

Reporting Live From Edge City:  
The Dynamic “Statuspheres” of Tom Wolfe’s America

by

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## ABSTRACT

During the 1960s, American youth were coming of age in a post-war period marked by an unprecedented availability of both money and leisure time. These conditions afforded young people new opportunities for exploring fresh ways of thinking and living, beyond the traditional norms of their parents' generation. Tom Wolfe recognized that a revolution was taking place, in terms of manners and morals, spearheaded by this latest generation. He built a career for himself reporting on the diverse groups that were developing on the periphery of the mainstream society and the various ways they were creating social spaces, what he termed "statuspheres," for themselves, in which to live by their own terms.

Using the techniques of the New Journalism—"immersion" reporting that incorporated literary devices traditionally reserved for writers of fiction—Wolfe crafted creative non-fiction pieces that attempted not only to offer a glimpse into the lives of these fringe groups, but also to place the reader within their subjective experiences.

This thesis positions Wolfe as a sort of liminal trickster figure, who is able to bridge the gap between disparate worlds, both physical and figurative. Analyzing several of Wolfe's works from the time period, it works to demonstrate the almost magical way in which Wolfe infiltrates various radical, counterculture and otherwise "fringe" groups, while borrowing freely from elements across lines of literary genre, in order to make his subjects' experiences come alive on the page. This work attempts to shed light on his special ability to occupy multiple spaces and perspectives simultaneously, to offer the reader a multidimensional look into the lives of cultural outsiders and the impact that they had and continue to have on the overarching discussion of the American Experience.

Ultimately, this paper argues that by exposing these various outlying facets of American culture to the mainstream readership, Wolfe acts as a catalyst to reincorporate these fringe elements within the larger conversation of what it means to be American, thereby spurring a greater cultural awareness and an expansion of the collective American consciousness.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wonderful and patient wife Celeste, who graciously lent me her ear and skilled editing hand, and put up with me through countless rants, late nights and moments of exasperation during the course of this project.

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## INTRODUCTION

By the time Tom Wolfe's manifesto *The New Journalism* was published in 1973, he (and several others) had been engaged in the reporting techniques by which he characterized the movement for nearly a decade. However, he was the first to attempt to define just what New Journalism was, and to offer a defense of the methods that defined its unique literary approach to journalism. The new literary style of journalism, Wolfe explains, began to take shape in the early 1960s, developed by a small group of feature writers working primarily for New York magazines and Sunday supplements. According to Wolfe, it was during this time that "a curious new notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature statusphere. It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would...read like a novel" (*New Journalism* 9).

Traditional reporting, Wolfe was all too aware, was bland, often little more than a simple regurgitation of the facts of a given event. "The archetypical newspaper columnist," Wolfe wrote, "was [Walter] Lippman. For 35 years Lippman seemed to do nothing more than ingest the *Times* every morning, turn it over in his ponderous cud for a few days, and then methodically egest it in the form of a drop of mush on the foreheads of several hundred thousand readers of other newspapers in the days thereafter" (12). For years, journalistic writing had abided by the unwritten law of *understatement*. "Most non-fiction writers," Wolfe explains, "without knowing it, wrote in a century-old British tradition in which it was understood that the narrator shall assume a calm, cultivated and, in fact, genteel voice" (17). Frankly, traditional reporting was a bore. It lacked the

charm, the eloquent style, the lasting appeal, the ability to captivate the reader, which a good novel possessed. This was because the traditional journalist had been equipped with a very limited set of tools and had been taught that these were all that were available to him—that those tools which the novelist had at his disposal to create worlds and to draw his audience into them, were off limits to the journalist. Naturally, the realization that this aging law had in fact become antiquated and need not continue to be observed was a huge revelation for those few who were able to overcome the fear of breaking rank, overlook the consequences of such a move and embrace the possibilities that might come with this new form of journalism that delivered the facts, but did so with the fullness and esthetic eloquence of a novel.

The new style, Wolfe states, took advantage of four key devices: “scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, point of view and the detailing of status life” (48). The first involved “telling the story by moving from scene to scene and resorting as little as possible to sheer historical narrative. Hence the sometimes extraordinary feats of reporting that the new journalists undertook: so that they could actually witness the scenes in other people’s lives as they took place” (31). The second device dealt with the gathering of enough dialogue to be able to show, not tell: to capture the essence of a character and recreate a given scene allowing his subject’s words—his verbal encounters with the others—to convey the action of the story. This meant that the journalist had not only to meticulously observe the subject as he conducted his daily affairs, but also to interview others about their interactions with him, read correspondence between he and his friends, family, business associates and enemies, watch video footage of him, listen to voice recordings—anything he could get his hands on, so that he might recreate not only



*what* was said, but *how* it was said, how it felt to be in the room as it was spoken. Using point of view the way a novelist could required even greater skill and commitment to the story and the characters it focused on. In several of his best stories, Wolfe uses point of view to effectively tell the story, as a novelist might, from the vantage point of a sort of third consciousness (telling the story neither from the “I” that is Tom Wolfe, nor the mind of his characters), or even more impressively, from within the mind of his subject, as in “The First Tycoon of Teen,” his piece on Phil Spector. In order to pull this off, the journalist had to go even deeper, beyond simply observing his subject, to interviewing him extensively about what he was thinking during a given event or conversation. Finally, and most importantly, the New Journalist interested himself (or herself) in the details of the subject’s ‘status life’: “everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of traveling, eating, keeping house, modes of behaving toward children, servants, superiors, inferiors, peers, plus the various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic [of a person’s status life] details that might exist within a scene” (32). In other words, “status life” is indicative of “the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be” (32). In an American society that had outgrown the Gilded Age, and was in a time of unprecedented prosperity, Wolfe was interested in how people were using the unique opportunities that this prosperity afforded them to remake themselves and establish their places within any of the new and various social hierarchies (“statuspheres”) taking root within the fabric of society, or even to create new ones of their own.

In order to effectively use these devices to push their new brand of journalism beyond the boundaries of their journalistic contemporaries, writers of the New Journalism had to immerse themselves in the worlds of their subjects. They had to dig deeper and go further than their traditional counterparts. Standard journalists might glean essential info enough to write a news piece—the who, what, when and where—without leaving the safety of their cubicle, by gathering a few secondhand accounts via telephone from persons who themselves had not been present at the time the event unfolded. However, New Journalists were not satisfied to simply relay to their readers “what happened.” They knew that there was more to a story than just the facts. Indeed, they would argue, the facts (the who, what, when, where) were often only the surface level “stuff” that a good reporter had to sift through to find the real meat of the story. The heart of the story, the juicy stuff, the real captivating stuff, lie in the bits and pieces that normal objective news reporting overlooked: the thoughts and feelings of the characters it concerned, their physical mannerisms and ways of speaking, their hopes and fears, the intimacies of the relationships that bound them to others—in short, the stuff that one must dig deeper to find, something that most reporters never bothered to do. Rather than acting merely as spectators, as was the natural role of traditional journalists, they became participants in the action. They were interested in the story that lay beneath the surface, and to get that story they often had to invest extended periods of time shadowing the subjects of their stories. Wolfe explains in his introduction to *The New Journalism*:

They [New Journalists] developed the habit of staying with the people they were writing about for days at a time, weeks in some cases. They had to gather all the material the conventional journalist was after—then keep

going [...] The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely, the subjective or emotional life of the characters. (21)

Getting at this part of the story—the real story—took time, patience, a certain social finesse, and above all, the willingness to get one’s hands dirty, to plunge right into the thick of it and stay there...for as long as it takes. Yet, this is something these writers were willing to do, because they understood the value of getting the story others overlooked. They weren’t content with regurgitating the facts for the daily press. They wouldn’t write straight for the straight world. And that’s why they were the perfect candidates to write the stories of others who couldn’t hack it in the straight world, or didn’t want to: the fringe elements of American society popping up on the periphery of the 1950s-leftover, conformist mainstream collectively referred to as the “counterculture.”

New Journalists and members of the counterculture shared a lot in common, whether or not they were willing to admit it. Both were engaging in a formal break from tradition. Both were attempting to create and insert themselves within new social hierarchies. In short, both were trying to create a place for themselves, in which to live and flourish on their own terms. And just as the counterculture made waves in its attempt to clash against, subvert or operate outside of the established traditions that preceded it, so did the New Journalism.

In the world of professional writing, there had long been a sort of unspoken hierarchy in place. In *The New Journalism*, Wolfe explains this class structure of the literary world, which had gone virtually unchallenged since the institution of the novel as the premier form:

The literary upper class were the novelists; the occasional playwright or poet might be up there, too, but mainly it was the novelists. They were regarded as the only ‘creative’ writers, the only literary artists [...] The middle class were the ‘men of letters,’ the literary essayists, the more authoritative critics; the occasional biographer, historian or cosmically inclined scientist also, but mainly the men of letters [...] The lower class were the journalists, and they were so low down in the structure that they were barely noticed at all [...] As for people who wrote for popular (‘slick’) magazines and Sunday supplements, your so-called free-lance writers—except for a few people on *The New Yorker*, they weren’t even in the game. They were the lumpenroles. (25)

It is no surprise then that as the New Journalism began to gain notoriety and transcend its lowly position at the bottom rung of the establishment, it became the subject of much criticism from above. These writers were essentially “ignoring literary class lines that [had] been almost a century in the making” (25). By incorporating elements that had previously belonged solely to the realm of fiction into journalism and creating a *literary journalism* that was both informative and entertaining, they were overstepping genre, and therefore class, lines and so were perceived as a threat by those inhabitants of the upper rungs of the literary ladder who had thought their place in the hierarchy of things to be safe and secure. “The Literary Gentlemen in the Grandstand,” as Wolfe called them, now began to feel pressure from this invading force advancing from below: this new form that read like fiction, but also had to its distinct advantage “the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*” (34). In his 1965 review of *The Kandy-Kolored*

*Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, critic Dwight Macdonald berated Wolfe for producing what he called ‘parajournalism,’ what he described as “a bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction” (Weber 28). In his view (and his view seems to have been shared by many other critics) Wolfe’s new brand of journalism was a form of heresy that simultaneously defiled journalism’s purity and took the holy name of literature in vein. According to author Ronald Weber, one of Macdonald’s primary objections to Wolfe’s work was that “Parajournalism appeared in the guise of journalism and claimed itself as journalism, but in fact it was not journalism since its aim was not to convey information but to create entertainment” (28). In the puritanical view of rigid literary critics then, it would seem, the common view was that business and pleasure should not be mixed. “The result of Macdonald’s criticism,” Weber explains, “was widespread doubt about literary nonfiction as serious journalism, let alone serious literature, and the tendency to see it as yet another branch of the entertainment industry” (28). But why shouldn’t journalism both entertain and inform? After all, the magazine and newspaper readership is comprised primarily of normal people (in contrast to staunch critics) and normal people, it has been noted, often prefer to enjoy their reading material, whether it be fiction or nonfiction. There is a sense conveyed in MacDonald’s review, as in much of the criticism that Wolfe received from the literary community, that art is something which is not to be enjoyed by the general public—that true art is above the simpleton’s vice of “entertainment.” In claiming that “Entertainment rather than information is the aim of its [New Journalism’s] producers, and the hope of its consumers” (Weingarten 5), Macdonald seems to imply that the common reader is little more than a hedonistic brute and that Wolfe and writers of his ilk

were simply pumping out bits of fluff and glitter to excite their senses. Fortunately, Wolfe did not espouse the view that art and enjoyment must necessarily be mutually exclusive. This stance elicited harsh criticism, but made for brilliant reading. And, as Weber notes, “Despite the varied critical attacks it drew, and no doubt partly because of them, literary nonfiction also drew a sizable audience. The nonfiction books of Capote, Wolfe, Talese, and Mailer were among the best sellers of the sixties” (34). So it seems that, like Wolfe, the general readership was also interested in “the way people are living now” (Wolfe *New Journalism* 28).

As the New Journalism continued to gain momentum, it upset many critics because, as Wolfe stated, “Really stylish reporting was something no one knew how to deal with, since no one was used to thinking of reporting as having an esthetic dimension” (11). However, Wolfe found that the increasing number of cold stares and harsh words focused in his direction were not only launched from among the ranks of various literary circles, but also from purveyors of his own profession. Many members of the journalism community shunned him and his new brand of literary journalism as well. In a 1965 article, for example, Emile Capouya, then reporter for the *Saturday Review*, begs the question, “And why should a talented writer compose dithy-rambs on the manners and morals of the underbred, undereducated, and underevolved? One wants to say to Mr. Wolfe: you’re so clever, you can talk so well, tell us something interesting” (8). In an article following the publication of Wolfe’s *The New Journalism*, Alan Trachtenberg of the *Partisan Review* writes Wolfe’s work off as a gimmicky display of “pyrotechnics,” that with its “corrugated verbal surface, the hyped-up prose, its tachycardiac speed, its fevered illusion of thinking and feeling,” only “asks to be noticed,

to have conferred upon it the status of ‘style,’ and now of ‘art’” (71). “His devices,” Trachtenberg writes, “include a bogus erudition and intellectuality, an OED vocabulary of technical terms, outrageous but ‘learned’ neologisms, and catalogue after catalogue of the names and things that fill the days and hours of American popular life, all presented without punctuation, as a kind of synchronistic pop mandala” (72). It seems that Trachtenberg could not resist extending the tone of condescension from Wolfe’s work to Wolfe himself. Still, by this point (1974), Wolfe had endured more than his fair share of snarky remarks and belittlement.

The fact of the matter is that Wolfe and other writers of the New Journalism blended elements of fiction and journalism to the distinct disdain of many members of both camps, but to the general enjoyment of the reading public. This new form was viewed by many critics as a cheap imitation of literature on the one hand, and an abomination of the journalist’s holy vow to relay the objective truth to its readers on the other. Many journalists, even those whose aesthetics and methods of reporting would suggest they be grouped in with Wolfe’s New Journalism, were loathe to have their names associated with his, and those who inhabited the ivory tower of the literary domain could scarcely be bothered to lower their collective gaze in Wolfe’s direction, much less allow that what he was doing even approached the high art of literature. In a 1973 interview with Michael Mok that appeared in the June 18 edition of *Publisher’s Weekly* following the release of Wolfe’s *The New Journalism*, Wolfe admits, “In this book I think I have managed to antagonize everybody in the fiction world—plus uncounted members of the nonfiction establishment, who at first I thought would be pleased” (30). Still, for all the criticism coming at him from both directions (and he seemed mostly to welcome it),

Wolfe was able to find astonishing success as a reporter. You see, Wolfe was a businessman too, an astute social economist, who understood that the mainstream readership still ruled the industry, and that their tastes, far and away, were very little concerned with (if even aware of) the purist, high-falutin opinions of his detractors.



## A NOTE ON STYLE

I have already discussed the unconventional reporting tactics that writers of the New Journalism employed, i.e. shadowing subject for days, weeks or months at a time in order to get a sense of who they are, not just on the surface level, but in terms of personality, modes of living, personal style and preference, mannerisms, ways of thinking, etc. However, their liberation from the conventional didn't stop there. Having freed himself from the strict constraints of traditional journalism and opened himself to the richness of devices available to the novelist, the New Journalist also found himself at liberty to really experiment with voice and style. Wolfe certainly allowed himself this freedom, and really came to delight in it, building a writing style that was all his own and instantly recognizable.

One major trait that Wolfe became known for was his free-flowing, off-the-cuff reporting, which mirrored the stream-of-consciousness prose that had characterized the Beat Generation before him. Wolfe was among the first to employ this literary style in journalism, but his discovery that non-fiction reporting could be written in this way came to him almost by accident. As William McKeen explains in his biography of Wolfe, this breakthrough was not the result of a conscious effort at trailblazing for Wolfe, nor did he realized at first how revolutionary the discovery was.

