Me, Myself and Jack Kerouac

John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln in a theater and ran to a warehouse. Lee Harvey Oswald shot Kennedy from a warehouse and ran to a theater. Lincoln had a secretary named Kennedy. Kennedy had a secretary named Lincoln. [...] And consider this dismaying observation: Ronald Wilson Reagan – how many letters in each name? Six-six-six (Long 44).

The shortest path between two people is a straight line, and the following dissertation shall investigate the remarkable similarities between two special writers from different generations: Jack Kerouac and myself.

In Jack's Book, Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee write, "The Sunday reviewer of the New York Times had warned that the road Jack had taken in On The Road could only be traveled once, and as Jack's books came out, one by one, the critics enforced their colleague's decision" (262). Indeed, when Kerouac's second book of poetry, Mexico City Blues, was published in 1959, it "certainly didn't get a warm reception" (Clark 176). Critics trashed Kerouac's drug-induced spontaneous verse, claiming, in a McCarthy-esque way, that "the naive effrontery of this book [Blues] is more pitiful than ridiculous" (Charters: Kerouac 308). When the world repudiated his only safe haven, the written word, Kerouac resorted to alcohol and, with this newfound source of comfort, soon drank himself to death. As Morris Dickstein writes in the New York Times Book Review:

Kerouac had a myth to him all right...but it only came through his remarkable ability to become his own "true" self on paper. Without paper and words he was a loser. His relationships with men as well as women were painful and unresolved, he was a bleeding ball of contradictions and private hells, he was in the flesh infantile, insecure, paranoid, desperate (Dickstein 4).

In the above quote, if you replace the name "Kerouac" with "Jonathan Yu," it makes absolutely no difference, because Kerouac's life is not all that dissimilar to my own. Every day I struggle to deal with my insecurities, but when I sit down to write, I am master of my domain, proving that the pen, er, keyboard is mightier than the sword, though not without some trouble. Like Kerouac, I have gone through hell and back to get published, having dealt with censorship, controversy, criticism, and rejection. Like Kerouac, I have become the easy target of the "established" literary scene that is the collective population of Mountain View. And like Kerouac, I find it hard to believe that the thing that keeps me going can ultimately bring me down.

Using Kerouac's Mexico City Blues experience as our focal point, let us now investigate the parallel lives and times of John (Jack) Kerouac and Jonathan Yu.

As a writer, "Kerouac was seeking a way of communicating the depths of his frustration with the modern world. He felt that he had to get beyond the bounds of conventional narrative to do it" (Hipkiss 85). In The Portable Jack Kerouac, Kerouac tells biographer Ann Charters that:

I got sick and tired of the conventional English sentence, which seemed to me so ironbound in its rules, so inadmissible with reference to the actual format of my mind as I had learned to probe it, that I couldn't express myself through that form any more (486).

Thus, spontaneous prose was born, "a way to record as rapidly as possible, thus presumably as freely and as completely as possible, life as an ongoing mental process" (Hipkiss 94). Using spontaneous prose as the basis of his poetry in Mexico City Blues, Kerouac is given the freedom to be personally brash, ["Fuck, I'm tired of this imagery / – I wanta quit this horseshit / go home / and go to bed" (Kerouac 216)].
of this imagery – I wanta quit this horseshit / go home / and go to bed” (Kerouac 216) personally playful,

["You just dont know / What dont I know? / How good this ham n eggs / is / If you had any idea / whatsoever
/ How good this is / Then you would stop / writing poetry / And dig in” (Kerouac 80) and personally melancholy "]Charley Parker, forgive me – / Forgive me for not answering you eyes...Charley Parker, pray for me – / Pray for me and everybody.– Charley Parker, lay the bane, / off me, and every body” (Kerouac 243)]

without having to resort to trite literary formulas.

Robert A. Hipkiss writes in Jack Kerouac: Prophet Of The New Romanticism

[...] What sets Kerouac apart from the “writer writers” and makes his voice carry, despite its comparative frailty and childishness, is that he has the courage to put down the unaccustomed rhythm and details of the frantic modern scene exactly the way he’s lived it (78).

Continues Hipkiss, “Much of his work is an expression of the creative impulse very much for its own sake – a refusal of rules of creation and a celebration, in the act, of the spontaneity inherent in creativity” (94).

Kerouac was having his lunch and writing it too, turning the world of poetry on its side with a goofball-infested slap in the face.

