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Confronting the (Un)Reality of Pranksterdom: Tom Wolfe and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*

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Abstract: In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe attempts to document and represent Ken Kesey and his Merry Band of Pranksters, a group of Californian, acid-taking “Day-Glo crazies,” with their own language and system of reasoning. Kesey and company prove remarkably difficult subjects for Wolfe, for their near-perpetual drug use drastically alters their collective perception of the world around them. Additionally, and most ironically, their quest to carve out a new reality—a new way of being in American culture—becomes an endeavor in escapism as they consistently reify their experiences, their very approach to life, with performance, allegory, and symbolism. This essay examines Wolfe’s documentary method in *Acid Test*, particularly the means by which he effectively ascertains and represents the reality of subjects engrossed in unreality. Drawing from earlier models of documentary literature—most notably *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*—as well as the aesthetic and humanist principles of the high modernists, he employs a host of literary devices and narrative perspectives to illuminate the real and the human in a haystack of allegory and abstraction (one often marked by the Pranksters’ identification with superhuman alter egos). Wolfe’s juxtaposition of Prankster perception with journalistic observation affords the reader the requisite number of perspectives to understand and even identify with the documentary subjects while cutting through the allegorical haze they create. In this he accomplishes his primary goal: to effect not simply understanding in his readership but, more important, identification with the humanity of the subjects being documented.

In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe takes on a formidable challenge: to document and represent Ken Kesey and his Merry Band of Pranksters—a group of Californian, acid-taking, “Day-Glo crazies” with their own language and system of reasoning—in such a way as to effect not simply understanding in his readership. More important, Wolfe seeks to demonstrate the cultural significance of such a complex and nuanced subculture to a readership far removed from their customs, discourse, and general milieu. Thus, as in his first book, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, a collection of what would later be called “New Journalism,” Wolfe must help his readers grasp and value—and in some ways identify with—marginalized subjects, that is, individuals on the forefront of the burgeoning counterculture in America. This is no easy task, as these subjects maintain an existence of perpetual fantasy, abstraction, and spectacle. This critique highlights the means by which Wolfe successfully navigates the exceptional challenges levied by Kesey and his followers. Specifically, it examines Wolfe’s method of working within and against the collective perspective of Kesey and the Pranksters, investigating their history, ethos, *mise en scène*, and ontology from myriad (often competing) points of view, ultimately juxtaposing Prankster artifice and delusion with the stuff of empirical reality and narrative realism to forge a more complete and faithful representation of their actuality.

To realize his narrative/journalistic ambitions, Wolfe establishes two fundamental objectives. Above all, he endeavors to demonstrate that much of the ethos and ideology driving his subjects’ brand of consciousness expansion—and to a greater degree, their entire approach to existence so far as the time documented is concerned—is in line with more general, mainstream American values and ideals.¹ In short, much like his approach to representing race-car legend Junior Johnson and twenty-something music mogul Phil Spector in *Streamline Baby*, Wolfe observes that many of the ostensibly strange and deviant beliefs and actions of this founding facet of the counterculture are actually in line with those often associated with the postwar, middle-class American Dream. The difference for Kesey and the Merry Band of Pranksters is that they, in their own words, are exceedingly “out front” about what drives them. That is to say, their professed lack of pretension, “hang-ups,” or adherence to middle-class morality creates only an impression of complete and total deviance from American values. Certainly they are not interested in some of the more obvious elements of this brand of the American Dream: the nuclear family, the house in the suburbs, and the two cars in the garage. That said, Wolfe shows us that some of the Pranksters’ most cherished principles, such as individualism, freedom, and mobility are also defining constituents of the contemporaneous notion of mainstream American ideals.² Therefore, his

is an endeavor in lessening the ontological divide between reader and subject. Of course, this is a hard sell—an audacious enterprise made even more so by the book's esoterically provocative title, as well as the impediments imposed by the very subjects he seeks to humanize.

To accomplish such an undertaking, Wolfe must take on a second, more difficult challenge. Immersed in the fledgling consciousness expansion movement, and therefore in the near- ceaseless throes of a hallucinogenic episode, Wolfe's subjects appear mired in a milieu of unreality. Not only do the psychedelic properties of their sundry array of narcotics (the favorite, of course, being LSD) extensively alter their perceptions of the world around them. Additionally, and most ironically, their quest to carve out a new reality—a new way of being in American culture—is in essence an endeavor in escapism. They, often through Wolfe's free indirect discourse,³ consistently reify their experiences, their very approach to life, with performance, allegory, and symbolism. Most visible of such exercises is the never-ending, seemingly aimless movie they are making, a work of artifice that becomes interchangeable with the Pranksters' actuality. Thus when the harsh realities of life, such as an unplanned pregnancy, motorcycle gang rape, or serious legal troubles intrude upon the "current fantasy" of Prankster existence, not one member of the group, Kesey especially, seems fit to address it with a real solution.⁴ Wolfe's task therefore becomes exponentially more difficult, for as a journalist he must ascertain and represent the reality of a subject engrossed in unreality, and he must find the real and the human in a haystack of allegory and abstraction, one often marked by the Pranksters' identification with superhuman alter egos. Only then can he access and communicate Kesey and the Pranksters, allowing a largely mainstream, "unhip" readership to understand, and to a great extent identify with, a gaggle of acid-taking hippies running amok in the northern California countryside.

