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“Your Goal Is Your Starting Place:” The Transformative Forces of the Road in the Novels of Jack Kerouac

„Tvůj cíl je tam, odkud jsi vyšel“:
Transformativní význam motivu cesty v románech Jacka Kerouaca

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to account for the significance of mobility in American culture and its reflection in literature. In order to reach this goal, the thesis observes the role of mobility in the history of the United States, its transformation in the twentieth century, and the manifestation of this motif in the works of Jack Kerouac. Through the analysis of his novels, including *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, *Lonesome Traveler*, and *Big Sur*, the thesis identifies some of the recurrent themes associated with the motif of journey and further interprets them in the context of postwar America. With the support of an array of secondary literature, this research approaches mobility as a constitutive part of the American identity and Jack Kerouac as one of its most ardent advocates.

The introduction probes the contemporary preoccupation with space and the necessity of interrogating its intersection with time. While incorporating both of these dimensions, movement is identified as a manifestation of this intersection and it is distinguished from mobility as lacking the meaning acquired through culture. In order to explain this process of acquiring meaning, the link between mobility and narrative is established and its presence in literature observed. It is subsequently argued that the pervasiveness of the motif of journey in literature is due to its potential for accommodating other symbolic meanings. Some of these meanings are identified within the introduction, while others are revealed and discussed in the subsequent chapters.

The objective of the second chapter is to explore the way mobility entered American literature and consciousness. A brief historical overview of migration into and within the country is provided, along with the introduction of the essential concepts connected to mobility in the United States, such as the Great West and the frontier. The changing approaches to traveling in the twentieth century are also identified. The second half of this chapter examines the reflection of this preoccupation with mobility in the literature of the nation and compares the American travel narrative with its European literary predecessors.

The third chapter offers an account of the Beat Generation, its philosophy and basic premises, as well as the political context of its contemporary age. The difficulty of providing a concise definition of this group is explained along with the indeterminacy in terms of the movement's actual duration. This chapter also focuses on the importance of

mobility in the lives and literature of the Beat Generation. While its members were often in opposition to the dominant values of American society, their obsession with movement reflected a similar tendency inherent in the nation's character.

The practical part of the study is presented in chapter four, which analyzes the novels of Jack Kerouac in the light of the previous observations. The theme of mobility in his literature is approached with respect to the findings of former research done in this field. The chapter is divided according to the individual interpretations of the motif of journey throughout Kerouac's oeuvre and provides a detailed analysis of this motif in each of the novels in question. These interpretations perceive mobility as an enterprise for its own sake, as a spiritual quest, social protest and liberation, and transformation. The last section describes the way in which both Kerouac and America itself developed over the course of the author's life.

The conclusion reiterates the objectives of this research and emphasizes its outcomes. The chief purpose of this segment is to recognize the contribution of the Beat Generation to the American literary canon and the participatory role of Jack Kerouac in the construction of the American identity.

Key words: mobility, journey, road, Jack Kerouac, Beat Generation, American literature, identity, travel narrative, transformation, liberation, spiritual quest, social protest, West

Abstrakt

Cílem této studie je objasnit význam mobility v americké kultuře a její odraz v literatuře. Za tímto účelem sleduje diplomová práce roli mobility v dějinách Spojených Států, její transformaci ve dvacátém století a projev tohoto motivu v dílech Jacka Kerouaca. Skrze analýzu jeho románů *Na cestě*, *Dharmoví tuláci*, *Andělé zoufalství*, *Osamělý poutník* a *Big Sur* pojmenovává práce autorova častá témata související s motivem cesty a interpretuje je v kontextu poválečné Ameriky. Na základě rozsáhlého souboru sekundární literatury je mobilita v této studii vnímána coby konstitutivní součást americké identity a Jack Kerouac jakožto jeden z jejích předních proponentů.

V úvodu je nastíněno, do jaké míry je v současných teoretických úvahách o myšlení akcentován prostor; zároveň se ukazuje, že prostorem je nutno zaobírat se v závislosti na čase. Jelikož pohyb zahrnuje obě tyto dimenze, může tak být považován za projev jejich střetu. Na rozdíl od mobility však pohybu schází kulturně podložený význam, kterého mobilita nabývá skrze vyprávění. Mezi těmito dvěma termíny existuje úzký vztah, který je popsán v této kapitole společně s jeho vyobrazením v literatuře; odtud se výklad odráží k hojnému výskytu motivu cesty v literatuře a ukazuje, nakolik daný motiv dokáže nést symbolické významy. Některé z těchto významů jsou zmíněny již v úvodu, ostatní jsou probírány v následujících kapitolách.

Druhá kapitola se zabývá tím, jakým způsobem se mobilita dostala do americké literatury a povědomí. V této části práce přichází stručný historický přehled migrace do Spojených států i vnitrostátní mobility a zároveň jsou představeny některé z hlavních pojmů spojených s tímto pohybem, jako je expanze na západ či teorie posunující se hranice. Rovněž je tu popsáno, jak se přístup k cestování proměnil v průběhu dvacátého století. Druhá část kapitoly zkoumá zastoupení tohoto motivu v americké literatuře a nabízí srovnání s evropskými literárními předchůdci.

Třetí kapitola poskytuje přehled o Beat Generation, o filosofii této skupiny a jejích základních hodnotách, jakož i o politickém kontextu dané doby. Je zde také vysvětleno, proč není možné toto hnutí stručně definovat ani ho s určitostí časově vymezit. Kromě toho se tato kapitola zaměřuje na roli mobility v životě a psaní jednotlivých autorů Beat Generation. Zatímco členové této skupiny se často vymezovali vůči dominantním aspektům společnosti, jejich posedlost cestováním byla v dokonalém souladu s americkou tradicí a národní povahou.

Praktická část této studie přichází ve čtvrté kapitole, která analyzuje romány Jacka Kerouaca v kontextu závěrů z předešlých kapitol. K tématu mobility v jeho literatuře je navíc přistupováno s ohledem na předchozí bádání v této oblasti. Kapitola je rozdělena podle jednotlivých výkladů motivu cesty v Kerouacově díle a zároveň poskytuje podrobnou analýzu tohoto motivu v každém z jednotlivých románů. Mobilita je zde interpretována jakožto cíl sám o sobě, jako duchovní pátrání, společenský protest, proces sebeosvobození a transformace. Závěrečná část této kapitoly mapuje, jakým způsobem se Kerouac změnil v průběhu svého života a jakým vývojem za tu dobu prošla sama Amerika.

V závěru diplomová práce shrnuje cíle výzkumu a rekapituluje jeho výsledky. Vyzdvižen je podíl Beat Generation na budování amerického literárního kánonu a v jejím rámci i role, jíž v budování americké identity sehrál Jack Kerouac.

Klíčová slova: mobilita, cesta, Jack Kerouac, Beat Generation, americká literatura, identita, cestopis, transformace, osvobození, duchovní poslání, společenský protest, Západ

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1. Introduction

Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice.

– Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

In his lecture entitled "Des Espace Autres" (Of Other Spaces) delivered in March 1967, Michel Foucault suggested that as opposed to the nineteenth century, which was marked by its obsession with history, the key subject of the present age would be space. While before, the emphasis had been on the development of events on a temporal scale, today we are more interested in the spatial experience of reality. However, what we need to be focusing on is the combination of these two dimensions, for there is an inevitable link between them. As Foucault observed, "space itself has a history in Western experience, and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space."[1]

The most vital expression of this intersection is movement. As a spatial transformation enabled by temporal progression, any kind of movement must necessarily involve both space and time. It is also an essential component of mobility – one of the chief preoccupations of our present age as well as the main subject of this study. Mobility is, according to Tim Cresswell, "central to what it is to be human. It is a fundamental geographical facet of existence."[2] Considering this prominence of mobility in our culture, it is quite baffling that the term itself should have been present in critical discourse for so long without being properly defined. It was only a decade ago, in 2006, that Creswell's influential study provided the definition of mobility as it is understood in contemporary theory. According to his now-familiar formula, mobility is the realization of movement equipped with meaning and power. In other words, the difference between simple movement and mobility is that the latter has "been given meaning within contexts of social and cultural power."[3] Since there is no inherent

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[1] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22, Foucault.info <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html> 22 Jul 2019. This text, entitled "Des Espace Autres," and published by the French journal *Architecture Mouvement Continuité* in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault's death.

[2] Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) 1.

[3] Ibid., p. 2.

value in movement, it is only through society and culture that it becomes mobility; “its meaning is created in a constant process of cultural give and take.”[4]

It has been observed ever since that this relationship between mobility and society might be, in fact, reciprocal. Not only does movement *acquire* significance through culture but it might also *provide* meaning for culture. Indeed, many societies have been founded on and defined by their mobilities. This is especially true of the United States, a country that is often perceived, according to Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen, as “a nation of immigrants and restless populace on the move.”[5] The present study reveals the participatory role of Jack Kerouac in the construction of this image. In fact, the case with Kerouac is a perfect example of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between mobility and culture. While his often-excessive geographical movement acquires value in the context of postwar America and its history, it also adds to and shapes the American identity itself. This is done through the representation of mobility in his novels, which is precisely the way in which culture invests movement with meaning – by applying a narrative to it.

Kai Mikkonen is one of the many theorists to recognize the palpable link between mobility and narrative. In fact, the two phenomena are so closely related in our understanding as to be almost interchangeable. According to him, “the journey is universally recognized as a narrative in our culture.”[6] Because the two share the same spatial and temporal structure, they can be readily used as metaphors for each other. The linear form of travel calls for narration, while narrative gives it significance and value. Both presuppose a consecution of events and places, with mobility creating a link between these and the narrative offering its interpretation. In other words, journey is what gives “identity and narrative to a series of events since it ‘humanizes’ the experience of time and space.”[7]

The relationship between these two and its reproduction in literature famously described by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. By observing the intersection of time and space in its fictional representation, Bakhtin opened up a field of research that has been considered relevant in our discourse ever since. He applied the term “chronotope” (from the Russian хронотоп, a portmanteau of the Greek words *χρόνος*, meaning “time,” and *τόπος*,

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[4] Tim Cresswell, “Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac’s *On the Road*,” *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 18.2 (1993): 253, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622366> 12 Feb 2019.

[5] Judith Hamera and Alfred Bendixen, “Introduction: new worlds and old lands – the travel book and the construction of American identity,” *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 1.

[6] Kai Mikkonen, “The ‘Narrative is Travel’ Metaphor: Between Spatial Sequence and Open Consequence,” *Narrative* 15.3 (2007): 286, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30219259> 7 Nov 2018.

[7] Ibid., p. 287.

"space") to refer to "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."[8] According to Bakhtin, the chronotope plays a significant role in the definition of literary genres; it is, in fact, the main defining factor in generic distinctions. He recognizes several different types of chronotopes, among which the one involving the road could be considered the paramount one. "The importance of the chronotope of the road in literature is immense," Bakhtin asserts, "it is a rare work that does not contain a variation of this motif, and many words are directly constructed on the road chronotope, and on road meetings and adventures."[9]

The question of why this has been such a consistent motif throughout literature is taken up by Janis P. Stout, who uses it to illustrate the utility of the road narrative for the development of fiction. She mentions "the simple linear form"[10] again, which has been identified by many critics before her including Scholes and Kellogg, but also the fact that the theme of journey is both extremely simple in terms of its structure and remarkably flexible when it comes to individual realizations. What is even more important, however, is that in the vast majority of cases, mobility in literature serves to communicate larger meanings that go far beyond the mere displacement of the main protagonist from one geographical location to another. Most journeys are thus endowed with a symbolic meaning that often bears no relation to mobility whatsoever. This might be exemplified already by the earliest instances of travel narrative in our culture. As Stout points out, all the ancient mythologies, biblical stories, and Homeric epics "clearly demonstrate the usefulness of journey motifs for conveying nonspatial experiences."[11]

In order to name some of these, let us return to Cresswell, who identifies the most prominent meanings conveyed by mobility in the literature of the modern Western world. These include "mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, and as modernity," together with "mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance."[12] We shall see some of these, as well as some other themes, demonstrated in the writing of Jack Kerouac. In fact, his most popular novel *On the Road* was often castigated by literary critics precisely for its alleged lack of meaning behind the theme of mobility. That this might not necessarily be the case will be

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[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 84.

[9] Ibid., p. 98.

[10] Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 73.

[11] Janis P. Stout, *The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1983) 13.

[12] Cresswell, On the Move 1–2.

argued in the last chapter. Nonetheless, Kerouac's work serves as a testimony to Cresswell's pronouncement that in the culture of the modern West, mobility "is more central to both the world and our understanding of it than ever before."[13]

Apart from the above-mentioned themes, journey has also often been used as a metaphor for life itself (cf. the phrase "the journey of life"). This has to do again with the coexistence of spatial as well as temporal experience in mobility. Due to the chronological order of places and events in traveling, journey is perceived as the physical representation of the passage of time and, therefore, of progress itself. After all, every trip takes up a segment of the traveler's life where each turn determines the future course of his or her evolution as a human being. This observation was made by Bakhtin, among others, who proposed that "a road is almost never merely a road, but always suggests the whole, or a portion of, 'a path of life.'"[14] Seen as such, journey involves a sequence of occurrences that contribute to and shape our existence. This image is to be found in Kerouac's own mobility and its representation in his fiction as "the unrolling of a mighty thread of accomplished-moments, accomplished-ments."[15] The road is thus interpreted in terms of personal development and, consequently, as a possible means of transformation.

It is the purpose of the present study to further investigate the role of mobility in American literature and culture through the novels of Jack Kerouac and to analyze some of the potential meanings it acquires in the context of the author's life and his role in society. The analysis shall proceed from general observations regarding mobility in American history to its relevance for the literary scene after World War II, and finally to the individual manifestations of this motif in Kerouac's writing. Drawing on different works of his artistic oeuvre, the study suggests the following ways of interpreting the theme of journey in his novels: journey as an end in itself, a spiritual quest, social protest and liberation, and transformation.

As the quotation in the title, taken from "113th Chorus" of Kerouac's collection *Mexico City Blues*, reveals, sometimes the final destination in mobility is not a particular geographical location, but rather an altered state of consciousness, a new perception of reality. With such a view in mind, the goal of traveling is not to reach distant lands, but to acquire

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[13] Ibid., p. 2.
[14] Bakhtin 120.
[15] Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972) 348.

new knowledge and experience and to return to the very beginning as a different human being. This quest is best depicted in the lines of T. S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding:"[16]

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.

Kerouac assumed this quest as his own and devoted to it the greater part of his life.

