"The Unsettlers":
Ken Kesey, the Merry Pranksters, and the Myth of the Frontier
in the American Counterculture

by

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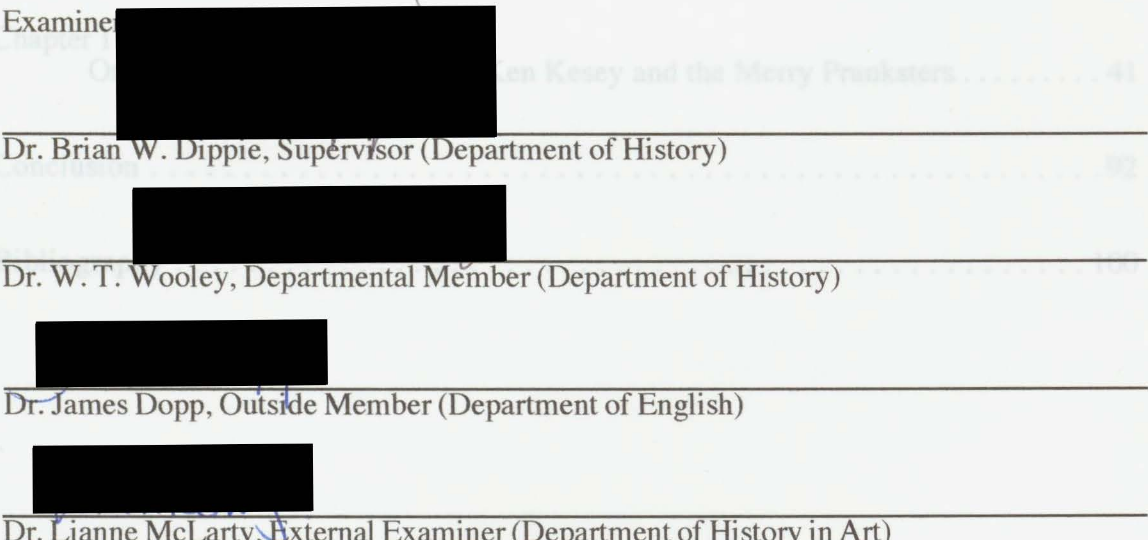
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the intersecting roles of the American Myth of the Frontier and of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the counterculture of 1960s America to make two connected arguments. Firstly, it argues generally that the Frontier Myth accounts significantly for the peculiar character and trajectory of the American counterculture. Secondly, it argues specifically that the experiments of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters from the early- to mid-1960s comprised a primary instance of the means by which the American counterculture creatively adapted the Myth of the Frontier to its purposes. Analyzing the Pranksters within the context of the Frontier Myth provides us with a convincing, if incomplete, explanation for why the American counterculture seemed to emerge, flourish and self-destruct so dramatically within such a short period of time.



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It is my good fortune to be married to a fine historian who was involved in every stage of my work. My wife Jill read, re-read and edited each draft I wrote and provided invaluable advice and insight. Without her generosity and faith in me, I could never have written this thesis.

Look out, Mama, there's a white boat comin' up the river
With a big red beacon, and a flag, and a man on the rail
I think you'd better call John,
'Cause it don't look like they're here to deliver the mail
And it's less than a mile away
I hope they didn't come to stay
It's got numbers on the side and a gun
And it's makin' big waves.

Daddy's gone, my brother's out hunting in the mountains
Big John's been drinking since the river took Emmy-Lou
So the Powers That Be left me here to do the thinkin'
And I just turned twenty-two
I was wonderin' what to do
And the closer they got,
The more those feelings grew.

Daddy's rifle in my hand felt reassurin'
He told me, Red means run, son, numbers add up to nothin'
But when the first shot hit the docks I saw it comin'
Raised my rifle to my eye
Never stopped to wonder why.
Then I saw black,
And my face flashed in the sky.

Shelter me from the powder and the finger
Cover me with the thought that pulled the trigger
Think of me as one you'd never figured
Would fade away so young
With so much left undone
Remember me to my love,
I know I'll miss her.

-Neil Young, "Powderfinger," from the album *Rust Never Sleeps* (Reprise, 1979)

Introduction:

Between Woodstock and Altamont:
The Heart of Darkness in the American Counterculture

We are a violent people with a violent history, and the instinct for violence has seeped into the bloodstream of our national life.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1968)[1]

Blood will be born in the birth of a nation
Blood is the rose of mysterious union
There's blood in the streets, it's up to my ankles
Blood in the streets, it's up to my knee
Blood in the streets in the town of Chicago
Blood on the rise, it's following me

The Doors, "Peace Frog" (1970)

This thesis examines the intersecting roles of the American Myth of the Frontier and of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in the counterculture of 1960s America to argue generally that this Myth accounts significantly for the peculiar character and trajectory of the American counterculture, and specifically that the experiments of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters in the early- to mid-1960s comprise a primary instance of the means by which the counterculture in the United States creatively adapted the Myth of the Frontier to its purposes. Particular attention is paid to the influence of the Frontier Myth on the formation and self-definition of the Pranksters, for it is my contention that analyzing the Pranksters within this context provides us with a convincing, if incomplete, explanation for why the American counterculture seemed to emerge, flourish and self-destruct so dramatically within such a short period of time.

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[1]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "America 1968: The Politics of Violence," *Harper's*, June 1968, quoted in David Steigerwald, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 8.

To explain the "end" of something we must start at the "beginning." These two terms are set off with quotation marks, of course, to underline the persistent problems of periodization and closure that face the historian. At the outset of any historical analysis, the historian may be sure of two things: over any given span of time, his or her subject will exhibit continuity and it will exhibit change. This is not, however, a very reassuring certainty. The historian's task, then, is to identify which changes and which continuities are significant, and why, and thereby to limit the scope of the study. This task is always somewhat arbitrary, for continuities are never completely static and changes are never absolute; in the "real world" events never have discrete beginnings and endings. Nevertheless, the historian must begin somewhere and end somewhere else. However some academic historians may object, we are ultimately tellers of stories about the past, but because the sources of our stories are events that have already transpired, rather than our imaginations, we must work from the inside out, starting from the event or events we seek to explain and moving outward to find the rest of the story: to identify the significant moments of which we can reasonably say, "this began here" or "this ended here." Yet we must always keep in mind that what we mark as a "beginning" may be another story's "ending"; this study's "turning point" or "watershed" might with equal validity be that study's "stasis." Like photographers, historians "frame" the objects of their studies, establishing boundaries in the representation where there were none in the objects represented, setting off what belongs in the photograph from what does not. The photographer might change the angle, the focus, or the degree of magnification, but the "whole picture" — "reality" — always includes what lies beyond the frame of the photograph.

In this study, the "picture" we are looking at is the youthful counterculture of the mid- to late-1960s — the self-identified "Woodstock Generation" that saw its own destruction in the horrors of the 1969 Rolling Stones concert at the Altamont speedway, in

the murderous fantasies of the Manson Family, and in the increasingly violent dreams of revolution that came to nought at the end of the decade. The "story" that remains to be told is of the rise and fall of this particular social phenomenon. In the scope of this thesis, however, we find the "frame" too limited to contain even this picture without losing crucial detail and clarity, so we must zoom in to a part of it, and hope that by studying the part we might see a bit more clearly the whole. To begin to account for the emergence, growth and disintegration of the counterculture, this thesis focuses on the interplay between a particular group of people — Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters — and a particular corpus of American thought — which we can think of as the Myth of the Frontier.

There was no single "American counterculture of the 1960s" but, rather, an amorphous and multifarious collection of individuals and groups who shared little more than the conviction that American society desperately needed fundamental change. That the decade was unique in this respect, and that a vast and more or less unified "counterculture" or "movement" existed by the end of the 1960s, are only partly illusions. Social unrest was hardly unique to this decade, and whatever else the "counterculture" may have been, it was never unified, though as the decade wore on, the lines that separated the political activism of the civil rights and antiwar movements from the drop-out, drugs-and-rock music subculture became increasingly blurred. What *was* unique about the 1960s, and the factor that lent the appearance of unity — this blurring of lines — to these movements, was the demographic bulge of the post-World War II baby boom.

The sheer demographic impact of this generation of children born after World War II, and the conditions under which it was reared, had profound effects on American society throughout the post-war era, but especially on the development of the counterculture as the first of the Baby Boomers came of age in the 1960s. The birth rate surged following the war, and sustained an unprecedented high level for roughly the next twenty years. Canadian historian Doug Owram writes that "the changing numbers of births, both relative

and absolute, created the force of the generation, as the baby-boomers came to overshadow the smaller generations that preceded and succeeded them."[2] At the same time, American society was becoming more affluent. During the 1950s "the gross national product doubled . . . , inflation remained low, and American consumption soared."[3] The twinned phenomena of the surging economy and birth rate had two important results. First, the disproportionate size of the Baby Boom generation meant that a significant portion of this consumption was directed toward its needs and desires; and second, more disposable income to spend on leisure activities (as well as technological developments) meant that more of the dollars that Americans earned were going — both directly and through advertising — to the producers of mass culture than ever before.[4]

The influence of the mass media and its by-products on the later development and character of a generational revolt in the 1960s was enormous. This was the first generation of children to grow up watching television, and this new medium, along with movies, comic books, rock music, and the advertising which punctuated it all, shaped the generation's expectations and understanding of the world.[5] As historian David Steigerwald notes, the "deluge of advertising" aimed directly at the young

> inflated the cultural importance of youth in general. This development, in turn, brought the natural process of youthful self-assertion into public life and indeed made a commodity out of it. Youth culture took on the character

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[2]Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby-Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996), x; Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University, 1995), 21; see also Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1988), esp. Chapters 6 and 9.

[3]Anderson, *The Movement*, 22.

[4]Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 247-48.

[5]Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 250.

> of a national, very public, generational conflict in part because it had become commercialized.[6]

The significance of this observation is that it leads Steigerwald to conclude that other attempts to explain the counterculture have been misleading precisely because of their uncritical reliance on the concepts of "youthful alienation" and a "generation gap." As advertisers targeted youth more and more as consumers, they appealed to the adolescents' sense of distinction from their elders by invoking the images of disaffected "anti-heroes" such as James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Elvis Presley.[7] By the beginning of the 1960s "alienation" had become more of a style than a mental condition.

> The weight of the sociological evidence suggests that the generation gap depended on the extent to which a particular child was enmeshed in mass culture. Middle-class children, whose relatively comfortable upbringings included massive doses of television and popular music, were far more likely to suffer from "alienation" than were working-class kids.[8]

Middle-class children, many of whose parents had only recently achieved middle-class status, were the ones most likely to enter college during the 1960s. Contrary to expectations, then, middle-class college students were more likely than any other group to feel alienated from the culture in which they lived, and they were also, somewhat paradoxically, the group which had imbibed the messages of the mass media most fully. By the end of the decade, the United States had "more college students than farmers, construction workers, miners, or transportation workers,"[9] and they were all products of post-war American culture.

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[6]Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 248.

[7]Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 248.

[8]Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 250.

[9]Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 133-34.

In the 1960s, two broad streams of "countercultural" activity are apparent. One was the "counterculture" proper — those mostly young people who, feeling alienated from mainstream American culture, turned to music, art and literature, and drug use; did not participate in politics; and generally sloughed off the constraints of conventional American values and mores. The other stream was the range of political activism that originated primarily in the civil rights movement and carried on through the New Left and antiwar activism. Neither originated in this decade, and at the start of the sixties they had very little in common. With the coming of age of the baby boomers, however, the ranks of both swelled. The once-tiny counterculture of the Beats — the post-World War Two bohemian subculture characterized by Bebop jazz and the free-form poetry and novels of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs — turned to LSD and rock and roll and became hippies, while political activism became increasingly campus-based and dominated by youth. Continuing disillusionment with American society on both sides led to a merging of the two streams from about mid-decade. Political activists grew their hair long, took drugs and talked about alienation while hippies became increasingly political. Thus, when I speak of the counterculture in the 1960s, I refer to this changing movement dominated by youth, and in this thesis I focus primarily on the apolitical stream that flowed from the Beats of the 1950s. The counterculture as a whole never claimed the adherence of more than a large minority of the baby boom generation, but its impact on popular culture and politics was such that it often seems to have been pervasive. Perhaps it is this very illusion that makes the counterculture's development so fascinating, but the continuing effects of the 1960s' upheavals in American society suggest the need to probe beyond the illusion.

Three trends stand out as characteristic of the counterculture's evolution through the decade, and therefore most in need of explanation. The most general and obvious of these (and one that encompasses the others) concerns the counterculture's dramatic rise to

national prominence in a few short years and its apparent collapse at the end of the decade. As late as 1964, the media and public were content to assume that the mass of the baby boom generation were destined to emerge from their youth as industrious and contented American citizens, yet a scant three years later, this same mass appeared to the same observers to be a generation in revolt — a vision reinforced by the national turmoil that carried through the remainder of the 1960s. The other two trends appear within this broader phenomenon. One was the incremental breakdown of distinctions between the socio-political and the cultural aspects of the counterculture as the new left, civil rights and anti-war movements merged with the counterculture proper — those who had dropped entirely out of mainstream society, choosing to base their lives on listening to and playing rock music and experimenting with drugs and communal living. Equally significant was the concurrent trend toward violence, particularly in the arena of political activism. These problems have occupied all scholars who have studied the counterculture, but no one has emerged with a fully satisfactory explanation.

Only recently have historians begun seriously to consider American society and culture in the 1960s in its totality. A perusal of any recent bibliography will yield scores of scholarly works on the political history of the era, from presidential biographies and works on the Vietnam War to chronicles of the New Left and civil rights movements. Direct treatments of the youth culture of the 1960s, however, have for the most part been relegated to the works of non-academics, journalists or one-time participants, and most of these tend to be either wide-eyed and uncritical eulogies of a magical time, or equally unbalanced indictments of the counterculture as an irresponsible and hedonistic movement.[10] Of the general historical works on the period, four stand out as

[10] A typical recent work is Joel Selvin's *Summer of Love: The Inside Story of LSD, Rock & Roll, Free Love and High Times in the Wild West* (New York: Plume, 1995), which chronicles the underground cultural scene of the San Francisco Bay area from 1965 through to the fabled Summer of Love of 1967. Selvin, a San Francisco pop music critic, focuses mainly on musicians and other cultural

representative of the range of approaches and current standard of scholarship. Two of these, Allen J. Matusow's *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (1984) and David Steigerwald's *The Sixties and the End of Modern America* (1995), are not centrally concerned with the counterculture itself, but their emphasis on explaining the decline of American liberalism in the post-World War II era positions the sixties as the crucial moment in this transformation, wherein the counterculture figures as a prominent though not a determining factor. Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987) and Terry H. Anderson's *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (1995), on the other hand, focus on the counterculture

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luminaries; thus *Summer of Love* is a treasure trove of counterculture trivia, but it is devoid of analysis or assessment. Peter Collier and David Horowitz, authors of *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties* (New York: Free Press, 1996), were both early participants in the New Left who have since become proud members of the neoconservative "counterculture" of the 1990s; their book is ostensibly a serious appraisal of the movement, but in reality they choose particularly damning aspects of the counterculture (such as the sexual immorality of the Weathermen) to account for America's problems in the 1970s and 1980s. Works such as these only reinforce the notion that the cultural side of the counterculture — and the more extreme aspects of the political side — are not worthy of more than passing notice by serious scholars. Nonetheless, significant academic studies of the counterculture do exist, particularly in the fields of sociology, musicology and cultural studies. These works concentrate, however, on contemporary issues or theoretical discussions, reading back from the present the developments of the 1960s to illuminate contemporary concerns, or using those developments to demonstrate a particular theoretical approach. Both tendencies appear, for example, in the work of American cultural studies theorist Lawrence Grossberg. His book, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), in discussing cultural conservatism in the 1980s and '90s, harkens back to the development of a "rock formation" in the 1960s to show the ways that political struggles are enacted on the ground of popular culture forms. On its own terms, Grossberg's analysis is illuminating and thoughtful, but it is historically shallow; the actual historical experiences of Americans in the 1960s are all but absent. Sheila Whiteley's *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counterculture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), on the other hand, looks specifically at progressive (or "acid") rock in the late sixties to analyze its relationship to the hallucinogenic experience of LSD, but her musicological analysis is primarily internal to the musical examples and mental experiences of their audience; she does not treat broader historical problems of the era, nor does she restrict her study to a specific nation or locale. Morris Dickstein's outstanding *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) focuses mainly on a critical analysis of the period's literature and popular music. It does step further outside the bounds of its immediate subject matter, but historical events here serve to illuminate the analysis of literature, rather than vice versa. Historians ought not to ignore these works, and others like them, for they have much to offer in terms of theoretical approaches as well as substantive arguments, but they are insufficient in themselves as historical analyses.

itself, and address directly the questions already raised concerning the nature of the movement's evolution.

Gitlin's book is one of the best discussions of the rise and fall of the counterculture in the sixties. As a founding participant in the New Left organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), he chose a personal starting point: his object in writing the book is to assess the movement of which he was a part and to try to explain its development within the broader historical context of the decade. Because of this background, Gitlin is not methodologically self-conscious, and his analysis of events is rather inchoate and inconclusive. Nevertheless, through his forceful intelligence and comprehensive research beyond the bounds of his remembered experience, Gitlin manages to craft a powerful narrative of the counterculture.

Rather than argue for a specific thesis to explain the eventual disillusionment and dissipation of the movement, Gitlin simply lets the shape of the narrative illuminate its meaning by tracing causes and effects chronologically. In this way, as he follows the New Left through the successive crises of the sixties — acting and reacting against "the establishment" in its various incarnations — he can account for decisions taken or deferred, the divergent paths of different groups at crucial moments, and the adoption of certain tactics of opposition in preference to others. Gitlin's narrative approach to the problem falls short, however, as even he is aware, when he comes to discuss the rise of increasingly violent forms of protest, especially the emergence of the terrorist collective Weatherman from within the ranks of SDS. He suggests that the seeds of the movement's degeneration were present from the beginning of the New Left, pointing to such contradictions as relatively affluent middle-class university students spearheading a revolt against their own society in the name of the oppressed; and the existence and cultivation of a native anti-intellectual hostility to ideology within a movement calling for revolution and claiming to be politically salient. Reacting to the intransigence of the U.S. government,

especially regarding the war in Vietnam by the late sixties, the movement kept upping the ante until revolution seemed inevitable. The progressive blurring of lines between the utopian hippie subculture and the activist movement reinforced this conclusion. "The revolutionary mood," Gitlin writes, "had been fueled by the blindingly bright illusion that human history was beginning afresh because a graced generation had willed it so."[11] But Gitlin's dismay at the turn the movement was taking and at his continuing inability to explain it is palpable. The romance of revolution attracted young activists — posters of Che Guevara hanging in their dorm rooms — but the actual turn to violence took many within the movement by surprise. A "missing link" must exist, Gitlin suggests:

> How exactly does one get from murky theory about the world revolution to blasting caps and roofing nails? Not just through wrongheaded political analysis. Not just by mistake, or the malignant habit of abstraction, or hermetic self-enclosure. . . . Nor can individual biographies account for the way revolutionaries can shade into nihilism. There is something not quite explained by the notion of forcing an impossible revolution. For even if one is willing to sever means from ends, it is not easy to forget the practical fact that the State possesses the vast majority of the guns. The war had kindled a loathing for "Amerikkka," but the Weathermen were traveling to the far reaches of loathing. Their immensely bad ideas and dreadful tactics must have had a root in some larger upheaval of the movement's collective psyche. Charles Manson, . . . the Weathermen as vandals and scourges — we have stumbled into the realm of the demonic.[12]

Gitlin has reached to the heart of the problem, but he never quite grasps a solution. The movement seemed, on the one hand, to follow an inexorable logic in pursuing its political aims, but on the other hand, Gitlin remains convinced, some alternative must have existed. He sees *something* spurious in the logic, something irrational — indeed "demonic" — but cannot discern what it was.

Gitlin's frank admission that the movement had entangled itself in revolutionary rhetoric — rhetoric that led to violence, despite the qualms of many activists — leaves him

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[11]Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 408.