Early in his foray into Pranksterdom, Wolfe learns that traditional journalistic approaches will not work in communicating the human actuality of those, Kesey in particular, who have already begun to see written language as an archaic mode of representation. This poses a significant problem for Wolfe, as his medium is, in fact, the written word—"*And you couldn't put it into words.*"⁵ Konas, too, observes that "Wolfe can only take language so far to reify these people. Kesey's aims are so cosmic, his LSD trips so experiential, that words can only approximate his reality."⁶ Wolfe's response is to implement a documentary method that circumvents the limitations of traditional literary forms, principally in the name of subverting the Otherness of Kesey and the Pranksters. Wolfe and New Journalists of his ilk, most notably Hunter S. Thompson, eschew singular, traditional modes. They combine myriad

literary forms, including prose, journalism, poetry, and a host of avant-garde modernist devices such as parataxis, collage, and bricolage in an effort to cultivate a new language. The aim is to transcend the limitations of the aesthetic and journalistic conventions of their day, more effectively accessing human actuality and thus negating the Otherness of their documentary subjects.

This does not mean that Wolfe foregoes the realism inherent to journalism (or literary journalism), for it is only via a commitment to realism that he can break through the illusory miasma effected by his subjects. Carl A. Bredahl argues as much when he observes that unlike Kesey, Wolfe does not lose himself in abstraction. He remains firmly footed in the physical world, and is thus able to communicate the actuality of subjects who seem dedicated to effacing such actuality.⁷ Wolfe's success lies in his ability to "focus on physical objects that sparkle with life"—evidence of his commitment to the amalgam of "structure" and "exuberance."⁸ That said, Wolfe's imaginative approach to the palpable here and now is compounded by his incursions into the fantastic world of allegory and abstraction of his subjects. Put another way, he proves adept at infiltrating the consciousness of those seekers of consciousness expansion, and his journo-documentary method is one that juxtaposes the accurate-yet-stylistic reporting that Bredahl observes with the altered and abstracted perspectives of Kesey and the Pranksters, which the reader experiences through Wolfe's narrative movement in and out of his subjects' consciousness. So while Wolfe must often favor realism to counter the unreality of Pranksterdom, he offsets the limitations of this realism by effectively assuming the voices and vantage points of his subjects. He affords his readers multiple channels of engagement, or as T.V. Reed wrote of another work of literary journalism, "several versions or angles of vision on a given object, character, or narrated scene."⁹ Wolfe ultimately filters the experiences of Kesey and company through his own subjectivity, one that on several occasions reveals an admiration for/identification with his subjects.¹⁰ This is important, as Wolfe, from the very beginning of *Acid Test*, lets readers know that his "blue silk blazer" and "shiny low-cut black shoes"—compared to the "Indian headbands, donkey beads, temple bells, amulets, mandalas, god's eyes, fluorescent vests, unicorn horns [and] Errol Flynn dueling shirts" of the San Francisco acid scene—make *him* the Other in the world he's chosen to document. As McKeen writes, it is as if to say, "I am as different from these people as they are from you."¹¹ Thus, if Wolfe can come to understand and regard Kesey and company, he can consequently lessen the divide between reader and subject.

Thus if it is Wolfe's mission to communicate the value, dignity, and cultural importance of his heroes, to convey each character's vision (and its inherent merit and significance) to a postwar populace largely conditioned

to reject (or at least be wary of) notions, behaviors, and cultural elements beyond the limits of the stifling social conservatism forged in the 1950s, he must expose the contrivances of collective Prankster identity. Only then can he implement his method for accessing the actuality of his subjects, replacing the allegorically superhuman identities they've constructed for themselves with the real humanity they attempt to abdicate.

Living the (Current) Fantasy

Throughout *Acid Test*, we see that Kesey and the Merry Pranksters exist in a near-constant state of performance—from their initial experiments with LSD at Perry Lane in 1963, where on one evening Kesey “dragged a piano out of his house and they all set about axing the hell out of it and burning it up,” to the “Acid Test Graduation” in Haight-Ashbury three years later.¹² It is in the early stages of their famed cross-country bus trip, the crux of Prankster mythology, that such theatricality becomes most visible. For starters, the members “took on new names and used them.” And as Wolfe notes, “They were all now characters in their own movies or *The Big Movie*.”¹³ These are not merely aliases; they are alternate identities, not unlike those cultivated by the comic book superheroes with whom the Pranksters expressly identify: Captain Marvel, Captain America, and the Flash, to name a few.¹⁴ Such artifice coincides with the Prankster notion of leading a “secret life,” one made possible by the drugs themselves. While the Pranksters are cognizant of the euphorically transformative effects of the many drugs at their disposal, the “befuddled citizens” whom they encounter on the journey “could only see the outward manifestations of the incredible stuff going on inside their skulls.”¹⁵

