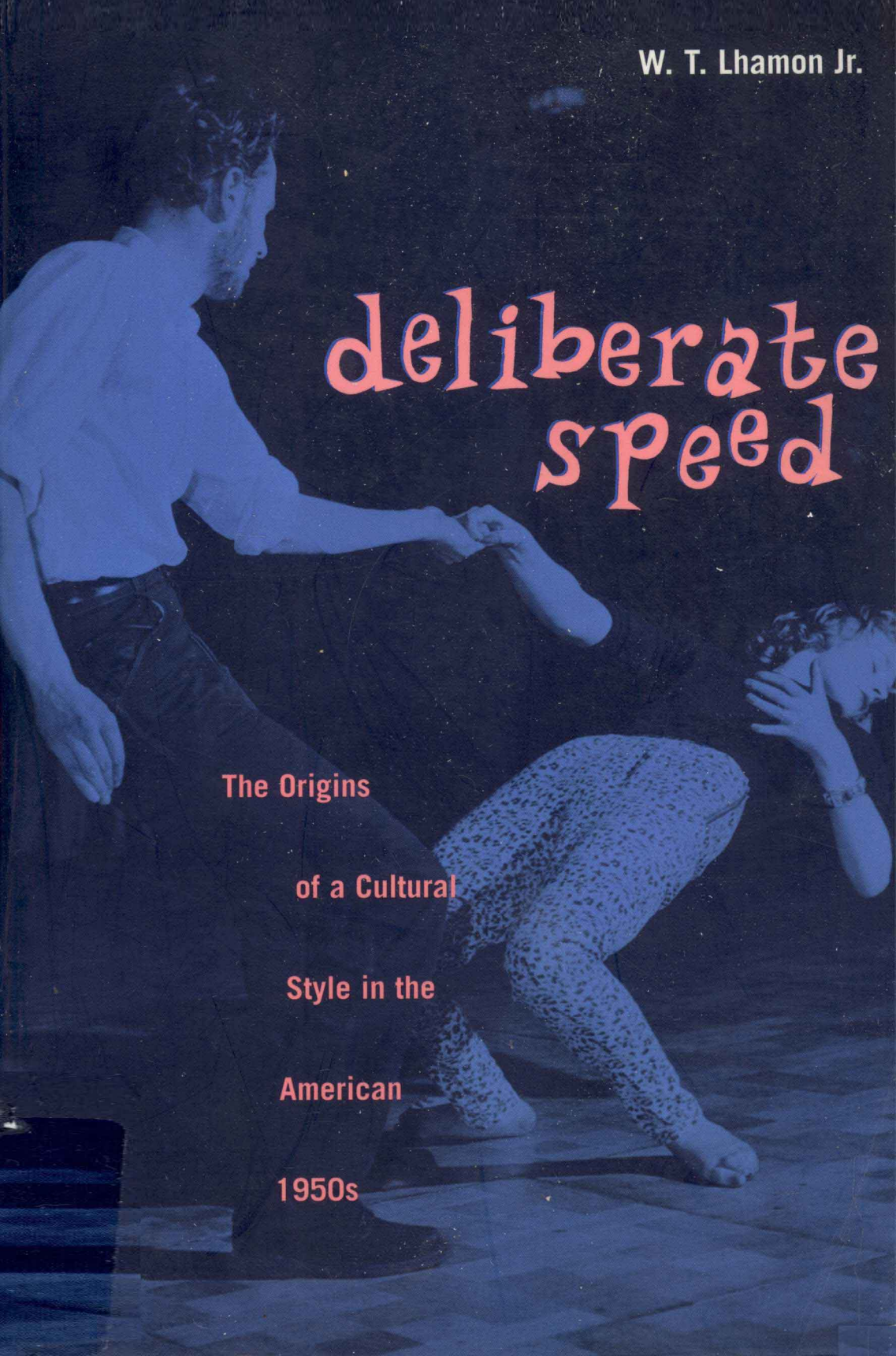
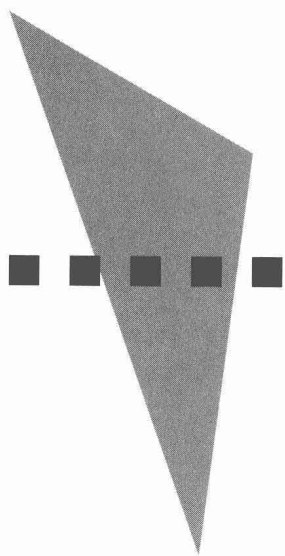