It all started when Wolfe went to the Hot Rod and Custom Car Show in New York in 1962 to write a feature for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, which had recently hired him (*Kandy-Kolored xi*). When he returned, he “turned out the requisite feature the newspaper expected,” (McKeen 25) that is, a sort of cookie-cutter story recounting the facts, with sensationalized accounts of those crazy fringe-type loons who listen to rock

and roll music and cut up perfectly good cars thrown in to appease the readers' appetite. However, as McKeen reveals, Wolfe saw more than what lay on the surface when he talked to the car customizers. He saw them "not as weirdos but as people busily redefining society" (25). "To him," McKeen writes, "the car show was not a freak parade [...] He saw it as a harbinger of a changing culture" (25). What fascinated Wolfe was the way that fringe groups, like the custom car builders he had talked to, were taking advantage of the unprecedented wealth and leisure time that a post war, post industrial America conferred, to establish new social spheres and modes of living outside of those that had traditionally been available. This is what he was interested in exploring further with the custom car crowd, and it would become a defining theme for much of his writing over the course of the next decade. They were artists in their own right, who had come from humble means and pursued their art, and though they were producing "these cars which more than 99 percent of the American people would consider ridiculous, vulgar and lower-class-awful beyond comment almost," (*Kandy-Kolored* xiii) they pursued it with undying passion and it wasn't long before a small but equally passionate niche market of aficionados emerged and they could actually make a living at it.

Wanting to investigate this more thoroughly, Wolfe approached *Esquire* magazine about doing a more in-depth piece exploring this phenomenon. Byron Dobell, managing editor at the magazine, was interested in what Wolfe had to say and agreed to finance a trip Los Angeles, the central hub of the custom car world, to dig deeper (McKeen 25). So, he dove in, immersing himself in custom car culture, and spending much time talking to some of its master builders, cult heroes like George Barris and Ed Roth. However, when he returned to New York, he just couldn't put it all together. The deadline rapidly

approaching, Wolfe still had nothing. “By this time,” Wolfe says, “*Esquire* practically had a gun at my head because they had a two-page-wide color picture for the story locked into the printing presses and no story” (*Kandy-Kolored* xiii). So, Dobell told him just to compile his notes and send them over so somebody else could write the story.

So, Wolfe sat down to his typewriter that evening and just let it roll. He typed and typed furiously through the night, uncensored, from his memory to the page. “I just started recording it all,” he recalls, “and inside a couple of hours, typing like a madman, I could tell that something was beginning to happen” (xiv). He worked through the night, driven by the pulse of the local rock and roll station and by 6:15 the following morning he had 49 pages. He handed in the memorandum when *Esquire* opened its doors and waited to hear back from Dobell. “About 4 P.M. I got a call from Byron Dobell. He told me they were striking out the “Dear Byron” at the top of the memorandum and running the rest of it in the magazine. That was the story, ‘The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby,’” Wolfe writes (xiv).

And so, Wolfe had stumbled onto a new freewheeling mode of writing. The tempo at which it was written, and at which it cruises through the various niches of the custom car subculture resembles the cars themselves—fast, fun, glittering, free in form—and Wolfe takes the reader along for the ride, up front, in the passenger seat, top down, wind in his face, rock and roll radio blaring. As McKeen states, “This process of madly recording everything became the Wolfe technique—the frenzy of composition, it turned out, was perfectly suited to the frenzy of the events he was narrating” (60). In this way, Wolfe could tie together all the various characters, sights, sounds, and sensations of the

experience he wished to convey to the reader, without losing the natural, often chaotic feeling inherent in way that it all unfolds in front of one in real life.

In *The New Journalism*, Wolfe says of *Kandy-Kolored*:

It was a garage sale, that piece... vignettes, odds and ends of scholarship, bits of memoir, short bursts of sociology, apostrophes, epithets, moans, cackles, anything that came into my head, much of it thrown together in a rough and awkward way. That was its virtue. It showed me the possibility of there being something 'new' in journalism. (15)

Wolfe reveals that the *secret* to his writing style at this point became that "I simply learned not to censor out the things that run through my mind as I write" (McKeen 23). He learned not only to write *what* he was thinking, but also *how* he was thinking. He experimented with ellipsis, to show the natural pauses in thought or dialogue, used exclamation points (sometimes many in a row) to express excitement, or no punctuation at all, running all his words together in an emulation of frenzied thought. He also tried out a number of other devices, in the vein of the Beats of the previous generation, including combining words or even making up his own occasionally when he could not locate the right word to suit his purpose. This type of experimentation was highly uncharacteristic of journalistic writing and something he quickly became known for. In the introduction to a compilation of criticism on Wolfe's journalism, editor Doug Shomette notes, "Each of the articles was previously published in magazines or newspapers of considerable circulation, but when assembled, they presented possibly the largest collection of hyphenated words, superfluous punctuation (and often total lack of punctuation), and repetitious usage of current sounds available in print" (xiii). Wolfe was not afraid to try

new things, nor did he seem to care too much what the popular response to his experimentation was. At the very least, it made him a standout in a crowd of standard, run-of-the-mill news reporters, whose default narrative tone was to “speak in beige or even New York journalese” (*New Journalism* 18). As critic William James Smith notes, “Wolfe has it, that magical quality that marks prose as distinctively one’s own. It is not just a matter of tricks. Few writers, even among the best, find a unique voice, and among journalists the tendency is to blend into the common, shirt-sleeve, hand-on-the-head anonymity” (9). Wolfe’s was an adventure in the language of non-fiction that garnered him much criticism and conversely, many copycats. “Tom Wolfe is undoubtedly the most parodied writer alive,” Smith writes in his review of *Kandy-Kolored*. “Two years ago he was unknown and today those who are not mocking him are doing their level best to emulate him” (7). Reading Wolfe’s writing, it is easy to tell that he was having fun doing it. And that fun was contagious, both for the reader and for other budding young writers who were also growing sick of doing things the standard, old, drab way. His writing has a magnetic personality all its own that one cannot help be drawn into. In his review of Wolfe’s *The Pump House Gang* and *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which were released concurrently, Paul West praises Wolfe’s unique approach to journalism for its ability to pull the reader into whatever realm of the American Experience he has immersed himself in at the given moment. West writes, “Eyeball invasiveness; the metamorphoses of an inquisitively adaptable personality; the wiretapping of a thousand individual psyches—call Wolfe’s own freewheeling performance what we will—it tells Americans what is going on in such a way that, even at two removes, they feel part of the scene” (19).

Part of what made Wolfe's reporting so captivating, so vital, was his special talent for bringing the reader into the minds of his subjects. This was a daring and dangerous feat that few journalists had previously had the talent or guts to pull off. It was an especially precarious practice because, as Wolfe has discussed, if one attempts to dictate his subjects' innermost thoughts and does not get it right, "the person may scream bloody murder, and you really don't have any defense except that you feel you're doing it accurately" (Bellamy 53). However, Wolfe did not take such a gamble in subjectivity without first doing his research. After having researched and spent enough time with a person, Wolfe states, "You really feel you know the person well enough and what their state was in this particular incident or you don't" (53). And, as it would seem, he was a pretty astute judge in this matter. After the publication of "The First Tycoon of Teen," in which Wolfe describes in detail the paranoid thoughts that plagued Phil Spector before flying, one news magazine "got into one of these anti-new-journalism spasms and called up Spector and a number of other people that I had written about and wanted to know if this was *accurate*," Wolfe states. "Spector hadn't told me about the whole thing," he continues, "but he said, 'Yeah, that's exactly the way I felt at that time'" (53).

Not only was Wolfe able to go inside the minds of the subjects of his writing, but he also had a knack for adapting his narrative voice to theirs. Even when he wasn't writing from within the mind of the character, or his dialogue, he would often continue the narrative using his subject's voice—his expressions, vernacular, etc.—in order to maintain the impression that it was filtering through the subject's point of view. In reference to "The Last American Hero," his piece on stock car racer Junior Johnson, Wolfe writes:

Now, as long as Junior Johnson was explaining the corn liquor industry, there was no problem, because (a) dialogue tends to be naturally attractive, or involving, to the reader; and (b) Johnson's Ingle Hollow lingo was unusual. But then I had to take over the explanation myself, in order to compress into a few paragraphs information that had come from several interviews. So...I decided I would rather talk in Ingle Hollow accents myself, since that seemed to go over all right [...] I was feigning the tones of an Ingle Hollow moonshiner, in order to create the illusion of seeing the action through the eyes of someone who was actually on the scene and involved in it, rather than a beige narrator. (*New Journalism* 18)

As adventurous as Wolfe was in his writing, he was equally adaptable. As several critics have noted, Wolfe's style and technique seems to have been fittingly adapted to the times and people about which he was writing. In the rapidly evolving, often chaotic America of the 1960s and 70s, especially as experienced by those fringe characters and groups that Wolfe consistently took as he subjects, Wolfe was able not only to keep up, but also to convey their stories in a language that matched the context. Michael Johnson elucidates this point in his book on the New Journalism: "It was necessary for Wolfe to participate fully in the culture he was writing about; and once he was attuned to the vibrations of that culture, his style had to change to accommodate its style, to do justice to it in his reporting" (53).

Wolfe was innovative and adventurous, living and working outside the bounds of tradition. He used language and techniques that defied genre and convention and paved

the way for a new journalism that reinvigorated the art of reporting. He lived by the mantra that the best rule is not to have any in the first place:

In this new journalism there are no sacerdotal rules; not yet in any case....If the journalist wants to shift from third-person point of view to first-person point of view in the same scene, or in and out of different character's points of view, or even from the narrator's omniscient voice to someone else's stream of consciousness—as occurs in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—he does it. For the gluttonous Goths there is still only the outlaw's rule regarding technique: take, use, improvise. (*New Journalism* 33-34)



## A WOLFE IN A WHITE SUIT

Wolfe was not only distinctive in his writing style, but also in his physical style, particularly his manner of dress. From very early on, Wolfe marked himself physically as an outsider, even among outsiders. Even now when one hears the name Tom Wolfe, one thinks of the white suit. As McKeen notes in his biography of Wolfe:

Wolfe became a character in the 1960s madness he was so effectively chronicling. In photographs and on talk shows, he could be seen in his distinctive white suits and high necked shirts, a dandy from an earlier age somehow dropped into the middle of a tumultuous decade that celebrated denim, not worsted wool, that smelled more of patchouli oil than Pinaud, and that saw the necktie as a corporate yoke, not a statement of sartorial defiance. (11)

When asked how he came to adopt this trademark feature, he gave an answer that seems fairly inconsequential: “In 1962 I was in a tailor shop and had a conventional summer suit made from some white silk tweed that impressed me,” he recalled in a 1975 interview with Philip Nobile for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (95). “But the suit was too hot for the summer. Then I began wearing it in December” (95). So, the iconic look was born (so says Wolfe) not out of a desire to stand out, but merely out of a sense of utility. When one pays tailor’s prices for a fine custom-made suit, one wants to get some use out of it, whether or not it lends itself to the trends of the time or customs of a given season. Wolfe goes on to explain that the out-of-season appearance of the suit garnered great annoyance from passersby on the street. Furthermore, he found that he liked the attention, negative though it might be. “Soon I discovered I had this marvelous, harmless form of

aggression going for me,” he states. “So I branched out into white suits with double-vested weskits and rows of white-covered buttons. Getting dressed in the morning was suddenly fun” (95).

Clad in his (often white) suit and fedora, characteristic of the dandified Southern gentleman of yore, he was sure to distinguish himself from members of just about any social circle that he found himself amongst. In her 1969 review of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* for *Saturday Review*, Rollene Saal describes Wolfe as “Easy to recognize” (23). “Here it is winter,” she writes, “and he’s wearing a white suit, white vest, white shoes, a blue and green plaid shirt, a flowered pocket handkerchief. His blond hair is straight and Beatle-length. He’s a superb dandy in the Wildean tradition—and it’s all camp and a Wolfe put-on” (23). After adopting this, what the everyday person might describe as *peculiar*, mode of dress, Wolfe found that this device or “put-on” actually worked to his benefit. Not only did his manner of dress draw much attention and make dressing “suddenly fun,” but again it had a perhaps unexpected utilitarian function to his line of work. Wolfe freely admits that affecting a rig such as those that he has become famous for is inherently pretentious. However, he insists that, despite the annoyance it incites among certain circles, it doesn’t hinder his work. In fact, as it turns out, quite the opposite is true. In a 1980 *Rolling Stone* interview, Chet Flippo asks Wolfe, “Does it ever get in the way of your role as the observer?” (148). “No,” Wolfe replies, “most often the opposite has gotten in the way. In the beginning of my magazine-writing career, I used to feel it was very important to try to fit in [...] and it almost always backfired” (148).

Wolfe did not always wear ‘the full rig’ out in the field. At first, he adapted his dress (as best he could) to try to suit his subject matter, believing it best to fit in when

working on location. However, it didn't take him long to figure out that insiders of any given niche are pretty quick to sniff out an imposter. When he began gathering information for a piece on stock-car racer Junior Johnson, Wolfe explains to Flippo, "I thought I'd better try to fit in, so I very carefully picked out the clothes I'd wear. I had a knit tie, some brown suede shoes and a brown Borsalino hat with a half-inch of beaver fur on it. Somehow I thought this was very casual and suitable for the races" (149-50). "I really thought I'd fit in," he goes on, "until about five days after I was down there. Junior Johnson came up to me and said, 'I don't like to say anything, but all these people in Ingle Hollow here are pestering me to death saying, *Junior, do you realize there's some strange little green man following you around?*'" (150). This event led Wolfe to a revelation:

I realized that not only did I not fit in, but because I thought I was fitting in in some way, I was afraid to ask such very basic questions as, what's the difference between an eight-gauge and seven-gauge tire, or, what's a gum ball, because if you're supposed to be hip, you can't ask those questions. I also found that people really don't want you to try to fit in. They'd much rather fill you in. People like to have someone to tell their stories to [...] Part of the nature of the human beast is a feeling of scoring a few status points by telling other people things they don't know. So this does work in your favor. (149)

So, not only did attempting to dress the part work against Wolfe, but he found that clearly distinguishing himself as an outsider actually worked to his *advantage*. Literary critic Brian Ragen astutely observed, "Wolfe's clothes serve another purpose. They are one of

his research tools” (3). Though at first glance Wolfe’s elaborate outfits may appear to typify the “fashion over function” mantra, there is more than meets the eye. Expounding on the hidden functionality of Wolfe’s trademark clothes, Ragen continues:

They mark him as an outsider in the societies he visits, and he finds it is more useful for someone who wants to learn what is going on to frankly act as an outsider [...] The coat and tie (usually not what he calls the full white rig) mark him as the outsider who will listen to your story rather than the interloper who may try to take your place in a status system. (3-4)

We see this at work in the early pages of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Wolfe’s Southern Gentleman getup comes in stark contrast to the *beautiful people*, flower-child types (his subjects) that he describes. In the opening pages, Wolfe plunges right into the psychedelic, techni-colored and strange “head world” of San Francisco in the mid 1960s, sending the reader ambling down the road in the back of a pickup truck of “blazing silver red and Day-Glo” (3). The other riders, Wolfe tells us, run the full spectrum of hippy-dipsy types, from “Cool Breeze,” with his “Seven Dwarfs Black Forest gnome’s hat covered in feathers and fluorescent colors” to Steward Brand, “a thin blond guy with a blazing disk on his forehead [...] and a whole necktie made of Indian beads” (2). And there among them, if you can imagine, is Wolfe in his suit and tie and shiny black dress shoes. Wolfe immediately appears as the outsider, even among the most outside of outsiders; and he remains so. Amongst the far out trinketry that so heavily adorned “the whole scene,”—“the jesuschrist strung-out hair, Indian beads, Indian headbands, donkey beads, temple bells, amulets, mandalas, god’s-eyes, fluorescent vests, unicorn horns, Errol Flynn dueling shirts” (3)—Wolfe’s suit and tie appear pretty tame, pretty square.

To the everyday straight American viewing the odd couple pairing—Wolfe in his suit, tie and jacket off to one side, Day-Glo flower power kids on the other—it might be difficult to discern just who was the misfit. From his subjects' point of view however, the title clearly belonged to Wolfe. McKeen underscores the irony of the situation in his biography of Wolfe, when he says, "The hippy freaks of the Prankster ranks regarded *him* as the weirdo" (63).

