

## **On The Road with Richard Prince: Beat Movement themes in the Art of Richard Prince**

Hannah Soltys  
Art History  
Saint Louis University  
221 N. Grand Blvd.  
Saint Louis, MO 63103 USA

Faculty Advisory: Dr. Bradley Bailey

### **Abstract**

Richard Prince was born in 1949 and grew up during the 1950s amidst the Beat Movement. The Beat Movement arose in wake of the Second World War and was a social and literary movement that promoted spiritual and sexual liberation, freedom of the printed word from censorship, and rebellion against the capitalism and materialism that had evaded previous generations. Likewise, the literature written during the Beat Movement was bolder than anything that had come before it and had a high emphasis on spontaneity; the term “first thought, best thought” became associated with beat prose. Kerouac famously wrote his quintessential beat novel, *On the Road*, on one unedited scroll. In addition to his upbringing during the Beat Movement, Prince is known to have an extensive collection of Beat literature. Thought to be one of the most comprehensive private collections of Beats books and papers in existence, it includes over 700 works, many of which are first editions or manuscripts that include personal authorial notes. His collection of Beat works, specifically his copies of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the quintessential Beat novel, is noteworthy. As a person and through his art, Prince personifies many of the Beat movement ideals of spontaneity, mystery, and unique style of artistry. Prince also questions modern society through his art in much the same way that the Beats did. Prince’s admiration for the Beats can be seen in his personal collection of books and in his attempt to fight and push the limits of orthodox culture through his works of art. His works of art, specifically his photographs and car hoods, best capture the ideas of the Beat movement and Jack Kerouac’s expression of the Beats in *On the Road*.

**Keywords: Beat Movement, Richard Prince, Photography**

### **1. Introduction**

Richard Prince is a notoriously enigmatic artist whose work is often controversial and ostentatious. As an artist, Prince pushes the limits of what is acceptable and he seems to embrace his mysterious persona.<sup>1</sup> Besides his artistic endeavors Prince is known to have, “possibly the greatest private collection of Beats books and papers in existence.”<sup>2</sup> Prince is an avid collector of many books, but his collection of Beat works, specifically his copies of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the quintessential Beat novel, is noteworthy. As an artist, Prince personifies many of the Beat movement ideals of spontaneity, mystery, and unique style of artistry.<sup>3</sup> Using historical and psychoanalytic methodologies, Prince’s admiration for the Beats can be seen in his attempt to fight and push the limits of orthodox culture. His photographs and car hoods best capture the ideas of the Beat movement and Jack Kerouac’s expression of the Beats in *On the Road*.

## 2. Beat Movement

With the end of World War II there was a divide in society. Many people chose to go back to their daily lives and, be contented with family, career, and their material wealth. However, according to William T. Lawlor in *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts*, “the war’s end also led to the Korean War, an arms race, the Cold War, the Red Scare, McCarthyism, the military-industrial complex, secret FBI files, and the ongoing threat of the nuclear termination of human civilization,” which caused many people to question previous traditional values of what success and living a fulfilling life truly is.<sup>4</sup>

During this age of uncertainty, the Beat movement proliferated. The Beat movement was an “American literary, musical and artistic movement that arose in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is applied to the primarily urban, intellectual and sub-cultural phenomenon that emerged in the aftermath of World War II.”<sup>5</sup> This movement involved poets, musicians and artists all rebelling against the strict conventions of 1950s society.<sup>6</sup> The Beats also valued spirituality and spontaneity over materialism.<sup>7</sup>

Of the literary Beat world, the key figures were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs; though Kerouac is generally recognized as being the most influential of the three.<sup>8</sup> It was Kerouac who coined the phrase “Beat Generation” in 1948 during a conversation with the journalist and writer, John Clellon Holmes.

The name Beat Generation got further press when Holmes published an article for *The New York Times Magazine* in November 1952 titled, “This is the Beat Generation”. However, It was not until October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1955, with Ginsberg’s legendary reading of “Howl” at Gallery 6 in San Francisco, that the Beats gained prominent literary fame. This reading, which led to the publication of *Howl and other Poems*, and the ensuing censorship trial that made the book nationally infamous, established the Beats as controversial figures from their onset.