[12]Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 402-3.

unable finally to account for this turn, but at least he has laid out the truth of the matter. In his exhaustively researched narrative history *The Movement and the Sixties*, historian Terry Anderson tries to solve this problem by arguing for a "Rhetorical Revolution." Drawing on a combination of establishment and underground sources, he takes issue with Allen Matusow's statement that by 1968 the "goal of the movement became the seizure of power,"[13] claiming that "the radicals called for revolution — but that was all." In short, the revolutionary rhetoric and talk of violence was intended to garner attention rather than to incite riots. To demonstrate this, he points to the fact that in "virtually every student-police confrontation throughout the sixties," the student protesters never "picked up guns and shot at the cops":

> Jerry Rubin might have boasted during the March on the Pentagon that "crazy revolutionaries . . . are ready to burn the whole motherfucker down," but they never poured on the gas and lit the match. This was a Rhetorical Revolution, something most journalists and their middle-class readers did not seem to understand.[14]

Movement insiders, of course, knew that they weren't *really* advocating violence, Anderson claims. But what, then? It is true that the potential for demonstrations to turn to open revolt was exaggerated in the media and in the minds of many mainstream Americans, and it is also true that groups such as Rubin's Yippies were fond of making outrageous and bizarre threats and statements merely to aggravate the straights and titillate the media. But Todd Gitlin's obvious discomfort (as a prominent movement insider who still believes that the movement had something to offer) with this aspect of the counterculture does not sit well with Anderson's explanation. If the movement was truly enacting a "Rhetorical Revolution," surely activists would have reacted with outright condemnation to a faction that took the rhetoric seriously. And if they were not *really* advocating violence, what

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[13]Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 335.

[14]Anderson, *The Movement*, 201-2.

exactly *were* they advocating? The fact that activists like Gitlin were sensible enough not to follow through on their own rhetoric may have prevented bloodshed, but it only heightened the tension in their own psyches. "Anxiety and despair were most of what I knew," Gitlin recalls. "My world had exploded, ten years of the movement; I had lost the ground I walked on."[15]

The cause of Gitlin's anxiety was rooted in earlier developments in the American counterculture. The overarching argument of this thesis is that the American Myth of the Frontier governed the American counterculture's development through the 1960s to such an extent that its impact significantly accounts for the ultimate turn towards violence and escapism and away from concrete ideological programs, as well as distinguishing the American counterculture from contemporaneous youth movements in other nations. Many of the sociopolitical, economic, cultural and demographic factors that contributed to the emergence of a youthful counterculture existed and played out in other Western countries during the decade, but the Myth of the Frontier largely explains the peculiar character of the American strain. As I mentioned earlier, the scope of this thesis permits only a focused examination of a limited part of the counterculture; Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters provide an appropriate subject, for their activities clearly demonstrate the genesis of this confluence of the Myth of the Frontier and the 1960s counterculture.

Other authors have overlooked the role of America's frontier mythology in shaping the counterculture's development through the 1960s. From the earliest colonial settlements of Puritan New England, Americans have drawn from their experiences of contact with the inhospitable New World and its aboriginal inhabitants, and the succession of westward expansions of their settlements and institutions, for stories and patterns to serve as guides to behaviour and interpretations of what it is to be American. As these stories were told

[15]Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 408.

and retold and modified, certain features of them became standardized, their structure, content, and lessons conventionalized, until they constituted a more or less coherent set of symbols and metaphors that would serve as a mythological guide to right action in the world. By the 1960s, Americans' historical experience of expansion into "uninhabited" tracts of American geography was long past, but this frontier mythology had become a pervasive and dominant aspect of American art forms and public discourse. Its ideological imperatives wielded enduring influence in American society, from the level of personal attitudes and decisions to the formation of public policy at the highest levels of government.

The Baby Boom generation grew up in the "Golden Age" of the Western in popular culture — roughly 1948-1970 — during which Hollywood produced literally hundreds of feature films and television programs in the genre. "During the last half of the fifties," Terry Anderson notes, "parents bought almost $300 million worth of toy guns, boots, chaps, lassos branded by the likes of Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Wyatt Earp, and the Cisco Kid. The Davy Crockett television series alone produced a market of a million coonskin hats."[16] The enormous popularity of the Western — which represented an American national mythology as well as simply a genre — during this period alone would have guaranteed a dramatic impact on this generation's values and ideas, but the novelist Ken Kesey integrated the Myth of the Frontier into a unique vision that became the standard countercultural style of the late-1960s. Kesey, with the Merry Pranksters, was the single most significant stylistic innovator of the 1960s counterculture. By studying the activities of Kesey and the Pranksters between roughly 1962 and 1966, I will show how the Myth of the Frontier was fused, or *articulated*, along with other diverse influences and characteristics, into this "new" way of life. From this linkage we learn that the counterculture was not entirely original, even as this particular articulation was new; and

[16]Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993 [1992]), 347-49; Anderson, *The Movement*, 22.

that this articulation allowed radicals who were fundamentally opposed to certain aspects of American society to model their defiance on the defining American Myth. The Frontier Myth allowed them to oppose American culture while presenting themselves as profoundly American. By attending to the significance of the Frontier Myth to countercultural thought and action, we can also see how the Myth dictated ways of acting which superseded or circumvented rational analysis or clearly articulated ideologies. Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters provide a case study wherein we can see how the internal logic of the Frontier Myth led its adherents to act in certain ways that were incommensurate with the reality of their situations — a logic that, due in large part to Kesey's early influence on the counterculture, later spilled over into the political activism of the period, both blurring the boundaries between political and cultural revolt among the young, and leading the counterculture into increasingly worse situations.

Chapter One of this thesis establishes the conceptual framework of my argument by discussing first, the theory of articulation, which helps us to understand how Kesey's stylistic innovations were accomplished and how the result came to influence others; and second, the genesis and cultural expressions of the Frontier Myth, to familiarize the reader with its forms and ideological content as they relate to the following chapter. Chapter Two is empirical; it discusses Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, in the light of the concepts already outlined in Chapter One, cautiously to see them as a microcosm of the 1960s counterculture and its relation to the Myth of the Frontier. Only by analyzing the Frontier Myth and its influence in American culture can historians account for many of the most significant features of the American counterculture and the reactions it engendered. When the people who formed the counterculture crossed the line from mainstream American society, they felt that they had discovered a new frontier. But once that line was crossed, the roads were unmarked and unmapped. The Myth of the Frontier directed them along the trail from Woodstock to Altamont, but it did not prepare them for what they would find.

Chapter One:

"the thought that pulled the trigger": Identity, Articulation, and the Myth of the Frontier as Discourse

In the end you end up dyin' all alone on a dirty street. And for what? For nothin'.

High Noon (1952)

People make history but in conditions not of their own making.

Stuart Hall (c. 1984)[1]

In 1893 a young and relatively obscure historian addressed the annual meeting of the American Historical Association on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis did not present novel ideas,[2] but his particular formulation of them as an explanation of American history made his reputation. Even as he noted the conclusion drawn from the 1890 census that a frontier of settlement no longer existed in the United States, Turner declared that "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" up to this historical moment.[3] While he acknowledged the influence of America's European heritage on the nation's development, he argued that the primary source of America's unique character and institutions was the nation's experience of

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[1]Quoted in Lawrence Grossberg, "History, Politics, and Postmodernism: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies," in *Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies* (Durham & London: Duke University, 1997), 186.

[2]Frederick J. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report, American Historical Association* (1893); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1970 [1950]), 251 and *passim.*

[3]Turner, "Significance," 199.

westward expansion along an ever-receding frontier line. The frontier marked the "meeting point between savagery and civilization," but it was perennially a border deferred, continually to be transgressed by the vanguard of American settlement. When settlers crossed over this line, they experienced "a return to primitive conditions," to which they had to adapt in order to survive. "American social development," Turner wrote, "has been continually beginning over again on the frontier."[4] This "perennial rebirth" was not enacted on *tabula rasa*, of course. Each successive wave of expansion bore the heritage of the previous frontier experience, including the original seeds of Europe; however, America had already transformed them. "Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines,"[5] even as it has meant a uniquely American improvement on European civilization, which had been continually reinvigorated and transformed through the proximity of untouched American nature.

Turner regarded the closing of the frontier as a melancholy event, for he discerned in the frontier experience the source of American individualism, democracy and national identity.[6] Hopefully — and in retrospect somewhat prophetically — Turner declared that "American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise." But since the "gifts of free land" had ceased for the agrarian republic, Turner was not sure where this energy could productively turn.

Turner based his conception of the frontier more in myth than in economic or geographic "reality." In the twentieth century Americans have managed to evade the perceived consequences of the "end of the frontier" by retaining the ideas, or Myth of the

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[4]Turner, "Significance," 200.

[5]Turner, "Significance," 201.

[6]Turner, "Significance," 221-225.

Frontier, as an abstraction. Ideologically, the frontier in the United States has never vanished. When John F. Kennedy spoke of a "New Frontier" in 1960, his phrase was more than simply a poetic metaphor; for Americans in 1960, this "New Frontier" was every bit as real as the geographical frontiers had been for earlier generations — and even partook of a geographical basis in the idea of the exploration of space as a New Frontier — for the real significance of the frontier in American history has always been primarily (though not, by any means exclusively) ideological rather than material.[7]

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the theoretical context within which we can understand how this Myth of the Frontier operated in the activities of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and, through their influence, came to dominate the American counterculture generally. The first section outlines the theory of articulation, drawn from the work of Stuart Hall and others in the field of cultural studies. Articulation describes the process whereby an individual or group — in this case Ken Kesey and, by extension, the counterculture — can connect extant practices, concepts, and ideas into a new ideological structure. Within this new articulated structure, each of the original elements is altered, reflecting its relations with the other elements in the structure. Thus, as we shall see, Ken Kesey's articulation of, for example, the attitudes and values of the Beats, the use of drugs (especially LSD), the forms and contents of post-war popular culture, and the Myth of the Frontier inaugurated a countercultural style that was new, even as it rested on practices and ideas that preexisted Kesey's particular articulation of them. Here, for example, the use of LSD acquired a particular meaning and significance through its deliberate association with other elements — a meaning that was far from a natural or predetermined quality or consequence of the drug itself. The so-called "Acid Rock" of the 1960s was not an

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[7]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 1-3.

inevitable development either of rock music or of LSD (Acid) use; it was a result of the conscious articulation of LSD to the preferred music of youth in a particular place and time.

The single most significant element (or group of elements) in Kesey's new articulations, however, was not LSD use but the American Myth of the Frontier. The second part of this chapter describes the Myth especially as it related to the 1960s counterculture. The main concern here is to describe and explain this Myth in the particular historical moment of the late twentieth century, but it will be necessary first to outline the Myth's development from its origins in the first colonial settlements, and then to explain how the Myth has continued to exert its influence to the present. This discussion will begin with a historiographical review of literature on the Frontier Myth, followed by an outline of the historical development of the Myth to the end of the nineteenth century. It will then lay out the main features of the Frontier Myth in the twentieth century. Together, these discussions of articulation and the Myth of the Frontier establish the conceptual framework within which the following chapter will demonstrate Ken Kesey's and, through him the Frontier Myth's, influence on the American counterculture in the 1960s.

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Post-structuralism has quite effectively critiqued the notion of the unitary subject — the idea that individuals and collectivities possess fixed, immutable identities which centre on certain fundamental characteristics of their being. This ontology — or theory of the nature of being — underlies, for example, the Marxist notion that one's identity is essentially determined by one's class position under industrial capitalism; alternatively, the liberal view of the free-willed, atomistic individual similarly rests on the assumption of a centred, unitary subjectivity (or sense of oneself). In opposition to this essentialism, post-structuralism proposes that the identity or subjectivity of an individual or group is "de-centred" — it is not founded on an internal essence, but generated relationally through external difference. One's subjectivity is not a stable reflexive recognition of one's "true

self," but an unstable and changeable relation to "others." A sense of identity is achieved through marking what one *is not*, rather than what one *is*.

Of course, a certain amount of circularity is built into this theory: how can one know what one is not without first knowing what one is? The answer becomes clearer when this theory of identity is applied to what we might call *discourses* — structures or entities above the individual level, composed of a multitude of material and ideological practices — which prescribe and justify ways of doing things.[8] We can identify such discourses operating throughout our society, from primarily ideological structures such as the "nation-state" or "democracy," to more material discourses such as the "university" or "architecture." In each of these cases, however, the discourse encompasses both material practices or techniques and philosophical justifications for these practices. A discourse of the nation-state, for example, might prescribe rules for governing a nation-state or for the conduct of war, and also sets the rules for what is or is not a nation and what makes it preferable to other forms of social organization. Taken together, various discourses constitute the social context within which individuals live their lives; thus individual identity is formed relationally to this context as well as to other individuals. Conversely, discourses are not independent of the individuals "under" them; they are historically contingent and dependent for their formation and composition on other discourses and individual subjectivities. The discourses which operate in a given society, we might say, pre-exist the individual and provide an *overdetermining* framework for the individual's development. In some ways this is a reformulation of the older notion of cultural determinism. Thus we are each born into a society where discourses — about the nature and function of the family; what it means to be black or white, male or female, rich or poor;

[8]Lawrence Grossberg, "Experience, Signification, and Reality: The Boundaries of Cultural Semiotics," in *Bringing It All Back Home*, *op. cit.*, 95.

and so on — are already operating, and these discourses tell us from an early age who we are, or who we ought to be.

With some justification, post-structuralism has been criticized for an essentialism of its own. On the one hand, it portrays a world where individuals' identities are in radical flux; with no essential "core" or "centre" of being, individual identity (potentially) has no stability or continuity. On the other hand, we see a world of radical determinism where the individual is bound from the start into an overdetermining web of discourse; every aspect of individual identity is predetermined by one's position in this web. Taken to its logical conclusion, post-structuralism seems to threaten annihilating the subject by collapsing it into a field of relations — an internally contradictory network of differences without coherence or agency. This ignores the simple observation that real people live a material existence within these networks, and that they make meaningful decisions based on their *sense* of identity to try (often successfully) to change the conditions of their existence.

To grasp this reality, Stuart Hall's concept of articulation comes into play. Articulation refers to the ways that people construct a sense of identity and unity out of "complexity, difference, [and] contradiction."[9] Identity is constrained, but not determined, by one's position in this field of relations. Our experiences are "real," but our understanding of our experiences is moulded by the discourses within which we live. "Reality" is there — it is not merely discursive — but we have no meaningful access to it except through the filters of our understanding: discourses, which are not fixed and immutable, and which people themselves construct and modify.[10] People construct their own subjective reality from the fragments of ideas, practices, and relationships that

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[9]Grossberg, "History, Politics and Postmodernism", 177-78.

[10]Lawrence Grossberg, "The Ideology of Communication: Poststructuralism and the Limits of Communication," in *Bringing It All Back Home*, *op. cit.*, 50, 62.

circulate and operate in the social world, and they construct that social world and give it meaning by inventing discourses; articulation provides the tools with which they do this.

With the concept of articulation, Hall wants to suggest that these disparate elements are brought together and made to fit — articulated — with each other. One can envision an endless jigsaw puzzle where each piece, representing an idea or practice, is indistinct and meaningless on its own, but as the pieces are articulated to one another, a picture begins to form, and as the picture being constructed becomes clearer, some pieces are added to it more readily than others; they seem to fit better. At the same time, as the "picture" becomes more distinct, its coherence appears to limit its extent, obscuring its potential endlessness. The theory of articulation allows us to see this picture — the creation of a subjectivity — as real because it has real effects in the world, while post-structuralism reminds us that the "fit" between the parts is far from natural or pre-determined, though such formations, through longevity and widespread acceptance, can often achieve this appearance.[11] Hall describes this as the operation of "lines of tendential force," a sort of inertia in articulated structures that makes them hard to de-articulate, or change the meaning of, because they have been made to seem coherent and natural.[12]

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[11]This analogy was suggested by a similar one used by Lawrence Grossberg in *We Gotta Get Out of this Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992), 64.

[12]Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," ed. by Lawrence Grossberg in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, 142; Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," Morley and Chen, *Stuart Hall*, 124.

In terms of discourses, we can use the example of music to illustrate this inertia, and the potential for breaking or reorienting its power. Thus the historically specific formation of European "art" music in the nineteenth century must be seen as the product of articulations: certain types of tonality and musical forms became attached to the idea of the individual artist-creator, to the supposed superiority of bourgeois culture, to literacy, to leisure, and so on. This formation, or discourse, seemed "natural." Although it has been disrupted in the twentieth century by the new articulation of mass production techniques, syncopated dance rhythms, and an emergent youth culture with bourgeois musical practices, as well as a *de*-articulation of music-as-art from élite culture, it is still dominant within the field of music, yet these modifications have been successfully made, and the discourse is not the same as it was in the nineteenth century. Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes & Philadelphia: Open University, 1990), 9.

We can discern a major reason for this inertia through observing that discourses often overlap one

Conversely, it is easier to articulate something new into an existing discourse because its significance or meaning is still relatively unfixed and open to contest. Thus, to take the example of LSD, we see that when Ken Kesey first used the drug, it was a recent product of scientific research; United States military and intelligence organizations sponsored its limited use in controlled psychological experiments, which linked it early to discourses of technological progress and national security, but its ultimate significance to its originating context was far from settled. It was not difficult for someone like Kesey to creatively and deliberately link LSD use to other discourses and thereby to give it specific meaning and significance through these associations.

The single most important of these discourses for Kesey was what we call the Myth of the Frontier. The reason for its significance lies in its considerable longevity and comprehensiveness. As a discourse, it lies at the other extreme from LSD; the Myth of the Frontier encompasses a theory, or theories, of historical causation; a genre of popular literature and filmmaking; a particular style of action; a view of racial and gender identities and relations; a set of social mores and values; even styles of speaking and dressing. In short, it is powerfully articulated to myriad aspects of American social identity, tending to overdetermine the effects of other linkages. When we invoke one aspect of this discourse, we are speaking the whole language. If we go out wearing a Stetson hat with a curved

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another. This is perhaps clearer to see when we remind ourselves that the concept of a discourse is merely a *concept* ; a particular discourse is not a concrete entity in the "real world," but a label that we use to make it easier to speak of these formations. The western musical discourse, for example, contains elements that belong simultaneously to other discourses, or that can be seen themselves as discourses, depending to a large extent on the particular aims and perspectives of the researcher. The boundaries which delimit a discourse are a convenient way of limiting the object of study, but the boundaries are much less tangible in practice. Thus, certain types of tonality in western music are linked to a certain gender ideology, which is itself a powerful discourse that operates quite apart from music (See, for example, Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minnesota & Oxford: University of Minnesota, 1991)). It is extremely difficult to change the gendered meanings associated with western tonality in large part because these meanings are embedded in a separate, but overlapping, discourse of gender which in turn is powerfully articulated to other political and social discourses that have been constructed and reinforced over a considerable period of time.

brim and high leather boots with pointed toes, we are not merely covering our head and feet; we are saying something about who we are in relation to this discourse. If the cowboy hat is pink and the boots sequined, we may be challenging aspects of the discourse, such as its version of masculinity, by re-articulating it in subversive ways, but we are still doing so on the discourse's own terms, and are liable to fall into speaking other parts of it unconsiously. This is the effect of the "lines of tendential force" of the discourse. Wearing a cowboy hat has cultural meaning because this type of hat is powerfully linked to the Myth of the Frontier. Furthermore, if we make a new connection, or speak to competing discourses simultaneously, the more pervasive discourse overdetermines the other. For example, if one both takes LSD and wears cowboy boots, the Myth of the Frontier will tend to determine or affect the meaning of taking LSD more powerfully than vice versa. The Myth of the Frontier thus inflected Kesey's articulations with its meanings, in a sense directing the whole project by its own inertial force — a direction that persisted even after Kesey lost prominence after 1966.

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Turner's hypothesis that the nation's frontier experience was central to the development of an exceptional American character has weathered the twentieth century remarkably well, both as a scholar's substantive contribution to American historiography and as a document with its own historical context and significance. Like a biblical text or a constitutional document, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" has left itself open to a multitude of interpretations. Criticisms ring true, but they never succeed in dismantling the monument. It looms over American historiography, particularly of the West, yielding here and there to cogent counterarguments, but never is its presence banished; historians must always reckon with it. One of the main reasons for the longevity of Turner's thesis as an explanation for the development of American society is, paradoxically, the shifting ground upon which Turner erected his arguments. As many

scholars have noted, Turner's "idea of the frontier was a mass of contradictions," yet the contradictions in Turner's argument actually bolster its substance. For Turner, the frontier was "somehow the meeting ground of enlightened civilization and degraded savagery, and, at the same time, decayed civilization and beneficent nature," Ann Fabian notes. "Turner's western farmers inhabited a region that was at once a democratic utopia and a primitive stage of social evolution." The "utopia of free land" was "the source of democracy, but with [frontier] society's inevitable passage to civilization the wellspring of democracy threatened to run dry."[13] On the surface of it, Turner's thesis is one of environmental determinism — the American character is forged by the American wilderness — but Turner tempers this determinism with a dialectical process that subsumes the contradictions that Fabian remarks. The transgression of the frontier is precisely what brings the contradictions to the fore and necessitates the adaptation and transformation of *both* civilization and the "savage wilderness" which meet on the frontier. The frontier is as much a process as a place.

