

# On My Road

**Holland Cotter**

(2007)

A high school friend—I'll call him Raymond—was in trouble. He'd been breaking into houses for thrills in our rich little white suburb of Boston. The police finally nabbed him; he was charged as a delinquent and shipped off to reform school in Austin, Tex., from which he sent back fearsome reports. In June of 1964, with school done for the year, I decided, in solidarity, to visit him.

Greyhound had a deal: an all-purpose, go-anywhere, good-for-a-year bus ticket for \$100. I scraped the money together, bought the ticket, then told my parents. Fireworks. But I went anyway, with a promise that I'd check in with family en route. The next day I was on a bus out of Park Square station, with a way-too-big suitcase and a bag of books, headed south.

The books: Thoreau's "Walden," Dickinson's poems, Whitman's "Specimen Days" and Jack Kerouac's "On the Road." It was the Kerouac novel, first published 50 years ago this Wednesday, that inspired the trip. A drop-in on Raymond, though it held a certain lunatic appeal, was a pretext for a larger plan: to make the great American pilgrimage on Kerouac's "holy road."

Americans have, or at least once had, a thing for quest-journeys. You find evidence in 19th-century paintings of wilderness to the horizon. In literature John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" was a national best seller before the Civil War, second only to the Bible. Its redemptivist impulse powers Thoreau's perambulations. Kerouac, a confessed religionist, used Bunyan's dream trip from the City of Destruction to the Gates of Heaven as his literary model.

In the 1950s a cult of the frontier enjoyed a popular revival. Davy Crockett and the space race provided safe, secular options to two kids, two cars and 9 to 5. The stage-savvy Beats, with their motorbike saints, were part of the getaway package. Then in

**FYI**

Holland Cotter is a critic for the *New York Times* who ordinarily writes about the art scene. But the hoopla in 2007 over the fiftieth anniversary of *On the Road*'s publication inspired him to write this memoir, casting the novel in a less flattering light and putting a different spin on what people learn (or don't learn) from the places they visit. The piece appeared in the *Times* on September 2, 2007.

the early '60s the poetics of travel turned political, with civil rights marches, Freedom Rides and songs about all the roads a man must walk down before you call him a man. It was around this time, post-Beat, pre-hippie, when I was catching a bus south.

For some reason I had a romantic view of bus travel, maybe because Neal Cassady, Kerouac's buddy-hero, came to New York City for the first time by Greyhound with his teenage wife. What I quickly learned was that buses were the way poor people traveled long distance, people who couldn't afford planes, trains or cars. Many of my fellow passengers, and more and more the farther south I went, were African-American.

When I was growing up, the color line was firm in ways hard to imagine today, in both the North and the South. Racism was a dirty bomb ready to detonate. I knew no African-Americans—Negro was the term then—personally. None lived in my town; there was only one black student in my school, and he didn't stay.

Yet I was immersed in African America. It came to me through pop culture: the calypso craze, Xavier Cugat's mambo, the gumbo in Campbell's chicken gumbo soup, Desi Arnaz's "Babalú." It came in the evening news, with the image of Patrice Lumumba of Congo, earnest and articulate in his dark suit and glasses. He wasn't a National Geographic African, but an urbane modern politician. Adults around me clearly viewed him with hostility, as they did Malcolm X.

My father, like Kerouac, was a jazz fanatic, and he listened to it all: Charlie Parker, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Waller, Miles Davis, Jelly Roll Morton, Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington. And blues and gospel. Mahalia Jackson's "Standing Here Wondering Which Way to Go" was the first road song I learned by heart. I was 10.

I had all this cultural information with me as I traveled from Boston to Baltimore, to Washington and on to Raleigh, N.C., Atlanta and Birmingham, Ala. But in some way, I was learning, it had always been abstract, imported into my life, from some source kept at a distance. Now I had a sense of that distance, and I wanted to ask questions. Why was Lumumba killed? Does Malcolm X truly hate us? What is it like to be in a church when Mahalia Jackson sings?

But I was a bookish kid, shy before I was bold, who looked even younger than he was. I felt vulnerable. I had never traveled alone so far from home, from my world. Still, there were hesitant conversations with people beside me, or across the aisles, or in bus terminals, and the trip took on a theme; it was about learning what it meant to be white in America, and how strange the very idea was.

In Washington I stayed with my great-uncle Sampson. I'd met him only a few times, and he never seemed to change: affable, energetic, with a shock of gray hair shooting out behind his head, like a Fragonard portrait. He had long ago moved out of the family loop, ever since he had finished Harvard Business School and gone into vaudeville as a songwriter and piano man. Later he married Tessa, a singer, settled in Washington and went into business. When I visited, they were sharing their house with Tessa's two divorced sisters, a tiny, adored white dog and back-to-back twin baby grands.

"We live each as he or she pleases," Sampson announced when I got there. "We eat when we're hungry, sleep till noon or get up before dawn, as we like. While you're with us, we hope you'll observe the house rules."

I did, and with the domestic anarchy we all spent a lot of time together, mostly visiting museums:

Chinese scrolls at the Freer, the Shakespeare folios at the Folger, the National Gallery Vermeers. In the evenings we listened to music and read. I felt right at home. Safe.

On my last night they took me to a concert in Rock Creek Park. Harry Belafonte was introducing the singer Miriam Makeba. Tessa explained that she was in political exile from South Africa. She also explained

what apartheid meant, a word I didn't know. On the way back in the cab she said that something was wrong in the country since Kennedy's assassination. Do you really have to go on with this trip? I thought: No, I don't. I said: Yes, I do.

