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# The Inevitability of Conformity: Ideology in Tom Wolfe's The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

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# The Inevitability of Conformity: Ideology in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, here is the paper's first paragraph:

In Tom Wolfe's 1968 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe follows author Ken Kesey and his group the Merry Pranksters as they develop as an American counterculture in the mid to late 1960's. In a key moment of the book, Kesey is asked to participate and give a speech at an anti-Vietnam War rally at Berkeley in 1965. He shows up, but instead of joining the political movement he shuns it, saying, "you know, you're not gonna stop this war with this rally, by marching... That's what they do... They hold rallies and they march... Ten thousand years, and this is the game they play to do it... holding rallies and having marches... and that's the same game you're playing... their game" [italics in the original] (Wolfe 222). Kesey rose to prominence after the publication of his first novel as the spiritual chief and leader of the Merry Pranksters and one of the early leading voices of the subsequent "hippie generation." Kesey and his group set out to explore the limits of consciousness and freedom by creating a countercultural movement based in drug use and non-conformity. Their ideology was to resist all ideologies, even without realizing the impossibility of such a task.

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### The Inevitability of Conformity:

#### Ideology in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

In Tom Wolfe's 1968 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe follows author Ken Kesey and his group the Merry Pranksters as they develop as an American counterculture in the mid to late 1960's. In a key moment of the book, Kesey is asked to participate and give a speech at an anti-Vietnam War rally at Berkeley in 1965. He shows up, but instead of joining the political movement he shuns it, saying, "*you know, you're not gonna stop this war with this rally, by marching... That's what they do... They hold rallies and they march... Ten thousand years, and this is the game they play to do it... holding rallies and having marches... and that's the same game you're playing... their game*" [italics in the original] (Wolfe 222). Kesey rose to prominence after the publication of his first novel as the spiritual chief and leader of the Merry Pranksters and one of the early leading voices of the subsequent "hippie generation." Kesey and his group set out to explore the limits of consciousness and freedom by creating a countercultural movement based in drug use and non-conformity. Their ideology was to resist *all* ideologies, even without realizing the impossibility of such a task.

Within the passage from Wolfe's book there is also a clear division between the "us," those who are young and at the rally, and the "them," which is those who

are in power and enforcing the status quo. “*That’s what they do... their game*” (Wolfe 222). Wolfe carefully makes “they” and “their” the only two words that are not in italics in order to emphasize the clear out-group that Kesey is taking note of and as a result creating through these polarizing terms. For Kesey there is simply no faith in the pre-existing institutions and conventions; even protesting is useless simply because it is not new and it is what the “norm” does.

However, his ideology and the ideology he and the Pranksters are resisting have much more in common than they may perceive. With influences from Kenneth Rexroth, the Beat poets and the San Francisco Renaissance poets who developed works based in Eastern philosophy and anarchism, the Merry Pranksters were not a new movement but rather a culmination of several pre-existing ideologies that Ken Kesey distorted—adding beliefs about psychedelic drugs like LSD and new ideas about devotion to ideological beliefs, through which he controlled the Merry Pranksters as the head of his own community of followers. He rejected one form of institution for another, but with himself as the leader. Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* chronicles the exciting lifestyles of the Merry Pranksters and puts on display the many ways that their cultural movement at the time resisted forms of conformity while still reifying it despite their intentions.

By situating Kesey and the Merry Pranksters in their cultural moment I will make clear the ways in which they were not part of a major new movement that celebrated nonconformity but instead a continuation of ideas shared between philosophers and poets and novelists within the San Francisco Bay area (and elsewhere) for many years. I will demonstrate those correspondences with other

writers to show how Kesey's ideas about nonconformity coincided and diverged from other thinkers at the time. Central to the Merry Pranksters' approach was a lack of a devotion to anything, which in turn created an unrecognized devotion to Kesey and tenets they did not fully understand. For instance, while the Merry Pranksters held hopes of "dropping out"—as other less known individuals did before and after them—they instead embraced the countercultural attitude of resisting mainstream America and rallying around Kesey and, as a result created a new form of conformity in the process.

Because of their unrealized political vision Tom Wolfe was able to not only chronicle their adventures but also make a critique on the inevitable state of conformity despite one's efforts to resist it at all costs. In doing so Wolfe funnels the adventures of the Pranksters through his own perspective in order to show the failures of their attempt and how a central form a devotion—something the Pranksters lacked—was actually central to a countercultural movement. In this way Wolfe aligns himself with many of the preceding countercultural figures but not with Kesey or any of the Pranksters as he undercuts their attempts to reject ideology al together.

Kesey's story starts with his rise to fame after his first novel. In 1962 Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was published. By this time Kesey had already started doing LSD while he served as a volunteer in several experiments where he was administered the drug and studied while the effects of the drug took place (Dodgson 102). Kesey, an Oregonian who moved to Stanford on a scholarship into the creative writing program, was quick to embrace the countercultural

attitudes of the Bay Area in the late 1950's and went to work on his first novel soon after graduating. The publication *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* made him a star and he used this newfound stardom to spread the good news about LSD and his personal philosophy about non-conformity, which was central to his novel. Right around this time—as a result of Kesey's newly found fame and developing reputation among the small bohemian community living near Stanford University—the Merry Pranksters started to experiment with LSD as the basis for a new philosophy that they thought was distinct from that of the Beats and others of the time.

Prior to the publication of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* Kesey was living on a street called “Perry Lane,” right outside of Stanford University. According to Wolfe,

Perry Lane was a typical 1950s bohemia. Everybody sat around shaking their heads over America's tailfin, housing-development civilization, and Christ, in Europe, so what if the plumbing didn't work, they had mastered the art of living... the model was always that old Zorba the Greek romanticism of sandals and simplicity and back to the first principles. (34)

Before Kesey had even garnered any major fame he was already involved in an early version of a somewhat communal lifestyle—something the hippies would take much further. Wolfe even refers to it as “typical,” pointing out the ways in which Kesey was not necessarily at the cusp of something new. He was living in a close-knit community with shared values like non-conformity, anti-capitalism and alternative lifestyles to that of the traditional “American Dream.” The group stressed simplicity and self-expression over modern development and conformist attitudes. Kesey

flourished in this environment and quickly became one of the most prominent members of this it.

