

Kerouac Reception in the 1980s: Renaissance and Scholarly Revival?

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A Report from the front:

In 1982 I published an essay titled “Notes For A Beat Renaissance” following important work by George Dardess in the mid-1970s, the 1979 Viking Critical edition of *On the Road*, and new scholarship by Robert Hipkiss and Harry Russell Huebel, and Tim Hunt’s groundbreaking 1981 study Kerouac’s *Crooked Road*, which could, I wrote, “initiate an overdue revision of Kerouac’s literary reputation by professional critics of literature.”¹ Hunt’s work, a book of undiminished influence, buoyed my belief in a Beat renaissance “heralded by serious scholarly criticism because,” I thought, “the changes in American life that occurred in the 1960s and . . . in part held against Kerouac and the Beats have been assimilated.”² It’s clear now that no matter how promising the new scholarship, the first years of the first Reagan administration were not auspicious for reconsiderations of Kerouac. Rather, this moment would foster further, more complicated devaluations of the writer, even as interest in him increased. Commentators and critics debated the revival. David Stanley, observing that a revival of interest in Kerouac in the eighties “is anomalous because of the neglect that he suffered in the sixties at a time when his purported countercultural descendents were most numerous,” thought that “[t]o speak of a Kerouac revival is to ask...why now?”³ Alf H. Walle also wondered “why as the 1980s begin is Kerouac being rediscovered? Is America merely being nostalgic or are we now distant enough to be objective and appreciative?”⁴ Was a Kerouac revival

a matter of his inevitable assimilation? Was it “caused,” as John Tytell claimed, to counter “the nearly unanimous rejection of Beat writing by the critics, the view that they were philistines without a viable literary past, some species of distasteful and aberrant contemporary anomaly”?⁵ Note the repeated use of “anomaly” as a trope for anything other than the traumatic negativity of Kerouac’s reception. Whatever the motive, for Tytell, a Kerouac revival had been accomplished by 1988: “The literary reputation of the Beats has changed remarkably in the eighties, and they are no longer. . . bohemians whom we refuse to take seriously. . . . *On the Road* has practically achieved the status of an American classic” (ix). Yet while the early to mid-eighties did seem to promise revisionary reconsiderations of Kerouac, this promise, as the published skepticism suggests, was hard to explain – why now? – and ultimately played out in ways that warped and undermined prospects of Kerouac’s recuperation.

The oracle of Kerouac revivalism was the 1982 conference in Boulder, Colorado, to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the publication of *On the Road*.⁶ The Kerouac conference garnered widespread mass media exposure and comment, becoming legendary for its roster of star artists, an impressive array of countercultural literary, political, and intellectual celebrities of the Beat and Sixties eras. The conference proposed to revise Kerouac’s reputation, as in the opening panel which was moderated by Tim Hunt, “Literary Politics and Misperceptions of Kerouac’s Work.”⁷ Significant later books that reclaimed Kerouac, such as Joyce Johnson’s 1983 *Minor Characters* and Regina Weinreich’s 1987 *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac*, were introduced at the 1982 conference.⁸ It seemed fair to hope as I then wrote for the *Boston Globe*, that “scholars, writers, biographers, and critics treat[ing] Kerouac’s art to a comprehensive

assessment” had launched a “revision in Kerouac criticism” at the Naropa conference.⁹ But studying the 1980s now, I can see that my optimism was premature and unfulfilled.

I want to focus on the impasse in Kerouac studies seen in the eighties, a central limitation in considerations of the writer that persists. Kerouac’s revival around the 1982 conference is marked by the misrecognition of fan enthusiasm for literary criticism; fan veneration for critical evaluation; and preferences for the vernacular or colloquial over the theoretical and analytic or critical. These emphases undermined the possibility of addressing Kerouac’s literature with the complexity and nuance his reconsideration required. A failure to make clear distinctions between fan appreciations and literary criticism institutionalized a debilitating confusion – and fusion – of diverse and incompatible forms of Kerouac reception.

