KEN KESEY AND LITERARY SHAMANISM

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ABSTRACT

This project aligns Ken Kesey's work as a novelist with his work as a counter-cultural leader in the Sixties. In particular, Kesey's fiction is influenced by his experimentation with psychedelic plants and chemicals, which began when he volunteered for government-sponsored research on psychedelics. We see this influence in a number of ways. In <u>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</u>, Randle P. McMurphy's entrance onto the psychiatric ward has similar effects on Chief Bromden as a psychedelic substance can have on the user. Through an exploration of his own wounded ego and McMurphy's support, Chief Bromden gradually recovers his sanity. In <u>Sometimes a Great Notion</u>, Kesey employs a complex narrative structure in which the various narrators engage in a continuous dialogue with one another. This narrative structure demonstrates a purported psychedelic experience of intersubjectivity, an experience where individuals in a group setting experience heightened awarenesses of other individuals within the group. Finally, I show how Kesey's abilities with language and his use of psychedelics equip him with two significant tools of shamanism. Kesey is a literary shaman.

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Finally, I thank Paul and Sharon Driscoll, my loving parents, who have always supported me and loved in spite of, if not sometimes because of, my eccentricities. Regardless of whether or not you support all of my ideas, you inspire me to continue to dream and incorporate those dreams into my life's path. As Kesey continuously noted during his work with the Merry Pranksters, words cannot express some experiences. And while I now try to do so with words, I cannot ultimately express my love for and appreciation of both of you.

DEDICATION

Ken Kesey dedicated his first novel, <u>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</u>, to Vik Lovell, a graduate student in psychology at Stanford University who first introduced Kesey to psychedelics, writing, "To Vik Lovell—who told me dragons did not exist, then led me to their lairs." While I do not condone the use of psychedelic substances as Kesey does in his dedication to Lovell, I dedicate this to the courageous intellectuals and artists who continuously question the potential of alternative forms of consciousness. To all who continue to examine the mysteries of the human mind and the mysteries of the world, know that your efforts continue to be significant. Here, I only help to enter an optimistic conversation about how we can uncover secrets that might make this world just a little bit better.

FOREWORD

This story began for me during my sophomore year of high school when, upon noting my interest in the history or perhaps more appropriately the zeitgeist of the Sixties, my father bought me two books: Tom Wolfe's The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test and Carlos Castaneda's The Teachings of Don Juan. Though my readings of these books were undoubtedly naïve and untrained at the time, I was introduced to a number of ideas that are essential to my work and research today. Wolfe's journalistic work investigates the altered states of consciousness that Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters explored through the use of psychedelic drugs in the mid-Sixties. Interestingly enough, it was not through either of Kesey's first two novels—the publication of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Sometimes a Great Notion precede his exploits as a psychedelic hero—that I became familiar with Kesey. For this reason, I cannot help but think that my reading of Kesey's fiction as "psychedelic" and "shamanistic" has always been greatly influenced, like many others, by Wolfe's book. Through The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, I caught a glimpse of the "psychedelic world" of the Sixties—a world where there existed an optimistic "mindset" that changes in individual and social consciousness were possible, if not imminent.

As a teenager in the comfortable 1990s, just beginning to question my place in the consumer culture of the United States, the described world of the Merry Pranksters was enchanting, so different than anything I had read about up to that point. As Wolfe suggests, the Ken Kesey of Kool-Aid Acid Test did indeed seem to possess a unique sort of power. Though I had yet to read his fiction, I felt drawn to him. When I did begin to explore his fiction a couple of years later, I discovered that his literature is saturated with psychedelic imagery and a divinatory treatment of certain themes specific to twentieth century America. But let me not stray too far from my beginnings.

After reading about the Merry Pranksters, I turned to Castaneda's The Teachings of Don Juan, another book that explores the Other World that emerges under the influence of psychedelic drugs. As a graduate student in anthropology at UCLA, Carlos Castaneda studied the "medicinal" use of psychedelic plants under the Yaqui shaman Don Juan. Though Castaneda's work, like Wolfe's, is also treasured reading for those interested in the psychedelic Sixties, it has a mystical edge to it, in the way that it presents the shaman Don Juan. Kesey and a number of other major figures—such as Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg—"discovered" psychedelic plants and chemicals in the 1950s, but they were actually drawing from an ancient tradition of peoples experimenting with the potential of altered states of consciousness. The Teachings of Don Juan suggests that some plants and chemicals are ancient tools that have been used by various shamanic cultures throughout history for personal, social, and religious purposes. Instead of questioning Castaneda's truth-telling ability as an anthropologist as some academics have done, I, as a young reader, concerned myself more with Don Juan's introduction to shamans, men and women who continued to play a significant role in the twentieth century American imagination. As I read Castaneda, I had my first encounter with shamanism, a system of beliefs that regards certain individuals as having spiritual power that enables them to guide others. To my already cynical, but still curious adolescent mind, such a suggestion seemed improbable, and at the same time somehow alluring.

Some ten years later, I approach these and other works of literature from the psychedelic Sixties with a heightened fascination and a strong desire to preserve a place for them in the American literary canon. Through the pages that follow, I suggest that psychedelic literature deserves a shelf or two in the library of great American books. The ideas set forth in Kesey's fiction demonstrate an optimistic vision—I would argue a shamanic vision—that is closely tied to the time and place from which his ideas emerged. Between 1997 and the present, we have seen the passing of Allen Ginsberg (1997), Ken Kesey (2001), and Hunter S. Thompson (2005)—all of whom play significant parts in the psychedelic genre of American literature that I propose to examine. In his 1960 poem "Magic Psalm," Allen Ginsberg anticipates the revolution, or some might prefer to say the change in consciousness, that marks the Sixties:

> Because this world is on the wing and what cometh no man can know
> O Phantom that my mind pursues from year to year descend from heaven
>   to this shaking flesh. (113)

Here, we see one of the great literary figures of the Fifties and Sixties anxiously awaiting his opportunity to claim what Tom Wolfe would define as his "divine birthright" (40)—a heightened consciousness that I will explain throughout this study.

Seeking more expertise on the Sixties, I turn to Hunter S. Thompson's <u>Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas</u> for his reflections upon the decade that some believe altered the course of human consciousness. Despite his decadent lifestyle, Thompson possessed an extraordinary ability to produce nuggets of wisdom that in other contexts are construed as directionless rants. Reflecting upon a prevailing optimism felt by the youth of the San Francisco area of the Sixties, Dr. Thompson writes:

> There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda….You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning….

> And that, I think, was the handle—the sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave…. (67-68)

I find it unimportant that Thompson's "energy" does not in fact prevail; there will not be the kind of hoped for sustained and significant change in consciousness initially imagined. Yes, the Sixties do have a lasting impact on consciousness as it relates to race, gender, sexuality, and a host of other social concerns; nonetheless, the materialism and consumerism which controls the masses only gets stronger after the Sixties. In "Periodizing the Sixties," Frederic Jameson writes:

> Late capitalism in general (and the 1960s in particular) constitute a process in which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism—the last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world—are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment when the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into the classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the Third World and the unconscious. The 60s will then have been the momentous transformational period when this systematic restructuring takes place on a global scale. (qtd. in Pinchbeck 174)

Despite the fact that the Sixties mark the moment when the "last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism" are "penetrated and colonized," at least momentarily there exists an optimistic belief in the possibility of a lasting social change. My hope is that as we look to major writers of the Sixties, we can examine all that is right about their vision and all that went wrong in the enactment of that vision, and in doing so we can recapture their optimistic vision of a society and individuals capable of achieving a sustained and significant change in our materialistic American consciousness.

The publication of such anthologies as The Outlaw Bible of American Literature in 2004 along with the continued interest in writers like Ginsberg, Thompson, and Kesey attests to the fact that there remains a number of intellectuals and readers who find value in those writers who, as Alan Kaufman, the editor of the Outlaw Bible, maintains, “revolt against a landscape dominated by a literary dictatorship of tepid taste, political correctness, and sheer numbing banality” (xvii). Outlaw writers are controversial and sometimes overlooked largely because they critique the American consciousness in its complacency and offer an alternative view. Kesey is indeed one such writer. As I investigate his work, I do not ignore his failings—the sometimes flawed treatment of gender in his fiction and his anarchical political vision—but I do give precedence to his successes, the most profound of which, I will argue, is the recovery of a shamanic vision that continues to be a necessary corrective for contemporary American society.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERARY SHAMANISM AND PSYCHEDELIC FICTION

Now is the time past believing
The child has relinquished the reign
Now is the test of the boomerang
Tossed in the night of redeeming
-Grateful Dead

Aside from an occasional nod to Aldous Huxley, literary critics do not often bandy about terms like "literary shaman" or "psychedelic fiction." In fact, it just might be the case that once I have uttered these terms, I will have compromised my chance at being recognized as a serious scholar. "Don't get off the bus," I tell myself. Instead, I wish to go "further," to suggest that not only is Ken Kesey a "literary shaman," not only is his fiction tinged with the influence of the psychedelic plants and chemicals with which he so openly experimented, but a complete critical—and dare I say serious—study of Kesey's fiction is incomplete until we have carefully explored the extent to which a shamanistic tradition and psychedelic substances influenced the thematic content, the aesthetics, and the grand vision of his most significant works. Furthermore, by examining the extent to which Kesey performs the role of literary shaman, I wish to recognize the host of other writers lauded for their literary abilities but underappreciated for their social contributions. Let us stick to Kesey though, whose various contributions as an author and a countercultural hero—though so often misunderstood—merit our careful consideration.

In this chapter, I define the terms "shaman" and "shamanism," attempt to locate a place for psychedelics and consciousness-raising through an appreciation of certain literary and cultural texts, and begin to establish Kesey as a literary shaman. Shaman and shamanism are clearly general terms that require defining, for shamanic practices vary according to their cultures of origin. However, rather than attempting to identify specific shamanic cultures that pertain to my study, I use shaman and shamanism as conceptual terms that describe archaic religious leaders and practices. Shamanism is an archaic form of religion that dates back to the Upper Paleolithic era of ten to fifty thousand years ago. Various shamanic cultures share a belief in healing, divination, and access to spiritual dimensions through the use of natural magic. In particular, I am concerned with the shamanic use of various psychedelic plants for visionary purposes, as psychedelics also temporarily discovered a profound place in American consciousness-raising during the Sixties.

Kesey's efforts fall within the long tradition of shamanism, which Daniel Pinchbeck—a journalist who has participated in shamanic initiation rituals in places such as Ecuador and Gabon in his pursuit for an understanding of the shamanic use of psychedelic plants—defines as a "technology for exploring nonordinary states of consciousness in order to accomplish specific purposes: healing, divination, and communication with the spirit realm" (69). While some shamanic cultures still exist, in the last few centuries, shamanism has been virtually cast aside in favor of more conservative organized religions and collective, often state-supported, beliefs. Because of his use of the word technology, a word that originally means a "discourse or treatise on an art or arts" (OED), I embrace Pinchbeck's definition of shamanism, for the practice of shamanistic beliefs strips technology of all of the implications that align it with the social-conditioning agents of contemporary American society (agents that writers like Kesey identify as threats) and returns technology to its archaic meaning. In line with twentieth century linguistic thinking, the shamans—individuals who according to Terence McKenna, a self-proclaimed "explorer" with a degree in Shamanic Studies from Berkeley, have attained "a vision of the beginnings and the endings of all things and who can communicate that vision"—believe that "the world is actually made of language in some fashion" (7). McKenna, who gained a great deal of popularity as the psychedelic guru of the Seventies and Eighties, argues that shamans are first and foremost shapers of language. In Food of the Gods, McKenna goes so far as to suggest that psychedelic plants, most notably the psilocybin mushroom, were the possible catalyst for the evolution of human consciousness and the creation of language in prehistoric times. McKenna's anthropological assertions regarding the role of psychedelics in the evolution of humankind may leave his critics shaking their heads, but his assertion that human language bears its roots in the archaic traditions of shamanic cultures provides writers and artists exploring this avenue of experimentation with a tradition in which to situate their work, through which they can "authenticate" their ideas. In the Sixties, Kesey and other countercultural figures build their work—artistic and experiential alike—around a number of ancient shamanic practices.

