Juxtaposition of Wor[l]ds: The Cultural and Literary Legacy of the Beat Generation

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"What's your road, man?—holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It's an anywhere road for anybody anyhow." –Jack Kerouac (1957), quoted from On the Road

"Despite the skepticism I brought here, I am suddenly experiencing their feeling. I am sure of it. I feel like I am in on something the outside world, the world I come from, could not comprehend. And it is a metaphor, the whole scene, ancient and vast, vaster than..." –Tom Wolfe (1968), quoted from The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

I am not a Beat or a New Journalist, an anarchist or a hippie—I am simply one soul searching for a pure existence in a world that has forgotten what it means to be human. Excuse me, Mr. Kerouac: I believe I have found my road. I believe the world only gives us what we seek to find, and through many years of searching I found a group of kindred souls in a most unlikely place and time. The seeds of individuality and revolution were well on their way to being planted in my soul when I discovered the Beat Generation but only now do I understand the enormity of their role in modern culture and postmodern literature. Nearly fifty years after the birth of what has come to be known as the Beat Generation, their influence can be seen in the way people dress, how they act, and the free nature they live in. Like many naïve youngsters who are given their first copy of On the Road I too was attracted to the allure of the Beat lifestyle; however, at this very moment I can only begin to understand the sacrifices they made for their art. It is not their berets, dirty work jeans, or dangling cigarettes that people should remember but the extent to which their art reflected...
their lives. History tends to paint a readily acceptable image of the world void from the
darkness that affects us all; however, the Beats embraced the darker side of life to show the
light on the other side. Their tales and radical sense of authenticity have attracted many
critics who write them off as just another cultural fad but their lives and literature have
attracted many more that can relate to (and take comfort in) their words—everyone from an
eccentric journalist to a young college kid looking for something more out of life. I am not
claiming to be a historian or even an intellectual, but I am one person who knows what they
are trying to say and that story is too great not to be told. By the way, Mr. Wolfe: I am in too.

Our journey along the beaten path begins back when artists and like-minded individuals
began congregating to express a similar view of their world and their art. As George and
Starr have noticed, "Wherever they lived, bohemians expressed certain Romantic ideals in
their art and life-styles. These included the notion that every human’s potential should be
allowed to develop freely; adoration of the ‘primitive’; the celebration of fraternity; the beauty
of nature; wanderlust and the lure of the exotic; the transformative power of art; free love;
the quest for intense experience; and, above all, living uncorrupted by bourgeois materialism
and unrestrained by bourgeois convention" (190). What happened after World War II was the
type of social rebellion that should have come as no surprise to anyone studying society or
literature—I know because I have heard the stories first hand. I am a product of an atypical
1950’s style family and my father has told me the stories of what it was like growing up with
a heightened sense of patriotism, security, and economic freedom. Although they were
picturesque, my father’s stories—like many other stories in history books or classic
television reruns—failed to acknowledge the existence of the radical side of our evolving
social order. As noted by Edward Halsey Foster, "Men [in the 1950s] were expected to be
logical efficient, and cool-headed, organizing their lives according to their employer’s needs.
There was no place for the excitable, intense, and independent personality exemplified by
frontier America" (8). Slowly, the citizens of the United States (whether they noticed it or
not) were being suffocated by a growing materialistic society where Mickey Mouse replaced
the bald eagle as our national symbol and dollar signs seemed to replace the stars on the
flag.

As the 50s progressed, a counterculture began to emerge just as bohemian cultures had
done centuries before during the Medieval and Romantic periods. "In the early 1950s,"
according to George and Starr, "some of the New York bohemian writers traveled to San
Francisco and made contact with their brothers. Within the next five years, they started a
countercultural rebellion. The Beat Generation was born” (190). The Beats, in their lives and
their literature, directly defied normal social order. They prided themselves on spontaneity,
authenticity, and a continuous search for IT (as Jack Kerouac explained in On the Road).
They dabbled in everything from drugs to sexuality and in doing so disrupted everything
people thought America was supposed to be. As noted by Jerold M. Starr, "...the Beats
mounted a “great refusal” against the establishment that justified the repression of dissent
in the name of militarism, racism, materialism, and conformity in American society, and
raved about free love, mind-expanding drugs, and creative expression. They shunned
“square” society and adamantly demanded the right to be different” (Cultural Politics 238).