On one hand, Kerouac’s rising reputation in the eighties was signified by the publication of academic studies and projects aimed at reconstructing his standing in American letters. Five monographs in addition to Hunt’s and Weinreich’s sought, with varying success, to elevate Kerouac from iconography and celebrity adulation to literary history: those by Chris Challis (1984), Joy Walsh (1984b), Tom Clark (1986 and 1989), and Warren French (1986).¹⁰ Doctoral studies about or including Kerouac by Weinreich (1982), Nancy Grace (1987), and me (1983) added to the field,¹¹ as did important foundational work: Thomas Nisonger’s 1980 essay “Jack Kerouac: A Bibliography of Biographical and Critical Material, 1950-1979” and Robert Milewski’s comprehensive 1981 book *Jack Kerouac: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Sources: 1944-1979*.¹² Mapping a new canon of Beat writing, in 1983 Ann Charters edited *The Dictionary of Literary Biography: Vol. 16: The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar*

America, which featured George Dardess's masterly biography of Kerouac's writing life.¹³ In addition to these texts, three academic or quasi-academic journals devoted special issues to Kerouac: the spring 1983 issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (RCF); the 1984 issue of *The Literary Denim*; and, in 1985, *Beat Indeed!* – a special issue of a semiotic studies journal. Coming after the 1979 Viking Critical *On the Road*, these journals, generating and collecting vetted literary criticism, were a next step in the project to recuperate Kerouac. But in these three journals, an editorial refusal or incapacity to distinguish fan and critic, amateur and scholarly commentary, or to make that differentiation hold in the editing process, subverted Kerouac's hoped-for reconsideration in the 1980s, compromising a real recuperation of his status in American writing.

On the other hand of Kerouac reception, non-academic advocacy also flourished in the eighties with awkward defenses of the writer that unfortunately abetted dominant culture doubts of his literary value. Contentious fans such as John Montgomery, Gerald Nicosia, and Jim Burns loudly rejected academic critics working on Kerouac's historical and literary restoration after 25 years of dismissal. Since the manifest agents of Kerouac's dismissal were reviewers, the mainstream press, and social conservatives, the attack on academics was a wasted shot and suggested the fans' self-interested agenda – to advance a people's criticism of Kerouac with themselves as its exemplars. Claiming for themselves the legitimacy and status of (uncredentialed) experts, anti-intellectual Kerouac advocates championed biographical interests and materials, an approach that neglected literary matters and favored (their) connections with living Beat writers in the work of assessing Kerouac. For Montgomery, the only possible knowledge of Kerouac was biographical, and expertise could only derive from first-hand experience: all Kerouac

biographies, “except mine and Jarvis’ [Visions of Kerouac, 1974] suffer,” he claimed, “because [the authors] did not know Jack,”¹⁴ a view widely held among Kerouac “partisans,” the untutored, non-professional enthusiasts. Thus Montgomery dismissed his rivals – scholars and researchers – and elevated Kerouac friends and fans as “experts.”

In the eighties, the interests of the academic literary scholar studying Kerouac were set against those of the Kerouac fan or *aficion* whether they each knew it or not. Fans published material in scholarly venues, competing with scholars to control possession, definition, and valuation of the writer and his work. The 1982 Naropa conference staged this as a conflict between (amateur) hagiography and (professional) literary advocacy for Kerouac. Though it aimed high, the 10-day conference, which garnered 300-350 registrants and an estimated 2000-3000 congregants, was ultimately inscribed as a celebrity event, thanks to the low sights of the over 100 reporters, photographers, and filmmakers who swarmed the scene. The intense publicity undermined the conference’s goal to, in the words of John Clellon Holmes, “attest to the validity of a literary and social movement now 25 or 30 years old, concretized for us in the figure of one man, [Kerouac], who more than any other could be said to have been its prophet, its exemplar, and its most crucial creative spirit.”¹⁵