Growing up in New England, the aspiring author dreamed of nothing else than leaving behind his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, and setting off on the road. After many years of crossing the continent in every possible direction and by every possible means of travel, he returns to his native region as a famous novelist but also as a man weary of traveling, his friends, and America itself. His premature death finds him stuck in Lowell and his journey thus comes full circle. It becomes epitomized in *The Duluoz Legend*, an array of his travel writings that, put together, comprise one great story – the story of his life that has been described by Gregory Stephenson as "a circular journey whose end is its own beginning."[17]

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[16] T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1944) lines 239–242.

[17] Gregory Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009) 17.

2. Mobility in American Literature and Culture

There is nothing more American than being On the Road.

– Phil Patton, *Open Road: A Celebration of the American Highway*

One of the defining features – arguably, the most striking one – of the American culture is mobility. Although a certain kind of movement, be it settlement, spreading, or migration, is an inevitable step in the origin of all cultures in this world, no other nation is as strongly connected to mobility as America. This is held as a general truth among countless social anthropologists and literary critics, such as Hamera and Bendixen, who open their comprehensive study of the American travel narrative by pronouncing the vital fact that "travel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked."[1] The formation of this country began with movement, its development was carried out by movement, and its identity continues to be shaped by movement. It is this centrality of motion that defines the United States of America and distinguishes it from other cultures.

The nascent American nation began its overseas migration at a time when all the major European countries had been already, if incompletely, formed. When compared to those countries, America is relatively young and its history considerably short. Even though the delimitation of its area was concluded by the beginning of the nineteenth century and the country as a whole is thus no longer physically on the move, mobility, in its individual manifestations, persists as the defining feature of the American consciousness. Whereas most Europeans perceive motion as a temporary state, a mere physical shift from one static place to another, for Americans it is an essential component of their existence. According to Stout, "spatial movement has been the characteristic expression of our [American] sense of life."[2] Being on the move is thus ingrained in the American experience.

The image of the road is one of the most common visual representations of the United States. It is a simple, straight road, cutting through vast spaces of the otherwise untouched nature. It is the "American road," as Phil Patton has duly designated it, for it is "permanently

[1] Hamera and Bendixen 1.
[2] Stout 4.

imprinted on the national consciousness."[3] This road is a symbol of the nation's irrepressible need for movement. It is also a place where many Americans will feel truly at home. While other nationalities often define themselves in relation to their dwellings, to be American means to be on the road. In this sense, mobility is not a simple transition from one mode of existence to another, but an identity in itself, and the most fitting one for the description of this nation. As Patton goes on to argue, "America's youth is its oldest tradition, change is its most unchanging premise, movement is its most firmly fixed pattern, impermanence its most permanent condition, and the receding horizon its most steadfast goal."[4]

In the United States, more than anywhere else, mobility plays a crucial role in the pursuit of one's ambitions. The elusiveness of life goals might be a general phenomenon, but due to the innate restlessness of the American people, for them, the pursuit is frequently connected to a change of place. The French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville observed this tendency already in 1835 in his influential study entitled *American Democracy*:

> In the United States a man builds a house to spend his latter years in it, and he sells it before the roof is on, (…) he settles in a place, which he soon afterwards leaves, to carry his changeable longings elsewhere, (…) and if at the end of a year of unremitting labor he finds he has a few days' vacation, his eager curiosity whirls him over the vast extent of the United States, and he will travel fifteen hundred miles in a few days, to shake off his happiness. Death at length overtakes him, but it is before he is weary of his bootless chase of that complete felicity which is forever on the wing.[5]

One might deduce from this observation that, no matter the nature of any particular desire, its fulfillment is to be found at the end of the road. However, there is no such an end. In Europe the saying goes that all roads lead to Rome, but this was not the case in Tocqueville's America and it is not the case today. As Patton notes, "in America, all roads lead to other roads"[6] and these to yet other roads. After a lifetime of pursuing his or her goals all across the country, the restless American might concede, just as the narrator of Kerouac's

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[3] Phil Patton, *Open Road: A Celebration of the American Highway* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986) 12.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Alexis de Tocqueville, *American Democracy*, vol. II, trans. Henry Reeve (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1863) 164.
[6] Patton 18.

On the Road did, that there would always be "longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life."[7]

2.1 Mobility in American history: migration, westward push, and the frontier

Due to the relative brevity of American history, it might be dealt with in its entirety even in a study of this scope, with only slight generalizations. This allows for the present overview to start at the very beginning of the nation's existence, reaching only a few centuries into the past. Although one might, in all probability, trace the initial impulses for the discovery of the American lands much earlier, few historians would deny the fact that the history of the United States was launched by a journey. Stout, for one, maintained that "American history begins with voyages, of exploration or escape or migration. The pattern, once set, continued."[8] Certainly, the arrival of the first settlers at the eastern coast of the vast continent was but a slight first step in what was to become a large-scale migration, not only over the sea but also toward the other coast.

This grand migration was undoubtedly driven by various kinds of motivations. Whether seeking a better future or merely escaping a grim past, the travelers had one thing in common – they were all willing to give up whatever material comforts they had previously possessed for the opportunity to begin anew in a land they knew very little about. It might be said, just as Paul Horgan did in the novel *The Common Heart*, that to these travelers and their heterogeneous hopes, "the land presented a new meaning each time, for each was looking for something different from what his predecessors had sought."[9] It soon turned out that the newly discovered land was extensive enough to accommodate all kinds of dreams, even if their fulfillment required a violent encounter and doing away with the former inhabitants. In any case, when the east coast turned out to be insufficient in satisfying the demands of the increasing number of newcomers (not so much due to any potential lack of land as rather for the diminishing presence of excitement), the settlers reached for their "suitcase full of

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[7] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 212. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

[8] Stout 4.

[9] Paul Horgan, *The Common Heart* (New York, London: Harper & Brothers, 1942) 8.

dreams,”[10] as García-Robles aptly describes it, and set out again. Just like Kerouac several centuries later, they left behind what for him was the “East of my youth” and headed for the “West of my future” (15).

To claim that Kerouac was on his journeys merely repeating the ventures of these forefathers would, of course, be a serious misconception. Not only did he live in a completely different age and under vastly different circumstances, but his various trips amounted to a much greater quantity than these people could either afford or imagine. Nevertheless, as shall be discussed in the subsequent chapters, some of the motivations that spurred his first journey west, which became epitomized in his most famous novel, were not entirely dissimilar to those of the first Americans. Furthermore, the underlying meaning behind the idea of the American West, which arose during these earliest westerly migrations, preserved its general validity until the times of the Beat Generation and, to some extent, it continues to be valid even today.

There have been numerous works of criticism dealing with the significance of the American West. Although the individual interpretations of this phenomenon may differ, they all agree on the fact that, in the context of the United States, the word “West” is not a mere denominator of the direction leading to the Atlantic Ocean. What urged the successive generations of settlers to leave the achieved security of the shifting frontier and drove them further toward the coast was not any particular desire to reach the great volumes of the sea that lay beyond, but rather the prospective values that became associated with this vision. In his speech at the meeting of the American Historical Association in 1893, the prominent American historian Frederick Jackson Turner observed that “the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.”[11] Sixty years later Sal Paradise, the narrator of *On the Road*, authorized this claim by confiding: “Beyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West. I had to go” (58).

The way both Turner and Kerouac, in the guise of his fictitious narrator, refer to the idea of the West betrays the true nature of this signifier. Rather than a mere indicator of the cardinal direction, the West is a symbol, the meaning of which is far more profound than most people realize. What complicates the process of interpreting this symbol is the elusive nature of its referent. Edwin Fussell has pointed out this obstacle by arguing that “the American West is almost by definition indefinite and indefinable, or at least changing, pluralistic, and

[10] Jorge García-Robles, *At the End of the Road: Jack Kerouac in Mexico*, trans. Daniel C. Schechter (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) 5.
[11] Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920) 3.

ambiguous in signification."[12] It is not the purpose of the present study to account for all the possible meanings and connotations the concept of the American West might have accumulated over the years. It is, however, crucial to acknowledge the presence of this symbol in American culture, as well as the ambiguity of its meaning, as a necessary precondition for understanding the novels of Jack Kerouac.

While keeping in mind the complexity of the symbol and the full scope of its potential meaning, I shall try to come up with a working definition that would enable us to apprehend the context of the American West in which Kerouac composed his works. Borrowing from Stout, one can talk about the journey west "as a move from the known to the unknown or from restriction to freedom."[13] This description is more than suitable in the case of Jack Kerouac, for whom the East represented the known security of his youth in the hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, as well as the intellectual environment around the Columbia University in New York, whereas the West was an embodiment of excitement, independence, and freedom. This serves as a proof of the claim that Kerouac's motivations in the middle of the twentieth century are not that far removed from the incentives of the pilgrims, and his notions of the West are strongly reminiscent of those associated with the image of the shifting frontier in the seventeenth century onwards. Although the idea of the frontier was already obsolete in his time, Kerouac had his own imaginary boundaries to push against.

More than a mere physical line separating the American territory from a wilderness, the frontier is another symbolic object in the nation's history. Just as the image of the West, it has accumulated its fair share of memories and connotations. Fussell describes the shifting of the frontier as a metaphor for the process of Americanization, of gradually assuming the land and imbuing it with new values and prospects.[14] It is also a movement away from the roots and European influence. The frontier is a line between the security of the past and the promise of the future; it includes what has been gained and excludes what is yet to be achieved. For Turner, it was also a significantly anti-social space. According to him, the conditions of life on the frontier produced traits of individualism that became one of the leading characteristics of the American identity. While living on the outskirts of civilization might bring singular opportunities, it also requires some degree of self-sufficiency and confidence. At the same

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[12] Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) 4.
[13] Stout 4.
[14] Fussell 17.

time, Turner argues, “it produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control.”[15] I find this perspective to be of special importance here, for it sheds some light on the ideology of the Beat Generation whose representatives were often in conflict with any kind of authority and control. Although for the Beats, living on the frontier was no longer an option, following the example of the settlers, they sought liberation in mobility. Of course, their individual frontiers were much more abstract and the meanings behind them much more elusive to allow for any definitive settlement. Nevertheless, the West remained an alluring vision even in their hectic travels.

To further complicate matters, it is not only the West that acquires some kind of symbolic quality in the context of American history. In fact, each of the four cardinal directions has its own set of ideas associated with it. In his study of the road genre, Brian Ireland has come up with a useful summary of these underlying ideas. Even though Fussell would probably dismiss his overview as rather simplistic and missing all the ambiguities and slight nuances, Ireland’s interpretation might serve as a springboard for a deeper understanding of these terms:

> While ‘‘The North,’’ ‘‘The South,’’ ‘‘The East,’’ and ‘‘The West’’ are geographically hard to pin down, as symbols they can be associated generally with the following ideas: The East, New England, is that part of America geographically and culturally closest to Europe; The South is traditionally and historically associated with slavery and the civil rights movement; The North is associated with freedom from slavery, (...) and The West is associated with images of the frontier and the idea of freedom.[16]

The east-west distinction has been already explained through the discussion of the frontier. A quote from Henry David Thoreau will serve as a conclusion to this theme: “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. (…) And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progress from east to west.”[17]

At this point I would only add that for the Beats, the East also became associated with Eastern thought and religion, particularly with Buddhism, which assumed a crucial role in their writing. This aspect of their ideology shall be given further attention in the subsequent

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[15] Turner 30.

[16] Brian Ireland, “American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre,” *The Journal of American Culture* 26.4 (2003): 475, EBSCOhost, doi: 10.1111/1542-734X.00107, 30 Nov 2018.

[17] Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 1995) 16.

chapters. What remains to be considered here is the north-south dichotomy and its implications.

Along with mobility, slavery was one of the major concerns of American history. Although it had been abolished long before the principal members of the Beat Generation were born, its aftermath had its own significance in the context of their works. After all, it was the downtrodden – the poor, the alienated, the socially marginalized as well as the racially oppressed – that they often sympathized with and wrote about. However, rather than a former scene of slavery, the Beats perceived the South as the birthplace of their beloved jazz music, which they regarded as an expression of freedom.

Although much more could be said about the image of the South, both in American history and in the literature of the Beat Generation, it would not be particularly helpful for the purpose of this study and it shall be, therefore, put aside. As for the North, the meaning becomes somewhat vague. Rather than a place with a strong symbolic quality, the American North serves as an antithesis to the other directions. As Ireland explained, the North is free from slavery, but it is also devoid of the attractions of the West and the cultural heritage of the East. Whereas the other directions are loaded with significance in Kerouac's works, there seems to be a proportional lack of attention given to the North. Suffice it to say that for the author himself, the North might have symbolized his French-Canadian roots, although that would only be a hypothesis.

2.2 Mobility in twentieth-century America

The year 1890 is generally considered a landmark for the closing of the frontier. In any case, by the end of the nineteenth century, the American West was positively settled. Reaching and inhabiting the coast put an end to massive westward progression. Even though more and more people kept arriving and settling along the coast, the exciting possibility of venturing beyond was effectively dissolved. There was not any further west one could go. The inevitable question is, what happened to the symbol of the West, once its geographical signifier had been attained? Has America stopped moving once it arrived at its destination?

While there seems to be at least a partial agreement on the meaning of the West before the frontier closed, opinions differ considerably when it comes to the nature of this symbol in the subsequent years. Fussell, for example, argues that the image and its reflection in literature

disintegrated together with the frontier: "The West exerted serious imaginative impact in the United States only so long as it remained a living idea, which was only so long as it survived in real potentiality; the winning of the actual West brought the Westward Movement of American writing to a natural and inevitable end a few years after the closing of the frontier."[18] Although Fussell's interpretation of the frontier and its significance in American culture remains one of the most revealing works of its kind, I cannot help but disagree with him on this point.

Three years after the official closing of the frontier, Turner felt that, although spatial possibilities had been exhausted, the need for some kind of movement did not die out. In his speech, he claimed: "He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased. Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise."[19] Of course, it might be argued that delivering his speech basically in medias res, Turner did not have the temporal distance necessary for such considerations. Nevertheless, as testified by the statements of numerous critics and social observes after him, most of his predictions turned out to be correct.

One of these critics is Sam Bluefarb, who promotes the idea that what the frontier left behind is a deep yearning for escape, a typical characteristic of the American identity. According to him, "while frontiers disappeared and hopes died, the urge to escape – which created both the hopes and the frontiers – continued to exist as if the frontier were still there and as if all hope had not been abandoned. That impulse, because of its tenacity in American life and character, continued in spite of the loss of hope, in spite of the cessation of migration and the closing of the frontier."[20] Even though this concept already seems to be more plausible than Fussell's complete dismissal of any continuity, I would even go as far as to say that there was no cessation of migration after the frontier closed, at least not an outright one.