Nevertheless, “his stance was deceptive. Although he had not exactly revised On The Road, he had written it in three or four different forms, and he never slighted hard work or discipline” (Douglas 6). Hard work and discipline – that just about describes a neurotic perfectionist like me who also happens to believe in telling it like it is. If that means using profanity and other blasphemous language, then so be it. I realize that my writing is oftentimes guileless and disturbing, but it is this guileless and disturbing writing that gives me the leverage to capture my thoughts and experiences. It may be the debauchery of the English language, but my self-proclaimed “blatantly irreverent writing” (BIW) gives me an outlet of communication that I can’t achieve when following MLA stylebook guidelines. Simple, unsettling prose like “I hate the French” and “I thought a guy screwing a pie was funny” leaves no room for confusion. “Jack’s talk was like [his poems in] Mexico City Blues, basically,” (Gifford 47) and in the tradition of Kerouac, I too do my best to write like I talk, because true life does not come bundled with Microsoft Word.

“Most of Mexico City Blues was loose sketching, and the choruses were based on what Kerouac saw and heard around him at the moment of writing his poems” (Charters: Kerouac 222), and “Jack was hugely satisfied with what he’d written in Mexico City” (Charters: Kerouac 228). However, when he returned to the Bay Area, “Kerouac found he couldn’t get poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights to accept Mexico City Blues” (Clark 157). Says Ferlinghetti, “I didn’t used to think very highly of Jack’s poetry. I had the manuscript of Mexico City Blues and could have published it, but it didn’t turn me on very much. I don’t know why” (Gifford 270). Ferlinghetti had said he would publish Blues if it was edited, but Kerouac rejected his offer, noting that:

If you don’t stick to what you first thought, and to the words the thought brought, what’s the sense of bothering with it anyway, what’s the sense of foisting your little lies on others, or that is, hiding your little truths from others? (Charters: Portable 486).

It is an understatement to say that I hate being edited. I spend hours at a time writing material only to have my editor-in-chief Myriah Cornwell glance at my work, roll her eyes and ask, “Do you really expect us [the Mountain View High School Oracle] to publish this? Try again.” I may be a stubborn human being, but I am open to editing when it is reasonable. My standards for what is appropriate are considerably different than those of the general public, and I’m willing to be kicked in the mouth when I cross the line. However, the downright rejection of my writing without much consideration and usually due to a personal bias pisses me off. The in-chiefs try to sugar coat the situation, claiming that it’s not censorship but rather “constructive editing.” What the hell is that? If you don’t like my writing, tell me that you don’t like it and spare me the hassle of having to make it family-friendly. I really don’t care if you want to publish it or not. Fuck that. In the Mountain View High School Oracle, my last column “Nookie Monster” went through so many revisions that the end result read nothing like the original version. It wasn’t even funny – literally. Look what happens when
the end result read nothing like the original version. It wasn't even funny—literally. Look what happens when my prose in run through the awful machine of copy editing:

The original sentence: Got milk? (heh heh) Thank you, God, for giving women tiny little nipples. Yummy down on this.

The revised sentence: Thank you, God, for giving women the power to lactate. Yummy down on this.

The original sentence: We all hope Mrs. Kaiser dies of ovarian cancer while being raped by rhesus monkeys with AIDS

The revised sentence: We all hope Mrs. Governmentwenchwithtenure dies of a brain tumor.

The original sentence: Oak Elementary School should hold a sex-a-thon. 10 cents an orgasm!

The revised sentence: This sentence never went to press.

How am I supposed to go on living when the power of my word is disfigured or worse, confiscated by the teacher? The in-chiefs might as well go ahead an send me to a concentration camp.

Kerouac finally got lucky at Grove Press. "Editor Don Allen this time left Kerouac's texts unaltered, which pleased Jack but made no difference to the critics" (Clark 176). "Though later Robert Creeley and Anthony Hecht reviewed it favorably" (McNally 274), the critical reaction toward Blues was mostly unfavorable. In Library Journal, Dorothy Nyren writes, "It is hard to find much to recommend in them. [...] Too often they are pretentiously intellectual improvisations on Buddhist themes" (3777). Adds John Ciardi in Saturday Review, "Poetry, I insist, is not a jam session in which the poet blows whatever comes into his head; and if it were, Kerouac is not musician enough to sit in with the men" (25). But the criticism of Nyren and Ciardi is considered tame when compared to the damning remarks of the New York Times writer Kenneth Rexroth.

Mexico City Blues was raked over in the Times by Kenneth Rexroth, whose attack on the book could have been motivated by bitter personal anger at Jack’s off-handed characterization of him as “Rheinhold Cacoethes” in The Dharma Bums. Kerouac had hoped Mexico City Blues would establish him as a serious poet, but Rexroth began his review with the ultimate putdown: “Someone once said of Mr. Kerouac that he was a Columbia freshman who went to a party in the Village twenty years ago and got lost. How true” (Kerouac 307).