True, the white suit drew attention, even scorn initially, from many of the sub and countercultural groups that Wolfe took as his subjects. However, he found that after these awkward first reactions, the suit actually seemed to produce the opposite effect. Essentially, he discovered that there was a very short transition from *the weird guy in the white suit* to the *harmless guy in the white suit* and then on to *the invisible guy who was last seen wearing the white suit*.

You see, what Wolfe found is that (as Ragen points out), as an obvious outsider who made it plainly clear that he had no interest in becoming *one of the crew*, he posed little threat to a given tight-knit (and wary) group of people. If he did not wish to be *one of the crew*, the status, the social positions of those individuals who comprised the crew, were safe. And once the danger diminished and he was not perceived as a threat, he found that he was hardly perceived at all, and was therefore free to carry on his business. "I began to understand that it would really be a major mistake to try to fit into that world," Wolfe explains in his 1980 *Rolling Stone* interview, "that world" being that of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters (Flippo 149). "There was a kind of creature that Kesey and the Pranksters, practically everybody in the psychedelic world, detested more than anything else," Wolfe continued, "and that was the so-called weekend hipster, who was the

journalist or teacher or lawyer, or somebody who was hip on the weekends but went back to his straight job during the week” (149). In effect, the white suit came to symbolize a sort of white flag of truce that told the subjects of his interest, *I come in peace. I don't want to replace you; I just want to see what you're about.* But his physical appearance is just one way in which Wolfe established the thoroughly outsider persona that allowed him seemingly unrestricted access to all the cultural colors of the American rainbow.

## WOLFE AS TRICKSTER FIGURE

As Doug Shomette aptly notes in his introduction to a collection of criticism on Wolfe's work, "Wolfe reports with a double perspective: simultaneously inside and outside the object of his investigation" (xvi). In several of his standout pieces of journalism, Wolfe moves in and out of his subjects' consciousness (as he does with Phil Spector in "The First Tycoon of Teen," and with Kesey and several others in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*). In a 1974 interview, Joe Bellamy compliments Wolfe, saying, "It seems to me that, in the form that you use, you get inside and outside of characters quicker and more subtly than most novelists do. That's probably the most characteristic piece of virtuosity one finds in your work" (52). Wolfe was able to perform this feat, not through telepathy—though one might think so, given the skillful and seamless manner in which he does it—but through hours and hours of research. Wolfe explains:

The subjectivity that I value in the good examples of the new journalism is the use of techniques to enable the writer to get inside the subjective reality—not his own, but of the characters he's writing about. In other words, to use stream of consciousness so that I can present the mind of Ken Kesey—as I try to do in a number of chapters of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*—to get completely inside Kesey's mind, based on interviews, tapes that he made, or letters that he wrote, diaries, and so on. (Bellamy 45)

By using this technique, Wolfe attempts to portray the experience—to transport the reader into the event as it unfolds—rather than simply showing him some snapshots of it after the fact.

Likewise, Wolfe showed an uncanny ability to move in and out of the disparate worlds of his subjects and to bridge the space between them. He seemed to inhabit a magical borderland that allowed him unrestricted access to a multitude of social and cultural landscapes, from which he could venture into one space for a moment and cross over into another the next, then another and another, or climb into a tower and peer down into all simultaneously.

Because of these special abilities and defining characteristics, Wolfe calls to mind the Trickster of Native American folklore. In his essay “Trickster: Shaman of the Liminal,” Larry Ellis writes, “Trickster personifies marginality. He stands in the ‘Betwixt and Between’ (93), the transitional state that Victor Turner calls ‘liminality.’ Straddling the juncture of two worlds, he belongs to neither and yet to both [...]” (56). Similarly, in his writing, Wolfe displays a unique consciousness that maintains the dual perspective of insider and outsider. He is able to immerse himself, and the reader, deep within the experience of his subject and then assume the stance of the outsider looking in, to provide an alternate view. This ability to zoom in and out, viewing the subject from multiple layers of perspective, gives the reader a fuller experience of the subject and his world.

Like trickster figures of Indigenous American and various other folklores, Wolfe was a sort of mythical creature, in his special ability to slip invisibly across social and cultural lines, to infiltrate worlds vastly different than his own. Wolfe, (whose name even calls to mind the familiar “Coyote” of Southwestern Native American trickster tales) was a white-suited incarnation of a trickster figure of his own untold fable, who created a liminal, portable space for himself someplace in the outlands of “Edge City,” which allowed him to move freely between the fringe elements on the outskirts of dominant



culture: hippies, Hell's Angels, acid freaks, custom car culture aficionados and hotrodders, Black Panthers, surfer kids, etc., while keeping one foot firmly planted in the mainstream culture that largely comprised his readership. Almost magically, Wolfe could view it all, both from above and from deep within, with a god-like omniscience that could put the reader into his subjects' minds one moment and drop him headlong into the confused skull of the straight-world onlooker the next, and then fly him up to the mountain-top at the edge of the city to give him a birds-eye view of the whole crazy scene playing itself out on the sidewalks, in the living rooms and under the warehouse roofs below.

Perhaps this sort of trickster persona and the ability it seems to give him to move effortlessly across borders of cultural (statusphere) subsets and fringe sects, and to zoom out and perceive the comical interplay between them, is what gives Wolfe his power. No other writer of the New Journalism seems to possess this mystical ability—to inhabit this liminal space and to capitalize on the freedom it confers—quite like Wolfe. And it is not just for his ability to infiltrate disparate social and cultural worlds, that Wolfe is identifiable as a trickster. He seemed to inhabit a liminal space in his physical appearance as well. His manner of dress and physical appearance, the often white suit and fedora, could not be easily tied to a specific cultural or social status group, nor even to a single era; it was stuck somewhere between Southern Civil War era gentility and modern dandy. And, let us not forget that white, the color that symbolizes peace, as I previously mentioned, is also the color that contains all colors. In this light, and within the context of our current 'trickster' conversation, Wolfe's white suit can be viewed as a sort of chameleon's cloak—an integral element of his trickster/shape-shifter persona—which

allows him to adapt to any given social milieu, quickly establishing himself as the unthreatening outsider and allowing him to blend into the backdrop, and then simply change ‘suit’ once again to slip across the border into another.

Furthermore, as with the Native American Trickster, Wolfe is “a figure who defies category” (Ellis 55). Similar to his manner of dressing, Wolfe’s brand of reporting cannot easily be pinned down. It does not rest firmly within the genres of literature or journalism, but rides the line between them; and his writing style—his voice, expression, phrasing—is a breed unto its own. Additionally, as with the classic Trickster, in his writing, Wolfe “may assume an array of contradictory personae [...] moving from one to the other with the skill of a practiced shape-shifter” (55). He never tied himself down to one point of view or voice, but rather adapted it to suit his subject, while maintaining an air that is still unmistakably Wolfe. “Even in expository sections I often try to adopt the tone of a character,” Wolfe explains in a 1974 interview, “When I write about Junior Johnson’s stock car race, often I may be just describing a race course or a carburetor or some damn thing, and I’ll try to do it in the language of Junior Johnson to create the feeling that you’re still within the person’s point of view” (Bellamy 52-53).

In all things, Wolfe was an Edge City dweller, walking the line between social, cultural and professional worlds, taking bits and pieces freely from here and there and discarding the rest, never confined to one place or culture, methodology or ideology. And it is this lack of a home, this *liminality* so to speak, that allowed him the freedom and mobility to create one for himself—wherever, whoever or however he might find himself to be.

## "PARA-JOURNALISM" FOR A COUNTER-CULTURE

The blending of literary and journalistic techniques and the development of unique writing styles that this allowed for were only part of what set the New Journalism apart and made it fascinating. Another way in which Tom Wolfe and many of his colleagues of the New Journalism set distinguished their unique brands of journalism from the standard fare was by their choice of subject matter. As David Eason notes in his essay "The New Journalism and the Image-World," "The New Journalism took its energy from the recognition of society as a tableau of interesting races, age groups, subcultures, and social classes and the detachment of the self from various conventional sources of identification" (191). All too often, standard journalism focused (as it still does) on the daily doings of high-profile characters: politicians, celebrities, the social elite—those sweethearts of the media spotlight. But, as Ragen notes in his biography of Wolfe, "throughout his career, Wolfe has known that good stories are at least as often to be found on the fringes of culture as in the centers of power" (11). Wolfe recognized that the nameless fringe character was just as much a part of America and what it meant to be American as the Hollywood starlet. Their stories were just as important to the American historical narrative as the big names that were continually worshipped by the mainstream media. When he declared "Hey! Come here! This is the way people are living now," (*New Journalism* 28) Wolfe didn't just mean the rich and famous few who held the power; he understood that the "people" also included the underdog NASCAR racer from the backcountry, the teenybop rock star idolizer and the flower power chick at the back of the Acid Test warehouse, swirling and twirling in the depths of a bad trip.

Wolfe was attracted to the new post-war American movement, headed by the youth and made possible by the combination of an unprecedented availability of money and leisure time (and the options that this created for alternative lifestyles), to seek out new ways of living, on their own terms. Wolfe made it his work to document this new breed of American outsider and the various ways that he was creating a place for himself, somewhere on the outer fringes of the American fabric, to live on his own terms. In a 1975 interview for *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Wolfe was questioned, “You mean if you had it to do all over again, you’d still devote yourself to the marginalia of American society?” Wolfe replied, “The subjects I wrote about were the major history of the Sixties. Changes in the way people lived will turn out to be more significant than Vietnam and the assassinations. As a newspaper man, I was over and over again drawn to this part of life” (Nobile 97). Wolfe relished in this work and was convinced that the stories of these people: the fringe characters, dropouts, outcasts, youth in revolt, heads, hippy freaks, motorcycle outlaws, surfer bums, car customizers and hotrod enthusiasts—the ones who were forming “their own leagues” or “statuspheres,” living by their own rules, and reshaping American history and identity—were every bit as important as those accounts of political events, war and celebrity drama that dominated the pages of newspapers and magazines from coast to coast. This revolution taking place in the “marginalia” of American society seemed to go largely unnoticed, or undocumented anyway, by journalists and novelists alike. This was a fact that astounded Wolfe, as he saw it to be the main event in that period of American history:

The Sixties was one of the most extraordinary decades in American history in terms of manners and morals. Manners and morals *were* the

history of the Sixties. A hundred years from now when historians write about the 1960s in America [...] they won't write about it as the decade of the war in Vietnam or of space exploration or of political assassinations... but as the decade when manners and morals, styles of living, attitudes toward the world changed the country more crucially than any political events...all the changes that were labeled, however clumsily, with such tags as 'the generation gap,' 'the counter culture,' 'black consciousness,' 'sexual permissiveness,' 'the death of God,'...the abandonment of proprieties, pieties, decorums [...] This whole side of American life that gushed forth when postwar American affluence finally blew the lid off—all this novelists simply turned away from, gave up by default. (*New Journalism* 29-30)

Unlike many folks situated comfortably within the mainstream, Wolfe viewed hippies and other fringe characters not as a shocking abomination of the American values system, but as its natural progression, given the context of the times. As Wolfe saw it, it was a simple matter of having options. Because of the economic boom of the 50s, the youth of the 60s experienced an availability of both money and leisure time that allowed them the mobility to explore new lifestyle options that simply weren't available to their parents. In a 1968 interview for *New York Magazine*, Wolfe told Lawrence Dietz:

[...] I wonder why people keep trying to find pathological explanations for why kids become hippies, to take a case. Usually they try to find a pattern—'Do they come from broken homes? Has society done this to them? Is there something wrong with their schools?'—when actually all it

is is that these kids have found a new option. The old option when you were 19 or 20 used to be either you had a job, or you went to school, or you lived at home, or you were in the Army [...] But suddenly the idea of there being enough money around somewhere, somehow, or being able to live life on your own terms with a lot of other people like yourself—it is very appealing. The hippies are just part of that phenomenon. (21)

Wolfe was very socially adept; he understood the movement and concerns of American culture, the ways in which its various facets related to one another. A keen observer, he was able, as few others were, to simultaneously immerse himself at the nucleus of a given cultural phenomenon and trace its inner workings, and to zoom out and view the larger picture, to see the way that society segmented itself and to understand the ways in which the interplay of these segments informed varied constructs of what it meant to be American, the ways in which subsets of society created unique identities and spaces for themselves within this overarching identity. And he understood that each cultural, subcultural or countercultural set could be viewed in terms of their relation to common signifiers and symbols: personal identity, group association, consumer identity, unifying ideologies, shared distrusts, etc. Wolfe saw that the America of this time (1960s and 1970s) was one of the most tumultuous, energetic and interesting of recent history, and he recognized that the American public shared in his fascination. He discovered that this America (representative also of his readership) had an insatiable thirst to know more about itself, to live in the here and now and to expose itself to the multitude of fringe characters, unprecedented historical contexts, far out philosophies, experimentation, etc.—all the overflowing richness—that comprised this, the *new* American experience.

And further (and very fortunate for he and his colleagues) he discovered that all of this wonderful material had been virtually untapped by the novelists, who Wolfe explains had abandoned realism in pursuit of a more sophisticated, more post (post-post) modern, more cerebral kind of fiction that explored the headspace of its characters, ignoring the physical world outside. “I wrote *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and then waited for the novels that I was sure would come pouring out of the psychedelic experience...but they never came forth,” Wolfe wrote (*New Journalism* 30). And so, by some stroke of luck, he explains, “The New Journalists—Parajournalists—had the whole crazed obscene uproarious Mamon-faced drug-soaked mau-mau lust-oozing Sixties in America all to themselves. So the novelists had been kind enough to leave behind for our boys quite a nice little body of material; the whole of American society, in effect” (31).

## CHRONICLING THE COUNTERCULTURE: THE KEN KESEY SHOW

Wolfe had always been interested in outsiders, perhaps because he was one himself. Many of his important pieces of journalism from the 1960s and 70s focused on bands of outsiders and the so-called ‘statuspheres’ that they were building for themselves. The 1960s and 70s were a time that allowed for experimentation in new ways of living. As Wolfe explains in a 1980 interview, “It was during the ‘60s that Americans began to believe that the economic boom was permanent, and they began cutting loose in all kinds of ways. We started having communes of young people that would be impossible without prosperity” (Gross 124). By the late 60s, Wolfe had developed a particular and deep interest in the cultural fringe that was developing in California. And during this time, there were few on the scene who were more “fringe” or more devoutly “cutting loose” than Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. When Wolfe caught wind of the writer turned drug freak turned fugitive turned convict, he knew he had tapped into a gold mine. Only, he didn’t know at first just how expansive that mine was.

When Wolfe first began his project on Kesey, he was focused on presenting the story of Kesey as a fugitive in Mexico. The first time he met with Kesey it was at the San Mateo County jail. Kesey had just been busted after fleeing the country to Mexico to avoid prosecution over some marijuana possession charges, then sneaking back into San Francisco. In the opening chapter of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe says, “I wanted to ask him all about his fugitive days in Mexico. That was still the name of my story, Young Novelist Fugitive Eight Months in Mexico” (8). However, as he dug deeper he began to realize that he had a much bigger story on his hands, namely, the inception of the psychedelic counterculture and its explosion onto the hip California scene.



