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A Man Went Looking for America and Couldn't Find it Anywhere: The Wanderer in On the Road and Easy Rider

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"A Man Went Looking for America and Couldn’t Find it Anywhere": The Wanderer in *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* (1969)

By

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"A Man Went Looking For America and Couldn’t Find it Anywhere": The Wanderer in On the Road and Easy Rider (1969)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the archetype of the wanderer as a cultural phenomenon in 1960s America starting with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* as an embodiment of the Beat Generation and ending with Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) as an embodiment of sixties counterculture.

Through this progression, *On the Road’s* projection of the wanderer is found within the hobo-hero as a dissident nomadic figure, and *Easy Rider’s* as a cosmic cowboy—a countercultural twist on an American icon. By analyzing these figures, the contradictory nature between rebellion and tradition meet as hobo-hero and cosmic cowboy reject societal norms in the search for America.

**Keywords:** *On the Road, Easy Rider, wanderer, Beat Generation, Counterculture, American Road, hobo-hero, cosmic cowboy*
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History, and Social Sciences Department for your kind words and encouragement on this journey
Late one night I was wandering down Michigan Avenue when one of Ralph Lauren’s window displays caught my eye—dimly lit and decked out in leather and flannel, the display is reminiscent of a cultural phenomenon and lifestyle—one of which beckons viewers to jump in a car, hit Route 66, and go west, or towards this “rebellious” lifestyle fit with motorcycles and leather jackets. Adorned with southwestern rugs, baker boy hats, Triumph motorcycle signs, and alcohol, Lauren is trying to sell an escape or lifestyle as luxury, placing young Dylan-esque outfits next to Dean-esque leather jackets. The displays calls upon one of the most romanticized periods in American history, marked by rebellion, freewheelin’, and Americana—a ragged American flag hangs behind one of the mannequins, the Triumph motorcycle sign placed directly next to the flag. Ralph Lauren is not just selling clothes, it is selling a mentality, a stylized romanticization of history. As I stared at this display, I questioned the evolution of this cultural phenomenon, as it cemented an ideology and movement all at once.

Why, decades later, is Ralph Lauren capitalizing on this “escape” and way of life? Why is the Mercedes Benz logo not too far off from the peace sign? Perhaps this countercultural figure is not as countercultural as we think and has conservative roots? What happened to the “wanderers” of the 60’s? In order to understand the implications behind the Lauren ad, one must look deeper at the influences behind these iconic outfits—I call upon On the Road and Easy Rider (1969) as manifestations of this wandering way of life, ones that sum up the popularity of this idea as it evolved through the 1960s.
Introduction

As “Born to be Wild”, “King of the Road”, “Ramblin’ Man” and other traveling songs would be the soundtrack to the sixties, the figure of the wanderer at this time in American history illuminated the spirit of a restless generation. The open American road would be romanticized as Route 66 and the West would inspire masses to explore the landscape as an extension of freedom and meaning of Americanness. The popularity and progression of the wanderer figure in 1960s America can be studied through Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* as literary inspiration and within Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) as the final manifestation of the wanderer and death of an American ideal.

As a formation of the human subconscious, archetypes can be identified in any literary, film, or cultural setting. The archetype of the “Wanderer” in literature is defined typically as a hero who rides out to face the unknown, or on a journey to find the inner-self. Carl Jung, famed Swiss psychologist and theorist, describes the wanderer figure as an outcast, a seeker, or a “rugged individual [who] braves loneliness or isolation to seek new paths” (Jung). The wanderer in the 1960s can be viewed as a projection of a romanticized life that served as a form of escapism and inspiration in popular culture and literature within the shifting cultural landscape of America. This “rugged individual” would be popularized in American culture as James Dean and John Wayne would capture the hearts and imaginations of viewers through the classic “rebel” and “cowboy” figures. Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) would embody the progression of this character through hobo-hero to the eventual cosmic cowboy as the cross-roads between the disenfranchised or “beat” individual to the epitome of counterculture, the Hippie, would illuminate a decade of radical cultural change.
The aftermath of World War II had a profound effect on American culture, solidifying homogeneity, nine to five jobs, and suburbia as tenets to the 1950s era. As a response to the state of society, Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation provided an “out” for readers and artists alike, as literary classic *On the Road* would cement what it meant to be “beat”. *On the Road* tells the tale of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, two friends looking towards the American road as place of opportunity and self-exploration through their various road-trips across the country. *On the Road*’s wanderer exists as the “hobo-hero”, a tired, dissident outcast of society wandering as a projection of failed nationalism, and romanticized simplicity. Sal Paradise’s romanticization of the open road and opportunity in America alluded to an America that was lost within its various ideals, and the road offered a way to reconnect with a spirit long gone. This idea cemented *On the Road*’s popularity in American culture, as it would inspire thousands to head out on the road searching for the same answer.

Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969) closes a decade of restless American mobility, marked by the romanticized notion of the open road and the search for America in a time of political and social uncertainty. The two main characters, Billy and Wyatt “Captain America” hit the road on their motorcycles, traveling from Los Angeles to New Orleans in a search for freedom and independence. Along the way, Billy and Wyatt come in contact with multiple manifestations of America, as a commune hippie, a rancher, a “square” lawyer, and rednecks would each have an impression on the two as they ride towards an idealized America. As symbolic gestures of an America past, Billy is an ode to the plains whereas Captain America is an all-American symbol. The progression of the wanderer figure in the late 1960s can be described as the cosmic cowboy, marrying both western myth with countercultural ideology. The
experiences the two would encounter in their journey would allude to the failure of America and its falsified notions of freedom and independence as intolerance and prejudice would lead to their deaths and the downfall of this idea.

As *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* both inhabit the road genre, the archetype of the wanderer shifts as history and culture progresses. Jack Kerouac’s hobo-hero alludes to the “beat” outsider using mobility as a rejection of culture, whereas *Easy Rider*’s cosmic cowboy uses mobility as a way to search for an idealized America through a countercultural-western myth. Although the two are contradictory in nature, the progression of this figure in American culture coincides with the historical period. The two are wandering embodiments of American culture yet critique the very foundation of its myth. As *OTR*’s hobo-hero alludes to American values and its ideals failed, the cosmic cowboy alludes to America “living up to” its paramount nature yet failing its inhabitants for not being “America” enough. Through tracing the archetype of the wanderer in *On the Road* and *Easy Rider*, the progression from hobo-hero to cosmic cowboy can be illuminated through Sal Paradise’s and Billy and Wyatt’s journey as the search for America reaps different outcomes.

**Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* & the Hobo-Hero**

Understanding *On the Road*’s success in 1950s America lies within understanding the social and political climate. As the road has always existed as a mythical place in American culture, Jack Kerouac invigorated the idea of the open road with a “beat” mentality, one of which travels as a display of dissent and disappointment with American society and politics, in order to find oneself. Author David Laderman of “What a Trip: the Road Genre and American Culture” described *On the Road* as “a countercultural manifesto that articulated a bohemian lifestyle
marked by its rejection of traditional, conservative 'family values', the Protestant work ethic, and middle-class materialism... as signature characteristics of the fifties” (Laderman 42). This very rejection of societal norms is embodied by the Beat Generation. The novel is contradictory in nature as the ideologies presented are countercultural yet embody a conservative ideal. *On the Road* critiques American values. Between studying these ideals in relation to the novel and projection of the wanderer, the hobo-hero as outcast offers a dissident figure yet one who takes America face on with classical traditional values. Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty hit the road in rejection of society as outcasts, looking for a new piece of the American dream. *On the Road* cements this wandering figure as the “hobo-hero”.

The hobo-hero, as the first introduction to this wandering ideal, embodies a disassociated member of society, an outcast rejecting American norms in exchange for unadulterated freedom. This freedom, as an ode to the pioneer spirit and western myth, is also embodied by the hobo, a Depression-era symbol. Coined by Author Todd Kennedy, the “hobo-hero is someone who is portrayed as heroic because he rejects the society that entraps him, instead of chasing a life of ceaseless wandering” (Kennedy 40). The rejection of society is a characteristic embodied by the Beat Generation and Kerouac, at a time of popularized homogeneity and the nuclear family in the 1950s. That being said, the wanderer and the hobo-hero exist in a time where it was unpopular to uproot yourself and continue on, highlighting the rise to capture the hearts of a restless white youth in mid-century America. As a wandering figure, the white nomad as an extension of the hobo-hero can be best described as “an alternative to the imagined status quo embodied in the white, middle-class suburban father and 'organization man” during the pre-Kennedy cold war years” (Elmwood 335). Victoria Elmwood’s “The White Nomad and the New
Masculine Family in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* illuminates the figure of the white nomad within the novel as means of rejection to societal norms, and offers a new understanding of this figure as Kerouac presents a revival and re-birth of an American figure in a shifting mind-set in American culture.