Rexroth, once a close personal friend of Kerouac, uses his review less as a criticism of Mexico City Blues and more as a place for him to vent his “bitter personal anger.” He goes on to “put down the entirety of Kerouac’s published work (it consisted, said Rexroth, in a great deal of writing on subjects about which the author knew ‘less than nothin’)" (Clark 176), and state that “this form of poetry separated the men from the boys, and Kerouac was obviously a boy and couldn’t write, and it was a disgrace that he would present this book in public” (Gifford 222). In fact, his “review” basically consists of pretentious pot shots like those presented above. “Jack felt Rexroth wasn’t being fair. It was like somebody from the old days had suddenly slammed the door” (Charters: Kerouac 308). Rexroth wasn’t being fair— he was being a dick— for his piece “was less a review than an intellectual’s voodoo curse on Kerouac’s career” (Clark 177).

Critics simply didn’t understand what Kerouac was trying to say with his poetry. The beauty of spontaneous prose was completely alien to them. They just saw Kerouac as this abominable un-writer and consequently, used the release of Mexico City Blues to launch their blitzkrieg of shame. Few, if any, critics actually reviewed the book in their reviews. At times like these, when the goodness in man appears to have been lost completely, we are reassured by the fact that this was the 60s. Segregation was rampant, “gay” meant “happy,” and Garrison Keillor was the “in” thing. So it is not surprising to see that why critics would attack a drugged-out Buddha-worshipping jazz-loving citizen of Bohemia who defied normal literary standards.

“This rejection of his best book of poetry especially disappointed him. For such ‘negative shits’ – critics and publishers – he now had...one thing to say: ‘fuck em all, I know better’” (Clark 157).

Flak has come to be expected in my world, and to my detractors, I too say “fuck em all.” Take, for example, the hot water I got into recently with the publication of my humor article "Taking On The Complete Word Of God:
A Review Of The Bible” and my column “American Booty” in the March 13 issue of the Mountain View High School Oracle. Although the humor was deliberately sophomoric, none of the two articles were written with the intention of being offensive. The Bible article was a satire of book reviews (at least to me it was) and the column was a commentary of gimmicks and the death of love in America. But that’s not how the public interpreted it. To tell you the truth, the eruption of response from teachers and students alike blew me away. Student Jill Toby writes in her letter to the Oracle:

I agree that people should be able to voice their opinion, but does a person’s opinion always have to be negative and then published in our newspaper as a great piece of work for everyone to unknowingly read and be offended? […] Just because you can upset people doesn’t mean that you are a good writer. I would have to say it just means you are a disturbed person (2).

Concerned parent Scott Brown agrees in his letter. “Neither of [his] articles would be acceptable in the mainstream press and should not be acceptable in a high school newspaper” (2).

Allen Ginsberg once said that, “Rexroth attempted a set-piece that would provide a new benchmark for excoriation, but bile drowned this wit” (Gifford 262). Inoperable debasement is also a problem with critics of mine. Typical censuring usually degenerates into a personal attack that rarely, if ever, takes heed of the articles in question. I concede that maybe a school environment is not the most suitable place for my writing, and maybe I’m “asking for it” when I continually pick on subjects I know will easily rile people up, like the Christians and Jill Toby’s favorite band NSYNC, but my writing deserves respect for being, well, writing. If you don’t like my ideas and morals, fine. I don’t care. But at least respect my ideas and morals for what they are – my ideas and morals. I don’t particularly enjoy Jill Toby’s brutish letter to the editor, but I respect her opinion. I might not agree with it, but I respect it.

The criticism would be easier to accept were it not for the bunches of people who say that they thoroughly enjoy the same articles that draw flak. It is times like these that I thank God (okay, maybe not him) that I have supporters of my work. Were it not for them, I would have probably already run out of town.

Kerouac also had defenders of his book of poetry, though they were few and far between. The New York Herald Tribune heralds, “His sentences frequently move into tempestuous sweeps and whirls and sometimes they have something of the rich music of Gerard Manley Hopkins or Dylan Thomas” (Kerouac back cover). In addition, “[Gary Snyder] later called it [Mexico City Blues] ‘the greatest piece of religious poetry I’ve ever seen’” (McNally 208). Says Snyder, “I gave a reading from Mexico City Blues, from the Buddhist poems, and said, ‘Now these are interesting contemporary Buddhist poems’” (Gifford 211). Furthermore, “a friend gave [Bob Dylan] a copy of Mexico City Blues and later Dylan grew with the knowledge that words could be free” (McNally 307). But despite the show of moral support, negative attention had already crushed Kerouac, and his days as a writer were cut short, as he chose to focus on his drinking instead. If only they had known how much he was hurting on the inside.