Turner, of course, never states his thesis in these terms, and one doubts whether he was even aware of many of the contradictions within his own rhetoric. Juxtaposed with the certainty of his argumentative style, the often indistinct and open-ended content of his study raise the broader historiographical question of how Turner's ideas originated and to whom among his contemporaries they appealed. And why exactly does his thesis still seem to explain so much even as it explains very little? To answer these questions it is

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[13]Ann Fabian, "Back to *Virgin Land*," *Reviews in American History* 24 (1996): 551. See the essays collected in Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin, eds., *Trails: Toward a New Western History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), especially Limerick, "What on Earth Is the New Western History?" and Michael P. Malone, "The 'New Western History,' an Assessment." In the same volume Brian W. Dippie's essay "American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives" explores the many avenues historians have followed under — and often in opposition to — the influence of Turner's thesis.

necessary to look at Turner as Henry Nash Smith and Richard Slotkin have: as a product of and contribution to the ongoing development of a national mythology of the frontier.

Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) was the first major historical work to treat the American frontier primarily as an intellectual and cultural construction rather than as merely a fact of geography or economics. Smith's historicization of the *idea* of the West and the frontier in American thought marked a new turn in American historiography, and *Virgin Land* retained a strong influence on the field through to the 1970s.[14] Due primarily to his less-than-rigorous definitions of the terms "myth" and "symbol," Smith's influence on scholarship has since waned, but as Ann Fabian notes in a recent reappraisal of *Virgin Land*, Smith "saw several things clearly" that are no less salient fifty years later:

> He recognized that the symbolic dimensions of politics were often as important as what passed for hard-headed realism. Beginning to explore the cultural dimension of politics, Smith also noticed the political dimensions of culture and asked readers to acknowledge the tensions in American literature between the conventions of genre and the peculiar social experience that was the United States.[15]

In his discussion of Turner, for example, Smith points out that Turner's ideas of the frontier and its role in American history rest on such extant concepts as the "Garden of the World" — the Jeffersonian vision of America as an agrarian utopia of independent yeoman — and the theory that the existence of a region of arable "free land" beyond the frontier would act as a "safety valve" to prevent overcrowding, unemployment and poverty, and social unrest in the American metropolis. The symbol of the Garden, in particular, "embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and

[14]Fabian, "Back to *Virgin Land*," 542; Dippie, "American Wests," 130.

[15]Fabian, "Back to *Virgin Land*," 543.

blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer."[16]

In "The Significance of the Frontier" Turner speaks of "rebirth" and alludes to the regenerative effects of the frontier on American society. These "are categories of myth rather than of economic analysis," Smith observes, but he argues that "ordinarily Turner kept his metaphors under control and used them to illustrate and vivify his logical propositions rather than as a structural principle or a means of cognition." At other times, however, "especially when the conception of nature as the source of occult powers is most vividly present, Turner's metaphors threaten to become themselves a means of cognition and to supplant discursive reasoning."[17] The idea of a society being "reborn," on the one hand, cannot be taken for anything but a metaphor, yet in Turner's use, it is not merely a metaphor; it expresses for him a reality that cannot be described in any other terms. Only a mythical conception of the world — spoken in the language of metaphor — can comprehend Turner's meaning.

That Turner's thesis impacted subsequent American historiography so deeply demonstrates the currency of his mythical conceptions. Yet "The Significance of the Frontier" is also a eulogy for the end of an era. "The frontier has gone," Turner wrote, "and with its going has closed the first period of American history."[18] Turner could not see what the next period would bring, and in the midst of economic crisis, urban labour strife, and rapid growth and "concentration of industrial wealth and power" he was pessimistic about the prospects for America's future. As Henry Nash Smith notes of Turner's ideas, "a system which revolved about a half-mystical conception of nature and

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[16]Smith, *Virgin Land*, 123.

[17]Smith, *Virgin Land*, 253-54.

[18]Turner, "Significance," 227.

held up as an ideal a rudimentary type of agriculture was powerless to confront issues arising from the advance of technology."[19]

Like Henry Nash Smith, Richard Slotkin has looked at Turner as a historical figure who was influenced by an extant mythology and who in turn contributed to it. But Slotkin's discussion of the American myth of the frontier looks beyond Smith's focus on agrarian utopianism to the darker side of the myth, specifically the role of violence. In the process, Slotkin posits a coherent theory of American development in opposition to Turner's. "The Myth of the Frontier," he writes, is the United States' "oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries."[20] Slotkin describes the historical origins, development and consequences of this mythology in American society in the course of three books, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (1973), *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985), and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992). For Slotkin, the nature and character of the United States' development is explained not by the colonists' immersion in a regenerative wilderness beyond the frontier, but by the continuing insistence on this very conception of the frontier that resides at the core of a national mythology. Although many authors, from a wide variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, have dealt with the themes and imagery of the frontier and their relations to American culture and history, Richard Slotkin's trilogy stands as one of the most comprehensive and focused treatments of the

[19]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 31, 18-19; Smith, *Virgin Land*, 259.

[20]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 10.

history of the Myth of the Frontier itself, and of its direct impact on American history.[21] This fact, coupled with Slotkin's sustained attention to the Myth's justification of violence which bears centrally on my discussion of the counterculture, makes his work the primary source for the following discussion of the Myth's development.[22]

Richard Slotkin construes myth as essentially *historical*, in several distinct senses. First, myths are stories that describe a culture's collective historical experiences. In this sense, they have a historiographical *content*; myths talk about the past. In the second instance, myths are historically constituted; that is, human beings create and modify myths under specific historical circumstances, for specific (perceived) needs. Myths do not spring unbidden from a collective unconscious, but are "stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness."[23] There is a third sense, however, in which "myth" can be understood as historical: it is historically *effective*, inasmuch as it

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[21]Aside from Smith's pioneering study, *Virgin Land, op. cit.*, other notable studies include Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1982) and *Custer's Last Stand: The Anatomy of an American Myth* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska, 1976); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1980); Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University, 1992); and James William Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

[22]Most of this discussion is drawn from the "Introduction" to *Gunfighter Nation* as it concisely recaps the major threads of Slotkin's arguments from *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1996 [1973]) and *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994 [1985]), and represents his most recent writing on the subject.

[23]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 5. This view is, however, somewhat modified from Slotkin's earlier statements. In the two decades since beginning the trilogy, he has moved from the archetypalist interpretation of myth of Carl Jung, George James Frazer, and Joseph Campbell nearer to the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz (as well as post-structuralists such as Roland Barthes). Thus, for example, in the first volume, Slotkin could assert that "true myths are generated on a sub-literary level by the historical experience of a people" (*Regeneration*, 4); the passive voice implies that it is the "historical experience" rather than the "people" which creates myth, and the existence of a "sub-literary level" is taken for granted, even as he explicitly acknowledges the agency of humans in myth-making.

serves its audience — the individuals who live in the culture — as a guide to action. Thus myth is not "merely" ideological; it has material, historically specific effects because historical actors make decisions under its influence. By focusing on the *historicity* of myth, we can thus describe a dialectical or circular process whereby people interpret their historical experience metaphorically (for example, the Puritans vision of a "City on a Hill" or the later idea of the West as the "Garden of the World"), thus creating a mythology which "provides a scenario or prescription for action, defining and limiting the possibilities for human response to the universe."[24] When a new historical circumstance or situation arises, people look to their myths to guide their decisions, and the results of those decisions become themselves historical "events" which may then be interpreted and integrated into a revised myth.

We can usefully apply the concepts discussed in the previous section to identify the Myth of the Frontier as a discourse. This may seem to be merely a matter of preferred labels — to speak of "discourse" sounds more current and theoretically rigorous than to speak of "myth" — and the reader may justifiably wonder if this substitution of words is worth the effort. To speak of the Myth of the Frontier in these terms, however, allows us more easily to integrate it into the previous discussion, and to place it on the same conceptual level as, for example, a discourse of gender. Thus, the Myth of the Frontier is also a product of articulations, open to modification, and overlapped by other discourses.

The first English settlers in America began to construct the Myth of the Frontier "to explain and justify the establishment" of their colonies, but the Myth continued to develop synchronously with the colonists' history, to explain the United States' "rapid economic growth, [its] emergence as a powerful nation-state, and [its] . . . approach to the socially

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[24]Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 7.

and culturally disruptive processes of modernization."[25] The characteristic narrative structure of this myth/history features the separation of an individual or group from the bosom of society (eg. the Puritans' emigration) and "temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state" as "necessary preludes to an improvement in life and fortune" — improvements brought about through the means of violence.[26] This myth of "regeneration through violence" serves as the ineluctable core of the Frontier Myth throughout its history, as, for example, in Turner's account of the frontier experience, where the "rebirth" of American society on the frontier takes place in the (unacknowledged) context of the destruction of forests and plains, the slaughter of buffalo to the point of extinction, and the systematic extermination and forced removal of Native Americans from their land.

Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, and the counterculture generally, justified their activities in these mythic terms. They sought a regeneration of American society and so followed this quintessentially American path of separating themselves from the decayed, or lost, society and "degenerating" to a more "natural" way of life. The ideal end of this narrative, of course, is the regenerative act of violence, so by justifying their alternative or countercultural lifestyle with reference to the Myth, these people were inclined to follow the Myth's logic further and to seek out, or at least welcome, conflict and confrontation. With Kesey and the Pranksters, this rarely resulted in actual violence, but later confrontations between the counterculture and the "establishment" proved less benign, especially with the tendency of the Myth to lead toward "savage war" as the supreme moment of societal regeneration.

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[25] Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 10.

[26] Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 11-12; *Regeneration*, 5.

At each stage in the nation's territorial expansion, from the founding of the original plantations of God's elect, the spectre of a "savage war" loomed over the colonists' exploits as an inevitable rite of passage to the next progression. The idea of the "savage war" contrasted with European notions of war as a limited conflict between trained soldiers of "civilized" nation-states on a clearly delimited battleground. Colonists saw the differences between themselves and Native Americans as insurmountable and peaceful coexistence with them as impossible "on any basis other than subjugation"; thus the "savage war" was a war of survival in which "one side or the other must perish, whether by limitless murder or by the degrading experience of subjugation and torture." Furthermore, the "myth of 'savage war' blames Native Americans as instigators of wars of extermination."[27] Yet this interpretation of Native/colonist conflict is insupportable as historical fact; thus "the accusation is better understood as an act of psychological projection that made the Indians scapegoats for the morally troubling side of American expansion." This projection was subsequently extended to encompass a wide "range of domestic social and political conflicts": sectional and class antipathies *within* (Euro-) American society were projected outward, onto the Indian, thereby defusing social disorder within the community.[28]

Nevertheless, Americans recorded their experiences and, especially given the Christian-eschatological background of the Puritan settlers, these narratives tended toward highly symbolic, exemplary tales of moral struggle. History was thus "translated into myth" and "the complexities of social and historical experiences . . . simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or 'heroes.'"[29] The heroes of such

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[27]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 12.

[28]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 12-13.

[29]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 13.

a myth/historical narrative served as the symbolic focus of their society's contradictions and anxieties. Their values, morals, and motives, however complex and ambivalent, were those of society writ small:

> The heroes of myth embody something like the full range of ideological contradictions around which the life of the culture revolves, and their adventures suggest the range of possible resolutions that the culture's lore provides.[30]

The most important feature of the "moral landscape" upon which these adventures were enacted was its division by "significant borders," the most basic of which was that between civilization and "Indian country." The American hero is a "man who knows Indians," a white man (or woman) "whose experiences, sympathies, and even allegiances fall on both sides of the Frontier." Because of this liminal character, the hero is capable of living successfully on either side while truly belonging to neither. Wars between whites and Indians (or, more abstractly, the "savage war")

> are, for these heroes, a spiritual or psychological struggle which they win by learning to discipline or suppress the savage or "dark" side of their own human nature. Thus they are mediators of a double kind who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds — the natural wilderness, and the wilderness of the human soul.[31]

Again, we can see Ken Kesey as embodying this heroic type. As a leader, his responsibilities included acting as a spokesman for the counterculture, an intermediary between "straight civilization" and the "savage" counterculture. His status as a well-known author in part identified him as one who could indeed succeed in mainstream society, but who had chosen instead to plunge into the "wilderness."

By the late eighteenth century, the expression of this core narrative structure reached full mythic proportions in the historical personage of the frontiersman Daniel Boone, and in the reworkings of Boone's career in literature which established "a single

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[30]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 14.

[31]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 14.

unified Myth of the Frontier in which the triumph of civilization over savagery is symbolized by the hunter/warrior's rescue of the White woman held captive by savages."[32] In the first half of the nineteenth century James Fenimore Cooper reworked such historical narratives as fiction in a series of frontier romances that "codified and systematized the representations of the Frontier that had developed haphazardly since 1700."[33] Many lesser talents imitated Cooper's tales and thus initiated the emergence of the "western" genre in popular literature, while at the same time other "serious" authors (Henry David Thoreau or Herman Melville, for example) were also attending increasingly to the themes of the Frontier Myth in their work.[34]

The nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented economic and geographic expansion in the United States. "It was perhaps inevitable," writes Slotkin, "that these two dramatic expansions be linked in American historical mythology and that the westward movement of population be read as a cause — even as *the* cause — of American economic development."[35] As the nation's economic base was transformed from a primarily agrarian to a corporate-industrial one, the Myth continued to function, "symbolizing current history and linking it to the traditions of a sanctified past."[36] When a bank panic in 1873 initiated a long-lasting economic crisis, however, the urban media increasingly turned the Frontier Myth's ideological uses to propping the new corporate-industrial order. Slotkin cites three

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[32]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 15; *Regeneration*, Chs. 9-12.

[33]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 15; *Regeneration*, Ch. 13.

[34]Slotkin, *Regeneration*, Ch. 14.

[35]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 17.

[36]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 18.

specific "simultaneous crises" which the supporters of this order "saw as organically related":

> the urban "class warfare" that began with the Tompkins Square "riot" of 1874; the breakdown of Reconstruction in the South and the threat of a "race war" in that region; and the failure of federal policy in regard to the development of western lands — specifically, the failure to police the opening of the territory to exploitation by the railroads and the failure to solve the "Indian question." All three crises would reach a violent climax in 1876-77. Reconstruction would collapse in a last wave of race riots and Ku Klux Klan outbreaks; labor unrest would culminate in the Great Strike of 1877, which seemed a foretaste of proletarian revolution; and the failure of western development would culminate in the outbreak of the Sioux War of 1876 and the catastrophe of Custer's Last Stand.[37]

All of these crises entailed a conflict between "the will and desires of a 'lower' human order or class (Indians, Black and immigrant laborers, urban wage-workers) and the imperative requirements of the new industrial system as defined by its owners and managers." At the heart of this opposition lay the ultimate incompatibility of republican democratic ideals and the managerial and organizational requirements of the "new corporate order." As a result, the proponents of this order employed an "ideological sleight of hand: the use of race-war symbolism . . . to interpret the class warfare of workers and managers."[38] Custer's Last Stand became the guiding metaphor for understanding all of these conflicts, and what was potentially at stake: the utter destruction of American civilization and its defenders at the hands of "savages." Under these terms, the stories in the national media forced the American public to choose a "'racial' identification" with one side or the other — with "savagism" or "civilization" — while eliding the real issues of class and relative economic and political power. This rhetorical manoeuver served to "deprive the embattled workers/freedmen/Indians of the sympathy they had hitherto received from the 'middle

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[37]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 18-19; *The Fatal Environment*, Chs. 13-15, 18, 19.

[38]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 19.

class' — that putative majority of farmers and city-dwellers who had not yet become either proletarians or members of a corporate hierarchy."[39]

Slotkin uses the term "progressive" to identify this ideological use of the Frontier Myth, which he opposes to the "populist" version typified by Turner's agrarian and democratic Frontier. Essentially, the crises of the late-nineteenth century engendered a split in the Myth of the Frontier between "progressive" and "populist" variations or "styles." The progressive version, Slotkin argues, "is the more politically coherent of the two . . . and its language has acquired greater authority in the twentieth century." The "progressive" style is the version of the Frontier Myth that has developed into the dominant subtext of the Western genre in twentieth-century popular culture, particularly in film. It is also the version of the Myth, Slotkin argues, that has most informed the formation of government policy in the same period, while the "populist" style has continued as the Myth's social conscience, lending "myth/historical resonance" to many of the "radical movements and social/political critiques of our post-Civil War history, including the Grangers and Greenbackers of the 1870s, Henry George and the Single Tax movement of the 1880s, the Farmers' Alliance of the 1890s, the Popular Front of the 1930s, and the counterculture of the 1960s."[40] However, Slotkin here elides the differences between these social movements and, in doing so specifically overlooks or draws attention away from the fact that the 1960s counterculture relied at least as heavily on the progressive mode of the Myth as it did the populist.

The populist style of the Myth typically employs Indians (in their "noble savage" aspect) or the American everyman farmer as the sympathetic protagonists who defend their simple way of life from the encroachments of "progress" — eastern capital, railroads,

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[39]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 20.

[40]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 23.

industry, the urban metropolis, and so on. In the post-World War II era, however, the progressive style was so dominant that even these countercultural opponents of conventional "progress" were drawn to identifying with the typically "progressive" hero of the rugged individualist gunfighter even as they adopted modes of dress and lifestyle that identified them with the collective "Indian tribe." Many scholars have noted the ways that the counterculture of the 1960s, especially the hippies, identified themselves with Native Americans in their ideology and style of dress; Richard Slotkin, especially, makes much of this.[41] But the theory of articulation allows us to ask whether this was the only position possible: the racialized opposition between White and Indian in the Myth posits the White (male) hero as the agent of progress, the Indian as his foe, and the necessary sacrifice to progress. Does this mean that one who opposes the triumphalist historical narrative of the Frontier Myth, or one oppressed by the society that adheres to the Myth, must adopt the stance of the non-white victim of American "progress"? My contention in this thesis is that American opponents — even non-whites and women — of their own culture's dominant values and policies were still more likely to identify with the White male hero, to see themselves as the gunfighter or frontiersman, because this protagonist of the Myth's narratives is, by definition, the one who *acts* — the *subject* — rather than the *object* of action. Even when members of the counterculture seemed to be acting like the Mythic Indian, they were identifying not directly with the Indian, but with the White male frontier hero who deliberately and strategically adopts the Indian's ways to conquer the wilderness and its non-white avatars.

As Slotkin himself notes, the progressive and populist styles are not "irreconcilable polar opposites." Rather,

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[41]Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 558; *Fatal*, 17; *Gunfighter*, 23, 590-91; Anderson, *The Movement*, 269, 270; Dippie, *Vanishing American*, 351.

> they represent two distinctive styles of usage which draw on a common myth/ideological language in which there is substantial agreement on such central concerns as the exceptional character of American life and history, the necessity and desirability of economic development, the vitality of "democratic" politics, and the relevance of something called "the Frontier" as a way of explaining and rationalizing what is most distinctive and valuable in "the American way." It is the existence of this common mythic language, to which all sides can appeal, that makes the conflict of progressive and populist interests a coherent political discourse — a political culture — rather than a clash of mutually uncomprehending and irreconcilable tribes.[42]

The single most significant result of this "discourse" of the Frontier Myth in the twentieth century is that for a wide range of social and political issues the Myth has, in a sense, pre-determined the bounds of acceptable interpretations of situations and set the range of desired ends and appropriate means for obtaining those ends. But this framework has continued to frame new situations in terms that refer not to present conditions and realities, but to a *perception* of a stage in American history that has long since passed, if indeed it ever existed.

Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* is centrally concerned with showing how twentieth-century mass media perpetuated the Myth of the Frontier and that its fictitious representations paralleled the development of American foreign policy, particularly during the Cold War and the War in Vietnam. The structure of Slotkin's work suggests that these two expressions of the Myth existed in a dialectical relationship as the themes and narratives of Western films influenced the formation of foreign policy, and America's military adventures overseas provided themes and narratives for filmmakers to translate into Westerns. It is perhaps more accurate to say, however, that the relationship between popular culture and foreign policy was not so reciprocal, but that both were following the logic of the discourse concurrently. In the event, the Myth of the Frontier, especially in its "Progressive" formulation, had become articulated ideologically to the ascendant

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[42]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 23-24.

democratic liberalism of the post-World War II Democratic Party. Thus, like the historians Allen Matusow and David Steigerwald, Richard Slotkin seeks in part to explain the collapse of the post-war liberal consensus in the 1960s. For Slotkin, the explanation lies in this close association of government policy and the Myth of the Frontier, for the logic of the Myth led to increasingly untenable decisions and stances in foreign policy, culminating with the United States' involvement in Vietnam and its conduct of that War. The collapse of post-war liberalism coincided with the abrupt decline of the Western's popularity, suggesting that the Myth had exhausted itself in all of its expressions. The outcome of the Vietnam War paralleled, for example, the narrative of 1969's *The Wild Bunch*, a film with no moral centre, relentless and escalating violence out of proportion with its ostensible ends, and an ambiguous resolution. As the following chapter will suggest, the counterculture related similarly to the Myth of the Frontier, following its logic to untenable conclusions.