But what are the characteristics of shamanism that, knowingly or not, Kesey brings to bear as a writer and a countercultural leader? Kesey's ability with language, whether written or spoken provides him with the primary tool of shamans. His construction of character, as exemplified by heroes like Randle McMurphy and Hank Stamper, allows him to communicate significant and complicated stories through a vernacular bound to the land—bound to the land because his characters belong to specific times and places. Indeed, this may be the very essence of the shamans' ability with language—while they can draw from history and mythology as they weave their tales, they are more importantly masters of relating their stories to their here and now, their present place and moment, so that their language effectively begins to shape the reality of that present. In Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism, Pinchbeck claims that shamanism is a "phenomenon that comes through the earth when human beings are connected to their home" and "this natural connection to the land manifests in supernatural ways" (222). While we rarely assign supernatural status to oral and written language, words certainly become magical tools when wielded by shamans.

At certain moments and in certain places, Americans have accepted the uncanny power of the imagination. Such was the case in the Fifties and Sixties when various artists and psychologists employed experimentation with psychedelics to access imaginary realms. Before the use of psychedelic drugs became a popular topic of political debate in the mid-Sixties, legitimate scientists were testing the potential of plants and chemicals—such as mescaline, psilocybin, and LSD—to explore mind control, psychosis, the unconscious, creativity, and religious sentiments. Kesey himself volunteered for government sponsored drug experiments involving psychedelics at the Menlo Park Veteran's Hospital, not far from his home in the bohemian Perry Lane community, where he lived while he was a graduate student in Creative Writing at Stanford University in 1961. Across the country, various experiments with psychedelics were underway; some, like Kesey's, were part of the CIA's MK-Ultra program which was searching for a potential mind-control drug under various auspices. Needless to say, when these then legal drugs were put into the hands of enthusiastic and optimistic young psychologists and artists, government officials and conservative scientists lost all hope of using them to control their enemies psychologically or coming to an understanding of psychoses respectively. Instead, they introduced a chemical formula that would open the door to the zeitgeist of the Sixties, a zeitgeist tremendously influenced by hallucinogens. Author of <u>Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream</u>, Jay Stevens writes:

> Indeed, the more thoroughly you study the Sixties, the more comforting becomes a concept like the *zeitgeist*. Strip away the decade's thick impasto of sex, drugs, rebellion, politics, music, and art, and what you find is a restless imperative to change, a 'will to change,' if you will, and one that could be as explanatory for the latter half of this century as Nietzsche's 'will to power' was for the first. (291)

Psychedelics were seen by Kesey as instruments of hope in achieving this change because they fundamentally altered consciousness. According to Kesey's first two novels and his subsequent work with the Pranksters, through the fantasies they facilitate, psychedelics allow users to dissolve their egos and access their ids—an affect with clear Freudian implications—or allow users to access spiritual dimensions—an affect with mystical, Jungian significance. What better way to effect social change than to alter the very consciousness that motivates individuals to conform to prescribed societal roles? Various attitudes existed among enthusiasts of the Fifties and Sixties concerning how to enact this *psychedelic* social change, but there was little doubt as to the powerful potential of these drugs to bring about personal and, perhaps, societal change.

The use of psychedelic drugs to alter consciousness was hardly a phenomenon unique to the Sixties and America. Though anthropologists like Mircea Eliade have argued that "the use of intoxicants (alcohol, tobacco, etc.) is a recent innovation and points to a decadence in shamanic technique" (qtd. in Pinchbeck 73), there is a great deal of evidence that points to the contrary, that psychedelic plants are in fact ancient tools of various shamanic cultures. It is true, as Terence McKenna explains, that "not all shamans use intoxication to obtain ecstasy, but all shamanic practice aims to give rise to ecstasy" (6) whether through drumming, manipulation of breath, fasting, or various other rituals. But to ignore the significance of psychedelic plants for shamans is to ignore the fact that "shamanic plants allow the healer to journey into an invisible realm in which the causality of the ordinary world is replaced with the rationale of natural magic" (McKenna 6). Access to this "invisible realm," which writers and artists in the Sixties later attempt to achieve through psychedelics, becomes particularly necessary for recent shamans trying to leave their mark on contemporary society where words like "archaic" and "mystical" suddenly bear suspicious connotations, as opposed to "scientific" and "technological." In the

Sixties and in contemporary America, the recovery of shamanism calls for the most powerful of measures. According to Pinchbeck, despite the long tradition of shamanism, the modern person "drawn to the shamanic archetype—the vision of the sacred earth, revelatory word, and multidimensional cosmos—finds himself horrified by contemporary society and the accelerating processes of global destruction it has unleashed. Yet he is cut off from the archaic traditions he might like to embrace" (76). Yet, in the Sixties, some particularly curious psychonauts—a name that gains popularity as a term used to describe those that explore altered consciousness through psychedelics—such as Kesey, emerge to declare that "psychedelics are keys to words that are already there" (qtd. in Plimpton 217), imaginary worlds that call for the utilization of shamanic practices.

Kesey uses these psychedelic keys to enter and retrieve the archaic world of the shamans. In turn, the turn of these keys leads to a number of fictional tales that serve the purpose of "healing, divination, and communication with the spirit world" (Pinchbeck 69). Kesey engages in another shamanic practice with his use of the mind-altering powers of psychedelic plants and chemicals. Through much of his fiction, he recreates the psychedelic experience: its healing affects on the ego, the emergence of feelings of intersubjectivity and synchronicity, and the perception of human existence as a cosmic dialogue. Here, it is important that I distinguish between Kesey the writer and Kesey the countercultural hero. In The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience, pioneers of modern consciousness research Robert Masters and Jean Houston write, "To be hopeful and optimistic about psychedelic drugs and their potential is one thing; to be messianic is another" (4-5). Like his counterpart Timothy Leary, Kesey's efforts outside of writing to bring about cultural change lead to his positioning as the leader of the Merry Pranksters, a group that becomes a psychedelic cult. As their leader and as an inspiration for young people across America, Kesey is looked to for directions concerning the future of a psychedelic revolution to the point where he is considered by many to be a messiah.

On the other hand, fiction provides Kesey with the opportunity to expound on the psychedelic experience and its value to narrative and creativity, without the responsibility of having to define the proper use of the psychedelic tools. Kesey's personal experimentation with psychedelic plants and chemicals affect his writing in a number of ways. Cuckoo's Nest and Notion are loaded with hallucinatory images and experimental narrative structures. Chief Bromden exhibits unique sensory perceptions and demonstrates the frightening aspects of the psychedelic experience as well as the pleasurable ones. According to two psychedelic researchers, the frightening aspects, both physical and psychical, of the psychedelic experience often must be passed through before the individual can begin to enjoy positive experiences with states of altered consciousness. In The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience, Masters and Huston write, "It is usually only after the passing of the more unpleasant physical symptoms that the subject experiences those drug-state awarenesses of the body and the body image" (68). If we look at Cuckoo's Nest as one psychedelic event, it becomes clear that Bromden has precisely this experience, a heightened awareness of his body and body image, over the course of the novel. He comes to regain his sanity, discover his individuality, and rediscover his tremendous physical strength and stature, a strength and stature that ultimately allows him to escape from the hospital where he has been institutionalized for years, labeled as a schizophrenic, and described as a "Vanishing American, a six-foot-eight sweeping machine, scared of its own shadow" (67).

Situated in a unique moment in the history of twentieth century experimental psychology, when psychedelic drugs were yielding compelling results in various psychological experiments, Kesey attempts to demonstrate to his readers the potential benefits of the psychedelic experience.

Labeling the journey inward that one takes under the influence of a psychedelic drug as the "recollective-analytical level" of the experience, Masters and Huston claim that the conception of "symbolic" and "integral" understanding during this stage is the "ultimate drug-state goal of the psychedelic journey" (184). During this stage, thinking "is markedly different as it increasingly appears that the usual boundaries between consciousness and unconscious have been breached and finally in large measure dissolved" (184). Clearly, the psychedelic experience has implications for Freudian psychologists and psychoanalysts and, thus, it also has implications for psychoanalytic literary critics examining Kesey's fiction.

That the Chief is reborn or reawakened due to McMurphy's influence is fitting in light of the perception, a common perception amongst numerous experimental psychologists in the Sixties, that psychedelic plants and chemicals can weaken the ego's efforts to repress unconscious thoughts. Psychedelics were, and in some circles continue to be, lauded as psychotherapeutic medicines that can accomplish in one session what often takes psychoanalysts several years to unlock through talk therapy and dream analysis. As an example of the psychotherapeutic potential of psychedelics for Freudian psychologists, Jay Stevens cites Myron Stolaroff's reliving of his actual physical birth during his first psychedelic experience in 1959:

> Although it was a torturous few hours, Myron emerged from the LSD womb convinced that many of his personal eccentricities and neuroses could be traced back to the trauma of his birth. This was not a radical possibility as far as psychoanalysis was concerned; Otto Rank, one of Freud's last disciples, had explored the effects of birth on the emerging psyche in numerous articles. But it would have taken psychoanalysis years to attain the level that LSD had reached in one climactic rush. (70)

For Stolaroff, one of the many influential psychologists doing research with psychedelics during the Fifties and Sixties, his experience was enough to suggest the efficacy of psychedelics as potential tools for psychological healing. For Kesey, the "climactic rush" of the psychedelic experience encourages him to explore his characters' psyches much as a psychoanalyst might.

Sometimes a Great Notion is also abundant with representations of the psychedelic experience. Kesey employs an ambitious narrative technique that continually alternates between various narrators without clear delineations. Using Wolfe's Acid Test, a text that explores Kesey's experiences with psychedelics, along with a number of other cultural artifacts from the Sixties that attempt to describe the psychedelic experience, I argue that Kesey's narrative technique in Notion allows him to demonstrate the heightened awareness of others that purportedly occurs through the use of psychedelics. Reflecting on the research of experimental psychologist Stolaroff and psychedelic enthusiast Al Hubbard, Stevens notes the potential of the drugs to create group intimacy: "Using LSD, they would foster an environment in which individuality would flower and mesh with the budding genius of everyone else's individuality, thus creating a corporation that served the impossible task of enhancing not only the individual, but the group as well" (71). Notion's narrators are able to speak to each other without being aware that their narrative is augmenting that of others. For example, Lee Stamper's self-pitying narration only serves to highlight the value of the rugged individualism that comes through in his brother Hank's narration. As a number of narrators are engaged in conflict with one another, I cannot say that every individual benefits from their participation in the grand narrative. In fact, one of the novel's most sympathetic characters, Joe Ben Stamper, is pinned beneath a tree and drowns in the rising waters of Oregon's Wakonda Auga River. However, the grand narrative depends on the contributions of each of the narrators for its sense of completeness and harmony.

In this way, the novel is an experiment with the "group mind," which becomes an essential aspect of Kesey's psychedelic experiences with the Merry Pranksters when he takes a hiatus from writing after the completion of <u>Notion</u>.

As one of the terms unique to the Sixties and the psychedelic experience, the concept of "group mind" clearly requires defining. Often defying verbal expression, the group mind is the experience of a simultaneous and collective, or shared, vision felt during the psychedelic experience. Jung's theories of the collective unconscious and synchronicity are particularly valuable as we consider the notion of the group mind and how it plays out in Kesey's second novel. In "The Function of the Unconscious," Jung writes:

> The more limited a man's field of consciousness is, the more numerous psychic contents (imagos) meet him as quasi-external apparitions, either in the form of spirits, or as magical potencies projected upon living people (magicians, witches, etc.). At a higher stage of development, where the idea of the soul already exists, not all the imagos continue to be projected (where this happens, even the trees and stones talk), but one or the other complex has come near enough to consciousness to be felt as no longer strange, but as somehow 'belonging'" (160-1).