“There was in Jack, a desire to be independent from and able to dispense with, every other person on earth” (Dickstein 4). Me too. Maybe I can’t write. Maybe my puerility is a sign of some serious self-esteem issues. Maybe I should go ahead and drink myself to death. Have we become so politically correct as a culture that anything that defies convention is immediately blacklisted? Or am I simply a pushover of a writer? You don’t see people attacking such established offenders like the National Lampoon or the Onion, and my writing is clean by comparison. And look at Kerouac. His writing wasn’t even offensive – it was just different – and people still complained. e.e. cummings was doing they same thing with his poetry, but did the critics barrage him with disapproval? No. They chose to pick on Jack Kerouac, the skinny little sitting-duck-of-a-guy from Lowell, Massachusetts. It makes me question the true power of the first amendment, whether in school, or in the outside world, when the average passive guy like Kerouac or myself is condemned for not holding back and putting everything he’s got into his writing. So to all those who have ever participated in a witchhunt of unorthodox writers, I quote from the 211th chorus of Mexico City Blues (Wheel Of The Quivering Meat Conception): “Poor! I wish I was free / of that slaving meat wheel / and safe in heaven dead” (211).
Meat Conception): “Poor! I wish I was free / of that slaving meat wheel / and safe in heaven dead” (211).

Bibliography


Toby, Jill. "Letters To The Editor". The Mountain View High School Oracle, April 3, 2000, p. 2.
Both have seven letters in their last names ("Lincoln" and "Kennedy"). Both were concerned with civil rights: Lincoln felt strongly that all slaves should be freed and issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which legally freed all slaves[15]. Although President Kennedy did have a female secretary named Evelyn Lincoln[58], there is no record that President Lincoln had a secretary named "Kennedy"[5]. Both assassins were born in '39: John Wilkes Booth was born May 10, 1838[40][41], while Lee Harvey Oswald was born October 18, 1939[42][43]. Later lists included a "kicker" that a week before Lincoln was shot he was in Monroe, Maryland and a week before Kennedy was shot he was with Marilyn Monroe. My best friend in business Devon has named me as a witness without telling me in a criminal case and my father without telling me. The recording adds to the litany of e-mails and stories broken by The National Pulse about the grift of the Biden family, including yesterday's scoop about the VP's son using White House access in exchange for resort villa stays and artwork. Listen to Hunter's "Most Genius Shit Ever" at The National Pulse.

Meanwhile: This is just the first of the Hunter tapes. — Jack Posobiec 🎤 (@JackPosobiec) October 27, 2020. Our research shows that for more than decade, HUNTER has been personally targeted by China's intelligence apparatus and its various 'foreign relations agencies'. Kennedy was named after his grandfather. Lincoln's father, Thomas Lincoln, owned two 600-acre farms, several town lots, livestock, and horses and was among the richest men in the county. Interesting Note: Lincoln did not attend his own father's funeral. Kennedy moved a short distance away from his birthplace in early childhood, had a brother (Robert) born there, and then moved away from his birth state (Massachusetts) before the age of ten. Lincoln served in the military as an officer (Captain) in the Black Hawk War. Kennedy ran as a minority party candidate and was considered to be a long-shot for the Presidency. He was also a Roman Catholic when nearly all Presidents before him were Protestant. Lincoln was a president of many "firsts". Lincoln had a secretary named Kennedy who told him not to go to the theater. Lincoln was shot in the back of the head in front of his wife. Lincoln was shot in Ford's Theater. He was shot on a Friday. John Wilkes Booth was known by 3 names. 15 letters in his name. Booth shot Lincoln @ a theater and fled to a warehouse. Booth was killed before being brought to trial. There were theories that Booth was part of a larger conspiracy. Lincoln's successor was Andrew Johnson, born in 1808. Kennedy was elected to Congress in 1946. He was elected President in 1960. Son died @ White House. He wa Ronald Wilson Reagan Mrs. Thatcher would have really liked to have unveiled this monument to her friend Ronald Reagan, but ill health prevented her attending when it was unveiled by the US Ambassador. Reagan never quite enjoyed the affection of the British people in the way that other American presidents did but he was given credit by his admirers for helping to end the Cold War, maybe his most famous saying being his appeal to “take down that wall, Mr. Gorbachev!” The Ronald Reagan Foundation paid for the ten foot (three metre) tall bronze statue which was unveiled on Independence Day 2011 wh