Quite on the contrary, mobility remained a primary expression of the American way of life and the West, now geographically situated in the state of California, its ideal destination. To support this claim, I will borrow again from Stout, who asserts that the "push toward California, the essence of the American Dream, was dramatically continued in the 1930s by the nomads of the depression and indeed continues today in a well-documented flight from

[18] Fussell 24.
[19] Turner 37.
[20] Sam Bluefarb, *The Escape Motif in the American Novel: Mark Twain to Richard Wright* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972) 3.

the aging cities of the East Coast to the sunny Southwest."[21] Similarly, Ireland perceives California as "the final destination for many travelers"[22] in the road genre, especially after the closing of the frontier. While acknowledging a degree of countermovement as well, Kerouac himself testified to this development in his thoroughly fictitious novella *Pic*: "Future of the United States was always goin to Californy, and always bouncin back from it, and always will be."[23] Contrary to Fussell's argument then, the West remains a vital symbol of freedom and progress, frequently appearing in the nation's literature, even when its geographical limits have been reached.

Stepping down from the figurative level, the twentieth century was marked by technological inventions in terms of mobility that had a profound effect on the understanding of space as well as the American identity. Although railroads had by now stretched all across the country, an autonomous movement was a whole different matter. With the advent of the automobile industry at the turn of the century, individual long-distance mobility became a part of everyday life. According to Jean Lindamood, the "automobile means mastery over technology. It means power, speed control. It means freedom, autonomy. It means we don't have to walk home."[24] Due to this newly acquired freedom, the character of mobility has significantly changed from what it used to be in the times of the frontier.

To own a car was at first perceived as a great privilege and symbol of one's wealth. However, times were quickly changing and, sooner or later, almost everyone was able to afford this comfort. What was a privilege once became the standard now. Movement was no longer understood as convenient but rather as necessary. Mobility, both physical and social, also became a key to individual accomplishments. This was especially true in postwar America, where, as Eftychia Mikelli argues, "success became largely connected with the ability to move quickly, whether this involved class mobility or automobile motion. The more mobile one was, the more prosperous one was deemed."[25] The fulfillment of the American dream was thus suddenly conditioned by the acquisition of an automobile. As a side effect, the distribution of cars among a wider segment of society precipitated the transformation of the American landscape.

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[21] Stout 5.

[22] Ireland 476.

[23] Jack Kerouac, *Pic*, *Satori in Paris and Pic: Two Novels* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988) 206.

[24] Jean Lindamood, *Road Trips, Head Trips, and Other Car-Crazed Writings* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996) 1.

[25] Eftychia Mikelli, "'Passing Everybody and Never Halting': *Dromos* and Speed in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," *Cultural Politics* 8.1 (2012): 146, Project MUSE <muse.jhu.edu/article/472212> 5 Dec 2018.

The act of constructing the First Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s is nowadays considered an archetypal image in American history. Although the initial conditions were vastly different, no less can be said about the first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway. Leading from coast to coast, this project from 1913 reorganized the landscape and made physical distance irrelevant. A visit on the other side of the country was no longer necessarily a permanent move but rather a matter of temporary displacement. The land itself received new meaning as people skimmed through it at a high speed with indefinite goals in their minds. Gradually, the single highway was replaced by a network of numbered roads, particularly under the Public Works Administration part of the New Deal project. While highways crisscrossed the American wilderness, the nation's obsession with mobility was accelerated. This hastened movement started to influence all aspects of everyday experience.

All of these changes had a direct effect both on people's lives and their reflection in literature. One of these effects, as Jason Arthur observes, was a new understanding of time: "concepts of time and time's relation to experiential reality change thanks to the 650,000 new miles of pavement aid down by New Deal works projects."[26] This change is evident in the works of Jack Kerouac, especially when compared to his literary predecessors. According to Arthur, "where 'time is the essence' for writers such as Austin and Agee, (…) time is essentially a nonissue for a writer like Jack Kerouac."[27] Indeed, being able to make "1180 miles in exactly seventeen hours," (238) just as Sal Paradise and his companion Dean Moriarty did, makes one quite independent of time. And that is precisely something the personal automobile has brought about. Mikelli claimed that it was "the automobile's power to reduce the time needed to move from place to place," which made driving "a way of life as well as a state of mind."[28] And yet, this does not seem to be what attracted the Beats to driving. Having no specific destination in mind, there was hardly ever any need to rush in their travels. It was more the speed itself, rather than the time saved, that appealed to these wild men searching for 'kicks.'

One might find it paradoxical that, although movement became so fast, Kerouac and his friends still spent a substantial portion of their time in between places. That is simply because they could not stay anywhere for too long and the great number of trips they undertook resulted in a great amount of time spent directly on the road. For this reason, the

[26] Jason Arthur, *Violet America: Regional Cosmopolitanism in U.S. Fiction* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2003) 30.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Mikelli 143.

road should not be considered a mere transitional space for them. Instead, just as any other location, the road is a place in itself. Roger Bill described the road in Kerouac's novels as a playground and mobility as an escape, "both being characteristics, I would argue, of the wave of automobile tourism that accompanied the creation of America's interstate freeway network in the 1950s."[29] In his constant need for movement, Kerouac was thus hardly an exception in his country. Instead, his novels were expressive of the general patterns of American identity brought about by the changing nature of mobility.

As mentioned before, the road itself came to represent the United States as one of its leading symbols. The simple fact that the idea of America often brings to mind the image of Route 66 testifies to the centrality of motion in this culture. According to Jason Spangler, "the tropes of the broad highway and the car have become central to defining what it means to live in this country. The road is a highly symbolic space in which history and future intersect."[30] It is a space where the migratory tendencies of the first Americans are enacted on a daily basis. The road is a stage for mobility, making, as Patton argues, "movement a permanent state of mind, turning migration into circulation."[31] And that is precisely the way America felt about mobility at the time when Kerouac traveled from coast to coast, never stopping long enough to allow for idleness to take over his mind. For him, as well as for many Americans at that time and even today, movement was not a necessary condition for arriving somewhere; it was a way of life. Perceived in this light, it found its way into Kerouac's work, which is so evocative of this lifestyle, that many recipients recognize his novels as its embodiment.

2.3 Mobility in American literature

There is not much dispute about the fact that literature is a product of the culture it originates within. The chief concerns of any given culture are thus necessarily reflected in its literary outcomes. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in a culture defined by its obsession with mobility, its literature would be marked by similar preoccupations. As Ireland asserts: "Americans are a restless people, imbued with a kind of nervous energy that manifests itself

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[29] Roger Bill, "Traveller or tourist? Jack Kerouac and the commodification of culture," *Dialectical Anthropology* 34.3 (2010): 415–416, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29790956> 5 Dec 2018.

[30] Jason Spangler, "We're On a Road to Nowhere: Steinbeck, Kerouac, and the Legacy of the Great Depression," *Studies in the Novel* 40.3 (2008): 319, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533876> 6 Dec 2018.

[31] Patton 13.

culturally through the mediums of literature, film, and music."[32] In fact, there are various ways in which the predominant features of mobility in American history became reflected in its literature.

The first and most obvious of these is the fact that mobility, in all of its forms, constitutes one of the main thematic concerns of American literature. No matter the message of any given work, there often seems to be a certain kind of movement involved in its thematic realization. When it comes to the discussion of the relationship between mobility in the history and literature of the United States, there is no better authority to draw from than Janis P. Stout, again. According to her, "from its beginnings, the American literary tradition has been characterized to a remarkable and peculiar degree, by narratives and images of journeys. It has been a literature of movement, of motion, its great icons the track through the forest and the superhighway."[33] Indeed, authors of as diverse backgrounds as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Walt Whitman or Jack Kerouac (to mention but a few) all have, in one way or another, incorporated themes of journey and traveling into their narratives. Often drawing on their personal experience, these authors have traveled both in their lives as well as through the lives of their characters. And they all had their preferred modes of traveling and environments to travel through. As examples, Bluefarb mentions the following: "Thoreau went to the woods; Whitman took to the open road; and Melville went to sea."[34] There is hardly any need to clarify which one of these was Kerouac inspired by.

In the works of these authors, journey is sometimes used as a structural device for conveying the plot. At the same time, however, journey is often the theme itself. It does not merely occur in the literature because the characters, just as Americans themselves, happen to travel a lot. Instead, the journey carries a specific meaning that goes beyond mere traveling. It is used as a symbol for progress, whether personal or collective, from one state of consciousness to another. The journey might stand for intellectual development, maturing or a simple awakening to some hidden truths of life. It might also, in response to the nation's history, represent a collective advancement toward a better future. A typical meaning is the allegorical journey of life that has been ascribed to travel literature in general for centuries. Bill Kauffman gives yet another possibility when he argues that Mark Twain "gave us the most enduring motif in our literature: the journey in search of freedom – and its frequent

[32] Ireland 474.
[33] Stout 3.
[34] Bluefarb 8.

reward, self-discovery – played out against the backdrop of this vast and wondrous continent."[35]

However, journey does not always have to be a theme in literature and it still might have an effect on it. Another way in which mobility has been reflected in American literature is by directly shaping this medium. The restlessness of the American people has been imprinted on the pages of their books not only by providing an inexhaustible source of stories but also by creating whole new genres and modes of narration. Be it the road novel, the sea novel, or the western, to name but a few, they all have been launched or influenced by mobility. And although these might not be exclusively American genres, they have either originated there or been predominantly interpreted within the American context. The mere fact that there is *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* but not to the European one, or that the journey narrative has been thoroughly examined in American literature but not so much in, for example, British literature, testifies to the importance of these genres in the literary output of this nation specifically.

Apart from new genres, the American preoccupation with mobility has also created specific patterns of behavior and attitudes toward traveling that are reflected in and expressed by literature. According to Stout, "the characteristic journeys of American history influenced our literature by providing images and a framework of values associated with movement and direction."[36] I would even go as far as to say that this is a reciprocal process. While the strong presence of mobility in American history had its share in shaping the national identity, which was subsequently reflected in its novels and stories, literature has also, in turn, contributed to the shaping of this image and promoting it in the outside world. In other words, when the American character became imprinted in literature, people started to identify with this image and act according to it. Ireland illustrates the workings of this process on an example of the archetype of the American pioneer: "There is nothing more American than the pioneer spirit, and in using that imagery, latter-day heroes are not only continuing a historic tradition, but also, to an extent, reclaiming traditional pioneer values and imagery from the history books."[37]

To recapitulate, the ways in which journey has been reflected in American literature are multifarious. In fiction and nonfiction alike, journey might serve as a predominant theme,

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[35] Bill Kauffman, *America First!: Its History, Culture, and Politics* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1995) 166.

[36] Stout 5–6.

[37] Ireland 475.

as a symbol, or as a shaping instrument. In any case, mobility has played an essential role in all of the culture media in the country and will continue to do so as long as it remains an essential quality of the American way of life.

2.4 American travel narrative and its literary precedents

When discussing the motif of journey, one must not overlook the fact that it is not exclusive to American literature in particular. Even though, as I have tried to argue so far, mobility has played an essential role in the development of the United States, it cannot be ruled out of the history of other nations. The same applies to its presence in the world's national literatures. There had been numerous travel accounts and journey narratives long before the settlers undertook their first overseas voyage. In fact, as Stout asserts, "the simple journey or road narrative is one of the most ancient of storytelling forms."[38]

One does not have to think long to come up with various examples of great travel literature. The most obvious ones include the *Aeneid* and the *Odyssey*, but also parts of the Bible such as the deliverance of Jews from Egypt and their subsequent journey to the Promised Land. Mobility is closely connected to original genres such as the epic, myth, travelogue, mock journey, picaresque novel or romance. Even the rise of the novel as a literary medium was performed through the works of travel including Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Among other things, all of these works had their share in the process of transforming the journey into a metaphor. When the Americans arrived at the idea of manifest destiny, this process had been already concluded and journey was long established as a literary symbol. As such, it fitted nicely in their scheme of expanding across North America.

And yet, there is something about the American travel narrative that makes it different from all of its literary precedents. According to Stout, the "patterns of road narrative already familiar in world literature and mythology – the quest, the migration, the homecoming, the wandering – were reshaped into distinctive, while yet familiar, patterns of American narrative. The patterns of journey narrative that we observe in American literature are not unique, but traditional and distinctively adapted."[39] While mobility as a theme is to be found across

[38] Stout 12.
[39] Ibid.

various genres all over the world, the way it is dealt with in American literature is both uncommon and persistent. This is a result of the nation's unique history and the particular context in which its literature has been developed. The journey in American literature is the outcome of an unprecedented interplay of circumstances; it combines the experience of earlier travel narratives with the singular American preoccupation with mobility. Due to this combination, mobility in American literature is not only a recurrent theme and a convenient way of expression, as the case mostly is with its European forebears, but also the dominant form of experience. In other words, the road in American literature serves as a literary interpretation of the American way of life itself.

There are a number of ways in which this uniqueness of American travel narrative is demonstrated in practice. First of these is the directional significance that has been discussed in the first section of this chapter. While all the cardinal directions assume certain meanings in American literature, it is mostly the West that serves as a primary destination. This heavy emphasis on the West and the wide scope of its symbolic meaning is something that is missing outside of the American context. Also, the ideas of freedom and progress, which form an intrinsic part of this image, constitute particular values that are nowhere as frequently associated with mobility as in American literature.

But the most important difference between American travel narrative and that of the rest of the world lies in the meaning of the journey itself. In American literature, movement acquires certain connotations that might not be original, but they are frequently recurring for they are derived directly from the nation's history. In this sense, journey might serve as a search for identity, as a self-discovery, social protest, transformation or liberation. These are just some of the most typical ones, but the list definitely does not end here. As has been already mentioned, Sam Bluefarb argues that the most frequent association of journey in American literature is the motif of escape. According to him, escape has been the chief purpose for mobility ever since the times of the first pilgrims and it continues to dominate the modern American novel: "Although the theme of flight may be seen in other literatures, it is only in American literature, particularly in the American novel, that the preoccupation with flight begins to loom large, begins to represent what is most characteristically American – the urge to be forever wandering forward into new territories."[40]

I have argued that this need for new territories did not end with the exhaustion of land when the frontier closed. The same applies to the need for endless wandering and escape. In

[40] Bluefarb 7.