Following the publication of Kesey's novel and his promotion of the powers of LSD, suddenly, according to Wolfe "all sorts of people began gathering around Perry Lane" (51). Wolfe says,

Neal Cassady had turned up... a bunch of kids from a pad called the Chateau, a wild-haired kid named Jerry Garcia and the Cadaverous Cowboy, Page Browning. Everybody was attracted by the strange high times they had heard about... the Lane's fabled Venison Chili, a Kesey dish made of venison stew laced with LSD, which you could consume and then go sprawl on the mattress in the fork of the great oak in the middle of the Lane at night and play pinball with the light show in the sky. (52)

Eventually, the Merry Pranksters started to take shape organically. However, their philosophy was still in its adolescent years with LSD as the main unifying element to their group so far. Kesey attracted some big names during this time period that had already or were soon to make a big impact on the American counterculture. Neal Cassady—Jack Kerouac's "Dean Moriarty" in his novel *On The Road*—became one of the most important Merry Pranksters and was their personal link to the Beat Generation. But their personnel lineup is only one of many links to the Beat Generation and other earlier countercultural figures and movements; Kesey had a vision for America that stood on the shoulders of those who came before him in the countercultural fringes of society. Taking from a variety of influences—the Beats and earlier writers, Eastern philosophy, anarchism, and experiences with psychedelic drugs—Kesey represented the culmination of several movements in one central figure rather than an entirely new ideology.

In 1957 an English-born philosopher and writer named Alan Watts published *The Way of Zen* to mainstream success. Watts's *The Way of Zen* served as one of America's most popular and easily digestible introductions to Zen Buddhism and Taoism in a time when Eastern thought was of growing interest for a large number of Westerners. Watts would go on to embody and simultaneously provide analysis for several of the developing countercultural movements from the later 1950's and 1960's, writing a series of books and essays that would prove influential and important to modern readers. Not only would he assist in the understanding of Eastern thought for Westerners, he additionally acted as a small but important symbol of the intellectual foundation on which the Hippies eventually stood.

In the introduction to *The Way of Zen* Watts claims that

during the last twenty years there has been an extraordinary growth of interest in Zen Buddhism. Since the Second World War this interest has increased so much that it seems to be becoming a considerable force in the intellectual and artistic world of the West... The deeper reason for this interest is that the viewpoint of Zen lies so close to the 'growing edge' of Western thought. (vii)

Watts felt that Westerners were looking for a change and Eastern philosophies were offering answers to some of the questions that Westerners were asking at the time. At the "growing edge of Western thought", as he refers to it, was the Beats and other countercultural groups that were in their adolescence at the time. The Beats were fighting conformity through self-expression and travel, and its proponents would have a big impact on mainstream America. Just the following year Kerouac would publish *The Dharma Bums*, in which he would explore Buddhism and the ways that he thought it would benefit American society. But Watts did not simply seek to popularize or educate people on the ways of Zen; he had a particular wisdom that



seemed to resonate with the era. He criticized mainstream ideology and offered insightful solutions to contemporary issues that often-times fit in well with the theories of countercultural groups while aligning with anti-authoritarian beliefs.

His 1966 book titled *The Book* contained a series of musings in which he laid out these anti-authoritarian beliefs. He published this book just before the major Hippie movement but well into the early days of the Merry Pranksters. In the book, he illustrates some of his frustrations with mainstream American conformist culture by saying,

It is increasingly difficult to take a walk, except in such “reservations for wanderers” as state parks. But the nearest state park to my home has, at its entrance, a fence plastered with a long line of placards saying: NO FIRES. NO DOGS. NO HUNTING. NO CAMPING. SMOKING PROHIBITED. NO HORSE-RIDING. NO SWIMMING. NO WASHING... PICNICS RESTRICTED TO DESIGNATED AREAS. Miles of what used to be free-and-easy beaches are now state parks which close at 6 p.m., so that one can no longer camp there for a moonlight feast. Nor can one swim outside a hundred-yard span watched by a guard, nor venture more than a few hundred feet into the water. All in the cause of “safety first” and foolproof living. Just try taking a stroll after dark in a nice American residential area. If you can penetrate the wire fences along the highways, and then wander along a pleasant lane, you may well be challenged from a police car: ‘Where are you going?’ Aimless strolling is suspicious and irrational. You are probably a vagrant or burglar. You are not even walking the dog! ‘how much money are you carrying?’ Surely, you could have afforded to take the bus and if you have little or no cash, you are clearly a bum and a nuisance. (43)

Here Watts is dissecting some interesting assumptions people have and makes clear his anarchist tendencies. An individual’s exposure to nature is confined to specific “natural zones” called “reservations” in which people are supposed to have access and the freedom to do what they want in the natural landscapes. But the very act of creating specific zones that are “natural” and “non-natural” is a sign of the control that the governing bodies have over an individual’s freedom and access to nature.

Because they are abstractly created zones, the governing body that owns them has the ability to restrict access and freedom as it chooses under the guise of a concern for safety. Watts underlines the ways that people in America, contrary to their beliefs, prefer safety far more than they prefer actual freedom. There is a longing—for Watts and other countercultural figures—to get back to a more primitive time when more human beings had access to land with which they could do what they wanted. For Watts, however, while most people appear to value a deep connection to nature, this lack of access and freedom—as represented in these prohibitions—is more symbolic of the ways that people in this conformist society allow the status quo to regulate people’s behavior. There doesn’t seem to be any room for expression. There must always be an ulterior motive behind everything. Even going on a walk at night is no longer acceptable. No one just goes on a walk; there must be something wrong with them. These are the sorts of attitudes that Watts and others were starting to question and rebel against.