W. T. Lhamon Jr.

# deliberate speed

The Origins  
of a Cultural  
Style in the  
American  
1950s





# ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ **Deliberate Speed**

THE ORIGINS

OF A

CULTURAL STYLE

IN THE

AMERICAN 1950S

*With a New Preface*

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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■ *W. T. Lhamon Jr.*

*For the memory  
of my mother,  
Dorothy Kearton Lhamon,  
who fostered libraries  
and worked for  
civil rights,  
AND  
To Dan Lhamon  
and Catherine Lhamon*

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Thanks most of all to Fita for her congenial scrutiny and always being there.

## PREFACE, 2002: STARTING OVER

*Deliberate Speed* shows vernacular culture getting the jump on the post-modernism we commonly associate with the Sixties. A dozen years after the book's first appearance, I am here bracing this idea anew for a changed climate. *Deliberate Speed* now engages not the market excess and fatal hubris that its first edition addressed in 1990 but, as I write, a recession, a war, and a general crisis involving images of confident structures collapsing in flames. Looking to the past for ways a culture might move through trouble is as much the point today as it was in the mid-1950s, the 1980s, when I researched and wrote this book, and the last decade. *Deliberate Speed* is about starting over.

The 1950s culture that *Deliberate Speed* describes came into being pushing against and past the designs of its immediate era. I have taken my cues from those prompts. To argue that old lore generated new culture, that an integrated people's culture re-emerged in mid-decade, as I do in *Deliberate Speed*, also cuts against the grain. Unlike others writing about the same period, I tell a story that does not show the Cold War determining the epoch. Here are typical titles on related topics that have appeared since *Deliberate Speed*: Thomas Schaub's *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991), Stephen Whitfield's *The Culture of the Cold War* (1991), Virginia Carmichael's *Framing History: The Rosenberg Stories and the Cold War* (1993), Tobin Siebers's *Cold War Criticism and the Politics of Skepticism* (1993), Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (1999), and Mary Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democ-*



*racy* (2001). Clearly, “Cold War” has been the customary label for the era. But even those with encyclopedic intentions conclude that “the culture of the Cold War was by no means synonymous with the culture of the 1950s . . . and what was exempt from the scorched-earth policy of the patriots remains among the adornments of American culture.”<sup>1</sup> What this writer calls “adornment” I consider central to the culture. What the consensus deems determinative, I treat as ruthless and cruel to individuals, rhythmic but survivable for the culture. The art forms that emerge in the Fifties, that kick-start the Sixties and remain important a half century later, stem from flows older and deeper than Sputnik or the Red Scare could tap.

Crows raid the nests of martins, carrying off eggs to eat in their own roosts. Nevertheless, martins thrive and mockingbirds harass crows all spring long while we who attend to these raids watch with fascinated horror. That’s the way Cold War politics took its toll. It punctuated without either turning or stopping the abiding cultural momentum. But its ruthlessness surely sharpened the significance of local scenes. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood candidly notes that she “liked looking on at other people in crucial situations . . . I’d stop and look so hard I never forgot.” For a while, the Cold War increased the sense of crucial situations in American life.