American culture, escape might be translated as the act of abandoning old securities for the prospect of new opportunities. Understood as such, the desire for escape is quite independent of areal resources. While on the run from the old, one might find new territories even on an already densely populated piece of land. And this is precisely what kept the Americans on the road long after the frontier closed. One of the chief motivations for leaving their home was to escape from the familiar zones into the regions of the unfamiliar, and thus to arrive at new territories or unknown potentials. This tendency is well captured in a quote from Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* that is, for some reason, often mistakenly ascribed to Kerouac's *On the Road*: "I was surprised, as always, by how easy the act of leaving was, and how good it felt. The world was suddenly rich with possibility."[41]

Even more typical than escape, however, is the theme of journey as an end in itself. Whereas conventional journeys are supposed to have a clearly fixed destination, in American literature and culture, movement is often undertaken for the sake of movement as such. This is especially true in the twentieth century, where historical circumstances such as the World Wars, the invention of nuclear weapons, and the Great Depression contributed to the shaping of everyday experience. As a result, the constant fear of annihilation and the spreading of existentialist thought provided for the feeling of futility in any human action. Within this context, people took to the road not only to find a better place but also simply to keep moving. They had nothing particular to escape from but stagnation. As Charles L. Sanford claimed, the "dedication of many Americans to the Open Road has, indeed, been a dedication to endless process itself rather than to any easily definable end point."[42]

The theme of aimless wandering has thus become a key element of the American road genre in the twentieth century. Both Stout and Ireland, as well as various other critics, have observed this development and discussed it in their works. Ireland noted that the characters of many novels and movies in this genre "seem either to be escaping from something or someone, or their journeys are entirely aimless."[43] To this, Stout added: "Our characteristic journey has become the journey of uncertain destination or duration, the journey to no end."[44] This is well exemplified by the protagonists of *On the Road*. When, during one of their numerous rides, they are asked, "You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?" the confused narrator thus ponders: "We didn't understand his question, and it was a damned

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[41] Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007) 136.
[42] Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1961) 17.
[43] Ireland 480.
[44] Stout 105.

good question" (20). This question did not trouble only Kerouac's characters. In fact, it haunted the whole of his life and career.

3. The Beat Generation and the Road

> The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way, in the late Forties, of a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way – a vision gleaned from the way we heard the word *beat* spoken on street corners on Times Square and in the Village, in other cities in the down-town-city-night of postwar America – *beat*, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction.
>
> – Jack Kerouac, "Aftermath: The Philosophy of the Beat Generation"

In the introduction to her anthology entitled *Beat Down Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?*, the leading Beat scholar Ann Charters disclosed: "Gary Snyder once told me, half seriously, that there was no Beat Generation – it consisted of only three or four people, and four people don't make up a generation."[1] What the poet must have had on his mind was the group of friends who met in 1944 around Columbia University and who later formed the core of the literary movement in question. These included Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, and Jack Kerouac. While no one would doubt their association with the movement, the definite extent of this so-called generation remains overall debatable.

In order to decide who did and did not belong to the Beat Generation, and whether or not it can actually be described as a generation, one would first have to come up with a coherent definition of the movement, which is not an easy task in itself. In fact, many people have attempted this and the result was that there now seem to be as many definitions of the Beat Generation as there were such attempts. One may try to identify its basic premises, but these did not always meet reality. In an article written for *Esquire* magazine in March 1958, Kerouac himself conceded that "as to the actual existence of a Beat Generation, chances are it was really just an idea in our minds."[2] And yet, no matter how abstract this idea was, many people in the country identified with it and felt themselves to be a part of what it represented. As Charters pointed out, "by the end of the 1950s, many thousands of us throughout the

[1] Ann Charters, *Beat Down Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) xv.
[2] Jack Kerouac, "Aftermath: The Philosophy of the Beat Generation," *Esquire* (Mar 1958): 24.

United States felt that we belonged to the Beat Generation, even if we all didn't go on the road with Kerouac or take off our clothes with Ginsberg or get stoned with Huncke."[3]

In this manner, the impact of the Beat Generation found its way throughout American society. What started as a small group of friends who loved poetry and despised authority quickly spread among similar-minded people, until it did, in certain aspects at least, comprise the whole generation. And just like the Lost Generation before them, the Beats were products of their time and most of their thinking was brought about by the social and political conditions it originated within. Indeed, the way they felt about life and society was not always exclusive to this group and their defiance was a reaction to circumstances experienced by the whole nation. It is for this reason that Christopher Gair duly observes it would "be a mistake to see them as an entirely isolated group, whose interests and concerns bore no relationship to the sense of alienation felt elsewhere in the United States at that time."[4] Quite to the contrary, in terms of ideas and attitudes, one may easily find overlaps between this group and the rest of the country after the World War II.

This also implies that the Beat Generation was much more than a mere literary movement, as it is commonly described. Although it is chiefly through their works that we nowadays approach this group, its influence reaches far beyond the world of literature. In fact, not all of those who felt associated with the movement were active writers. This includes even some of the core members, such as Kerouac's perennial friend and travel mate Neal Cassady, who might have written thousands of rather intriguing letters throughout his lifetime and aspired to become a great writer, but whose only published independent piece of literature is an autobiographical novel *The First Third*, which is not very well known and scarcely read. There are also authors who became associated with the Beat Generation through media other than literature, as Bob Dylan, for example, whose songs are said to impersonate the energy of Beat poetry. In any case, the underlying idea behind this movement seems to have a life of its own, quite independent of, though epitomized by, its literature.

I always found it intriguing how many biographies were written of the individual members of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac in particular. Compared to other literary movements, the focus is quite notably on the lives of its representatives, especially the few who formed its nucleus. Even though we read their books and approach the movement mostly through literature studies, there is often more attention paid to the content of these works rather than the form. With novels, in particular, the literary quality seems to be somewhat

[3] Charters, Beat xvi.
[4] Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007) 39.

secondary to the factual one in our contemporary reading. Even though I find the true significance of the Beat Generation in the way they captured their ideas within their works and the way they transformed conventional literary forms in order to meet this goal, I feel like we nowadays know more about their lives than their art.

Whether this lack of appreciation of the art form is justifiable or not, the predominance of this particular focal point further attests to the argument that the Beat Generation was not all about literature. Many critics would agree that what the Beats promoted in their actions and described in their works was a whole new attitude towards society, a way of life. Borrowing from Charters again, "'beat' was not only a literary movement that described a generation of writers (whether the writers liked it or not), but also a new lifestyle."[5] In his own interpretation, Kerouac went even further and, without acknowledging any degree of contribution to or satisfaction with this development, observed that "'Beat Generation' has simply become the slogan or label for a revolution in manners in America."[6] It is this endless stretching and reshaping of the label itself that complicates the whole process of coming to terms with the Beat Generation. The pursuit of a comprehensive definition seems to become more futile the further one delves into it.

And yet, a certain degree of explication is necessary here, for, in order to understand the works of Jack Kerouac properly, one needs to acknowledge the context they stemmed from and the impact they left behind. As one of the leading members of the Beat Generation, its initiator, in fact, as well as its chief advocate, Kerouac had a deeper connection with the movement than any other author before or after him. A lot of the group's basic premises came directly from his own thoughts and beliefs, not to mention that a significant portion of the group's active years is actually recorded within his novels. Therefore, whenever it comes to the discussion of Kerouac's novels, one cannot avoid discussing the goals and assumptions of the Beat Generation as such. And since this study is concerned with mobility and its manifestation in American culture, the main purpose of the present chapter is to establish the link between the philosophy of the Beats and their approach to movement. That there should be such a link is beyond any doubt. For, as Gregory Stephenson rightly alleged, "movement, both outward and inward, physical and metaphysical, was the guiding principle of the Beats and 'go!' their imperative."[7] To this claim, a quote from *On the Road* easily attests: "We sat

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[5] Charters, Beat xxi.

[6] Jack Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation," *Playboy* (Jun 1959): 42.

[7] Stephenson 12.

and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go" (119–120).

3.1 Historical context and its implications

As the poet Gary Snyder has alluded to, the roots of the Beat Generation might be traced to the first half of the 1940s, when its principal members met at the Columbia University campus and started to explore the various bars of downtown New York together. The label itself was introduced by Kerouac in 1948, but it was not until the Six Gallery poetry reading of October 1955, the group's first public manifestation, that they came to be recognized as a distinct literary movement. Three years later, after the publication of *On the Road*, there could be no more doubt about the existence of the Beat Generation.

Emerging right after World War II, the Beats were significantly marked by the effects this conflict left upon society in general. These included a sense of alienation and disillusionment, feelings of insecurity and hopelessness, constant possibility of annihilation brought about by the advent of the nuclear age, as well as the spreading of paranoia enabled by the advancement of electronic mass media. One might easily find such circumstances as rather unfavorable for a developing group of artists. This is what John Tytell was referring to when in his study of the Beat literature he argued that "few periods in our history have presented as much of an ordeal for artists and intellectuals."[8] Yet, the Beats succeeded in releasing themselves from this stifling atmosphere of postwar America and decided to face the negative forces of the period in their own way. Their literature was both a product of a society suffering from the said symptoms as well as a reaction against it. And as such, it became epitomized in the literary history of the nation. According to Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, "for many European readers, the Beat Generation wrote the most representative American poetry of the postwar years."[9] I would argue that the same applied to their prose.

Although the Beats rarely addressed these topics directly, the influence of the war and the transformations it brought upon society are always present in their works. After all, the state of exhaustion caused by the violence of the preceding years became reflected in the very

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[8] John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives & Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1976) 5.
[9] Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) 395.

name of the group. There might be other, more significant meanings to the word "beat," but the desperation left behind by the war is definitely part of it. As Cresswell pointed out, people after the war "felt weary and hopeless – beat."[10] This presence of conflict during the emergence of the group makes one automatically think of another postwar movement, the Lost Generation. In fact, this is precisely where the word "generation" in the name of the later movement came from.

That there might be an analogy between these two groups was noted by several critics as well as some of the Beats themselves. As a representative of the former, Stephenson argued that the characters of the Lost Generation "prefigured the Beats in their use of drugs, their sexual experimentation, and their pursuit of the extremes of experience. (…) It was the writers and poets of the Lost Generation from whom the Beats inherited both their attitude of social revolt and their penchant for radical literary experimentation."[11] There is thus a discernible degree of continuity between the two movements, which goes beyond mere similarity in terms of historical context. That it should be so seems only natural for two generations less than thirty years apart. In fact, the correlation between their attitudes to life and artistic expression might as much stem from their common national identity as it does from the shared presence of war in their lifetimes.

What I find more striking is that, despite their analogous status of postwar movements, the Lost and the Beat Generations are actually remarkably different. While acknowledging the undeniable similarities, John Clellon Holmes, himself a member of the Beat Generation, identified a whole range of aspects in which the two generations contrasted. In his 1952 article for *The New York Times Magazine*, Holmes made the following observations:

> The wild boys of today are not lost. (…) The repeated inventory of shattered ideals, and the laments about the mud in moral currents, which so obsessed the Lost Generation, do not concern young people today. They take these things frighteningly for granted. They were brought up in these ruins and no longer notice them. They drink to 'come down' or to 'get high,' not to illustrate anything. Their excursions into drugs or promiscuity come out of curiosity, not disillusionment. (…) The absence of personal and social values is to them, not

[10] Cresswell, Resistance 254..
[11] Stephenson 5.

a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. How to live seems to them much more crucial than why.[12]

The disparity between Holmes's and Stephenson's point of view is rather striking here. What the latter perceived as a common trait of the two movements, namely the use of drugs, sexual experimentation, and the approach to society, the former used in order to illustrate the differences between them. As a way of resolving this conflict of opinions, I would argue that the distinction between the Lost Generation and the Beat Generation was not in terms of historical circumstances, neither in the way the representatives reacted to these, but rather in the approach itself: in the underlying motives that drove their behavior, in the actual meaning of their acts, and in what they hoped to achieve through them.

Although Stephenson seems to advocate the kinship of the two generations, he does, in fact, name some discrepancies as well. According to him, the "principal difference between the Lost Generation and the Beats is the latter's intense interest in metaphysical issues – in mysticism and spirituality."[13] While I definitely consider these concerns of great importance for the Beat Generation, I believe the primary difference to be of another nature. I am more inclined towards Tytell's analysis of the context, which promotes the idea that what inspired the philosophy of the Beats "was not so much the horrible fact of the war, as it had been for the Lost Generation of the twenties, but the emergence of the new postwar values that accepted man as the victim of circumstances, and no longer granted him the agency of his own destiny."[14] It was precisely this loss of agency and, by implication, also individuality and heterogeneity that truly characterized the social setup after World War II.

What was significantly different about this war, as opposed to the previous one, was the sense of horror caused by the Holocaust and the atomic bomb. Even though the battle was won, the cost of this victory was too severe. All of a sudden, human life and individual identity became meaningless as the threat of massive destruction kept looming in the background. It was also an age of paradox, accurately captured in one of Henry Miller's novels: "Never has there been a world so avid for security, and never has life been more insecure. To protect ourselves, we invent the most fantastic instruments of destruction."[15] The constant presence of death, or its potential, left the whole society in a state of paralysis.

[12] John Clellon Holmes, "This Is the Beat Generation," *The New York Times* (November 1952): 19.
[13] Stephenson 5.
[14] Tytell, Naked Angels 9.
[15] Henry Miller, *The World of Sex* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1957) 85.

The ideological implications of this trauma are best expressed by Norman Mailer in his acclaimed essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster." In this article, Mailer described the society in the postwar era as suffering from the so-called "collective failure of nerve."[16] As a remedy for this breakdown, collective effort and conformity were enforced in favor of individual zeal. Society had to work together towards a common goal, even if that involved repression of individuality and diversity, which were then perceived as undesirable. As Mailer argued, "one could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an elite by being a radical were forever gone."[17] These were the conditions that the Beats entered the literary scene under and had to overcome in order to be heard. As a result, they made diversity and resistance the key features of their philosophy and the chief objects of their interest. Robert Holton observed this strand in their thought when he argued that "the Beat movement became one focal point for the exploration of a complex set of cultural constraints," characterized by their "willingness to investigate various folds of heterogeneity that persisted in the increasingly uniform fabric of American modernity."[18]

Instead of pursuing the American Dream and its materialistic realizations, instead of striving to be good middle-class citizens with a family and a house in suburbia, instead of trying to fit in the homogeneous society and follow its conservative values, the Beats have chosen another path – the path of music, alcohol and drugs, movement, spontaneity, energy, madness and joy; in other words, the path of freedom, individuality, and diversity. As Tytell asserted in another one of his works dealing with the Beat Generation, "rejecting the glut of post-war materialism and an obsessive national conformism, the Beats proposed a creed of individuality and a commitment to the life of the spirit."[19] That such a way of life should assume the form of a social rebellion was only natural. If the majority of America perceived the Beats at outcasts, rebels, and bums, they embraced these labels and wore them proudly at the margins of society they felt increasingly alienated from. Their answer to the postwar trauma was exactly what Mailer suggested in his article: "to divorce oneself from society, to

[16] Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," *Dissent* (Fall 1957): par. 3.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Robert Holton, "'The Sordid Hipsters of America': Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity," *Reconstructing the Beats*, eds. Jennie Skerl (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): 26.
[19] John Tytell, "The Beat Generation and the Continuing American Revolution," *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture*, eds. Holly George-Warren (New York: Hyperion, 1999) 7.

exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self."[20] And that is exactly what the Beats did, through drugs, art, and unceasing movement.