The Review of Contemporary Fiction’s special Kerouac issue was early to institutionalize the conference as the locus of a literary revival, and in this the editor John O’Brien bought into a confusion of fan with expert writing that undermined the influence of the valid studies that were also published there. Holmes’ essay about the conference, “Tender Hearts in Boulder” (61-64), blends report, personal reflection, and literary history. He parsed the classic context of Kerouac’s reception/recovery/commemoration,

identifying two competing and self-negating discourses on display in vivo at the 1982 conference: the participants' testaments to Kerouac and his literature; versus the press's interest in the celebrity literati and counterculture icons testifying to Kerouac and his literature – how Kerouac's significance came to be derived from the significance of his famous advocates. Holmes observed that Beat generation participants in the conference were divided, "rooted in the personal even as we performed as 'personalities.'" He marked a diverging doubleness – Kerouac's literary reputation versus gossip about him – both of which were studied in the RCF special issue, as the difference between the "private" "personal" self/subject and the performance of the Beat "personality" or subjectivity (61); as the difference between artist and celebrity. Holmes's personal/"personalities" binary also restates an aspect of Beat literature's postmodern condition: the binary of real vs. simulacrum. As Kerouac's reception evinces, the simulacrum – the "personality," the Beatnik, what Holmes elsewhere termed the "image of Kerouac" – eclipses the real – the subject: the writer. This facilitates the erasure of Kerouac's literary work from his cultural representation, leaving him an artist divested of his art; just a cult icon.

The Review of Contemporary Fiction's 1983 Kerouac issue sponsored both sides of this binary, without comment on their differences. For example, Holmes's essay appeared with a report from Arthur Knight, editor of the now defunct Beat primary source small press, the unspeakable visions of the individual (tuvoti). Where Holmes lauded the conference – it had "no scandals, no excesses of reckless libido or perilous intoxication" to mar the proceedings, an "utter absence of carping anecdote or bitchy

innuendo and debilitating ego-wrestling” (63) – Knight saw self-display, commercial interests, and prurience, and his leering report that sex and ego dominated the conference provided ample “bitchy innuendo”: “there’s a lot of sexual energy in the air and a lot of people are going to end up in bed together, even tho they probably wouldn’t talk to each other if they met somewhere else. I tell people a good title for a book about this event would be *Half of the People Here Went Home with Herpes*.”¹⁷ Knight’s trope for the conference figures it as disease, viral sexual exchange, contagion (“herpes”); a literary meeting abroad ending with an infected return “home,” marketable tell-all book in hand. Holmes’s binary of personal/ “personalities” plays out in the discordant differential between his account and Knight’s, whose salacious tales of narcissistic Beat writers opportuning him for publication mitigate Holmes’ perceptive analyses. What is such work as Knight’s doing in a literary journal?

Jim Burns’ 1984 review for his journal *Palantir*, reprinted in the special Kerouac issue of *The Literary Denim*, edited by V.J. Eaton,¹⁸ focuses, at least analytically, on the conflict between fans and critics over Kerouac’s reception and potential revival. Burns finds that fans oppose “neutralizing...academic surveys which can’t possibly capture the energy and excitement that was an integral part of the literature” – while academics should “treat Beat-related material in such a way that something more than the energy/excitement also comes through.” For Burns “the recent resurgence of interest...has the twin opposing dangers of over-academicizing and over-trivializing built into it” as “professors and lecturers, anxious for academic status and ready to latch onto anything likely to help them in the struggle for recognition” contend with “well-meaning enthusiasts who almost reduce everything to a fan-club level.”¹⁹ While Burns implicates

the fans' fan-club role in Kerouac's negative reputation, he denigrates academics, whose hiring and tenure chances have in fact been historically impeded – not advanced – by specialization in Kerouac and Beat literature: there's a whole generation of scholars who experienced professional backlash, which is to say their careers suffered for their Beat studies.