Sylvia Plath’s novel begins by referring to one of the Cold War’s determinative effects—“It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.” Still, the rest of the novel shows a dozen nineteen-year-old women living tangential to those events. Esther achieves sexual knowledge, finds out who she is amid the varied faults of men, discovers the nature of careers and psychiatry, suffers shock treatment and sees its relationship to the more dire predicament of the Rosenbergs. But Esther walks away at the end, if only for the nonce “patched, retreaded and approved for the road.” Politicians, psychiatrists, mothers, editors, professors, and medical students all having had their way with her, Esther finds the resources—however fleeting or, as in her last sentence, “magical”—to dodge around them.<sup>2</sup>

Side-stepping not only characterized Esther Greenwood and her creator, Sylvia Plath, but also became the maneuver of choice for the many they represented in their epoch. Plath’s tangent turns out to be consonant with the claim even of books like Edward Brunner’s *Cold War Poetry* (2001). Brunner covers mainstream poetry—not the outrageous poetics that Olson and Ginsberg, Plath and Baraka generated in the Fifties, but the lyrics that “mature citizen-poets” like Melvin Tolson, Katherine Hoskins, and Richard Wilbur wrote. Brunner shows that such poets thoroughly refused determination by divisive national politics, us against them, and scare tactics.<sup>3</sup> Thus,

those many books whose titles emphasize the mad electoral politics and international confrontation of the Cold War tell us that down on the commons even the tame poets avoided what history assumes was popular reality.

The issue here is what produces importance. More than 52,000 Americans died waging the Korean War. The House Un-American Activities Committee ruined and warped careers. In June 1953, the U.S. government rode a wave of scapegoating to execute the Rosenbergs on sketchy evidence having to do with a torn Jell-O box.<sup>4</sup> No one wants to deny or gainsay these mortal facts. But did they determine American culture? The evidence in this book is that a stubborn resilience in common culture kept on keeping on. Common culture was not impervious to the ambient weather, nor independent of it, but still it persisted through this storm of official politics. If scapegoating and executions and staggering deaths abroad did not determine local culture, does that not heighten our sense of its stubborn resilience?

Where did this resilience come from?

While I was writing *Deliberate Speed*, the infinite tethers linking particular performances high and low, and across forms, were what most excited me. Jack Kerouac riffed on Miles Davis, who was at that time scoring French films. In *The 400 Blows*, Truffaut diddled the improvisations James Dean had packed into *Rebel without a Cause*. The script for that movie had begun as a sociological case study of postwar juvenile delinquency.<sup>5</sup> These webs still, and increasingly, seem fundamental to me. But chronicling them remains uncommon in accounts of American culture. My claim that postmodern American style grows out of earlier styles is challenging because, as others have described it, the inventions and social irresponsibility of postmodern culture are supposed to be unprecedented. Other accounts, but not mine, consider postmodernism a series of rude severances from pasts that up-to-date people no longer find relevant.

Still, the links I have described in *Deliberate Speed* were astonishingly constant. Little Richard updated ancient nursery rhymes. Ornette Coleman proliferated folk melodies. Referential figuration kept creeping into Jackson Pollock's abstraction. For all its panache and scurrying along the top reaches of chord changes, Bebop has a history in Swing and a fascination with pop tunes. So consistent were these cross-cultural transfusions that I had to account for them in a process I elaborated as a *lore cycle*.

A lore cycle is important because it provides connection underlying the breaks that we experience as historical shifts. Lore is vernacular culture that people practice without any sense of who authored it. Lore is manifest in the anonymous practice of groups. It is a group's common sense, its gestures and styles, its tunes and tendencies. Lore is the source for all the plots and forms,

choreography and architecture, that individual makers copyright and credit to themselves. Lore is the cultural dust from which individual ideas arise and to which they return. Lore drifts slowly. Its cycles turn in time. The lore of the eighteenth century is not the lore of the twentieth, although there are continuities. The lore of the middle class overlaps, but is not the same as, the lore of the multitude. Women's lore overlaps men's lore, and lores of class, country, and region also interweave apparently separate constituencies. Lore undergirds modern life just as it did the peasant past. Rural illiterates are not the only ones who have lore. People in cities and suburbs have lore. Intellectuals live in lore. Discussion of the relationship among folklore, poplore, high and low cultures, epochs, and lore cycles interlaces this book.<sup>6</sup> Because lore cycles enforce the return to an underlying continuity, they also point to places where emerging groups will break with imposed or engineered social directions.