But Watts doesn’t just question the attitudes but also the lifestyle and choices of those who are within the conformist tradition of the day. Later in *The Book* he says,

For most of us the day is divided into work-time and play-time, the work consisting largely of tasks which others pay us to do because they are abysmally uninteresting. We therefore work, not for the work’s sake, but for money—and money is supposed to get us what we really want in our hours of leisure and play. In the United States even poor people have lots of money compared with the wretched and skinny millions of India, Africa, and China, while our middle and upper classes (or should we say ‘income groups’?) are as prosperous as princes. Yet, by and large, they have but slight taste for pleasure. Money alone cannot buy pleasure, though it can help. For enjoyment is an art and a skill for which we have little talent or energy. I live close to a harbor packed with sailing-boats and luxurious cruisers

which are seldom used, because seamanship is a difficult though rewarding art which their owners have no time to practice. They bought the boats either as status symbols or as toys, but on discovering that they were not toys (as advertised) they lost interest. The same is true of the entire and astounding abundance of pleasure-goods that we can buy. Foodstuffs are prolific, but few know how to cook. Silks, linens, wools, and cottons are available in colors and patterns galore, and yet most men dress like divinity students or undertakers, while women are slaves to the fashion game with its basic rule, 'I have conformed sooner than you' (81-82).

In one paragraph Watts summarizes the countercultural attitude of being fed up with the mainstream social structure that the majority of American citizens are a part of. In a capitalistic society such as America's most people are put to work with the belief that it will maximize the pleasure of their leisure time. Watts and many others from this time period were finding that this wasn't necessarily true and that it was instead creating a dependence on money to such a degree that there was no understanding of the concepts of leisure or self-expression in any way. The owners of the sailboats do not engage in the hobby that they want to because they have no predilection to put the work in to achieve the pleasure of sailing. Without money as the output of this hobby, these men seem to have no way to measure the worth of the hobby itself. Instead of spending the money that people have earned on experience or other things that have a more spiritual or transcendent impact on someone—as was a priority for many of the countercultures—people accept the belief that they must spend their money on materialistic things such as clothes or other items that make them look better to other people. To Watts this is a symbol of conformity as fashion trends are a way to control people into wanting to look like

everyone else does. In this environment if you look different you are left out and looked down upon rather than looked at as someone who is unique and exciting.

These ideas of anti-materialism, anti-authoritarianism, and non-conformism are some of the ideals that Watts embodied that the Merry Pranksters would take further after Kesey gained his fame following the publication of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. However, some of the major tenets of the Merry Pranksters and the larger 1960's Bay Area scene can be found as far back as 1930's San Francisco. Moving there in 1927, Kenneth Rexroth built the foundation on which subsequent poets and writers would develop their own ideas in countercultural thought. Known as an "anarchist poet," Rexroth published poetry criticizing American capitalistic values and its effect on art and society, as well as developing an interest in Asian literature and philosophy where he became one of the first American based poets to work in *haiku* (Charters 232). Using poetry as a voice to critique mainstream American beliefs, he fused anarcho-leftist philosophy with Asian literature, in which he conveyed intense emotion in short and sporadically linked lines. In one of his most famous poems "Thou Shalt Not Kill," Rexroth speaks directly to capitalists, placing blame on them for the tragedies that are commonly inflicted on artists and poets who cannot escape capitalistic expectations. He asks,

How many stopped writing at thirty?  
 How many went to work for Time?  
 How many died of prefrontal  
 Lobotomies in the Communist Party?  
 How many are lost in the back wards  
 Of provincial madhouses?  
 How many on the advice of  
 Their psychoanalysts, decided  
 A business career was best after all?  
 How many are hopeless alcoholics? (Rexroth 238-239)

As a series of questions, Rexroth forces the reader to recognize the typical condition of the artist in a capitalist society. Giving up on ones dreams at thirty, or being called crazy and being sent to a “madhouse”: these, to Rexroth, are the result of the social expectations placed on individuals within capitalism rather than the fault or the innate condition of being an artist. Rexroth challenges the status quo and blames a lack of self-expression in society on a capitalist ideology that devalues individualism. Many of the Beat poets and the Pranksters echoed these thoughts in later years.

Rexroth developed a reputation in the Bay Area, and when others started to move to San Francisco, particularly after World War II, they found him already there writing the poetry that they had been imagining. William Everson in his essay, “REXROTH: *Shaker and Maker*,” writes,

After the War I moved to the Bay Area when Kenneth was welding together the nucleus of the movement that would surface ten years later as the San Francisco Renaissance, ushering in the Beat Generation which would itself usher in the Sixties, decade of confrontations and revolt, and change the lifestyle of American youth as radically as it changed the practice of contemporary poetry. (242)

Allen Ginsberg, after meeting Rexroth in the late 1940's, shifted his entire poetic style to a more free verse approach. He abandoned standard poetic conventions, opting instead to write simply whatever pleased him (Charters 60). Not only did Ginsberg's style reflect that of Rexroth's but his thematic interests expressed similar concerns and worries about the status quo in America and the capitalistic restrictions on self-expression and creativity that he and other artists felt. While “Howl” is his most famous piece, his feeling of rebellion and contempt for American conformism is most vocally expressed in his 1956 poem “America” where he says,

America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies.  
 America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry.  
 I smoke marijuana every chance I get.  
 I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet.  
 When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.  
 My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.  
 You should have seen me reading Marx.  
 My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.  
 I won't say the Lord's Prayer (Ginsberg 75).

Here Ginsberg almost seems to be addressing American capitalists in the same way as Rexroth, nodding to the concerns and worries that Rexroth expresses in “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” He claims that his psychoanalyst won't be recommending a career in business. He calls himself a former communist and does not feel as if he has to apologize for it and gives a nod to the “Wobblies,” the nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World. In rather Rexrothian terms Ginsberg is fighting the tradition, or the common narrative, of a poet struggling to give a voice to his experience in a capitalist society. He talks openly about drugs and sex and doesn't want to fit the traditional religious demographic that he is expected to fit as an American. Both Rexroth's and Ginsberg's poetry spoke to the resistance of the environment that Watts was analyzing and writing, an environment in which materialism, commodity fetishism, and conformity were valued and privileged. The foundational tenets of these two poets—anti-capitalism, individualism, self-expression—corresponded deeply with the ideas of Watts and those advocating for an alternative path for the culture.