Just like the youth of our current nation, the Beats saw something wrong with the way
society was being run and the constraints it put upon the normal people; or, as Allen
Ginsberg once put it, the “...angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly /
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night” (qtd. in Charters 62). They are,
however, a perplexing group to study. Much of their literary work is marked by highly
autobiographical and confessional text, which makes us wonder whether their lives were
influenced by their art or their art by their lives. Based on the chaos of comfortability that
they were reacting against, the early Beats can be identified as early practitioners of a normative revolution. Perhaps I should explain this: the lifestyles of the Beats (the one thing that most critics of the revolution zone in on) directly defied the norms of society; on the same note, by reflecting on their lives in their literature the Beats broke through the canon and created a new—more authentic—form of artistic expression. As stated by Mel Van Elteren:

The subculture of the Beats, which can indeed be studied as an art world, was much broader in scope than simply those of discrete artistic forms such as literature, film, painting, and music. It also entailed specific signifying practices, that is, modes of ordering and coding the experiences of the group in question. These were manifested in expressive forms and rituals that not only referred to artistic work but also to specific attitudes, behavior patterns, dress codes and the like, as well as to objects and paraphernalia with which the members were associated. Thus, the artistic practices were located within a larger setting of modes of social expression employed by this particular group.

Aside from contemporary nonfiction writers, the Beat were among the first group of writers to fictionalize their lives. In that respect, their novels and poetry have carried a certain level of authenticity to their readers who, like myself, appreciate and thrive on the experience of the Author. Because there is no clear line between the Beats, their lifestyle, and their literature, it is important to understand both: if we can find meaning in both and understand how one affects the other, then we may be able to find meaning in our own world—I have.

In their search for authenticity in their world, the Beats stumbled across (and embraced) the underground movements going on all over the United States. “Toward the end of the war,” according to George and Starr, “[Jack Kerouac] observed hipsters around Times Square who ‘looked like criminals’ and spoke a language sprinkled liberally with such phrases as ‘crazy, man’ and ‘man I’m beat’. He also heard them articulate ‘long lines of personal experience and vision, nightlong expressions full of hope that had become illicit and repressed by War, stirring rumbles of a new soul’” (194). Perhaps the most riveting account of the post-war counterculture that was emerging at the time—a culture which adopted language and mannerisms from jazz music as well as Times Square junkies—is Jack Kerouac’s breakthrough novel On the Road in which Kerouac’s characters interact with hobos, junkies, jazz musicians, and immigrants to find the sort of pure existence Kerouac himself was searching for (but we will get into that more later). Jack Kerouac coined the word “Beat” to characterize his generation after speaking with a Times Square junkie named Herbert Hunke, who, as George and Starr have noted, “used it to describe a person ‘exhausted, defeated, depressed, but full of internal convictions’” (194-195). The original Beats—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and, to some extent, Gregory Corso—were intellectuals; most of them attended highly respectable universities, and yet all of them felt the constraints of their world around them. In jazz and other countercultural movements, they saw the spontaneity and truthfulness that a traditional education usually lacks. Moreover, as Mel Van Elteren has observed, “…in Kerouac’s view, blacks symbolized those qualities that he felt were tragically absent in white civilization, namely the existential joy, wisdom and nobility that evolve from a history of suffering and victimizations” (11).

As white middle-class white men, the Beats did not share the same life experiences as those they wrote about and connected with; however, theirs was a new type of suffering—a suffering that resulted from the established norms of a society that seemed to tell them how to live. Like the normal folk the Beats wrote about and emulated in their lives, the Beats had their “…own sense of life, something that might be defined as an intricate web of
By the late 1950s, the Beat Generation had cemented its role in the new American counterculture. Much to the surprise and dismay of many of the original Beats, however, it was their lifestyle rather than their art that was receiving critical acclaim. Like no generation before them, the Beats clearly defined social and generational gaps of their time, but as George and Starr have noticed, “What distinguished them from ordinary deviants or malcontents was their talent, their inner conviction, and the historical circumstances that made it possible for them to communicate with the growing constituency of youth and bohemians they came to represent. In so doing, they turned their stigma into a blessing, their shame into defiance” (203). The social climate of the 50s, however, presented the Beats with a paradoxical situation: yes, it was the perfect time to utilize their talents as a means to articulate the growing dissent for social constraints; however, it was also a time when the media was just beginning to mass produce the ideal “America.” It is tragic how the media can change a revolution into a cultural fad. As noted by Ann Charters, “When the term ‘Beat Generation’ began to be used as a label for the young people Kerouac called ‘hipsters or beatsters’ in the late 1950s, the word ‘beat’ lost its specific reference to a particular subculture and became a synonym for anyone living as a bohemian or acting rebelliously or appearing to advocate a revolution in manners” (xxi-xxii). Dually noted by Mel Van Elteren, by 1956 the term “beatnik” had been coined by Bob Kaufman to characterize the physical allure of the Beats instead of their social and intellectual radicalism. “In his own time,” Van Elteren states, “the ‘Beatnik’ tended to be the brunt of jokes rather than someone to be feared” (5). Consequently, the artistic nature of the movement was widely dismissed by academics as well as critics—the social scientist invaded the world of the artistic intellectual.