The central image of Kesey's <u>Notion</u>—Henry Stamper's severed arm, which hangs from the family's mail post with the middle finger extended—serves as a great example of such a "strange" imago that enters into each narrator's consciousness, thus earning an unlikely "belonging" in the grand narrative of the novel. Though a severed arm may seem an improbable mystical subject, it operates as the unifying image of the story, for as Kesey explains in his notes for the novel, "*everything has to have bearing on that arm's being there*. Everything leads to the hanging of it" (qtd. in Strelow 51). According to Jung, mystical, psychical content is accessible through the collective unconscious. In Sometimes a Great Notion, all of the narrators are concerned with the concepts of liberated individuality and community responsibility in various ways. This book would be without unity if not for the fact that the characters, by exploring these concepts through the shared image of Henry Stamper's defiant arm, are all drawing from a collective unconscious.

Kesey's use of psychedelic drugs in the early and mid-Sixties predates the illegalization of LSD and differs from the typical, recreational use of drugs in America. As was common of many individuals who first ingested psychedelic drugs in the Sixties, before the public had raised a panic over the "maddening" nature of these substances, Kesey believed that psychedelics had revolutionary potential. In an interview with the Peninsula Times Tribune in 1964, Kesey discusses his experiences with psychedelics outside of the laboratory:

> With these drugs, your perception is altered enough that you find yourself looking out of completely strange eyeholes. All of us have a great deal of our minds locked shut. And these drugs seem to be the key to open these locked doors. (qtd. in Perry 12)

Kesey's thoughts echo those of Aldous Huxley who, based upon his experiences with psychedelics, described the brain as a reducing valve and believed that psychedelic drugs had the capability of raising consciousness. As a shaman, Kesey uses psychedelics on his quest to find an integration of his body, his mind, and the world around him.

Sharing a number of Jung's theories, Alan Watts, a Sixties philosopher fascinated by the potential of psychedelics and a close friend to Aldous Huxley, writes about the feelings of integration and connection that are experienced during the psychedelic experience. In The Joyous Cosmology, reflecting upon one of his "trips," Watts writes, "slowly it becomes clear that one of the greatest of all superstitions is the separation of the mind from the body" (3). Echoing the thoughts of other radical philosophers from the Fifties and Sixties, such as Herbert Marcuse, Watts contends:

> Just as the separation of mind from body is an illusion, so also is the subjection of the body to the independent schemes of the mind. Meanwhile, however, the illusion is as real as the hallucinations of hypnosis, and the organism of man is indeed frustrating itself by patterns of behavior which move in the most complex vicious circles. The culmination is a culture which ever more serves the mechanical order as distinct from those of organic enjoyment, and which is bent on self-destruction against the instinct of every one of its members. (5)

Watts' reflections call for a better understanding of the mutual codependence of the mind, the controlling part, and the body, the controlled part, as humans make the effort to transform into healthy and empowered individuals, an end result that Kesey also pursues through his work. Furthermore, by realizing the intimate connection between mind and body in the experiencing of pleasure, Watts suggests that improvements in individuals' mental health necessitate an understanding of the unity of all things.

By drawing all the characters of <u>Sometimes a Great Notion</u> into a unified dialogue, Kesey expresses his faith in the possibility for the unity of all things, no matter how vast their differences. Actually, "faith" is a particularly apt word to describe various psychedelic writers and activists' belief in unity because to many the experience had a distinct spiritual side. Commenting on the nature of the group psychedelic experience, Watts writes:

> Members of the group usually become open to each other with a high degree of friendly affection, for in the mystical phase of the experience the underlying unity or "belongingness" of the members can have all the clarity of a physical sensation. Indeed

> the social situation may become what religious bodies aim at, but all too rarely achieve, in their rites of communion—a relationship of the most vivid understanding, forgiveness, and love. Of course, this does not automatically become a permanent feeling, but neither does the sense of fellowship evoked in strictly religious gatherings. The experience corresponds almost exactly to the theological concept of a sacrament or means of grace—an unmerited gift of spiritual power whose lasting effects upon the use made of it in subsequent actions. (18-19)

Considering Watts' thoughts on the psychedelic experience as a "means of grace," Through a careful study of his fiction and his work with the Pranksters, Kesey's readers and critics find that he attempts to use the "unmerited gift of spiritual power" bestowed upon him and others by psychedelics in the Sixties in an effort to create a more ethical world. His fiction critiques contemporary society, often offering metaphorical alternatives for how we might make a better world. Furthermore, through his efforts with the Pranksters, Kesey attempts to shock and awaken American society, to suggest that we can do better.

In The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs, Marcus Boon devotes an entire chapter to the affects of psychedelic drugs on writing throughout history. Disappointingly enough, he does not devote more than a page to Kesey's literary efforts and the significant impact that psychedelics had on his writing. However, Boon make a relevant observation when he concludes that "literature and the psychedelic experience are both fundamentally acts of poiesis—poiesis not as representation but as creation itself" (275). Creation is the essential function of both writers and shamans, creation through imagination for writers and creation through altered consciousness for shamans. They have the potential to inspire new ways for humans to exist in the world or to reconnect us with archaic manners of life that were less destructive than those we currently employ in contemporary American society. Since in contemporary society “ambiguity hovers over shamanism wherever it appears” (Pinchbeck 148), the most acceptable means to recover the ancient and valuable tradition of shamanism is to look to authors who engage in shamanic techniques and to regard these authors’ shamanic texts as worthy of cultural and literary analysis. By suggesting that Kesey is a literary shaman, I simultaneously hope to cast a new critical light on his work and partake in the act of the cultural recovery of shamanism.

CHAPTER TWO: GETTING ON THE BUS:
THE SUPERHEROES OF KESEY'S IMAGINAL LANDSCAPES

The bus came by and I got on
That's when it all began
There was cowboy Neal
At the wheel
Of a bus to never-ever land
-Grateful Dead

In truth, Ken Kesey was "on the bus" long before he met Neal Cassady or purchased the 1939 International Harvester school bus, transforming it into "Furthur," a moving representation of the psychedelic consciousness of the Sixties. In his biographical sketch of Kesey, Stevens notes his "all-American boy" (221) beginnings: "one day he was a superb athlete, an upstanding civic example, voted 'most likely to succeed' by his high school; a promising novelist, author of two highly praised books before his thirtieth birthday, a committed family man, married to his high school sweetheart, sober, abstemious" (221). But as all who are familiar with his activities in the Sixties well know, there is much more to Kesey than the all-American boy. When we consider the path taken by Kesey that results in his success as a writer, his prominence as a leader of the counterculture in the Sixties, and his performance as a literary shaman, it becomes clear that he is partially the product of his environment. Yet, clearly his environment is not singular.

Kesey's family migrated from Arkansas to Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado, where Ken was born on September 17, 1935. Not too long thereafter, when Ken was in the third grade, the family moved from LaJunta, Colorado, to Springfield, Oregon. His family and his Oregon upbringing had a great deal of influence over the man that Kesey was to become. In particular, his father Fred Kesey taught his children to be "self-sufficient and tough. He taught them how to hunt, fish, swim, fight, wrestle—how to compete! Even manhood was a contest" (Stevens 222).

His father was Ken's first model for himself and for his literary heroes of, "the swaggering gambler, the big redheaded brawling Irishman, the cowboy out of the TV set walking down the middle of the street to meet a dare" (Cuckoo's Nest 189). Kesey views the cowboy as a representation of the individual, autonomous self, whose last frontier is the American West, and integrates this mythical American figure into his fiction. The American West provides the setting for all of Kesey's novels for precisely the fact that, for the American of the Fifties and Sixties, it is the Final Frontier, the site where the battle for liberated consciousness is to be waged.

In his dissertation "Impressionable Landscapes: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century California Literature," Mark Allan Thompson contends that "the myth of California has allowed the perpetuation of those utopian visions which propelled people westward" (304). While Thompson's analysis is limited to California literature, I have to add Oregon, Washington, and Alaska to the remaining American frontiers in the twentieth century, but even these frontier lands will be corrupted and exploited during Kesey's lifetime. According to Kesey though, hope remains. Frontier landscapes remind and inspire characters in his novels that there are alternatives to lifestyles based on materialism, consumerism, and cultural conformity. Integrating his personal experiences—his childhood in the Oregon wilderness and the model of manhood provided by his father—Kesey sees the independent and physically vital American Western man as the defender of a sense of individuality that is forfeited when man succumbs to the rule of "the inhuman part of American industrialism" (Kesey qtd. in Plimpton 224). As a young writer in the Sixties, facing the omnipotent influence of American capitalism and its many educational, financial, and cultural institutions, Kesey integrates the individuality of the cowboy into his recovery of shamanism through fiction. Thus, his homeland in Oregon, a place that

Leslie Fiedler calls "one of our last actual Wests" (177), is integral in understanding what drives Kesey to design a number of his characters based upon the mythologized American cowboy.

The cowboys that he incorporates into his fiction are not those of traditional American Western tales like Owen Wister's The Virginian. Kesey's cowboys pertain to a genre specific to the latter half of the twentieth century that Leslie Fiedler, a critic of literature from or about the American West, defines as the "New Western" in The Return of the Vanishing American (interestingly enough published in 1968). Fiedler's vanishing Frontier continues to be explored throughout the twentieth century, to the point that scarcely a Frontier or wilderness remains. According to Fiedler, rather than being nostalgic about the changing nature of the West, the New Western is psychedelic:

> But no other name fits as well as the New Western, which, like the Old Western at its most authentic, deals precisely with the alteration of consciousness. Besides, many of the so-called 'psychedelics' themselves, those hallucinogenic drugs, at least, found in nature rather than synthesized in the laboratory (marijuana, peyote, the Mexican Mushroom, Ayahuasca, etc.) are our bridge to—even as they are gifts from—the world of the Indian: the world not of an historical past, but of an eternally archaic one. (175)

Although I hardly expect the connection between Kesey's fascination with heroic cowboys and his psychedelicized writing to be obvious, there is an important connection to be made. Since Kesey's fiction is part of a larger utopian vision, one that falls in line with the other "utopian visions which propelled people westward" (Thompson 304), Kesey takes on the project of updating mythological American heroes. Kesey's cowboys are reborn to accommodate the needs of a uniquely Sixties' imagination that is influenced by psychedelics.

As part of this rebirth, Kesey integrates comic-strip superheroes into his construction of the heroic characters in his fiction. This, according to Fiedler's explanation, is another logical step in the creation of the New Western:

> If there still exists for us a Wilderness and a Place-out-of-time appropriate for a renewal rather than nostalgia, rebirth rather than recreation, that place must be in the Future, not the past: that Future towards which we have been pointed ever since Super-Guy comic books and the novels of science fiction shifted the orientation of Pop Art by one hundred and eighty degrees. (174)

In Kool-Aid Acid Test, Wolfe considers the typical heroes of the Postwar American youth, a group into which Kesey, born in 1935, belongs, and explains that "the myths that touched you at that time [were]—not Hercules, Orpheus, Ulysses, Aeneas—but Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, The Human Torch, The Sub-Mariner, Captain America, Plastic Man, The Flash" (35), all of course superheroes. Wolfe goes on to explain how, even when surrounded by academic intellectuals at Stanford University and at his home on Perry Lane, Kesey "talked about the comic-book Superheroes as the honest American myths" (35). The fact that heroic characters in Kesey's fiction bear the mark of comic-book superheroes only gains in significance when we consider the similarities between the animated images in comics and the colorful hallucinations of Cuckoo' Nest's Chief Bromden.

The Chief's perception of the Big Nurse—her name itself is reminiscent of that of a super-villain—could very easily come from an illustration in the pages of a comic book:

> She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform and she's let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them five, six times… So she really lets herself go and her painted smile twists, stretches to an open snarl, and she

> blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside the way you smell a motor pulling too big a load. (4-5)

Clearly, Chief Bromden's perception of the Big Nurse as a villain is at least partially born of his paranoia, but there is also the sense that his sensitivity to the evil in her puts him on the heroes' side. To accept and surrender to the control of Big Nurse and the Combine, "a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she [Big Nurse] has the Inside [the ward]" (26), is to be as complicit in the dissemination of evil as those individuals who actively work to adjust all individuals in society to fit a mold. Kesey's heroes continually resist being controlled by outside forces. Particularly in <u>Cuckoo's Nest</u>, the ultimate victory would be for every individual to be able to determine his or her own fate.