It was Jack Kerouac who, in *On The Road*, introduced mainstream America to the Beat Generation and the counterculture. In the novel, published in 1957—the same year Kesey moved to Stanford and Watts published *The Way of Zen*—Dean

Moriarty (based on central Beat figure and Merry Pranksters Neal Cassady) symbolized the excitement that conformist mainstream America was lacking. Dean runs back and forth between America's East and West Coast in speeding cars looking for sinful fun at every corner. (Neal Cassady would show up later in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—no longer under the disguise of Dean Moriarty—as the main driver for the Pranksters' road trip in their bus "Further"). Kerouac had finished writing *On The Road* in the early 1950's, although it didn't see publication until 1957, and in the meantime he wrote a number of novels. As he progressed as a writer he began to insert into his fiction his own philosophical beliefs, which were often steeped in a variety of sources such as Buddhism.

One of Kerouac's most popular novels, *The Dharma Bums*, laid out the groundwork for Eastern thought and its potential infusion into countercultural movements in America. The narrator, Ray Smith, based on Kerouac himself, follows his friend Japhy Ryder throughout the Bay Area, climbing mountains and experiencing the San Francisco Renaissance in real time as he learns the ropes of Buddhism and embarks on his own spiritual journey to enlightenment. In this, he and Japhy imagine an entirely new society emerging through a societal acceptance of Buddhist tenets. Smith says,

'I've been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that's the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see

a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.' (Kerouac 98-99)

Here Kerouac explicitly lays out the reasons he and his likeminded compatriots rejected American consumerism and the status quo and instead embraced the lifestyles and philosophy of the "Zen lunatics" they admired. They truly saw themselves as the Zen Wanderers of the West, inspired by the *haiku* poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Japan such as Matsuo Basho; carrying a tradition of wandering, poverty, and self-expression through writing, art, and devotion. (Kerouac would take this even further in his novel *Desolation Angels*). A read through Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* will highlight some major similarities in the beliefs of the Zen poets and that of the American Beatniks.

Japhy Ryder, the charismatic character at the center of the events in *The Dharma Bums*, was based on Gary Snyder, one of the most important countercultural figures in the Bay Area during the 1950's and 1960's. Gary Snyder, an Oregonian who moved to the Bay Area, like Kesey, represented a culmination of the countercultural ideals. Kerouac gives us Snyder's (named Japhy Ryder in this passage) background early on in *The Dharma Bums*, saying:

Japhy Ryder was a kid from eastern Oregon brought up in a log cabin deep in the woods with his father and mother and sister, from the beginning a woods boy, an axman, farmer, interested in animals and Indian lore so that when he finally got to college by hook or crook he was already well equipped for his early studies in anthropology and later in Indian myth and in the actual texts of Indian mythology. Finally he learned Chinese and Japanese and became an Oriental



scholar and discovered the greatest Dharma Bums of them all, the Zen Lunatics of China and Japan. At the same time, being a Northwest boy with idealistic tendencies, he got interested in old-fashioned I.W.W. anarchism and learned to play the guitar and sing old worker songs to go with his Indian songs and general folksong interests" (9-10).

Kerouac brings everything together with this passage. Snyder's deep interest in Eastern thought and nature, as well as another important reference to the "Industrial Workers of the World", are critically important in understanding the gravity of Snyder's presence in the Bay Area and what he meant to the counterculture. Snyder represents almost every aspect of what made the Merry Pranksters and the hippies prior to their very existence. Long before Kesey arrived, Snyder was forming a small group of followers who were interested in his beliefs in anarchism, Eastern thought, and non-conformity, just as Kesey would do in later years. Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* is in many ways the predecessor to *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, as it chronicles the life of a very similar individual and his attraction to alternative lifestyles than that of typical, mainstream Americans.

Essentially, what Kesey brought to the counterculture ideals of Snyder and Watts and the Beats was his interest in LSD, and that was the crux of both Kesey's popularity and his very message. That interest was fueled in part by Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*, which was published in 1954, several years before Kesey's first experiences with psychedelics. In that book Huxley explores the psychedelic drug Mescaline, a drug that has been used by several Native American tribes in the American Southwest and Central America, describing its effects and ultimately what his experiences meant to him and what they could mean to others. He discusses art,

philosophy, religion, and most importantly, notions of poverty and consumerism, echoing the thoughts of the Beats and Gary Snyder. He speaks of,

the poor Indian, whose untutored mind Clothes him in front, but leaves him bare behind. But actually it is we, the rich and highly educated whites, who have left ourselves bare behind. We cover our anterior nakedness with some Philosophy—Christian, Marxian, Freudo-Physicalist—but abaft we remain uncovered, at the mercy of all the winds of circumstance. The poor Indian, on the other hand, has had the wit to protect his rear by supplementing the fig leaf of a theology with the breechclout of transcendental experience. (35)

He claims that materialistic success is simply a cover with which rich people pretend they are “successful.” Watts makes similar claims in *The Book* in which he argues against material success with the belief that self-expression and a connection to nature provides one with a much more fulfilling vision of success. Both Watts and Huxley—being Englishmen—sought alternative sources of happiness than that of the typical “American Dream.” Simultaneously Huxley rejects any notions of organized religion, ideology, or philosophy, claiming that they are simply illusions of belief without any real transcendental meaning. Huxley argues that Americans need to move beyond these ideological beliefs in order to form a more “real” and connected form of reality. This notion of transcending the current form of reality, or the values within, is something Kesey would take further as he attempted to reject all ideological beliefs, ultimately finding that such a feat is impossible, as it will innately create another ideological system.

Like Huxley, Kesey and the Merry Pranksters were greatly influenced by their experiences with psychedelic drugs, especially LSD. In explaining their relationship to the drug, Wolfe refers directly to Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*, writing, [Huxley] compared the brain to a ‘reducing valve’” (44). Essentially, he

argued that reality is much grander than what we experience but our brains process the overwhelming amount of information and portrays only what is necessary so that we can function. Wolfe continues his explanation of Huxley's theories saying, "*We're shut off from our own world. Primitive man once experienced the rich and sparkling flood of the senses fully. Children experience it for a few months—until "normal" training, conditioning, close the doors on this other world... Huxley had said, the drugs opened these ancient doors.*" (44) Many of the countercultural figures of the time yearned for a more primitive and simple time (Kerouac, Snyder, Watts, etc.) and—following Huxley—felt that they could access that level of connection to nature and to the world that their primitive ancestors experienced through their use of psychedelic drugs. While many of the previous countercultural groups had complained about the conformist society in which they lived and could not escape, Huxley and the Merry Pranksters were actually advertising a solution to the problems of capitalism, materialism, and conformity, and that solution was psychedelics and the experiences that they brought and the perceptions that they lead to.