Edited by Rudi Horemans, the 1985 collection *Beat Indeed!*, from Antwerp, Belgium, is a special issue of the periodical *Restant, Review for Semiotic Theories and the Analysis of Texts*. The substitution of semiotic textual studies with Beat studies elucidates a topography of Kerouac's 1980s reception: the evacuation of the high for the low, of the academic for the popular, of the theoretical for the feel-good – “Beat Indeed!”. Horemans had ambitions for the volume that were thwarted by his stated prejudices concerning the academy's indifference to Kerouac. He noted that “the academic world hardly has any interest for beat writing...hardly any interest in [anything outside] the canon of civilization and culture” that left an intellectual void filled by avid advocates. Horemans thus included “not only...academic and solid essays... [but also] non-academic approaches to beat literature” in his volume. His hope that “as far as the novels of Jack Kerouac are concerned, these non-academic, open-minded approaches will probably prove to be the most interesting ones.”²⁰ This did not take in to account the ways these approaches helped to stymie Kerouac's recognition in the eighties and beyond. Horemans simply gave in to the amateur approaches and gave them pride of publishing place in his special issue journal, exemplifying my concern about missteps and failures at the editorial level in these three volumes of the 1980s.

Some significant issues for Kerouac reception arising from the phenomenon of combining and then blurring academic and fan writings include: 1) the canonization of fans as critics, and as critics preferred over trained literary scholars. John Montgomery, gadfly fan and Kerouac friend, considering Tom Clark's 1984 biography *Jack Kerouac*, observed that "I see this book as an antidote and also as a model for academics who usually aren't able to cope with a writer like Kerouac."²¹ According to Montgomery, even Clark, who is not an academic, is too academic: his "impartiality" and use of secondary "resources," as well as his "extensive footnotes" and bibliography – these things alienate Kerouac "partisans." Montgomery's standing in Kerouac reception comes from his self-promotions and sheer ubiquity. He offers his many publications – including three collections of biographical essays on Kerouac (1976, 1982, and 1986), as well as a 1970 memoir²² – as proof of and to substantiate his critical authority and influence, in place of academic credentials and training, or analytic acumen.

Another significant issue here for Kerouac reception is: 2) the devolution of academic critical work through some scholarly writers' aspirations to hipster affiliations and affectations (the adulteration of high culture by proximity to low); the postmodern blurring of enunciatory positions. *Beat Indeed!* includes a sycophantic "review" of Nicosia's *Memory Babe* by an academic, Richard Morris of the University of Knoxville. As if embarrassed for his scholarly status, Morris represents himself as a fan in a voice of sympatico hipsterism. This approach seems pitched to mitigate what are felt to be the stodgy methods of criticism without sacrificing academic authority. Morris's intensely anti-intellectual 10-page review of Nicosia's biography is awestruck: "You're a hardworking man, Gerry Nicosia! It fascinates me as much to think of the wild research

that had to go into *Memory Babe* as it hacks me to recall all the publishing ordeals you went through to keep the manuscript intact.”²³ Morris writes to Nicosia, directly addressing him as if this were not an evaluation of his work; as if Nicosia were as beleaguered a critic as was Kerouac a writer. In suspending critical methods and objectivity in assessing Nicosia’s Kerouac biography, representing himself not as a critic but in solidarity with Beat writers via Nicosia, Morris forsakes obligations to Kerouac’s critical reception; he refuses his profession as scholar.

The third issue that is significant for Kerouac reception is the surrender of Kerouac studies to biography, memoir, and fan rivalries; or, debased biographical criticism. Editor Horemans melodramatically claims “that it is not always the textual reality of Kerouac’s writing that intrigues so many...[but] the man behind these books, the life and lust of one individual in the second half of the twentieth century.”²⁴ Critic Michael Basinski wearily noted in 1984 that while Kerouac’s “art should be treated to literary [critical] discourse,” instead of this, fan-based “biographies have picked, pocked, and sought to record and dispute every second of Jack Kerouac’s life,” and these “endless mutations have rarely dealt with his fiction, which is the art he left for posterity.”²⁵ Indeed, the failure to divest Kerouac’s life from his work has subverted the literary criticism that might counter its dismissal as “typewriting.”