Tony Tanner devotes the final chapter of <u>City of Words</u>, a critical examination of American fiction between 1950 and 1970, to Ken Kesey's work during the Sixties. In the chapter, entitled "Edge City," Tanner notes the influence of comic strips and TV on <u>Cuckoo's Nest's</u> McMurphy and claims that superheroes propel McMurphy to act out "one of the most enduring and simple of American fantasies—the will to total freedom, total bravery, total independence" (374). It is significant that Tanner identifies this enduring fantasy as an "act" because in reality to oppose the control of a powerful enemy like Big Nurse, McMurphy has to "base his act on the only models he has encountered, in cartoons and movies," which of course are not real. Thus, as Tanner explains, McMurphy is "a fake, a put-together character with all the seams showing" (374). As we will see, Kesey soon chooses to act out this fantasy of total freedom when he himself chooses to discontinue his writing and take up, through action rather than word, the struggle against total control that occupies his first two novels. Stepping aside from narrative, language, and all the trappings of plot, Kesey attempts to actively perform the role of superhero and shaman with the Merry Pranksters, encouraging those who join the group to do the same. As is true with Kesey when he enacts his Prankster fantasy, fake or not, McMurphy's attempts to influence and inspire the other patients on the ward are worthwhile and do make a difference in spite of Nurse Ratched's seemingly unassailable omnipotence.

Yes, McMurphy must sacrifice his own life as he inspires the other patients to join in the opposition to the total control of individuals by the Combine. And yes, during the enactment of his fantasy with the Pranksters , Kesey becomes an outlaw, and eventually spends six months in a work-camp prison after his arrest for possession of marijuana. But these are consequences that men who choose to act as superheroes must face. They are consequences that McMurphy, Kesey, and Kesey's later characters choose to face for what they perceive to be the good of "the people." It is for this reason, for his creation of both stories and a movement that expand on the "will to change" that exists in the Sixties, that a number of scholars have paid tribute to Kesey, regardless of whether or not they agree with his utopian vision. In "'Furthur': Reflections on Counter-Culture and the Postmodern," Brett Whelan states that "to attempt a rescue of the counter-culture, with all its shortcomings"—from right-wing critics' accusations of its "laxity and anarchical spirit, its disrespect for the past" and from the idea that it is a "hopelessly idealistic, superstructural phenomenom, a perverse variant on consumerism, a fashion" according to critics from the left—"would be unwise" (64). However, Whelan, like Tanner, cannot help but note that these criticisms do nothing to overshadow the importance of Kesey's fiction or the counter-culture of which the Merry Pranksters are part. According to Whelan, the counter-culture "should be *read*, positively and negatively, with all the intensity of 'serious' criticism, first of all because it was in its own moment so decisively *there*" (64). To arrive *there*—entirely in the moment, outside of social influences—can require the efforts of a superhero and to be *there* is to have made a significant psychological breakthrough.

Kesey returns to the hero with mythic and/or superhuman powers in the works that follow Cuckoo's Nest. For example, Sometimes a Great Notion includes references to mythologized American heroes and Captain Marvel comics. Hank Stamper takes on the role of a Paul Bunyan-like hero, willing to log the entire forest on his own if necessary. Meanwhile, the intellectual Lee Stamper demonstrates a fascination with comic-book superheroes, declaring, "I don't know what I expected—perhaps to actually find myself swollen to Captain Marvel magnitude, flying away replete with cape, spit-curl, and neon-orange leotard" (527). They both face intimidating opponents—Hank is matched against the entire town of Wakonda, along with the powers of nature and Lee must face his traumatic past, complete with an Oedipal conflict of grand proportions—and live according to the values of the heroes with which they are familiar. These are, of course, heroes from Kesey's own childhood.

It is likewise important to explore Kesey's efforts with the Pranksters. As Tanner explains, "you could regard the multicoloured bus as Kesey's third novel, only this time he was inside it and at the wheel" (390). Kesey's work with the Pranksters solidifies his performance as a shaman. If his skillful manipulation of language in his novels proves his mastery of the shaman's primary tool, language, then his efforts to move beyond "the subtler entrapments of language" (Tanner 382) suggest that Kesey recognized his role as a shaman required more of him than the telling of inspirational stories. Reflecting on Kesey's decision to quit writing and engage in social activism following the completion of Notion, Robert Stone says:

> In the period of three or four years of working very hard, [Kesey] turned out two very important novels. And then he was ready to quit writing for awhile. He noticed

> something that I didn't, that a revolution was in progress. Ken saw the revolution coming and felt he had a social mission. He was going to use the power of his personality to do something special. (qtd. in Perry 35)

In many ways, to be a shaman in Fifties and Sixties America is to possess extraordinary, almost superhuman powers. Kesey uses the force of his personality, a personality that has clearly been influenced by those very same superheroes that inspire Randle McMurphy and Hank Stamper, in order to attempt to critique American ideologies that continue to merit such criticism.

Pinchbeck explains how contemporary Americans are "cut off from the archaic traditions [they] might like to embrace" due to a number of societal structures and constructs:

> In contemporary life we do whatever we can to deny intuition of the invisible realms. We clog up our senses with smog, jam our minds with media overload. We drown ourselves in alcohol or medicate ourselves into rigidly artificial states with antidepressants. Then we take pride in our cynicism and detachment. Perhaps we are terrified to discover that our "rationality" is itself a kind of faith, an artifice, that beneath it lies the vast territory of the unknown. (100)

Yes, Pinchbeck is critiquing contemporary America, not the Fifties or Sixties, but his critique of a materialistic, self-destructive American society is born out of the affluence of the Fifties, an affluence that Todd Gitlin, author of <u>The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage</u>, writes, "was assumed to be a national condition, not just a personal standing. Indeed, affluence was an irresistible and psychological fact in a society that had long since made material production and acquisition its central activities" (12). In order to overcome flawed ideologies—such as a mentality that places precedence on material production and acquisition at the cost of pollution of the land and an attitude towards drugs which condemns some plants and chemicals that create altered states of consciousness while profiting from the mass use of others—and confront the barriers that blocked useful shamanic practices, Kesey became intensely interested in control and power. Kesey's use of control is particularly evident in the control that he exerts over the psychedelic experience of the Merry Pranksters and those that join them, as recorded by Wolfe in Acid Test. Whether on the road with the "Furthur" bus, at a two-day long party with the Hells Angels at his home in La Honda, or at the California Unitarian Church's annual conference, Kesey and the Pranksters continually test their potential to assert control over their environment. Wolfe, borrowing Kesey's own language, explains how the Pranksters attempt to draw everyone at the Unitarian Church conference into their "movie":

> Kesey was, in fact, now tremendously interested in the whole phenomenon of…Control. He had discovered that the Pranksters had been able to control the flow of the conference, not by any Machiavellian planning, but simply by drawing the conference into their movie. The conference was on a schedule, but the Pranksters always arrived… *Now*, and in no time at all everyone had become a player in their movie. (169)

Kesey's efforts to assert control are both a significant part of what he does as a writer, guiding his readers on a journey of the imagination, and as a countercultural leader, drawing everyone he comes upon into the Pranksters' "movie."

As Tanner asserts in "Edge City," Kesey's exploits with the Merry Pranksters are an extension of his efforts as the writer of Cuckoo's Nest and Notion. While Kesey's fictional heroes draw their inspiration from superheroes and modern myths, Kesey's path with the Pranksters "was intended to turn ordinary American youths into 'Superheroes,' and their cry was, 'Go with the flow'" (Tanner 384). The flow that Kesey and the Pranksters enter through their experimentation with psychedelics is an ecstatic state, where "the structurings of society, language, accustomed habits of perception, individual identity, begin to fall away" (Tanner 389). Kesey and the Pranksters bring about this flow by ingesting hallucinogens, but Kesey also acknowledges that the Pranksters' vision must extend beyond altering consciousness through drugs if it is to have lasting social value. This acknowledgement is shamanic in a number of ways because, though shamans may use psychedelics as tools to guide or teach, they ultimately must apply their trade in everyday life, without psychedelics, in order to heal individuals or positively affect a society. Thus, in Wolfe's rendition of a vision that he has while a fugitive in Mexico, Kesey considers how the Sixties counter-culture might move beyond experimentation with chemicals in its pursuit for psychological and social change:

> I went outside and there was an electrical storm, and there was lightning everywhere and I pointed to the sky and lightning flashed and all of a sudden I had a second skin, of lightning, electricity, like a suit of electricity, and I knew it was in us to be superheroes and that we could become superheroes or nothing. (27)

His vision here is typically idealistic, but this does not nullify its worth. Indeed, in contemporary society, where so many individuals resign themselves to apathy and complacency as alternatives to optimistic activism, Kesey's vision of a society peopled with socially responsible superheroes seems particularly valuable.

In The Road of Excess, Marcus Boon reminds us that "the imaginal plays a part in our lives at all times, in the most extreme experiences of altered states, in the virtual realities of science fiction films, cartoons, or religious iconography, and in how our perceptions of everyday objects flickers and shifts in subtle ways, from moment to moment" (222). Boon uses the term "imaginal" to describe the mental images that become a part of our consciousness due to the influence of culture. In the case of Kesey, these mental images derive from the model of mythological American heroes, as often recreated in movies and on television, and people with superhuman powers, as represented in the comic books that he revered. Just because Kesey's superheroes are born of an idealistic vision that derives, at least partially, from his use of psychedelics we should not disregard the significance of his imaginal realms. What we, particularly those of us devoted to the study of literature, must remember is that his fiction merits our attention, amongst a number of other reasons, because "the imaginal presents itself to us at certain moments as a realm in its own right, separate from our sensory experience, independent of our will, but rich with meaning" (Boon 222). In fact, the combination of Kesey's fiction and his subsequent experimentation with psychedelics in the Sixties make him an important defender of these imaginal realms "rich with meaning." Boon explains:

> Both literature and certain psychoactive substances are strongly associated with such imaginal realms. In fact, they are often made to bear the entire weight of our struggles with the imaginal and its meaning, and many believe that the dangers of the imaginal realms, such as they are, would be forever eradicated if certain methods of accessing them—art and psychoactive substances—were forever banned. (222)

It is precisely the object of the literary shaman to preserve the potential of these imaginal realms and Kesey does so with all of the means at his disposal, through art and psychedelics.

CHAPTER THREE: OUT OF THE FOG:
THE DISSOLUTION OF CHIEF BROMDEN'S EGO
IN ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

They say ev'ry man needs protection
They say ev'ry man must fall
Yet I swear I see my reflection
Some place so high above this wall
I see my light come shining
From the west unto the east
Any day now, any day now
I shall be released
-Bob Dylan

The incorporation of the mythical American cowboy and the comic book superhero into his vision as a writer is hardly enough to lead Kesey to an effectual performance as a literary shaman, for this authorial choice is only demonstrative of Kesey's tendency toward what Tanner describes as a "detectable anti-intellectualism in Kesey's work" (376). Though it does not have to come through a formal Western education, the shaman must possess a significant intellectual capacity. Kesey's rustic upbringing—"the woodsy, logger side—complete with homespun homilies and crackerbarrel corniness, a valid side of me that I like" (Kesey qtd. in Perry 39)—converges with his formal education, first at the University of Oregon and later as a graduate student at Stanford University, to create a conflicted young writer. As is true for many creative talents, the conflict between his intellectual side and his rustic background contributes to the uniqueness of Kesey's message. In Kool-Aid Acid Test, Wolfe writes, "He had Jack London Martin Eden Searching Hick, the hick with intellectual yearnings, written all over him. He was from Oregon—who the hell was ever from Oregon?—and he had an Oregon country drawl and too many muscles and callouses on his hands and his brow furrowed when he was thinking hard, and it was perfect" (31). Rustic as he might have been, when he arrived at Stanford University in 1958 on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, Kesey made a quick impact on their well-respected

Creative Writing program, which at various times during Kesey's career as a student included novelists Larry McMurtry, Ed McLanahan, and Robert Stone. The combination of his Oregon upbringing, the intellectual and bohemian environment that existed at Perry Lane—where he lived with his wife Faye during his years as a graduate student—and Kesey's ensuing volunteer work at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital would provide him with a shamanic message, a message that suggests the possibility of fusing twentieth century psychological practices with shamanic techniques of individual healing.