After this opening chapter, where Wolfe describes this first meeting with Kesey at the jail and the several days he spent waiting at a warehouse in San Francisco among Kesey's followers for his release from jail, he backtracks, giving the reader the story of Kesey's journey to psychedelic sainthood. Back in his college days at Stanford, the budding young writer had taken up residence in one of a string of little cottages on Perry Lane, a sort of intellectual bohemian safe-haven outside the university. A psychology grad student friend of his, Vic Lovell, turned him on to a way to make some spare cash. The Vets hospital over in Menlo Park was paying volunteers \$75 a day to participate in experiments they were conducting with "psychomimetic" drugs, drugs that brought on temporary states resembling psychoses" (Wolfe *Electric* 40). Kesey jumped at the opportunity. While participating in the experiments, "they would put him on a bed in a white room and give him a series of capsules without saying what they were" (40). One day at the hospital he was given what he would later learn was lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD. It was a life-altering experience for him. Wolfe takes the reader down the rabbit hole, describing Kesey's initial trip from inside *the experience*:

He looks at the ceiling. It begins moving. Panic—and yet there is no panic. The ceiling is moving—not in a crazed swirl but along its own planes its own planes of light and shadow and surface not nearly so nice and smooth as plasterer Super Plaster Man intended with infallible carpenter level bubble sliding in dim honey Karo syrup tube... Suddenly he is like a ping-pong ball in a flood of sensory stimuli, heart beating, blood coursing, breath suspending, teeth grating... *Now*... as if for the first time he has entered a moment in his life and known exactly what is happening to his

senses now, at this moment, and with each new discovery it is as if he has entered into all of it himself, is *one* with it, the movie white desert of the ceiling becomes something rich, personal, his, beautiful beyond description, like an orgasm behind the eyeballs [...]. (40-41)

The experience was too much, too incredible not to share. As Kesey continued on with the experiments, “somehow drugs were getting up and walking out of there and over to Perry Lane, LSD, mescaline, IT-290, mostly” (45). It wasn’t long before Kesey had turned the Perry Lane intellectual crowd on to psychedelics. Without knowing it they were pioneers at the forefront of what was to be a massive movement, “hooking down something that in the entire world only they and a few avant-garde neuropharmacological researchers even knew about, drugs of the future” (46).

After the experiments, Kesey took a job as a night attendant on the psychiatric ward of the hospital, planning to earn some dough and use the downtime during the early morning hours to work on a novel he had started writing about North Beach, entitled *Zoo*. However, it wasn’t long before Kesey became “absorbed in the life on the psychiatric ward,” and he abandoned *Zoo* for a new project that was coming to life, a book that would later be published under the title *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wolfe reveals that Kesey wrote several passages of the book while under the influence of LSD and peyote, and he infers that Kesey’s visions while on psychedelics were a prime source of inspiration for Chief Broom’s visions “in his schizophrenic fogs” (49).

After the book was published in February of 1962, Kesey gained instant notoriety in the literary world. When Perry Lane was purchased by a developer and demolished the

following summer, Kesey and his wife Faye, along with some of the Perry Lane crew picked up and moved out to a large compound that Kesey had purchased in La Honda. Before long, Kesey established a commune on the property. People began to come and go, some staying longer than others—intellectuals and writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Richard Alpert, members of the Hell’s Angels, celebrities like Neal Cassady of *On the Road* fame and Jerry Garcia, whose band The Grateful Dead would go on to cultivate the acid rock sound, and young people who had heard about Kesey’s far out arrangement out there in the woods, or who came with friends to a party and never left.

Gradually, a core group of more permanent residents formed around Kesey at the La Honda compound, who became known as The Pranksters. It was a weird scene Kesey and the Pranksters had going out there. They had the house and the trees that surrounded it all rigged up with a mass of wires, speakers, microphones and sound equipment, so that the sounds from inside the house were broadcast out through the surrounding acreage and the sounds of the forest were broadcast inside the house. Bob Dylan or the Beatles could be heard reverberating through the woods and relayed back into the house through a continuous loop, with a slight lag that produced a doubled-up chorus effect. Or else in the quieter hours of the morning the house was filled with the chirping of birds or the whistle of wind through the treetops. The drug experimentation that had started out on Perry Lane was continued at La Honda, and something new was beginning to take shape amongst the group. No one, not even Wolfe, could exactly put a name to it. However, there was a sense that among the group—who were continuously, simultaneously pushing toward the outer limits of consciousness and inward toward a sense of one-ness—things were coming into *synch*. Kesey was always engaging the group’s creativity, often aided

by the use of drugs, so that “every day would be a happening, an art form” (58). “Kesey was trying to develop various forms of spontaneous expression,” Wolfe writes. They would participate in group improvisations for example, where someone would say whatever came to mind, just put it out there, and then someone else would respond with the first thing that popped into his head, and then another would chime in, until the whole group was jiving and rapping off of one another, the chatter of their voices carrying out through the room mics and echoing through the woods. Wolfe explains that it was “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 and beyond...the walls of conventional logic” (60). And soon enough, though it sounded like, “freaking gibberish to normal human ears, most likely,” a peculiar thing would begin to happen among the group. Suddenly the words and phrases emitting from here and there would cease to sound random and begin to take a coherent form, almost as if spoken from a single consciousness, almost as if each person *knew* exactly what the next was going to say: *intersubjectivity*.

It was all “sort of *avant-garde*,” to be sure. “But,” Wolfe writes, “in fact, like everything else here, it grows out of...*the experience*, with LSD. The whole *other world* that LSD opened your mind to existed only in the moment itself—*Now*—and any attempt to plan, compose, orchestrate, write a script, only locked you out of the moment, back in the world of conditioning and training where the brain was a reducing valve...” (59). And so, that became the name of the game out on La Honda—the *NOW* game. The goal was to get everyone “out front,” speaking their minds and doing their thing right out in the open, with total transparency, so that they could all synch in to one another—

*intersubjectivity*—and live totally in the present, letting go of any hangups or bummers that would inhibit them from fully *experiencing* the current moment.

This thing they had going out there in the woods was pretty groovy, but after awhile, it seems, a few of them were itching for a little change of scenery. So, they decided to take it on the road. According to Wolfe, the original idea was that Kesey and a few others would take a station wagon across the country to New York for the release of Kesey's latest novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, which just so happened to coincide with the New York World's fair. "On the way," Wolfe writes, "they could shoot some film, make some tape, freak out on the Fair and see what happened" (67). However, somebody saw an ad for a school bus, outfitted with bunk beds and a refrigerator and sink—*the whole nine yards*—and so it quickly evolved into an all-out group adventure. Kesey bought the thing and they all went to work painting it in day-glo colors and rigging it up with sound equipment the way the house had been, so that the sounds of the road would be amplified and played inside the bus and the sounds from inside the bus, their sounds, would be broadcast outside the bus, to the consternation of square citizens all across the nation. They dubbed the bus "Furthur," filled the fridge with LSD-laced orange juice, and packed in—fourteen or fifteen of them, though they would gain and lose a few along the way—and gallivanted off onto the Great American Roadway, to do their thing across the map and blow people's minds all along the way, filming it all for "the great movie." "The Pranksters were now out among them, and it was exhilarating—look at the mothers staring!" Kesey writes, "and there was going to be holy terror in the land" (69).

And so, for several months, they did just that, dropping acid, grooving to the vibrations of the road, drinking in the perplexed, amused or disgusted looks on people's

faces as they rolled through small town, suburb and city with Cassidy—Mr. Dean Moriarty himself—at the wheel. It was the ultimate test of the concepts they had explored back in La Honda: putting it all “out front,” living in the now, developing group consciousness. With a dozen or more people on the bus day in and day out, there was no room for hangups, squabbles or secret grudges. Though it was never officially declared that Kesey was running the show on the trip, Wolfe makes it clear that he was the self-delegated leader, keeping the peace, keeping the bus rolling, so to speak. Just before they made it out of California, Kesey addressed the group:

“Here’s what I hope will happen on this trip,” he says, “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 right on 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. What we are, we’re going to wail with on this whole trip.” (73)

You either had to be all-in, a fully engaged part of what was going on or you had to get off the bus. “Now you’re either on the bus or off the bus,” Kesey later said after it was clear that there was tension mounting between several of the group. “If you’re on the bus,

and you get left behind, then you'll find it again, If you're off the bus in the first place—then it won't make a damn" (83). And so, Wolfe writes, "Everything was becoming allegorical, understood by the group mind, and especially this: 'You're either on the bus...or off the bus'" (83). You're either a part of this thing or you're not. And so, those who were really truly a part of the thing Kesey had going stayed on the bus, and those whose hearts weren't fully in it got off someplace along the way. As Wolfe notes, the deeper they got into the *synch* thing, the more they were drawn into the acid otherworld of amplified perception, the more it began to resemble full-fledged religious experience: "Gradually the Prankster attitude began to involve the main things religious mystics have always felt, things common to Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and for that matter Theosophists and even flying-saucer cultists. Namely, the *experiencing* of an Other World, a higher level of reality. And a perception of the cosmic unity of this higher level" (142).

Thus, by the time they returned to La Honda, there was a sense that they were no longer just a group of wild heads zonked out on acid; they were, for all intents and purposes, a religious group—acid their holy sacrament, Kesey their mystic guide. Still, Wolfe alludes, Kesey the pioneer, ever pushing forward and onward, was not satisfied to keep this thing confined to their little group. Referencing Joachim Wach's paradigm of the way religions are founded, and drawing the parallel to Kesey's group, Wolfe writes:

In all these religious circles, the groups became tighter and tighter by developing their own symbols, terminology, life styles, and, gradually, simple cultic practices, *rites*, often involving music and art, all of which grew out of the *new experience* and seemed weird or incomprehensible to

those who have never had it. At that point they would also... ‘develop a strong urge to extend the message to all people.’ (129)

Strangely enough (though nothing was really all that strange by this point), Kesey’s real revelation was brought on by a visit to a Unitarian church conference. As Wolfe explains, an especially liberal group of Unitarian ministers known as the “Young Turks,” thought that the church, which had always been known as progressive, was beginning to become a bit too comfortable, stale even. So, they invited Kesey to come speak at their upcoming conference, to be held in Asilomar, a “beautiful state park by the sea.” “The theme this year was: ‘Shaking the Foundations,’” (185) Wolfe writes, and who better to come and shake things up a bit than a cowboy celebrity who’d been arrested on charges of narcotics possession? So, Kesey obliged and rolled on down to Monterey with a bus full of Pranksters. The group arrived to mixed reactions. Wolfe writes:

Among the middle-aged Unitarians, ministers and laymen, tamping down their pipes for a nice relaxed Sport Shirt week, there was consternation written on practically every face as they watched the bizarre vehicle pitching and rolling into the campgrounds. They were...uptight from the moment they got there [...] But the Unitarian...Youth, the teenagers weren’t uptight at all. They flocked around the bus as soon as it got there. Which only wound their parents up tighter, of course. By nightfall the Unitarian Church in California was divided into two camps: on the bus and off the bus. (186)

His first night as a guest speaker, Kesey took the pulpit in “an iridescent jacket with a huge Yin-Yang symbol painted on the back in red, white, and blue” and



announced, “We’re going to be here seven days [...] so we’re going to try to work a miracle in seven days” (186). So Kesey went about his miracle working, shaking everything up around there until he’d become a real-life messiah to all the kids, who’d never before seen anything like him. They were in awe. Before too long, some of the more straight-laced brethren approached the Young Turks with concerns that Kesey was a bad influence, leading the flock astray, so to speak. Kesey made them nervous and they wanted him gone (189), but by that time the kids were so devoutly hung on his every movement that kicking him out was likely to start a riot and create a permanent rift in the fabric of the church.

At the end of the week, Kesey had had a religious experience at the Unitarian conference, but not in the traditional *pastor hands down the vibrant word from on high; faithful follower becomes enlightened* sense. No, Kesey had barged in there with his groovy day-glo bus, psychedelic followers in tow, and stolen the show from the Uptight Aging Ministers Club and spun the thing into The Ken Kesey Show. Kesey himself, Wolfe notes, became a sort of prophet to the youth there, as well as a few left-leaning young ministers; he had felt the POWER, the hold he had over them. “For a week,” Wolfe writes, “Kesey had mystified, like *mystified*, and taken over the whole Unitarian Church of California” (200). Yes, he was the prophet and the Pranksters had been refigured as his disciples.

Afterward, he returned to La Honda on a natural high—Kesey the Prophet—now charged with the mission of bringing his prophesy to the people: the prophesy of expanded consciousness, of broadened perception, of ACID. “When you’ve got something like we’ve got, you can’t just sit on it,” Kesey announced to his disciples,

“You’ve got to move off of it. You can’t just sit on it and possess it, you’ve got to move off of it and give it to other people. It only works if you bring other people into it” (194). There it was: The Great Revelation. But how to do it? That was the question. How was one to turn them on to the *experience*? It wasn’t just something that one could put into words and make them understand. Wolfe writes, what they had experience through LSD, was the same as what founding members of fledgling religions of all kinds had been driven by: “an overwhelming experience that is psychological, not neurological—a feeling, an overwhelming *ecstasy* that they have interpreted in a religious way and that they want to enable the rest of the world to have so it can understand the *truth* and the *mystery* that has been discovered” (151). No, this experience could not be merely written down or otherwise explained; one had to *feel* it for oneself. “You had to create conditions in which they would feel an approximation of *that feeling*, the sublime *kairos*,” Wolfe writes, “You had to put them into ecstasy” (231). But how does one pull this off? How could one bring the *feeling* to the masses? After much contemplation, it dawned on Kesey—The Acid Test.

The Acid Tests were conceived as a way to bring it all, the total *experience*, to the people. “And suddenly Kesey sees that they, the Pranksters, already have the expertise and the machinery to create a mindblown state such as the world has never seen, totally wound up, lit up, amplified and...controlled,” Wolfe writes, “plus the most efficient key ever devised to open the doors in the mind of the world: namely, Owsley’s LSD” (231). It would achieve, hopefully, the same effect as ancient religious ceremonies meant to bring on the divine experience, only in a totally modern—totally *Now*—fashion, complete with

rock and roll, light shows and segments from the bus movie projected onto the walls and...the drug of the future.

The Pranksters' first public Acid Test was put on in a big run-down house in San Jose, owned by a man they called "Big Nig." The Pranksters handed out handbills for the event to the masses as they spilled out into the street after a Rolling Stones concert at the Civic Auditorium. "Can YOU pass the Acid Test?" the fliers asked, with the address written on the bottom. A few hundred young heads showed up and grooved out to The Grateful Dead, who were fronted by Jerry Garcia, an old acquaintance of Kesey's from parties back on Perry Lane. A mind-blowing array of splashing and swirling lights and movie projections swept over everything in the place, as acid made its way around. And everyone there grooved and came into tune with one another, with the indescribable, beautiful *Thing*, "drawn into The Movie, into the edge of the pudding at least, a mass closer and higher than any mass in history, it seems most surely" (238). They had pulled it off, and with a group of total strangers no less. They had brought *that feeling* to the people; they had *put them into ecstasy*. A short while later Kesey and the Pranksters put on another Acid Test, this time at Muir Beach. Kesey could feel the thing growing. More and more people were catching on to what was going on, being swept into the experience, and there was Kesey the Prophet at the helm, guiding the people toward the divine glow.

The historical and geographical context was ripe for a charismatic leader like Kesey to emerge. Young people, as Wolfe mentions time and time again, had unprecedented freedom to experiment with new modes of living outside of the traditional parameters that confined their parents' generation, but what they were lacking was direction. They knew they wanted to do something different, to get beyond the 9-to-5

hangups of the square world, but they didn't exactly know how, or what they would do out there in the vast BEYOND. At this point (the 60s), the young people of the nation (though it was not strictly confined to the youth) seemed caught in a state of liminality—where the old traditions, religious and moral precepts and institutions that America used to rely on were being called into question and even discarded altogether. They had become disenchanted with Western religion and lost faith in politicians completely—and a clear leader who could be trusted to usher the people through this time of confusion and back to understanding and stability seemed to be missing. These conditions produced the perfect opportunity for a trickster figure like Kesey to rise up, taking on the appearance of the charismatic (almost religious) leader who could lead his people to understanding, and establish a cult following. Kesey had cult celebrity status and charisma, and most importantly, he offered people access to the holy sacrament LSD and with it the *ecstatic experience* that promised to open the doors of perception and take people *further*, beyond the hangups and petty concerns of daily American life. Wolfe, also a trickster type, recognizes this happening and is able to understand Kesey and the psychedelic apostles who follow him.

Yes, things were really cooking now. A movement was beginning to develop around Kesey and the Acid Tests. But then, just as things were really beginning to gather steam and get groovy, two nights before the Trips Festival—what promised to be the biggest, most far out Acid Test yet—“an uncool thing happened” (255). Kesey was caught on the rooftop of a friend's apartment in North Beach with marijuana in his possession. Though it was only a few grams, this was Kesey's second offense, which “carried an automatic five-year sentence with no possibility of parole” (258).