3.2 Label and philosophy

"Beat Generation" is one of the most frequently discussed labels in the literary history of the United States. Even though Kerouac tried to clarify its meaning in more than one of his articles, it is still sometimes being misread and subsequently misused. This is not because the word "beat" would be in any way complicated, but the scope of its potential interpretation is so wide that the audience often fails to grasp it in all of its intended connotations. Kerouac himself acknowledged that there "couldn't be a more economical term to mean so many things."[21]

According to Ginsberg, the term "Beat Generation" first appeared in a conversation between himself, Kerouac, and Holmes around the year 1950. Many years later, Ginsberg recollected Kerouac saying: "'Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation,'"[22] and he argued his friend did not mean "to name the generation but to un-name it."[23] In my own understanding, what Kerouac was trying to achieve is to set himself and his group of literary comrades apart from the Lost Generation, suggesting the analogy was itself baseless. They were not a found generation; in fact, they were hardly a generation at all at that point. Instead, they were a group of distinct individuals, best described in Kerouac's own terms as "*beat*, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction."[24] They were often without money or a place to stay, jobless, and destitute, but always maintained that degree of hope, which would carry them across the country countless times and push them towards capturing these experiences within their works.

"Beat" was originally a word used by Herbert Huncke and his associates from the Times Square hipster scene. As Huncke later explained, "when I said I was *beat* I was *beat*,

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[20] Mailer par. 4.
[21] Kerouac, Origins 42.
[22] Allen Ginsberg, "A Definition of the Beat Generation," *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995*, eds. Bill Morgan (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000): 236.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Kerouac, Aftermath 24.

man, I was tired, exhausted, worn out. That's what *I* meant."[25] However, this sense of exhaustion and weariness ended up being only one of the dimensions of what the label came to represent. It was an actual physical weariness, as well as a symbolic one or, as Park Honan observed, "a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world."[26] That is essentially where all the rebellion of the Beat Generation sprang from. But the label goes beyond this state of being beaten, it also includes the notion of beatitude.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, beatitude can be described as a "supreme blessedness or happiness."[27] This implies there was a certain degree of religious connotation to the term, which Kerouac openly admitted, even embraced. As a Catholic himself, Kerouac was once heard to say that the Beats were "basically a religious generation… Beat means beatitude, not beat up."[28] Indeed, one may easily discern this aspect in his works, which are replete with religious symbolism and imagery. The Beats might have been weary, exhausted, and worn out, but they were also endowed with this sacred energy, beatitude, "a state of blessed happiness and cheerful acceptance of earthly suffering,"[29] as Bill Kauffman recognizes it.

Finally, it was also the beat of jazz music, that energy-driven sound they sought throughout bars and imitated in their works, which became reflected in the label. In fact, jazz was just as essential for the Beat Generation as literature itself. It served not only as a major inspiration in terms of lifestyle but also as a driving force behind their literary technique. For Kerouac in particular, jazz music was a "central structural metaphor,"[30] as Cresswell observed, an inherent part of the style he termed 'spontaneous bop prosody,' which he spent his whole career developing and bringing to perfection.

When, in 1958, Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* added the Russian diminutive -nik to the label, thus coining the term 'beatnik,' the movement acquired a political dimension the original members might not necessarily have felt affiliated with. As a portmanteau on the name of the Russian satellite Sputnik, this new term emphasized the leftist propensity in the group's political orientation, which would be seen as subversive during the years of Cold War. While most of the members were decidedly leftist in their views, Kerouac

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[25] Herbert Huncke, *From Dream to Dream* CD (Netherlands: Music & Words, 1994).
[26] Park Honan, eds. *The Beats: An Anthology of 'Beat' Writing* (London, J. M. Dent, 1987) x.
[27] "beatitude, n." def. 1.a., *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Dec 2018 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/16632> 26 Feb 2019.
[28] Jack Kerouac, qtd. in Lisa Phillips and Maurice Berger, *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Flammarion, 1995) 30.
[29] Kauffman 167.
[30] Cresswell, Resistance 256.

himself feared this political edge would overshadow the essentially spiritual quality of the movement and he dissociated himself from the term. Rather than a nickname for the Beat Generation, 'beatnik' thus became a pejorative for the arising group of their followers, especially those who were ignorant of the literary qualities of the generation. As Charters distinguished, "'beat' was literary. 'Beatnik' was lifestyle."[31]

Ever since its first public introduction, the term 'Beat Generation' was thus exposed to constant misapprehension and questioning. A lot of Kerouac's literary effort was spent in trying to clarify the term, although these attempts only seemed to bolster the confusion. Charters captured this paradox when she argued the "readers probably thought that the term had been defined more coherently by its critics than by its originators."[32] And thus the confusion persisted and carried on until it became an inherent part of the label itself; a part of the Beat image of indefinability.

As has been discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the label is not the only thing about the Beat Generation that seems to be shrouded in mystery. Although most people have a certain notion of what the movement represented for them, this idea is often rather vague or even inaccurate in some aspects. Since the group was so heterogeneous and its members so individualistic, it is difficult to name all the key points and values that potentially united them and defined them as a literary movement; nevertheless, certain basic premises of their philosophy should be delineated here.

I have already mentioned the distrust of collectivity that characterized the Beat Generation in the context of postwar America. The same kind of forces that drove their instinct for individuality also stimulated in the Beats a simple need for honesty, both in their lives and their works. While their actions were triggered by the spontaneous energy and an unmasked zeal for life, when recording these adventures in their literature, the Beat writers opted for the same degree of frankness, which resulted in the singular sense of realism their works embody. Stephenson described this strategy in the following terms:

> They did not seek to dissemble or disguise their personal anguish in the contrivances and artifices of technique and craft but strove to bare their hearts, to give spontaneous and honest expression to their deepest tensions and visions. Raw and unrefined, occasionally naive, even crude: there is a liberating, elemental vitality at the core of Beat writing in contrast to which

[31] Charters, Beat xxi.
[32] Ibid., p. xxxii.

much of the mainstream literature of the period seems affected, insipid, and insufficient.[33]

In this way, the Beats approached art not as something that needs to be artificially embellished and encoded in elaborate language, but rather as something natural, inherent in the very life itself.

No matter how irresponsible and carefree the members of the Beat Generation might have been towards other aspects of life, they took their art very seriously and dedicated most of their potential to cultivating it. In its perfect state, art was to equal life, with all of its joys and excitements as well as imperfections and failures. Literature was not to be superior to everyday experience, neither was it supposed to elevate it or amplify, but to represent it as candidly as possible, so that one may relive these moments while reading about them. Modest about their achievements and straightforward in their desires, the Beats were, as Tytell observed, "concerned with removing artificial barriers between their lives and art."[34] In doing so, "art could not be expected to differ from life itself, and would have to include its accidents, chances, variety, and disorder."[35]

Art had thus an irreplaceable role in their lives, just as life was an indispensable substance in the creation of their art. One may even speculate whether the literature of the Beat Generation did not influence the lives of its authors in the same way it was influenced by them. Michael J. Dittman argued that Kerouac turned "his life into material for his writing,"[36] which is not to say that he was acting in any way pretentious or trying to alter his behavior in order for it to look good in his novels. But, in keeping with his art and philosophy, he and the rest of the Beats forsook the surrounding values of middle-class America and strived for a life rooted in deeper awareness, mental satisfaction, and freedom.

Gary Snyder once said that "the Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed before, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum."[37] Indeed, freedom was an essential quality in their philosophy and much of the ideas surrounding it were taken from their literary predecessors. After all, freedom, just like mobility, is embedded in the American identity and is often demonstrated through the literature of the nation. For the Beats, freedom was not only

[33] Stephenson 11.
[34] Tytell, Naked Angels 26.
[35] Ibid., p. 27.
[36] Michael J. Dittman, *Masterpieces of Beat Literature* (Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2007) 26.
[37] Gary Snyder qtd. in Stephen Prothero, Introduction, *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, eds. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) 13.

a major theme in their works but also a necessary condition for the creative process itself. Social constraints were their biggest enemy that had to be fought on an everyday basis in order to meet one's imaginative potential. Carolyn Cassady, the second wife of Neal Cassady as well as Kerouac's longtime secret lover, expressed this thought when she argued in one of her articles about the two friends that Kerouac "had to write, and in his case, to do so he had to be mobile and free – free of responsibilities that would tie him down until he became a success."[38] Kerouac would definitely agree with this claim, just as he did in *The Dharma Bums* when he acknowledged: "Better to sleep in an uncomfortable bed free, than sleep in a comfortable bed unfree."[39]

The need for freedom the Beat authors epitomized, the "freedom to pick up and go across the country at a moment's notice,"[40] as David Halberstam has identified it, manifested itself in the group's attitude of social revolt. That the Beat Generation stood for social protest and rebellion is indisputable, what they protested against is, however, not so straightforward. Most critics would agree that the focus of the Beat rebellion was the prevailing values of middle-class America, especially the materialism of the American Dream. Halberstam, for instance, maintains that "if other young people of their generation gloried in getting married, having children, owning property and cars, and socializing with neighbors much like themselves, these young men and women saw suburbia as a prison. They wanted no future of guaranteed pensions but instead sought freedom."[41] That is why they were understood as the pioneers of the counterculture and celebrated as a part of "the subversive tradition of American literature," as John P. Sisk recognizes, "'subversive' because writers in this tradition so often appear as destructive forces to the middle class from which they come."[42]

And yet, is it really justifiable to say that the Beats were destructive to society? Did they not, in their own sense, contribute to the making of the American identity? Were they not representative of the nation, despite or even due to their rebellious tendencies? The Beats were, after all, the products of the society they were brought up in, and to say that they were at odds with everything in that society would be an overstatement. In fact, it was only in certain aspects of modern life that they diverged from the picture of typical white male

[38] Carolyn Cassady, "The Blind Follow the Blind," *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture*, eds. Holly George-Warren (New York: Hyperion, 1999) 165.
[39] Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 123. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.
[40] David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993) 295.
[41] Ibid.
[42] John P. Sisk, "Beatniks and Tradition," *The Social Rebel in American Literature*, eds. Robert H. Woodward and James J. Clark (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1968) 94.

Americans. In a land where rebellion itself became a part of the status quo, one cannot categorically label the Beat Generation as subversive, for they were just as representative of the American character as they were in the refusal of its values.

For this reason, it seems more feasible to approach their rebellion through the lens of art rather than class, just as Kauffman did. According to him, the Beats "were in rebellion not against 'Middle America,' as is commonly supposed (Kerouac, for one, loved it dearly), but rather the sterile dissertation-writing, politics-playing, suffocation world of *Partisan Review* (...) and the whole generation of writers who were allowing Cold War to misshape their work and concerns."[43] This is precisely how the original members of the Beat Generation met in the first place – through their defiance of the academic staff at the Columbia University and its adherence to traditional poetic forms in place of unrestricted artistic expression, which the Beats strove for and eventually found in the bars of downtown New York, especially in the jazz music. If they did rebel against society and its materialistic values, it was only because it came into conflict with their creative potential and the need to express themselves. Their protest, as Simon Rycroft observed, took the form of "an intellectual, spiritual and poetic revolt,"[44] and although some of its manifestations included elements of an aggressive class conflict, the outcome was culturally productive rather than socially destructive, as Sisk tried to argue.

The original idea behind the Beat Generation did not have it as its objective to install a complete revolution in terms of politics, nor did most of the members aspired to overthrow the class structure of America. Their strivings were of a deeper nature, concerned with the individual rather than the society; their focus was inward rather than outward. Rycroft would even recognize their protest as religious, claiming that "the universal theme of beat rebellion was the spiritual quest."[45] Indeed, as the discussion of the label revealed, spirituality was of great importance for the Beat Generation. I did already touch upon Kerouac's ancestral Catholicism, it should be mentioned that Ginsberg was from a Jewish family, and Burroughs, despite his Protestant upbringing, "believed fervently in almost anything except conventional religion."[46] It might come as a surprise that this variety of religious backgrounds did not in any way interfere with their common interest in Eastern thought, Buddhism in particular.

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[43] Kauffman 167.

[44] Simon Rycroft, "Changing Lanes: Textuality off and on the Road," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 21.2 (1996): 426, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622493> 21 Feb 2019.

[45] Ibid., p. 427.

[46] Peter Schjeldahl, "The Outlaw: The Extraordinary Life of William S. Burroughs," *The New Yorker*, 3 Feb 2014 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/03/the-outlaw-2> 12 Mar 2019.

As opposed to the different religions these authors were raised within, Buddhism seemed to satisfy the "desperate craving for belief"[47] that Holmes identified as characteristic of the Beat Generation, although some of the members were more resistant to its allure than others. Nevertheless, it was no coincidence that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, each on his own but collectively inspired by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, at some point in their lives came to seek their spiritual satisfaction outside Western culture. According to Prothero, they turned their attention to the East "because they could not find God in the churches and synagogues of postwar America. They venerated the poor, the racially marginal and the socially inferior because they saw no spiritual vitality in the celebrated postwar religious revival of mainstream white preachers."[48] As it turned out, not even the Eastern religion could accommodate all of their beliefs.

The interest in Buddhism eventually abated for most of the original members of the Beat Generation, but it had a lasting effect on their works and philosophy. What they created in their literature was actually a mixture of Eastern thought and the characteristic notions of freedom installed in the American identity by authors such as Thoreau and Whitman. The Beats adapted Buddhist teachings to the specifically American environment and used it to interpret their own struggles within that context. With this new doctrine, they set off on the road, incorporating movement as a strategic component in their religion. Due to its redeeming potential, mobility became the means of articulating their conviction, recognized by Stephenson as such when he argued that "there is a metaphysic implicit in movement; to move is an expression of faith in a final destination."[49] Although their countless trips both within and outside the country might have seemed as aimless wanderings, there was always this notion of a spiritual quest behind them, the search for "IT" (207), as it was identified by Kerouac in *On the Road*.

In shaping their attitude toward this world and society, the authors of the Beat Generation drew on different sources and traditions, some of which were inherent in the American character and others that came from outside this culture. It was through their intellectual and metaphysical striving that they reacted to the predominant conformism of the contemporary age. In their freedom-driven lives and literature, the Beats expressed the need

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[47] Holmes 22.

[48] Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *The Harvard Theological Review* 84.2 (1991): 211, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509800> 20 Mar 2019.

[49] Stephenson 13.

for individual zeal, honesty, and spiritual fulfillment – qualities that turned out to be only attainable as long as one kept on the move.