Kesey's preference for comic books to Greek myths and his radical and rebellious tendencies did not necessarily make him the perfect fit for an elite academic institution. But the camaraderie that grew between the intellectual community that existed at Stanford University and at Perry Lane influenced his writing a great deal. In particular, Malcolm Cowley, his writing professor during the fall semester of 1960, created "a constructive atmosphere of respect" (Perry 14) in which Kesey thrived.[1] Furthermore, inclusion in an academic community offered Kesey the opportunity to meet and share ideas with a number of other radical thinkers and artists. Indeed, Kesey may never have become involved with psychedelics had it not been for the discourse community he entered during his tenure at Stanford. Of Kesey's most influential acquaintances during his years as a graduate student, Wolfe writes:

> The most interesting person as far as he was concerned was not any of the novelists or other literary intellectuals, but a young graduate student in psychology named Vic Lovell. Lovell was like a young Viennese analyst, or at least a California graduate-student version of one. He was slender with wild dark hair and very cool intellectually and wound-up at the same time. He introduced Kesey to Freudian psychology. Kesey had

[1] According to On the Bus: The Complete Guide to the Legendary Trip of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and the Birth of the Counterculture, Cowley's maxim was "Remember, it is just as hard to write a bad novel as it is a good one" (14). This is precisely the kind of humored leader that a young Kesey undoubtedly appreciated.

> never run into a system of thought like this before. Lovell could point out in the most persuasive way how mundane character traits and minor hassles around Perry Lane fit into the richest, most complex metaphor of life ever devised, namely, Freud's. (35-36)

As critics look to Kesey's texts, it is important (that is, if it isn't unavoidable) to consider the extent of the psychoanalytic influences on his fiction. Besides utilizing the Oedipal conflict as a plot device, a technique that Kesey clearly shares with an innumerable host of writers, he involves Freudian concepts in his fiction in a complex and entirely original manner. Kesey's use of psychoanalytic philosophies in his fiction is original because his particular brand of psychoanalysis is tied up with the use of psychedelics.

One need only be faintly familiar with <u>Cuckoo's Nest</u> to recognize the significance of twentieth century psychological practices in the novel. Setting the novel in an Oregon mental hospital, Kesey critiques the staff's flawed treatment of the patients on the ward, many of whom are voluntary admissions. While Nurse Ratched and Doctor Spivey claim that the Group Meetings are based on the psychoanalytic concept of the "talking cure," in truth the hospital only uses the group therapy sessions to get the patients to tell on one another and betray themselves. Thus, though a working knowledge of Freud and psychoanalysis informs a reading of <u>Cuckoo's Nest</u>, Nurse Ratched's ward does not operate based upon these potentially useful psychological practices. In fact, Kesey highlights the failure of the staff to uncover, or even attempt to uncover, the origin of the patients' various neuroses.

The staff, influenced by the oppressive presence of Nurse Ratched, makes few attempts to aid in the recovery of the patients' mental health through professional analysis or therapeutic activities. Instead, according to Chief Bromden, Nurse Ratched acts as the representative of a social organization that seeks to turn individuals into "one-dimensional" social products, "one-dimensional" because all characteristics and traits are determined by and for the social organization.[2] According to the narrator, when McMurphy arrives, a number of the patients are worse off than when they were first admitted to the ward. Chief Bromden points out that some of the Chronic patients, "the culls of the Combine's product" (14), owe their damaged mental states to poor handling by the Combine: "But there are some of us Chronics that the staff made a couple of mistakes on years back, some of us who were Acutes when we came in, and got changed over" (14). According to the Chief's explanation, the doctors consider the Acute patients "still sick enough to be fixed" (13), whereas the Chronics are "machines with flaws inside that can't be repaired, flaws born in, or flaws beat in over so many years of the guy running head-on into solid things" (14). It says a great deal about the hospital as a mental institution that it is just as likely to further damage the patients as it is to offer therapeutic help for them. While the doctor, powerless himself to the will of Nurse Ratched, explains that the goal of the existing Therapeutic Community on the ward is "a democratic ward, run completely by the patients and their votes, working toward making worth-while citizens to turn back Outside onto the street" (47), McMurphy's assessment of the Therapeutic Community—although initially resisted by Harding and the other patients—is far more accurate.

After witnessing his first Group Meeting, where his peers critique various aspects of Harding's sexuality, McMurphy confronts Harding and asks, "Is this the usual *pro*-cedure for these Group Ther'py shindigs? Bunch of chickens at a peckin' party?" (55) Harding requires an explanation of McMurphy's "quaint down-home" question, but after initially defending the goals of the Therapeutic Community, Harding admits the accuracy of McMurphy's assessment of the

[2] I borrow from Marcuse's term "one-dimensional man," which suggests the extent to which modern capitalist and communist societies determine the limitations of individual freedoms at psychic, social, intellectual, and cultural levels.

Group Meeting as a pecking party. However, his admission of the flawed nature of the hospital leaves little room for hope as far as creating individuals with healthy egos is concerned:

> This world …belongs to the strong, my friend! The ritual of our existence is based on the strong getting stronger by devouring the weak. We must face up to this. No more than right that it should be this way. We must learn to accept it as the law of the natural world. The rabbits accept their role in the ritual and recognize the wolf as the strong. In defense, the rabbit becomes sly and frightened and elusive and he digs holes and hides when the wolf is about. And he endures, he goes on. He knows his place. He most certainly doesn't challenge the wolf to combat. (62)

Considering the basis of the "ritual of existence" and the "law of the natural world" to be such that the strong get "stronger by devouring the weak," Harding sees little possibility for altering the hierarchy that exists within the institution. McMurphy, representing an alternative therapeutic model, will not so easily accept the omnipotence of the Big Nurse and the Combine's policies.

In "Mechanistic and Totemistic Symbolization in Kesey's <u>One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest</u>," Don Kunz attempts to identify the schools of American psychology that Kesey critiques in his novel. Kunz notes that "all schools of American psychology during the first half of this [twentieth] century, including classical and neobehaviorism, learning and motivation theories, psychoanalysis, and cybernetics" (82) are based upon the idea that man is a "reactive organism" (82). According to Kunz, Kesey's novel offers a critique of American psychology—at least as he understands it during his volunteer work at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital in 1960—because "the idea that man responds predictably to stimuli, is shaped by environmental conditioning, and strives in the most economic fashion to achieve homeostasis is for Kesey a nightmarish absurdity" (82). While I agree with Kunz, that in Cuckoo's Nest Kesey sees the behavioral hypotheses of psychology as a "grotesque, dehumanizing myth, which receives suicidal endorsement by an America that glorifies machinery" (82), he fails to note Kesey's hope that psychoanalysis might evolve so as to better serve troubled and marginalized members of American soceity. In order to evolve, Kesey suggests that psychological therapy must be entrusted to those that will most benefit from its employment, namely patients. Taking psychoanalysis back from the "White Smocks" (Wolfe 39), a name Wolfe uses to describe the clinicians with whom Kesey does his volunteer work at Menlo Park, is necessary for its successful employment because, according to Kesey's understanding, psychology is yet another American construct that has been corrupted by institutionalization. Thus, Kesey offers an alternative to institutionalized psychology in his first novel.

When Randle McMurphy is admitted to the ward with no more than his street smarts and sense of humor, the patients begin to better understand the symptoms of their neuroses and to recall repressed, unconscious thoughts. Before McMurphy's arrival, both the staff and the patients are convinced that the Chief is a deaf-mute and a lost cause in terms of his potential for even limited psychological recovery. It doesn't take long before McMurphy discovers that Chief Bromden can in fact talk and begins to integrate him into the community of patients. Furthermore, Bromden begins to recall heretofore repressed memories from his experiences as a soldier in World War Two and traumatic childhood events. McMurphy's ability to engage the Chief's repressed memories mirrors the affects of a psychedelic substance on the user's unconscious mind. Due to Kesey's early experiences with psychedelics, which had profound effects on his psyche, he foresees them as potential catalysts for awakened consciousness. As we examine literary and cultural artifacts from the Sixties, including Cuckoo's Nest, we see that they repeatedly testify to the therapeutic potentials of psychedelics. According to these artifacts, for the Chief and for the individual who ingests a hallucinogen, the emergence of unconscious materials is not always pleasant, but it can lead to an individual's renewed sanity and psychological liberation.

Along with Masters and Houston's The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience, Dan Merkur's The Ecstatic Imagination: Psychedelic Experiences and the Psychoanalysis of Self-Actualization offers perhaps the most objective and thorough examination of the psychotherapeutic potential of psychedelic drugs. Merkur, a Research Reader in the Centre for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto and author of numerous books about shamans and mystical visions, explains the two primary methods of using psychedelics for psychotherapeutic purposes. The first technique, known as "psychedelic therapy," seeks "to produce religious experiences on the assumption that religious experiences can accomplish the work of therapy" (29), but it is not the psychotherapeutic technique that Kesey portrays in Cuckoo's Nest. Instead, through McMurphy, Kesey explores the second technique, known as "psycholytic therapy," which "uses a series of psychedelic sessions as an adjunct to protracted verbal psychotherapy" (Merkur 29). Explaining the psychotherapeutic possibilities of this technique, Merkur writes, "Because psychedelic drug action accelerates the manifestation of unconscious fantasy materials, psycholytic therapy gives the therapist more to analyze than nocturnal dreams and free associations alone. Because one category of unconscious speculation is the type of self-observation of which insight consists, some of the manifesting materials are curative in their own right" (29). Exploring traumatic events from his childhood that are lodged in his unconscious and attempting to make sense of his fantasy of the fog machine, clearly Chief Bromden undergoes a process at least quite similar to psycholytic therapy over the course of the novel. But this therapy does not come from Nurse Ratched, the etherizing drugs she and her staff dispense, or the pseudo-therapy the hospital provides. Instead, McMurphy enters the ward and takes the patients, most significantly Chief Bromden on a journey towards an awakened consciousness.

Neither psychoanalysis nor the psychedelic experience is without its adverse reactions. Among the most common criticisms of the use of psychedelics in psychotherapy is the criticism of the potentially harmful “bad-trip.” However, in Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research, the leading proponent of psychedelics as psychoanalytic tools, Dr. Stanislav Grof maintains that the adverse reactions during the psychedelic psychotherapy “are byproducts of the second class of psychedelic phenomena and, as such, equivalent to adverse side effects that occur during the course of any psychotherapy. In other words, these are not adverse reactions to the drugs, but adverse reactions to the healing process that the drugs facilitate” (qtd. in Merkur 32). Therefore, the fact that McMurphy’s presence creates adverse reactions in the psyche of Chief Bromden fits with my theory that McMurphy acts as a psychedelic drug might—as a psychotherapeutic tool.

During McMurphy’s first day on the ward, Chief Bromden’s paranoia is particularly acute. He notes Big Nurse’s ability to control time: “The Big Nurse is able to set the wall clock at whatever speed she wants just by turning one of those dials in the steel door; she takes a notion to hurry things up, she turns the speed up, and those hands whip around that disk like spokes in a wheel” (73). Additionally, although he initially notes that “they haven’t really fogged the place full force all day today, not since McMurphy came in” (75), Chief Bromden settles on the notion that McMurphy’s impact on the ward can only be a temporary victory against the omnipotence of the Big Nurse and the Combine. Essentially, during McMurphy’s first couple of days on the ward, the Chief's paranoid fantasies only demonstrate the totality of his pathology. The fog, which Chief Bromden imagines is produced by a machine that the Big Nurse controls, prolongs his insanity:

> Right now, she's got the fog machine switched on, and it's rolling in so fast I can't see a thing but her face, rolling in thicker and thicker, and I feel as hopeless and dead as I felt happy a minute ago, when she gave that little jerk—even more hopeless than ever before, on account of I know there is no real help against her or her Combine. McMurphy can't help no more than I could. Nobody can help. And the more I think about how nothing can be helped, the faster the fog rolls in.
>
> And I'm glad when it gets thick enough you're lost in it and can let go, and be safe again. (109-110)

In truth, the Chief has simply not given McMurphy enough time to take full effect. He does not comprehend the fact that the initial adverse affects of McMurphy's presence on the ward must be endured before it can be of therapeutic value. Nonetheless, while Chief Bromden indicates that he prefers being lost in his fog to risking hope that he might be able to heal his damaged ego, McMurphy soon lifts him out of the fog of insanity.