Wolfe is keen to emphasize the central role of performance in the collective Prankster identity, and it is Kesey, of course, who stands out as the unmistakable star of the traveling show. Despite assuming the role of “non-navigator,” a self-proclaimed guide rather than controlling leader, Kesey orchestrates, by direct mandate or more subtle means of manipulation, nearly each facet of the Prankster experience: from who is allowed to take acid to who is directing the movie at a particular juncture of the bus trip. This element of control is an important part of Kesey's theatrical nature and manifests in, among other places, the religious reverence, iconography, and vernacular implemented by and cast upon Kesey and his teachings. In much of Wolfe's text, the Biblical parallels are obvious. Kesey is a Christ figure, a teacher leading his disciples across great distances and through strangely profound experiences, preaching novel ways of looking at existence, and even pulling off a miracle or two (for example, keeping the Hell's Angels in line).¹⁶

This dynamic, largely fueled by Kesey's irresistible (if not brazen) charm,

even prompts members of an established religious order, the Unitarian Church, to refer to him as the “Prophet Kesey.”¹⁷ As would be expected, Kesey wholly denies such identification. Were he to not, his would be an endeavor in renewal or reclamation, rather than creating something new and unique. “We’re not on a Christ Trip,” he declares. “That’s been done, and it doesn’t work.”¹⁸ Despite this adamant denial, Wolfe cannot help but repeatedly point out the religious (often Judeo-Christian) parallels in the Prankster quest. And this is largely due to the fact that Kesey plays the role so well. For Wolfe, the religious implications of Pranksterdom begin with the group’s focus on “the experience.” He observes, “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.”¹⁹ Rather, like consciousness expansion itself, each “began with an overwhelming *new experience*.”²⁰ Thus, while Kesey’s trip might not be definitively Christian, Wolfe sees in his leadership the makings of a prophet or, at the very least, a man who plays the part so well he eventually believes himself to be one. For it is the “*provocateur* Kesey” who “prophesied” the death of the UC Berkeley student movement against the war.²¹ And it is Kesey, in only an *ostensibly* failed prediction that the Beatles would travel from their 1965 concert at the Cow Palace in Los Angeles to an after-party at his residence in La Honda, who foresees the band’s co-opting of the Pranksters’ journey “Furthur” in the *Magical Mystery Tour* a few years later.²²

Wolfe’s seamless transitions between journalistic observation and the myriad (often coalescing) perspectives of his subjects can at times obscure the guiding hand of the writer in the establishment of these religious attributions. That is to say, the melding of so many identities in Wolfe’s brand of immersed, literary journalism—Wolfe’s (as both journalist *and* participant-observer), other narrators, and subjects—makes it difficult to see that Kesey the prophet is nearly as much a product of Wolfe as he is of Kesey, the Pranksters, and the Unitarians.²³ Jack Schafer also observes this element, noting that while “Wolfe finds in the Pranksters the germ of a mid-century religious awakening,” the prophet-disciple relationship between Kesey and the Pranksters “could be judged a matter of a writer’s Ph.D. overpowering a simpler tale about a group of founding stoners.”²⁴ That said, guidance and invention are two very different things, and Wolfe’s use of words like “prophet” and “miracle” are taken directly from the discourse of Pranksterdom. It is Kesey himself who, upon arriving at the 1965 Unitarian Church conference in Asilomar, California, declares, “[W]e’re going to try to work a miracle in seven days.”²⁵ And it is Kesey, positioned on a balcony high above the masses at the 1966 San Francisco Trips Festival, who scrawls in great red letters upon

the wall, “Anybody Who Knows He Is God Go Up on Stage.”²⁶ Thus, when Wolfe writes assertions such as, “Ever since Asilomar, Kesey has been deep into the religion thing,” the reader can trust that his is an *observation*, not a loose interpretation.²⁷ And it is on the heels of this very observation that we find the principle flaw in the religious character of Prankster existence.

Wolfe notes Kesey’s engrossment in the “religion thing” while revealing a private moment between Kesey and Mountain Girl, a Prankster with whom the former is having an extramarital affair. As Kesey pontificates on his latest vision of Prankster existence (“Miracles—Control—Now—The Movie”), we find Mountain Girl unable to concentrate on the “great waves” of words. “Her mind keeps rolling and spinning over another set of data, always the same. Like—the eternal desperate calculation. In short, Mountain Girl is pregnant.”²⁸ In this moment, amid Kesey’s sermonizing on “very deep and far out stuff,” we find the central conflict in the narrative: the intrusion of reality upon Prankster escapism.

Mountain Girl’s pregnancy is a significant development; it is an unplanned conception with a married man, the wife of whom is the matriarch of her immediate social circle.²⁹ She is living in a commune, perpetually high on psychedelic drugs, with no real income and no immediate means of providing for her unborn child. Yet the gravity of her situation is belied by the rather nonchalant, matter-of-fact way in which Wolfe breaks the news. Really, the exploration of Mountain Girl’s condition goes no further than the quote above. Her pregnancy is mentioned only twice more in the book, once on the following page, and then briefly referenced again nearly a hundred pages later; this is about as many times as her (and Kesey’s) daughter, Sunshine, is mentioned in subsequent chapters.