3.3 The significance of the road

That mobility was a crucial element in the Beat esthetic is indisputable. It was not only Kerouac and Cassady who traveled from coast to coast as well as outside of America; a certain degree of restlessness characterized most of the core members and it continuously urged them to pursue their goals on the road. However, the nature of these goals was not always clearly determined. Just as the motivation itself kept changing, so did the underlying meaning of movement for the Beats transformed from one to another.

Although their constant need for motion was partially reflective of the same tendency in the American identity in general, the authors of the Beat Generation were frequently driven by different forces than either their pioneering predecessors or property-seeking contemporaries. They might have been after the same kind of freedom, to begin with, but once they realized it was only to be experienced on the road, many of them were unwilling to give this satisfaction up for any final settlement. Upon arriving in the symbolic West, the more restless of the Beats would turn around and go somewhere else or back to wherever they came from. Their various trajectories were too erratic to be merely representative of the American character. In fact, they often used mobility to set themselves into opposition with the rest of the country and its values, as much as the method itself might have been emblematic of these. For the Beats, movement was a way of escaping a culture that was itself based on motion but increasingly marked by ownership and materialism. As Deborah de Barros observed, "they drove their cars, not to impress or acquire or to arrive somewhere better, but to escape normative culture and to exist in the moment."[50]

This longing for withdrawal from the society that the Beats achieved through their seemingly aimless wanderings eventually became the object of condemnation by their reviewers. These would argue, just like Bluefarb did, that "it is the dynamics of escapism rather than of true escape that are at work"[51] here. What this implies is that, rather than

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[50] Deborah Paes de Barros, "Driving that highway to consciousness: late twentieth-century American travel literature," *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, eds. Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 229.
[51] Bluefarb 5.

defying a particular society and its corrupted values, the Beats were running away from reality itself, especially the mundane and unpleasant aspects of daily life. Perceived in this light, their flight was far from heroic or constructive; it was a cowardly retreat from everything that was disagreeable about their lives, including certain truths of their own identity. Paul Goodman is one of those critics who would thus denounce the Beat Generation and its literature as a mere representation of detrimental escapism. According to him, "when you ask yourself what is expressed by this prose, by this buoyant writing about racing-across-the-continent, you find that it is the woeful emptiness of running away from even loneliness and vague discontent."[52]

I would argue that such an utterly dismissive approach is far too simplistic for a group of authors as heterogeneous as the Beats were. Their reasons to set off on the road differed not only from author to author but also throughout the various stages of their individual lives. To condemn all of their travels as mere flights from reality would be a misconception. Although there might have been an inclination towards escapism in their journeys, everything they avoided or ran away from they replaced with something else. Sinclair Lewis once observed that "in a passionate escape there must be not only a place from which to flee but a place to which to flee."[53] This was definitely the case with the flight of the Beat Generation. While escaping from, they also arrived at, albeit in a spiritual rather than geographical sense. In the end, these escapes turned out to be remarkably productive, not only of a whole new set of values associated with the life on the road but also of a large body of art that captured this experience and thus contributed to the shaping of the American culture.

The Beats did not perceive the road as a mere transitional territory, but as a space with its own creative potential; movement as an alternative to the steadfast life in suburbia. The road was not just a retreat for their lost souls but, as de Barros contends, also "the place to celebrate, a space that radically juxtaposed the fixed domesticity that had become modern America."[54] Subsequently, going on the road was much more than a passive escape from disagreeable conditions; it was an active statement of discontent and opposition towards these conditions and to whatever had caused them. Mobility thus became one of the ways to voice and perform the Beat rebellion, first by their fervent engagement in it and secondly by their immortalization of that experience in art. It was also a mechanism of resistance to contemporary issues and the civic responsibilities stemming from these. As Tietchen and

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[52] Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (New York: Random House, 1960) 279–280.
[53] Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1921) 361.
[54] De Barros 231.

Spangler agree, for the Beat Generation movement offered both "an antidote to the stultifying demands of Cold War nationalism"[55] and an "attempt to come to terms with the disturbing anomalies of a capitalist system."[56] By keeping on the move, the Beats expressed both their discontent with these increasingly dominant aspects of the American society and their unwillingness to indulge in them.

So far I have been discussing where the Beat authors departed from in their travels, it remains to be examined where they headed. Although their goals might seem rather vague, the Beats were nevertheless often driven by concrete motivations, even if these were rarely acknowledged by them or brought into the open. In any case, many critics made it their mission to uncover these hidden goals. Prothero, for example, argues that behind their numerous journeys lies "a never fully satisfied attempt to find a place to rest."[57] Prothero is by no means the only one who sees this yearning for a final settlement in their wanderings. Several other theorists have interpreted their mobility as a search for home and family.

Inspired by the observations of Carolyn Cassady, Linda McDowell maintains that the lives of the Beats were marked by the unresolved duality between "wild experiments with drugs and travel and a straight family-based life,"[58] and that "the construction of an idealized 'home' was an important (...) element of the beats' ability to travel."[59] For this reason, they always made sure to have a stable place to return to from their travels – for Kerouac it was the apartment of his mother, for Cassady the house of his second wife and their children. Although these places played an indispensable role in their lives, they could never stay there for too long. While recognizing the same inclination towards family life and settlement in the Beats as Prothero or McDowell did, Carolyn Cassady herself perceived the actual fulfillment of that desire as hypothetical and future-oriented, at most. Talking about her husband Neal, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg, she wrote in her autobiographical novel that "in the lives of these three, 'home' didn't seem to be a major factor of the past or present, only of their future dreams."[60] As if to confirm Cassady in her doubt, Kerouac chanted in *On the Road*: "Home in Missoula, / Home in Truckee, / Home in Opelousas, / Ain't no home for me. /

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[55] Todd F. Tietchen, "Ethnographies and Networks: On Beat Transnationalism," *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, eds. Steven Belletto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 209.

[56] Spangler 321.

[57] Prothero, Holy Road 211.

[58] Linda McDowell, "Off the Road: Alternative Views of Rebellion, Resistance and 'The Beats,'" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21.2 (1996): 417, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622491> 26 Mar 2019.

[59] Ibid., p. 414.

[60] Carolyn Cassady, *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990) 29.

Home in old Medora, / Home in Wounded Knee, / Home in Ogallala, / Home I'll never be" (255).

Whether the Beats really felt this need for a stable home or accepted the road as their final destination remains disputable. The answer to this question also cannot be deduced from their literature only, as Carolyn Cassady's account attests. Although I partially take sides with McDowell in this dispute and support her opinion that the Beat authors must have sought some kind of security in their lives, even if not quite consciously, I believe that the home they envisioned for themselves was not necessarily a concrete physical place, but rather an abstract condition, a state of mind that would allow for spiritual comfort without restraining their freedom. Since no particular place or person could satisfy this craving, the Beats never quite ceased in their pursuit, investing their physical journeys with a higher spiritual purpose. And that is something most of their travels had in common. While acknowledging their plausible need for "a place to rest," Prothero also recognized that all of the Beats shared "not an identifiable geographical goal but an undefined commitment to a spiritual search."[61] Along the same lines, Tonkinson used this claim as a counterargument to their alleged escapism, when she suggested that "their urge to go (...) was motivated not, as critics claimed, by adolescent flight but by spiritual searching."[62]

It was John Clellon Holmes who was probably the most avid advocate of the idea that the Beats were guided by a spiritual quest rather than any particular form of escape. That is how he distinguished them from their predecessors, the Lost Generation, the representatives of which were, according to him, mostly driven on the road by negative forces such as economic necessity, confusion or disillusionment rather than positive anticipation of some spiritual achievement. Contrary to their travels, the journeys of the Beat Generation were motivated by that "faith in a final destination"[63] Stephenson assigned them. No matter whether this final destination meant an actual topographical settlement or a higher state of mind, there was always a metaphysical dimension to their movement: to traverse and explore the country implied wandering through and analyzing their own psyches. All in all, the true objective of their search might as well have been themselves. As Stephenson observed, the real journey the Beats were undertaking "was always inward – a passage through the arid zones and waste tracts, the wilderness and nether regions of the self."[64]

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[61] Prothero, Holy Road 211.
[62] Tonkinson 6.
[63] Stephenson 13.
[64] Ibid., p. 12.

There are also those, however, who claim that the sole purpose of movement for the Beat Generation was mobility itself. This argument keeps reappearing throughout various interpretative accounts of their literature, whether it is Prothero, who suggested that "they aimed not to arrive but to travel,"[65] Tim Cresswell, for whom "it never matters where they are going; they are just going celebrating travel itself,"[66] or Spangler, who perceived their "act of moving" as "both strategy and goal."[67] Indeed, it is Kerouac's work in particular that allows reasons enough for anyone to formulate such impressions. While he never gratifies the audience with any definite motivation for all the journeys he depicts, his characters seem to be just as ignorant of their intentions as the readers might be. When Sal and Dean, the protagonists of *On the Road*, are asked by one of their rides: "You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?" the narrator Sal reflects: "We didn't understand his question, and it was a damned good question" (20). Yet, the question remains unanswered for the rest of the novel and the audience is thus left with the freedom to form their own resolution.

Phil Patton was among the many who attempted to answer that question. According to him, Sal and Dean, just as all the rest of the Beats, were driven by what he termed a "pure existential restlessness."[68] I would even go as far as to say that for them, movement was a necessary prerequisite for life itself, a condition required in order to make existence meaningful. Without movement, life would be not only unbearable but also unthinkable. William Burroughs once said that "the most dangerous thing to do is stand still."[69] Under such a predicament, one could hardly expect the Beats to be truly satisfied in any permanent habitat. If freedom is only to be found on the road, then the road is the place to stay, the true home, which, although restrictive in social and economic terms, offers an unlimited source of freedom for the mind – the one thing that mattered the most to the members of the Beat Generation.

While adopting the term "hipster" to describe the postwar generation that included the Beats, Norman Mailer devoted a significant part of his influential article precisely to discussing the role of movement in their lives. According to him, "movement is always to be preferred to inaction. In motion a man has a chance (...) to go again, to go faster next time and so make more and thus find more people with whom he can swing."[70] Even though this might

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[65] Prothero, Holy Road 211.
[66] Cresswell, Resistance 255.
[67] Spangler 322.
[68] Patton 232.
[69] William S. Burroughs qtd. in Tytell, Naked Angels 35.
[70] Mailer 286.

seem a somewhat insufficient explanation of their urge to travel, I find Mailer's statement to be truly reflective of their approach towards mobility. It is only on the road, physical as well as spiritual, that one is able to experience life to the fullest. And that, for the Beats at least, was imperative. For individuals such as Neal Cassady, who embodied the spirit of the movement, mobility was not a choice but a necessity. Modeled on Neal, the character of Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* insists: "Whee. Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there," and when Sal tries to find out where they are going, Dean simply replies, "I don't know but we gotta go" (240). While the destination thus remains unknown even to the travelers themselves, the need to stay on the move, the inviolable impulse of the Beat Generation, is immortalized on the pages of their books.

3.4 Criticism and legacy

I have already mentioned one of the ways the Beat Generation was criticized by its adversaries – through the presumed escapist tendency of their social revolt. There are, however, other ways the Beats were condemned by literary authorities. Although there was also a lot of romanticizing of this movement and its characteristically American yearning for freedom, many scholars would perceive the authors of this generation as both immature in their approach to life and unproductive in their artistic expression. What seemed to aggravate the critics the most was the hostility of the Beats towards America itself and the presumed inability to suggest anything better in its place. In accordance with this claim, Prothero identified in various responses the predominant "inclination to judge this impulse negatively, as a revolt against rather than a protest for something."[71]

One example of such criticism is Paul O'Neil's article "The Only Rebellion Around," published in the *Life* Magazine in 1959. As this article famously stated, the Beats were "against virtually every aspect of current American society: Mom, Dad, Politics, Marriage, the Savings Bank, Organized Religion, Literary Elegance, Law, the Ivy League Suit and Higher Education, to say nothing of the Automatic Dishwasher, the Cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level House and the clean, or peace-provoking, H-bomb."[72] All the positive values that the Beats actually celebrated and supported through their literature and

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[71] Prothero, Holy Road 205.

[72] Paul O'Neil, "The Only Rebellion Around," *Life* 47.22 (1959): 115.

lifestyle, such as freedom, individuality or honesty, were ostentatiously overlooked by this article. In doing so, the author gracefully avoided acknowledging the fact that there was no place for these notions in the American culture at that time. Rather than admitting that the Beat authors were among the few who noticed the disappearance of such qualities from the American way of life after World War II, O'Neil accused them of being "so psychotic or so crippled by tensions, anxieties and neuroses as to be incapable of making their way in the ordinary competitive world of men,"[73] – an offence that would hardly find its way to a public magazine today.

But nothing could surpass in harshness the 1958 review of *On the Road* by Norman Podhoretz. In this widely read article entitled "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," Podhoretz accused the Beats of being "hostile to civilization"[74] as he approached them mainly through their violence and criminality. Indeed, one cannot deny instances of criminal behavior, both in their lives and literature, but few critics would address it with such vehemence as Podhoretz did. There is an explicit link in his review between Dean Moriarty's habit of stealing cars and a recent case of murder in Central Park, New York, that betrays the author's outlook on one of the characteristic expressions of the Beat attitude. Although Podhoretz also recognized some positive aspects of the movement such as their celebration of spontaneity, it was only to be used as a supporting argument for their presumed lack of intelligence and cultivation. In the end, he merely dismissed them with the following words: "Very primitive, very spontaneous, very elemental, very beat."[75]

Paul Goodman and his critique of the Beat Generation based on the escapist mode were already touched upon in this chapter, but it deserves some more attention. While Podhoretz denounced the Beats for their adherence to primitivism, Goodman blamed most of their faults on immaturity and ignorance. Although he began by arguing that the Beat authors were simply running away from their responsibilities, he later acknowledged that there might have been something behind this endless flight: the mysterious "it," which they heard in jazz music and searched for on the road. However, instead of trying to decode the meaning of "it," Goodman merely castigated the Beats for the inability to directly name what it stands for. No matter whether this was an actual fault on Kerouac's side, or a perfectly intentional way of allowing the audience the freedom to interpret the mystery on their own, Goodman thus

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[73] Ibid., p. 130.

[74] Norman Podhoretz, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," *Partisan Review* 25 (1958), reprinted in *Beat Down Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* eds. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001): 484.

[75] Podhoretz 487.

concluded: “These boys are touchingly inarticulate, because they don’t know anything; but they talk so much and so loud because they feel insulted by the existence of the grownups who know a little bit.”[76] Once again, the Beats are being set into opposition with the generation of serious academics before them, of which Goodman was a representative and the reputation of which he felt he needed to guard against the dangerous spirit of these young rascals.