Defining what it meant to be a “Beat” or “Beatnik” was, and continues to be, difficult.<sup>9</sup> Beats claimed to be spiritual and Kerouac often talked of the Sermon of the Mount, specifically Matthew 5:1-12, where Beatitudes are discussed. Kerouac would use this passage to help define Beat as a derivative of Beatitude—or the state of being blessed.<sup>10</sup> Though journalists focused on the promiscuity and delinquency of what they considered the Beat lifestyle, Kerouac pointed to its spirituality. Many of the founding members of the Beats were also involved in Zen Buddhism but “flexibility and individuality [still] prevailed, with each person discovering the combination of beliefs and practices that yielded the greatest personal satisfaction.”<sup>11</sup> This once again added to the mystifying nature of defining the Beats as they were united in their views of Beat as a form of spiritually yet still maintained their individuality of specific beliefs.

In April 1951, Jack Kerouac spent three-weeks typing his novel, *On the Road* on a single scroll of paper.<sup>12</sup> This novel would end up becoming the quintessential book of the Beats. In 1957, the first year of its publication, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* became a best seller.<sup>13</sup> However, “While Millstein extolled the literary merits of this book, to the American public the novel represented a departure from traditions, particularly in its characterization of the American hipster and a lifestyle of movement back and forth across the American landscape.”<sup>14</sup>

## 3. Richard Prince

In 1977, approximately a quarter of century after *On the Road* was first written, twenty-eight-year old Richard Prince began a job at the Time-Life building in the tear-sheet department after a failed attempt at art school.<sup>15</sup> Prince’s job was to tear out the textual articles of from *Time*, *People*, and *Sports Illustrated* magazines so the authors could have copies of their writing. After cutting up most of the magazines all he was left with were the scraps of the images from advertisements.<sup>16</sup>

It was at this time that he got the idea to appropriate, or to take the images for his own use, and re-photograph them. His first re-photographed images were of these advertisements.

When asked about his chosen medium of photography, Prince explains, “I didn’t know anything about photography. So it was a way to put together a picture that I didn’t have any history with....for me, it was all brand new.”<sup>17</sup> Prince forced people to see that there is artistry to be found in even the most commercial of photography. Prince also admits, “I had no ‘expertise’ with the camera. I didn’t use a dark room, I took them to a lab.”<sup>18</sup> In this act Prince removed himself from the process of making the work. As Prince’s friend and rare book collector John McWhinnie points out, “Prince has never done anything to...a picture that hasn’t been done to it first by a team of paid professionals.”<sup>19</sup>

When he is not making art, Richard Prince likes to collect rare books, which he has been doing for over thirty years and his collection spans the years 1949-1984. McWhinnie notes that Prince started with the year 1949 because that is the year he was born.<sup>20</sup> Prince owns at least eight copies of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Included in these copies is Neal Cassady's copy of *On the Road*, which has Cassady's signature and marginal notes in it. Neal Cassady was a close friend of Kerouac's and very influential in the Beat movement. He was also the inspiration for the main character in *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, Prince has Kerouac's copy that was prepared for the *Steve Allen Show*, a famous talk show during the Beat era, and inscribed to Allen with letters to Allen and photos from the show. This copy was "famously read on the *Steve Allen Show* [and] is dedicated to Allen (actually Kerouac didn't read from the book itself but from some pasted-in pages that would later appear in *Vision of Cody*. Prince has these pages too)."<sup>22</sup> Prince also owns the copy that was inscribed to Kerouac's mother.

In addition to his numerous copies of *On the Road*, Prince owns the original scroll of *Big Sur*, another Beat novel written by Kerouac. He has many other versions of *Big Sur* as well such as the unpublished and rejected version of *Big Sur* and the scroll drawing of *Big Sur*. He also owns Kerouac's *The Town and the City*, Inscribed by Kerouac and signed by the Beats and a copy inscribed to Carolyn Cassady, the wife of Neal Cassady. Additionally, he owns a copy of *Visions of Cody* by Kerouac Inscribed to Neal Cassady.<sup>23</sup>

With his palpable interest in Beat culture, as observable in his book collection, Prince additionally personifies the ideas of *On The Road* and many facets of the Beat movement, especially those associated with Kerouac, in his works of art. Prince has an obvious fascination with cars, as they appear in many of his pieces in various mediums.