The three special-issue Kerouac periodicals of the 1980s typified the blurring and combination of fan appreciations with literary analyses – the pop and the scholarly – that constituted strands of Kerouac reception in the eighties. The lack of differentiation between partisan and scholarly writing in these periodicals marks the ambiguity and ultimate ineffectuality of the 1980s Kerouac revival; the amateurization of critical

evaluation that still characterizes Kerouac's reception. This raises issues of reception that anticipate by 25 years Wikipedia and wiki communities, which are ruled by the democratizing view that anyone – read: including rank amateurs or fans – is fit to collect, present, and edit materials said to constitute “knowledge.” My study of Kerouac's reception is titled “Inventing Jack Kerouac,” and it is this sort of amateur construction of Kerouac erected in the 1980s by the pre-wiki community that encourages my impression that Kerouac's reception in this period had been, overall, a matter not of evaluation but of pure wishful projective invention – an invention of the Everyman's Kerouac, literally.

Notes and Works Cited

1. Ronna C. Johnson. Rev. of Kerouac's *Crooked Road*. *Poetry Project Newsletter*. No. 93. November: 1982; See also Tim Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction*. Hamden, Connecticut: Arehon Books, 1981. Rpt. 1996. University of California.
2. Ronna C. Johnson. “Notes for a Beat Renaissance.” *Fiction, Literature & the Arts Review* 1, No. 1, 1982: 14.
3. David Stanley. “The Kerouac Boom.” *Western American Literature* 16. No. 2, August 1981: 138-139.
4. Alf H. Walle. “Jack Kerouac's Vision: Heroes and Antiheroes of the Golden West.” *Journal of American Culture* 3 No. 3, Fall 1980: 571.
5. John Tytell. “Foreword.” Arthur Knight and Kit Knight. Eds. *Kerouac and the Beats: A Primary Sourcebook*. New York: Paragon House, 1988: xiii-xiv. Subsequent quotations will be noted in the text by page number.
6. “The Jack Kerouac Conference” was sponsored by the Naropa Institute (now Naropa University), The Cultural Affairs Board of the University of Colorado, and *New Age* journal, and was held from July 23 to August 1, 1982, in Boulder, Colorado, on the campus of the University of Colorado, Boulder. The conference was convened to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the publication of *On The Road*.
7. The roster of panels offered at the On the Road: The Jack Kerouac Conference of 1982 in Boulder, Colorado, is as follows: Literary Politics and Misperceptions of Kerouac's Work; Symposium on Texts I; Political Fallout of the Beat Generation; Kerouac in Denver; Kerouac in the '80s; Jack and Jazz Kerouac's Biography; How the 50-60-70s Led to the 80s; Tape Archives Out Loud, Kerouac's Voice; Kerouac and Women, The

Beats and Women; Recollections and Gossip; Kerouac's Sound; Kerouac, Catholicism and Buddhism; Kerouac's Influence on a Later Generation of Writers; Censorship and the Beat Generation; Impact of Jack Kerouac on American Literature; and Symposium on Texts II. This list is compiled from the original conference schedule held in the author's archives.

8. See Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters: the Romantic Odyssey of a Woman in the Beat Generation*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1983, and Regina Weinreich, *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: A Study of the Fiction*. Carbondale, Illinois University Press, 1987.

9. Ronna C. Johnson. "Celebrating Kerouac and the Beats." *Boston Globe*. August 12, 1982: 57-58.

10. See Chris Challis, *Quest for Kerouac*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984; Joy Walsh, *Statement in Brown*. New York: The Textile Bridge Press, 1984; Tom Clark, *Kerouac's Last Word: Jack Kerouac in Escapade*. Sudbury, Massachusetts: Water Row, 1986; and *Jack Kerouac in San Francisco*. Berkeley: Ammunition Press, 1989; Warren French, *Jack Kerouac: Novelist of the Beat Generation*. Boston: Twayne, 1986.

11. Dissertations focused solely on Kerouac in the 1980s were written by Regina Weinreich, 1982 (NYU); Ronna C. Johnson, 1983 (Tufts); and L. R. S. Graham, 1988 (U of Nottingham, UK). Dissertations that included significant treatments of Kerouac were produced by Harold R. Goldman, 1984 (SUNY Stony Brook); Elizabeth Wheeler, 1984 (SUNY Stony Brook); Ronald J. Bartnik, 1986 (Kent State); Nancy Grace, 1987 (Ohio State); and Timothy Poland, 1987 (Georgia State). The one master's thesis on Kerouac in the 1980s was produced by Suzanne Ives in 1984 (York U, Canada).