This thesis' second chapter deals with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, who provide the first major countercultural rearticulations of the Frontier Myth in the 1960s. Ken Kesey's personal background as a westerner and as a student in Wallace Stegner's creative writing graduate program at Stanford University in the late 1950s attuned him to many of the themes of the Frontier Myth (as well as counterarguments to the mythic view of the west) and positioned him to adopt the role of a latter-day frontiersman. In his own work as a novelist, he explored the Frontier Myth in fictional narrative and later, after encountering LSD, continued his artistic exploration of the Myth in public with the Merry Pranksters. At first glance, the day-glo painted faces of the Pranksters and the equally garish bus in which they travelled through the country, the infamous Acid Tests, the Pranksters' playfulness, communal spirit and fascination with technology may seem to have little in common with the grim, nineteenth-century gunfighters of the Westerns that Kesey and millions of other Americans grew up on in the 1940s and '50s, but the Myth of

the Frontier runs deeply through all of these. Under the conscious direction of Kesey, the Merry Pranksters were able significantly to rearticulate the Frontier Myth. The effects of LSD, for example, were likened to crossing a frontier, a view of mind-expansion that leads back at least as far as Henry David Thoreau's statement that "The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact."[43] Similarly, in positioning themselves as frontiersmen and -women and outlaws, the Pranksters de-articulated the principle of *pain* — a central feature of the Western hero's experience[44] — from this character type and re-articulated *pleasure*, in the forms of play, drug use, sex, music and dancing, to the discursive Western-hero experience without abandoning the emphases on strenuous exertion, mortal danger, control and skill which heretofore had been closely linked to the pain of the Western hero.[45] Kesey's and the Pranksters' rearticulations of the Myth were so skillfully accomplished and influential that their adventures essentially constructed a new counter-discourse that served as the prototype for the counterculture through the rest of the decade.

This counter-discourse remained, however, so closely linked to the original that it was reabsorbed into the larger Frontier Myth. The broader influence of this modification in popular culture can be seen, for example, in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), which portrays the gunslinging heroes as fun-loving and irresponsible pleasure-seekers — proto-hippies thrown back into a nineteenth-century Western setting. Conversely, Dennis

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[43]Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam, 1982 [1962]), 81.

[44]Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 104-109, 122, 126-7.

[45]Lawrence Grossberg, in "History, Politics, and Postmodernism," 191-2, argues that *affective states* — emotional states and feelings such as pleasure and pain — are given meaning and significance within articulated structures as much as any other practice or concept. Thus, for example, Christian mores can negatively construct sexual pleasure as sinful and a reason for shame; and again, the athlete's maxim, "no pain, no gain," associates physical discomfort with the positive goals of exercise.

Hopper's *Easy Rider*, also released in 1969, takes the grim, progressive-realist formula narrative of the late Western and effortlessly places it in a modern setting and populates it with modern characters, hippie dropouts who ride motorcycles rather than horses. The fun-loving and playful Western hero was not unprecedented, nor was the modification of the Western formula by modern themes or settings.[46] What is significant about these films is that they were both clearly intended to appeal to the youth who identified with the counterculture, yet they both followed the *progressive*, rather than the *populist*, style in their hero types, and a narrative logic that brought these heroes to violent ends. Their heroism is not directly associated with any collective group — countercultural or otherwise; their sacrifices have no redeeming social value except to underline these heroes' commitments to living outside the pale of civilization and free of any social bonds.

The same narrative logic obtained in real life, when people such as Ken Kesey chose to identify themselves with the Western hero, or when Lyndon Johnson chose to describe the Vietnam War in terms of the captivity/rescue scenario of "savage war." Ken Kesey, as I will show, ultimately refused to follow the progressive narrative to the final confrontation that observers — sympathetic and antipathetic alike — anticipated, and instead turned back to the idea of exploration without the emphasis on confrontation. By thus thwarting his audience's expectations, however, Kesey lost stature as a counterculture hero. The imperatives of the progressive version of the Frontier Myth proved stronger than Kesey's attempts to redirect the Myth.

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[46]See Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, Chs. 6-8, 10.

Chapter Two:

On the Edge of the Continent: Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters

They were truly followers of the American pioneer spirit, but without killing any Indians in the process.

Paul Krassner[1]

If society wants me to be an outlaw, then I'll be an outlaw, and a damned good one. That's something people need. People at all times need outlaws.

Ken Kesey (1966)[2]

In Ken Kesey's 1994 novel *Last Go Round* — "A Real Western," the dust jacket tells us — the historical figure of William F. "Buffalo Bill" Cody comes in for a revisionist thrashing. *Last Go Round* is a fictionalized account of the 1911 Pendleton Round Up at Pendleton, Oregon, at which three cowboys — a black, a white Southerner, and a Nez Percé Indian — became friends and vied against one another for the first World Championship Broncbusting title. Buffalo Bill was on hand that year, his Wild West in tow, to observe the Round Up and, he hoped, to recruit performers. Kesey, possibly unaware of the modern rodeo's genesis in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, spares no opportunity to portray Cody and his entourage as materialistic charlatans, perhaps better suited to hawking snake oil than cowboying.[3]

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[1]Quoted in Paul Perry with Ken Babbs, et al., *On the Bus: The Complete Guide to the Legendary Trip of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and the Birth of the Counterculture* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1996 [1990]), xxii.

[2]Quoted in Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Bantam, 1980 [1968]), 235.

[3]Ken Kesey with Ken Babbs, *Last Go Round* (New York: Viking, 1994).

Aside from their shared fascination with the mythic American West, however, Ken Kesey and Buffalo Bill have more in common than Kesey might care to admit. Both men were visionaries who parlayed their original talents (Cody as an Army scout and Indian fighter; Kesey as an acclaimed novelist) into public spectacles — part performance, part real life — that made them legendary. Buffalo Bill organized his Wild West around a series of tableaux or reenacted episodes of crucial moments in American history, each set on the frontier. These were interspersed with displays of prowess — riding, shooting, roping livestock — by various principal performers such as Annie Oakley and Buffalo Bill himself.[4] The Merry Pranksters' bus trip of 1964, when they travelled across the United States and back again, bore similarity to the Wild West in that the Pranksters put on a show wherever they went, but, unlike the Wild West, without reference to a reality or history outside of the trip itself. The comparison becomes more obvious in the later Acid Tests that the Pranksters held primarily in California. The Acid Tests were more controlled performances that reenacted, through the film footage and sound recordings made during the trip, the earlier exploits of the Pranksters themselves, much in the way that Buffalo Bill, who continued his work as a scout in the West between seasons of travelling with his show — he took his "first scalp for Custer" five years after he began starring in stage melodramas about himself — became simultaneously a performer and a historical character in the Wild West. A glance at the Merry Pranksters' internet website today demonstrates that Kesey and his companions, like Buffalo Bill a century ago, continue to sell nostalgia for a romanticized and poorly-understood period in American history.[5] Just as Buffalo Bill's version of the Wild West became the prototype for many of our most persistent portrayals of the nineteenth-century American West in popular culture, Ken Kesey and the

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[4]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 67-8.

[5]http://www.IntrepidTrips.com/

Merry Pranksters, more than any other individual or group, established the dominant popular conception of "the hippie" of the 1960s. "We pioneered what have since become the hall-marks of hippy [*sic*] culture," an early associate of Kesey's later recalled. "LSD and other psychedelics too numerous to mention, body painting, light shows and mixed media presentations, total aestheticism, be-ins, exotic costumes, strobe lights, sexual mayhem, freakouts and the deification of psychoticism, eastern mysticism, and the rebirth of hair."[6]

From the start Buffalo Bill intended that his act portray the vanishing/vanished American West for people who would never have the opportunity to see what Buffalo Bill had seen; his authority to tell this "history" was based on his own putative involvement in that history: "I was there; I know whereof I speak." The Merry Pranksters similarly set themselves up as both historical actors — an originating force in the counterculture — and as the tellers of that history. Like Cody's relationship to the history of the American West, Kesey and the Pranksters influenced the subsequent development of the counterculture itself, as well as subsequent *representations* of it, in part by inflating their own contributions and making themselves over into legendary figures. Their self-promoted fame did as much to broaden their influence as any substantive action. The primary *content* of their influence, however, also brings to mind Buffalo Bill's Wild West, for it centrally revolved around the Myth of the Frontier. Kesey's conscious rearticulation of the Frontier Myth in his work, both as a writer and as the leader of the Merry Pranksters, provides the central feature of Kesey's unique influence on the countercultural movement which followed.

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[6]Ken Kesey, "Ken Kesey: The Art of Fiction CXXVI," interview by Robert Faggen, ***Paris Review*** 36 (Spring 1994): 63-68; Vic Lovell, "The Perry Lane Papers," *Free You* 2, no. 15 (October 1968): 20, quoted in Stephen L. Tanner, *Ken Kesey* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 13.

This chapter examines Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters to demonstrate their relationship to the Frontier Myth, and this relationship's influence on not only the Pranksters and their activities, but also the counterculture that followed them. I regard Kesey and the Pranksters' activities between 1964 and 1966 as a text to be "read" and critiqued. This approach follows from their own and others' characterization of their actions as a "new artistic medium." After writing two brilliant novels, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and *Sometimes a Great Notion* (1964), Kesey declared writing "old-fashioned" and announced that he would pursue his muse in a more spontaneous combination of media centred first on the trans-American bus trip and then on the Acid Tests. Kesey's and the Pranksters' public lives were their primary artistic expressions. The Pranksters' experiments during this period do not have the artistic merit of Kesey's novels, but they are significant for the enormous impact they had on the development of the counterculture through to the end of the decade.

The fundamental themes of Kesey's work, both in his writing and with the Merry Pranksters, revolve around the Myth of the Frontier which Kesey imaginatively articulated — in his novels — to modern settings and characters and — with the Pranksters — to the experience of LSD, late-twentieth century technology and popular culture, and countercultural attitudes. By examining this body of work, I will demonstrate first the effects of the Frontier Myth here, and the impact that this work, especially with the Pranksters, had on the rest of the counterculture. By approaching the Merry Pranksters as a text, I will also show that their activities can be seen to a limited extent as a microcosm of the counterculture generally. The Pranksters consciously chose to live life like a novel, and under the influence of the Frontier Myth they followed a particular narrative structure that restricted the choices and types of action open to them. The Frontier Myth, as a guide to action, imposed a certain logic; policy makers in Washington, as Richard Slotkin has

demonstrated, as well as the American counterculture in the 1960s followed this same logic.

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In Ken Kesey's early life and family history we can discern the genesis of much of his later artistic output. Kesey was born in La Junta, Colorado in 1935. His father operated a creamery business and his family, on both sides, had been farmers and ranchers. Like the Stamper family in *Sometimes a Great Notion* — "a stringy-muscled brood of restless and stubborn west-walkers" — they had gradually migrated west from Tennessee and Arkansas.[7] In 1941 Kesey moved to Eugene, Oregon when his father enlisted in the navy. For the duration of the war, the Keseys moved back and forth between Eugene, La Junta and San Francisco before finally settling in Eugene in 1946. Kesey was reared in a "long tradition of frontier American oral storytelling" and had tremendous respect and admiration for his father.[8] Literary critic Stephen L. Tanner notes that "Kesey once described his father as 'a kind of big, rebellious cowboy who never did fit in.' . . He was a sort of hero to Kesey, a man he identified with the John Wayne image." Kesey's father took him and his brother Chuck fishing and hunting from an early age and encouraged athletic competition; Kesey won a scholarship to the University of Oregon as the "outstanding college wrestler in the Northwest." The elder Kesey also "believed a time comes when a son should whip his father." It is not clear whether this confrontation ever took place, but Kesey depicted such a fight in his unpublished early novel "Zoo," and such conflicts are significant in his fiction generally.[9] As a boy, Kesey

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[7]Tanner, *Kesey*, 3; Ken Kesey, *Sometimes a Great Notion* (New York: Penguin, 1977 [1964]), 16.

[8]Tanner, *Kesey*, 4.

[9]Tanner, *Kesey*, 8, 3-4.

read voraciously, as did his father, who enjoyed mostly popular literature and was especially fond of Zane Grey. Kesey liked Grey well enough later to name his son Zane, and he spent his youth reading the novels of Grey and Edgar Rice Burroughs, as well as "plenty of comic books and some science fiction."[10]

Kesey carried these early influences with him to Stanford University in 1958, where he began graduate studies in the creative writing program that Wallace Stegner had established. Studying under Stegner "was like playing football under Vince Lombardi," Kesey later remarked, but Stegner's immediate influence on Kesey's work was more negative than positive. Kesey arrived at Stanford seemingly determined to be an iconoclast and was sufficiently impressed by Stegner's stature that, drawing perhaps on his father's maxim about generational conflict, he perversely made Stegner into a symbol of the frontier beyond which Kesey wished to forge. "I took LSD, and he stayed with Jack Daniel's; the line between us was drawn," Kesey recalled. "That was, as far as he was concerned, the edge of the continent, and he thought you were supposed to stop there. I was younger than he was, and I didn't see any reason to stop, so I kept moving forward."[11] For his part, Wallace Stegner later suggested that Kesey had achieved fame more for his outlandish behaviour than for his talents, and he became increasingly disgusted with the destructiveness of the sixties radicals as the decade wore on. Stegner resigned from his position at Stanford in 1971 when he could no longer bear the political climate; he later said that teaching had become nearly impossible by 1968.[12] Stegner had spent much of his

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[10]Tanner, *Kesey*, 7; see also, for example, Kesey, "Art of Fiction," 91-92.

[11]Jackson J. Benson, ***Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work*** (New York: Viking, 1996), 248-49; Tanner, ***Kesey***, 11-12; Kesey, "Art of Fiction," 61-62.

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[12] Wallace Stegner, interview by Kay Bonetti (Columbia, MO : American Audio Prose Library, 1987), sound cassette; Benson, ***Stegner***, 312-16, 340-43. See also Stegner's novel *All the Little Live Things* (New York: Penguin, 1991 [1967]) for his interpretation of the era and its excesses, especially the parallels between Stegner's fictional character Jim Peck and his student Ken Kesey.

career debunking aspects of the Frontier Myth, particularly the rugged individualism embodied in the figure of the Western gunslinger, believing that it was "destructive of the people and the land,"while Kesey, enamoured of movie and literary Westerns, embraced the Myth in his writing.[13] Kesey did take lessons from Stegner, such as the importance of point of view and the necessity for careful revision and craftsmanship in a writer's work, but Kesey's life outside the university at this time was the more significant influence on the direction his work would take.

At the height of the Beat movement, Kesey took a house on Perry Lane, a Bohemian enclave of Palo Alto where the inhabitants patterned their lifestyle on the Beats of North Beach in nearby San Francisco. The scene strongly affected Kesey. Himself a descendent of "west-walkers," he had read *On the Road* — Kerouac's pæan to American mobility and post-frontier exploration — three times before coming to Stanford and found himself immediately drawn to the "radical attitudes" and "unconventional behaviour" of his new circle of friends. Kesey had, as Tom Wolfe put it, "Jack London Martin Eden Searching Hick, the hick with intellectual yearnings, written all over him." The bohemian sophisticates considered him a "diamond in the rough," but with his keen intellect, wit and charisma, Kesey soon became a trend setter in the scene.[14] At the suggestion of a friend, Vic Lovell, a psychology graduate student, Kesey volunteered to participate in drug experiments at the nearby Menlo Park Veterans' Hospital, where he was introduced to LSD. He and Lovell soon managed to bring doses of LSD and other drugs back to Perry Lane to share with their friends. While at Perry Lane, Kesey met the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, Richard Alpert (later Ram Dass), an associate of Timothy Leary, and Neal Cassady, who arrived on Kesey's doorstep in 1960 and soon became a muse to Kesey as

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[13]Benson, *Stegner*, 254.

[14]Benson, *Stegner*, 250; Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 31; Tanner, *Kesey*, 13-14.

he had been to Jack Kerouac. In the midst of this anarchic experimentation, Kesey somehow managed to write his first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

In 1963, while still working on his second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Kesey bought a secluded house and land among the redwood trees of La Honda, north of San Francisco. Before long, "so many people from Perry Lane had gravitated to La Honda and were camped around there that it had become the new gathering scene."[15] When Kesey completed the novel he and a few friends conceived the idea of driving a station wagon across the country to be in New York for the book's publication in the summer of 1964 and to take in the World's Fair in Queens. Kesey purchased a 1939 International Harvester school bus to convert into a camper, and more than a dozen people decided to come along. The making of a film became a serious focus of the trip, and they established a company, Intrepid Trips Inc., to produce the film. They mounted a turret and platform on the top of the bus, wired it inside and out with speakers and microphones and tape-recorders, and painted it a "frenzy of primary colors" in what would later be known as the psychedelic style. During a collective acid trip one night, Ken Babbs dubbed the group the "Merry Band of Pranksters" and began giving everyone nicknames. Kesey became "Swashbuckler," Babbs, "The Intrepid Traveller," and Neal Cassady, who drove the bus, "Sir Speed Limit."[16] The destination manifest on the front of the bus was to the ultimate frontier: "FURTHER."[17]

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[15]Gurney Norman quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 36.

[16]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 60-61; Ken Babbs quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 59; *The Merry Pranksters* (Eugene, Oregon: Key-Z Productions, 1993), videocassette.

[17]The bus was subsequently repainted several times, occasionally with the manifest misspelled as "FURTHUR." Though photographs and film footage show that it was originally spelled correctly, Tom Wolfe used the misspelling in *Acid Test* (61) and "'Furthur,' with two *u*'s," has since entered counterculture folklore as the proper name of the Pranksters' bus.

Fourteen Merry Pranksters set out from La Honda in June, 1964, travelling south and then east, through the deep south via Houston and New Orleans to Florida, north to New York, then back west through the midwestern states and into Canada to attend the Calgary Stampede. They reentered the United States via Vancouver, British Columbia, and returned to La Honda two months after their departure. Throughout the journey, the Pranksters took copious amounts of LSD and other drugs, made spectacles of themselves everywhere they went, and recorded their activities on audio-tape and film. In the course of the trip they had mutually disappointing meetings with Jack Kerouac in New York, and with Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert and others who were conducting LSD experiments of their own at a mansion in Millbrook, New York. Viking Press published *Sometimes a Great Notion* while the Pranksters were in New York, and the novel garnered mixed reviews. The critical and commercial letdown after the acclaim of *Cuckoo's Nest* probably reinforced Kesey's decision to leave writing behind, but by this time Kesey was "already talking about how writing was an old-fashioned and artificial form and pointing out, for all who cared to look . . . the bus."[18]

The Merry Pranksters returned to La Honda by August 1964. Travelling expenses, equipment, film processing, plus the continuing living expenses of the resident Pranksters, whose numbers swelled after the trip, would cost Intrepid Trips Inc. $103,000 by the end of 1965, most of it Kesey's money. The Merry Pranksters had shot 45 hours of film and recorded "hundreds of hours of audio-tape" which they now needed to put into some kind of order.[19] The Pranksters realized that the people operating the cameras and microphones had been as high as those they were filming; consequently much of the film was under- or over-exposed, shaky, unfocused, or simply uninteresting. No doubt the attempt to impose

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[18]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 91. Ellipsis in original.

[19]Tanner, *Kesey*, 91; Perry, *On the Bus*, 47; Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 121-23.

order on the recorded chaos sharply clashed with the Pranksters' creed of "going with the flow," and anyway, the film was no longer the point — the project had been the trip itself: the real audience had been the average Americans whose towns this crazy, day-glow-painted mob had invaded; the real work of art had been the interaction between the Pranksters and the unsuspecting civilians. Nevertheless, the Pranksters set to work trying to edit the film and continued to host their parties at La Honda, which grew louder and more boisterous as word-of-mouth attracted more would-be Pranksters, as well as the attention of police, to the Kesey household.