Wolfe’s ostensible trivialization of Mountain Girl’s pregnancy effectively reflects the disconnection between the collective Prankster mindset and the goings-on of the world around them. For all of their desires to expand their consciousness through hallucinogens, multimedia experiments, free-association dialogues, and other such activities, Kesey and his Merry Band of Pranksters only succeed in isolating themselves from the “real world” (and potentially the reader). Thus when the palpable, often harsh developments of actuality infringe upon the “current fantasy,” we find the Pranksters retreating further into the fantasy, often to the point of delusion. Even Mountain Girl, in this moment of real-life crisis, cannot “hardly help but marvel at the current fantasy.”³⁰

This existential disconnect is emphasized in the Acid Tests themselves.³¹ In the book’s title chapter, Ken Babbs, the Prankster who assumes leadership while Kesey is on the lam in Mexico, asserts that the idea behind these gatherings is to “learn how to function on acid.”³² The implication here is that

these communal experiments will teach those involved how to successfully engage in consciousness expansion in the “straight” world. In other words, the Pranksters seek a method for leading functional and relatively productive lives while continuing to take acid. The irony of this idea is that the structure of the Acid Tests only serves to further isolate its participants from the world they seek to navigate. Kesey’s initial notion of the tests explicitly conveys such disengagement. He envisions a multimedia burlesque comprising “lights, movies, [and] videotapes.”³³ And among the many projectors, “speakers, microphones, tape machines, live, replay, variable lag,” and strobe lights, participants “could take LSD or speed or smoke grass and lie back and experience what they would, *enclosed and submerged* in a planet of lights and sounds such as the universe never knew.”³⁴ This vision echoes a consistent paradox (or perhaps contradiction) in the Prankster mindset: the confrontation of reality with unreality. And while the actual Acid Tests are nowhere near as grand or sophisticated as Kesey’s aforementioned conception, they nonetheless serve to separate their participants from the world outside the walls of their venues, which include the Fillmore West, San Francisco’s Longshoremens’ Hall, and L.A.’s Troupers Club.³⁵ The culmination of the Acid Tests is fantasy, not reality. Wolfe sees this clearly, hence their identification with the magic of motion pictures, specifically “Cinerama,” by which “[a] man could become—for a while, at least—any other person, and could take part in any conceivable adventure, real or imaginary.”³⁶ In essence, the experience is designed to be “indistinguishable from reality itself.” So, like the bus trip, the Acid Tests are only “an allegory of life,” not life incarnate.

Of course, most experiences conceived by Kesey and the Pranksters in *Acid Test* adhere to this disconnect. Wolfe’s task is therefore significantly more complicated than that of your average documentarian or journalist. He must cut through not simply simulacra, but also the pervasive allegory and delusions that Kesey and the Pranksters have positioned as actuality.³⁷ In essence, they buy into and become lost in the myth of their own creation, and it is against this descent into artifice that Wolfe must show what Prankster existence really looks like. The reporter quickly recognizes the limitations of the traditional journalistic approach in an acid scene where “no one is going to put it into words for you.”³⁸ Wolfe implements such convention in his first encounter with Kesey while visiting him in prison. There is an implicit metaphor in this encounter wherein the two communicate via telephone while only a few feet across from one another, separated by the thick, soundproof glass of the visitation area. While Kesey and Wolfe are in close physical proximity, “imaginatively they are miles apart.”³⁹ Because so much of Prankster existence resists linguistic representation, Kesey seeks a new art form—a new

language—one that cannot be adequately represented by the stuff of convention. Wolfe, in turn—on the heels of this initial failure with Kesey—makes it his mission to reveal the ostensibly ineffable “other world” of the Pranksters.⁴⁰

Cutting through the Haze

Wolfe’s narrative technique for making clear the opaque abstraction that is Prankster existence becomes the juxtaposition and blending of his own journalistic and subjective voices with the voices and perspectives of both his subjects and other writers who’ve helped in his research. What is more, Wolfe was privy to the forty-plus hours of film footage shot by the Pranksters during their cross-country bus trip (an invaluable documentary resource in itself). The host of recorded interviews, footage, and documentary materials did more than help Wolfe assemble a cohesive narrative from a mountain of fragments.⁴¹ It provided him with the material by which he could effectively cultivate distinct and accurate narrative voices. These, along with the many literary styles—from journalistic prose to rhyming poetry, ballads, and formally avant-garde arrangements on par with e.e. cummings and Gertrude Stein—provide the reader with multiple ways of seeing. Ultimately, Wolfe succeeds in subverting Prankster unreality via the collocation of their perspectives with his (and others’) journalistic observations and narrative interpretations.

Wolfe’s approach to representing Pranksterdom is the means by which the writer can impose order (and thus clarity) on a milieu seemingly devoid of any structure whatsoever—something Kesey and the Pranksters will never be able to do with the miles of film and audiotape they’ve recorded. Such becomes clearest in Wolfe’s ability to implement a representational form that effectively communicates the effects of an LSD trip to a readership largely unfamiliar with the actual effects of the drug. Put another way, Wolfe has successfully interpreted Kesey and his followers, who have themselves developed a means of interpreting the world based upon the use of drugs with which an overwhelming majority of Americans had no experience whatsoever.⁴² Consequently there is an intrinsic cognitive disconnect between the reader and these proponents of consciousness expansion. The former will approach Wolfe’s coverage of the latter with the rationality inherent in the act of engaging a written text. But consciousness expansion is rooted in the irrational. In a sense, it attempts to counter the methodology of deductive reasoning ingrained in the minds of modern man. To more clearly illustrate this idea, Wolfe turns to another author who experimented with hallucinogenic drugs, Aldous Huxley. As Wolfe notes, Huxley’s book *The Doors of Perception* positions “ordinary perception” or rational thought as the product of centuries of detrimental conditioning:

In ordinary perception, the senses send an overwhelming flood of information to the brain, which the brain then filters down to a trickle it can manage for the purpose of survival in a highly competitive world. Man has become so rational, so utilitarian, that the trickle becomes most pale and thin. It is efficient for survival, but it screens out the most wondrous part of man's potential experience without his even knowing it.⁴³

Consciousness expansion attempts to offset these limitations. Drugs open the doors of perception and return to modern man the ability to "experience the rich and sparkling flood of the senses fully," something only known to his "Primitive" ancestors and childhood self. For Huxley, this is no less than a rediscovery of man's "divine birthright."