*On the Road* is loosely based on Jack Kerouac’s travels taking place from 1947-1950 spanning east to west, as well as a trip down south to New Orleans, and eventually Mexico. Written as four separate road trips in one novel, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty take to the road on a trip to find Dean’s father, although the appeal and necessary mobility is a consistent thought and/or longing that forces Sal to leave at different points. Dean Moriarty within *OTR* is an “all-American Beatnik prophet” and inspiration for the road trips, as his “rugged” genuine nature in a time of conformity and intellectualism is intriguing to Paradise. Referenced as a “western kinsman of the sun” (Kerouac 4), Moriarty exists as a muse and embodiment of a “real America”, one in which is lost and needs to be called upon again. As Sal Paradise becomes enamored by Dean Moriarty’s free-spirit and appetite for the world, Moriarty becomes Sal’s inspiration, catalyst, and muse for his road trips:

“I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life on the road” (Kerouac 1)

The novel would start and end referencing Dean Moriarty as his character in *OTR* and Cassady in real-life would embody what it meant to be “beat”. Dean Moriarty would be a constant thought
in Sal Paradise’s life, although Moriarty would be passing in and out of people’s lives throughout the novel and in real life. In the beginning of the novel, Sal Paradise’s romanticization of Dean Moriarty introduces the rejection of his “intellectual” friends in New York in exchange for Dean, a rebellious, rugged-type, but nonetheless intriguing to Sal:

“... Dean’s intelligence was as every bit as formal and shining, and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his “criminality” was not something that was sulked and sneered; it was a yea-saying over burst of American joy; it was Western, the West wind, an ode from the Plains…” (Kerouac 7).

The spirit that Dean Moriarty embodies and is to Sal Paradise influences his interest and desire to go on the road as life without Dean is a life of restlessness and dissatisfaction. Sal romanticizes the West in this time in American history as a means to call upon older, classic ideas of manifest destiny and cowboys—the pure, raw, untouched, free-spirited lifestyle that Dean embodies as the hobo-hero. Sociologist Robert Ezra Park characterizes the hobo as “merely a belated frontiersman, a frontiersman at a time and in a place when the frontier is passing or no longer exists” (Park 160). This recall to the frontier spirit is a characteristic of wanderers in the 1960s as mobility is tied to the very idea of expansion, imperialism, and the pioneer spirit of America past offers an outlet for re-discovery. The “belated” frontiersman also alludes to the absence of this figure, therefore its manifestation in culture, adds a heightened mythic quality of this wandering figure. Sal places Dean acts as a form of escapism for Paradise and so does the open road. Kerouac aims to relieve these symptoms through the act of mobility, with the destination not first on the list, but rather the journey itself. The West, always open, beckoned to Paradise as America was more “raw”, more natural, and far more interesting than what life had to offer back in New
England. Throughout *On the Road*, Dean’s character would embody America for Sal Paradise, the rugged story of Moriarty’s life would encapsulate and inspire Sal to hit the road in search and in awe of Dean’s lifestyle:

"Dean was the son of a wino, one of the torrenting bums of Larimer Street... He used to plead in court at the age of six to have his father set free... when Dean grew up he began hanging around the Glenarm pool halls; he set a Denver record for stealing cars and went to the reformatory... Dean had brothers on his dead mother’s side—she died when he was small—but they disliked him... Dean... had the tremendous energy of a new kind of American saint" (Kerouac 34).