The pop-culturesque stigma the mass media pegged on the Beat Generation is undeniable; like journalists tend to do, they exploited the only two thing they could begin to understand about the Beats—their image and lifestyle. They turned the real Beats who, as Van Elteren states, “…were flamboyant individualists, ‘speedy,’ [and] ‘mad to live...’ into the Beatnik (readily acceptable impersonators) who “…were studiedly ‘cool’-conformists like everyone else, but in a different way; they conformed to the values and norms of their subculture” (5). The original Beats continued to live their lives under these conditions, but they never swayed from living on their own terms or presenting a realistic vision of their world through their literature. “Through the years,” according to George and Starr, “they never stopped believing in their destinies as great writers. They burned with the need to justify themselves to the world and, through their writings, they gave voice to many others” (198).

Unlike other celebrities that succumb to the darker side of fame, the Beats (especially Jack Kerouac) rejected their media image and never forgot their art. They embraced experience, lived fast, and rejected everything conveniently laid in front of them and in doing so created a form of literary expression to embody those ideals. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once noted, “…the postwar literary movement was shaped by ‘the madmen and the outlaws of the generation before.’ The early Beat writers deliberately selected as their models such unlikely ‘Secret Heroes’ (the term is Allen Ginsberg’s) as the bop musicians Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, the Welsh alcoholic performer-poet Dylan Thomas, the California anarchist poet Kenneth Rexroth, and others outside the canon of acceptable Anglo-American literary models” (qtd. in Charters xvii).

If the Beats were viewed as social radicals in their lifestyles, they were viewed as social philosophers in their literary art. Several Beat novels delve into the depths of what it truly means to be American and on a deeper level what it means to be human. It is an interesting connection: in lieu of the drastic social changes taking place all around them the Beats felt a
certain optimism for the America they once knew; however, they understood the necessity to evolve as humans to achieve that dream. According to Halsey, "Convention and respectability had very nearly eradicated Kerouac’s ‘America…invested with wild self-believing individuality,’ but he felt that the America he once valued ‘suddenly began to emerge again’ after World War II when ‘the hipsters began to appear.…’” (8). In their literary texts (just as in their lives) the Beats tried to capture the breakdown of conventional ideals, the spontaneity of life, and the freedom of experience, however, their lives were based on experiencing these new attitudes whereas their art was focused on dissecting and explaining them.

Taking their cues from early Romanticism, expressionism, and realism, the Beats sought to shape their literature around the spontaneity of life. As Fredrick R. Karl has noted, “The desire to achieve spontaneity or to confess was not so much experimental or "a dare," as it was an obsessional need to find print forms for the continuous racing of the mind, a drug-induced vision, with wild swings of manic and depressive feelings" (201). Like many other college students, it is this spontaneity of thought and the ability to record it that has drawn me to the Beats. Unlike other authors who are lumped into the canon, the Beats present a certain fervor in their text–one that is not held down by conventions of literature and language. According to Carl D. Malmgren:

The Beats rejected the modernist aesthetic as productive of art that had become over the years, esoteric, obscurantist, elitist, safe, sterile, dead. Beat poetics called for rebellion against all forms of authority, especially culturally sanctioned authority,...It rejected the notion that the artist must distance himself from his material, seeing in it an unhealthy need to control or contain nature, life, people; the Beats preferred to ‘dig it.’ (60)