As this state and the experiences it yields transcends rational, utilitarian thought, Wolfe must engage the problem of representation through both stylistic and philosophical means. First, he "adapts his writing to his milieu," constructing a form to match content, "subverting his language" and "dosing his prose."⁴⁴ In *Acid Test* this means developing an expressionistic form that emulates the experience of an LSD trip. To do this, Wolfe employs a barrage of familiar modernist devices, including rapidly shifting points of view, abstruse (ostensibly nonsensical) interior monologues, and non-linear word organization—all in an effort to effectively represent the thoughts and feelings of people on such powerful hallucinogenic drugs.

But mere style would not be enough to do this. Wolfe understood that in order to truly express the Prankster mindset, he would have to take acid himself. The fundamental disconnect between the "straight world" and Kesey and his followers is that "the Pranksters' unique practices . . . derived from the LSD experience and [were] incomprehensible without it."⁴⁵ Wolfe's first attempt to write something on Kesey and the Pranksters, a three-part series of articles published in *New York* in January and February of 1967, reflects this idea. As Weingarten notes, they were thorough pieces of investigative reporting, but they were also "written with a reporter's detachment that came no closer to explaining the Prankster's reality than the early press coverage Wolfe dismissed as hopelessly stodgy."⁴⁶ To access the "metaphysical aspect of the story," Wolfe would have to take the acid plunge.

At La Honda, Wolfe refused Kesey's offer of LSD, but he eventually understood that he could not fully access the actuality of his subjects without partaking in their defining ritual. In 1967 he traveled to Buffalo, New York, to meet a friend with a means of acquiring acid. There he dropped 124 milligrams and had, what seemed like at the time, "a phenomenal insight, a breakthrough."⁴⁷ Actually, the experience was not entirely profound awareness and epiphany. The beginning of Wolfe's trip was quite terrifying. He

states, “At first I thought I was having a gigantic heart attack—I felt like my heart was outside my body with these big veins.”⁴⁸ Despite this horrific facet of his first (and only) LSD trip, Wolfe would walk away from the experience with a degree of understanding unimaginable to him before.

One example of such insight comes during the description of one of the early Prankster experiments at Perry Lane. Here we are privy to an acid-fueled conversation between two Pranksters, George Walker and Sandy Lehmann-Haupt, on (what is to them) the profoundly fascinating topic of “intersubjectivity.” In this moment, Sandy has a staggering revelation: “[H]e knows precisely what Walker is thinking.”⁴⁹ It is not enough that Wolfe simply *tell* his reader of this development; he must *show* us by effectively bringing about the marriage of form and content. In other words, he must reveal what intersubjectivity *looks like* with words. He does this comprehensively, beginning on the outside of the conversation—with description and dialogue (the aforementioned journalistic observation)—and ending inside the shared consciousness of the Pranksters (the multiple, soon-to-be-singular perspectives of his subjects). The moment of discovery for Sandy and George is initiated with third-person narration, wherein we find that Sandy “and George Walker are up in the big tree in front of the house, straddling a limb.” Wolfe refers to both men by name and third-person pronouns—and marks their dialogue with quotation marks—until the notion of intersubjectivity is introduced. Then, suddenly, the narration (and thus the reader) moves inside the minds of *all* of the Pranksters:

“You paint the cobwebs,” Sandy says, “and I’ll paint the leaves behind them.”

“Too much!” says George, because, of course, he knows—all of *us* sliding in and out of these combinations of mutual consciousness, intersubjectivity, going out to the backhouse, near the creek with tape recorders and starting to *rap*—a form of free association conversation, like a jazz conversation, or even a monologue, with everyone, or whoever, catching hold of words, symbols, ideas, sounds, and winging them back and forth beyond . . . the walls of conventional logic. . . . One of us finds a bunch of wooden chessmen.⁵⁰

From here we are presented with a continued exposition of meandering interior monologue and conversations, never really knowing who’s thinking or speaking at a given moment. But this is precisely the point. At the moment when the Pranksters discover intersubjectivity, so do we, the readers. And the narration shifts from the journalistic third person (the use of names and “he”) to an immersed, rapidly shifting, first-person account in which all speakers and thinkers become “us.”

By purposely blurring the lines between interior monologue and dia-

ing focused on the tangible world, Wolfe can make connections that Kesey cannot. Whereas the Pranksters spend so much time creating *allegories* of life, Wolfe focuses on the stuff of *here and now*. He takes very seriously the implications and significances of the palpable world, for it is in that world where we discover the human condition. This is why Kesey cannot grasp the seriousness of Mountain Girl's pregnancy. Wolfe, on the other hand, moves fluidly between Prankster consciousness (or perhaps false consciousness) and the stuff of indexical reality.