Paradise refers to Dean as a “saint”, one who embodies the traits of being “beat”, rugged, down one’s luck, and is intriguing to Sal. Dean represents every “poor” thing that Paradise romanticizes as the pure tragedy of Dean’s upbringing instills a longing to be around Moriarty, putting both the journey of being and Moriarty himself in mythic stature. Dean’s manifestation of hobo-hero can also be described through a white nomadic figure. Elmwood’s “The White Nomad and the New Masculine Family in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*” analyzes Dean’s role within *OTR* as muse for Sal Paradise, but also as a projection of America itself through the idea of the white nomad. Elmwood addresses the idea of “undiluted American independence” in relation to Dean and his childhood which serves as muse and interest for Sal Paradise in his ability to apply this Beat mentality and lifestyle in his journey. The ability for Dean to abandon any type of structure which comes in forms of families, jobs, etc., is intriguing to Paradise, which fuels this idea of rejection of societal norms and pressures of the time. This is further explained
within the popularity of the Beat Generation and it’s followers through Elmwood claims that

“Old Dean’s somewhat negligible tutelage is the very crucible from which Dean’s admirable, anti-domestic, anti-that “middle-class proclivities spring” (Elmwood 351). Dean is a manifestation of the white nomad, a white wanderer fueled by the political and social climate of times as well as the ability to reject societal norms based on “imagined status quo”, a figure Kerouac romanticized and also embodied as a member of the Beat Generation. As a manifestation of the wanderer, the white nomad uses mobility as resistance as fuel to join the open road:

“It was drizzling and mysterious at the beginning of our journey. I could see that it was all going to be one big saga of the mist. 'Whooee!' yelled Dean. 'Here we go'. And he hunched over the wheel and gunned her; he was back in his element, everybody could see that. We were all delighted, we all realized that we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved.” (Kerouac 134)

The “confusion and nonsense” of the life Sal left behind can be attributed to the projection of the American dream at this time in white America, using mobility as a means to perform the “one and noble function of the time”. This act of mobility shifts between the mythic nature of the road and journey once found in the frontier spirit as the destination was important as a place of opportunity and new land. As much as Kerouac and Paradise romanticize the American landscape, the internal journey is one that is reflected upon, as the use of mobility shifts between the various road trips but the longing is still there. The unmediated road and use of mobility is a
personal affirmation of “living”, as the one and only “noble function” the white nomad or hobo­hero can do.

The fantasy of mobility and the open country would fuel Paradise and Moriarty’s road trip: “He and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there” (Kerouac, 138). The white nomad’s romanticization of the road can be understood as a “fantasy of a borderless world”, one in which America exists as an extension of home and familiarity. Ann Brigham’s “The Fantasy of a Borderless World” attributes this spirit in On the Road to the “white masculine fantasy of a boundless self on the move in a borderless world” (Brigham 44). This privileged extension of mobility is indicative of a spirit found within this time period and would extend to the various examples of this male figure in popular culture, as first illuminated within On the Road. Brigham alludes to the idea that the fantasy of borderlessness lies within the idea of unmediated experience, ability to cross borders without any fear, and be able to move within these “constraints” or lack thereof, freely. Sal Paradise and his friends act upon this ability to move between racial and social boundaries in stratified America, as a white nomadic figure, but also one that romanticized the “unknown” and appropriates cultures along the way. The borderless notion in this novel lies upon the familiarity of America and the ability for white nomads to believe America is an extension of the home, therefore any culture and individual along the way is viewed as something that is exotic, but not out of reach to infiltrate. In the novel, we see this understanding unfold time and time again as Sal Paradise moves between America’s “displaced and forgotten populations” (Brigham 45), and the romanticized projection of these cultural groups are deeply flawed, especially when appropriated to answer one’s own white identity.
As mobility is form of identity for the white nomad, Sal Paradise took to the road to find himself and his “outcast” identity: “I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man disillusioned’” (Kerouac 170). Using the road as an outlet for self-discovery as a white nomad suggests that the mobility practice is a form of identity as established in the definition of the wanderer. In relation to On the Road, Sal Paradise looks towards the road as a manifestation of this old frontier spirit in the midst of changing, mid-century America. His romanticization of this idea and journey is found within his fetishization of these marginalized communities during the time period, but also as his identity as a white man “disillusioned”, upset he does not fit into these communities and therefore felt “misplaced”. Brigham’s article suggests that Sal Paradise’s character and white males on the road “claim a common marginalized location and absorb all of humanity while simultaneously revalidating their own individuality and authority” (Brigham 45). This absorption is found within Sal Paradise’s time in Denver: “I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark... wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (Kerouac 170). This highly disillusioned display of privilege and whiteness on behalf of the white nomad also allows Paradise to be able to adhere to the “calling of back home” with no consequences.