In April of 1965, police raided the place and arrested Kesey and several others. Most of the charges were dropped, but Kesey stood charged with possession of marijuana (LSD was still legal in California at this time). Through legal wrangling, he managed to stay out of jail, and the resulting publicity spread the Pranksters' reputation.[20] That summer, Hunter S. Thompson, who was researching a book on the Hell's Angels motorcycle gangs, introduced Kesey to the Angels. Kesey, fascinated by the Angels' outlaw image, invited the San Francisco chapter to come to a party at La Honda, instigating a loose but lasting association of the Hell's Angels and the Bay area counterculture. The Hell's Angels party also provided the inspiration for the Acid Tests, which began late in 1965. The Acid Tests were essentially the La Honda parties held in more accessible and public venues. The Pranksters hosted several Acid Tests in December 1965 and January 1966, when Kesey was again busted for possession of marijuana. Only four days earlier, Kesey had finally been sentenced on the first charge to a relatively light six months on a work farm and three years on probation, on the condition that he not associate with the Merry Pranksters. This time, because of his prior conviction and his violation of the condition of his earlier sentence, Kesey faced an automatic five-year sentence if convicted

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[20]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 134-37.

of the new charge, and he would now have to serve the full three years on the first conviction, regardless of the outcome of the new charge.[21]

Faking his own suicide (in such a ham-handed, put-on style that nobody believed it), Kesey fled to Mexico where he remained for eight months before he returned to California, intending to remain in the United States "as a fugitive, and as salt in J. Edgar Hoover's wounds," as he put it in an interview. Finally, Kesey was a *real* outlaw. In October 1966 FBI agents arrested him.[22] Kesey now faced three felony charges, and potentially twelve years in jail, but the FBI dropped the charge of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution, and he ended up serving only five months on a prison work farm just outside of La Honda in the summer of 1967. Upon his release he returned to his home in Oregon and retired from the active ranks of counterculture heroes.

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In light of Kesey's legendary status as one of the founders of the American counterculture, this sketchy narrative raises a number of questions. Kesey's influence on the counterculture — especially the "hippie" side of it — is indisputable. The spread of LSD use, the psychedelic style, acid rock — all can be traced to a significant degree back to Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' bus trip and the Acid Tests. Why did their experiments have such broad appeal? What were Kesey and the Pranksters trying to accomplish, and what did they actually accomplish? And finally, why did Kesey turn his back on the movement he had helped to create at the very moment that it seemed about to be vindicated in the so-called Summer of Love? Although many other factors were at work concurrently, we cannot answer these questions without examining the significance of the Myth of the Frontier in Kesey's and the Merry Pranksters' work in this period. In this discussion, I

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[21]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 222-30.

[22]Quoted in Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 328.

will adhere loosely to the chronology outlined above, examining first Kesey's own influences and his first two novels before turning to the Merry Pranksters period and Kesey's ultimate departure. Throughout this analysis, I will highlight Kesey's relationship to the Frontier Myth, the ways it influenced him and how he, in turn, incorporated it into his work.

It is significant that Kesey's early literary influences were Edgar Rice Burroughs and Zane Grey. Although the ostensible subject matter of their novels was quite different — Grey wrote Westerns; Burroughs wrote mostly science-fiction and fantasy (but also some Westerns) — the two authors had much in common, not least the influence of the Frontier Myth upon their work. Both were enormously popular and successful writers of "pulp fiction," the mass-produced medium of popular literature which succeeded the nineteenth-century dime novel, and both published the first novels of their prolific careers in 1911; thus their work appealed to essentially the same audience within a common historical context. In terms of theme and setting as well, these authors followed the dime novel, albeit indirectly, through the influence of what Richard Slotkin calls the "red-blooded" novelists of the turn of the century, such as Jack London, Owen Wister and Thomas Dixon, Jr. These novelists and their pulp-fiction successors alike "addressed the problem of adapting the traditional concept of democratic heroism, based on the Myth of the Frontier, to a post-Frontier America." Where the red-blooded novelists, however, undermined the populist elements of their dime-novel influences by positing racially-superior "neo-aristocrats" as the heroes of their novels and appealing to a "higher-quality" audience, pulp-fiction writers such as Grey and Burroughs gave their heroes similar noble attributes but appealed to a broader audience "by finding a way to re-confound the

distinctions of class and heredity that Wister, Dixon, and the red-blooded social scientists had labored to define."[23]

Edgar Rice Burroughs in particular followed (after 1916) the theories of two racialist historians, Madison Grant and Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, who saw "world history as merely the lengthened shadow of an eternal and unremitting war of 'colors.'" These men felt that the frontier experience — conquering the lands of non-white races — had had a regenerative effect on the White race, but now, with this task finished, the preservation of the race depended on scientifically-managed eugenics programs and immigration restrictions. Burroughs' novels, however, posited situations in which his heroes found new regenerative frontiers "in outer space or at the Earth's core or in the latent 'savagery' of their own nature," observes Slotkin. "Where Stoddard fears and wishes to repress the 'inner barbarian' who succumbs to the 'lure of the primitive,' Burroughs sees the inner barbarian as the repository of the racial energy that will sustain, and if need be regenerate, the hegemony of the Great Race."[24] It would of course be absurd to suggest that Ken Kesey sympathized with the messages of Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) or Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920); even in Burroughs' work, the political intent of these polemics was diluted and confounded by their transposition into fantastic scenarios where "race wars" became wars between interplanetary species. Burroughs' particular genius, and a lesson well-learned by Kesey, was imaginatively to rearticulate "the theme of the White man's adventure in the wilderness and his struggle to master savage nature and savage men — the theme of the Myth of the Frontier" — into situations and contexts that had nothing to do with the "historical" frontier. According to Slotkin, this allowed Burroughs

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[23]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 194-95.

[24]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 199, 202; see also Dippie, *Vanishing American*, 250-257.

> to project an almost limitless range of possible resolutions to the historical scenario envisioned by the Myth — to adapt the myth to shifts in political concern and mood — while retaining enough of the ideas and images made familiar in the original to lend credibility and resonance to the most fantastic variations.[25]

Burroughs, and Kesey after him, was thus able to retain certain themes of the Frontier Myth, such as the emphasis on the hero's individual mastery of self and environment, the regenerative value of violent conflict, and the need to reconnect with "uncivilized" human nature. Removing these themes from the historical context of the American frontier merely allowed the extension of their application and broadened their appeal.

To the extent that he was interested not in presenting a vision of the "real" West, but rather in telling entertaining stories, Zane Grey shared Burroughs' freedom in this regard. For Grey, "the central symbols of the myth/ideological system are not representations of real-world values and conflicts but literary properties whose meaning is established by well-understood conventions."[26] This is not to say that the values and ideals that Grey speaks to are meaningless, but that he abstracts their meaning from the stock images and situations that his novels depict. Thus, conflicts between Indians and Whites, or between Mormons and Gentiles, in his novels are not "about" racial or sectarian conflict as such, but about alternate styles of action and ways of living. The Mormons Grey depicts in *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912), for example, are not intended to correspond to real Mormons living in the West; rather, their "villainy" is an "abstraction and combination of several standard types of literary 'evil,'" notes Slotkin. "Their treatment of women links them to the savage enemy of the Indian war romance: they seduce and/or kidnap and rape Gentile

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[25]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 198, 211.

[26]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 212.

women or coerce them into polygamous marriages. Their monopolistic politics and economics link them to the oligarchs of the 'populist' dime novel."[27]

For a twentieth-century reader like Kesey, the pulp fictions of Grey and Burroughs are of a piece. Whether the adventures take place on Mars or in Utah, in the nineteenth or twenty-first century, the settings are imaginary and fantastic while the values and style of heroic action are timeless. As Slotkin points out as well, the pulp-fiction genres of this era — the Western, science fiction, and the hard-boiled detective story — all retained key aspects of the Frontier Myth and "have remained staples of cheap literature and have been successfully adapted to movies and television." Though its outward manifestations have diversified, key elements of the Frontier Myth have permeated modern American mass culture, and it has been imbibed in many different forms by Kesey and just about anybody who grew up in the latter half of this century.[28]

The impact of the Myth of the Frontier on Kesey's own work is evident in his first two novels, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*. *Cuckoo's Nest* instantly became a best-seller and garnered rave reviews for the promising young author. Along with such novels as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* became a literary staple of disaffected youth in the 1960s. It is significant for this thesis both for its popularity and for its use of the Frontier Myth. The critics and public alike were cooler in their reception of Kesey's next novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. It was much longer, more experimental and intricate, and subtler in its use of the Frontier Myth, but it was also much less popular

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[27]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 214.

[28]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 194.

and well-known. Thus it is important in the present study less for the impact it had on a nascent countercultural audience than for its reflection of Kesey's artistic development.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest tells the story of Randle McMurphy, who feigns psychopathy to obtain a transfer from a prison work farm to a psychiatric hospital. McMurphy persistently opposes the repressive regime of the hospital, enforced by "Big Nurse" Ratched, and becomes a hero to his fellow inmates. In this allegorical tale the hospital is an extension or manifestation of "the Combine," the conformist and lifeless American society of the late twentieth century. All the marks of Kesey's development to this point show to some extent in this novel. *Cuckoo's Nest* clearly shares the Beat sensibility of Kerouac and Ginsberg in its revolt against conformity and authority. Stylistically, Kesey's lyrical, stream-of-consciousness prose also resembles the Beats' jazz-like freedom with language, even though Kesey, unlike Jack Kerouac, carefully and extensively revised the novel before publication. The impact of Kesey's experiments with drugs is also present, though muted. Kesey wrote the first few pages of *Cuckoo's Nest* while under the influence of peyote and has claimed that "this Indian came to me. . . . The Indian came straight out from the drug." "This Indian," Chief Bromden, was the novel's narrator and one of the hospital's inmates. In terms of what was to follow for Kesey, however, the real departure from the Beats, and the insertion point of the Frontier Myth, was his choice of protagonist, Randle McMurphy.

McMurphy is no Beat poet or nihilist intellectual; his character "comes from Sunday matinees, from American westerns," says Kesey. "He's Shane that rides into town, shoots the bad guys, and gets killed in the course of the movie [significantly, contrary to Kesey's statement Shane does *not* die in the movie; he rides off, badly wounded, to continue his lonely travels]. McMurphy is a particular American cowboy hero, almost two-

dimensional."[29] Ideologically, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* rearticulates the Frontier Myth by placing the hero in a new context — a twentieth-century psychiatric hospital. This alters the Myth's meanings by simultaneously reinforcing its conception of heroic action while undermining its efficacy in the modern world. McMurphy is clearly a hero: the other patients admire him and begin to emulate him, but these heroic qualities lead to his destruction when the hospital's doctors finally lobotomize him.

McMurphy's personal defeat is a recurrent theme in formula Westerns, suggesting the tragedy of the eponymous hero (memorably portrayed by Alan Ladd) of George Stevens' film of *Shane* (1953), who survives his ordeal but whose very heroism sets him apart from the "common man," thus preventing him from living a normal life of stability, family and community; or the character of Jimmy Ringo (played by Gregory Peck) in *The Gunfighter* (1950) whose reknowned prowess invites an endless series of challenges from other would-be gunfighters until one of them eventually slays him. In its fatalism and in the opposition of Ringo's chosen life to that of his old compatriot who had reformed and become a sheriff before building a fatal reputation, *The Gunfighter* implicitly criticizes the gunfighter's style of action as anti-social as well as self-destructive, but in the usual formula, the hero's personal defeat is the cost of a social victory. Shane's efforts save the Starretts' and their neighbours' farms; Will Kane (played by Gary Cooper) in *High Noon* (1952) saves the town, despite the townspeople's "cowardly" refusal to countenance or assist him. McMurphy defeats no one; Big Nurse and the Combine survive after

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[29]Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Viking, 1962); Benson, *Stegner*, 256; Kesey quoted in Tanner, *Kesey*, 21; Kesey, "Art of Fiction," 70. Tanner, *Kesey*, tells of an earlier unpublished story by Kesey, "The Kicking Party," wherein "the main character . . . is a jazz musician, a North Beach type with goatee and a drug habit. He is a mental patient who one of his fellow patients says is 'plotting to undermine the whole system with his evil laugh and sinful stories.' The head nurse watches him 'through her protective glass shield from her sterilized isolation booth.' He tells 'heightened, hilarious stories of jazz days or junk days or juice days.' The undermining of the system, the laughter and stories, and the head nurse suggest *Cuckoo's Nest*; but at this point Kesey is still caught up with Beat life. The Beat response to an uncongenial conformist society was withdrawal by such means as wine, pot, jazz, and Zen. Kesey's temperament was not suited for withdrawal" (24).

engineering his destruction. Yet McMurphy is also not merely a doomed figure like the Gunfighter, for he has taught the audience (both his fellow inmates and the reader) the lesson that the Combine can only win with the continued assent of its "victims." The townspeople in *High Noon* cannot prevent the hero's victory by their capitulation to the villains, but in *Cuckoo's Nest* the "townspeople's" (the inmates') capitulation is the *source* of the villains' power. One man, no matter how heroic (and the cowboy/gunslinger is the apotheosis of American heroism) cannot defeat the Combine. McMurphy's style of action is not discredited; it is the audience's passivity, their reluctance to participate in McMurphy's movie and become heroes themselves, that ensures the Combine's victory.

Kesey's next novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, followed two years later. It was a tightly constructed (despite its size — over 600 pages) and complex work, and Kesey experimented with narrative technique, drawing especially from cinema.[30] None of his innovations were merely empty demonstrations of formal prowess, and some were brilliant, but the brilliance of his experiments ironically pointed to his increasing dissatisfaction with the novel form. Writing *Great Notion* had been extremely arduous for Kesey — it had taken him two years whereas he had written *Cuckoo's Nest* in only ten months — and following its completion, he felt that the book had taken too much out of him. He declared that he would never undertake a project of its size again.[31]

Sometimes a Great Notion casts Hank Stamper, the head of an Oregon logging family, in the role of the frontier hero. The plot of the story revolves around the conflict between the Stamper family and the unionized loggers of the fictional town of Wakonda. The union is on strike but the independent Stampers insist on defying the strikers and fulfilling the obligations of their contract with the lumber mill. The central conflict of *Great*

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[30]Kesey, "Art of Fiction," 82; Tanner, *Kesey*, 58-65.

[31]Perry, *On the Bus*, 36; Tanner, *Kesey*, 54.

Notion, however, is between Hank and his younger brother Lee, a sensitive, college-educated "panty-waist" who, following a botched attempt at suicide, accepts the invitation from Hank to return from the east to help with the logging operation. As in the novels of Zane Grey, *Great Notion* is not really "about" the opposition between the union and the independent loggers, or between Hank and Lee, but between the value-systems and styles of action that they each represent. The union is not "evil" in itself, nor are its members, but it symbolizes the conformist, homogenizing force of modern society and the fear that prevents the mass of people from acting independently and effectively; rather, they seek safety in the anonymous crowd. Lee embodies the other end of civilization's evil: the effete and "cultured" eastern metropolis that controls the instruments of "progress" and disdains the "common man." Hank stands between the two: on the one hand he is "common" — he works with his hands, he reads little, prefers action to talking, and possesses no inherent qualities of race or class to distinguish him from his neighbours — but at the same time he is possessed of a singular strength of will and wit that raises him above the mass. Thus Hank can be seen as a "populist" hero in the sense that he is "of the people" and opposed to the "eastern establishment," even as he fights the "organized populism" of the lumbermen's union.[32]

In the course of the story, Hank comes to discover that he has spent his life playing the hero to an audience — his brother and the townspeople — who expected him to be a larger-than-life figure and wanted at the same time to knock him down for being what they could not. He is like The Gunfighter, famous for his heroism and skill, and therefore the obvious target for anyone who wants to make a name for himself. Hank's ultimate victory, and his reconciliation with Lee, comes from his acknowledgement of his own weakness

[32]See Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 214, 216-17, on Zane Grey's ideological confounding of "populist" heroism with "progressive" outcomes: "A hero who acts in a 'populist' style may be taken as the representative of liberal or democratic values (for example, racial tolerance or anti-monopoly) even though he acts on behalf of a conservative, repressive, or corporatist program" (216-17).

and his refusal either to lie down and surrender to his enemies or to continue playing the hero for an audience. He retains his frontier-hero qualities, but he exercises them for himself, rather than to fulfill others' expectations. Unlike Randle McMurphy, Hank will not sacrifice himself for the benefit of others.

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When Kesey decided not to continue writing after *Sometimes a Great Notion*, he did not cease to perceive himself as an artist. The moment the Merry Pranksters' bus trip became an artistic experiment, it also became essentially *Kesey's* artistic experiment. Despite his assertions that the group had no leader — that everybody did "their own thing" and went "with the flow" — Kesey was the *de facto* leader of the Merry Pranksters. We might compare the Pranksters to a jazz combo where the players were allowed to improvise within the group dynamic, but Kesey was the band leader; he was the one who scored the charts, chose the musicians, and decided who would solo and when. As Kesey was a writer, the members of the group also had to be characters in the narrative. He did not have complete control of the Pranksters themselves, but he sketched the narrative structures they would follow and defined the types of characters they ought to play. If we see this period as Kesey would have us see it, as an autonomous artistic expression like his novels, we can also observe the progression of his work from those novels to the bus trip and the Acid Tests.

When we approach the Merry Pranksters in these terms, then, we find first that the "narrative," given its real-world context, was contingent on unforeseeable events and decisions that Kesey and the Pranksters made from day to day. The artistic analogy appears to break down somewhat because Kesey could not control, beyond a very limited extent, the external circumstances against which decisions were made. As in any good novel, however, the narrative flows from the *characters'* decisions, so to understand the narrative, we must first understand the characters — the values, conflicts, and motivations

that informed their decisions. In this respect, Kesey had much more control. He defined the types of characters that would figure in his "novel," and he found the roots of all these types in the Frontier Myth.[33]

In adopting such an approach, however, we must be cautious about trying to discover strict one-to-one correspondences between the Merry Pranksters-as-characters and their mythical types, for two crucial circumstances invariably confound such correspondences. In the first place, we are always talking about real people who acted in the real world, so they did not act as consistently to their types as we might expect if they were merely fictional characters and, more to the point, variations from type cannot always be expected to serve a particular artistic purpose. Secondly, the fact that the participants and historical context are of the late twentieth century necessitates significant variation from the originals and also allows Kesey imaginatively to conflate or combine types (as in his fiction). Thus, for example, we can see Kesey alternately, or in combination, embodying the types of the Frontiersman in the mold of Daniel Boone, the Outlaw Gunfighter of twentieth-century Western novels and films, or the wild and strange Indian waging guerilla war on American civilization. With these caveats in mind, however, we can still analyze the Merry Pranksters in these terms to understand the meanings they intended to convey and also the possible meanings that a contemporary audience might have "read" in their actions.

Both in the event and in the analysis, the locus of this enterprise is, of course, Ken Kesey himself. In this "novel" Kesey was the protagonist. Kesey identified closely with

[33]It is worthy of note that this emphasis on character *directing* the narrative has strong parallels in the way Kesey wrote his novels, especially *Sometimes a Great Notion*. That novel began with the image of an amputated arm, with its middle finger extended, hanging over a river. Kesey recalled that this image "came to me before I knew whose arm it was. Writing the book was the way to figure out who belonged to the arm and why" (Kesey, "Art of Fiction," 81). Thus, even in his fiction, Kesey felt that the story had a life of its own, that by creating characters and seeing how they interact with one another, the narrative would emerge without his direct (or premeditated) control, as a result of the characters' actions.

Randle McMurphy and even more so with Hank Stamper.[34] Others identified him with his fictional characters as well, as when Robert Stone, commenting on Kesey's flight to Mexico in 1966, said that "in a way he became a character in his own book. He became McMurphy."[35] Ken Kesey the Merry Prankster was the protagonist of the new artistic endeavour, cut from the same cloth as McMurphy and Hank. As the protagonist, Kesey was himself the frontiersman or the gunfighter. The Merry Pranksters may have also seen themselves in these terms, and Kesey in fact encouraged it, but they were still supporting characters. Anybody who was not Kesey was like one of the townspeople in *Great Notion* or the inmates of *Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey set the example and people could emulate him or not. One was either "on the bus" or "off the bus." Being "on the bus" meant that one had the courage to try to be like Kesey — independent, fearless and disciplined — but it also meant that one deferred to Kesey's leadership. And ultimately, Kesey's rule was assured by the fact that, despite the protestations of democracy and communality, his money bankrolled the Pranksters.