With his appropriation photography, Prince alludes to many of the Beat movement's core values and ideologies. In his *Untitled (Living Rooms)* 1977 Prince took photographs of advertisements for furniture sets.



Figure 1. Richard Prince, *Untitled (Living Rooms)*, 1977, Set of four Ektacolor prints, edition of ten, 20 x 24 (50.8 x 61) each

These photographs were originally published in *The New York Times Magazine* and caused a sensation. "The images were selected for their look and for their proportions, which fit the 35 mm slide frame exactly."<sup>24</sup> These photographs were a whole new category of photography, mixing the commercial with the artistic and therefore questioning the definition of both. Just as the Beats were against capitalism and materialism, Prince seems to be making a similar commentary with his images.

Even though the photographs are of different rooms and places, they are all strikingly similar. They all display a lavish living room from an upper-class home.

The Beats questioned materialism and what true wealth was. They believed in individuality and breaking away from societal norms and Prince has likewise put these appropriates in a context to be questioned. Without seeing the text that was probably part of each of these original advertisements, one can see them for what they truly are: standards of the American dream and what one is expected to desire.

The way that these images were obtained is also important. The fact that they were "stolen" as Prince would say, from magazine clippings, has to be noted.

Taken out of their original context, these photographs have no past and no knowledge of where they came from; they only have what they are right now, a NOW captured through photography. In these way too they pay homage to the Beats, focusing on the moment and not the past or future.

These images represent a brand, but without knowing that brand name, they are just living room sets. They have no past, no knowledge of where they came from, they only have what they are right now, a NOW captured through photography. In these way they are also similar to the Beats, focusing on the moment and not the past or future.

In his *Untitled*, 1975 he used a photo collage on paper to take two pictures from the interior of a car.



Figure 2. Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 1975 (detail), photo collage on paper, 30 x 40 (76.2 x 101.6)

Both photos are taken from the inside of the car looking out the front window. Before discussing this image it must be noted that this image is just a detail. Richard Prince rarely discusses or allows his work prior to 1977 to be published even though he was creating works at this time and earlier. There is “virtually no photographic documentation of his earlier works,” according to Lisa Phillips, Whitney Museum curator, so this work is a rare exception.<sup>25</sup>

“Underneath the two stacked squares (of the photographs) is a stenciled caption: ‘I was lost by the sign in the first place (earlier)/The same could be said for the sign in the second place (later) and the signs in this place (now).’”<sup>26</sup>

With this comment Prince makes reference to a present (now) but no reference to a future. This way of thinking would be consistent with the Beat movement. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise, “admired a character like the jazzman in the moment of creation....for whom the perpetual NOW is all.”<sup>27</sup> This idea that NOW is more important than the past or future for a Beat is also evident in this image by Prince. There is no idea or consideration of what the future will bring. The journey of NOW is what is most important.

Additionally, knowing that the words in the quotes are stenciled on indicates a rigidity and conformity. Stenciling is often used in military letters and signifies an exactness that juxtaposes the blurry images.

The image with its blurriness captures the NOW without capturing the past or indicating the future. The images with their blurriness, coupled with the media of the camera, capture the NOW. To see the image you can only focus on what is happening in that instant. In Lawlor’s words, to be Beat is to be, “one that exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future,” and this blurry image is a specific time in the present and forces one to embrace and focus on this specific moment.<sup>28</sup>

The media of the camera in itself only captures the NOW. It captures one specific time that continues to exist as long as the image is developed. There is no future for the image, there is only what it is NOW and it will stay in this state for as long as it exists. This duality of means would be consistent with the Beat movement and its contradictions of being, “emptied out, exhausted, and at the same time wide open and receptive to vision.”<sup>29</sup>

The setting of both night and day in the two corresponding pictures demonstrates a full sequence of time, a day coming full circle. This full circle indicates a life cycle, with the morning, rainy scene as the beginning of life, being baptized and brought into the world, and the night scene being the end of life, with just a shallow light of what is ahead.