In the midst of the Pranksters' self-imposed myopia, Wolfe effects clarity. We see as much when the group takes Furthur to the Deep South. While walking through the French Quarter of New Orleans, Kesey and the Pranksters are able to charm the police officers who come to inspect the exotic strangers donning "red and white striped shirts and Day-Glo stuff."⁵³ This becomes "comic relief" for the Pranksters as they "talked sweet" to these potentially dangerous figures of austere authority who ultimately "skedaddle in a herd of new Ford cruisers." They come away from this encounter with an intensified sense of confidence and accomplishment, "like they all owned the place." Through the current fantasy, they have seemingly subverted the social paradigm that says 1960s cops in the Deep South harass Northern intruders.

Wolfe masterfully juxtaposes this scene with another encounter, one that strips Kesey and company of this newly cultivated buoyancy. The group soon leaves the French Quarter and travels to a nearby lake where they drop acid, blast Martha and the Vandellas and Shirley Ellis from the speakers mounted on the bus, and head into the water to cool off. Initially, and quite intentionally, the writer paints the moment as an idyllic scene, noting the spaciousness of the park, the muscular builds of the Prankster men as they slip on their swimming trunks, and the "nice trees" and "endless nice water" before them.⁵⁴ This seems a fitting celebration and reward for their aforementioned victory over social mores. We soon learn, however, that the Pranksters have unwittingly ventured into "a segregated beach, for Negroes only." While Kesey and his followers might have been able to momentarily escape the oppressive heat (literally and figuratively), they cannot escape the racial climate of the Southern United States in the 1960s—a climate made all the more volatile and ironic by the fact that these white outsiders are blasting black music. Hence the menacing reception Prankster Zonker (Steve Lambrecht) receives from a group of wading African American men into which he swims. With a head full of acid, Zonker in this moment is only able to see the world in shades of orange, but this is absolutely no time to be colorblind. The unwelcoming men call Zonker and his companions a "[l]otta fucking trash" just before threatening to "cut [his] little balls off."⁵⁵

Thankfully, Zonker remains intact, though in an instant, a much larger group of African American beachgoers has gathered around the bus “doing dirty rock dances and the dirty boogie” to a Jimmy Smith record.⁵⁶ The symbolic implications of this detail are not lost upon the reader as the black music, co-opted by white America (and these white interlopers) is being reclaimed. All of this becomes a “horrible bummer” for Kesey and the Pranksters as the threat of violence looms. It quickly dissipates, however, when the cops arrive to disperse the crowd and shoo away the “white crazies.” Up until this point, the trip Furthur has been largely defined by Prankster provocation of the police—their systematic attempts to “break up the Cop Movie,” that is, disrupt police procedure. Here, though, they stay on the bus, happy to “go with the Cop Movie and get their movie out of there.”⁵⁷ So, in a sudden and significant shift, the Pranksters have found themselves willing participants in this most iconic paradigm of 1960s Southern America: white cops and white citizens on one side, and African Americans on the other. Thus the abstract and idealized world of the current fantasy, in Wolfe’s hands, has given way to the harsh realities of 1960s American culture.

These juxtapositions afford the reader the requisite number of perspectives to understand and at times even identify with the documentary subjects while cutting through the allegorical haze they create. Here we see clearly the complexity of Wolfe’s endeavor: the escapist ethos Wolfe confronts positions being human as an obstacle, something to get around or move beyond. If left unmitigated, such could only enhance the divide between reader and subject. Indeed, so much of the Prankster ethos trivializes what it means to be human. Such is revealed in the near-constant fantasizing of becoming superheroes—metahumans who can transcend the “lag” of earthy existence and go where no earthbound creature has gone before. Ultimately, humanity becomes a “predicament” to Kesey, something to overcome despite the fact that much of the calamity that becomes his existence requires several complex, often laborious human abilities, like editing the film, sorting out legal troubles, dealing with a child born out of wedlock, and confronting the ever-present paranoid delusions that envelop Kesey while a fugitive in Mexico.

When superheroes and delusional paranoia converge late in the text, the extent of Kesey’s fantasizing becomes very apparent. After secretly crossing the border from Mexico back into the United States, Kesey begins to plan his final performance, the grandest prank in history. He envisions a “monster trips festival,” the biggest Acid Test in San Francisco’s “largest” hall, Winterland. Of course, the promotion of such an event promises to solicit the attention of police, much to Kesey’s delight. Really, their attendance is an “integral part of the fantasy.”⁵⁸ And just at midnight, at the height of the “hideous bacchanal,”

Kesey is to appear on stage, disguised as Captain America. He will rip off his mask, revealing not simply his face, but also his vision for moving “beyond acid”—the unnamed next step in the consciousness expansion movement. Then as the police converge upon the stage, the fugitive Kesey just beyond their collective grasp, Captain America will ascend a rope hanging from the roof, climb through a trap door, and escape via a waiting helicopter.