### *What Announced It?*

Henry Adams was perhaps our earliest historian of American acceleration. He knew the danger of living between eras and said they "had a habit of crushing men who stayed too long at the points of contact." He, who saw so intimately the world his forebears had authored, claimed that the upheaval in his lifetime was unforeseeable. "Even the violent reaction after 1848," Adams wrote, "and the return of all Europe to military practices, never for a moment shook the true faith. No one, except Karl Marx, foresaw radical change. What announced it?" Henry Adams was the Mister Jones of his day. Master ironist, shrewd commentator on constitutional ideas and the elite circle that maintained them, Adams mistook the patina on the top of everything for reality. He strove to integrate what he saw with what he knew, but he was looking for change in all the wrong places. Adams believed his class created order. Therefore any change toward stability or its opposite, in his view, trickled down to the rest of us. Writing in the third person about himself, he said Adams "took for granted that his ideas, which were alone respectable, would be alone respected."<sup>7</sup> When respect for those ideas went, he too was lost. He did not realize that change, like disrespect, percolates up from below. These matters are manifest in the next epoch and underpin *Deliberate Speed*.

By the time *Deliberate Speed* appeared in 1990, lots of people were paying attention to the nether regions of culture. The proliferating media since the 1950s, turning inexorably to popular culture in the ways this book recounts, had thrown low culture into everyone's face. No one could ignore it. But too often those who were looking at low culture were either holding

their noses or had dived so deep that they could not come up for air. Thus, toward the end of the twentieth century we were still without what we lacked at its beginning, when Adams described his *Education*. However much we recognized it in theory, in practice we lacked a view that acknowledged the base and knew also that the quarrel between the base and the top implicated us all. By 1990, we had books on contemporary fictions, on interwar and postwar modernisms, on the Beats and the experiment at Black Mountain. Some studies skewered and others celebrated fifties films, auteurs, and stars. The same went for Elvis, the blues, and jazz of every style and decade. Abstract expressionist painting had provoked good accounts of its work, both formal and social. But I thought I could hear and might pick out the characteristic cultural chords of an emergent culture playing through all these. That's why I wrote *Deliberate Speed*.

I drafted the earliest versions of this book under the working rubric *Surviving Doom*. I had wanted to write about modernism's careening off its evolutionary track until a reconstituted popular style summoned it back. I wanted to treat Charlie Parker and Chuck Berry with the same seriousness as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jackson Pollock. My intended beat was the way vernacular and other low styles helped model cultural restoration. But for a long time and through several drafts, I could not make it work. The thicket was too tangled and rife. To clear and contour the field, some practical limit was necessary. I was finally able to write *Deliberate Speed* only by imposing a simple principle: my limit would be those events and texts that were in place by the year 1955.

Rather than the ongoing story that fifties culture bequeathed, I would focus on its ripening by mid-decade. Lifting the title phrase from the great integrative decree at mid-century, I used it to name my own attempted integrations. Above all, I wanted to flag the importance of black involvement for the rest of the culture. The title would also point out the culture's acceleration, which had excited and disrupted Americans even before Henry Adams started describing it in the first years of the twentieth century. In the intervening half century, the culminating years of American modernization, the speed that had stymied Adams became a calculated cultural intention.