One of the most vivid examples of Kesey's strange control over the Merry Pranksters concerns his ongoing relationship with one young man, Sandy Lehmann-Haupt. Lehmann-Haupt seemed to fit into Kesey's project right from the start. A sound technician in New York, Sandy had been going through a rough period in his life and tried to check himself into a psychiatric hospital in 1963. His older brother Carl, who had known Kesey at Perry Lane, talked Sandy out of it and took him to the opening of the stage version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Carl introduced Sandy to Kesey, who had flown to New York for the opening, and asked Kesey to take his younger brother back to

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[34]It is perhaps more apt to note Kesey's dual identification with both Hank and Lee Stamper in *Great Notion*: "The two Stamper brothers in the novel are each one of the ways I think I am," Kesey said in an early interview. Gordon Lish, "What the Hell You Looking in Here for, Daisy Mae? An Interview with Ken Kesey," *Genesis West* 2, no. 5 (1963): 26, quoted in Tanner, *Kesey*, 54.

[35]Quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 156.

California, "to get him out of the whole New York morass."[36] Kesey obliged and Sandy became one of the Merry Pranksters and a perfect foil for Kesey. In Wolfe's account, Sandy Lehmann-Haupt is very much like Lee Stamper to Kesey's Hank. Early in the bus trip, Sandy felt "his first twinge" that only "Authorized Acid" would be consumed and that the Pranksters were "going to be separated into performers and workers, stars and backstage. Like . . . there [was] an inner circle and an outer circle."[37] His early resentment of Kesey's control soon turned, with the aid of drugs, into full-blown paranoia and distrust of Kesey, mixed with a need to have Kesey's approval.[38] The ultimate dynamic of this relationship seemed virtually identical to the fictional relationship between Hank and Lee. Kesey liked Sandy, but he expected Sandy to stand up for himself, to act like the independent and strong gunfighter, and so he was reluctant to extend to Sandy any special treatment. Sandy, on the other hand, was clearly emotionally fragile to begin with, and he misinterpreted Kesey's attitude as disapproval of him, when Sandy desperately wanted to be "on the bus," to be what Kesey expected.

What did Kesey expect? He expected the Pranksters to be modern-day gunfighters, to possess the idealized qualities of the Frontier Myth's hero type. He converted, for example, the mythical gunslinger's physical prowess and skill into terms appropriate to their project. He demanded that they "be deadly competent," writes Wolfe. "Like with the red rubber balls they were always throwing around when they got out of the bus. The idea of the red rubber balls was that every Prankster should always be ready to catch the ball, even if he wasn't looking when it came at him. They should always be that alert, always

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[36]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 50-1.

[37]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 67.

[38]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 82-3.

that alive to the moment, always that deep in the whole group thing."[39] The costumes, musical instruments and items such as the red rubber balls, the filming and recording equipment, the bus itself — all of these were the Pranksters' tools, like the frontiersman's axe and rifle, with which they must be efficient and controlled, ready for anything regardless of the state of their minds from drugs, hunger, or lack of sleep.

Richard Slotkin discusses what he calls the "Gunfighter Mystique" that predominated in Western films from the 1950s. Slotkin's characterization of the Frontier Myth's "gunfighter" bears more than passing similarity to Kesey and the Pranksters. "It may be more useful to think of the term 'gunfighter' as describing a style of action appropriate to a certain kind of world-view rather than a specific social role in a particular historical frame," he writes:

> The "cult of the gunfighter" is constituted by the use of a particular character and style of action to resolve a wide range of conflicts in a nearly limitless variety of settings. The outward form of the gunfighter style emphasizes artistic professionalism in the use of weapons, but what justifies and directs that professionalism is a particular state of mind, a "gunfighter" understanding of "how the world works."[40]

Kesey demanded "artistic professionalism," but the weapons appropriate to their mission were the movie cameras and red rubber balls. The classic movie gunfighters stand "on a historical border between the world in which things were still 'possible' for them and a world in which they and their profession are becoming outdated"[41] — much as Kesey maintained that writing, his original profession, was outdated. Unlike the gunfighter who sticks to his craft despite the diminishing theatre in which his skills are useful, however, Kesey simply changed his profession. In another inversion of the mythic narrative,

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[39]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 88.

[40]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 401-2.

[41]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 401.

Kesey's version of the gunfighter is a harbinger of the new age rather than a relic of the old, but his primary identity as a writer still guarantees his double identification with his "outdated" profession.

Where Kesey and the Pranksters diverge from this characterization is in the nature of their understanding of "how the world works." The gunfighter's understanding is "essentially 'hard-boiled': the world is a hostile place, human motives are rarely good, and outcomes depend not on right but on the proper deployment of might."[42] The subtle twist on this is that the Pranksters' understanding is not the stark realism of the movie gunfighter — or Cold War era "realpolitik" — but a "soft-boiled," transcendentalist vision based on LSD experiences and the extension of a left-bohemian emphasis on anti-materialism, sensual pleasures and community. Both counterculture warrior and gunfighter "become critically conscious . . . of just what has gone wrong with them and their world." The conclusions may differ in detail, but the emphasis here is on the possession of a *superior* knowledge. "Irony is as essential to the gunfighter's heroic style as his skill with weapons," writes Slotkin. "It tells us that, like the 'man who knows Indians,' he has 'seen through' the mystifications of society. But the object of his irony is American society itself — the sacred 'people' of the democracy for whose sake the hero of the 'progressive' Western idealistically risked his own life."[43] The hero of *Shane* is the epoch of this style. Many of the terms of Slotkin's description of Shane could apply as easily to Kesey in the Prankster period as to Kesey's own earlier fictional creations: "Shane is never part of the community, and his superior values are not seen as belonging to the community. He is an aristocrat of violence, an alien from a more glamorous world, who is better than those he

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[42]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 402.

[43]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 401.

helps and is finally not accountable to those for whom he sacrifices himself."[44] By the time the Merry Pranksters reached New York in July, Kesey had them disciplined into the tight unit he wanted. To all appearances they were some unholy cross between comic-book superheroes and the heroes of *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), trying to save American peasants from the tyrannical conformity of Cold War culture, whether they wanted to be saved or not.

The elitism of the gunfighter's style — which Kesey and the Pranksters translated into "You're either on the bus . . . or off the bus" — served to a great extent to isolate the Pranksters from those who chose not to see the world in their way, as the visits with Jack Kerouac and Timothy Leary in New York illustrate. When the Pranksters arrived in New York, they hosted a party in Manhattan where they met Beat poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky, and Jack Kerouac. Kerouac, wasted from alcohol, embittered and hostile, was decidedly unimpressed by the Pranksters, who by this time were always "on"; they merely carried on their show for the Beat luminaries. The Pranksters, for their part, felt their hero, the author of *On the Road*, had rejected them. Each side misunderstood the other. Tom Wolfe describes the scene in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*:

> Kesey and Kerouac didn't say much to each other. Here was Kerouac and here was Kesey and here was Cassady in between them, once the mercury for Kerouac and the whole Beat Generation and now the mercury for Kesey and the whole — what? — something wilder and weirder out on the road. It was like hail and farewell. Kerouac was the old star. Kesey was the wild new comet from the West heading christ knew where.[45]

In the classic frontiering mode, however, the Pranksters accepted the break with the old community, determined to kick over the traces and set out into the unknown.

At the suggestion of Allen Ginsberg, the Merry Pranksters next stopped at the mansion in Millbrook, New York, where Timothy Leary, Richard Alpert, and others were

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[44]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 400.

[45]Perry, *On the Bus*, 83-90; Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 90.

conducting experiments with LSD as the International Federation for Internal Freedom. The Pranksters arrived unannounced at the Millbrook mansion the morning after twenty or so of the house's inhabitants had participated in a "very intense and profound [acid] trip," Alpert (Ram Dass) recalled, and "by seven or eight in the morning, everybody was in [a] mellow, delicate, vulnerable space and drifting off to bed for the day." Then the Pranksters arrived: "So we rolled in there, and set off a green smoke grenade that blew green smoke right through the open windows into their house," Ron "Hassler" Bevirt said. "It was like the Huns coming to visit Camelot."[46] Ken Babbs remembers Alpert saying to the Pranksters later in the day, "I feel like we're a pastoral Indian village invaded by a whooping cowboy band of Wild West saloon carousers."[47] This stop, too, disappointed the Pranksters, who had anticipated a "summit meeting" of the "acid tribes of the different coasts." Ram Dass suspected that "they ended up feeling kind of rejected and I don't think very warmly welcomed."[48]

The difference between Leary and Kesey was primarily one of style. Leary, too, was following an American tradition dating from the Transcendentalists, but Stephen Tanner notes that even among the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists there was a discrepancy of style between the "high-principled, chaste, self-disciplined" Emerson and Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, who "joined the transcendental vision with the vulgar, the physical, and the sexual."[49] Whitman's stronger influence on the Beats, Tanner argues, carried over to Kesey in his early association with that scene. This same split was duplicated in the respective styles of Leary and Kesey. Tom Wolfe oversimplified, but hit

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[46]Ram Dass and Ron Bevirt quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 93

[47]Perry, *On the Bus*, 96.

[48]Quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 97.

[49]Tanner, *Kesey*, 95.

to the heart of the matter when he wrote that "the trouble with Leary and his group is that they have turned *back*" where Kesey and the Pranksters were going forward. The Merry Pranksters were fascinated by technology, popular culture, speed, primary colours and the aesthetics and semiotics of the American flag. Leary and his followers

> have turned back into that old ancient New York intellectual thing, ducked back into the romantic past, copped out of the American trip. New York intellectuals have always looked for . . . another country, a fatherland of the mind, where it is all better and more philosophical and purer, gadget-free, and simpler and pedigreed: France or England, usually — oh, the art of living, in France, boys. The Learyites have done the same thing, only with them it's — India — the East — with all the ancient flapdoodle of Gautama Buddha or the Rig-Veda blowing in like mildew.[50]

The invocation of the Frontier Myth in Kesey's pronouncements and the Pranksters' journey lent the project historical resonance, justifying their actions by contextualizing them within a recognizable and nationally-sanctioned narrative of expansion and exploration, but it was a narrative that in itself looked not to the past and simplicity, but to the future. The imperatives of the Frontier Myth's historical narrative are imperialistic and progressive.[51]

Even so, the classic American frontier or Western hero embodies a central paradox regarding imperialism and progress. As I have already pointed out, he always stands on the border between wilderness and civilization, between the past and the future. The frontiersman blazes the trails for civilization, making the frontier safe for progress, and the women who represent civilization, but his heroism and skill derive from the very wilderness and savagery that civilization must destroy in its progress. Ultimately, the

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[50]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 100-1.

[51]Ironically, Kesey is today less well-known than Leary probably because his use of the Frontier Myth, at the height of its impact in American culture generally, made the Pranksters' activities seem within a few years ultimately more commonplace and unremarkable than Leary's more emphatic rejection of American culture in particular and Western European culture in general. At the same time, Kesey's reliance on the Frontier Myth put him up against more widely-accepted interpretations of the same symbols and narratives, such as the use of Frontier-Myth language to justify United States involvement in Vietnam. See Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, esp. Chs. 13-16.

Western hero is more comfortable among Indians and outlaws in the wild west than in the civilization that follows on his heels.

In this light, Kesey's fascination with the Hell's Angels makes sense, as the Angels represented an anarchic, individualistic but tribal way of life that was distinctly opposed to effete American civilization. Kesey's questionable decision — taken without consultation with any of the Merry Pranksters — to associate the Pranksters with these violent hoodlums again illustrates, as well, the extent of Kesey's leadership of the group. When Kesey announced that the Hell's Angels were coming to La Honda, there was no debate among the Pranksters.

Hunter Thompson, who introduced Kesey to the Hell's Angels, was never comfortable with Kesey's plans. "I didn't know how they would take to Kesey," he recalled, "because they didn't know him from shit. But they took to him right away. It was like I'd brought them Bob Dylan. We smoked a couple of joints and they just liked him. It was a love affair from the start." Kesey invited the San Francisco chapter of the Angels to come to the place at La Honda the next weekend, and the Angels accepted. In preparation, the Pranksters put a fifteen-foot long, red, white and blue sign on the gate reading "THE MERRY PRANKSTERS WELCOME THE HELL'S ANGELS." Hunter Thompson, Allen Ginsberg and Richard Alpert came for the party, as did four or five police cars which stayed across the road, lights flashing, "waiting for the riot that was sure to come." The Hell's Angels and the Merry Pranksters got along famously and the resultant "two-day rout" miraculously went off without any open violence or trouble from the police.[52]

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[52]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 206-7. For accounts of the Hell's Angels party see Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 150-161; Perry, *On the Bus*, 113-14, 129-35; Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (New York: Ballantine, 1996 [1967]), 191-93, 227-37.

Why did Kesey decide to include these hoodlums in the Pranksters' activities? In a matter of one or two months in 1965 the Hell's Angels, primarily with the assistance of the national media, had gone from being an obscure gang of small-time California hoodlums to nationally recognizeable celebrities. They immediately became the darlings of the Bay area hip intellectual circuit, to the stupefaction not least of the Angels themselves.[53] Kesey and the Pranksters' flirtation with the Angels in the summer of 1965 may or may not have instigated this strange association, but the Pranksters certainly took it further than anybody else. The left generally caught on to the Angels as symbols of alienated youth, cast out from the stifling, conformist mainstream of Cold-War America; they had only a vague notion of the reality of the Hell's Angels' lives. Hunter Thompson writes that when he was working on his book on the Hell's Angels, Berkeley intellectuals regarded him as the Angels' social coordinator and thought he could produce them for any function. He recalls with black humour

> one party at which I was badgered by children and young mothers because the Angels didn't show up. . . . I told the Angels about the party and gave them the address . . . but I hoped they wouldn't come. The setting was guaranteed trouble: heaping tubs of beer, wild music and several dozen young girls looking for excitement while their husbands and varied escorts wanted to talk about "alienation" and "a generation in revolt."[54]

Kesey's fascination with the Hell's Angels seems at once both inexplicable and completely natural. He appears to have had a much more realistic idea of what kind of people these were — an idea that might have given the East Bay intellectuals pause — but this was part of the attraction for Kesey. They were given to excesses, yes, but the Hell's Angels were real outlaws in the mold of the Wild West, walking anachronisms from the mythic era that most appealed to Kesey. As Thompson demonstrates, the mass media's representations of the Angels in 1964 and 1965 duplicated this interpretation, independently

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[53]Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 38-39, 226-62 and *passim*.

[54]Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 226.

of Kesey.[55] The Hell's Angels were another foil for Kesey. His ability to associate with, and to be accepted by, these notorious outlaws marked him as a "man who knows Indians." He was an outlaw among outlaws. In a sense, the Angels allowed Kesey to put his theory into practice. He might have claimed to be a frontiersman or an outlaw, but by earning the respect of the Hell's Angels he palpably demonstrated that he was what he claimed.

55A police reporter for the San Francisco *Chronicle*, himself a former Hell's Angel, wrote that "Some of them are pure animals. They'd be animals in any society. These guys are outlaw types who should have been born a hundred years ago — then they would have been gunfighters" (Birney Jarvis quoted in Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 4). The media did not use this sort of language from the start; Thompson relates an incident in 1964, which was the first to garner national coverage, where several Hell's Angels allegedly raped two teenage girls on a beach in Monterey. According to the Angels themselves, the girls had wandered with their boyfriends into the Angels' beach party, curious and probably drunk. The girls consented at first to having sex with some of the Angels, but they may or may not have started to object after the first few encounters. In the meantime, "one of their boy friends had got scared and gone for the cops — and that's all it was" ("Frenchy," a Hell's Angel, quoted in Thompson, 17). The press coverage of the story, on the other hand, bears a striking resemblance to the oldest narrative form of the Frontier Myth, the "captivity narrative." "According to the newspapers," writes Thompson, the Hell's Angels were savages, "'Stinking, Hairy Thugs,'" at least twenty of whom "snatched" the girls "away from their terrified dates, and carried them off to the sand dunes to be 'repeatedly assaulted.'" The point here is not to suggest that the girls were "asking for it," but Thompson notes that the underaged girls had earlier been in a local bar where the Angels gathered while authorities — who had decided to receive the motorcycle gang in a "spirit of armed truce" — tried to keep locals away to prevent any trouble. The Angels — with their wives and girlfriends — continued their party on a secluded Monterey beach, away from tourists and locals; the girls and their dates had followed. The girls may in fact have been forcibly raped at the beach, and should not be held in any way accountable, but the media's claims that they had been abducted were clearly exaggerated in the interest of good copy and maintenance of moral standards. The adoption of the captivity narrative structure made the media's version seem plausible and palatable, at least to the extent that it drew a clear line between victim and perpetrator in terms familiar to an American audience.

By typifying the Hell's Angels as wild savages, however, the media allowed the flip-side of the Frontier Myth's view of Indians as "noble savages" to come into play. In this counter-interpretation of the media's portrayal, one could see the Angels as the truly oppressed victims of the mainstream society, unjustly cast out and shunned as "the lowest form of animals," as Senator George Murphy described them (Murphy also explained Mexican field-workers' fitness for their labour by saying: "They're built low to the ground, so it's easier for them to stoop.") (Quoted in Thompson, 14). With detractors like this, it was easy for radicals to defend the Hell's Angels, to explain away their worst acts as an inchoate lashing-out against society, born of their alienation from the modern world. "The Hell's Angels' massive publicity — coming hard on the heels of the widely publicized student rebellion in Berkeley," wrote Thompson, referring to the Free Speech Movement on the University of California's Berkeley campus in 1964, "— was interpreted in liberal-radical-intellectual circles as the signal of a natural alliance." By the following year, however, the media's Hell's Angels were no longer wild savages, but lonely, alienated, elite gunfighters. Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 4, 13-18, 244; See Slotkin, *Regeneration*, Chs. 4-5 for a discussion of the captivity myth.

The Frontier Myth's particular construction of gender identity formed a fundamental part of this demonstration, and its effects run throughout the Merry Pranksters' activities and internal dynamics during this period. Kesey's identification with the Hell's Angels was also, perhaps primarily, a way of proving his manhood, in the terms of the Frontier Myth. The world of the Hell's Angels was homosocial, and built around a version of masculinity and a complementary version of femininity that bear a startling resemblance to that of the twentieth-century Western. To be a Hell's Angel, or to be accepted by them, one had continually to prove himself, like the gunfighter. He must accept all challenges, never let his guard down, and demonstrate his superiority through violence, or at least through a marked willingness to use violence, if necessary. Physical prowess and decisive action are the marks of a man; thoughtful analysis, verbal communication, and dependence on others are shunned as womanly. Men act; women are acted upon, when they figure at all.

Jane Tompkins has argued that the Western genre in twentieth-century literature and film — which typically features the gunfighter, as against the frontiersman, hero type — developed specifically in response to the domestic novel of the nineteenth century and the social values that it represented.[56] The twentieth-century Western was a genre that articulated a reaction to the feminized Christianity of the late nineteenth century. Again and again in Westerns, "the climactic scene . . . occur[s] in opposition to a woman's will"; women espouse Christian values of charity, forgiveness, and opposition to violence, and the men in Westerns repeatedly win the day by proving the woman's Christianity to be so much claptrap.[57] Action, not words, gets things done. The world of the Western is godforsaken; the only power that works in the real world is the bullet, not the Word of

[56]Tompkins, *West of Everything*, Chs. 1-2 and *passim.*

[57]Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 132.

God, and certainly not the words of women who believe in God. The Frontier Myth devalues women's Christian, humanistic discourse specifically, but it devalues women's experiences and opinions more generally. The woman opposes the hero's use of violence, but when the job is done, all is forgiven. The woman's opposition — her voice — is meaningless because her experience and values are divorced from "reality." Women invariably acquiesce to the hero's — the man's — discourse because it is demonstrably superior to their own. The woman finds, despite her original beliefs, that the violence of men in fact solves all problems.

Kesey's early novels rearticulated the Western's view of women. Kesey objected to the screenplay for the 1975 film of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* on the grounds that it depicted Nurse Ratched as the villain, whereas the real villain of the novel is the Combine. Yet over Kesey's objections, we have to ask, Who are the women in the novel? Three characters are female; two are prostitutes — the "whores with hearts of gold" familiar to the Western's audience — and the third is Nurse Ratched herself. She is the Combine's representative, its executive officer, in the psychiatric ward. Her gender is not a happenstance, for she represents the civilization that has become the Combine and has emasculated the men in McMurphy's ward. Some of the men's problems are specifically related to women in their lives. One is a cuckolded husband; another has been made helpless by a domineering, prying mother. McMurphy is in the ward because he wanted to get out of serving time on the prison work farm, but the crime that put him behind bars to begin with was the statutory rape of a fifteen-year-old girl ("Said she was *seventeen*, Doc," McMurphy claims, "and she was *plenty* willin'"[58]). McMurphy, unlike his fellow inmates, is a *man*, and his mission on the ward is to make the inmates act like *men*, which means specifically that they must overthrow the control that these women — wives,

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[58]Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest*, 44.

mothers, underage girls who lie about their age, and the Big Nurse — have over them. In doing so, they will reclaim their masculinity. Defeating the Combine is as simple as this: Be a man.