This idea also illuminates the contradictory nature as the bohemian nature of the novel is canceled out by the extension of “rugged white male individualism”, critiqued by Laderman in “What A Trip” as “the treatment of women and people of color ... are romanticized as 'repositories of authenticity’ to white urban angst” (Laderman 43).
The borderless fantasy of America exists for the white nomad and the white nomad alone in the quest for identity and self-discovery. Paradise's longing to be a "poor overworked jap" is a quest to search for an identity in a society that is "ostracizing" him as Beats are "outcasts" of society. Sal Paradise goes out to the road in a way to validate and perpetuate his white understanding of America and yet still feel disenfranchised by the ability to have to be ostracized from marginalized communities but also society back home. This mobility acts as a resistance form but also a means of self-discovery however troublesome it may be, the spirit of the road as far as the western myth and interest is embodied by Dean's character and the romanticization of this open road through opportunity and the existence of the outcast.

Through analyzing *On the Road* as a projection of the hobo-hero, the contradictory nature of the novel lies within its bohemian ideology and tradition. Between Dean Moriarty's embodiment of the hobo-hero and western ideal, the novel critiques America as a place of failed ideals as the use of mobility is the very rejection of society. Jack Kerouac cements Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty as symbolic, idealized wandering icons of the 1950s, and these two would be an iconic duo and manifestation of a spirit. Laderman's "What a Trip" suggests Paradise and Moriarty's hobo lifestyle is "idealized.... for the unattached rambling lifestyle and for the implicit critique of materialism he represents... [they] embrace the hobo lifestyle as the debris of a failed system" (Laderman 42). The hobo-hero exists as a direct critique of American values. The very nature of the novel is contradictory as Sal Paradise looks to reject society and American culture—in order to go west, as a classic American narrative and literary journey. Stuck between rebellion and tradition, *On the Road* offers the hobo-hero as an outcast figure yet embodies a classic literary travel narrative similar to Homer's *Odyssey*. *On the Road* and the Beat Generation
offer an understanding and projection of a wandering figure known as the hobo-hero that would shift in mindset, ideology, and function as the counterculture of the 1960s would be a transitional period from Beats to Hippies as formations of a youth subculture. As On the Road embodied the hobo-hero, the seeds of dissent and mobility would carry on throughout the sixties as pieces like Electric Kool Acid Test and Easy Rider shift the idea of the wanderer throughout this time in American history to the eventual cosmic cowboy as critiques of the American dream.

**Between OTR & Easy Rider (1969): The Hippies & Electric Kool Aid Acid Test**

As the countercultural torch was passed from Beatniks to Hippies in the early 1960s, the romanticization of the road and the West shifted as the culture evolved. William S. Burroughs, Beat author, commented on On the Road’s popularity: “…On The Road sold a trillion Levi’s and a million espresso coffee machines, and also sent countless kids on the road… The alienation, the restlessness, the dissatisfaction were already there waiting when Kerouac pointed out the road” (Kerouac xxii). The restless, dissatisfied nature of the novel projects the wanderer as a hobo-hero as the transition between the fifties and sixties in America gave way to the Beats and the dissident nature of a generation. A “beat” way of living slowly morphed into a free love, spirituality-driven existence, maintaining a sense of community and away from Jack Kerouac’s conservative ideology. The Hippies would create a youth-based counterculture that subscribed to the most liberal and “free” movements, straying away from the black and white seriousness of the Beat Generation and into more colorful understanding of the world. The hobo-hero turned white nomad after the success of the novel gave birth to a generation of individuals who instead of taking on the road as an external journey, looked inward. The white nomad exists as an afterthought exists at a time where all the land has been discovered yet the mythic qualities of open
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American road and the west still embody this spirit but forces this character to go on an internal journey. The journey was never about the destination, but the experience itself.

Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters' 1964 trip immortalized in Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* would serve as a middle ground between hobo-hero and cosmic cowboy, as the search for America is doused in LSD and spiritually driven. Kesey alludes to the influence *OTR* had on him and the Pranksters: "we weren't old enough to be beatniks, and we were a little too old to be hippies... Everybody I knew had read "On the Road." It stirred us up, so we decided to travel across the country" (Kesey). Kesey and the Pranksters served as the bridge between the Beat Generation and the Hippies, his use of mobility as a continued rejection of society and restlessness but with a drug-riddled trip to change society. Neal Cassady’s involvement in *EKAT* illuminated a lasting ideology in a changing time. Cassady, the inspiration for Dean Moriarty in *OTR*, would transform to “Speed Limit”, a crazed bus driver who no one understood. His presence in the Prankster’s trip would be an ode to *OTR*, but also illuminating the change in the movements. Cassady was not Kerouac’s western muse anymore, he drove for Kesey now. The meeting in New York City for the sole purpose for Kerouac to meet Kesey would go wrong, as Kerouac’s cold nature and failing health would cement him as a “man of his time” and Kesey’s antics with his Merry Pranksters would be illustrative of the Hippies. As hobo-hero turned white nomad in the midst of the 1960s, the “outcast” figure turns towards an internal space as the social and political climate of the sixties would allude to a “nation in transition”. The end of the sixties would produce the cosmic cowboy, a wandering figure who embodies America, marrying both western myth and counterculture in an unlikely pair searching for the same dream.
Easy Rider (1969) and the Cosmic Cowboy

"Get your motor runnin’
Head out on the highway
Lookin’ for adventure
and whatever comes our way”

Steppenwolf, “Born to be Wild”

As this song would become an anthem for the 1960s, the open road would invite restless individuals to seek their own adventure instilled with a type of individualistic freedom that could not be mirrored elsewhere. This freedom, as an extension of the American dream, would be romanticized throughout the 1950s and 1960s as On the Road would cement this ideology as a “rite of passage”. Dennis Hopper’s Easy Rider (1969) mimics this search and rite of passage as Billy and Wyatt take to the American roads in the late 60’s. As the end of the decade would mark the end of one of the most turbulent times in American history, Richard Nixon’s presidency, the continuation of the Vietnam War, and the moon landing marked a radical shift from the dreamy, starry-eyed “Camelot” America embodied just years earlier. The road genre in Easy Rider captures a spirit of America that is soon to die out, the forever-immortalized individualistic freedom and rugged lifestyle that defines a countercultural mindset and cultural time period.

The two companions in Easy Rider, Billy and Wyatt aka “Captain America” (played by Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda), hop on their motorcycles and hit the open road in the search for America. In the opening scenes, “Born to be Wild” plays as Billy and Wyatt cruise down the two lane-blacktop stretch in the west. Traveling from Los Angeles to New Orleans after a drug deal, Billy and Wyatt come in contact with strangers along the road, ranging from a stranger
from a commune to a ranch family, and eventually an eccentric all-American lawyer from the South, George Hanson (played by Jack Nicholson). Hanson joins the two on their journey to New Orleans, but with each stop the three encounter bigotry and intolerance at the hands of rural small-town America. Although Hanson would never make it to New Orleans, Billy and Wyatt are impacted by the senseless death of their friend and disturbed by the reality of America. In New Orleans, Billy and Wyatt end up picking up two girls at a brothel and going to a nearby cemetery to take LSD. After a bad trip, Billy and Wyatt continue to repress their journey and become more despondent than after Hanson’s death. The state of America at this time and the death of their American dream becomes clear, as freedom terrifies rural America, and there is no place for these rugged individuals in the transitional state of the nation. In the end, the two were blown one by one off of the road in a symbolic end to not only these two individuals searching for America and coming up short, but as the death of a countercultural ideology and the wandering individual.

As Jack Kerouac’s *OTR* illuminated the dissident hobo-hero, *Easy Rider* embodies the iconic cosmic cowboy. Marrying both western and countercultural ideology, the cosmic cowboy adheres to the Cowboy Code and agrarian ideology during their quest. “‘I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy’: Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture” by Michael Allen uses the Cowboy Code to discuss the similarities between these two icons: “the fundamental tenets of the code encompassed qualities of wanderlust, love of nature, strength, courage, adaptability, loyalty, stoicism, individualism, egalitarianism, and independence” (Allen 277). These traits are found within both communities as the Code to live by are embodied through the rodeo lifestyle and commune living. Allen also alludes to the idea of hippies not
being as countercultural as others project: “sixties hippies are supposedly aimed to “counter” the
dominant “culture”, they in fact adopted some of the fundamental tenets and values of that
culture” (Allen 296). Although many equate hippies to be strictly countercultural, the similarities
between the cowboy and the hippie suggest a cultural phenomenon which best fits within the
traveling narrative and popularity of this figure in 1960s America. The road genre illuminates the
contradictory nature preceding the figure of the wanderers, as David Laderman describes:

“the cultural roots of the road film go beyond the immediate context of its
emergence, however, and include a literary tradition focused on voyaging, which
in turn often reflects an ideology of expansionism and imperialism. This Euro­
American ideological strain, which combines enterprise and mobility, is best
perhaps summed up by the term “manifest destiny” which reverberates with
connotations that may seem contrary to the overtly rebellious themes of the
genre” (Laderman 41).