The Chief's ability to access his repressed memories is an important part of his gradual return to sanity. Before McMurphy arrives on the ward, Chief Bromden uses his memory to escape from his fears in the present. Hiding from the orderlies, who are to shave him, he remarks, "But like always when I try to place my thoughts in the past and hide there, the fear close at hand seeps in through the memory" (6). Chief Bromden suggests that his past is a safe place, a place in time he can regress to for momentary security. What the Chief fails to acknowledge at this point is that the traumatic events of his past, memories located in his unconscious mind, have played a significant part in the wounding of his ego in the first place. In other words, the Chief has been hiding *in* his past, but at the same time hiding *from* his past. Over the course of McMurphy's presence on the ward, Chief Bromden begins to look to his past for an understanding of the trauma that is the root of his psychosis, rather than looking to it as a place where he can hide.

It is precisely when he is in the depths of his adverse reactions to the changes McMurphy brings about, thinking "I'm floating by myself again, more lost than ever" (130), that Chief Bromden begins to dissolve the barriers of his ego and access the traumatic events of his past. Observing the mental state of another patient Pete Bancini, the Chief considers the hurt that might have caused the man's struggle to live in the existing American society:

> I can see all that, and be hurt by it, the way I was hurt by seeing things in the Army, in the war. The way I was hurt by seeing what happened to Papa and the tribe. I thought I'd got over seeing those things and fretting over them. There's no sense in it. There's nothing to be done. (130)

What the return of Chief Bromden's repressed here indicates is that there is, in fact, still a great deal of trauma work left to be done. The return of the Chief's repressed memories to his conscious mind indicates that McMurphy's therapeutic affect has just begun. Chief Bromden notes the weakening efficiency of his repression in the face of such a powerful therapeutic device as McMurphy. He remarks, "That's that McMurphy. He's far away. He's still trying to pull people out of the fog. Why don't he leave me be?" (132) After his initial struggle with coming to terms with McMurphy's presence, the Chief takes his first step towards sanity by taking part in the patients' vote to be able to watch the World Series on the ward's television instead of the world news. In taking part in the vote, he admits to the patients and the staff on the ward that he is capable of hearing.

While the return of Chief Bromden's healthy physical and memory functions—functions returned, at least, in the eyes of the other patients—appear to be indebted to McMurphy and his psychedelic influence, it is the Chief himself who is responsible for his psychological and physical improvement. Referring to his hand raising during the vote, he admits:

> It's too late to stop it now. McMurphy did something to it that first day, put some kind of hex on it with his hand so it won't act like I order it. There's no sense in it, any fool can see; I wouldn't do it on my own. Just by the way the nurse is staring at me with her mouth empty of words I can see I'm in for trouble, but I can't stop it. McMurphy's got hidden wires hooked to it, lifting it slow just to get me out of the fog and into the open where I'm fair game. He's doing it, wires…
>
> No. That's not the truth. I lifted it myself. (136)

McMurphy's value as a therapeutic device is important, but as with psychedelics used for psychotherapy, it is the patient who actualizes a meaningful change in his/her self. Following the vote in which the Chief participates, his mental health only continues to improve.

Later on, after McMurphy offers him a stick of gum—"Juicy Fruit is the best I can do for you at the moment, Chief" (205)—Chief Bromden begins to speak for the first time in years. Again, the Chief at least partially owes the recovery of one of his senses to McMurphy, who is determined—despite a momentary setback after learning that his lack of cooperation on the ward will lead to a longer sentence—to inspire the uninspired patients on the ward. The recovery of Chief Bromden's senses culminates during the fishing trip organized by McMurphy. When the patients are on their return voyage from the fishing trip, the readers see that the Chief has not only recovered his senses (particularly his visual and auditory senses), but has also in part recovered the healthy consciousness of his childhood: "I noticed vaguely that I was getting so's I could see some good in the life around me. McMurphy was teaching me. I was feeling better than I'd remembered feeling since I was a kid, when everything was good and the land was still singing kids' poetry to me" (243). While the Chief may only notice "vaguely" the recovery of his child-like perception of the world, he does indicate that, with the help of McMurphy, his consciousness can be liberated from the constraints imposed upon him by his previously unhealthy psychosis. This child-like perception of the world is an essential marker of the altered consciousness that Kesey experiences under the influence of psychedelics. Furthermore, it refers us again to the psychoanalytic implications of the psychedelic experience. The Chief's continuous flights to childhood memories accent his desire and his ability to liberate himself from the damaging psychosis that keeps him bound to the ward.

At this point, I would like to return my attention to Kesey's experimentation with psychedelics during the writing of Cuckoo's Nest. In an interview with The Paris Review, Kesey responds to the question of how psychedelic drugs affected his writing of the novel: "I was taking mescaline and LSD. It gave me a different perspective on the people in the mental hospital, a sense that maybe they were not so crazy or as bad as the sterile environment they were living in" (qtd. in Plimpton 217). This sense that a better therapeutic environment and model could aid mental patients pervades his first novel. Tom Wolfe records his rendition of Kesey's initial experience with LSD at Menlo Park in The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test:

> But one of them—the first thing he knew about it was a squirrel dropped an acorn from a tree outside, only it was tremendously loud and sounded like it was not outside but right in the room with him and not actually a sound, either, but a great suffusing presence,

visual, almost tactile, a great impacting of…*blue*…all around him and suddenly he was in a realm of consciousness he had never dreamed of before and it was not a dream or delirium but part of his awareness. (36)

Before long, Kesey had experimented with a number of psychedelic drugs. Furthermore, he began to take these psychedelic drugs outside of the controlled laboratory environment. Through the psychedelic experience, Kesey discovered "keys" to unlocking a world that already existed but was difficult to reach due to constraints posed by the superego and a "sterile environment."[3]

Within Kesey was born a new consciousness reminiscent of that of a child seeing the world through fresh and innocent eyes. Like the Chief who begins to hear the land "singing kids' poetry" (243), Kesey's consciousness was awakened through experimentation with psychedelics. The return to a child-like perception of the world is comparable to the psychedelic experience as described in Wolfe's text:

> The whole thing was…*the experience*…this certain indescribable *feeling*…Indescribable, because words can only jog the memory, and if there is no memory of…The *experience* of the barrier between the subjective and the objective, the personal and the impersonal, the *I* and the *not-I* disappearing…that *feeling*!...Or can you remember when you were a child watching someone put a pencil to a sheet of paper for the first time, to draw a picture…and the line begins to grow—into a nose! and it is not just a pattern of graphite line on a sheet of paper but the very miracle of creation itself and your own dreams flowed into that magical…growing…line, and it was not a picture but a *miracle*…an *experience*…and now that you're soaring on LSD that *feeling* is coming on again—only now the creation is the entire universe—(40-41)

[3] In his interview with The Paris Review, Kesey suggests that psychedelics "are only keys to worlds that are already there. The images are not there in the white crystals in the gelatin capsule. Drugs don't create characters or stories any more than pencils do. They are merely instruments that help them get to the page" (qtd. in Plimpton 217).

These are Wolfe's words and not Kesey's; however, this heightened awareness of perception—likened to that of a child—is central to the Chief's emergence from the "fog" of his psychosis in Cuckoo's Nest. By knowing that Kesey began writing the novel during his early experiments with psychedelic drugs, readers can better appreciate one of Kesey's central themes—the potential of psychedelic therapy. While for various and often legitimate reasons people will continue to be skeptical about the use of psychedelics as psychotherapeutic tools—a practice that experienced its golden years in the Sixties when psychedelics were still legal—Kesey offers an optimistic and honest glance at the positive potential of psycholytic therapy.

As we continue to reconsider One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest in an American society where the employment of psychedelic drugs for psychotherapeutic purposes is merely a memory from an era long in the past, we need to recognize that through his intoxicating first novel, Kesey guides his readers on their own psychedelic journeys with the power of language rather than chemicals. Hopefully, this study marks a place for considering psychedelics within the field of psychoanalytic literary theory. For if it does, I not only draw attention to a critical aspect of Kesey's writing that so often gets overlooked, but also enter into a discussion of how One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest—a novel which suggests the importance of exploring the vast unknown that is the unconscious mind—allows Kesey to act as a literary shaman, a healer equipped with psychedelic plants and masterful language.

CHAPTER FOUR: "SETTING THE WHOLE SCENE ATINGLE": THE COSMIC DIALOGUE OF SOMETIMES A GREAT NOTION

> I must tap senses—unknown senses only suspected, only dreamed of …I must explore all the other world of me. I sense the answer is somewhere in there. Sense is the key I must use to unlock itself—like a Chinese puzzle box.
>
> -Ken Kesey (qtd. in Strelow 72)

In the second chapter of The Art of Grit: Ken Kesey's Fiction, entitled "The Ringing of Hank's Bell: Standing Tall in Wakonda," M. Gilbert Porter concludes his insightful and provocative discussion of the "multifold point of view" (41) narrative technique in Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion by claiming, "All of the key scenes in the novel are constructed with this kind of complexity and symmetry, and all of them reward detailed examination, but such analysis becomes tedious in large doses and, once the narrative method is understood, unnecessary" (59). I disagree with Porter that such analysis can be "unnecessary," on the basis that Kesey's second novel picks up where Cuckoo's Nest leaves off in explicating the psychedelic experience. It is through his unique narrative technique that, in Sometimes a Great Notion, Kesey treats another potentially positive aspect of the psychedelic experience, the possibility of establishing what Tom Wolfe calls "intersubjectivity" (54). Examining Kesey's notes for Notion, Porter explains that Kesey originally intended his second novel to be told through a "threefold point of view" (Porter 41), but ultimately could not resist using a multifold point of view, "in which, at one time or another, we are privileged with an inside exposure to almost every character in the novel, even Molly the hound" (41).[4] The multifold point of view allows Kesey to successfully demonstrate that "Unspoken Thing" (Wolfe 111) that he would

[4] In Northwest Review's compilation of Kesey's notes for Sometimes a Great Notion, entitled Kesey, Kesey considers how he is going to deal with point of view in his second novel: "Style: I have a story being told by three people, me, Hank, and Lee. Lee's style will come, if I can keep it from being Arny. Hank will come if I can keep him from being Chief or McMurphy. But my style is the important one" (50).

invest himself in on a full-time basis for the couple of years that followed the publication of the novel.

In <u>The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test</u>, Wolfe describes the experience of "intersubjectivity": "*It is the strangest feeling of my life*—intersubjectivity, as if our consciousnesses have opened up and flowed together and now one has only to look at a flicker of the other's mouth or eye or at the chessman he holds in his hand, wobbling" (54). Perhaps one of the most impressive aspects of Wolfe's text is the extent to which he is able to write himself, a rather straight-laced East Coast intellectual, into the story of Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Jack Shafer notes Wolfe's ability to sustain a "'you are there' intimacy…taking you directly into the heads of his subjects when necessary to chronicle three years of Prankster adventures in consciousness" (1), while at the same time pointing out that, "The immediacy is an illusion, because as every Deadhead and tripster knows, Wolfe was never 'on the bus'" (1). Regardless of Wolfe's level of intimacy with his subjects, his book owes its fame to the fact that it miraculously finds words to explain the "Unspoken Thing." He writes:

> Back in Kesey's log house in La Honda, all sitting around in the evening in the main room, it's getting cool outside, and Page Browning: *I think I'll close the window*—and in that very moment another Prankster gets up and closes it for him and smi-i-i-i-les and says nothing…The Unspoken Thing—and these things keep happening over and over. (111)

The fact that Wolfe, only an observer of to the psychedelic world of the Sixties, is able to so accurately describe something that is beyond words in so many respects—"To put it in so many words, to define it, was to limit it" (113)—is suggestive of the potential of psychedelics to call attention to what Watts describes as, "the mutuality and reciprocity of all the possible contents of consciousness" (34). So many of the individuals who invested themselves in the psychedelic experience in the Sixties—as well as both before and after that momentous decade—record the all-encompassing merging of consciousness that can occur during the experience, that I find it impossible to label such a possibility a fallacy.