Both Kesey and Huxley advocate for a rejection of major ideological beliefs as they find them to be simply a way for people to conform rather than to experience the more transcendental nature of reality. When Kesey is asked to join in with Anti-Vietnam war protests at Berkeley, as Wolfe details in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, he refuses to submit to their ideological beliefs. He instead argues that their actions are useless since they are simply another ideological group that is conforming in one way or another. Kesey held that any ideological belief is a dangerous one and that

they all operate in the same ways in the end. After telling the crowd about how they are essentially doing merely the same thing as those they are resisting, he goes on to compare the speaker who was up before him to Mussolini, saying, *“I was just looking at the speaker who was up here before me...--and I could see his jaw sticking out like this... silhouetted against the sky... and you know who I saw...and who I heard?... Mussolini... I saw and I heard Mussolini here just a few minutes ago... Yep... you’re playing their game...”* [Italics in the original] (Wolfe 223). Kesey essentially calls a group of free speech movement students and professors who are clinging on to the belief that they are liberal and progressive a group of fascists. He makes the point that it isn’t the political “right” that needs to be fought but it is all ideological beliefs across the spectrum that need to be abandoned. He claims he has the solution to the conundrum, however, 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 at it, look at the war, and turn your backs and say... Fuck it...”* [Italics in the original] (Wolfe 224). He is offering a solution to the war and to the protestor’s problem of reifying—in his view—a type of authoritarianism. But his solution isn’t simply a type of apathy towards the war and other major problems; he instead advocates a sort of civil disobedience in which people look inward for a better self-understanding before they can look outward to make any political difference. The Merry Pranksters focused on an inward perfection through which non-conformity and complete self-expression without the fear of judgment from those around them could enable a better and more peaceful society. This is essentially *their* ideology, but it involves a paradox of presenting an ideology that simultaneously rejects and presents a new ideology. To do this, they

must simply pretend that they do not have an ideology while simultaneously maintaining it.

In stressing the importance of self-expression Kesey gives a speech before the Pranksters embark on a road trip across the country, during which they hope to spread their message to as many people as they can. Kesey says,

'Here's what I hope will happen on this trip... what I hope will continue to happen, because it's already starting to happen. All of us are beginning to do our thing, and we're going to keep doing it, right out front, and none of us are going to deny what other people are doing... If saying bullshit is somebody's thing, then he says bullshit. If somebody is an ass-kicker, then that's what he's going to do on this trip, kick asses. He's going to do it right out front and nobody is going to have anything to get pissed off about. He can just say, 'I'm sorry I kicked you in the ass, but I'm not sorry I'm an ass-kicker. That's what I do, I kick people in the ass.' Everybody is going to be what they are, and whatever they are there's not going to be anything to apologize about' (Wolfe 73).

In doing this Kesey tries to foster an environment of acceptance within his own group so that everyone feels at least that they can express themselves in whatever way they might see as fit. Kesey is fighting, as Rexroth and Ginsberg tried to, the fear with which artists and others are afflicted when they try their best to deviate from the norm and expresses themselves in whatever ways they please. They are not going to restrict themselves in any ways possible as they see society doing all around them, as Watts took note of in *The Book*. They will try to resist the many problems that other countercultural figures took note of and pointed out in their work. This, according to Kesey, is what non-conformity and self-expression looks like, and so he defines it as such. He shares his idealistic and utopic vision with his group just before they start their cross-country road trip, showing their intense similarities to the Beat generation. Neal Cassady is their driver, just as he was for

Kerouac in *On The Road*. Their beliefs eventually get contrasted with the Beats in later years but at this point they are still very much in debt to the Beatific vision that Kerouac and others laid out for them in the years before them. Psychedelic drugs and the false belief of their own lack of devotion are the only things that separate themselves from standard Beatniks.

Throughout Wolfe's book there are references to the *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and other important works in Eastern thought and Kesey draws a lot of philosophical arguments from these works. Yet, there is a problem with the ways that the Pranksters view and use Eastern thought to inform their beliefs. They seem to treat it more as a trend, knowing that it influenced some of their personal heroes like Kerouac and Snyder. Wolfe at one point writes,

For a long time I couldn't understand the one Oriental practice the Pranksters liked, the throwing of the *I Ching* coins. The *I Ching* is an ancient Chinese text. The Book of Changes, it is called. It contains 64 oracular readings, all highly metaphorical. You ask the *I Ching* a question and throw three coins three times and come up with a hexagram and a number that points to one of the passages. It 'answers' your question... yes; but the *I Ching* didn't seem very Pranksterslike. I couldn't fit it in with the Pranksters' wired-up, American-flag-flying, Day-Glo electro-pastel surge down the great American superhighway. Yet—of course! The *I Ching* was supremely the book of *Now*, of the moment. For, as Jung said, the way the coins fall is inevitably tied up with the quality for the entire moment in which they fall, the entire pattern, and 'form a part of it—a part that is insignificant to us, yet most meaningful to Chinese minds' ...these things. (142).

Their references to Eastern thought and draw direct ties to both Snyder and Kerouac. In contrast to Snyder (and Kerouac), however, they were not in any way devoted to the tenets of Buddhism; they simply took what they liked from it and added to it what they wanted to. They liked the *I Ching* more out of the fun they had

in performing the act of throwing the coins rather than the actual devotion to the act that of course is very sacred to others. They liked the *I Ching*, according to Wolfe, because of its stress on “living in the moment” as that, in some ways, aligned with their own personal beliefs. But there are other aspects of the *I Ching* that Wolfe notes do not necessarily correlate with the actions of the Pranksters.

