezeit hinausgeht, belohnt wird. Auf diese Art schafft *Lost* eine Mentalität innerhalb der Seherschaft, die einem individualistischen Wertesystem ähnelt.

Aus der Arbeit wird ersichtlich, dass der amerikanische Individualismus nicht nur gesellschaftliche Werte beeinflusst, sondern auch, wie diese vermittelt werden. Die Bedeutung von Mythen sowie ihre Fähigkeit, zu zeigen, ohne zu drängen, machen diese Erzählform zu einer wichtigen Lehrmethode und erklärt, warum die Mythifizierung der amerikanischen Geschichte und die wiederholte Behandlung des Themas in der Literatur von Bedeutung für die intellektuelle Entwicklung der amerikanischen Gesellschaft sind.

## Curriculum Vitae

### Persönliche Daten:

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2003 – 2007 Gymnasium Sir-Karl-Popper-Schule, 1040 Wien  
seit 2007 Studium der Anglistik und Amerikanistik; Publizistik und  
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### Berufliche Erfahrung:

2005 Freiwilliger Arbeitseinsatz beim Südtiroler Bauernbund  
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2006 Ferialpraxis bei ProCom Strasser  
Freiwilliger Arbeitseinsatz beim Südtiroler Bauernbund  
auf dem Innerlahnhof  
2007 Ferialpraxis bei Austria Tabak  
Freiwilliger Arbeitseinsatz beim Südtiroler Bauernbund  
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2008 Ferialpraxis bei Austria Tabak  
Englischunterricht bei Lernquadrat  
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2009 Ferialpraxis bei WKÖ  
Deutsch-, Englischunterricht bei Lernquadrat  
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Englisch, Russisch in Wort und Schrift, Französisch  
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Musik solo und in der Gruppe (Klavier, Akkordeon, Bass), Chor