12. Thomas Evans Nisonger, "Jack Kerouac: A Bibliography of Biographical and Critical Material, 1950-1979." *Bulletin of Bibliography* 37, No. 1, Jan-March 1980: 23-32 and Robert Milewski, *Jack Kerouac: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Sources: 1944-1979*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1981.

13. George Dardess, "Jack Kerouac." *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Vol. 16: The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*. Ed. Ann Charters. Detroit: Gale, 1983: 278-303.

14. John Montgomery, "Tom Clark's Academic Antidote." In *Beat Indeed!* Ed. Rudi Horemans. Antwerp, Belgium: EXA, 1985: 73.

15. John Clellon Holmes, "Tender Hearts in Boulder." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3, No. 2, Summer 1983: 61. Subsequent quotations from this essay will be indicated in the text by page number.

16. See John Clellon Holmes, "Rocks in Our Beds: The New England Beats." *Stony Hills* 10, 4, No. 1, 1981: 1, 15.

17. Arthur Knight, "Searching for Jack Kerouac." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3, No. 2, Summer 1983: 14.

18. In the 1984 "Catching Up With Kerouac: Getting Boulder On the Road" issue of *The Literary Denim*, the periodical's mission is described: "*The Literary Denim* is an *annuus sporadicus* Period Journal of Beat Literature and exists solely as a vehicle for scholarship and original material which pertains specifically to or is composed specifically by individuals of or associated with or to this period." The editor of *The Literary Denim* was V. J. Eaton and the journal was based in Phoenix, Arizona.

Jim Burns, whose triple review appears in this special Kerouac issues of *The Literary Denim*, also devoted work as an editor to Beat writing. Contributor's Notes in *The Literary Denim* identify Burns as "the former editor and publisher of the England based small mag *Palantir*, well regarded for its many contributions to Beat literature, the last volume having appeared in 1983. He is a highly regarded scholar and is, perhaps, most admired for his sympathy and insightful criticism of the work of John Clellon Holmes. His last known Beat-related work appeared in the Kerouac issue [1983] of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*."

What kind of "scholar" Burns is is not apparent from any of his published writing; I have not heard of his work on Holmes; and for my book I have written about Burns's Kerouac-focused work, and that mostly about jazz.

A disclosure: I too published in *The Literary Denim* special 1984 issue, as well as in the 1983 Kerouac issue of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*.

19. Jim Burns, "Palantir: Three Books Reviewed." In *The Literary Denim: A Journal of Beat Literature. Catching Up with Kerouac: Getting Boulder on the Road*. Ed. V. J. Eaton. Phoenix, Arizona. 1984: 112.

20. Rudi Horemans, "Beat Indeed." In *Beat Indeed!* Ed. Rudi Horemans. Antwerp, Belgium: EXA, 1985: 11-16.

21. John Montgomery, "Tom Clark's Academic Antidote." In *Beat Indeed!* Ed. Rudi Horemans. Antwerp, Belgium: EXA, 1985: 73-74.

22. See John Montgomery, 1970. *Jack Kerouac: A Memoir In Which Is Revealed Secret Lives & West Coast Whispers, Being the Confessions of Henry Morley, Alex Fairbrother & John Montgomery, True Madmen of The Dharma Bums, Desolation Angels & Other Trips*. Fresno: Giligia Press, 1970; *Kerouac West Coast: A Bohemian Pilot, Detailed Navigational Instructions*. Pala Alto, California: Fels & Firn, 1976; Ed. *The Kerouac We Knew: Unposed Portraits*. San Anselmo, California: Fels and Firn Press, 1982; and *Kerouac at the "Wild Boar" and Other Skirmishes*. San Anselmo, California, Fels & Firn, 1986.

23. Richard Morris, "Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac." Review. In *Beat Indeed!* Ed. Rudi Horemans. Antwerp, Belgium, 1985, 49.

24. Horemans, *ibid.* 12.

25. Michael Basinski, in Joy Walsh, *Statement in Brown*. New York: The Textile Bridge Press, 1984, 69.