Furthermore, these images bring to life the plot of *On the Road*, where two characters go on a trip across the United States and make new discoveries about themselves and the people and places around them.

Additionally, this photo has a striking resemblance to one taken by the famed Beat photographer, Robert Frank in his photographic book, *The Americans*.

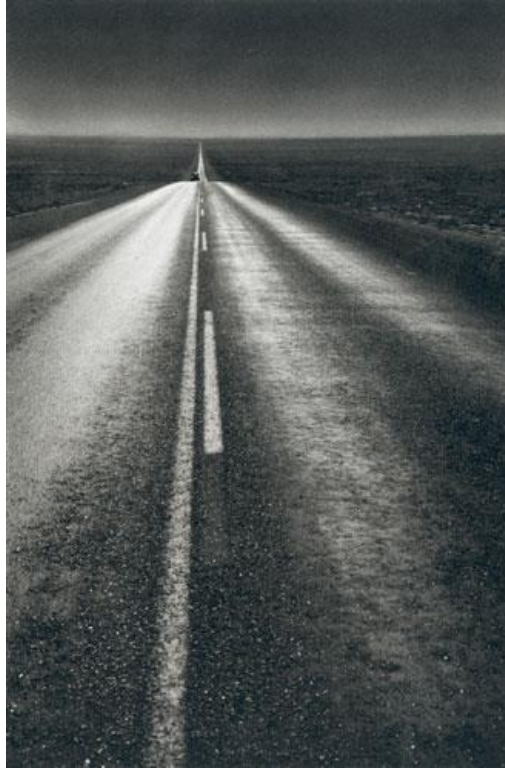


Figure 3. Robert Frank, *US 285 New Mexico*, 1956, Gelatin Silver Print, 34.3 x 25.0 cm

This book, which includes an introduction by Kerouac, was an assemblage of photographs Frank took on a cross-country journey from 1955-1956, and Prince is known to have at least one copy.<sup>30</sup> Prince immortalized his finding of this book in his short story *Bringing it All Back Home*. Prince explains how he “remember[s] finding a copy of Robert Frank’s, *The Americans*, the Grove Press edition, in a discard bin outside of Caldor’s in Bridgehampton, Long Island, New York.”<sup>31</sup> This Beat photography of the open road, undoubtedly influenced Prince and reinforces the idea that he appreciated both Beat subject matter and aesthetics.

Another one of Prince’s series that has a strong connection with *On the Road* are his car hoods, as this novel was about “the antics of two travelers across the vast body and expanse of America in a fast car.”<sup>32</sup> The “fast car” was most likely a 1949 Hudson Commodore.<sup>33</sup>

The Hudson Commodore was produced by the Hudson Motor Company out of Detroit, Michigan and was the largest and most luxurious of all the Hudson models.<sup>34</sup> The Commodore driven in *On The Road* was a four-door sedan. This car was made for speed and stability.