The aesthetic beauty and authentic meaning derived from the literature of the Beats comes from their desire to experience their world in every way possible. Like their predecessors, the Beats took a special interest in the underbelly of society: the musicians, hobos, junkies, and immigrants; however, they adamantly sought to define America based on those who are generally forgotten. “The Beats,” according to Van Elteren, “revered these hipsters as folk heroes. Via reading the works of Rainer Maria Rilke and Federico Garcia Lorca, they turned them into angel-headed hipsters of the poetic imagination” (11). Although steeped in both the intellectual and deviant worlds of society, the Beats pursued the latter as a means to identify their unique position in the world. By blending cultural deviancy with brilliant and passionate writing, however, they created an art form that captured the spirit of both worlds—and defied social as well as literary norms. “Kerouac’s challenge,” as noted by George and Starr, “was to break down the distinction between the frank content of personal conversation between friends and the formality of conventional literary subject matter” (204). The Beats found a certain value in reality that most people of the 1950s appeared to forget; however, instead of pressing themselves into society’s constricting mold, they created spontaneous art complete with the language, thoughts, and aspirations of the normal American. Finally, art that reflected the way things really were. The Beats did not dance around convention or respectable ideals in their art—they stood face to face with what had been established for them both in literary and social circles, and in the end defied everything people thought was good and pure about their existence.

Beat ethos in writing and life had begun to saturate post-war America as early as 1954, but by the time 1957 rolled around the publication of one book would flood the world with the meaning of what it was truly like to live as a lost soul in a dehumanizing world—that book:
On the Road. "Gilbert Millstein (1957), writing in the New York Times," according to George and Starr, "hailed its publication as a ‘historic occasion’ and predicted that just as The Sun Also Rises was a testimonial to the Lost Generation, so would On the Road become a monument to the ‘Beat Generation.’ On the Road Millstein concluded, was the ‘most beautifully executed, the clearest and most interesting utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named ‘beat’...” (208).

“One is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call ‘form’ as content, as ‘the matter itself.’ To be sure, then one belongs in a topsy-turvy world: for henceforth content becomes something merely formal—our life included.” – Friedrich Nietzsche, (1887), quoted from Will To Power

My intention is not to dissect or present a “close reading” of On the Road here—the experience of reading it is too much to put into words. There is, however, a distinct social and personal message that can be derived from the novel, which is exactly why it cannot be ignored in my venture to explain the importance of the Beat Generation to literature and modern social aesthetics. Like most Beat novels, On the Road is characterized by “...the juxtaposition of opposites, presenting a picture of the world in all its beauty and terror; a sense of the absurd; the importance of the clown or holy fool; and insistence on the nonrational as a way of knowing” (George 204). For Kerouac’s characters, the road is a means to escape the past and find enlightenment through experience and exploration. The whole of the novel is centered on Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty’s various trips across the heartland of America—from New Jersey to New York to Denver to “San Fran” to Mexico, and back again. Along the road they each (in their own way) confront personal demons, grapple with the idea of what it means to be happy, and contemplate the meaning of living a pure existence. According to Gerald Nicosia, “Travel to them is a conscious philosophical method by which they test the store of hand-me-down truisms. Moreover, as a potent imaginative symbol, travel is a philosopher’s stone that turns every experience into a spiritual lesson” (343). Like those social critics who have made it their life-long obsession to debunk the myth behind the Beats cultural influences, literary critics of the same nature tend to forget the lesson behind the duos spiritual trips across the country.

The spirituality of On the Road exists on a dualistic plane—within the novel and outside the novel. On one hand, experience and the acceptance of simplicity plays a large part in Sal and Dean’s quest for a pure existence. Sal’s acceptance of Dean Moriarty is, in itself, an acceptance of something different and odd but seemingly something pure and natural:

But Dean’s intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his “criminality” was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love... (708)

Like the Beats themselves, Kerouac’s fictionalized characters (especially Sal Paradise) are eager to find authenticity and purity in a world full of falsity and pre-established traditions. It does not stop with Sal’s discovery and acceptance of Dean’s wild-eyed view of life—Dean only serves as a catalyst (and perhaps an excuse) for Sal to seek out and embrace all those things normal society traditionally swept under the rug. As Fredrick R. Karl has noticed, “Dean [becomes] Kerouac’s Proteus and Prometheus, a man whose life, not his work, is the
expression of how an era, otherwise constricted, can express itself” (201). Sal revered those who lived life on the fringe—the hobos, middle-class, and immigrants—who seemingly maneuvered their way through time and space avoiding the constraints of an evolving society. As Sal states, “...the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never say a commonplace thing but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" (5-6). The mad ones. Huh. We are all mad in our own ways (aren’t we?), just like Sal is mad in his own way. It is not until we understand our madness and the madness around us that we understand what it means to live. In Kerouac’s novel, Sal Paradise (although timid, conventional, and worrisome) reaches true understanding of himself when he lets go of everything that has been placed in front of him on a platter of conformity.