Writing cultural history that focuses on a single year has attracted several other authors recently.<sup>8</sup> They chronicle their years overtly and rigorously. Perhaps because my working limitation was covert, I felt free to include exceptions. I imagined my mid-decadal year more like a sieve than like a bucket because I wanted it to catch a particular tangle. My 1955 would include *Invisible Man*, for instance, even though Ralph Ellison began his novel in the late Forties and published it in 1952. My 1955 would also expand to

welcome Thomas Pynchon's novel *V* (1963). My excuse for a full discussion of *V* was that half its plot concerned a group of layabout string-smokers, hack writers, and sculptors of cheese danish in the year 1955. These types and their apparently antiformal work were just the particulate I wanted to inspect. The louts in *V* were replete with attitude and often with a symbolism they could never know they carried. Their presence coded, for instance, Robert Rauschenberg, Thelonious Monk, and Ornette Coleman. Furthermore, the other half of Pynchon's story embodied aggression toward modern decay's degrading toward fascism. Thus *V* suited my needs exactly. Pynchon's novel enacted deliberate speed all by itself and wore its fifties-dependence on its sleeve. *Deliberate Speed* aimed to reckon what this consummate analyst of my generation called his culture's "cross-purposes."<sup>9</sup>

### *My Generation*

I wanted to show an American postmodern style not merely in literature but in music and jokes, painting and design, movies and more. This style did not come from outer space, despite sci-fi fantasies of the time. It did not depend on European sources, despite the intellectual shibboleths then and still current (Atget caused Frank; Picasso caused Pollock; Ibsen caused O'Neill; Beckett caused Shepard). The postmodernism I pursued was not merely a function of exhausted paradigms (although they were factors). The postmodernism of *Deliberate Speed* was not due to painters and musicians, say, inventing ways to soil the nests of their predecessors. Those postulates shunned local agency and emergency.

Instead, *Deliberate Speed* would insist on homegrown invention. It would show that the style it named gelled earlier than most people thought. It came together, indeed, at just the moment many critics took a nap after deciding nothing of value could occur. Mid-century critics were disavowing the culture of their own time to celebrate and theorize literature of a century earlier. To emphasize my commitment, I wanted *Deliberate Speed* to zig and zag like Pynchon's jagged writing and Pollock's flung-aluminum lines. I wanted it to stutter like Pete Townshend's later anthem, "My Generation," and push against the consciousness of overload. I wanted tangential stories to interrupt and proliferate each other. I hoped their piling on would jostle tranquil recollection. I wanted this book to sample my experience of the era.

That a newly contrapuntal American style was in place by 1955—and that some people recognized it—hazards more than that the Sixties had a five-year head start. The fundamental issue here is what enabled my generation to start over. What directed us to constitute another quite recognizable

American cultural epoch by reassembling familiar parts in surprising shapes? The distinctive argument of *Deliberate Speed* is that our sources and implications were social, yes, political, yes, but less institutional or electoral than vernacular. The resources tallied in *Deliberate Speed* rose from the yeast of daily life. Their style did not primarily react to Cold War jolts from on high. Neither did their style catch fire from essays in *Partisan Review*, the *Hudson Review*, or *The New Republic*. Intellectual journals were as insensitive about the budding style as were the politicians and school boards who rushed to squelch it. At the same time, however, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, Earl Warren, invoked the phrase that names this book. He tried to fit official life to the tumult of the land. In the mid-Fifties there was partial accord, however tenuous, high and low. Sometimes, it happens.

### Threepeat

*Deliberate Speed* might well have had the subtitle "A Regathering of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s." The origins I was after were not an immaculate conception but a reconvening of modes and attitudes that had clasped together before and would find each other again, periodically. New as it appeared, grating as it was to many people, the culture of deliberate speed deployed cultural elements that had moiled in American substrata for more than a hundred years. The Fifties was one of the moments when repressed, preterite forces surfaced surprisingly. It was not the first time. Subliminal cultural energy had activated at least two other epochs. This sorting and quilting of the past's pieces proceeds continually, especially when it is unapparent, beneath the surface, not so much unconscious as unattended. Antecedent to consciousness either individual or collective, cultural energy is always, like a great river, sifting, grinding, carrying its cargo. If we map its rise and fall over centuries, we can determine America's three cultural floods. One was in "the newness" of the 1830s that nourished the American Renaissance.<sup>10</sup> The heat of the Harlem Renaissance that boiled over into the Jazz Age was a second instance, often known as American high modernism, but it was really the "High Water Everywhere" that Charley Patton sang about in Mississippi.<sup>11</sup> Add the mid-Fifties, when American postmodernism slipped its sluices, and you have the three deeply sedimented deltas that still furnish America with its cultural life.