For another example, one needs look no farther than Kesey's east coast counterpart Timothy Leary and the "transpersonative community" (qtd. in Stevens 185) he experiments with at Harvard University. Various psychedelic activists' were concerned with the merging that occurs within groups under the influence of psychedelics. In his commentary on Timothy Leary's weeks of experimentation with psychedelics at the Hotel Catalina in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, during the summer of 1962, Jay Stevens writes:

> Tim was curious to see whether he could create the kind of community that Huxley had only imagined in *Island*, a transpersonative community (*transpersonative* was the newest buzzword among the Harvard group), which meant a group of people who had evolved past the ego, who were living beyond "the persona, the role, or mask, which we normally are compelled to exhibit socially." (186)

Despite the fact that "there were times when people failed to live up to the transpersonative ideal" (194), achieving the group mind—"with all the strange nonverifiable phenomena (precognition, telepathy, ESP) that that implies" (194)—became one of the most exhilarating components of the psychedelic experience within Leary's group. Within such a group, all individuals share a collective experience, an experience is not unlike what Kesey describes from his own perspective—the "Big Story Teller's" rather than Hank or Lee's—in the fourth chapter of <u>Sometimes Great Notion</u>:

> *Time overlaps itself. A breath breathed from a passing breeze is not the whole wind, neither is it just the last of what has passed and the first of what will come, but is more—let me see—more like a single point plucked on a single strand of a vast spider web of winds, setting the whole scene atingle.* (200)

Kesey, who by the time he sets out to write his second novel has experienced the group mind in his own right at psychedelic-driven parties on Perry Lane, begins this chapter with the voice of the "Big Story Teller" (qtd. in Strelow79), a voice identified repeatedly with italics. Porter distinguishes a distinct voice within that of the "Big Story Teller," naming it "the Tutelary Spirit," a "monitoring voice of his [Kesey's] persona" (42). In his efforts to distinguish the voice of the Tutelary Spirit from that of the omniscient narrator, Porter writes, "Like a Greek chorus, the Tutelary Spirit instructs, mediates, corrects, reflects, sets up scenes, and plays freely with aesthetic distance" (42). This tuned-in voice within the multifold of points of view, unlike the voice of the omniscient narrator, points to how the smallest of actions, the pluck of a single strand of a spider web, is integrated into a totality.

Wolfe furthers his attempt to make sense of the Kesey and the Pranksters' feelings of intersubjectivity by bringing Carl Jung and his theories of synchronicity into the discussion. Like every other aspect of the experience, Kesey and the Pranksters "never talked about synchronicity by name, but they were more and more attuned to the principle" (Wolfe 127). Though Freud certainly has his place in any honest discussion about the psychedelic experience, based upon Wolfe's account of the Pranksters, Jung's mystical theories are unavoidable if we are to try to come to grips with what happens under the influence of these drugs and what happens in the pages of Sometimes a Great Notion. Discussing the vibe that developed at Kesey's ranch house in La Honda after the Pranksters returned from their infamous bus trip, Wolfe writes:

> This side of the LSD experience—the *feeling!*—tied in with Jung's theory of synchronicity. Jung tried to explain the meaningful coincidences that occur in life and cannot be explained by cause-and-effect reasoning, such as ESP phenomena. He put forth the hypothesis that the unconscious perceives certain archetypical patterns that elude the conscious mind. These patterns, he suggested, are what unite subjective or psychic events with objective phenomena, the *Ego* with the *Non-Ego*, as in psychosomatic medicine or in the microphysical events of modern physics in which the eye of the beholder becomes an integral part of the experiment. (125-6)

To an extent, Wolfe is commenting on his own ability to become an "integral part" of the Pranksters "experiment," but more importantly he highlights the connection to Jung's mystical theories. Regardless of whether intersubjectivity or synchronicity are imagined by those that partake in the psychedelic experience or the drugs indeed actualize an experience long pursued by mystical thinkers, it is clearly a vital component of the experience.

As recorded in Acid Test, with the Pranksters, Kesey uses the term "on the bus" (74) literally to describe being on the Furthur bus, but the term also carries metaphorical meaning, signifying those individuals who "understand" the psychedelic experience. Wolfe writes:

> The world was simply and sheerly divided into "the aware," those who had had the experience of being vessels of the divine, and a great mass of "the unaware," "the unmusical," "the unattuned." Or: *you're either on the bus or off the bus*. Consciously, the Aware were never snobbish toward the Unaware, but in fact most of the great jellyfish blob of straight souls looked like hopeless cases—*and the music of your flute from up top the bus just brought them up tighter*. But these groups treated anyone who showed possibilities, who was a potential brother, with generous solicitude… (116)

Despite their difficulty in understanding each other, Lee and Hank ultimately end up “on the bus” together by the end of the novel despite their differences. Though Lee, according to Kesey’s notes for the novel, is fixated on “*a ticker tape of dying, a manufacturing of robot identities bent on death*, an outside yet inside thing” (qtd. in Strelow 57), he learns from Hank’s motto of “NEVER GIVE AN INCH!” (31) Hank’s efforts to hold on to everything in his life—the foundation which protects the Stamper home from the Wakonda Auga River, his wife Vivian, his own rugged individualism—demonstrate his will to preserve life, a will that stands in marked contrast to Lee’s self-pity and fixation on death. But again, by the novel’s end, Lee learns. As Hank rushes off

to bring the logs down the river by himself, Lee declares:

> For there is always a sanctuary more, a door that can never be forced, whatever the force, a last inviolable stronghold that can never be taken, whatever the attack; your vote can be taken, your name, your innards, even your life, but that last stronghold can only be surrendered. And to surrender it for any reason other than love is to surrender love. Hank had always known this without knowing it, and by making him doubt it briefly I made it possible for both of us to discover it. I knew it now. And I knew that to win my love, my life, I would have to win back for myself the right to this last stronghold. (622-3)

Their conjoined effort to bring the logs down the river at the end of the novel suggests that the Stamper brothers have discovered “awareness” or mutual understanding through such “generous solicitude.” Indeed, this increased awareness that leads to the brothers’ heroic efforts to meet their logging contract might very well be the “great notion” that Kesey refers to in the novel’s title.

Although, after completing Notion, Kesey acknowledges what he perceives to be the limited potential of language and, more specifically, the novel in conveying messages with lasting social significance, I find his fiction to be anything but limiting.[5] In particular, Sometimes a Great Notion expresses concepts—such as synchronicity and intersubjectivity—that often lie beyond words. Kesey claims, "It's my best work, and I'll never write anything that good again. It's a question of time spent on it. I worked on *Notion* for two years without interruption, exploring symbols and characters and letting the narrative take its own way" (qtd. in Plimpton 226). The narrative takes its way through Kesey's multifold point of view technique, drawing all of the people of Wakonda into a cosmic dialogue. To examine how the narrative becomes such, I look to one of the passages that Porter critiques in "The Ringing of Hank's Bell," because as he suggests this scene is representative and illustrative of the efficacy of Kesey's technique.

The first scene Porter examines as exemplary of Kesey's multifold point of view is the departure scene, set on the day Lee Stamper and his mother depart from Wakonda to move to New York. In this scene, Porter explains, "The objective voice of the omniscient narrator describes the scene, but the subjective voices of most of the principals, including the ghost of old Jonas, punctuate the narrative in a tricky syncopation of sliding tense and shifting person" (47). The principals in this scene are Hank, who reflects on ferrying his younger brother and his stepmother/lover across the Wakonda Auga River twelve years later; Lee, whose reflections are "detached in time" (47); and Jonas, Henry Stamper's father, long since disappeared and dead but

[5]Interviewing Kesey for the Paris Review, Robert Faggen asks him about his dissatisfaction with the novel as a medium of expression following the completion of Notion. Kesey comments, "At one point, I was trying to write an illuminated novel with pictures and different kinds of print, experimenting with visual form as well as prose form. It's not right yet. But I haven't felt like I have taken a vacation from my work. I feel that I am continuing to probe into that big hollow, but the traditional form of the novel won't do…The novel is a noble, classic form but it doesn't have the juice it used to" (231).

continually present as a haunting spirit of the Stamper family. After employing extensive quotation in his analysis of the departure scene—Porter quotes two pages of Kesey's text—he notes, "Better than any other, this scene demonstrates technique capturing the themes of interrelated time and event" (49). This scene creates a cosmic dialogue, a dialogue infinitely extended, because it spans "sixty years in terms of the Stamper family history (from the desertion of Jonas Stamper in 1901 to Myra's suicide in 1960 to Lee's return in October 1961)" (47). Kesey transcends the boundaries of time and space so that numerous generations of Stamper consciousnesses are engaged in a singular, though highly complex dialogue.

I will not quote this scene quite as extensively as Porter, however, one passage in particular captures the interrelation of time, events, and people that is crucial to creating a cosmic dialogue between characters present and past, dead and alive. Kesey writes:

> They row through the glittering water. And reflections swirling gently among the flower petals. Jonas rows alongside, muffled from the neck down in green fog: You have to know. Lee meets himself coming back across twelve years after with twelve years of decay penciled on his pale face, and translucent hands cupping a vial of poison for Brother Hank…*or more aptly like a spell*…(But I was wrong about it being finished. Dead wrong.) *You have to know there is no profit and all our labor avoideth naught*. Jonas pulls, straining at the fog. Joe Ben goes into a state park with a brush knife and an angel's face seeking freedom. Hank crawls through a tunnel of blackberry vines, seeking thorny imprisonment. The arm twists and slowly untwists. (41)

As Porter explains, this scene is about Lee's departure, but the omniscient narrator adds that, "Lee meets himself coming back across twelve years after with twelve years of decay penciled on his pale face," thus clarifying that the departure scene is also a return scene. Furthermore, Jonas' ghost rows alongside Hank and Lee, in both temporal moments, the moment of departure and return. As the man that migrated west and left his family in Oregon in the nineteenth century, Jonas Stamper is a reminder of the potential for weakness that both frightens and inspires generations of Stampers to come. Due to the fact that Kesey's novel is in large part about the collective battle against various human weaknesses, Jonas' presence in this scene is of the utmost importance.

Jonas' weakness—Porter describes it as a "faintheartedness" (49)—drives him to abandon the family. Nonetheless, Jonas' spirit does not depart from the Stamper home alongside the Wakonda Auga River because his weakness is so tied to that particular body of water. Before he leaves, we learn: "He was being drowned. He felt he might awake some foggy morn with moss across his eyes and one of those hellish toadstools sprouting in the mist from his own carcass. 'No!'" (24) The presence of Jonas' spirit draws the weaknesses and fears of other principal characters into the narration. As "Jonas pulls, straining at the fog" (41), the omniscient narrator is obliged to reveal Joe Ben's weakness, the beautiful face that served as a constant reminder of his father Ben who, in keeping with Jonas' abandonment of family, left Joe Ben to be raised by Henry Stamper. The narrator refers to the day when "Joe Ben goes into a state park with a brush knife and an angel's face, seeking freedom" (41), alluding to Joe Ben's decision to counter what he perceives to be his weakness by mutilating his own face. Kesey's readers do not yet have the context to understand the narrator's reference to Joe Ben and his weakness. Likewise, the reference to Hank crawling "through a tunnel of blackberry vines, seeking thorny imprisonment" (41) seems out of context at first, but Kesey makes it a point to return to these references later and explain their significance.

As the readers come to find out, Hank's greatest weakness is his pride—more specifically, the pride that moves him to face off against the overwhelming power of the river. Alluding to Hank's crawling through blackberry vines to capture three bobcat kittens, the narrator presents a clue as to why Hank has such an antipathetic relationship with the body of water that borders his home. Later on, justifying his vigilance of the foundations of the Stamper residence against erosion, Hank explains how the water level rose so high during a storm one night that the cage where he kept the kittens fell into the river, drowning his beloved pets. Not often moved by sentimental notions, Hank admits: "So as close as I can come to explaining it, friends and neighbors, that is why that river is no buddy of mine" (110). Though the readers will know little about the pride that the tragedy with the bobcats activates as they read the departure scene, Hank's human weakness—an all-consuming pride—joins in with Lee's "translucent hands cupping a vial poison for Brother Hank" (41) and Joe Ben's "angel's face" (41) to establish a pattern of weaknesses that Kesey interweaves throughout the novel.