Anyway, while Kesey was awaiting trial, the Trips Festival was indeed carried off and in grand style, and the third night, as scheduled, they put on the largest, wildest Acid Test the world had yet seen. This thing that they had put into motion was set to really take off, to an even greater degree than they could have imagined. Wolfe writes:

Three nights the huge carnival went on. It was a big thing on every level.

For one thing, the Trips Festival grossed \$12,500 in three days, with almost no overhead, and a new night club and dance-hall genre was born.

Two weeks later Bill Graham was in business at the Fillmore auditorium with a Trips Festival going every weekend and packing them in [...] The heads were amazed at how big their own ranks had become—and euphoric over the fact that they could come out in the open, high as baboons, and the sky, and the law, wouldn't fall down on them. The press went along with the notion that this had been an LSD experience without the LSD.

Nobody in the hip world of San Francisco had any such delusion, and the Haight-Ashbury era began that weekend. (263)

A new culture had been spawned, and the Pranksters, under Kesey's guidance, were at the forefront. However, after the madness of the weekend had begun to wind down, Kesey still had to face the fact that he had gotten himself into quite a mess. Five years was a long time to spend in prison, too long.

He gathered the crew out at 'The Spread,' Babbs's place in Santa Cruz, where he and Faye and the kids had been staying since the judge ordered him to sell off his place in La Honda and get the hell out of San Mateo County (and stay out!). And it was decided Kesey would flee to Mexico, leaving behind a suicide note and a crashed pickup truck on

a cliff top overlooking the sea, making it look like he went over the edge to a watery death (264-65). “‘If society wants me to be an outlaw,’ said Kesey, ‘then I’ll be an outlaw, and a damned good one. That’s something people need. People at all times need outlaws,’” (264) Wolfe writes. And so, it was arranged. While one Dee, a friend of Kesey’s who bore a striking resemblance to him, ambled up the coast in Kesey’s pickup to handle the matter of the staged suicide, another of his buddies, Boise, and Kesey headed for Puerto Vallarta (264-65). In Kesey’s absence, Babbs would keep the show running.

And so it was that Kesey the Prophet became Kesey the Fugitive. Kesey spent eight months down in Mexico, moving from town to town whenever he felt the heat was beginning to catch up. He had a lot of time to think while he was down there, which turned into a pretty intense paranoia before too long, by Wolfe’s account. “Kesey had gotten paranoid as hell,” Wolfe writes, “but that wasn’t the only thing. He liked this Fugitive game. Man, he’d scam out in the jungle and hide out there for two or three days and smoke a lot of grass and finally straggle in” (299). However, like all games and hangups of all other kinds, the “Fugitive game” eventually got old and pure paranoia took hold. Kesey began indulging in drugs at a much greater frequency and of a higher concentration than even he was accustomed to. He began to freak out, thinking that every car, every passerby was an FBI agent. They were closing in. Indeed, he did have one or two close brushes with the law down there, even fleeing the Federales amidst gunfire at one point (327).

But somewhere amongst the haze of drugs and paranoia, a second revelation began to materialize in Kesey’s mind. He was beginning to see that drugs alone could not

take him any further. He had plunged into that forest over and over and over, and for a long time he had felt that he was going deeper each time, pushing the frontier further and further toward “Edge City.” But now he could see that if they were to make any real progress, they had to go *beyond acid* (323). Acid had opened the doors of perception, so that they might walk through for a moment and peer into the vast beyond, but in order to keep that door open, they had to be able to go through it without the drug. Wolfe writes, it was “either make this thing permanent inside of you or forever just climb dragged up into the conning tower every time for one short glimpse of the horizon” (324). Thus, it became Kesey’s new quest to return to the scene up north, no matter the cost, and transmit this new vision to his people. “It was now time to bring the future back to the U.S.A.,” Wolfe declares, “back to San Francisco, and brazen it out with the cops and whatever else there” (343).

So, Kesey slipped across the border and journeyed up to San Francisco, back into the scene he had cultivated. Kesey, “the *Man*, the Castro who had won them what they have today in the first place,” (352) had returned. Only when he walked into the Haight-Ashbury, after his eight months absence, he couldn’t believe what he saw. Wolfe explains:

Down in rat land red tide Manzanillo, Kesey and the Pranksters had been so cut off they got almost no news from San Francisco [...] They had only a dim idea of what was going on among the heads in Haight-Ashbury. But now, like, you don’t even have to look for it. It hits you in the face. It’s a whole carnival [...] the Trips Festival of eight months before was what really kicked the whole thing off. Eight months!—and all of a sudden it

was like the Acid Tests had taken root and sprung up into people living the Tests like a whole life style. (252-53)

In short, the psychedelic scene had exploded in San Francisco, with kids pouring into Haight-Ashbury to get a piece of “The Life.” It was big business, and entrepreneurs in the area were beginning to take notice. Local exhibition halls were being converted left and right into night clubs, purveyors of the psychedelic experience, to cater to the new culture that was catching fire. Multiple clubs had picked up where Kesey left off when he fled, and were doing the Acid Test thing every weekend. “Both the Fillmore and the Avalon,” Wolfe writes, “did the Pranksters Acid Test with all the mixed media stuff, the rock ‘n’ roll and movie projections and the weird intergalactic amoeba light shows” (354). Acid and the culture that had been built around it were no longer underground; psychedelia had become synonymous with ‘hip’ in San Francisco. And now here came Kesey, the Godfather in Exile returned, to tell them...to stop taking acid.

Kesey wasted no time announcing his return. First, he conducted a secret interview with the San Francisco *Chronicle* detailing his escape to Mexico and his triumphant return, in which he announced, “I intend to stay in this country as a fugitive, and as salt in J. Edgar Hoover’s wounds” (366). Next, just in case that article had escaped the authorities’ attention, he did an interview for TV, to air on the local ABC outlet. Again he announced the fugitive bit, complete with the part about salting Hoover’s wounds. The groundwork having been laid, “All that remains to be done,” Wolfe writes, “is the grand finale” (367). Wolfe describes Kesey’s vision: “The Pranksters will hold a monster trips festival, the Acid Test of all times, the ultimate, on Halloween, in San Francisco’ largest hall, Winterland, for all the heads on the West Coast or coast to coast



and galaxy to galaxy [...] At the midnight hour, Kesey, masked and disguised in a Superhero costume, on the order of Captain America of the Marvel Comics pantheon, will come up on stage and deliver his vision of the future, of the way ‘beyond acid.’” (367). That was the fantasy.

However, it wasn’t long after that the hammer dropped. On a Friday afternoon, October 20, just 25 minutes after his TV interview had aired, Kesey and a friend were driving along the Bayshore freeway out of San Francisco when the law caught up to them. They were pulled over, and Kesey jumped out of the car and screamed down the freeway embankment. A short but dramatic foot pursuit ensued and he was taken into custody (368-69). Wolfe writes, “They have Kesey on three felonies: the original conviction in San Mateo County for possession of marijuana, which he never served time on; the arrest for possession in San Francisco, after which he fled to Mexico; and a Federal charge of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution” (371).

In court, Kesey’s lawyers explained to the judge, “Mr. Kesey has a very public-spirited plan...He has returned voluntarily from exile in his safe harbor, to risk certain arrest and imprisonment, in order to call a mass meeting of all LSD takers, past, present and potential, for the purpose of telling them to move beyond this pestilent habit of taking LSD” (372). “Repentance and redemption are sailing around the courtroom like cherubim,” Wolfe tells us. And remarkably, somehow, it worked. Kesey was let out on bail and the FBI dropped the unlawful flight to avoid prosecution charge.

Soon after, Kesey appeared on TV again, this time on John Bartholomew Tucker’s show on KPIX, to discuss his plan to tell people to move beyond acid. “It’s time to move on to the next step in the psychedelic revolution,” he says, “I don’t know what

this is going to be in any way I could just spell out, but I know we've reached a certain point but we're not moving any more, and that's why we've got to move on to the next step—" (379). As Wolfe explains, this plan, now out in the open, sent a shockwave through what had become a vast California psychedelic community. *Kesey, one of the biggest names in the psychedelic world, is telling everyone to stop taking acid? Is this some kind of prank?* Nobody could believe it. Wolfe writes, "The heads don't know whether Kesey is selling them out or shoving a big Roman candle up the universal arse" (381).

After hearing about Kesey's crazy idea of moving beyond acid a lot of the big names with money in the scene, like Bill Graham, who had agreed to back Kesey's big forthcoming Acid Test, pulled out. Left without a venue and without The Dead, whose manager pulled them from the show, Kesey had no other option than to put on the Acid Test Graduation, as he was now calling it, at the Prankster's ramshackle warehouse space. "We're moving it all in here, into the Rat Shack," (388) he says.

The night of the Graduation, a pretty good-sized crowd shows up at the Rat Shack, despite the fact that the Pranksters only had a day or two to pull it all together at the new location and get the word out. People are intrigued to see if Kesey is for real about the whole moving-beyond-acid thing. The party kicks off with a bang, in the usual manner of the Prankster Acid Test of yore—with rock and roll music blaring, lights flashing and swirling around the place, the Pranksters all in their Prankster getups, complete with stars and stripes overalls. However, into the early hours of the morning, the party takes a weird turn. "At the height of the frenzy suddenly the lights go out, the

sound goes out, all replaced by a single spotlight hitting the center of the floor,” and Kesey, in Captain America regalia, steps out from the darkness into the beam (394).

“When we were down in Mexico, we learned a lot about waves,” he begins (394). After a little metaphorical bit about waves and the evolving state of man, Kesey gets down to the point: “For a year we’ve been in the Garden of Eden. Acid opened the door to it. It was the Garden of Eden and Innocence and a ball. Acid opens that door and you enter and you stay awhile...” (395). At this point the cops show up and there is a nervous shuffling in the crowd, but then the cops leave and Kesey continues: “We’ve been going through that door and staying awhile and then going back out through that same door. But until we start going that far...and then going beyond...we’re not going to get anywhere, we’re not going to experience anything new...” (397). Kesey finishes his little speech up and people are weirded out a bit and confused, but then the music and lights come back on and everyone starts to groove again. However, a few minutes later, everything cuts out again and the spotlight comes on again through the silence and there is Kesey at the center of it all. People are getting very uneasy by this point. There is a call from the audience, “Hey! Start the music!” (398). Then it gets REALLY weird. As if there has been a wordless call to communion, the Pranksters start to emerge from the darkness of the crowd—one, two, three at a time—and surround Kesey, sitting lotus style in the ring of light. Very strange.

And they just sit there, with their eyes closed, trying to feel the energy, trying to enter group consciousness—the all-one—trying to go BEYOND, as if conducting the first test of Kesey’s late prophesy, to see if it can be done...without acid. Others, non-Pranksters begin to tune in to this thing they’re trying to do and join the circle, but

mostly, Wolfe tells us, “People are milling around, starting to leave. They’re befuddled and embarrassed” (399). They don’t get it. They’re thinking, “What the hell kind of party” (399) is this? “People stare at the stage, but there’s no sign of music. Is it over?” Wolfe writes (400). The strange mystic ceremony continues under the spotlight as people shuffle out. Finally Kesey says, “Everybody who’s with us, everybody who’s with us in this thing, move in close. If you’re not part of this thing, if you’re not with us, then it’s time to leave. You can move in close and get into this thing or you can leave, because...that’s what time it is...” (400). Yep, it’s still The Ken Kesey show, but what a strange episode. People can’t follow just what’s going on; they’re tuning out, turning off, until it’s down to just the few, the core believers: about 50 people doing the group trance thing under the holy spotlight (402).

And when it has been whittled down to just the faithful disciples, the real ceremony begins—The Acid Test Graduation. Suddenly the lights go up and Cassady is up on stage wearing a mortarboard graduation cap and holding a stack of handmade diplomas. A rock and roll version of “Pomp and Circumstance” diffuses through the warehouse as Cassady calls the names of the graduates up to the stage and awards them their Acid Test Graduation diplomas.

“Back among the acid heads of San Francisco there were two or three days of post mortems after the collapse of the Prankster Winterland fantasy and the strange night in the garage,” Wolfe writes, “A little breast-beating here and there...Oh, did we give in to Fear and Doubts, which a good head cannot afford, and thereby stop a brave cat from doing his thing...” (403). Wolfe continues:

But just as many said Kesey was out to freak us out or cop out on us, and

it was just as well. And then the communal mind, not willing to be anti-freak-out, settled on the cop-out theory of it. Kesey had been just copping out all along, to keep from going to jail. (403)

After that weird night at the Rat Shack, Kesey and the Pranksters cleared out all the Acid Test decorations, paraphernalia, etc., piled it up in the empty lot next door and vacated. It was over. It was ALL over. The end of an era. In the closing section of the book, we find Kesey and a few of the Pranksters at a place called The Barn, “a great barn, truly, once converted into a theater and now into a psychedelic nightspot run by Leon Taboory” in Scott’s Valley, about 10 miles outside of Santa Cruz (406). They have brought a collection of instruments and sound equipment left over from the Acid Tests and they are there to try their hand at playing some music for the small collection of groovy folks that have gathered out at The Barn. And so, after a smooth little jazz number going under the name The New Dimensions wraps up their set, they take the stage. They fire up the amps and mics and start their set, only nobody is playing in unison with the others. “Somebody starts and nobody else can pick it up,” Wolfe writes, “and soon it’s obvious that none of these crazy-looking people is going to play the instruments, except for the drummer...and they’re not playing *songs*, they make it up as they go along” (409). And then they start rapping off of one another, in spontaneous free association, like the good ole days back in La Honda, but the crowd...doesn’t get it. *What in the hell is this jibberish?* they’re thinking. The Pranksters start to feel like they’ve got something going, but they’re the only ones into the thing. “The slump and slough are total...” Wolfe writes, “The kids all going in droves now...just the Pranksters left... An atmosphere of total tedium... It’s... all... too... much...for mortal—Even Pranksters drifting off...leaving

the main floor, going downstairs...Hagen shakes his head. ‘It’s like a wake...’ (409). It’s no longer a *wave*, like the one they were riding atop just one short year ago. No, their wave has crashed on the shore—not like a wave, *like a wake, man. Like, it’s over bud*. Still, it carries on, even after everyone in the audience has left, even after the manager Taboory himself has had all he can take: “‘Just shut the door tight when you leave,’ he tells Kesey, and he takes off” (410). Finally, it’s just Kesey and Babbs up there on stage, eyes closed, “strumming slowly...alone in the center of the vast gloom of the barn” (410). And they are still rapping off of each other, carrying on with some strange parable, heard by no one:

“I took some pseulobin and one long diddle...”

“WE BLEW IT!”

“Ten thousand times or more...”

“WE BLEW IT!”

“...so much we can’t keep score...”

“WE BLEW IT!” (411)

Over and over, they repeat the refrain, “WE BLEW IT!”

Unfortunately, Kesey’s revelation and his attempt at penance seem to have come too late. He had already lost his relevance. He no longer had a power-hold over the scene. It had outgrown his vision. The Ken Kesey Show was coming to an end, dissolving into itself. As Wolfe biographer McKeen notes, “Despite the promise inherent in being avatars of a new order, the Pranksters by the end of the book are chanting not a mantra, or the name of a new guru, but instead a phrase that encapsulates their missed opportunity: ‘We blew it! We blew it!’ What had been so full of promise has become a wake” (65).