To insist that adventitious geopolitical hysteria, on the one hand, and liberal intellectuality, on the other, were not real sources for the style I wanted to describe in *Deliberate Speed* is of course hardly to say they were negligible. Some of us, in fifth- and sixth-grade air-raid drills during the

Fifties, crouched beneath Formica desktops, heads between our knees, in fond hopes that this most subservient posture would protect us against nuclear attack. We were certainly scared. Others were blacklisted, caught like deer in the klieg lights of investigative committees. They were certainly scarred. Norman Mailer's *Barbary Shore* (1951) and *The Deer Park* (1955) addressed these topics. So did the collaboration between Budd Schulberg and Elia Kazan that became *On the Waterfront* (1954). But the style that replenished culture beyond those fears depended, as Kazan also knew, on stimuli paradoxically more enduring and evanescent. He stuffed his characters—like the pigeons they cooped on Hoboken rooftops—into claustrophobic space. Fog horns and hissing steam baffled their talk, while the Empire State Building loomed across the river as impossible alternative and apparent cause. Pressing against these limits came Kazan's attitude, Schulberg's affirmation of street patois ("crickets make me nervous," Brando tells Saint), and their players' improvisation: Saint dropping her white glove, Brando snugging it on his fist while they court each other. Brando to Saint, asking her to dance for the first time: "C'mon, you want, you wanna spin?" Saint to Brando, not much later: "You're like an explosion!" The story is all about these inklings of charisma, their spawning and surviving in a hostile climate.

What was most important in fifties regenerations, therefore, did not come primarily as a reaction to Senator McCarthy. Sputnik did not stun the epoch into existence. The generating impulse was not fear of a purple people-eater. It was no European *idée fixe*. What was new in the Fifties was also old. The new mix rooted itself in lore and its performance modes that common people had been ripening for more than a century. These modes provided more usable direction than the behavioral dictates that governmental agencies tried to impose. Culmination changes behavior more than intervention does. The modes and patterns conveyed in lore had surged to visibility before. They likely will again.

Now, a dozen years after its first edition, the idea of the lore cycle in *Deliberate Speed* no longer seems an invention to anchor its story. Lore cycles pipe the crude resources people use to rebuild their lives. They were not a fifties one-off that allowed people with flat-top haircuts and poodle skirts to dodge the Cold War. Such cycles also have a history and do their work before and after the era of *Deliberate Speed*. In the Fifties there was a remarkable—not unique—openness to lore's allure. It cropped up at the oddest spots to jump across groups, classes, and regions. As in the 1830s and 1920s, the 1950s was one epoch when the culture of the multitude provided a general transfusion.

*Shoot the Juice to Me, Bruce*

Right at the heart of the Fifties a song climbed the charts that gave wild tongue to the idea of transfusion. In fact, the song was called “Transfusion,” and it was by Jimmy Drake, who was no kid at age forty-three. He had been around the block at least a couple of times already, was now working as a truck driver in Oakland, but was also churning out odd lyrics and plugging them wherever he could. As part of a vocal group called the Four Jokers, Drake first recorded his song in 1955 and sold it to the Diamond label. When this version tanked, Drake ditched the other jokers, remade the song on his own, calling himself Nervous Norvovous, wangled a contract with Dot Records (an independent label just transferred from Nashville to Hollywood), and broke into the top-ten charts in 1956. “Transfusion” told the story of a “real gone paleface,” a hip-talking, out-of-control speed demon ignoring stop signs, passing trucks on hills, playing the boss all the way. Every stanza climaxed in a crash—screeching brakes, smash, tinkling glass—concluding in a moral:

My red corpsuckles [sic] are in mass confusion.  
 Never, never gonna speed again.  
 Pass the crimson to me, Jimson.