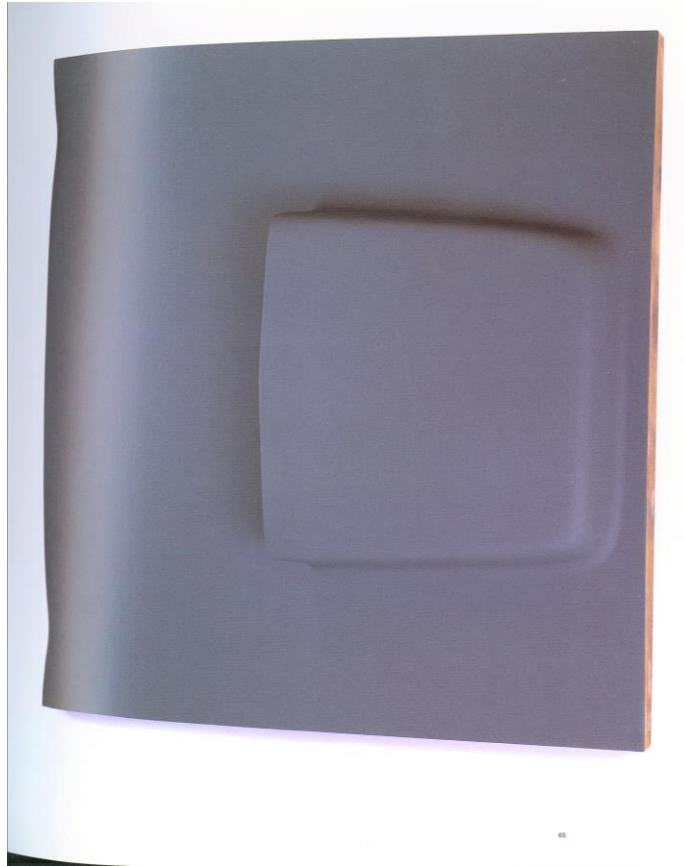


Figure 4. Richard Prince. *Green Onions*, 1989, Oil on Fiberglass, 135 x 125 x 15 cm

The car hoods that Prince uses are also mainly from muscle cars, known for their speed and power as their name suggests. According to Whitney curator Lisa Phillips, Prince “took car hoods from muscle cars he had always admired—Mustangs, Challengers, Chargers---hoods you could send away for in a magazine---and repainted them in the same act of literalism that had inspired the rephotographed photographs...”<sup>35</sup> With speed comes danger and these hoods suggest a kind of danger in driving such a vehicle at a high speed.

Cars also coincide with the Beatitudes aspect of the Beats. The Beatitudes are about the blessing of life and therefore going forth and finding and experiencing those blessings. (is this a new idea in this paper? I didn’t see it mentioned in section 2. If it’s relevant perhaps it needs to be developed further (is it where the term “beat” came from? And included in Section 2. As it is here it seems a bit of a random stretch) “The Beats set out for what Kerouac on *The Steve Allen Show* in 1959 called ‘pleasure in life’ seeking what Ferlinghetti’s dog sought by ‘touching and tasting and testing everything’ penetrating the *real* reality.”<sup>36</sup> The pleasure of cruising around in a car and finding new experiences on a road trip, as *On the Road* essentially is, can be seen in these car hoods.

The variety of different car hoods used by Prince can also be looked at as people’s unique experiences in life and in their interpretation of those experiences. Everyone has a expedition to travel, but each person’s is unique. This uniqueness was key to Beat ideologies as well.

#### 4. Conclusion

Richard Prince is a man as interesting and cryptic as the works of art he creates. Not only is he a great artist, but he is also a great collector of books. It has been said that, “Richard Prince the artist and Richard Prince the book collector are one and the same,” and this is a valid conclusion.<sup>37</sup> Though Richard Prince’s work often has a stigma of unoriginality, the connection between the Beat movement and his works of art prove otherwise. His pieces that seem

to be arbitrary chosen appropriations are actually thoughtfully decided upon images that highlight the trivial nature of materialism that is pervasive in today's society, while pushing for an embrace of the sense of enlightenment that come from living life in the NOW and not worrying about the consequences of the future.

## 5. Acknowledgements

This author would like to thank her faculty advisor for this paper, Dr. Bradley Bailey, and the Saint Louis University Art history faculty.

## 6. References

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1 On Prince's website he openly admits that a lot of what he is says is "Bird Talk"(and he dedicates an entire section of his website to his own ramblings titled as such). I also personally emailed his book company Fulton Ryder asking about any information from his book collection and his secretary forwarded my email to him and told me that he wouldn't tell me anything because he is very "protective and secretive about his book collection" further reinforcing his desire to be enigmatic and keep people guessing. "Richard Prince--Contact and News," *Richard Prince*, accessed on November 10, 2013, <http://www.richardprince.com/contact/>.

2 George Pendle, "Beats Art," *Modern Painters* 21, no. 5 (2009):24-25.

3 Prince's website, richardprince.com has two albums full of pictures of his book collection. "Richard Prince—Own Collection," Richard Prince, accessed on November 10, 2013, <http://www.richardprince.com/collection/books/>.