Oh yeah, I promised another plane of spiritual understanding didn’t I? The irony of *On the Road* lies in our own search, as readers, for meaning—in the text or in our own lives. The autobiographical set-up of Kerouac’s novel begs readers to relate to rather than sympathize with his characters (especially Sal Paradise). But, just as Sal constantly urges others to explain the meaning of *IT*, we urge Kerouac and his characters to explain the meaning we are all searching for. We are, however, confronted by *IT* with every word we read. As Steve Wilson acknowledges, Dean has discovered “The essence of human existence: to be in the moment and living without the need for what John Keats called ‘reaching irritably after facts and reason’” (3). However, Dean cannot put *IT* into words because *IT* means something different for everyone. Attempting to convey the meaning of *IT* to his readers, Kerouac cannot help make his novel autobiographical. It has become human nature to try to access reality through fiction, but in a fragmented society such as ours why bother making up conventional stories when life itself constantly makes us question the nature of our own existence? It should be the Author’s job to guide us, as Dean and others guide Sal, into the otherness of conventional existence. He cannot show us the way, though, we must travel with open minds and open hearts to the eye of the storm to extrapolate our own meaning from his words—it is only his job to begin the process:

Time stops. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his belly bottom strain, remembrances of ideas, rehashes of old blowings. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but *IT*... (207-208).

So, that other plane I was talking about is the essence of *On the Road*. T.S. Eliot once said that any good text has universal meaning—one meaning. *On the Road*, however, “…operates on many levels,” as Nicosia has stated. On one level, we are faced with Sal’s (Kerouac’s) quest for a pure existence; however, on another level we are constantly confronted by our own desire to find meaning in the text. Although Kerouac has been blasted by critics for the intimate literary devices he employs in *On the Road* it is, in fact, the reality of the novel that gives readers like myself hope in our journey to find *IT*—*IT* is the hope of a better day, the hope of a purer existence, the hope for a day when we are all accepted as humans not outcasts—it happened once why can’t it again?

Iuggchytid tr64 yu875 ruigffgghjk\/.\mbm—I wonder if Old Jack ever punished himself like this—beating his head on his keys like a madman waiting for the right words to finally come out? Of course he didn’t! On that note, there is one more thing we should probably take a
look at while we are on the subject of Jack Kerouac and his writing...

In part, the meaning derived from *On the Road* serves as a testament (even a blueprint) for Kerouac's generation; however, the prose style he implements to construct his novel is also a direct defiance to established literary norms that he and the rest of the Beats sought to breakdown. Like many "writers" I constantly find myself searching for words and phrases that I can put together to articulate my thoughts and it is evident here how frustrating that process can become. Kerouac, on the other hand, subscribed to and created a new form of prose style he called "spontaneous prose" which, by looking at *On the Road*, conveys in itself the sense of authenticity Sal Paradise (Kerouac) sought to discover. With "spontaneous prose," "[Kerouac] calls for a highly personal and confessional narrative," according to Carl D. Malmgren, "one scribbled down without correction and at a high speed in a quest for spontaneity and, consequently, authenticity: 'Never afterthink to 'improve' or defray impressions, as the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind'" (61). What Kerouac's "spontaneous prose" brings to the literary table is the sense of truth that most readers long for when reading any narrative or poem. Whether it is *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, or *Mexico City Blues* Kerouac's use of "spontaneous prose" allows him to connect to his readers on a level of honesty and authenticity—to distance himself from his readers would be to distance them from something he saw as being vital to a pure existence. As Allen Ginsberg has stated:

> That was Kerouac’s great discovery in *On the Road*. The kinds of things that he and Neal Cassady were talking about he finally discovered were the subject matter for what he wanted to write down. That meant, at that minute, a complete revision of what literature was supposed to be. (qtd. in George 204)

Or, in Kerouac’s own words:

> I was originating (without knowing it, you say?) a new way of writing about life, no fiction, no craft, no revising afterthoughts, all of it innocent go-ahead confession, the discipline of making the mind the slave of the tongue with no chance to lie or elaborate. (qtd. in Malmgren 61)