Despite the moral and the singer’s oath, his every verse achieves lurching speed; another crash; further recognition and resolution; another seemingly final plea for a transfusion—“Put a gallon in me, Alan”; only to be followed by a repeat of the cycle “Pump the fluid in me, Louie.”

No one can listen to this song and doubt that the American faith in new beginnings is stronger, more desperate, at society’s hotrod level than at its limo level. No one can hear “Transfusion” and worry that “thinker-tinker” culture (to use Ralph Ellison’s self-description) is exhausting its invention, self-irony, or momentum. His absolute and repeated inability to suspend speed’s charisma puts Nervous Norvovous in Henry Adams’s camp. His capacity to push through contrarities, his rampant vulgarity, delight in surreal hijinks, and backtalk to authority anticipate Thomas Pynchon (and Ginsberg and DeLillo and Coover). His ever-ready banter echoes his own era’s Lenny Bruce. Crash, burn, and return, that’s the American way.

This insistent starting over is a leitmotif of American culture. Therefore, it is a constant feature of American cultural theory. Implications in Washington Irving (Rip Van Winkle), Emerson, and Whitman note it early. Starting over recurs in the explications of Constance Rourke, F. O. Matthiessen,



Irving Howe, and Philip Fisher.<sup>12</sup> But just *how* the culture manages to start over, where performers and analysts have given it thought, is a matter of increasing dispute. My own answer relies, like Constance Rourke's, on vernacular momentum.

One of the first talks I gave about *Deliberate Speed* after its publication roused a strong challenge from the audience. Wasn't the importance of black culture, which *Deliberate Speed* claims is diagnostic of the 1950s, in fact an enduring trait of American culture? Had it not played a major role earlier? Would it not continue to determine future waves of American culture? I answered by pointing out the presence of new media (TV and portable radios and cheap 45 rpm records), plus the rise of the youth culture during the postwar baby boom. The cultural reach of these new factors in the Fifties was unmatched by anything that preceded those years (even though America has, since the inaugural spirit Ben Franklin personified, always proliferated new media, and even though youth culture dates to the felt presence of black culture early in the nineteenth century). Yet the challenge provoked me. It was clearly worth pursuing the long pastness and the putative future of these new phenomena. It was worth seeking their connections.

In the intervening years since 1990, therefore, I have gone back to trace one lore cycle whose earliest constellation surely came together in what Constance Rourke—answering Van Wyck Brooks—named America's "usable past."<sup>13</sup> By about 1830, she wrote in *American Humor* (1931), regional inhabitants had groomed cycles of tales and images that might continually travel. As Americans moved west, traversing regions to their furthest frontiers, their stories developed an American comic trio: Yankee Peddler, Gamecock, and Long-Tail'd Blue. Americans carried these figures with them, like dolls and rabbits' feet, generating talk through them in order to figure out who they were themselves, who their neighbors were, and to what their mutual relations amounted. Their stories laid the plinth course on which we would build American performance in successive generations. Thus the gamecock figure gave rise to the Davy Crockett legends that were oral by the early 1830s and printed in almanacs by mid-decade, underwrote Frank Murdoch's play in 1872, then recurred on Disney TV, Wednesday evenings at seven, as I recall, in the middle of the Fifties. Since then, the rough gamecock and the Yankee Peddler seem to have lost currency, at least among the teen and twenty-somethings who remain the target audience for most popular culture. But these cycles are deceptive: who would have thought between 1840 and 1870 or between 1880 and 1956 that Crockett's story would recur? Some lore cycles seem to play themselves out—like these first two