The most significant female character in *Sometimes a Great Notion* is Hank's wife Viv, and her character is thinly developed. Kesey has since asserted that *Great Notion* can be read as a "Women's Lib" novel. "It's about men matching egos and wills on the battleground of Vivian's unconsulted hide," he told Paul Krassner in 1971. "When she leaves at the end of the book, she chooses to leave the only people she loves for a bleak and uncertain but at least *equal* future."[59] From Viv's point of view, we can perhaps agree with Kesey's assessment, but the fact remains that the intolerable circumstances of her life in the Stamper family essentially force her to leave, and her departure has no negative moral repercussions for Hank or Lee. On the contrary, her absence removes the final obstacle to Hank and Lee's reconciliation, and thus the masculine world of Hank, the western hero, is left intact, and now Lee, too, can be a man.

The Western's construction of gender roles is no less evident in the Merry Pranksters. Men dominate the Pranksters' activities, while women are seldom more than ciphers in the extant accounts.[60] The women who have any significant roles are invariably one of two possible types: they are either sexual creatures, with no voice or personality; or they appear because they are capable of acting like the men. In the Merry Pranksters' documentary video of the bus trip, only one of the six Pranksters interviewed is a woman (Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Adams). Paul Perry's book *On the Bus* contains first-hand reminiscences from eighteen men and one woman. Of the fourteen Pranksters who went

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[59]Quoted in Tanner, *Kesey*, 87.

[60]The significant accounts are Wolfe, *Acid Test*; Perry, *On the Bus*; and *The Merry Pranksters* videocassette. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* also contains a good deal of information about Kesey and the Pranksters in relation to the Hell's Angels.

on the 1964 bus trip, three were women (Kesey's wife, Faye, stayed in La Honda with their two children), while of these three, only one, Paula Sundsten, was considered a "real" Prankster. Jane Burton, who was pregnant at the time, needed a lift to New York, while the third was an aspiring young actress named Kathy Casano, who had been allowed to come along because she was a girlfriend of Prankster Mike Hagen.

Casano fits the first of the two types mentioned. Hagen had told her that they were making a movie, and that if she came along she would be in it and her "future stardom assured." None of the Pranksters knew anything about her. According to Wolfe, Casano stayed stoned continually from the first distribution of acid in Wikieup, Arizona, mostly huddled naked under a blanket in the back of the bus, until the Pranksters pulled up to novelist Larry McMurtry's house in Houston. McMurtry was an old friend of Kesey's from Stanford's creative writing program and was expecting them. He did not expect the lurid lunacy of the bus and its riders, or the greeting he received from Casano. Hearing the Pranksters' approach, McMurtry had gone outside with his young son in his arms. Casano leapt from the bus, dropping the blanket that covered her, and rushed naked to McMurtry and his son, screaming "Frankie! Frankie!" in the belief that she had been reunited with her own "divorced-off little boy." She tried to take the boy from McMurtry, who gently tried to prevent her from doing so while attempting to explain her mistake to her. The Pranksters managed to calm her down for awhile, but she wandered off in the middle of the night, was picked up by police and turned over to the custody of a boyfriend who flew out from San Francisco. According to Wolfe, she ended up in a psychiatric hospital for a time. The Pranksters dubbed her Stark Naked and drove on. She "had completed her trip. She had gone with the flow. She had gone stark raving mad," Wolfe wrote, perhaps hyperbolically, but Kesey and the Pranksters accepted little responsibility for this

episode.[61] They salved their consciences as they drove out of Houston by sending a telegram that read:

> TO KATHY AKA STARK NAKED CARE OF HOUSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT FOURTH FLOOR. CONGRATS ON FINE PERFORMANCE STOP CAPTURED ON FILM AND TAPE STOP FUTURE STARDOM ASSURED STOP PRESSING DEMANDS OF SHOOTING SCHEDULE FORCES DEPARTURE STOP CONTINUED SUCCESS AND WELL WISHES FROM THE MERRY BAND END.[62]

For them, it was merely part of the experience — at best an experiment that didn't work out; at worst, an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of frontiering. Casano was never more than a tragic sex symbol for the Pranksters.

The following year, at the Hell's Angels party at La Honda, an even more disturbing incident occurred that Hunter Thompson described as "somewhere between a friendly sex orgy and an all-out gang rape."[63] This incident is recounted in Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, Wolfe's *Acid Test*, and by Thompson and two other male witnesses in Perry's *On the Bus*. No woman comments on the incident in any of these sources. It is important to contextualize the accounts in relation to the reporters' vantage points. Tom Wolfe began his book in 1966, long after the Hell's Angels party; his account is based on interviews with the Merry Pranksters and others, including Hunter Thompson. According to all of these accounts, the scene began consensually, as one of the women at the party offered to have sex with three Angels, and the four went off to a small building on the property. Soon others heard about what was going on and came to join in. Wolfe depicts a lurid scene that never departed from the woman's wishes. When the woman's "ex-husband" (whom Wolfe does not name, but the accounts in *On the Bus* reveal was Neal

[61]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 74-79; Perry, *On the Bus*, 69-78.

[62]Quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 78.

[63]Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 191.

Cassady, although they all claim that he was her "friend") joined in, Wolfe commented, "shit, this is going too far — . . . but that is her movie," he concluded, "it truly is, and we have gone with the flow."[64] Of the three eyewitness accounts, Ram Dass (Richard Alpert) and Prankster Ron Bevirt both minimized the possibility that the woman was actually raped by describing a humorous scene. Both noted that the "Angels were too stoned to get erections" (though obviously they overcame this setback) and "the Angels were very courtly," Bevirt recalled. "They were calling the woman 'ma'am.'" According to Bevirt, he and Ram Dass left when one Angel said, "Maybe things would go better if the people who weren't participating would leave."[65]

Thompson's comments are more revealing. He was clearly very uneasy about what was happening, but his interpretation is ambiguous. "She was not struggling in any way," he insisted. "I think under the circumstances she could have left any time she wanted to because the Angels would have been way out of line if they said, 'No, you can't leave.' They created the atmosphere, but then so did she." Thompson continued:

> At any given time there were twenty people in the room and maybe half of those either participating or likely to. There were always four or five participating, sort of like a bunch of cats toying with a mouse. Word of it seeped out, and pretty soon others got involved and it was like a party. It made me pretty nervous. I was tape recording, but I would have to leave the room and go out to the car every once in a while because it was making me nervous. I figured that what was going on was really over the line.[66]

The woman was obviously stoned; to suggest that she actively consented — assuming that she was even aware of what was happening — was wishful thinking at best. Thompson's handwritten notes from that night describe the "girl jerking and moaning, not fighting,

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[64]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 157.

[65]Ram Dass and Ron Bevirt quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 134.

[66]Perry, *On the Bus*, 134-35.

clinging, seems drunk, incoherent, not knowing, drowning . . ."[67] "If the girl was raped why didn't she protest or ask somebody for help?" he asks, but he seems already to have answered that question. "The Angels were vastly outnumbered, and it was not the sort of party they would have wanted to break up for the sake of a would-be mama. . . . If anybody had protested the gang-bang the outlaws would have called it off. But nobody seemed bothered."[68]

What is most interesting about Thompson's comments is the suggestion that he bought Kesey's self-identification with the Western hero. Thompson assumes, first, that if the woman really had been in danger, one of the stalwart heroes would have known and come fearlessly to the rescue. Second, he takes for granted the notion that Kesey and the Pranksters had — on this, their first meeting — sufficiently impressed the Hell's Angels with their own version of Wild West outlawry that they could order the Angels about. But the most disturbing aspect of the whole incident is the fact that apparently nobody thought to ask the woman if she was frightened or — even assuming that she did instigate the encounter, which is by no means certain — if she had had enough at any point during the "several hours" the "gang-bang" continued. Thompson seems to have been fully aware that he was witnessing a gang-rape, but he has to deny his own understanding because he believes Kesey's heroic construction of himself and the Pranksters. At the very least, this belief allows Thompson to absolve his own failure to intercede. The underlying logic is that if the woman *had* been raped, the *men* at the party (excluding the rapists), being *men*, would have interceded on her behalf. None did, so it stood to reason that — contrary to appearances — she must not have been raped.

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[67]Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 192.

[68]Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 192-3.

What of the other women associated with the Merry Pranksters? Kesey's wife Faye has already been mentioned. Faye seems to have played the role of the quiet, supportive and subordinate wife to Kesey, the man of action. She is such a non-entity throughout Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* that it comes as something of a shock to see her face in the photographs of *On the Bus*. She appears to have tolerated Kesey's parties and departures from the home without a word of criticism, cooking for whatever visitors happened to be hanging around the place at La Honda and caring for their children. We do not even know how she reacted when Prankster Carolyn Adams became pregnant with Kesey's child. Loud, opinionated, and boisterous, Carolyn Adams (also known as "Mountain Girl"), on the other hand, was one of the rare women who fit into the Merry Pranksters because she could act like a man. At the Hell's Angels party, rather than shrink from the outlaws, Adams showed her fearlessness by smart-talking and ordering the Angels about as though she was one of them.[69]

The Frontier Myth constructed a strict formula of gender identities, but it was not absolutely necessary for these to correspond to biology. A woman like Mountain Girl could, of course, act like the men around her and adopt the guise of the outlaw/gunfighter, but it was more difficult for a woman to do so. Adults and children of both sexes watched Westerns and women and girls could identify with the men in the films simply because any audience tends to identify with the protagonist of the tale, the one who acts. The difficulty for women was that the popular culture of the post-war period, of which Westerns were a significant part, was also a socializing agent in the culture. Westerns were more than fanciful tales with colorful heroes and villains; they carried the Myth of the Frontier which, as we have seen, was a powerful ideological force in American society. It presented moral lessons and types of heroic action that were explicitly identified with national values.

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[69]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 116-7, 156.

Having been thus socialized from childhood, adult women had to deny significant aspects of their social identity as females before they could actively identify with the masculine Western hero. Mountain Girl had considerably more to prove than any of the men in the Merry Pranksters if she wished to be one of them.

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To this point, I have focused mainly on the Merry Pranksters as characters in their own "novel" or "movie," providing sketches of the types with which they identified. I will now turn more closely to the "narrative" — what the Pranksters *did*. The Merry Pranksters' work falls generally into two fairly distinct stages: the bus trip and the Acid Tests. By looking at how Kesey directed these ventures I will show further how the Frontier Myth informed Kesey and the Pranksters, and how it impacted, in turn, the counterculture's development generally.

In a 1994 interview, Kesey was asked what he had wanted to explore on the bus trip. Kesey responded:

> What I explore in all my work: wilderness. I like that saying of Thoreau's that "in wilderness is the preservation of the world." Settlers on this continent from the beginning have been seeking that wilderness and its wildness. The explorers and pioneers were out on the edge, seeking that wildness because they could sense that in Europe everything had become locked tight with things. The things were owned by all the same people, and all of the roads went in the same direction forever. When we got here there was a sense of possibility and new direction, and it had to do with wildness.[70]

As Kesey himself notes, this trope of pioneering was central to his activities in the sixties. The literal wilderness of the American frontier having been exhausted, in terms of significance if not in geographical fact, Kesey and the Merry Pranksters throughout this time explored two *figurative* wildernesses, each of which in turn predominated the two major phases of the Pranksters' experiments. The original "wilderness," and the one that

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[70]Kesey, "The Art of Fiction," 82-83.

became central to the Acid Test period, was the landscape of the mind that LSD opened up. The notion of equating the expansion of consciousness with the American experience of frontiering was not a new one; the American transcendentalists, and Henry David Thoreau in particular, had used the frontiering metaphor to describe the individual's journey to enlightenment.[71]

The second "wilderness" the Pranksters explored, which showed most vividly in the bus trip of 1964, was on the surface still the geographical space of America, but ironically transfigured by the Pranksters' invocation of the Frontier Myth. Geographical mobility had long ago been identified as a peculiarly American trait, and one identified particularly with the experience of frontiering. In the age of the automobile, the Beats had raised mobility for its own sake to an art form, and the historical resonance of westward movement and exploration was not lost on them, but Kesey and the Pranksters deliberately obscured the line between their present and the American past.[72] The Merry Pranksters were "the unsettlers of 1964," Kesey reportedly said, "going backwards across the Great Plains. All of these things have a mythic story. . . ."[73] They were not merely travelling to New York; they were self-conscious explorers, inverting the mythic story of the frontier by driving east — only in terms of the Frontier Myth could travelling east be construed as "backwards" — through American civilization, as though it had become the new wilderness that must be explored and colonized. The "squares" — the average, suburban, workaday Americans whom the Pranksters would startle and terrify — suddenly became the avatars of "civilization," the strange and unfathomable Indians whom the intrepid

[71]Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 518-38.

[72]George W. Pierson, "'A Restless Temper . . .'," *American Historical Review* 69, no. 4 (1964): 969-989; see, for example, Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin, 1991 [1957]), *passim.*

[73]Kesey quoted by Ken Babbs in Perry, *On the Bus*, 52.

pioneers from the western edge of the continent must displace and convert (or "turn on," in the parlance of the time). The metaphor of frontiering allowed Kesey and the Pranksters to conflate art with reality, so that in reproducing the mythic process of temporary degeneration on the frontier by behaving like "savages" to outrage and amuse themselves and their audiences, they somewhat arrogantly used "America as the set," as Ken Babbs recalled, "and the people of America as part of the experience and drama that would happen. We had no idea how it would turn out."[74]

The deliberate conflation of life and art turned out to be a problem that intermittently plagued Kesey throughout this period, and would later lead to some of the ethically unsound (or worse) actions of his imitators in the counterculture. The main idea on the bus trip was for the Pranksters to invade towns like a guerilla circus, trying to draw "civilians" into their carnival, to break down the barriers between "performers" and "audience." Tom Wolfe frequently used the metaphor of a movie or movies to describe a sense of participation in the Pranksters' show; the Pranksters' ideal was to expand their "movie" to include everybody who wanted to play in it. A typical Merry Prankster raid was their descent on Phoenix, Arizona, conservative senator Barry Goldwater's home town, during the 1964 election campaign. With a sign on the bus reading: "A Vote for Barry is a Vote for Fun" and American flags flying from the roof, the Pranksters "drove the bus backward down the main drag of Phoenix" while Mike "Mal Function" Hagen, the Pranksters' cameraman, filmed it from the road. "The citizens were suitably startled, outraged, delighted, nonplused," writes Wolfe, "and would wheel around and start or else try to keep their cool by sidling glances like they weren't going to be impressed by any *weird shit* — and a few smiled in a frank way as if to say, I am with you — if only I could be with

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[74]Perry, *On the Bus*, 66.

you!"[75] Equally typical, however, were the bad trips, disasters and near-disasters that "going with the flow" brought out. Sandy Lehmann-Haupt's paranoid fantasies, Kathy Casano's acid-fueled breakdown in Houston, and the rape at the Hell's Angels party all demonstrate that turning real life into art had potentially dangerous consequences, and Kesey did not have sufficient artistic control to guarantee the safety and well-being of those who *were* with him.

Nonetheless, artistic expression remained the indelible core of all that Kesey and the Merry Pranksters did during this period. Kesey intended the trip itself to be a primary artistic statement, taking the immediacy of the Beats' spontaneous writing a step further by eliminating the medium. Kesey did not even see the film as the ultimate goal of the exercise, but as a second-hand record of the real work, like a film of a jazz performance. After the bus trip, the Merry Pranksters settled in at La Honda, editing the film and hosting parties on a weekly basis. These parties provided the setting within which the Pranksters continued their experiments with electronic media and LSD, and they soon evolved into the notorious Acid Tests which, by the end of 1965, had helped to inaugurate the new psychedelic scene.

It is important to remember that although Kesey had given up on writing, he was still an artist. He had not given up on communicating with an audience; he was seeking a better medium. "Better" for Kesey meant more direct and spontaneous and less artificial. So while the Pranksters worked at editing the film, they were also perfecting the artistic expression of their "parties," trying to augment the effects of the LSD with the live musical performances of assorted Pranksters and the folk-rock band The Warlocks (who would soon become The Grateful Dead), and technological innovations in sound systems and light shows, which included segments of the film shot on the trip. Kesey was toying with the

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[75]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 69.

idea of building an enormous geodesic dome as a "theatre" within which people could take acid and participate in the whole sensory experience of sights and sounds. He wanted to erase the distinctions between artist, medium and audience. The Hells Angels party, as Tom Wolfe writes, "hadn't been a party but a show"; it had demonstrated to the Merry Pranksters that outsiders — even those as scary as these thugs — could participate in their show and appreciate on some level what they were doing. So after a year of experimentation, tinkering with the film, and watching their ranks swell with newcomers, the Pranksters decided to take the show on the road once again, not least because Kesey's place was becoming too small to contain it.

The first Acid Test was essentially the La Honda show transplanted to Babbs' chicken ranch just outside Santa Cruz. The extent of the publicity the Pranksters managed to generate was a sign reading "Can YOU Pass the Acid Test?" that they placed in a local bookstore, and most of the participants were the usual La Honda crowd. The Pranksters held the second Acid Test in San Jose on December 4, 1965, on the night of a Rolling Stones concert. This time they advertised with handbills bearing the same cryptic question and a street address and somewhere between 300 and 400 people showed up. Despite a last-minute change of venue to Muir Beach, north of San Francisco, the third (or fourth) Acid Test attracted a crowd of similar size.[76] According to Paul Perry, after the Muir Beach Acid Test Kesey "told the other Pranksters that the Acid Tests were over. Too many people, too much weird energy, too many bad vibes. No more, said the Chief."[77] Whether the Pranksters overruled him or Kesey simply changed his mind is unclear, but the Acid Tests continued through the end of 1965 and into the new year.

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[76]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 204-221; Perry, *On the Bus*, 115. Wolfe identifies the Muir Beach Acid Test as the third, as does Perry on page 115, but on page 141 of *On the Bus* the text refers to it as the fourth, the third allegedly having been held in Mountain View.

[77]Perry, *On the Bus*, 115.

The Acid Tests were both parties and shows, but they were also more than either of these terms suggest: they were *rituals*. Buffalo Bill's Wild West had been, above all, a ritual which sanctified a certain version of the American frontier experience. Buffalo Bill's reenactments of such events as Custer's Last Stand provided interpretations of these events, determining a certain meaning. The repetition of the performance ritualized the event by simplifying causes and effects and attaching firm and clear meanings to the outcome. It was emphatically not a "show"; it *was* "The Wild West," suggesting, as Slotkin points out, that it was a *place* rather than a show. It was "a space in which history, translated into myth, was re-enacted as ritual."[78] The Acid Test was just such a place, where searchers could come and experience anew the Merry Pranksters' psychedelic voyage through America and their own minds.

The hip counterculture would later wink knowingly when, for example, the 1966 Trips Festival (discussed below) was billed as "An LSD experience without the LSD," but this was precisely the point of the Acid Test: to replicate — through a sensory overload of sounds, coloured abstract projections, bizarre costumes, strobe lights, and film from the Pranksters' bus trip — the total experience of LSD generally and the bus trip specifically. Most of the Acid Test participants took LSD anyway, but Kesey and the Pranksters had quite deliberately created a technological environment which would *simulate* as nearly as possible the effects of LSD, independently of whether the participant had ingested the drug itself. The Pranksters' 1964 bus trip was inextricably articulated into this experience, through the film and sound recordings that were remixed and played back within the context of the Acid Test. The result was that Kesey's unique version of the psychedelic experience, replayed over and over for ever-growing audiences, became *the* psychedelic experience. Where LSD use had previously been restricted to small groups of individuals

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[78]Slotkin, *Gunfighter*, 69. See *Gunfighter*, Ch. 2 for a discussion of Buffalo Bill's Wild West.

in parlours or rigidly-controlled laboratories, Kesey and the Pranksters took crowds of unprecedented size and enjoined them to use LSD simultaneously and communally. The Acid Tests opened the doors to the psychedelic experience to anyone who was curious enough to attend, and at the same time tried to shape or define that experience in specific ways. A crucial aspect of the Acid Test, and one that is easy to overlook, however, is that it was a *controlled* environment. Kesey and the Pranksters had created a psychedelic panopticon that reproduced the particular experiential structure that *they* favoured. Thus, Kesey's articulations of frontiering metaphors to the use of LSD, rock music and pop culture, and disjointed and disorienting multi-media, through the repetition of ritual, became characteristic of the counterculture in general.