The New Critics of the 1950s had a proverbial field day with Kerouac's new creation. "Spontaneous prose" coupled with the radical material Kerouac was writing about struck the main nerve of everything they thought literature was supposed to be; and just like with the sociology of the Beats, they zoned in on the evident rather than the real. In other words, to debunk the messages Kerouac was attempting to send to his readers, critics focused on his writing style calling it "unintelligent" and "sloppy." Exactly! At some points, Kerouac’s material does seem unintelligent and sloppy—SO IS LIFE. Kerouac was only one member of the Beat Generation, albeit a key member, but one member at that. Collectively they attempted to convey to their readers every aspect of life—the madness and the chaos they represent in their writing is the same madness and chaos we all experience in our own lives. What better way to represent humans than by writing in a language they can understand and relate to?

Well...I have gone too far and said too little. So, let’s take a break. Breathe in breathe out, and when you are ready follow me because we have much ground to cover. Ready? Let’s get started.

*On the Road*, with little doubt, was the proverbial bible for a generation; likewise, the Beat Generation themselves laid the groundwork for the next generation of disgruntled youths—
As Ann Charters has noticed, “As the 1960s progressed, the number of dissident writers and small press publishers swelled in the development of an American ‘counterculture.’ In this time of disruptive social changes, the complacency of the 1950s evaporated as the civil rights movement took on a new militancy in the South, the resistance to war in Southeast Asia grew when United States troops were sent to Vietnam, students protested adult authority on college campuses across the nation, LSD became more readily available than peyote as a ‘consciousness expander,’ and rock music developed as an art form from earlier folk roots and black rhythm and blues” (xxxiv). Where the Beats left off, a new generation of discontent youths took over the gospel and created their own counterculture. Those in sync with Beat ethos admired their sense of brotherhood, the justification of authenticity, and understanding of experience; however, more and more of the “new generation” simply adopted the Beat lifestyle—dabbling in drugs, strange religions, and the idea of free love.

Several participants of the original Beat movement (including several poets from the San Francisco Renaissance and even Allen Ginsberg) embraced this new generation of Beats, but many more, most notably Jack Kerouac, were “...shocked and repelled by the blatancy of those who carried the movement forward” (George 217). In an interview with Kerouac himself, Charles Jarvis noted, “[Kerouac] had no use for them, said they were assuming a stature they had not earned, said they were playacting, said they hadn’t produced any real literature and never would” (qtd. in George 217). The hippies, albeit tactical Beat impersonators, created their own vision of the world they lived in—a vision directly taken from the Beats. They were not living in post-World War II America anymore, though; they were a generation faced with their own issues. They were, however, searching for the same ideal society the Beats strove for one generation prior. The Beats may have disliked them, or even rejected them, but the influence they had on the hippies is undeniable.

Ironically, Ken Kesey (author of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Sometimes A Great Notion) emerged as one of many spokesmen for the hippie counterculture. “Kesey was referred to as a kind of ‘hipster Christ,’ a ‘modern mystic,’ after the model of Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs” (Wolfe 153). Contrary to his Beat counterparts, however, during the 60s Kesey gave up writing for the same reasons the Beats sought to break through traditional literary forms. “‘Writers,’ he told a reporter, ‘are trapped by artificial rules. We are trapped in syntax. We are ruled by an imaginary teacher with a red ball-point pen who will brand us with an A-minus for the slightest infraction of the rules’” (Wolfe 153). Maybe Jack was right? Then again, maybe Kesey gave up writing because, unlike Kerouac, he was unable to articulate his vision based on his fear of its rejection? Either way, Kesey abandoned writing to embark upon a journey through the depths of perception to arrive at a true understanding of the world.