Clearly, Kesey does not escape “into the California ozone.”⁵⁹ He is captured by federal agents in an anticlimactic chase on foot, which Wolfe reveals but a few pages after the escape fantasy. There is no epic struggle, no near-getaway. There is only a flustered and befuddled Kesey who cannot outrun the nameless agents in their “Shiny Black FBI Shoes.”⁶⁰ Rundown and apprehended, he is no Captain America and certainly no Flash; he is but a “poor petered-out schmuck” with ripped pants about to be taken to jail.⁶¹

Through the juxtaposition of epic fantasy and the strange, though sometimes deceptively mundane, reality of Prankster existence, Wolfe succeeds in not simply illuminating this particular failing of Kesey’s. More important, throughout *Acid Test* he ruptures the sphere of abstraction, allegory, and fantasy that his subjects have placed in the way of his journo-documentary ambition. With this barrier felled, Wolfe’s work realizes its paramount goal of communicating the relevance of its subjects to a readership largely apt to relegate ostensible deviants to a position of Other. We ultimately come to see Kesey and the Merry Band of Pranksters not merely as “California Day-Glo crazies” or—on the other side of the ontological spectrum—metahuman pioneers cutting a trail to an impossibly enlightened realm of existence. Rather, Wolfe shows us the actuality of real—though extraordinary—people: flawed-yet-earnest American dreamers with whom, on some level, we can identify.

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Notes

1. Weingarten observes that Wolfe's work in the 1960s was seen by many as "an important forum for voices and cultural trends that had not been given their proper due in the mainstream media": Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 100.

2. What is more, we see that Kesey and the Pranksters, in their reverence for the "technological superheroics of the jet, TV, atomic subs, ultrasonics" and so on, embrace contemporaneous, space-age American culture, complementing what Wolfe notes as the prevailing myth of 1960s America in his nonfiction work *The Right Stuff*: a new civilization founded upon "the incalculable power" of science and technology, "not of nature, as archaic magic had been": Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Picador, 1979), 97.

3. This is Wolfe's method of narrating through the voice and perspective of his subject, seamlessly making the transition between their consciousness and his own.

4. The "current fantasy" is the central tenet of the Prankster ethos by which members are to attempt to live in, be totally conscious of, and savor the absolute present without reminiscence or anticipation. As Kesey sees it, people suffer from "all sorts of lags. One, the most basic, is the sensory lag, the lag between the time your senses receive something and you are able to react": This is the central predicament facing Kesey—and the thing LSD promises to overcome. "We are all of us doomed to spend our lives watching a *movie* of our lives—we are always acting on what has just finished happening": Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Picador, 1968), 129. Italics in original.

5. *Ibid.*, italics in original.

6. Gary Konas, "Traveling 'Further' with Tom Wolfe's Heroes," *Journal of Popular Culture* 28, no. 3 (1994): 190.

7. Carl A. Bredahl, "An Exploration of Power: Tom Wolfe's Acid Test," *Critique* 23, no.2 (1982): 67–84.

8. *Ibid.*, 68.

9. T.V. Reed, "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*," *Representations* 24 (1988): 164. Reed positions James Agee and Walker Evans's work as a response to the limitations of any single literary form to adequately represent "the real." He notes that while "representational systems are always inadequate," *Famous Men*, in its merger of profound realism and aestheticism, comes closer to delivering the representation of reality than any prior attempt. He also posits that the "ossified" representational categories and practices of its time (or any time, for that matter) need to be subverted and ultimately shattered if one is to successfully "capture the real" (159, 161). Thus, like Wolfe, Agee implements myriad representational approaches, from realism to cubism, supplementing the inadequacies of singular aesthetic or discursive forms that provide but one such version or angle.

10. In addition to complimenting the physical appearances of Kesey, his wife, Faye, and several Pranksters, Wolfe openly describes the ways in which he becomes temporarily seduced by the aura and energy surrounding Kesey and his followers—

the “mysto steam” that begins “rising in [his] head” (16).

11. William McKeen, *Tom Wolfe* (New York: Twayne, 1987), 62.

12. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 48. Perry Lane, what Wolfe describes as “Stanford’s bohemian quarter,” was a thriving artists’ colony in Menlo Park, California, largely made up of graduates of Stanford’s graduate creative writing program—like Kesey. In 1962, Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* while residing in his Perry Lane cottage. The Acid Test Graduation was a ceremony wherein Kesey, the Pranksters, and a few other members of the “inner circle” officially acknowledged the limitations of LSD and consequent need to “move beyond” acid to another form of consciousness expansion.

13. *Ibid.*, 69. These are terms Wolfe uses to describe both individual and collective consciousness.

14. Examples of such names are “dis-MOUNT” (Sandy Lehmann-Haupt), “Mal Function” (Mike Hagen), and “Gretchin Fetchin, the Slime Queen” (Paula Sundstren).

15. *Ibid.*

16. Despite the notorious motorcycle gang’s penchant for violence and mayhem, Kesey and company consistently demonstrate their ability to interact with the Angels sans catastrophe. There is one notable exception to this observation, an apparent gang rape carried out by the Angels at a party thrown in their honor at Kesey’s rural La Honda compound. Wolfe’s handling of this event is ambiguous, as it is unclear to what extent and until what point (if at all) the victim willfully participates in the act. Such ambiguity is also present in Thompson’s portrayal of the incident in *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (New York: Random House, 1966). Thompson was present at the party and provided Wolfe with tape recordings from the event to assist in his research: Jann S. Wenner and Corey Seymour, eds., *Gonzo: The Life of Hunter S. Thompson* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2007), 142.