The Merry Pranksters lacked an essential vision of “devotion” with which their ideology could be realized, at least in the terms laid out by Huxley. Having a lack of direction and a lack of devotion is central to their existence. They seemed to want to simply reject all things ideological without realizing that doing so is an impossible task. Furthermore, they did so without an understanding what they actually *were* devoted to. Their new devotion was to LSD and its effects on their view of reality (and, of course, their devotion to their own lack of devotion). One character—Doris Delay—in explaining their success says that “they’re starting to transcend the bullshit. There’s this old trinity, Power, Position, Authority, and why should they worship these old gods and these old forms of authority” (Wolfe 22). She compares older forms of devotion—the type of devotion that mainstream America upholds—as old gods. To the Pranksters, these older forms of devotion are religious in nature and they are attempting to reject this sort of devotion altogether. But they are simultaneously replacing it with a devotion to LSD and a different form of conformity that forces its subjects to look and act in a particular and specified way.

Drugs, the primary object of devotion for the Merry Pranksters, played a major role in drawing a line between those who were members of the

counterculture movement and those who were not. The Hippie culture started to adopt this “experienced” versus “inexperienced” model rather quickly. As one of the most prominent figures of the movement, Jimi Hendrix, once asked, “are you experienced?”, naming his debut 1967 album in reference to those who have moved on into a new phase of enlightenment through the use of LSD and other drugs. In order to be a member of the counterculture you had certain expectations that you were required to meet. Drug use was certainly one of these expectations and those inside the group used them as a source of differentiation between themselves and those who were not in the group.

To many of the Beats the hippies seemed like a sort of unorganized group of strange individuals without any real goals or aspirations because of their evident lack of devotion. In 1968—just a few months before his death—Kerouac, when asked what the Beats had in common with the hippies, said, “We’re just the older ones. I’m 46 years old. These kids are 18, but it’s the same movement—apparently some sort of Dionysian movement—in which I did not intend... I believe in order, tenderness, and piety” (“Buckley, Kerouac, Sanders, and Yablonsky discuss Hippies,” 7:07-8:48). Calling it Dionysian, Kerouac and many of the other Beats who came before the Merry Pranksters felt that the hippies were taking what they had done and distorting it into a sort of pointless community in which nothing would be accomplished while taking drug use too far. Kesey certainly didn’t—at least publicly—line up with Kerouac’s beliefs in devotion and piety. Kesey had generated a shift from devotion to a lack of devotion that was dangerously unstable. Kesey was certainly taking from those who came before him but changing the overall



ideological basis on which those ideas were formed. While they all had certain bigger arguments to make about American politics and society, Kesey instead wanted individuals to look inward rather than outward. This is the central influence that Huxley and Snyder had on Kesey's presence.

Wolfe, in demonstrating this shift from politics and other ideologically based groups to the LSD-influenced lifestyle writes that, "the whole New Left, is all of a sudden like *over* on the hip circuit around San Francisco, even at Berkeley, the very citadel of the Student Revolution and all. Some kid who could always be counted on to demonstrate... and immediately everybody knows he has become a head. His hair has the long jesuschrist look" (356). Wolfe goes on to say that this type of individual has sympathy for those who are still members of the civil rights movement but that they are caught up in silly, "political games" (356). Even within this passage there are constructions of an "us and them" dynamic between those who are "experienced" in the use of LSD and have moved beyond politics and those who have not. This polarization is something that can be found throughout *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and it brings to light underlying ideological battles as some characters have harsh interactions with non-Pranksters. Bill Graham, a non-Prankster, says to Neal Cassady, "Look, Neal, we're in two different worlds. You're a hippie and I'm a square... I got off the subway in 1955, but you're still on it" (Wolfe 385). The terms "hippie" and "square" quite clearly designate each individual into his group and place within the larger culture during the time period.

One character, in discussing the reasons why they are no longer involved in politics, claims that it is because being politically active has essentially become

“mainstream.” He calls all of the political students, “a bunch of fraternity men in their Mustangs” (Wolfe 357). Wolfe follows this by saying,

*A bunch of fraternity men in their Mustangs! Oh Mario, and Dylan, and Joan Baez, oh Free Speech and Anti-Vietnam—who in his right mind would have ever dreamed it could come to this in twelve months... and it is, unbelievably, all as the provocateur Kesey has prophesied it, droning on his goddamned harmonica and saying Just walk away and say fuck it... (357).*

To the Pranksters, political activism was simply another form of conformity and they were all onto the next thing—including a number of the political movements largest members. Wolfe here references Kesey’s speech at the Vietnam War protests in order to demonstrate the ways in which Kesey was successful at getting people to reject their political ideologies. They instead wanted to distance themselves from movements or groups, which is what they became as a result of their polarization and in-group versus out-group mentality. Being a “hippie” becomes a way to be different from others and not necessarily a means of self-expression at this point. But it’s important to note the tone of Wolfe’s narration here. Wolfe appears to have a negative view on the ways that the Pranksters turned their back on politics and other ideologies to which many other countercultural figures were devoted. This is where Wolfe makes his critique rather clear as he points out the ways he sees this as a failure despite it being—in many ways—a success in terms of the speech Kesey gave and the impact it had on the larger counterculture.

This belief in a lack of devotion that Kesey advocated for is in itself a sort of devotion and inherently forces them to avoid confronting their faith in any way possible. The Pranksters certainly had a type of devotion, and Wolfe most adequately represents this through analogies made between the Merry Pranksters

and the formation of major religions. There are points where the Pranksters themselves will make references to religious characters, but for the most part, they shy away from admitting that there was a religious aspect to their lifestyle. It isn't that they don't realize the connections between their beliefs and those of an organized religion; it's just that they don't want to admit it. They talk about themselves in highly religious ways, but it is Wolfe's perspective that makes the connections rather than the characters themselves. He calls it "the unspoken thing" and uses their adventures to outline their religion and its destiny (Wolfe 124). To Wolfe they have become another "old god" as Doris Delay put it, in that they are now a type of authority that other "dropouts" are now forced to worship. Wolfe is careful to include this to give the audience a general idea of the mindset that these individuals have found themselves in—the constant search for meaning in their lives steeped in vibrations, rebellion and deviation from the norm in the rubbles of the Beat Generation.