During this period, LSD had already spread throughout the Bay area, beyond the Pranksters, and other groups were holding their own parties, but the Acid Tests were the model; the Merry Pranksters were the pioneers. "The Acid Tests were the *epoch* of the psychedelic style and practically everything that has gone into it," Tom Wolfe claimed in 1968. "I don't mean merely that the Pranksters did it first but, rather, that it all came straight out of the Acid Tests in a direct line leading to the Trips Festival of January, 1966." Hip entrepreneur Stewart Brand decided to bring the "tribes" together in a massive three-day long "Trips Festival," to be held at the San Francisco Longshoremen's Hall. The second night was to be the highlight of the festival; it would be called The Acid Test and would feature Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. According to Tom Wolfe, the Festival "grossed $12,500 in three days, with almost no overhead, and a new nightclub and dance-hall genre was born." Within two weeks Bill Graham, whom Brand had hired to promote the Festival, "was in business at the Fillmore auditorium with a Trips Festival going every weekend and packing them in." The Trips Festival

> brought the whole thing full out in the open. "Mixed media" entertainment — this came straight out of the Acid Tests' combination of light and movie projections, strobes, tapes, rock 'n' roll, black light. "Acid rock" — the

> sound of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album and the high-vibrato electronic sounds of the Jefferson Airplane, the Mothers of Invention and many other groups — the mothers of it all were the Grateful Dead at the Acid Tests.[79]

The "acid heads," as the turned-on underground population referred to themselves, were "amazed at how big their own ranks had become — and euphoric over the fact that they could come out in the open, high as baboons, and the sky, and the law, wouldn't fall down on them. . . . The Haight-Ashbury era," Wolfe concludes, "began that weekend."[80]

At least part of the success of the Trips Festival can be attributed to the publicity that Kesey's second arrest, on the eve of the festival, generated. Out on bail, Kesey attended the Trips Festival incognito, "disguised" in a silver space suit with bubble helmet but, rather than wait for the police to catch up with him, he decided to go into hiding in Mexico. He left on January 23, 1966, the final day of the Trips Festival. The Haight-Ashbury era would have to go on without Ken Kesey.

Some of the Merry Pranksters have since speculated that Kesey "wanted to get busted so he could force himself to become a fugitive. Why? For the adventure." But there was more to it than adventure. In the first place, as noted earlier, Kesey had tried in vain to end the Acid Tests less than two months earlier. He may have reconsidered at the time, but it is clear that he felt things were getting out of hand. He was being turned into a guru, which, besides being a drain on his own vigour, ran against his belief that people ought not to look to others for guidance, but stand up on their own. Allowing himself to be arrested gave him an excuse to abandon the scene that he had significantly helped to create. Additionally, becoming a fugitive from the law by escaping to Mexico fit Kesey's self-image as an outlaw and a loner. "If society wants me to be an outlaw," he declared just before leaving San Francisco, "then I'll be an outlaw, and a damned good one." He

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[79]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 234, 223.

[80]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 234; Perry, *On the Bus*, 151.

further justified this stance by giving his escape social significance: "People at all times need outlaws."[81]

The Pranksters continued to hold Acid Tests in Kesey's absence, carrying them up and down the west coast while young dropouts from all over the United States flocked to California, San Francisco and the Haight-Ashbury district. Some pilgrims sought out Kesey himself in Mexico, while he slipped into paranoia and excessive drug use. A friend of Kesey's from Stanford, Robert Stone, followed him to Mexico and lived with him there for some time. "Kesey was rather worried," Stone recalled:

> He didn't know what the hell he was going to do next. I mean, he was a fugitive. . . . People kept turning up who nobody knew. Things were a little out of control. . . .
>
> It was a pretty bad scene. Everybody was very paranoid . . . and some very peculiar people showed up, some of whom later had some connection with the Manson family. Needless to say, there were some extremely bad vibes down there.[82]

Several of the Merry Pranksters also joined Kesey in Mexico, but after eight months, Kesey decided to return to the United States.

As I have already noted, the FBI caught Kesey very soon after his return to the States. During the short time between returning from Mexico and this arrest, Kesey had begun to talk about going "beyond acid." He felt that the counterculture had exhausted the drug's possibilities and, ever the explorer, he wanted to move on. In court now, his lawyers used this vision to get him out on bail, suggesting that he was going to tell the kids about the dangers of LSD (which had recently been made illegal). He was up against three felony charges, and potentially twelve years in jail, but within five days he had posted bail on the drug-possession charges and the FBI had dropped the charge of unlawful flight to

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[81]Steve Lambrecht quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 152; Kesey quoted in Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 35.

[82]Quoted in Perry, *On the Bus*, 173.

avoid prosecution.[83] He and the Pranksters began to plan the Acid Test Graduation for October 31, 1966.

The hip underground went into a panic. Some thought that Kesey had sold out to avoid a lengthy jail term; others suspected that the Graduation was a huge prank through which Kesey would reassert his power over the movement. Few believed that Kesey was sincere, but several of his comments, both before and after the FBI nabbed him, clearly indicate that he was disillusioned with the growing psychedelic scene and the direction (or lack thereof) it was taking. Wolfe recounts a conversation shortly before the Acid Test Graduation, for example, between Kesey and Gary Goldhill, an advocate for the legalization of marijuana and LSD. Goldhill felt that Kesey was turning his back on the movement. People were not ready to stop taking acid, Goldhill argued: "They're just beginning to open the doors in their minds —." "But once you've been through that door," Kesey replied, "you can't just keep going through it over and over again. . . . Don't say stop plunging into the forest. Don't say stop being a pioneer and come back here and help these people through the door. If Leary wants to do that, that's good, it's a good thing and somebody should do it. But somebody has to be the pioneer and leave the marks for others to follow."[84] The Graduation was held, not at Winterland Coliseum as had originally been planned, but at a warehouse in San Francisco. Bill Graham, the original promoter of the event, had panicked and pulled out. It was a relatively small event, basically the long-time core of Pranksters and fellow travellers and several reporters. The counterculture did not want to graduate from acid; Kesey had left behind the movement that he had helped to create. Like Daniel Boone or James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, Ken Kesey's

[83]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 324, 332-33.

[84]Quoted in Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 27. See also *Acid Test*, 339, 353-4, 355.

trailblazing had opened a new territory for others to settle, but there was no longer room for the frontiersman. Kesey packed his kit and plunged into the forest.

This was, of course, Kesey's own spin on his departure, echoed by Tom Wolfe in 1968. The logic of the Frontier Myth narrative precluded all but a narrow range of solutions. Kesey had set himself up as a gunfighter crusading for a good cause. The story of the gunfighter's crusade leads inexorably to a final conflict — a showdown or shoot-out. When Kesey planned the Acid Test Graduation, this is what most observers expected (or hoped) was coming. Even the guise of the frontiersman, plunging further into the forest, was insufficient for most of the counterculture — members of a generation raised on gunfighter westerns and struggling to exist in a tense atmosphere of confrontation with police, soldiers, and government officials. If Kesey was taken at his word, his attempt to move "beyond acid" was bare cowardice; he was cynically selling out to the powers that be. What most of the Bay area heads hoped for instead was a confrontation with the authorities, a final showdown from which either Kesey would emerge triumphant as the undisputed champion of the counterculture — the "fastest gun in the West" — or, better yet for those who did not want a single, powerful "leader" with his own agenda, Kesey would be martyred, safely carted off to jail for standing up to the law of the metropolis.

In reality, the new frontier for Kesey indeed seems to have been more of a withdrawal than a forging ahead. Several court appearances between November 1966 and May 1967 resulted in a ninety-day sentence on the second possession charge and six months on a work farm, plus three years probation, for the first. He was allowed to serve the sentences concurrently. He took the bus and moved his wife and children back to Oregon and began serving his sentence in June 1967 on the prison work farm near La Honda. The Merry Pranksters drifted apart. Kesey was released in November, having served five months, and he returned to Oregon, where he began tending his farm, raising

his children, and he resumed writing.[85] He had spent the Summer of Love behind bars, and did not seem concerned with what he had missed. In 1969 several of the Merry Pranksters tried in vain to convince Kesey to come with them to Woodstock. When they returned from the music festival, they found that Kesey had erected a sign in his driveway bearing an unmistakable message: "No."[86]

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[85]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 369-70.

[86]M. Gilbert Porter, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: Rising to Heroism* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), xviii.

Conclusion

We are all outlaws in the eyes of America.

Jefferson Airplane, "We Can Be Together" (1969)

On October 15, 1965, Ken Kesey appeared at Berkeley as an invited speaker at a two-day rally to protest the war in Vietnam. Wearing a Day-Glo orange helmet, and with the Merry Pranksters behind him, he stood before the crowd of 15,000 and delivered a rambling talk punctuated with choruses of "Home on the Range" blown on his harmonica. "You know, you're not gonna stop this war with this rally, by marching," he said. "That's what *they* do . . . They hold rallies and they march . . ." he continued, comparing the speaker who had preceded him to Mussolini. He finally concluded by saying, "There's only one thing to do . . . there's only one thing's gonna do any good at all . . . And that's everybody just look at it, look at the war, and turn your backs and say . . . Fuck it . . ."[1] Rally organizers, not surprisingly, considered their invitation to Kesey a mistake.

As bizarre and bewildering as the assembled students and activists found Kesey's speech, however, it fell short of the spectacle Kesey originally planned. The Pranksters had painted the bus red and emblazoned it with assorted military insignia from American eagles to swastikas. Clad in military costumes and brandishing toy guns, the Pranksters wanted to arrive at the rally in the bus "as a freaking military invasion"[2] behind a full

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[1]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 197-200. Ellipses in original.

[2]Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 193.

cohort of Hell's Angels. The Hell's Angels failed to meet the Pranksters at the designated rendezvous, however, and they had to appear at the rally without them.[3]

Kesey's anti-ideological solution to the Vietnam War was typical of the Frontier Myth. From the early concept of the "safety-valve" through formula westerns, the ideal solution to social and political problems is to expand the frontier. Ideology is corrupt and artificial, the language of city-slickers who try to extort the ordinary man and woman. The language of the true American — the frontiersman — is action, even if that action is just to walk away in search of a better place. The lesson was not entirely lost on the Left, however, as versions of Kesey's anti-ideological stance began to show up in political activism as early as the following year when, during a student strike on the Berkeley campus, students tried to strike up a chorus of "Solidarity Forever." After a minute of stumbling, someone started singing "Yellow Submarine," and the assembly "rollicked into it, chorus after chorus." When asked about the song's significance by a reporter, one student, wearing a Lone Ranger mask and goatee, explained rather clumsily, "We're banding together in a Yellow Submarine and . . . it represents a new way of looking at life."[4] But in 1965 the 15,000 earnest war protesters who heard Kesey speak were still looking at life the "old way," seeking concrete solutions to clearly defined problems, and Kesey was already on another planet.

Barely four years later, in mid-August 1969 nearly half a million people, most of them in their late teens or early twenties, converged on a small town in upstate New York

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[3]The Hell's Angels did turn out on the second day of the rally, not to support the anti-war effort but (possibly with the collusion of the Oakland police) to assault the protesters when they attempted to march to the Oakland Army Terminal, a shipping point for men and supplies bound for Vietnam. The Hell's Angels later denounced war protests as "despicable" and "un-American", and the protesters as "traitors." Almost immediately the media began favourably comparing the Hell's Angels to the outlaws of the Old West; Lucius Beebe of the *San Francisco Chronicle* compared the Angels to the Texas Rangers. Thompson, ***Hell's Angels***, 253; 55-57.

[4]Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 209-10; Mark Kitchell, *Berkeley in the Sixties* (New York: First Run Features, 1990), videocassette.

for "3 Days of Peace & Music" that would prove a watershed moment for the blossoming American counterculture. They came from all over the United States, wearing long hair, bright colours, beads and buckskins. Labelled a "gathering of the tribe," the Woodstock Music and Art Fair represented for many of its participants a palpable sign that the "movement" was exactly that — a national phenomenon encompassing hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of people working together toward the attainment of shared ideals and goals. Participants sensed that they had ceased their isolation — had perhaps never been truly isolated at all — and were united in a loosely confederated movement that would continue to grow and change the face of America. Janis Joplin told the assembled audience, "We used to think of ourselves as little clumps of weirdos. But now we're a whole new minority group."[5] For many in the counterculture at the time, the trials and turmoil of the preceding decade had built inexorably to this joyful climax, and Woodstock has since become one of those rare events that epitomizes a whole era in the popular imagination.

The events of the decade had also been leading in more disturbing directions, however. The triumphalism of Woodstock gave way, before the year was out, to the despair and confusion of Altamont. Billed as "Woodstock West," the concert at the Altamont Speedway in California that December ended with the deaths of four people, one of them fatally stabbed by the headlining Rolling Stones' security force of Hell's Angels. But the ugliness of the event was not confined to the proximity of the gangsters. "Scanning the audience," one attendee later wrote, "I could see the chaos mounting — drunken brawls and bad acid trips. . . . I felt a sense of loss. My people hadn't the strength to transcend rudeness and get it all together." The feminist press reported that several women were raped during the concert, and another eyewitness made explicit the

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[5]Janis Joplin quoted in Jack Curry, ***Woodstock: The Summer of Our Lives*** (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), xx.

contrast with Woodstock: "I saw they were no longer joining hands and dancing together in spontaneous joy, as at the first gathering of the tribes."[6] The *faux*-Indians of Woodstock apparently had been displaced by the iron-horsed gunslingers of the Far West.

Also in December 1969, the national media began reporting the even more disturbing story of the Manson Family. In Los Angeles, less than a week before the Woodstock festival, followers of Charles Manson had savagely murdered seven people over a two day period. As but one of the hundreds of hippie communes springing up all over the United States, Manson's "Family" — which in its organization and many of its activities bore more than a passing resemblance to Kesey's Pranksters — struck a chord of fear among the general population; beneath the rhetoric of love and peace, could it be that all hippies were potential murderers? Most of the straights and hippies who considered this question gave answers that were direct — yes or no — and blandly predictable. Hippies sloughed off cherished American values, some argued; they disregarded authority; they abused drugs; of course they were capable of murder. One reader responded to *Life* magazine's coverage of the Manson Family by musing that if he had ever considered supporting the legalization of "indiscriminate public use of marijuana," the magazine's depictions of "such a hideous transformation" of formerly good young Americans "have convinced me it would be wrong — wrong — wrong."[7] Even so, *Life* had emphasized that "Charlie was no hippie; the very name made him angry," characterizing Manson as one of the criminals and ex-cons who in recent years had learned to "grow hair, assume beads and sandals, and sink — carnivores moving in with the vegetarians — into the life of

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[6]David A. Horowitz, Peter N. Carroll and David D. Lee, *On the Edge: A New History of 20th-Century America* (St. Paul: West Publishing, 1990), 471; Steigerwald, *The Sixties*, 177-78; Anderson, *The Movement*, 280-82; participants quoted in Anderson, 281; on the rapes, Susan Brownmiller, in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1975), 297, refers to an eyewitness account which appeared in a "West Coast women's liberation newspaper," but does not cite the exact source.

[7]*Life*, 23 January 1970, 18A.

hippie colonies,"[8] and the association appalled many hippies. "Now communes will be associated with trippy midnight blood rituals and wow don't ever get caught alone with somebody with long hair and cosmic thoughts 'cause he'll slit your throat for sure," lamented one disgusted hippie. "Down here the muttered comments and clammy stares are enough to make even a seasoned freak cry."[9]

Within the counterculture, however, existed a third and deeply ambivalent range of reaction to Manson. Some suggested that Manson was a victim of the Establishment and hailed him as a hero. Yet the praise of Manson's "heroic" qualities — primarily his revolutionary rhetoric — slid easily over to praise of the murders themselves. The Los Angeles underground *Tuesday's Child* proclaimed Manson "Man of the Year" and antiwar activist Jerry Rubin visited Manson in jail in 1970 and later declared, "His words and courage inspired us. Manson's soul is easy to touch because it lays quite bare on the surface."[10] These people may have believed Manson innocent, but Bernardine Dohrn of Weatherman, a radical fragment of the disintegrating New Left, took no pains to make such an argument. "Dig it!" she exhorted her fellow revolutionaries at Weatherman's 1969 "National War Council" in Flint, Michigan. "First they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them, then they even shoved a fork into the victim's stomach. Wild!"[11] Dohrn's remark underlined the subtext of all the attempts to turn Manson into a hero: members of the counterculture admired Manson above all because he preached violent revolution. If Manson had been framed, as he claimed, then here was tangible proof of the

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[8]Paul O'Neil, "The Monstrous Manson 'Family'," *Life*, 19 December 1969, 24.

[9]*Life*, 23 January 1970, 18A.

[10]Letters to *Life*, 23 January 1970, 18A; Anderson, *The Movement*, 279-80; Jerry Rubin, *We Are Everywhere* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), np, quoted in Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter* (New York: Bantam, 1988 [1974]), 296-97.

[11]Quoted in Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 400.

arbitrariness and illegitimacy of the state. Given this proof, however, the necessity of overthrowing the state became clear, and the possibility that Manson *had* ordered the murders could thus be admitted and even admired by virtue of its revolutionary impetus. At bottom, Manson's guilt made him even more attractive, for he had followed his revolutionary rhetoric through to its conclusion.

The ugly disaster at Altamont and the mixed reactions to the Manson family indicated that the American counterculture was in a crisis. Indeed, so many writers have cited Altamont and Manson together as symbols of the end of the hippie dream that the pairing is in danger of becoming a generic cliché. When we ask what happened to the counterculture — represented by Woodstock — the usual answer, in essence, is that Manson and/or Altamont brought it to an end; when we ask why Manson and Altamont happened, however, the response is either some variation of the "bad apples" theory or, more persuasively, that the counterculture inevitably self-destructed. Yet these stock answers do not address what aspect of the counterculture made its destruction inevitable, nor how it could have been both falling apart and reaching its fullest expression concurrently.

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the influence of the Frontier Myth on the counterculture to provide both a means of understanding where the counterculture came from and an explanation for its demise. The Frontier Myth pervaded and defined the counterculture to such an extant that it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine what the Sixties would have been without its influence. The Myth governed appearances and actions; it provided both the counterculture and its observers with a common language for explaining, justifying, accepting and criticizing the counterculture's activities. The counterculture did not simply adopt the Myth wholesale, however. Rather, various constituents adapted and revised the Myth to suit their particular purposes. In Chapter One I outlined the original Myth and also the concept of articulation, the process of creating a

new discourse by connecting seemingly discrete elements from extant discourses. In Chapter Two I applied this theory to one aspect of the counterculture to show how a group could adapt a quintessentially American myth for countercultural purposes. I focused my analysis on Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, a particularly apt example as the Merry Pranksters initiated the lifestyle most commonly associated with the "Psychedelic Sixties," and the demise of the Pranksters prefigured the chaos that marked the "end" of the Sixties.

Even as Kesey turned his back on writing "serious" fiction in favour of pranks and acid tests, the earnest student activism of the early sixties gave way to seemingly purposeless acts of disruption and violence. In the New Left, for example, the SDS would adopt increasingly confrontational tactics while relying less and less on clearly articulated ideological positions. Leaders who demurred from upping the ante with each clash became impotent while groups like Weatherman, who were willing to keep going, picking up guns and planting bombs, took over the movement. Charles Manson, as eclectic a psychopath as ever was, simply combined Prankster-style communalism with the rhetoric of violent revolution to attract followers to carry out his bizarre murders. Much more of Manson's tale than can be described here resonated with the imagery and ideology of the Frontier Myth: some of the more obvious examples include the Family's secluded home at the Spahn Ranch, once a site for filming Westerns; Manson's characteristic garb of fringed buckskins; and his fantasy of apocalyptic race war.

Most members of the counterculture, of course, held back from Manson's extremes. But when Joan Baez spoke to the audience at Woodstock about her husband's ongoing imprisonment for refusing to obey draft orders, she addressed a crowd of teenagers for whom the 1960s meant music, drugs and personal freedom. Even as they entertained vague, almost mystical, ideas about changing the world, they had little aptitude or inclination for serious political activism. "Yellow Submarine" had eclipsed "Solidarity

Forever," and eventually irreverence led to confusion and then disintegration as the counterculture fragmented and its leaders, like Kesey before them, walked away.

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