However, if there was someone who really detested the Beat Generation for their seeming immaturity, it was definitely Leslie Fiedler. In his celebrated book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler compared the heroes of Kerouac’s novels to the children characters of Mark Twain. According to him, in both instances, there was a certain degree of ambiguity when it came to the age of these protagonists. While he praised Twain for his mastery of delivering serious thoughts through childish diction, he was not that impressed by the youthfulness of Kerouac’s characters. The presence of immaturity had thus supposedly the opposite effect in these two authors. As Fiedler argued, “Twain blurred adolescence back into boyhood to avoid confronting the problem of sex. (…) The protagonists of the hipsters have crossed the borderline of genital maturity, but in all other respects they have not left Jackson’s Island.”[77] By ‘Jackson’s Island’ he refers to the setting of Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, where this location served as a scene of children’s play and innocence. If the value of Mark Twain’s fiction lies in the fact that he mediated significant insights through seemingly inadequate characters, the weakness of the Beat literature then must be its inability to discuss serious topics, although the characters have all the advantages of age and physical maturity on their side.

As we have seen, Fiedler was not the only one who found fault with this group of authors, especially among the generation of critics who were just around a decade older than most of the Beats themselves. They were either outraged by the Beat lifestyle or truly disappointed by their art, just as Fiedler claimed to be when he sadly observed: “One feels sometimes that only the weaknesses of American literature survive from generation to generation; that the heritage of our writers is a series of vacuums, which by evasion or strategy they must bridge or by-pass.”[78] Such a degree of pessimism was, however, rather rare in the criticism surrounding the Beat Generation. Although people like O’Neil, Podhoretz,

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[76] Goodman 280.

[77] Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960) 272.

[78] Leslie A. Fiedler, “Adolescence and Maturity in the American Novel,” *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955) 207.

Goodman or Fiedler did their best to debase its public image as a group of immature young delinquents with no respect for their own country, the Beats remained popular among their audiences as their literature reflected the American society itself. Barbara Ehrenreich summarized their public influence as follows:

> No matter how busily the media diagnosed or dismissed the Beats, Americans could not simply turn their backs on them. (...) Men looked to the Beats for a vision of themselves and, even after the imagined viewers had been discredited, the vision remained compelling. What the media said that the Beats thought about everyone else was, after all, not too far from what many men already suspected about themselves.[79]

The Beat Generation thus provided an image of society that, although far from flattering, turned out to be quite accurate. That they should receive harsh criticism for speaking the truth instead of glorifying their homeland seems only natural. In the end, all of that surrounding controversy made them even more popular in the wider public circle. And they did not even abhor the country as their adversaries believed, anyway.

As much as the Beats criticized contemporary American society, they were still part of it and themselves embodied some of its key values and premises. Their revolt was a sign of care and interest rather than ignorance or disregard. Even the fact that they chose to rebel in the first place was a distinctly American strategy, which secured them a spot among the country's most influential movements of the twentieth century. William Lawlor quite correctly observed that "as a part of the American tradition, the Beats are nontraditional. They challenge America because they love it, and, in doing so, they are inseparable from it."[80] They might have bickered about certain aspects of the American culture and lament the direction it was heading in on its future course, but the whole movement would hardly be imaginable anywhere outside its borders.

And how long has the Beat Generation been with us? While the beginning of their active years is fairly easy to determine, few critics would agree upon the actual duration of this movement. Quite surprisingly, the original members themselves felt it was rather short-lived. Even before most of his works got published, Kerouac already perceived the Beat Generation as a thing of the past. Only one year after the publication of *On the Road*, which

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[79] Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1983): 63–64.

[80] William Lawlor, "Were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs a Generation?" *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, eds. Steven Belletto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 34.

marked a significant turn in the development of the group and made the author an instant celebrity, Kerouac made the following statement: "the sad thing is, that while I am asked to explain the Beat Generation, there is no actual original Beat Generation left."[81] However, as Anthony DeCurtis argues, the Beats "have not merely survived, but thrived. The movement's central figures – Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs – have become icons."[82] Although they eventually drifted away from each other, the message lived on in their works and was followed by their numerous adherents, just as Kerouac suspected it would when he ended his 1958 article by pronouncing: "indications are that its effect has taken root in American culture."[83]

In this way, the Beat Generation contributed its share in the shaping of the American consciousness and survived as an indispensable part of the nation's identity. The way of life these authors epitomized in their works continues to inspire countless young people in their search for freedom, while the social changes they helped to bring about are still with us. On this point, I cannot but agree with Charters and her concluding statement, that the "phenomenon known as the Beat Generation has become part of the fabric of cultural life in the United States, and the weave seems enduringly strong."[84]

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[81] Kerouac, Aftermath 25.
[82] Anthony DeCurtis, "Spontaneity Through Time: Why the Beats Have Lasted," *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture*, eds. Holly George-Warren (New York: Hyperion, 1999): 342.
[83] Kerouac, Aftermath 25.
[84] Charters, Beat xxxvii.

4. Mobility in Jack Kerouac's Novels

> Trip from New York to San Francisco, 1949. N.Y. across the tunnel to New Jersey – the "Jersey night" of Allen Ginsberg. We in the car jubilant, beating on the dashboard of the '49 Hudson coupe . . . headed West. And I haunted by something I have yet to remember. And a rainy, road-glistening, misty night again. Big white sign saying "West" → "South" ⟵ our gleeful choices. Neal and I and Louanne talking of the value of life as we speed along, in such thoughts as "Whither goest thou America in thy shiny car at night?" and in the mere fact that we're together under such rainy circumstances talking heart to heart. Seldom had I been so glad of life.
>
> – Jack Kerouac, *From the Journals 1949–1954*

Jack Kerouac is nowadays recognized as a leading member of one of the distinct groups that contributed in the shaping of the postwar American sensibility. Indeed, as I have already argued in the previous chapters, many of the values and notions he and the Beats promoted in their literature became part of the American identity itself, no matter how subversive they were in their own time. The characterization of this author as an American subject is, however, not so straightforward. Although from the current perspective, Kerouac might be seen as the country's representative, his own feelings about his national identity were far from inclusive. In fact, a strong sense of alienation from American society characterized his whole life and literary career.

Growing up in a French-Canadian family, the young Kerouac, according to his biographer Ellis Amburn, did not understand a word of English until the age of six and spoke it with some reserve until he was eighteen.[1] Due to economic instability during the Great Depression, the family was often forced to move from place to place, leaving the children with a vague idea of home. Furthermore, the early death of Kerouac's older brother Gerard contributed to his sense of insecurity and isolation. All of these factors shaped the author's complicated relationship to American and the sense of his role within it. According to

[1] Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998): 9.

Amburn, "though he would grow up to become a homeless wanderer for much of his life, he never overcame the fear and sense of doom that characterized his rootless childhood."[2]

Isolated by his language and cultural heritage, lacking a definite sense of home, and traumatized by death in the immediate family circle, Jack Kerouac entertained no desire to belong. It is no wonder that by the time he reached his early maturity, the young author felt strongly alienated from his surroundings and soon started forming ideas of escape. Although the few semesters of university brought him valuable connections, including some of the future members of the Beat Generation, it did not satisfy his intellectual craving and he dropped out soon after his football career at Columbia failed due to health problems. In order to arrive at his independence, Kerouac subsequently tried various occupations, including military service with the Merchant Marine, but none of these afforded the same kind of fulfillment as his writing endeavors. In the end, the young writer found his inspiration on the road. Just as generations of Americans before him, he sought his refuge in what Gerald Nicosia termed "the promise of the great spaces of the West, where even oddball writers might find a place to fit in."[3]

It deserves to be pointed out that this sense of alienation, which drove Kerouac on the road, became one of the defining features of the American experience after World War II. Paradoxically enough, his feeling of estrangement from the society and the capturing of that anxiety in his novels helped him get recognized as belonging to the American literary tradition. In this way, the author's social exclusion eventually grew into inclusion. Even his rebellion against and dissociation from traditional American values later in his life did not set him apart. Quite on the contrary, all of his subversions only contributed to our contemporary understanding of Jack Kerouac as representative of postwar American culture. According to Dittman, "Kerouac's name and the title *On the Road* have become shorthand for freedom, and, abroad, shorthand for America itself."[4] On top of that, he also became known as a leading member of the Beat Generation – a notion that eventually consumed him.

More than sixty years have passed since the first publication of *On the Road*, an event that forever secured its author's place in the literary canon. While this event marked an essential turning point in his writing career, it was also considered one of the first manifestations of what was yet to become the Beat Generation. In fact, the novel soon became

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[2] Ibid., p. 14.

[3] Gerald Nicosia, "Kerouac: Writer Without a Home," *Un Homme Grand: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroads of Many Cultures*, eds. Pierre Anctil, et al. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1990): 22.

[4] Dittman 35.

the movement's chief expression. In his prompt review of the book in September 1957, Gilbert Millstein predicted this development when he maintained that whereas "*The Sun Also Rises* came to be regarded as the testament of the Lost Generation, so it seems certain that *On the Road* will come to be known as that of the Beat Generation."[5] And so it did, indeed. As a result, all of Kerouac's subsequent works were regarded in relation to this group. Rather than an individual author, Kerouac thus became a representative of a movement he had forsaken several times throughout his lifetime.

This transformation from a literary persona to the symbol of the Beats was observed by many critics dealing with Kerouac's life and literature. David L. Stevenson, for instance, notes that both Kerouac and James Jones, another prominent American author of the postwar era, "became identified in the press and in the popular mind less as writers of novels than as spokesmen for eccentric rebellion against the prevailing tone and mood of the fifties."[6] While Marco Abel agrees with this observation, he confronts the assumption with the following evidence from Kerouac's celebrated novel: "Indeed, at no time in the novel does Sal desire, let alone attempt, to become a spokesperson for what he (in)famously conceives of a 'new beat generation that [he] was slowly joining' (54)."[7] Nevertheless, the instant fame brought about by the publication of *On the Road* decided the way its author was to be perceived for many years after. As Ronna C. Johnson asserts, "Kerouac's celebrity has negated him as writer and replaced him. In a way that surpasses or bypasses his books, he is a writer who is famous for being famous."[8]

Although many of Kerouac's subsequent novels bear more literary quality than *On the Road*, none of them ever achieved the same kind of fame and popularity. In fact, not only his other books but the author himself seem to stand in the shadow of this one particular novel. The general readership is more acquainted with Sal Paradise than Jack Kerouac; moreover, the focus was always on Dean Moriarty, the novel's true protagonist. In this way, as Douglas Brinkley points out, Kerouac became "the victim of his own mythmaking."[9] Obscured by his

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[5] Gilbert Millstein, "Books of the Times," *The New York Times* (September 5, 1957): 27, accessible online <archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/09/07/home/kerouac-roadglowing.html> 22 Jul 2019.

[6] David L. Stevenson, "James Jones and Jack Kerouac: Novelists of Disjunction," *The Creative Present: Notes on Contemporary American Fiction*, eds. Nona Balakian and Charles Simmons (New York: Gordian Press, 1973): 195.

[7] Marco Abel, "Speeding Across the Rhizome: Deleuze Meets Kerouac On the Road," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 48.2 (2002): 231, Project MUSE <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/21666> 15 Nov 2018.

[8] Ronna C. Johnson, "'You're Putting Me on': Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence," *College Literature* 27.1 (2000): 24, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112494> 29 Nov 2018.

[9] Douglas Brinkley, "The American Journey of Jack Kerouac," *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture*, eds. Holly George-Warren (New York: Hyperion, 1999) 116.

literary heroes, the author remained neglected for many years after the publication of his most famous work. Even though the sustained interest in Kerouac's literature today might serve as a proof of his eventual recognition as an artist, Charters justly remarks that "*On the Road* became an American classic long before he did."[10]

Nevertheless, the significance of Jack Kerouac for the American literary tradition is undeniable. Even if most of the public attention has fallen on the single novel that established him as the leader of the Beats, his influence on the value system of the country should not be overlooked. According to Tim Hunt, "Kerouac's true relevance for the 1950s goes beyond the contemporary fascination for the man who found himself labeled 'King of the Beatniks.'"[11] He might have spent the latter half of his life and career in the shadow of the early success and been approached as a member of a rebellious movement ever since, but the increasing volume of criticism devoted to his life and literature, of which the present study is a part, shows that the legacy he left behind continues to speak to both American and international audiences. Furthermore, many readers and critics have, by this time, discovered the qualities of his other novels and his literary persona outside of the Beat Generation.

It is often the case that the most popular authors are also the most misunderstood. Jack Kerouac is no exception to this rule. I have already discussed the fact that the Beat Generation was mistakenly perceived as a political movement. Despite Kerouac's insistence on the spiritual character of the group, his novels were often read as expressions of certain political ideology, mostly in opposition to the dominant views. Brinkley argues such an approach was only natural in the politically heightened context of the Cold War America.[12] As for today, literary criticism has all the temporal distance necessary for regarding Kerouac's literary output as a whole from a position outside of the claustrophobic political atmosphere of his age. If nothing else, such a perspective facilitates the search for the values associated with mobility in his novels and their reflection in the American identity, which is the purpose of this chapter.

Before I delve into the analysis of the individual works and their portrayal of the road, I will briefly comment on Kerouac's own relationship to mobility, as it is depicted in several of his biographies. For a contemporary reader, it is necessary to understand that the approach to traveling in the fifties was still somewhat removed from the way we understand mobility

[10] Charters, Beat ix.

[11] Tim Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010): lx.