Wolfe prefers to describe it simply as being a "new experience." He says,

On the face of it there was just a group of people who had shared an unusual psychological state, the LSD experience—But exactly! The *experience*—that was the word! ... in fact, none of the great founded religions, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, none of them began with a philosophical framework or even a main idea. They all began with an overwhelming *new experience*. (126–127)

Here Wolfe is making the point that there is no intention on the part of Kesey's or the other Pranksters to generate an ideology to which these individuals must subscribe, but it simply evolved out of the shared experience that these individuals had. While Wolfe isn't directly talking about them forming a new power structure in

which the members must conform to the expectations of the group, he is making a comparison between the Merry Pranksters and several of the most important historical ideologies or religions that individuals do subscribe to. Yet, the Pranksters themselves do not want to admit it—"The unspoken thing" is what the Pranksters fear. Calling it a religion would make everyone conform without choice. Since they don't call it a religion or an ideology it allows them all to conform without admitting it. Instead it is their unknowingness and unwillingness that allows them to generate the new hierarchy and conformist group.

One of Kesey's most popular sayings throughout the entire book is "you're either on the bus or off the bus." While this started simply as a way to designate who would be coming on the road trip with them, it quickly turned into a way in which Kesey subconsciously polarized the group. Through this expression, he would apply pressure to his fellow Merry Pranksters in order to get him to essentially follow his orders despite his lack of acceptance of the role of leader. He was quick to deflect leadership. Throughout the book, the only people who actually refer to Kesey as a leader are those who are not immediately a member of the Merry Pranksters. To the Pranksters it is a sort of—as Wolfe named it—and "unspoken thing" that Kesey is the leader. In one scene, a girl is giving a speech and repeatedly refers to Kesey as "Prophet Kesey" (Wolfe 193). Wolfe takes particular note of this instance saying, "—repeating the phrase, the Prophet Kesey, and adorning it with all the biblical rhetoric—only she was serious! Straight! Rapt! A true believer! And probably thought the Prophet Kesey would beam when he saw it" (193). Wolfe is careful to note that "only she is serious!" as many of the Merry Pranksters will make jokes

about religion—which may or may not actually be jokes—but this girl was being serious. She, however, was not an “official” Merry Prankster and therefore she was unaware of “the unspoken thing.” She was not aware of their conformity in disguise and she therefore noticed it and put it into words. Kesey is immediately offended and stunned by her words and, according to Wolfe, “has his head down and he says in a melancholy way: ‘we’re not on the Christ Trip. That’s been done, and it doesn’t work’” (Wolfe 193). He recognizes the power and the failure of conformist-forming groups such as organized religions and therefore he shies away from admitting that they are very closely related to one.

At one point Wolfe refers to the “Prankster hierarchy,” writing,

*“Prankster hierarchy? There wasn’t supposed to be any Prankster hierarchy. Even Kesey was supposed to be the non-navigator and non-teacher. Certainly everybody else was an equal in the brotherhood, for there was no competition, there were no games. They had left all that behind in the straight world...but...call it a game or what you will”* (330).

As the road trip on the bus named “further” went on, Kesey’s idealistic and utopic vision that he shared with the group prior to their trip turned into a new notion, in which even a hierarchy exists. They didn’t leave “all that behind in the straight world,” mostly because they hadn’t fully dropped out as they said they wanted to. Despite his efforts to deflect his leadership he inevitably became the central figure under which all other Pranksters reside. He becomes another “old god” that others must worship.

The ways that Wolfe discusses the Merry Pranksters is important because it is a work of non-fiction in which the narrator explicitly states that there were moments

that he was sometimes there during the scenes that take place. All types of non-fiction depictions—including journalism and new journalism—have some sort of interpretation despite their attempt at being objective, according to John J Pauly of Marquette University (596). Rather than watch the events at a distance, Wolfe includes himself in the action and presents his own beliefs and values as if they are just as important as the beliefs and values of the characters he is focused on. He does not shy away from using pronouns such as “me” or “I.” In this way Wolfe’s narration must be taken into account if one is to truly grasp not only the events but also the way that Wolfe represents them in the book. Wolfe is—after all—making characters out of these individuals. In some ways it is Wolfe’s story and not the story of the Merry Pranksters. The accuracy of Wolfe’s portrayal of the Merry Pranksters and their adventures is certainly something that is open for debate. Some research shows that Wolfe was actually rather different than the Merry Pranksters and he was not always present during some of their biggest adventures. According to Scott MacFarlane, Wolfe himself had never actually done LSD, or was “inexperienced,” and therefore he was forced to rely on descriptions and accounts from other people on the effects of the drug (113). Since a great deal of the book is spent describing LSD and its effects this opens up a lot of questions concerning the accuracy of other sections of the book. It is essential to keep this in mind as it may be difficult to distinguish what is true versus what is Wolfe’s perspective on what is happening.

Some scholars prefer to emphasize this distinction between the Pranksters and Wolfe further as a way of understanding how the Merry Pranksters developed. According to Barbara Lounsberry, Wolfe claims that this “new experience” is rather

an extension or “intensification of what is already present” (20). She explains this with electricity, saying, “neon signs and liquor stimulants are staples of postwar American life,” but that the Pranksters and Wolfe take this “further” with constant references to electricity and neon throughout the story as a symbol of their spirituality (20). It is important to note, however, that this is not how the Merry Pranksters view their development. One passage from the book that demonstrates this is when Wolfe discusses how Kesey would pray as a child and “there would be the sky and the light blinking—and he always kind of thought he was praying to that red light” (Wolfe 37). But, of course, this is inferred by Wolfe rather than actually being articulated directly by Kesey, and so it is easy to see the ways that Wolfe could be manipulating the story. Lounsberry ultimately finds that Wolfe is using the Merry Pranksters to make an argument about the American status quo more than the actual Merry Pranksters were.