Having taken the thing straight on through, no turning back, all the way to its logical conclusion, Kesey had alienated his audience and finally was broadcasting his show on a closed network: he his own and only audience. And outside the studio, a new, bigger movie was playing out on the psychedelic streets of California. In a 1980 interview for *Rolling Stone*, Wolfe reflects:

By the time I met Kesey, he was already starting to promulgate the concept *beyond acid*: the idea that LSD could only take you to a certain level of understanding and awareness, but that you couldn't become dependent on it. Having reached the plateau, you must move on without it. He announced this new truth to the movement and was much criticized for it, because by this time, 1966, the rest of the movement was having a helluva good time still getting high. They didn't want to hear this. (Flippo 151)

In the final chapter of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe implies that instead of moving beyond acid, as Kesey had implored, the acid heads had moved beyond HIM, beyond the whole strange, in-the-pudding, on-the-bus, intersubjectivity Prankster scene. *It's not hip; it's not cool, man. It's just weird and embarrassing. Like going to see the Beatles in concert, only when you get there it's an 80-year-old, retirement-home, out-of-fashion version. Bummer. It's just no fun. The scene has moved on, man. Get with the times or get left behind.* And so, Kesey and the Pranksters, the pioneering forefathers of the psychedelic counterculture, were being left behind.

Though what Kesey and the Pranksters had set out to do—to open the doors of perception and move into new realms of consciousness—can ultimately be viewed as a

noble cause, they were so completely focused on the *NOW*, that a plan for further development or a final goal was never really given proper consideration. Being so completely wrapped up in the present, Kesey failed to secure a future for the work and values he had invested himself in. As Ronald Weber states, “Wolfe seems to view Kesey and the Pranksters as only the latest and most bizarre figures in a long and honorable procession of American experimenters heading out toward the Edge City of human experience, fleeing from the limitations of history in search of the totally experienced present” (97). However, I would argue that, while Wolfe may laude Kesey for his good intentions, he ultimately highlights the point that these intentions did not finally come to fruition. On the contrary, Wolfe seems to imply that if anything was indeed achieved in the end, it ran opposite to Kesey’s intentions. This is evidenced in the way that Wolfe ends the book with the repeated refrain “WE BLEW IT,” clearly emphasizing Kesey’s failure to carry out his prophesy.

By the time Kesey had the Acid Test Graduation revelation it was too late; things had run their course and there was no going back. As Ronald Weber states, “Kesey is able to articulate the feeling of stalled movement; the bus is no longer going ‘Further’ but simply repeating its journeys. But he is unable to chart new directions. At the end he fails as the prophetic leader because his vision of the future dims” (95).

Thus, the holy quest, or the vague idea of what such a quest might be, was lost in the shuffle, in the constant movement without progression. Though Kesey is struck throughout the journey with brief and fragmented flashes of vision, he is never able to draw these pieces together to form a unified whole. Though he feels compelled, driven by a divinely purposed mission, he is never able to grasp it with clarity. It lays always just



beyond his reach. And so, he only runs himself in circles. Weber writes, “‘Furthur’ is the exactly right Prankster motto, an expression of continual movement without destination” (97).

Ultimately, in the larger context of the developing psychedelic culture outside of the Kesey/Prankster complex, all their experimentation, their journey, fails to produce the mass enlightenment that Kesey had envisioned, ultimately culminating instead in “the probation generation,” (Wolfe *Electric* 360) a couple hundred thousand young people wandering the streets of San Francisco strung out on drugs. As Wolfe reveals through the narrative, though Kesey had all the markings of a prophetic figure at first—one who woos the masses with his ecstatic vision, and draws them into it, giving them a taste of the divine (*the experience*)—he failed, ultimately, to lead them into the promised land. McKeen captures the overarching tone of Wolfe’s narrative well when he writes:

Without overstating the message, Wolfe ultimately offers a verdict on Kesey: he insinuates that the young writer—in the language of the era—most assuredly did blow it. The cross-country trek had begun as a frivolous adventure; it ended as not much more, and perhaps no real harm was done. But the greater good that Kesey had envisioned as the result of his hallucinogenic pilgrimage did not come to pass. The story of Kesey and the Pranksters was, in a way, the whole story of the 1960s in a nutshell: the ultimately doomed search for a guru. (66)

The “movie” of the bus trip that Kesey had spent so much time and money filming serves as the perfect metaphor for his journey and its lack of unifying vision. “Kesey had high hopes for the film, on every level,” Wolfe writes. “It was the world’s first acid film, taken

under conditions of total spontaneity barreling through the heartlands of America, recording all *now*, in the moment” (*Electric* 136). Only after they got home, unpacked it, sent it in for color processing and began actually to go over the miles and miles of film, they found that the images were largely fragmented, out of focus and often too shaky to watch, due to the jolting of the road. In the end, they had traveled across the country, taken a copious amount of drugs and had a lot of fun doing it and even turned a few others onto it, but what they were left with, finally, amounted to little more than an editing room stacked to the ceiling with \$70,000 worth of essentially unusable footage (136-37).

In a 1981 essay, critic A. Carl Bredahl notes, “Ultimately, the difference between Wolfe and the Pranksters is evidenced in Wolfe’s ability to keep his narrative eye focused on the physical world of the Pranksters and to unify *The Electric Kool-Aid Test* in contrast to the talk and endless feet of film and electrical wires that the Pranksters can never manage to bring together” (38). The Pranksters are too wrapped up in the here and now, too consumed with constant movement, to be able to put the pieces together in any meaningful way. The triumph of Wolfe is that he is able, at once, to relay the total chaos of the journey, while also unifying Kesey and the Pranksters’ narrative in a way that they cannot. He takes the reader into the madness for the total Prankster experience, and then draws him out again to view the overarching narrative from above. And through a work of pure Wolfe Trickster magic, he is able to blend these disparate worlds of perspective seamlessly before our eyes.

While Wolfe’s narrative emphasizes Kesey’s shortcomings as a messianic figure, it does not undercut his relevance to the cultural historical conversation. Kesey and the

Pranksters may not have brought the people into a state of total divine consciousness. Still, the cultural significance of what they had done and the impact it would have over future generations is undeniable. Having come onto the scene at just the right time and place, California in the early sixties, and latched onto the right group of people (Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters), Wolfe was able to witness and chronicle what was essentially the birth of the psychedelic counterculture. As Wolfe recognizes, Kesey and his group sparked a cultural revolution. They pioneered a new lifestyle, complete with new ideologies, and modes of thinking and being in the world. In short, they were the frontrunners of a movement that was affecting a paradigm shift in the “manners and morals” of an entire generation. Wolfe recognizes this and gives credit where credit is due. He credits Kesey and the Pranksters, essentially, with giving birth to or directly inspiring much of the iconic sights, sounds, art and artifacts associated with the psychedelic movement:

The Acid Tests were the *epoch* of the psychedelic style and practically everything that has gone into it. I don't mean merely that the Pranksters did it first but, rather, that it all came straight out of the Acid Tests in a direct line leading to the Trips Festival of January 1966. That brought the whole thing full out in the open. 'Mixed media' entertainment—this came straight out of the Acid Tests' combination of light and movie projections, strobes, tapes, rock 'n' roll, black light. 'Acid rock'—the sound of the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album and the high-vibrato electronic sounds of the Jefferson Airplane, the Mothers of Invention and many other groups—the mothers of it all were the Grateful Dead at the Acid Tests [...] Even

details like psychedelic poster art, the quasi-*art nouveau* swirls of lettering, design and vibrating colors, electro-pastels and spectral Day-Glo came out of the Acid Tests. (*Electric* 251)

Ultimately, Wolfe recognizes and appreciates the cultural historical value of Kesey and the Pranksters' journey—both in their successes and failures.

In *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* Wolfe followed the peaks and valleys of the Prankster movement, chronicling it in its shortcomings and jubilations—from earnest beginnings (i.e. the cause, the enlightenment, Liberation!, free love, etc.), to the lost and searching youth that followed on its crest, and the commercial mainstream exploiters that followed them. What he produced is honest writing that both places the reader inside the movement's evolution and gives him the lenses through which to view its facets from a removed perspective. In this way, the reader can begin to understand the various ways that the counterculture and its fallout irreversibly altered the social-cultural landscape of America and changed perceptions of what it meant to be an "American" for an entire generation, and really, for all generations to follow.

## RADICALISM AND THE "RADICAL CHIC"

The tag “outsider” did not necessarily belong solely to the lower, or even middle, class. There was a new class coming into its own in 1960s America, of youngish professionals that had learned to work the system and earn themselves a little upward mobility. Thanks to the rapidly increasing public demand for entertainment over the previous couple of decades and the emergence of new technologies—modes by which to disseminate this entertainment to greater and more far-reaching public audiences—initiates of this very new class, those who were “in the biz”: actors, directors, producers, composers, musical performers, etc. found themselves enjoying the luxuries, amenities and comforts of the old-moneyed upper crust. Of course, though they may have had money and lots of it, this did not necessarily buy them admittance into the social circles of those leftovers of the Gilded Age aristocracy among whom they lived. This new class of wealthy showbiz types had not been born into money (in many cases anyway); they had come into it, almost as if by a sheer stoke of luck. They were not bred for it, so to speak; so they were still outsiders. And as outsiders, many of them were drawn to the plight of other outsiders, though they might have been on the lower end of the social-economic spectrum.

In fact, that many of the radical bands of outsiders fighting for a voice in Vietnam War era America did not have money or social grace made them more appealing to hip members of the new-moneyed class. There was a sort of undeniable mystique, a primitive beauty one might say, surrounding the downtrodden sweat-of-the-brow, working-class-man-turned-revolutionary. The “romanticizing of primitive souls,” or *nostaligie de la boue*, literally “nostalgia for the mud,” Wolfe explains in *Radical Chic*, “tends to be a

favorite motif whenever a great many new faces and a lot of new money enter society” (27). These new arrivals, says Wolfe, had two options when attempting to “certify their superiority over the hated ‘middle class’” (27). The first was to put on the “trappings of aristocracy,” and the second was to “indulge in the gauche thrill of taking on certain styles of the lower orders” (27). This affinity for the mystique of the lower class struggle, Wolfe explains, though it was reaching a new pinnacle among the wealthy in Manhattan during the late sixties and early seventies, was not new, but had been trending among the more in-tune wealthy circles in London and New York for the past century (27-31).

However, Wolfe clarifies, this latest generation of wealthy socialites was engaged in a more refined iteration of social slumming, which he has dubbed “Radical Chic.” It wasn’t hip merely to dress beneath one’s social rank or hang around dive bars and seedy night clubs. There were unwritten laws, which must be abided by if one was to boost one’s social status in this way. “One rule is that *nostalgie de la boue*—i.e., the styles of romantic, raw-vital, Low Rent primitive—are good; and *middle class*, whether black or white, is bad,” Wolfe writes (35). “Therefore,” he continues, “Radical Chic invariably favors radicals who seem primitive, exotic, and romantic, such as the grape workers, who are not merely radical and ‘of the soil’ but also Latin; the Panthers, with their leather pieces, Afros, shades, and shoot-outs; and the Red Indians, who, of course, had always seemed primitive, exotic, and romantic” (35-36). There was also an added advantage to favoring these groups in particular: physical proximity. “At the outset, at least,” he points out, “all three groups had something else to recommend them, as well: they were headquartered three thousand miles away from the East Side of Manhattan, in places like

Delano (the grape workers), Oakland (the panthers), and Arizona and New Mexico (the Indians)” (35-36).

Of course, though it was important to maintain the distinction between oneself and those of the lower classes, it was hip and *righteous* to be identified with the *cause* of “the people.” And wouldn’t you know it, the relationship often proved to be mutually beneficial, because as it turned out, the plight of “the people” was often wanting of a little cash to help further the cause, and a bit of publicity never hurt either. Of course, the thought that any self-respecting member of Manhattan’s social elite would go romping through the mean streets of Oakland or the fields of Southern California, shoulder to shoulder with those working at the ground level for the cause, was out of the question. One wanted to show support for *their* cause, but one could not risk being mistaken for one of *them*, and besides, it was dangerous out there...and dirty. The natural solution then, of course, was the fundraising cocktail party. It could be conducted from the comfort and safety of one’s own home and in the company of one’s friends, accomplishing the double task of supporting the cause (and more importantly, being associated with it) and keeping one’s hands clean. It was perfect. One could gain some status points, while relieving a bit of the guilt so unfortunately associated with wealth, and simultaneously experience the exhilaration of being in such close proximity to real-life revolutionaries. As an added bonus, when the evening had concluded, the revolutionaries would return to their respective homes and one would be left forever after with the immense satisfaction of having furthered the cause, without ever having to see them again. Conveniently, as Wolfe points out, these radical groups were headquartered

on the opposite side of the country and so were not “likely to become too much...*underfoot*, as it were” (35-36).

And so, often times, even though no less distance separated the world of the militant Black Panther on the streets of Oakland from that of the millionaire composer in his Park Avenue loft than did the latter from the old-world, sixth-generation Aristocrat, the former pair found a way of joining together, even if only by the symbolic gesture of a “benefit” party. Thus, the new phenomenon, “radical chic,” was born. Pretty soon, unlikely co-ops were formed across the most disparate of social lines: i.e. a wave of New York socialites hosting benefit dinners (parties) to raise bail money for imprisoned Black Panthers or for the Hispanic migrant workers’ cause in California, or for Puerto Rican nationalist revolutionaries The Young Lords. Here were these wealthy members of the Upper East Side set, lining up to give parties for immigrants, militants and revolutionaries. And to the initiated, it seemed a most natural thing to do. In fact, Wolfe mused in an interview following the publication of *Radical Chic*, “The idea that there might be anything funny about it, or amusing, was unthinkable” (Flippo 135).

Wolfe recognized the incredible irony bound up in these strange and complex, though seemingly mutually beneficial, relationships he saw forming across normally impermeable status lines. As Ragen notes, “The irony of people trying to ensure their place in the society status hierarchy by embracing the revolutionary provided Wolfe with the perfect subject...” (21). In “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s,” first published in *New York* in June of 1970, and later in book form under the shortened title *Radical Chic*, along with *Mau-mauing the Flak Catchers*, Wolfe examines this duality, and the often



humorous complications bound up in it, with an honest and meticulous social critic's eye from which no one, no matter how much their assets are worth, is immune.

*Radical Chic* is perhaps Wolfe's most brilliant social satire that almost wasn't. In truth, Wolfe was not actually invited to Leonard and Felicia Bernstein's lavish party for the Black Panthers, which served as the centerpiece for his article-turned-book. As Marc Weingarten recounts in his seminal New Journalism historiography *The Gang the Wouldn't Write Straight*, Wolfe came upon the opportunity by chance while visiting his friend David Halberstam's office at *Harper's*:

Wolfe happened to see an invitation on Halberstam's desk for a fundraiser that was taking place at Leonard and Felicia Bernstein's Park Avenue apartment [...] on behalf of the Panther Twenty-one, a group of Black Panthers who had been arrested on a charge of conspiring to blow up five New York department stores, New Haven railroad facilities, a police station, and the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. Wolfe thought he might write a book about this new tendency toward downward nobility, but with Bernstein—the dashing maestro of the New York Philharmonic, a true New York icon—now casting his lot with the radical left, the story suddenly had a compelling and timely angle [...] He surreptitiously scribbled the RSVP number on the back of a *Harper's* subscription card when Halberstam wasn't looking. (221)

And so, clad in his signature white suit, steno pad in hand, Wolfe rode the elevator up to the Bernstein's 13-room loft apartment. And when the butler opened the door, what unfolded to him was a scene more deliciously contradictory than he could have hoped

for. True to his trickster, Edge-City-dweller persona, Wolfe had found himself yet again standing in the bizarre-o borderlands at the intersection of two disparate worlds. This time it was that of the charity-party-going radical chic of Park Avenue and the afro-and-mutton-chop attired militant Panthers of Oakland and Chicago. It was a strange scene, to be sure, but it is in these environments of collision and contradiction that Wolfe seems most at home.