17. In chapter fourteen, “A Miracle in Seven Days,” Kesey and the Pranksters are invited to speak at the 1965 Unitarian Church conference. The group proves quite alluring to the younger factions of the conference, many of which position Kesey’s teachings as prophetic.

18. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 172.

19. *Ibid.*, 113.

20. Italics in original.

21. *Ibid.*, 319.

22. After an early exit from the concert, the Pranksters attempt to conjure the presence of the group at their La Honda headquarters by simply posting a sign at the entrance reading, “The Merry Pranksters Welcome the Beatles.” Of course, the Beatles never show. However, Kesey does not see this as a failure, for just two years later, the Beatles embarked on their own psychedelic bus trip, the “Magical Mystery Tour”—a scripted and filmed appendage to their album of the same name. In no uncertain terms, Wolfe notes Kesey’s belief that he and the Pranksters directly inspired this development. It should also be noted that “Further” is the name of the

Pranksters' bus. Originally, the word, *Further*, was painted above the windshield and then changed to "Furthur" during the famed cross-country trip. Here I use the term as both a reference to the actual bus and the trip itself.

23. Wolfe is not the only storyteller in *Acid Test*. At points throughout the narrative, he implements verbatim recitations of letters, notes, and recordings from other writers, such as Thompson, author Larry McMurtry, and *Los Angeles Free Press* contributor Clair Brush—as well as, of course, Kesey and the Pranksters.

24. Jack Schafer, "The Tripster in Wolfe's clothing: Jack Schafer on Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and the Underappreciated Art of Dissecting Cultural Trends," *Columbia Journalism Review* 44, no. 6 (2006): 55–6.

25. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 165.

26. *Ibid.*, 234.

27. *Ibid.*, 177.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Kesey was married to Norma "Faye" Kesey, with whom he had three children. In 1966, Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Adams gave birth to his fourth child, Sunshine. Fifteen years later, Adams married Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead.

30. *Ibid.*

31. The Acid Tests are a series of LSD-fueled parties conceived and put on by Kesey and the Pranksters. The events feature a multimedia blitz of projected movies, sounds, lights (strobos and black lights), and music (usually provided by the Grateful Dead).

32. *Ibid.*, 241.

33. *Ibid.*, 206.

34. *Ibid.*, italics added.

35. The advertising slogan for these events, "Can you pass the Acid Test?" does seem to support the notion that the tests are designed to, in fact, help people "function on acid"—the idea being that if one can hold it together during the overwhelming barrage of lights, images, and sounds of the Acid Tests, then dealing with the "real" world while on acid will pose no problem whatsoever. However, the construction of an artificial or virtual reality is simply that—a construct.

36. *Ibid.*, 208. Wolfe borrows this quote from *Childhood's End*, Arthur C. Clarke's science-fiction novel.

37. Both the Pranksters and Wolfe use "allegory" and "allegory of life" throughout the text to signify the ideas and practices of the group.

38. *Ibid.*, 140.

39. Bredahl, 70.

40. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 52. Further complicating Wolfe's endeavor is Kesey's consistent (and often convincing) rhetoric regarding the demise of writing—what was, to him, "old-fashioned and artificial" (91). Regarding conventional journalism, Wolfe does not disagree. In observing coverage of the Furthur trip, he notes, "The local press, including some of the hipper, smaller sheets, gave it a go, but nobody really comprehended what was going on, except that it was a party" (*ibid.*).

41. In addition to the comprehensive interviews conducted with Kesey and the Pranksters, Wolfe had access to “Kesey’s extensive archive—diaries, photographs, [and] correspondence” (Weingarten, 111).

42. The established idea that “the 1960s were the heyday of illegal drug use” may be more myth than reality. According to a 1969 Gallup poll, “only 4% of American adults said they had tried marijuana,” Jennifer Robinson, “Decades of Drug Use: Data From the ’60s and ’70s,” Gallup, July 2, 2002, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6331/decades-drug-use-data-from-60s-70s.aspx>. What’s more, “According to the first National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, in 1972, five per cent of Americans, almost all of them under the age of 18, had used psychedelics”: Jeremy Travis, “Rise in Hallucinogen Use,” NCJRS.gov, October 1997, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/txtfiles/166607.txt>.

43. Quoted in Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 40.

44. Weingarten, 112.

45. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 125. This very valid point lends credence to Konas’s assertion that Wolfe, as good a writer as he is, “can only take language so far to reify these people.” In other words, unless all of his readers take or had taken acid prior to tackling *Acid Test*, Wolfe’s “words can only approximate [their] reality.”

46. Weingarten, 107.

47. Dorothy McInnis Scura, *Conversations with Tom Wolfe* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 212.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 53.

50. *Ibid.*, italics in original.

51. Weingarten, 112. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S. Thompson would follow suit, proving himself even more adept at using written language to express the hallucinogenic drug experience. Unlike Wolfe, Thompson was an avid drug taker and could thus draw upon his innumerable experiences with LSD, mescaline, and a host of other drugs.

52. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 42.

53. Wolfe, *Acid Test*, 79.

54. *Ibid.*, 80.

55. *Ibid.*, 80–1.

56. *Ibid.*, 81.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 328.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, 330.

61. *Ibid.*, 331.