The contradictions between the two lie within the use of mobility as a means of expansion yet
the society the wanderers are rejecting does not align with the circumstances behind “manifest
destiny”. Within On the Road, the wandering ideal is contradictory as the embedded notion of
mobility lies within the rejection of societal norms to search for a classic American idea, and
Easy Rider offers a countercultural figure that is influenced by classic American values. The
overt projection of cowboy and hippie in Easy Rider cements itself as a countercultural
masterpiece, yet the contradictions between ideologies allude to an America that has failed its
inhabitants. The marriage between both hippie and cowboy in American history alludes to a new
projection of a wandering ideal, as the cowboy and the hippie come together as one American
As the last manifestation of the wanderer in this time period, the cosmic cowboy is an American icon, searching for an America that does not exist—it has failed its ideals. *Easy Rider*’s Billy and Wyatt are these icons, driven by western influence, subtly influenced by countercultural ideology.

As Billy and Wyatt take off on their journey, Wyatt takes off his watch and throws it, a testament to the carefree lifestyle and breaking free from the constraints of time and society. This kicks off the road trip, already a testament to the two characters and their attitudes going forth. Billy and Wyatt embody the “bad boys” of America, the motorcycle riders going wherever the journey takes them. Donned in a leather jacked with an American flag painted on the back, American flag helmet and chopper, “Captain America” (Peter Fonda) symbolizes the visionary and detached America at this time in cultural history. His character, as a cosmic cowboy, seeks the very ideals that he is rejecting. “What a Trip” by David Laderman touched upon the contradictory nature of this character: “Captain America’s peaceful soul searching strangely recollects and re-articulates the quiet stoicism of the cowboy… he also admires the rugged individualism of the farmer… suddenly revealing the militant patriotism and “manifest destiny” it intends to mock” (Laderman 48). Captain America is seeking the same norms he is trying to reject. Billy, decked out in a fringe leather jacket, cowboy hat, and sea shell necklace is an ode to the western expansion and manifest destiny spirit. The two together symbolize two classic American figures who are on the road to search for America, an America that is long lost, an America that is not America enough. They are America.

This scene within *Easy Rider* illuminates the very basis of their journey and realization of failed American ideals:
George Hanson: *They're not scared of you. They're scared of what you represent to 'em.*

Billy: *Hey, man, all we represent to them, man, is somebody who needs a haircut.*

George Hanson: *Oh no. What you represent to them is freedom.*

Billy and Wyatt’s mobility as wandering figures is propelled by the search for the American dream but also as an exertion of freedom. The two characters are carriers of this mobile spirit and attitude through white rugged individualism, but they are affected by the close-minded small town people of the South. With long hair, motorcycles, and using words like “man” and “groovy”, the two set themselves as hippies or figures from the West on the road as a lifestyle and attitude, as outcasts of society. As Billy and Wyatt would be turned away from hotels and jailed for “parading without a permit” just based on their looks, Hanson describes the fear caused by their appearance and presence past the Mason Dixon line as the “hidden part” of America. The South is unforgiving to Billy and Wyatt—subjected to bigotry and the mindset of many “squares” and reserved people of the day. This mindset is best explained by the backwards notion of the South and the discomfort experienced when “long hairs” show up in town. Their “otherness” poses a threat, and in the end, between Hanson’s death and the ending, pushes towards the intolerant nature of the nation. The senseless death of both Billy and Wyatt at the end further illustrates an idea and movement eliminated by the hands of rural America.
Billy: *Hey, man! We've done it! We've done it! We're rich, Wyatt. Yeah, man. Yeah.*

*Say, we did it, man. We did it! We did it. We're rich, man! We're retirin' in Florida now, mister.*

Captain America: You know Billy, we blew it."