“I introduced myself to Mr. and Mrs. Bernstein,” Wolfe later explained. “At the time, they figured anybody who was there was riding the same wave they were” (Flippo 135). However, they had misjudged. The clairvoyant and cunning Mr. Wolfe saw that *their wave* must inevitably come to a violent crash upon the shore of the public eye, and he was merely there as a spectator to watch as it came tumbling down, and to record it all for posterity. Wolfe doesn’t waste any time in establishing the comical relief that seems to him to be radiating from the whole affair, beginning with a lengthy description of the first round of hors d’oeuvres that have been brought out for the Panther’s enjoyment:

MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM. These are nice. Little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled in crushed nuts. Very tasty. Very subtle. It’s the way the dry sackiness of the nuts tiptoes up against the dour savor of the cheese that is so nice, so subtle. Wonder what the Black Panthers eat here on the hors d’oeuvre trail? Do the Panthers like little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled in crushed nuts this way, and asparagus tips in mayonnaise dabs, and *meatballs petites au Coq Hardi*, all of which are at this very moment being offered to them on gadrooned silver platters by maids in black uniforms with hand-ironed white aprons.... (Wolfe *Radical 2*)

*Subtle*, yes. However the attention that Wolfe pays to these little intricacies, the carefully arranged details of the event and the odd contrasts prevalent in every corner of the enormous 13-room spread—between the Panthers and the distinguished members of the social elite, who have been called here tonight (such is the pretense anyway) in their honor—is not so *subtle*. There they are, all those who’s whos at the top of the definitive New York socialite’s party guest list, all those *who simply must be in attendance if the party is to be anything at all*. Wolfe runs down the catalogue list:

There’s Otto Preminger in the library and Jean vanden Heuvel in the hall, and Peter and Cheray Duchin in the living room, and Frank and Donna Stanton, Gail Lumet, Sheldon Harnick, Cynthia Phipps, Burton Lane, Mrs. August Heckscher, Roger Wilkins, Barbara Walters, Bob Silvers, Mrs. Richard Avedon, Mrs. Arthur Penn, Julie Belafonte, Harold Taylor, and scores more including Charlotte Curtis, women’s news editor of *The New York Times*, America’s foremost chronicler of Society [...]. (4)

And in the same apartment, “in the season of Radical Chic, the Black Panthers,” in full Black Power regalia: “the tight pants, the tight black turtlenecks, the leather coats, Cuban shades, Afros. But real Afros, not the ones that have been shaped and trimmed like a topiary hedge and sprayed until they have a sheen like acrylic wall-to-wall—but like funky, natural, scraggly...wild...” (4-5). Wild, exotic, spectacular—and here they are, all gathered in one place, for one night only, ladies and gentleman. The energy among the spectators is, as one might expect, befitting of such an event. “Harassment & Hassles, Guns & Pigs, Jail & Bail—they’re *real*, these Black Panthers,” Wolfe writes. “The very idea of them, these real revolutionaries, who actually put their lives on the line, runs

through Lenny's duplex like a rogue hormone" (4). One woman in attendance can no longer contain her excitement at all this stimulation and exclaims "I've never met a Panther—this is a first for me!" (4-5).

To their credit, Wolfe does allow that the Bernsteins and their guests have gone to great lengths (in accordance with Radical Chic protocol) to do their level best not to insult their Panther guests with lavish and flagrant displays of wealth and class superiority. Wolfe goes into great detail, for example, about the careful considerations given to wardrobe choice. "What does one wear to these parties for the Panthers or the Young Lords or the grape workers? What does a woman wear?" he questions. "Obviously one does not want to wear something frivolously and pompously expensive, such as a Gerard Pipart party dress. On the other hand one does not want to arrive 'poor-mouthing it' in some outrageous turtleneck and West Eighth Street bell-jean combination, as if one is 'funky' and of 'the people'" (10). Yes, adapting one's dress to the given context of the party while maintaining the proper degree of elegance and tastefulness could be a daunting task, no lesser in complexity than in importance. However, as Wolfe explains, it is an art that the Bernsteins had mastered. "Look at Felicia," Wolfe writes, "She is wearing the simplest little black frock imaginable, with absolutely no ornamentation save for a plain gold necklace. It is perfect. It has dignity without any overt class symbolism" (10). And Lenny, whose tailor comes around regularly to take measurements and do fittings for such occasions, is outfitted in "a black turtleneck, navy blazer, Black Watch plaid trousers, and a necklace with a pendant hanging down to his sternum" (10). It is an outfit that is sensibly chic, with just enough *funk* thrown in, to take

off the edge and let onlookers know that he is hip, but without looking too much like he is trying to look hip.

All of this—the hors d’oeuvres, the carefully selected clothing and accessories—is very nice, yes, but there are other things to attend to when giving a party of the radically chic variety, *especially* if one is planning to host the Black Panthers. For example, one must consider the servants. It is not enough simply to have servants. In fact, it is absolutely expected, required even, among the social elite of the radical chic that one should have servants (36). That is a given. Yes, one must and will have servants; the point of detail that requires attention here is what *kind* of servants. Bearing this in mind, Wolfe laments, “In the era of Radical Chic, then, what a collision course was set between the absolute need for servants—and the fact that the servant was the absolute symbol of what the new movements, black or brown, were struggling against! How absolutely urgent, then, became the search for the only way out: white servants!” (36-37). The Bernsteins or any of the radically chic who found themselves in their position before or after, could not insult the Black Panthers, or any other revolutionary-type group of the ethnic persuasion (or more importantly, humiliate themselves) by having “a Negro butler and maid, Claude and Maude, in uniform, circulating through the living room, the library, and the main hall serving drinks and canapés” (6). Luckily, the Bernsteins were ahead of the radical chic curve, and already had white servants, even before the slew of fundraising parties hit the Park Avenue loft circuit. Crisis averted.

Still, at least to the discerning reader, even these attempts to play down the incredible disparity in economic status between Bernstein and his party guests and the Panthers, only seem to draw more attention to it. “God, what a flood of taboo thoughts

runs through one's head at these Radical Chic events..." Wolfe writes, "But it's delicious. It is as if one's nerve endings were on red alert to the most intimate nuances of status. Deny it if you want to! Nevertheless, it runs through every soul here. It is like the delicious shudder you get when you try to force the prongs of two horseshoe magnets together...*them* and *us*..." (8). And the fact remains that a 13-bedroom Park Avenue loft, arranged by a top dollar interior decorator with a multi-million dollar array of fabulous décor can only be made to appear so humble.

The stark contract between "*them* and *us*," as Wolfe puts it, comes to a climax when all have been gathered in the living room for the evening's feature presentation: Black Panther Field Marshal Don Cox's delivery of the Panther's 10-point Program. Wolfe describes the scene:

The Field Marshall of the Black Panther Party has been sitting in a chair between the piano and the wall. He rises up; he has the hard-rock look, all right; he is a big tall man with brown skin and an Afro and a goatee and a black turtleneck much like Lenny's, and he stands up beside the piano, next to Lenny's million-dollar *catchka* flotilla of family photographs. In fact, there is a certain perfection as the first Black Panther rises within a Park Avenue living room to lay the Panthers' ten-point program on New York Society in the age of Radical Chic. Cox is silhouetted—well, about nineteen feet behind him is a white silk shade with an Empire scallop over one of the windows overlooking Park Avenue [...] The whole image, the white shade and the Negro by the piano silhouetted against it, is framed by a pair of bottle-green velvet curtains, pulled back. (16)

There he is, the exotic Panther, the spectacle, beautifully, theatrically on display to the wide-eyed grown children of the upper crust, who've all trickled down from their upper Manhattan lofts to gaze, eyes glimmering and jaws hung open, upon its splendor. *Very rare to catch a glimpse of such a magnificent, such a dangerous specimen in this part of the world. And just look at the luster of his ebony figure juxtaposed against the silky white backdrop.* Here, Wolfe really pulls it all together, hits the reader in the face with it: the stark contrast of two worlds forced together—the distinct, unimpeachable rift that remains still between the guests of honor and all others in attendance. It is a spectacle, Wolfe suggests, that is at once demeaning, embarrassing even, but still humorous. This theme continues throughout the story. Wolfe continually calls the reader's attention to the comical inconsistencies between the party as it is perceived by its rich white patrons (the oblivious) and how the rest of us on the outside (not excluding the Panthers themselves), who almost feel sorry for the poor schmucks, so obviously see the way it *actually* is. He tells the story like an inside joke and invites the reader to be on the laughing side.

As Cox begins to deliver the 10 points, the audience looks on in awe. "Everyone in the room, of course, is drinking in his performance like tiger's milk," Wolfe recounts, "for the...Soul, as it were. All love the tone of his voice, which is Confidential Hip" (17). He goes on about the current state of police brutality and government-backed oppression against the Panthers. The crowd loves it, not just the words—whether or not they are really hearing the words, deriving meaning from them, seems questionable—but the way he speaks, the tone of his voice, the way he interjects "see" and "you know." It is "so, somehow...black...so funky" (17). Once Cox has said his piece, Leon Quat, defense lawyer for the Panther 21, rises and makes the call for the donations segment to begin.

The money rolls in. Two hundred and fifty here, three hundred there, a thousand from the German gentleman up front. This has been a good bit of fun. However, the paying audience, which has sat so still and quiet for the first act is beginning to get antsy. Suddenly, it is not enough merely to sit and watch. The audience longs to be involved, to hear its own voice rise to join the Panther's, to see how it sounds beside it, to know how it will react to its sound. Questions begin to issue forth from the back of the room. The audience plays along at first, asking questions of feigned interest, keen to demonstrate that they have paid attention, questions such as "Besides the breakfast program, do you have any other community programs, and what are they like?" (23). But this does not continue for long before the real, burning questions are given voice:

Suddenly, there is a much more urgent question from the rear: 'Who do you call to give a party?' [...] 'I won't be able to stay for everything you have to say,' he says, 'but who do you call to give a party?' [...] And Richard Feigen, man of the hour, replica 1927 Yale man, black tie and Eaton Square hair, has dropped in, on the way [to a contributing members' reception at the Museum of Modern Art], *en passant*, to the Bernsteins', to take in the other end of the Culture tandem, Radical Chic—and the rightness of it, the exhilaration, seems to sweep through him, and he thrusts his hand into the air, and somehow Radical Chic reaches its highest, purest state in that moment... as Richard Feigen, in his tuxedo, breaks in to ask, from the bottom of his heart, 'Who do you call to give a party?' (24-25)



And with that, any bit of the veneer that still remained to maintain the notion that this was a *serious meeting, a voicing of serious issues surrounding a common concern*—well, it seems to have been scraped away. “All at once,” Wolfe exclaims, “the candid voice of Radical Chic, just ringing out like that, seems about to drop Don Cox, field Marshal of the Black Panthers, in his tracks, by Lenny’s grand piano.” He is unsure how to respond. He stands there stunned for a moment, and “just stares at Feigen” (48). And who can blame him? “For what man in all history,” Wolfe writes, “has ever before come face to face with naked white Radical Chic running ecstatically through a Park Avenue duplex and letting it all hang out” (49). Somehow this seemingly innocent question opens the door to the peanut gallery, who begin to try their voices out, barraging Cox, with commentary. There is a concerned young blonde woman, anxious to join the cause, pleading, “We want to do something, but what can we do? Is there some kind of committee, or some kind of...I don’t know...” (51). There is Bernstein prodding Cox to discuss “the friction between groups like the Black Panthers and the established black community” (53). Then Otto Preminger breaks in, upset about something Cox has said: “‘He used one important word’—then he looks at Cox—‘you said zis is de most repressive country in the world. I dun’t *beleef* zat’” (56). This sets off a verbal sparring match between the two of them: Cox beginning to address the question; Preminger interjecting; Cox pleading, “Let me answer the question;” Preminger again interrupting with “You dun’t eefen *listen* to de kvestion[...]How can you *answer* de question?” (56). Then there is Lenny again demanding to know about the threats of violence the Panthers are rumored to have made against officials and leaders, including those of the Black

community. “Cox to Preminger to Bernstein to...” Wolfe writes, “They’re wrestling for the Big Ear...quite a struggle” (58).

Finally, Cox is able to break through and deliver an anecdote that seems somehow to calm the roaring chorus. “Our Minister of Defense, Huey P. Newton, has said if we can’t find a meaningful life...you know...” he says, “maybe we can have a meaningful death...and one reason the power structure fears the Black Panthers is that they know the Black Panthers are ready to die for what they believe in, and a lot of us have already died” (59).

It is now, after Preminger has had his turn and Lenny has said a word or two to keep things moving, and Cox has more or less said his piece as well as the present audience will allow, that something strikes Lenny. It is as if it has all started to sink in, or maybe it is just the first time the talking, talking, talking has ceased to bombard his ears from every direction. Maybe the heartfelt emotion of Cox’s homage to his fallen comrades has struck a chord within him; whatever it is, he has been struck with a sudden realization, or at least the beginnings of one. Having had a moment to let the thing hit him, and taking another moment to assign words to it, he looks up at Cox and delivers a heart-felt monologue. And Wolfe captures his moment of epiphany beautifully:

‘When you walk into this house, into this building’—and he gestures vaguely as if to take it all in, the moldings, the sconces, the Roquefort morsels rolled in crushed nuts, the servants, the elevator attendant and the doormen downstairs in their white dickeys, the marble lobby, the brass struts on the marquee out front—‘when you walk into this house, you must feel infuriated!’ (59-60)

It is a revelation of incredible force. Lenny continues, despite Cox's repeated embarrassed refutations: "Don't you get bitter? Doesn't that make you mad?" "And Cox stares at him," Wolfe tells the reader, "and the Plexiglas lowers over his eyes once more... These cats—if I wasn't here to see it—" (60). Bernstein has worked himself into a frenzy over his late revelation by this point and exclaims, "Well, it makes *me* mad!" He continues, to the heart of the matter, as Wolfe transcribes: "'This is a very paradoxical situation,' says Lenny. 'Having this apartment makes this meeting possible, and if this apartment didn't exist, you wouldn't have it. And yet—well, it's a very paradoxical situation'" (60).

Here, Bernstein starts to see the elephant in the room at last, but cuts himself off before he can begin to understand just how large and terribly intrusive it really is. He is too close to the elephant, one might suppose, to take in the details of its shape, the vastness of its expanse. He is somewhat like a child, trying to watch a movie with his nose pressed to the projection screen. How can he be expected to fully appreciate the film? Though it unfolds right in front of him in hi-definition, depicted with stunning cinematography, he can only see a small fraction of what is really taking place and even this is blurred and pixelated. Similarly, Bernstein is too close to the action to recognize its significance, to take in its nuances, to form meaning. In fact, nobody in the room, apart from maybe the Panthers, seems able to recognize the blinding irony of the whole scene. Fortunately for the reader, Wolfe is far enough removed to recognize the spectacle for what it really is and fortunate again, he just happens to be the ideal wordsmith to put it down in full comic relief for the reader's enjoyment. What luck! And Wolfe does not restrain himself. The juxtapositions that Wolfe continually sets up for the reader highlight

the absurdity of the whole affair, until it begins to read like a modern-day interpretation of some Shakespearian farce, taking place on the stage in front of him.

Lenny's revelation does not seem to resonate so strongly with the others however, and so after a brief pause, the barrage begins anew. Barbara Walters expresses her concern for her children in a hypothetical future world where the Panthers have gotten their way. Cox repeats that he cannot see a peaceful resolution to the problem at hand, that nothing short of a violent overthrow of the current capitalist system will bring about any real change (62-63). Cox goes on to explain that "There's 750 families that own all the wealth of this country" (63). Preminger objects: "Dat's not *tdrue!*" (63). And around and around it goes again—with the occasional volley of a "Right on!" or "Power to the People" or a "You don't even *listen* to de kvestion—" coming from Preminger's corner (63-67).

The morning after the party, Wolfe tells the reader, Charlotte Curtis's write-up of the evening rolled out in *The New York Times*. According to Wolfe, her initial coverage was not critical of the Bernsteins or their party and did nothing in the way of exposing or damaging. In fact, Wolfe states, "No one in the season of Radical Chic could have asked for better coverage. It took up a whole page in the fashion section, along with ads for B. Altman's, Edith Imre wigs, fur coats, the Sherry-Netherland Hotel, and The Sun and Surf (Palm Beach)" (68).