Finally, the last image that Kesey's omniscient narrator employs in the passage is that of an arm that "twists and slowly untwists" (41). It isn't until the end of the novel that the readers learn that the arm is that of old Henry Stamper, who lost it during the Stamper family's urgent efforts to fill their logging contract. Nonetheless, Kesey makes the arm a central image from the outset of his writing. According to Kesey's notes, the arm is the central image of the novel: "Now….this arm will give me a *reason*. My reason is to tell about it" (qtd. in Strelow 51). Kesey is explaining the fact that the novel is built entirely on the image of an arm hanging from the Stamper family flag pole. As the Tutelary Spirit opens the first chapter of the novel, the arm appears for the first time, completely out of context: "Twisting and stopping and slowly untwisting in the gusting rain, eight or ten feet above the flood's current, a human arm, tied at the wrist, (just the arm; look) disappearing downward at the frayed shoulder where an invisible dancer performs twisting pirouettes for an enthralled audience (just the arm, turning there, above the water)" (2). In his notes, Kesey adds, "*And everything has to have bearing on that arm's being there*. Everything leads to the hanging of it" (qtd. in Strelow 51). Like the images raised by the narrator during the departure scene, when it first appears in the opening pages of the novel, Henry Stamper's hanging arm is not contextualized and only becomes meaningful after Kesey ties it in with a series of interrelated events, moments, characters, and stories. Once Kesey's various narrators reveal the hostile conflict that exists between the Stamper family and the rest of the town, readers discover that the arm represents the defiance of the Stamper family. Kesey simultaneously celebrates the will power and rugged individualism of the Stampers and critiques them for their hardheadedness. Regardless of whether or not he admires their defiance, Kesey uses Henry Stamper's arm to speak the "Unspoken Thing" within the cosmic dialogue of Sometimes a Great Notion. That "Unspoken Thing" is the idea that all components of the human experience are interrelated, that life is made up of cyclical patterns of events, and that time overlaps itself.

While the many narrators of Notion do not necessarily share common goals, they are all part of a singular but multifaceted conflict. This conflict, which appears throughout Kesey's fiction, is one in which individuals—or sometimes small and tightly-knit communities—are confronted with powerful social institutions that threaten to impose two things: limitations on individuality and questionable definitions of proper social conduct. Specifically, the two Stamper brothers—the macho woodsman Hank and the intellectual Lee—have to struggle to free themselves from the influence of social forces, the labor union for Hank and his familial past for Lee, as they pursue psychological and social autonomy. Through the communication between the various narrators of the novel, Kesey suggests that laws, governments, social institutions, and traditions will not determine the outcome of a conflict such as Hank and Lee's, though they will clearly impact it. Rather, the conflict is resolved, or at least meaningfully discussed, through a cosmic dialogue between individuals with varying attitudes concerning what one man or one family ought to be allowed to do. With the image of Lee going off to help Hank bring the logs down the river at the end of the novel, Kesey supports the "great notion" that an individual's rights go beyond state or economic controls. As a man who has always found happiness in his individual will power, Hank refuses to play the role of the responsible citizen, foregoing his family's needs for the "good" of the community, which the rest of the town continually pressures him to play. Similarly, Lee refuses to continue playing a role, the role of a self-pitying hypochondriac, which has denied him happiness throughout his adult life, declaring at the novel's end that he "would have to win back for [himself] the right to this last stronghold" (623) that is a life motivated by love.

Thus, what the group mind creates, both in relation to the psychedelic experience and within the pages of Sometimes a Great Notion, is a conglomeration of independent perspectives on how individuals can contribute to the awakening of a new social consciousness in contemporary American society. In "Psychoanalysis and Sixties Utopianism," Marianne DeKoven notes how the commitment to "total psychic-political-social-cultural transformation" (264) is consistent with the pursuit for utopianism that existed among radical intellectuals and artists in the Sixties. Furthermore, such ideal notions of total transformation can easily take on a spiritual character, as they do with Timothy Leary and his International Foundation for Internal

Freedom.[6] In his examination of the idealistic and religious foundation underlying Leary's work with psychedelics, Stevens writes,

> For months he had been kicking around the concept of internal freedom. In a speech to the Harvard Humanists he had proposed that one's right to do what one wished with one's own consciousness was in effect a "fifth freedom," and one that ought to be amended to the Constitution. *Congress shall make no law abridging the individual's right to seek an expanded consciousness*. This fifth freedom was necessary, Leary told the Humanists, to prevent America from becoming an "anthill civilization," in which all of us were "mere puppets playing out roles in complex games." We were all becoming Organization Men, but this wasn't the only choice. Through a judicious use of psychedelics, Americans could recover a spiritual dimension that would free them to do great things—to explore the stars, conquer disease, eliminate poverty—in short to attain the goals of Kennedy's New Frontier while eliminating the greed and self-serving motives of the old frontier. (188)

Stevens clearly questions, as I think we all should, the realistic potential behind Leary's vision of a psychedelic utopia. However, I do not think we should be too quick in dismissing psychedelics' potential to allow users access to spiritual dimensions. Nor should we be quick to denounce the value of this access to a spiritual dimension. The experience of a group mind or intersubjectivity through psychedelics appears to demonstrate that human beings possess abilities that cannot be explained by rational thought. This fact, that some human abilities lie beyond the scope of people's explanatory powers, is what makes <u>Sometimes a Great Notion</u> a masterpiece of

[6] Leary's group, which began as a group of psychologists and graduate students at Harvard University, would later be renamed the League for Spiritual Discovery and then the Castalia Foundation.

psychedelic fiction. Through a masterful narrative technique, Kesey at the very least comes quite close to making sense of a significant human mystery.

CONCLUSION

In a 1970 interview published in Kesey's Garage Sale, Kesey responds to the question of whether or not he maintains a particular vision garnered during the years that follow the publication of his first two novels and his work with the Merry Pranksters. He responds:

> You ask me if I've got any vision. I've got three kids. I mean I'm invested in this world. I prune my trees even though I'm not going to have fruit for two years in a row. Because I'm doing all I can to try to build a better world. All the time… (205)

This answer suggests that Kesey does not maintain a radical, revolutionary vision after the Sixties. However, such an interpretation of his answer to the question of his vision is too limited. Although Kesey steps out of the spotlight as a writer and a counter-cultural hero after the Merry Pranksters' Acid Graduation, his later work attests to his continued commitment to a change in consciousness. After serving his six month sentence on a San Mateo County work farm in 1966-67, Kesey returns to his property in Oregon with his wife Faye and his kids and continues working with the movie the Pranksters recorded during their bus trip on Furthur. In 1986, Kesey publishes Demon Box, a series of essays that comment on the "natural running-down of energy" (qtd. in Plimpton 222) that occurs in America in the decades that follow the Sixties. Finally, in the late Eighties and Nineties, Kesey returns to fiction writing, the artistic genre that originally brought him to American consciousness.

Kesey's concern for mythological American heroes and superheroes—a concern that was extremely important to him during his work in the Sixties—continues when he returns to fiction in 1992 with Sailor Song. In many ways, Sailor Song is a Cuckoo's Nest for the Nineties and beyond. The hero, Ike Sallas, is faced with a more specified source of total control than the Combine. In Sailor Song, the weary ex-activist Sallas sees the entertainment industry invade his refuge in the rustic town of Kuinak, Alaska, with hopes of profiting from the last remaining remnants of the American frontier. He recognizes that it is “no cheap fly-by-nightie carnival wheel they [are] up against; this [is] a high casino caper, big time owned and big-time rigged” (427). Nonetheless, Sallas experiences little doubt about his obligation when the Hollywood producers reveal their intentions to destroy the town and replace it with a tourist attraction. While he had long held hopes of abstaining from activism, he resolves to play a heroic part in the resolution of the conflict. After discovering the dead body of Omar Loop, killed by one of the movie’s producers, Nicholas Levertov, so that SilverFox could purchase Loop’s properties, Sallas sets his mind to a familiar task:

> He could not have said what that business was, or how it would be handled, but he was resigned to do what had to be done. He had kind of gone to total auto himself. The moment he saw that telltale red bowling ball he knew he was going to cut loose any hopes he still harbored that his superstitions about Levertov might just be fantasy. No this dirt mama was real. Dolls were being set up, and being knocked down. The situation was in progress, and in dedicated lock; it couldn’t be blinked and it couldn’t be ducked. Fortunately, it was a situation for which he had his own dedicated program. All he had to do was plug it in. His program was surely outdated, but he knew he could trust the old chipware to guide him into correct position and action when the chips were down. (401)

Sallas’ resignation to act as a hero is a reactivation of the heroism that Kesey temporarily put on the shelf when he stepped out of the public eye following his literary and counter-cultural efforts of the Sixties. Kesey recognizes the vast challenges facing the individual trying to act as hero on the last remaining American frontier.

By describing the activation of heroism as a mechanical process—a "program" with "old chipware" that can be plugged in—Kesey suggests that, in the twenty-first century world where Sailor Song is set, heroism is not so easily recalled, if not "outdated." The implication is that, in the twenty-first century, humans will no longer be capable of rescuing their world due to the fact that their actions are so dependent upon technology. Ultimately, Sallas does not have to face off with Levertov, the man primarily responsible for drowning Loop by weighing him down with his "telltale red bowling ball," because before he can engage his enemy a terrifying electrical storm disrupts the Hollywood takeover of the town of Kuinak. However, he does save a number of his friends from a watery death after their boat is short-circuited by the electrical storm. Without the aid of the boat's technological functions, which are fried during the storm, Sallas still manages to rescue his friends from drowning. The conclusion to Sailor Song is a hopeful one because the hero still prevails despite the potency of his enemies—Levertov, SilverFox Productions, and the greed of the townspeople who are willing to sacrifice their town for money.

A number of passages from Sailor Song recall Kesey's earlier psychedelic writings. But even more importantly, they note how much more work is to be done to save American culture from any of a number of unfavorable fates. As a final call to arms in his book, Daniel Pinchbeck concludes:

> Unlikely as it seems, we have to become our own shamans, wizards, and seers. As spiritual warriors, we must take responsibility for the plight of our species. To break the spell of our culture's death trap deceptions and hypnotic distractions, we need the courage to confront what lies behind the open doors of our own minds. (297)

Just as Kesey seems to have done throughout his fiction, indeed throughout his life, Pinchbeck sees a heightened awareness and a shift in consciousness as essential to the preservation of the human species. Kesey foresees a favorable outcome in humans' confrontation with the destructiveness of their own cultures. In "An Impolite Interview with Ken Kesey," another interview taken from Kesey's Garage Sale, he comments on the probable outcome of the drama that the human race was involved in during the Sixties and Seventies, a drama that continues today: "The Good Guys will win. The consciousness now being forged will hang tempered and true, in the utility closet alongside old and faithful tools like Mercy and Equality and Will Rogers" (221). I don't think that Kesey would be disappointed by the fact that the good guys haven't won yet—so many of us have yet to forge shamanic ideals into our consciousness—because this is a drama we must face over the course of generations. But, like Kesey, I agree that the Good Guys can and will win. Until then, we need to keep on "pruning our trees."

In "The Creative Writer and Daydreaming," Freud explains how creative writers offer readers experiences of "*fore-pleasure*" (The Uncanny 33) through the ways they shape their tales. As is true with most of Freud's writings, his analysis of the pleasure readers get from creative writers is sexual, with the reader in some ways seduced by the creative writers' fantasies. Looking at Kesey's works, I recognize the value of Freud's commentary on the experience of reading fiction, for I myself do experience a great deal of pleasure in reading. However, writers like Kesey remind me that the pleasure I gain from reading is born of the awe-inspiring power of language—a power recognized early in human history by shamanic cultures—which more often than not has little to do with sexuality. Through language, writers and shamans have the potential to take us on incredible journeys. With his fiction and with his countercultural efforts in the Sixties—which have themselves become a part of American mythology—Kesey reminds me that these journeys do not only serve the purpose of providing me with personal pleasure. Rather, as a literary shaman, Kesey guides his readers on journeys by way of the imagination, provoking them to explore the mysteries of life and to question how they can all take part in the making of a better world.

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