4 William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2005), xiv.

5 Ellen G. Landau, "Beat Movement," *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed on November 2, 2013, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T2085639>

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 According to Lawlor, "Kerouac was the so-called King of the Beats, the incarnation of the Beat spirit. Thought Kerouac is credited with being the Leader of the Beats, it has been said that Ginsberg was the source of beat unity. He was the marketing mind behind the Beat. [He] connected ideas with thinkers, books with readers, and performances with audiences,...[he] was the charismatic person whose personal contacts and public oratory helped the Beats to emerge, flourish and endure" Ibid., xiii.

9 The term beatnik came from, "Herb Caen, a writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, adapted the suffix from *Sputnik*, the newly launched soviet satellite, and coined the word 'beatnik' in his column dated 2 April 1958, half a year after the Russians launched Sputnik, establishing the caricature of the Beats as lazy, indulgent, and probably communist wierdos. 'Beatnik caught on, and the Beats themselves often used the term, perpetuating the confusion between authentic artists and the derisive caricature established by Caen" Ibid., 13.

10 Ibid., 14.

11 William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2005), xv.

12 Ibid., xxxi.

13 William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2005), xiv. The fame that Kerouac received for the ideas in his book but not for the literature himself would plague him for the rest of his life. He would become an alcoholic and eventually died after a bar brawl of internal hemorrhaging on October 21st, 1969 while watching the *Galloping Gourmet* on television. Ibid., 180.

14 Ibid., 174.

15 Ibid.

16 John McWhinnie, *No Country for Old Men: Spiritual America and its Wild History*, ed. by Bob Rubin and Rose Dergan, and published in *Richard Prince: American Prayer* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2011), 33.

17 Richard Prince, interview by Jeff Rian, published in *Prince: Richard Prince*, (London: Phaidon, 2003), 12.

18 Ibid., 13.

19 John McWhinnie, *No Country for Old Men: Spiritual America and its Wild History*, ed. by Bob Rubin and Rose Dergan, and published in *Richard Prince: American Prayer* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2011), 38

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20 George Orwell's *1984* was the first rare book Prince ever bought at auction. This is also as of 2011 so his collection has probably expanded since the publication of this book. ed. by Bob Rubin and Rose Dergan, and published in *Richard Prince: American Prayer* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2011), 12.

21 George Pendle, "Beats Art," *Modern Painters* 21, no. 5 (2009): 25.

22 George Pendle, "Beats Art," *Modern Painters* 21, no. 5 (2009): 25.

23 Richard Prince—Own Collection, Richard Prince, accessed on November 10, 2013, <http://www.richardprince.com/collection/books/>.

24 Lisa Phillips, *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1992), 22.

25 This work is in the personal collection of Richard Prince and was only documented by Lisa Phillips, the curator of a Richard Prince retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art from May 1st-July 12th 1992. Michael Lobel, *Fugitive Artist: the early work of Richard Prince, 1974-1977*, (New York: Nuerberger Museum of Art, 2007), 15.

26 Lisa Phillips, *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1992), 21.

27 William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2005), 175

28 William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2005), 175.

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31 "Richard Prince--Bringing it All Back Home", *Richard Prince*, accessed on 16 February 2014, [http://www.richardprince.com/writings/bringing-it-all-back-home/Richard prince website](http://www.richardprince.com/writings/bringing-it-all-back-home/Richard%20prince%20website).

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33 Ronan McGrath, "1949 Hudson Commodore--The Car that started the modern road movies," *Autoweek*, last modified 30 November, 2013, <http://www.autoweek.com/article/20121130/carnews01/121139982>.

34 "Hudson Commodore," Wikipedia, last modified 3 July 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson\\_Commodore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson_Commodore).

35 Lisa Phillips, *Richard Prince* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1992), 45.

36 William T. Lawlor, *Beat Culture: lifestyles, icons and impacts* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc., 2005), xv.

37 Bob Rubin, *Frog Prince: The Gallic Charms of an American Original*, ed. by Bob Rubin and Rose Dergan, and published in *Richard Prince: American Prayer* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2011), 11.