Next I crashed with a cousin, John, a young professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Smart, tense, busy

with summer school, he gave me a tour of the neat, green campus, then said, "I want to show you another part of town." He drove me a short distance from the university to a road lined with falling-down houses, where African-Americans lived. I had never seen such poverty.

He asked to look at my Greyhound map, and he traced with his finger the route I was taking to Texas. "Look," he said, "when you get to Mississippi, stay on the bus. Don't get off. Go straight through." Just a few days earlier three civil-rights workers, two of them white and from the North, had disappeared near Meridian. The word was that they'd been murdered. This was Freedom Summer in Mississippi. Bad things were happening, beatings, burnings. John was afraid the South was going to blow.

After North Carolina the trip was different because I was different, on the alert. In Atlanta, on Peachtree Street—a name I knew from "Gone With the Wind"—I saw a restaurant with a side window for serving blacks and drinking fountains labeled "black" and "white." I lost my wallet there and slept overnight in the bus station and then later in a park in Montgomery, Ala. A recruiting street preacher found me there, brought me to a soup kitchen breakfast, then gave me the third degree: "Have you found the Lord? Are you saved?" I honestly didn't know.

**Do you really have to  
go on with this trip?  
I thought: No, I don't.  
I said: Yes, I do.**

Of course I got off the bus in Mississippi, more than once. In Jackson I wanted to find Eudora Welty, but her name wasn't in the phone book. By this time lack of sleep, combined with hot weather, gave the days a kind of hallucinatory looseness. I was at ease on the road for the first time.

In a bus terminal farther south, I met a scared teenage soldier on his way from a home leave back to his base, then on to Vietnam. Americans still didn't know anything real about this war. He'd learn about it fast when he landed in Saigon. The country would learn about it when a quarter of a million protesters marched on Washington in 1965. Meanwhile Jackson was the biggest place he'd ever seen, and Asia meant nothing. I stayed with him because he said he felt sick, too sick to get on a bus. His side hurt, then it hurt much more. When he started crying, someone called a doctor. Another passenger came over. "Appendix, I expect."

Late at night, on the bus, I woke to find that I was resting my head on the shoulder of the sleeping woman in the seat beside me. When I woke again, she was still sleeping, but with her head on my shoulder. When we got where we were going—I can't remember where now—we went our separate ways.

There were other rides and stops and more complicated meetings, some offers of rooms and meals. I was reading intensely now, trying to center myself, gain focus.

"On the Road," which had started everything for me, ended up being of little help. Its excitations felt forced; its descriptions of Americans, particularly of African-Americans, seemed cartoonish, false, often mean. Were Kerouac and I traveling the same country? Why had I ever thought of him as brave-hearted and generous? He was just another scared white boy, like me.

I finally reached Austin and was told that I couldn't see Raymond. He had been misbehaving and wasn't allowed visitors. It didn't matter. That had never been the point. I stayed in town a few days. After Sampson

wired me some money, I started back by a different route, on another trip, in some ways a much stranger one, but a different story.

The bodies of the three civil rights workers—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner—were unearthed in Mississippi early in August. By that time I was back home, catching up on news. There were uprisings in Harlem. The autobiography of Malcolm X was in stores. Home looked different; I was only half there. America, which had felt like a foreign place seen from bus windows a few months before, looked familiar, smaller.

56

**America, which had felt like a foreign place  
seen from bus windows a few months before,  
looked familiar, smaller.**

57

I couldn't know that within the year Malcolm would be dead; that the bombing of North Vietnam, and the anger in response to it, would begin; that Kerouac's Beat would become a period artifact, replaced temporarily by something called Flower Power. Or that in a new century Americans would stop making quest-journeys, would spiritually stay put, put on weight, wait for the world to come to them. But I did sense where I might stand in relation to all of this. I didn't have to wonder which way I'd go.

After the summer I found myself reading a little less, and differently, and looking around me more. Thoreau—loner, sojourner, abolitionist—still made sense. Dickinson is forever. But "Specimen Days," Whitman's diaristic account of nursing Civil War soldiers, boys dying far from home, was a revelation, as if I'd never seen it before.

Then came college, where I majored in literature, but, half by chance, my first class was on African art. I loved it, went on to Chinese, then to Vermeer, then to India, where I stayed a long time. Actually I'm still there. Art ended up being my thing, not a thing

just to look at, but to read like a map or a book; not just something to feel safe with, but something to get lost in, confused by; a world with lines and colors but no color lines—none.

And maybe it's just another stop on a long trip, one marked by the sight of Patrice Lumumba's face on TV, the voice of Miriam Makeba in a Washington park and by leaning-together slumbers on buses through the night.

### CONSIDER

- 1 Cotter places both his bus trip and *On the Road* within a long American literary tradition of quests and journeys. Can you identify other works that fit into this tradition? What is its appeal? What have been the goals of journeys and quests in the past?
- 2 Cotter says his trip south from Boston proved to be “about learning what it meant to be white in America.” How did the trip make it possible for him to come to this realization? In what ways has a change in place or environment altered your own sense of reality?
- 3 Cotter claims that Americans no longer explore the world: “in a new century Americans would stop making quest-journeys, would spiritually stay put, put on weight, wait for the world to come to them.” Do you find his assessment convincing? Why or why not?

### COMPOSE

- 4 Have you visited a place or series of places that changed your life? Write an essay modeled on Cotter's that describes your experience—although it need not be as significant or shattering an event. Your discovery may be on a smaller scale and considerably less serious. Remember, too, that not all shifts in perspective necessarily make a person wiser.

### CHALLENGE

- 5 In a brief essay, specifically contrast the America Kerouac describes in *On the Road* with the country Holland Cotter experiences in his essay. Pay attention to differences in tone, language, and point of view. Does it matter that Cotter is looking back on his experiences more than forty years after the fact?