The trouble did not show up at the Radical Chic's doorstep until the next day, after the Curtis article had gone out to the rest of the U.S. and Europe via *The New York Times* News Service wires. "[...] It was played on page one," Wolfe writes, "typically, to an international chorus of horse laughs or nausea, depending on one's *Weltanschauung*"

(68). An editorial published in the same paper, Wolfe writes, reported that “[...] The group therapy plus fund-raising soiree at the home of Leonard Bernstein, as reported in this newspaper yesterday, represents the sort of elegant slumming that degrades patrons and patronized alike” (69). Felicia Bernstein was of course quite upset hearing her party talked about in such an unflattering manner, and sent the *Times* a letter of retort. She objected that, “the frivolous way in which it was reported as a ‘fashionable’ event is unworthy of the *Times*, and offensive to all people who are committed to humanitarian principles of justice” (71). However, this letter, which did not run in the *Times* until five days later, seemed to do little to quiet the media storm surrounding the Bernstein party, and soon the Bernsteins’ trouble began to come from other directions. Wolfe reveals that it wasn’t long before “they started getting hate mail, some of it apparently from Jews of the Queens-Brooklyn Jewish Defense League variety” (71-72). Of course, the Bernsteins cannot have been expected to know, but as it turns out, the Panthers and other Black Power groups had lately been “voicing support for the Arabs against Israel” (72-73). And, as Lenny Bernstein was among the most prominent celebrities of Jewish descent in New York, this raised more than a few eyebrows in the Jewish community. And so, it seems, the Bernsteins’ little party—which they now firmly asserted was not a party at all, but a “meeting” (76)—had gotten them into quite a pickle. Furthermore, it was bringing quite a lot of heat onto the whole Radical Chic scene. Suddenly, the Panthers had gone from ultra cool to too hot to touch. A surge of panic could be felt circulating through the social elite of the Upper East Side like a heat wave. An acute state of panic, Wolfe tells us, settled upon two Radical Chic couples who were already planning “meetings” for the Panthers and another who had already sent out invitations for another to be held in honor

of the Young lords, who were “in some ways Spanish Harlem’s Puerto Rican equivalents of the Black Panthers and were, in fact, actually allied with the Panthers” (76).

In the end, Wolfe writes, “In general, the Radically Chic made a strategic withdrawal, denouncing the ‘witchhunt’ of the press as they went” (78). He notes that this debacle turned out to have a very positive impact on slightly less fashionable charities, considered *safer*, such as The Friends of the Earth, which lobbied for the protection of other wild cats, such as leopards and cheetahs, once the Panthers had become too “radioactive” (78).

Wolfe does an excellent job of highlighting the flimsy nature of the Radical Chic’s support for the Panthers and other radical groups. As he explains, it was a trend, little more than a fashion statement that went out of style and was tossed aside. In a 1979 interview for the *U.S. News & World Report*, Wolfe states, “The people who were involved in what I call radical chic were always much more interested in the chic part than the radical part. They were not anxious to endure the heat if it became unpleasant. So they were quite ready to jettison the Black Panthers or the Weatherman or any of those groups when it became known that they were supporting those causes” (“Tom Wolfe Examines” 113). Still, that it was a phenomenon so bound in contradiction—not the least of which was the fact that the wealthy were reaching downward as a means of obtaining upward status mobility—made it an interesting topic, and a humorous one. Perhaps the funniest thing about the whole affair was that the Bernsteins were wholly unaware that there was anything funny about it. In an interview for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Wolfe recalls, “...It never occurred to Leonard Bernstein that there could be anything humorous about the spectacle of the Black Panthers outlining their ten-point

revolutionary program in his 13-room duplex on Park Avenue” (Nobile 96). However, Wolfe was able to draw the humor out in droves, and with seemingly little coaxing. And filtered through the all-seeing Wolfian eye, what the reader gets is an astute portrayal of the Bernstein party and the phenomena of Radical Chic that birthed it, that is equally valuable as social critique and comedy of errors.

The strange statusphere of the Radical Chic provided an ideal between-world for Wolfe to take as his subject and infiltrate. Wolfe, an artist whose reporting thrives on the intricacies, eccentricities and status implications of a given social group or movement, had found himself in abundant supply upon discovering the Radical Chic. And the Bernstein’s cocktail hour fundraiser turned out to be a veritable Smithsonian of the movement, putting itself on display for him. Of course it takes an eye like Wolfe’s to know exactly what one’s looking at and to recognize the wealth of humor inherent in the interplay of its artifacts. As Weingarten wrote, “Wolfe had hit the mother lode with Bernstein’s party; it threw all the ‘status contradictions and incongruities’ of the privileged class into bold relief, and there was no other subject, in his view, that better explained the motivations of certain powerful New Yorkers” (223).

True, Wolfe’s was not the only coverage surrounding the Radical Chic or even the Bernsteins’ party at the time. However, his article was unique in the scope, perspective and voice of its coverage. Wolfe was present at the Bernsteins’ party and, had he followed the traditional news reporter’s instinct to be on the leading edge, he could have produced a simple write-up of the facts to be release the following morning as the *Times*’ Charlotte Curtis did. But Wolfe knew that the party was only the beginning of the story. Rather than jumping the gun and publishing his account of the party straightaway, he

predicted and waited for the fallout that he knew was to follow and included all the various perspectives (those of the Bernsteins, their Panther guests, other party goers, the various news reports that followed and the reports, opinion pieces and critiques that followed them and of course, that of the omniscient consciousness that is Wolfe) in his piece, making it the definitive piece of the Radical Chic scene. This is the genius of Wolfe: his ability to infiltrate disparate microcosms, view things from a multiplicity of angles, through a variety of lenses, to gather perspectives—from inside, outside and beyond—to pluck them out of their various surrounding contexts and replace them again, and to draw connections that are not readily available to the common news man, and of course, to put it all together for the reader in a way that is both artistic and intelligent, entertaining and informative.

The publication of Wolfe's *Radical Chic* brought on mixed reactions from critics. In his review titled "Journal du Voyeur" for the *New York Review of Books*, Jason Epstein, commenting on the fact that Wolfe was an uninvited guest at the Bernsteins' party, questions, "Why, when he left Mrs. Bernstein's party, didn't Wolfe simply thank his hostess, leave a small check for the bail fund, and depart... Why did Wolfe choose instead to offend his hostess further by writing his own frivolous account of her efforts?" (Shomette xvii). Philip French expresses a similar sentiment in his review of the book, attacking Wolfe for refusing to *play nice*. "Tom Wolfe's latest exercise in the frenetic 'New Journalism,'" the piece opens, "is a victory of the mean-minded over the well-intentioned." He seems to feel that Wolfe has a personal vendetta against Bernstein and his social set. "No one present gets away without a personalized poison-dart in his back,"



French asserts, “no one, that is except the unseen Wolfe who’s cranking the candid, *cinema-verite* camera at 24 truthful frames a second” (49).

However, there were those who came to Wolfe’s defense, not that he needed it. In his introduction to an anthology of critical responses to Wolfe’s work, Doug Shomette describes Alicia Ostriker’s response in the *Partisan Review* to those who might accuse Wolfe of being “uncaring and insulting.” “She felt that those reviewers missed the whole point of ‘Radical Chic’ —that in reality the good intentions and high motivations about social and ethnic problems are mostly self-delusion” (xvii). “In brief,” Ostriker writes, “everybody still wants to bark up the tree of Good and Evil—and so the message is missed” (53). In his review for *Book World*, Richard Freedman defends Wolfe similarly against those holier-than-thou journalists launching accusations against him:

When ‘Radical Chic’ appeared last June in *New York*, that worthy magazine was deluged with letters accusing Wolfe of the twin sins of racism and snottiness (the latter, one gathered, being more the heinous), but a careful reading reveals that in fact his attitude is that the Panthers are demeaned by such occasions. The attitude to Bernstein is simply that being a great musician is no guarantee that one has the social sense of a campfire girl. (46)

As for Wolfe himself, he had already faced his share of negative criticism by this point, and it didn’t bother him much anymore, if it ever had. When Philip Nobile of the *Richmond Times Dispatch* asked him, “Why do your critics despise you so? What have you done to merit such contempt?” Wolfe answered, “Intellectuals aren’t used to being written about. When they aren’t taken seriously and become part of the human comedy,

they have a tendency to squeal like weenies over an open fire. I knew what I was in for, but it was irresistible” (95). In fact, he had so much fun making those weenies squeal, it seems, that he decided to continue the trend, in spite of (or maybe partially *because of*) the flak he caught for it. As Ragen notes, “Wolfe’s willingness to mock liberal pieties in *Radical Chic*, which he compared to ‘laughter in church,’ led parts of the literary establishment to begin to shun or marginalize him. But Wolfe was not unhappy to be out of the mainstream. Rather, he relished his position, questioning the reigning dogmas in several of the arts, starting with literature itself [*The New Journalism*]” (21). If he had been a card-carrying member of the traditional mainstream press, publishing something like *Radical Chic* might have been reason enough for the other, more *respectable* members of the club to revoke his membership. However, in truth, he was already an outsider, having established himself as such when he first burst onto the feature writing scene with his two-part “Tiny Mummies” article, which blasted William Shawn, editor of *The New Yorker*, perhaps New York’s most well-respected magazine, as the “‘embalmer’ of a dead institution” (Sims “Joseph” 105). Wolfe was no stranger to controversy, nor did he lament his position. He was happy as an outsider. After all, why should one play by the rules if he can be twice as successful and 10 times happier throwing them to the wind?

## CONCLUSION

Tom Wolfe created a liminal zone, an in-between space for himself in his professional world, hanging somewhere between fiction and nonfiction, using elements of them both to his own best advantage. Wolfe cast himself as an outsider from the beginning, in terms of style, approach, attitude and even dress. He received a great deal of criticism for his approach to journalism, and especially his claim that the New Journalism was both leaving traditional journalism in the dust and usurping the novel as the most relevant form of literature. However, he welcomed this criticism. Ultimately, it only served to set him apart from the rest and thrust him into the public eye. As Ronald Weber states, “His description of what happened to both fiction and nonfiction in the sixties was laced with hyperbole that seemed intended to infuriate almost everyone; consequently, his description inspired attacks that brought the New Journalism and Wolfe himself to public attention” (19).

Like the Trickster figure of Native American tradition, Wolfe demonstrated a magical ability to slip across borders between worlds, and not only in terms of bridging literary genres. He extended this ability to slip over borderlines into the physical world as well, infiltrating various status groups that lay on the outlands of mainstream society—what he called ‘statuspheres.’ He presented a three-dimensional perspective of his subjects: from within the thick of the subject’s world and from the outsider’s perspective looking in, and simultaneously from that magical omniscient Wolfian vantage point, viewing it all—inside and out—from above, with godlike clarity. Because Wolfe was the governor of his own particular Edge City, so to speak, he could relate to those people inhabiting the literal Edge City—living on the fringe, trying to build a place for

themselves that both allowed them to live according to their own values, apart from those of the mainstream, and also exploit the mainstream to their own advantage. A distinct parallel can easily be drawn between Wolfe's subjects and himself. Wolfe too, to put it somewhat harshly, was engaged in the practice of exploiting various social/cultural worlds to his advantage, for it was the strange practices, value systems, nuances, social quirks, etc. ("morals and manners," in his words) that made these groups unique which provided Wolfe with fodder for his stories and gave them that exotic element that drew in his readership, who were often outsiders, into the strange worlds that Wolfe's subjects inhabited.

As Alan Trachtenberg notes in his review of Wolfe's *The New Journalism*, "Radical changes in 'the people as a whole' is what Wolfe is after, where his subject lies" (71). Through his deeply engaged and thoughtful immersion reporting, Wolfe developed a special hyper-awareness of the social and cultural hierarchies (statuspheres) that were being altered or constructed or reconstructed—as were individual's identities and values systems within them—and the way that all of this forced a rethinking, evolution or modification of the very fabric of American society. The awareness that Wolfe created through his writing, of the ways that other cultural subsets were living, could not help but initiate self-reflection on the part of the reader. And so, by building this awareness in his readership—by exposing the various facets of America to itself—Wolfe could actually bring the reader not only to understand others better, but to understand himself better as well. Becoming aware of the ways other people are living causes one to reflect on his own way of living and the various ways of living he is now aware of within the greater context of his world. This is how we come to understand what it is to be American. So,

whether intentional or not, Wolfe helped to spur a greater cultural consciousness, and his writing continues to have that effect on readers today. Roy Wagner's theory of how 'culture' develops is especially illuminating in this context:

In experiencing a new culture, the fieldworker comes to realize new potentialities and possibilities for the living of life, and may in fact undergo a personality change himself. The subject culture becomes "visible," and then "believable" to him, he apprehends it first as a distinct entity, a way of doing things, and then secondly as a way in which he could be doing things. Thus he comprehends for the first time, through the intimacy of his own mistakes and triumphs, what anthropologists speak of when they use the word "culture." Before this he had no culture, as we might say, since the culture in which one grows up is never really "visible"—it is taken for granted, and its assumptions are felt to be self-evident. It is only through "invention" of this kind that the abstract significance of culture (and of many another concept) can be grasped, and only through the experienced contrast that his own culture becomes "visible." In the act of inventing another culture, the anthropologist invents his own, and in fact he reinvents the notion of culture itself. (56-57)

It is only by making oneself aware of the various cultures that lie outside his own, or of those subsets of his own culture of which he is not a part, that he can begin to identify the traits of his own culture or cultural subset, by way of contrast. One's own culture only really becomes visible to himself through observation of other cultures. In order to

observe other cultures in any meaningful way, one must look back to his own culture, placing the identifying traits of the culture under study within the context of his own, in order to make sense of what he observes. Thereby, he gains not only an understanding of another culture, but a greater understanding of his own and of himself as a part of it.

The various social sets that comprised Tom Wolfe's America during the 60s and 70s, he found, were very interested in what the others were doing. Wolfe had only to seize upon this interest and capitalized on it by providing his eager readers with a sort of verbal TV set through which they could look in on each other's worlds. Thus, Wolfe was a catalyst for the exposure of the American fringe (and thereby also a catalyst for its reincorporation into the mainstream, or mainstream consciousness anyway), and he simultaneously helped to establish and expose his new brand of journalism, bringing it into the mainstream consciousness. Richard Goldstein writes in his book *Reporting the Counterculture*, "Counter-reportage became the voice of mobility on the margins, as it percolated up from hip weeklies like the *Village Voice* to adventurous monthlies like *Esquire* and *Harper's*, this rogue reporting served as a carrier of messages between the counterculture and the mass" (Goldstein xv).

It may be noted that a lot of what Wolfe wrote about basically amounts to ill-fated good intentions, idealism that doesn't pan out in the end, in reality. But, I think Wolfe would argue, this is not to speak negatively of the effort that these cultural pioneers put forth. After all, trial and error is synonymous with the human experience. Nor do these "failures" on their part constitute a lack of relevance or a failure to impact America in the larger cultural historical context. I think Wolfe understood this and was intrigued by the fact that people were trying for something different, something ideally better, and he was

not so much concerned that it produce any particular result. If a revolution accomplished its end goals it made for a great article; if it didn't, all the better. Wolfe wished only to present "the way people are living now." During the 1960s, he looked around him and saw that America was undergoing a radical change in its attitudes, "manners and morals" and styles of living. And he saw that people on the fringe, those who were "starting their own leagues," were at the forefront of this evolution. This evolution and the people who were pushing it forward, he saw as the most important story to be told about America during the sixties, because as he said, "Manners and morals *were* the history of the Sixties." It was "the decade when manners and morals, styles of living, attitudes toward the world changed the country more crucially than any political events," (*New Journalism* 29) and as nobody in fiction or nonfiction seemed to be writing about it, he took it as his subject and made a career out of it.

Wolfe was a social critic, but not a moralist. He was not trying to promote a social agenda. He was not an activist and did not claim to be. "I'm always happy if people can't figure out my attitude," Wolfe has said, "I'm much more interested in making the reader understand what Caligula is doing than to make him hate him" (23). Wolfe recognized the beauty and the humor inherent in the human condition and was equally inspired by its failures and successes. Win or lose, he appreciated the impact that these pioneering fringe "statuspheres" had on the collective consciousness of America. He was able to rejoice in its achievements and find humor in its shortcomings. It was all an inevitable, necessary and most importantly, *fascinating* part of the whole; that is, the American Experience.

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