All of the information that the reader receives from reading *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is funneled through Tom Wolfe. Wolfe gets to decide what he wants to include and what he does not want to include. He has the final say on what the narrative was. For instance, the “unspoken thing” was exactly that—“unspoken.” Wolfe was denoting and naming something the Merry Pranksters themselves did not even talk about. Wolfe, through his argument of the “unspoken thing” claims that the Pranksters were all—deep down—knowing conformists. In these terms it seems rather clear that Wolfe was using the Merry Pranksters to show the power of conformity rather than the success of a countercultural group. Wolfe isn’t making an argument about mainstream America and showing the ways that the Merry

Pranksters were defying it; he was showing how even an attempt as big as theirs was still unsuccessful in fighting the overarching powers of conformity and capitalist ideology. Through the display of polarization, religious rhetoric, and the various failures of the Merry Pranksters on their adventures to fight the status quo and the American mainstream, Wolfe presents the reader with a sense of the power that conformity—and ultimately the power of capitalism—has over even the most defiant individuals as Watts, Rexroth, and Ginsberg stated years prior to this. In many ways, Wolfe's arguments align with Kerouac's on Buckley's *Firing Line* in 1968.

Towards the end of the 1960s several of the prominent figures of the era had started to notice their paradoxical nature. In 1970, just a few months before his death, Jimi Hendrix—In an interview that was later animated in a PBS Digital Studios YouTube video—complained, “You have to be a freak to be different. And even freaks, they're very prejudiced. You have to have your hair long and talk at a certain way in order to be with them. In order to be with the other people you have to have your hair short and wear ties.” Here Hendrix is acknowledging some of the major problems the hippie generation has had in bringing people together despite their attempts to do so. Both of the groups that he points out are essentially equally worried about image—for instance, one requires long hair and the other requires short hair—which to Hendrix is a prejudice that both have sadly developed. With goals of “dropping out” the Pranksters and the subsequent hippies seemed to divided their preexisting culture without leaving it at all.



Gary Snyder actually did drop out from the traditional American lifestyle in many ways and left the country to devote himself to alternative ideologies. Snyder said “*Fuck it*” more successfully than Kesey and the Pranksters themselves were able to do as a group. But there’s a major distinction to make between the ways that Snyder and the Pranksters operated and the types of cultures that each actually belonged to. Peter Connors in his book on counter cultures, subcultures, and the Grateful Dead titled *Cornell '77: The Music, the Myth, and the Magnificence of the Grateful Dead's Concert at Barton Hall* carefully illustrates the differences in the ways that “countercultures” and “subcultures” operate by saying,

“the labels ‘hippie’ and ‘counterculture’ are synonymous because hippies largely operated against—or counter to—mainstream culture. Said another way, many hippies were ‘against’ what mainstream culture represented. While ‘subculture’ and ‘counterculture’ are often also used synonymously, there’s an important distinction between groups that operate ‘counter’ to a dominant culture and ones that operate ‘sub’ or below it. Hippies who were against the war, against discrimination, against drug laws, against government laws that impinged upon personal freedoms, and so forth, were operating within a countercultural context. They were using their energies to push back against the values, mores, and laws of their day. Hippies were simply wanted to ‘drop out’ and be left alone by mainstream culture were operating on a subculture value system. They didn’t strive to change the world—they just wanted to be ignored enough not to get hassled” (14).

Applying Connors notions of the terms, the Merry Pranksters—while thinking they were operating on a subcultural level—were really operating on a countercultural level. Even though they advocated “dropping out” or, as they said, “turning around and saying *fuck it*,” they were still advocating for something and articulating a larger vision that they were actively trying to get others to join them. They wanted to spread their “gospel”—that was one of the main points of going on their road trip—

even though their message was to “drop out” and to stop listening to other people’s messages.

Snyder, in contrast to the Pranksters, was much more effective at practicing and accomplishing the tenets and goals that Kesey himself spoke of.

After attending classes at University of California at Berkeley in Chinese and Japanese, Snyder actually fled the country and lived in various monasteries in Japan (Charters 288). He had been writing poetry since the early 1950’s but only published one collection in 1959, after which he stopped publishing for several years. He wasn’t worried about spreading his vision or making any societal changes at all; he was simply trying his very best to “drop out” and live according to his own tenets. His poetry is far more personal than that of the other Beats of the period who were concerned with political and ideological arguments. Snyder instead writes about the beauty of nature and the feeling of relief at the end of a long day of hard work. He—seemingly—was writing for no one but himself. He may have felt that if more Americans followed similar tenets as he did that society would have become better, but he did not actively present such an argument. He instead devoted himself entirely inwardly—as Kesey recommended—and devoted himself to dropping out.

Snyder represents Kesey’s goals much better than Kesey and the Merry Pranksters did themselves, but even he still felt compelled in perhaps the smallest way to share his wisdom. While in Japan Snyder wrote to his friend that he had realized “I am firstmost a poet, doomed to be shamelessly silly, undignified, curious, cuntstruck, & considering (in the words of Rimbaud) the disorder of my own mind sacred” (Charters 288). He considered being a poet something silly and not worth

taking seriously; nevertheless, he felt compelled to be a poet and to share what he had been writing with someone else. He would submit to the innate need to share with others his own vision in whatever small way he possibly could. But Snyder admitted this to himself and admitted that he had devotion. In his first collection of poetry from 1959, titled *Riprap*, he wrote a quick note titled, "Note of the Religious Tendencies," in which he outlines what he thinks are the three main tenets of the Beat Generation. The third point is "Discipline, aesthetics, and tradition." These ideals are in high contrast to the Merry Pranksters, who believed in a complete lack of structure. Snyder concludes that being a member of the Beat Generation involves a "real commitment to the stewpot of the world and real insight into the vision-lands of the unconscious" (Charters 306). For Snyder (and Kerouac and even Ginsberg), an ideological framework was always inevitable. This is essentially what the Merry Pranksters missed. Snyder was devoted to several things—as were many of the other Beats and the earlier poets that came before them—and as a result more successfully "dropped out" of the mainstream as a result.

As Kesey stood on the shoulders of those before him he missed some of their central wisdom in doing so. In an attempt at "dropping out" he instead stayed within, spreading a paradoxical message of which he did not fully understand. Wolfe, in chronicling Kesey and the Pranksters adventures, aligns himself more with their predecessors and their ways that they found something to be devoted to in order to more successfully create either a counterculture or a subculture. Rexroth, Watts, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Snyder had their devotions—whether it was political or religiously related—and recognized them as such. The Pranksters, however,

missed that central tenet in their attempt to fuse the beliefs of their predecessors with their own on drugs. Instead, they were left simply asking, “are you on the bus or off the bus?”

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