Before we get into how Kesey fits into the grand scheme of things as I see it, we should acknowledge those who chronicled his journey—namely Tom Wolfe—because just as Kesey broke out of social norms with his life, Tom Wolfe broke out of conventional forms by blending journalism and fiction. A generation before Tom Wolfe published The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, social scientists and reporters alike portrayed the Beat Generation in all their superficial glory—focusing on their habits and lifestyle and completely ignoring their philosophies: “Titillated by their reports,” according to George and Starr, “‘squares’ crammed into buses offering tours of the bohemian sections. Motion picture and television producers moved quickly to capitalize on public interest in the beatniks” (209-210). That is the way it usually works in our society—sad isn’t it? History (and journalistic accounts), you see, rarely tell the complete story. Headline:
Although these are made-up headlines, the point is this: whenever the public is faced with "historical" events they should take them with a grain of salt. More times than not it is either the journalist's feeble attempt to convey information or the historian's attempt to inform the reader of what happened at a given time in history. In both cases, the writer simply gives an overview of the facts: the historian does not always know what it was like to experience the Vietnam era; and likewise, in his constant struggle for objectivity, the journalist leaves out the human side of the story and in doing so disregards the emotion of those involved in a given situation. "Confronted by subjects the significance of which lay in their experience, in their consciousness," according to John Hellman, "many journalists [during the 1960s] found that conventional reporting only made the subjects seem stranger" (3). Among others (Hunter S. Thompson, Truman Capote, and Norman Mailer), Tom Wolfe recognized the need for a journalism that could capture the attitudes and essence of his subjects, and yet, still present facts in a journalistic nature. As Wolfe himself has noted:

> The best thing is to have both—to have both someone who will bring you bigger and more exciting chunks of the outside world plus a unique sensibility, or rather a unique way of looking at the world, a unique fantasy, even, to use the way Freud explains it, a unique emotional reality of his own that somehow echoes or vibrates with the emotional states of the reader. So that you get both the external reality and the subjective reality. (qtd. in Hellman 102)

With the New Journalism, Tom Wolfe does several things; however, most notable here is the ironic correlation between his style of writing and that which Jack Kerouac called "spontaneous prose." Eager to present facts in a way that captures the essence of his subjects, Wolfe employs the language and mannerisms of his subjects (much like Kerouac did in *On the Road*) to not only present, but to explain, the ethos of a new American counterculture. "Wolfe," as noted by Alfred Kazin, "never suggests any lack of truth or any sacrifice of reality. Instead, he insists, and rightly so, that the New Journalism adds to the depth of reality and truth, that literary devices such as symbolism, dialogue, experimentation in narration, imagination in development, etc. complement the facts by adding new dimensions of reality, providing the reader with an entry into the situation being recounted" (230n.). Sound familiar? It should. Wolfe, for the same reasons as Kerouac, blends fact and fiction to adequately allow the reader to grasp the sense of experience both authors are writing about.

That brings us back to Kesey (quickly but still effectively). In a round-about kind of way, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is a novel that actively confronts everything *On the Road* did a generation before. Seemingly, the only difference between the two is the style and point of view from which the experience is conveyed—where Kerouac used his own life to enlighten his readers, Wolfe uses the lives of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters (both are dually effective). Ironically, Wolfe as well as the Pranksters find themselves on the fringes of yet another change in the social order of America—a change not even the Beats could foresee.

> Slipping and sliding down to North Beach, the fabled North Beach, the old fatherland bohemia of the West Coast, always full of Big Daddy So-and-so and Costee Plusee and long-haired little Wasp and Jewish buds balling spade cats—
and now North Beach was dying. North Beach was nothing but tit shows. In the famous Beat Generation HQ, the City Lights Bookstore, Shig Murao, the Nipponese panjandrum of the place, sat glowering with his beard hanging down like those strands of furze and fern in an architect’s drawing, drooping over the volumes of Kahlil Gibran by the cash register while Professional Budget Finance Dentists here for the convention browsed in search of the beatniks between the tit shows. (9)

Slowly, as mainstream America infiltrated the heartland of the revolution, hippies and Beats alike were forced to go even Further to find that pure existence both groups sought for. “What I still find fascinating about the enduring popularity of ‘on the bus’ and so many other elements of The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,” lamented Wolfe in a 1993 interview, “is the fact, as far as the Pranksters were concerned, they did not think of themselves as beginning an era: as far as they were concerned, their grand experiment was over” (qtd. in Reilly 227). Like Sal Paradise’s epic journeys across America, however, the Pranksters’ Further trip is the embodiment of everyone’s search for something beyond their reality— it is everlasting and undying. The unifying experiences of Kesey and Wolfe pull the novel together to articulate what it means to live Now. “Being alive to the moment is integrally related to Kesey’s particular understanding of art,” according to A. Carl Bredahl, “For him art is a way of getting totally into the now, a world where one experiences an event at exactly the same time it is occurring: ‘The whole other world that LSD opened your mind to existed only in the moment itself—Now—and any attempt to plan, compose, orchestrate, write a script, only locked you out of the moment, back in the world of conditioning and training where the brain was a reducing valve.’” (74).