The last exchange between Billy and Wyatt illuminates the death of the wanderer and the spirit of mobility as the two never found a place they were happy or did not find the America they were looking for. As the two wanderers spent time on a commune and once on a ranch, they still left and pursued life elsewhere. Billy cheered at the prospect of retiring in Florida and the money they had on them, but Captain America was quiet and mournful of an opportunity lost. During this morose scene, one could only wonder if Captain America dreamed of a trip that was less destructive both mentally and emotionally. The search for America and living life to the fullest was elusive, a disappointment, and fatal. Instead of finding America, Billy and Wyatt pursued money, empire, and to challenge society. Billy was content “retirin” in Florida with the money made from the drug deal, Captain America wanted more than that. The end of the 1960s in America was similar, instead of having the opportunity to be different and change, post-victory WWII America chased after Vietnam, consumer culture, and greed. The freewheelin’ spirit of the 1960s and the wanderer goes up in smoke as the death of Captain America and Billy is the death to the romanticization of the American road. These two characters are immortalized in film as an iconic, over-exertion of this ideal and spirit of a decade, as the optimism of the previous years was dying out. Towards the end of the movie, the realizations on behalf of both Billy and Wyatt allude to a journey that failed. Not only did the two not find their place in American society, they
were ultimately wiped out of it as their symbolic deaths at the end point to a countercultural end
to the spirit of the decade.

Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* symbolizes the failed search for an American myth. Wyatt and Billy’s journey to “reclaim” America as cosmic cowboys falls short as their symbolic death alludes to an America that could not deliver. As Captain America drapes his jacket over Billy’s body at the end of the film, the search for an America as an exertion of freedom and expansion was murdered before it was captured. As this figure would capture the mind of a generation, the idea illuminated within *Easy Rider* points towards the shifting mindset of a nation in progress, as a form of road escapism. As many romanticize Billy and Wyatt’s rugged individualism and attitude towards life, the death of this figure would be marked by the inability to find true freedom out of the road, or as an American ideal. Through analyzing Billy and Wyatt as wandering figures in *Easy Rider*, the cultural manifestation of this figure is found within the cosmic cowboy. As their journey progressed, the true nature of America challenged Billy and Wyatt, they never found their America, instead they came face to face with the America that did not change through the decade. *Easy Rider*’s Billy and Wyatt went on a journey in a quest for freedom, America, and self-discovery, and in the end: “a man went searching for America, and instead he found nothing” (*Easy Rider*, 1969).

**Conclusion**

Through studying Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* as a chronological progression of an archetype and cultural phenomenon, the hobo-hero turns cosmic cowboy as a projection of western ideals and societal dissent. *On the Road*’s Sal Paradise and
Dean Moriarty embodies the hobo-hero as a dissident outcast, hitting the American roads in a search for a classic, untouched America away from societal pressures. As *On the Road*'s popularity would cement Dean and Sal as classic wandering figures, many would try and emulate the same rugged spirit through hitting the road. The spirit embodied by the Beat Generation and its followers would carry into the 1960s as the mythic nature of the road and *On the Road* would be a call to action for many. This “beat” outcast and hobo-hero transformed into the white nomad as Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters would reverse the classic road trip out west in an iconic countercultural search for America, fueled by the remnants of *OTR*’s spirit. As the 1960s came to a close, the optimism of a decade died out as the reality of America’s state extended beyond the free-spirited, carefree lifestyle embodied by the hippies. The final state of the wanderer as a cultural icon in the sixties would end with *Easy Rider*. As modern-day cowboys, Billy and Captain America drive east in the “search for America” yet fall short. The figure of the cosmic cowboy ends the wandering ideal in the sixties as the marriage between a western ideal and countercultural ideology. As a nation unchanged, Billy and Wyatt’s failed journey and death is a testament to America’s failure to live up to its mythic nature, and the death of an American ideal. The progression of hobo-hero to cosmic cowboy alludes to a nation in the midst of change as the ideals embodied by both figures shift from outcast to American icon. The hobo-hero illuminates a figure rejecting American values, whereas the cosmic cowboy is the embodiment of America. As Ralph Lauren capitalizes on this romanticization of American culture and history, the countercultural embodiment of the wanderer contradicts itself as the rejection of American values and materialism is met with the classic American road trip and the spirit of expansion. Through studying the progression of this figure in American history, the
hobo-hero turns cosmic cowboy as *On the Road* and *Easy Rider* illuminates an ideal challenged by its habitants and the failure of an American dream.
Works Consulted


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