“And you don’t even know, bub...with these drugs your perception is altered enough that you find yourself looking out of completely strange eyeholes. All of us have a great deal of our minds locked shut. We’re shut off from our own world. And these drugs seem to be the key to open these locked doors.” –Aldous Huxley (1954), quoted from The Doors of Perception

For the Pranksters, LSD and other mind-altering drugs served as their doorway to another plane of existence—one where the world appeared as it was in all its beauty and madness. Their world, however, is not a world that an objective journalist could whole-heartedly engage in; so, in his writing of The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, Tom Wolfe merely presents himself as a medium by which his reader can travel through to experience the same state of consciousness as the Pranksters. “Wolfe’s concern,” according to Chris Anderson, “is not only with the special quality of the Prankster’s experience but with the rhetorical problem of trying to communicate that experience” (11-12). Although they embark upon the same type of journey that we read about in On the Road, the Pranksters are unable to reach the same understanding of the world as Sal and Dean had simply because the world has commercialized and ripped away the true meaning behind the underground movements they saw authenticity in. For the Pranksters, the only way to reach the other plane of existence is through the experience of LSD:

But don’t you see?—the visual stuff was just the décor of LSD. In fact, you might go through the whole experience without any true hallucination. The whole thing was...the experience...this certain indescribable feeling...Indescribable, because words can only jog the memory, and if there is no memory of...The experience of the barrier between the subjective and the objective, the personal and the impersonal, the I and the not-I disappearing...that feeling!... (45)
The very fact that Wolfe cannot explain the Prankster phenomenon is what draws readers into their own Movie (as Kesey might have called it). We can all read books, we can all derive meaning from books, but what does it mean to experience a book? Can we do so? Can words on a page elicit real emotions and the urge to change one's self? YES! In both On the Road and The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test it is the reality that there is something more to be experienced that makes the novels a testament to the human soul. Even though, as Chris Anderson proclaims, "...Wolfe ultimately cannot describe the subjects he takes up, for all the reasons that his characters cannot describe their experience. If the experience is truly ineffable, it ultimately resists even Wolfe's attempts to describe it. ...even if he did succeed in describing these subjects, that success would in itself label him as an outsider: since the experience of the pranksters...is fundamentally nonverbal and even antiverbal, the journalist is by definition—by virtue of the fact that he is writing a book, in whatever form, at whatever level of sympathy and engagement—an outsider, someone who is not on the bus...." we all still get a sense of the experience through our own individual readings—we all get "on the bus" when we engage ourselves as, not readers, but experimenters of life.

Now, we have reached the end: Sal and Dean have reached the end of the road, the bus is parked, and Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Kerouac can tell us no more. I apologize for the abrupt ending, but that is the way things tend to work. I am not capable of telling anyone what to think of the connections I have made here; nor can I expect anyone to see things the way I see them. I am just one person. However, I believe I have captured the essence of what it means to be an outcast and a roaming soul constantly searching for more than what is given to me. Things began with the Beat Generation: a small tight-knit group of artists who were able to articulate their views of the world through their art. Moving from post-World War II America into Vietnam and the Cold War presented the youth of America with a whole new set of hurdles to jump over. Our world has been collapsing around us, and gradually we are losing our souls and identities because a few people have tried to define us based on what they stand for. Why do you think I have come to connect with the authors I have discussed here? Like no generation since the hippies, my generation is falling prey to everything Kerouac, Kesey, and Wolfe rebelled against in their lives and literature. Now, it is my turn to rebel. The paths of brilliant generations that have preceded us have been laid—we just have to uncover them. That is what I have attempted to do here even though it has been a daunting task putting my experiences to paper—at some points I rambled and could not totally explain what I was thinking—but that is the point. Anyone who reads this will have to forage through their own forests to find the path that has been constructed for them just as I have done. I assure you, though, IT is out there! Be courageous enough to look for it.

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**About Eric V. Patterson**

Eric Patterson graduated in 2002 from Saginaw Valley State University where he earned a bachelor's degree in English. Eric's major focus has been on the cultural and literary impact the writer's of the Beat Generation had on America. As a new graduate, he presented his paper entitled *Rebirth of the Author in Jack Kerouac's On the Road* at the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities. Eric is currently planning a return to the classroom to pursue a Master's Degree in American Studies. Until then, he continues to read and write.
about the Beats and those they have influenced.

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