[12] Brinkley 122.

today. In fact, it was around this time that the modern sense of traveling for the purposes of tourism entered the popular mind and became available to wider segments of society. With this context in mind, Roger Bill builds his paper around the following question: was Kerouac "among the last hobos or the first of a new kind of American tourist, a forerunner of the coming of mass tourism in a consumer society?"[13]

If one were to use his fiction in order to approach this question, the answer would be quite straightforward. None of Kerouac's protagonists was ever truly interested in the destination itself as rather in what happens along the way. That is also why the traveling itself never stops and no destination is ever the final one. Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are still a long way from the modern image of tourists with cameras hanging around their necks. At the same time, Bill locates Kerouac and his heroes even further from the image of the wandering hobos, with whom they identified but among whose ranks they never quite belonged. All in all, Kerouac is neither a tourist, nor a true hobo, inhabiting the blank space outside of this distinction. He has neither the financial need to pursue better economic opportunities nor the desire to explore new geographic locations. For him, the road offers a strategic perspective on the society that he feels both alienated from and attracted to. His desire for continuous movement might be explained by Jason Arthur's claim that "only from the road is one properly placed to have any vision of America en masse."[14]

When compared to the wanderers of the previous generations, Kerouac and his group of friends enjoyed undeniable privileges, although they lacked serious motives. While the characters of his books often had the benefit of conducting their travels in the comfort of someone's car, rarely did they possess any clear idea of purpose or destination. For most of them, just as for the author himself, the state of being on the move was of the utmost importance. All the more surprising it is to learn that Kerouac, in fact, entertained a deep-rooted fear of cars and never properly learned to drive them. According to Amburn, "due to a serious car wreck (...) Jack developed a phobia and would never be able to drive an automobile with any degree of confidence or proficiency."[15] Brinkley confirms this fact as he wittily remarks: "nobody could have guessed from reading *On the Road* that the shy Beat author was afraid of cars."[16] Not only did he abhor driving, Kerouac also maintained, as Gair points out, "that he hated hitchhiking (a point generally forgotten by his legions of

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[13] Bill 397.
[14] Arthur 37.
[15] Amburn 55.
[16] Brinkley 116.

imitators).”[17] Reading these claims, one would expect the writer never to set his foot on the road. Nevertheless, Kerouac did and his literature serves as a proof that he positively enjoyed mobility and the freedom that came with it, for a certain period of his life, at least.

4.1 Journey for journey’s sake

I have already shown that mobility in the lives and literature of the Beat Generation did not always have a clearly defined objective. In fact, it seems to be the predominant view in literary criticism that the sole purpose of their constant travels was mobility itself. As García-Robles remarks: “The road was the thing–the journey, not the destination. The only point in arriving was to set out again.”[18] Indeed, many times throughout *On the Road* is the reader invited to form such an impression. The story is comprised of endless excursions, the meanings of which are rather vague at best. The book is a testimony to aimless traveling, “the quintessential novel of compulsive wandering,”[19] as Stout designates it, and as such offers the best starting point for the present analysis.

Mobility without any distinct purpose has its negative as well as positive implications. *On the Road* does an amazing job of representing both. One of the negative outcomes of Sal and Dean’s hurried movement is the impossibility of truly appreciating any given location. At a certain point in the novel, the narrator is forced to admit: “With frantic Dean I was rushing throughout the world without a chance to see it” (206). As a result of this ignorance, all the places they visit blur into an indistinguishable generic space with no individual character: “I looked down Market Street. I didn’t know whether it was that or Canal Street in New Orleans: it led to water, ambiguous, universal water, just as 42nd Street, New York, leads to water, and you never know where you are” (172). This sense of the outward uniformity of all geographical locations carries a melancholy message about the world Kerouac found himself living and moving in. According to Stout, “it suggests that in the modern closed-in world of alienation and irrationality, motion deteriorates into a ‘frantic’ zigzagging between arbitrary terminal points on linear reaches into emptiness.”[20]

[17] Gair 43.
[18] García-Robles 9.
[19] Stout 109.
[20] Ibid., p. 110.

This kind of erratic motion suggests a certain degree of derangement in its subjects – another negative implication of aimless wandering. The narrator, however, seems to be well aware of the constant presence of madness around him. As opposed to Dean, who never questions the need for movement in his life (not openly, at least), Sal uses the dull moments of their travels to take contemplative breaks from the action of the plot, pondering the meaning of their unstable existence. One such moment arises when he is confronted with pictures of Dean's family. The sudden stillness of life on the picture offers a stark contrast to the "raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, or actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance" (253–254). This somber vision of Sal's experience serves, according to Benedict Giamo, as the reflection of the postwar condition in America, with the road as the most accurate verbalization of its madness. Borrowing a line from William Carlos Williams's poem "To Elsie," Giamo asserts that "however it is laid out, whether short or long, straight or curved, the road is the perfect vehicle for expressing all the 'pure products of America go[ne] crazy.'"[21]

All of this madness and senselessness stems from the fact that there is no stable point in the heroes' lives, "no defined center,"[22] as Tytell calls it. This lack of a center is demonstrated, first of all, in the absence of a place to call home. As the narrator affirms in his provocative song, there "ain't no home for me (...) home I'll never be" (255). But it is also performed through a lack of identity, which is continuously perpetuated rather than cured in their purposeless mobility. Mikelli argues that the narrator's inability "to define himself against a firm geographical boundary" results in "a dislocation of identity,"[23] which makes him all the more susceptible to madness and confusion. This state of things he readily confesses: "I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion" (125–126).

At the same time, however, *On the Road* depicts mobility as something positive and productive, especially when it is without any definite aim. In fact, only a couple of pages later, the narrator describes motion as doing away with confusion, as a delightful activity that is man's most dignified occupation: "We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving

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[21] Benedict Giamo, "Enlightened Attachment: Kerouac's Impermanent Buddhist Trek," *Religion & Literature* 35.2/3 (2003): 174, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059920> 21 Nov 2018.
[22] Tytell, Naked Angels 163.
[23] Mikelli 144.

confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*. And we moved!" (134). In a similar way, Sal also perceives madness itself as a potentially positive quality. After all, there is not much choice for him as he admits that "the only people for me are the mad ones," by which he alludes to a similar kind of confusion that drives his own wanderings, for the people he describes are, just like himself, "desirous of everything at the same time" (5). Although frantic movement might thus be one of the outward manifestations of madness, such condition is always preferred by Kerouac's characters over any other kind of experience that the American way of life has to offer.

On the Road is thus a glorification of free mobility and aimless traveling rather than its rejection. While this kind of mobility has its negative consequences in the novel, which are sometimes consciously accepted by the narrator, at other times implied within the plot, the story can hardly be read as anything else than a triumph of spontaneity and boundless energy performed through ceaseless movement. In order to support this claim, I will borrow from Cresswell who maintains that the "novel celebrates mobility via the road. It never matters where they are going; they are just going celebrating travel itself."[24] This is best illustrated through the character of Dean, who is the embodiment of joyous mobility and its most eager advocate. He is depicted as "crossing and recrossing the country every year" because there is "no place he could stay in without getting tired of it" and because, for him, there is "nowhere to go but everywhere" (26). In fact, as much as he is said to have no home, he finds one everywhere he goes. That is the principal difference between him and the narrator, for whom the lack of a stable place triggers anxiety and always forces him to return to his aunt in the end.

While confusion is generally associated with life in the cities in the novel, it is only on the road – the liminal space in between destinations – that the characters might fully enjoy the peace of mind associated with free movement. As Sal puts it: "All alone in the night I had my own thoughts and held the car to the white line in the holy road" (188–189). The religious aspect of mobility shall be discussed in the following section, but it is worth pointing out here as well, for religion was one of Kerouac's most frequently discussed themes, especially later in his career. What is of more importance to us now is the fact that mobility, whether driven by a specific goal or conducted for its own sake, serves as the primary means of progress for the two protagonists. The whole story revolves around their travels that soon become the main forces in the shaping of their relationship. Even if their mobility is not driven by any definite

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[24] Cresswell, Resistance 255.

sense of purpose, it has, nevertheless, created a lasting bond between the two friends, which influences all of the subsequent events in the plot. This productive side to mobility shall be further discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Before moving on, it should be reemphasized that mobility in *On the Road* is not portrayed exclusively in positive terms, no matter how favorable the overall picture might seem. Although there is not enough reason to suspect that Kerouac might have intended his novel as a cautionary tale about the potential hazards of excessive movement, there are moments within the story, as I have illustrated above, where the narrator is not completely sure about the meaning of their erratic existence, nor his own sanity. As Giamo observes, both the road and the frantic movement of Dean Moriarty "are treated ambiguously by Kerouac. Together they form the hard surface and romanticized subject for celebration as well as for registering sorrow."[25]

How does this reflect the role of mobility in American history? Indeed, in terms of motivation, one can hardly compare the aimless wanderings of Kerouac's characters to the overseas voyages of the first explorers seeking new lands, nor to the journeys of the pioneers driven by the promise of new economic opportunities. And yet, there are certain parallels to be drawn between these seemingly contrasting ways of mobility. According to Tytell, "for Kerouac, the free open road represented the promise of America as once envisioned by European immigrants; it was a way of keeping in touch with the pioneer enthusiasms of the past."[26] In *Big Sur*, this connection with the past becomes evident as the narrator compares the scene in front of him to the settling of the Old West: "The eyes of hope looking over the glare of the hood into the maw with its white line feeding in straight as an arrow, the lighting of fresh cigarettes, the buckling to lean forward in the next adventure something that's been going on in America ever since the covered wagon clocked the deserts in three months flat."[27]

The motives behind the journeys of Kerouac and his fictional characters might be different from those of the pioneers, even altogether missing at times, but the general direction remains the same – West. One may argue that in his excessive mobility, Kerouac crossed the continent in every direction possible, but the ideas he formed of the individual cardinal points are not that far from the symbolic qualities North, South, East, and especially West acquired in the context of American history. It is only natural that, for a young man who

[25] Giamo 175.

[26] Tytell, Naked Angels 169.

[27] Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) 176–177. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

grew up and spent most of his youth on the East Coast, the West retains all the promises of freedom and future prosperity that were envisioned by the pioneers already a few centuries ago. Karen Skinazi goes as far as to argue that with his initial faith in the West "Kerouac is recreating the journey of the pioneers, the adventurers, and the rugged individuals of American history, with Sal Paradise heading westward (ho!) from Eastern civilization to the Western frontier of the unknown."[28]

It is hardly surprising to witness the young traveler's dreams dissolve as he crosses the continent only to find the opposite coast a great disappointment. He depicts this experience in his novel as follows: "Here I was at the end of America—no more land—and now there was nowhere to go but back" (77). What is quite unforeseen, however, is the fact that this eventual disillusionment with the West does not in any way lessen Sal's optimistic perception of this symbol. Seemingly untouched by his disenchantment, the narrator continues to associate West with freedom and other positive qualities, only he no longer identifies them with any specific geographical location. In fact, the notion of the Great West is replaced by the character of Dean Moriarty, who embodies all of the symbolic qualities that go with this idea. Howard Cunnell identifies these when he remarks: "The West was freedom and joy as exemplified by Cassady, openness, and individualism, the authentic America waiting to be rediscovered and written."[29] For Kerouac, it was thus Neal Cassady who represented the West in his life, and in the novel he celebrated him for his "wild yea-saying overburst of American joy," which he further describes as "Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming" (7–8). Similarly, in *Visions of Cody*, the narrator insists that Cody (another code name for Cassady) "represents all that's left of America for me."[30] In this way, through his friendship with Cassady, Kerouac might actually continue his predecessors' pursuit of the frontier, as if it was never closed. As Charters observes, what attracted him to Cassady was "the energy of the archetypal west, the energy of the frontier, still coming down."[31]

In stark contrast to the West, the East in Kerouac's life and literature stands for everything that is wrong with American society. It is the Old World of his youth but also of the Columbia University, which he rejected for its "tedious intellectualness," setting it into

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[28] Karen E. H. Skinazi, "Expanding Jack Kerouac's 'America': Canadian Revisions of *On the Road*," *American Studies* 51.3/4 (2010): 32, Project MUSE <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/504291> 13 Nov 2018.

[29] Howard Cunnell, Introduction, *Kerouac Ascending: Memorabilia of the Decade of* On the Road, by Elbert Lenrow (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) 12.

[30] Jack Kerouac, Cody 342.

[31] Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015) 274.

opposition with "Dean's intelligence" (7). Besides that, the East also belongs to his New York friends who are "in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons" (7). In short, Kerouac uses the symbol of the East to designate his frustration with the world he is coming from and to distinguish it from the world of his future dreams and aspirations. His way of westward progression includes the development of his relationship with Neal and their common pursuit of freedom from the stifling conditions of postwar America. If their predecessors did not stop until they reached the Pacific Coast, Kerouac and Cassady are never to stop, for their destination lies in the movement itself. In this sense, according to Ireland, they stubbornly "reject Turner's conclusion that the frontier is closed, thereby maintaining the illusion that endless freedom is available if only they do not settle down and face the grim reality of everyday American society."[32]

Once again, *On the Road* might thus be read as a celebration of mobility that characterized American culture ever since its beginnings. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is not the first book to introduce the theme of movement, nor is it revolutionary in its preoccupation with this topic for its own sake. As Stout affirms, "the novel continues the tradition of zest for motion itself that we have observed throughout American literature."[33] While this particular novel offers a fine vantage point into the Beat Generation's aesthetic of mobility, looking into some of the other books by Jack Kerouac will allow us to approach this theme from different angles and perspectives and to compare his changing perception of movement with that of other prominent American authors. As Tytell duly complained, the very speed and haphazardness of Dean's movement in *On the Road* deprived the narrator of any possibility of self-discovery, such as is associated with journey in the poetry of Walt Whitman, for instance.[34] In a similar way, it might have hindered Sal's personal growth and transformation of identity, other typical outcomes of traveling as depicted in American literature. Although these and other qualities associated with mobility were of rare occurrence in Kerouac's most popular novel, it cannot keep us from searching for them in the rest of his oeuvre.

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[32] Ireland 480.
[33] Stout 109.
[34] Tytell, Naked Angels 169.

4.2 Mobility as a spiritual quest

By the time Kerouac made all the necessary editions to his manuscript of *On the Road* and the novel was finally approved for publication, his mind was already engaged in a new interest that was to change the course of his writing. Although the initial reaction to his long-awaited book was of a mixed character, it triggered a wave of public interest in Kerouac's work that secured him a place among the most popular authors of his age. And so it happened that only one year after this memorable event, a new novel appeared that incorporated his recent enthusiasm for Eastern philosophy. It was *The Dharma Bums*, a novel that depicts Kerouac's early insight into Buddhism, and which Ginsberg praised as a "brilliant Buddhist exposition."[35] Even though the general theme of this book is significantly removed from that of *On the Road*, the two novels share certain elements, such as the presence of mobility as the primary means of experience. As opposed to its more popular predecessor, however, *The Dharma Bums* approaches mobility at a slower pace, allowing for a greater number of contemplative moments amidst all the action.

In describing the transition from *On the Road* to *The Dharma Bums*, I could hardly do a better job than Tytell, who compares it to the "movement from beat to beatitude."[36] While the protagonists of the former book, with Dean Moriarty in the lead, pursued their dreams of freedom with a frantic energy inspired by the beat of jazz music and the sound of their own excited heartbeats, the latter set of characters went on the road to enjoy the beatific state of happiness and resolution that comes with spiritual satisfaction. Although each novel incorporates a bit of both aspects, the unequal distribution is quite apparent and has its share in the development of the main themes. Tytell further explains that this sort of transition involves a "shift from the need to express self through adventure to an absorbing and contemplative adoration of nature."[37] It is precisely through this close relationship with nature that the protagonists of *The Dharma Bums* practice and expand their knowledge of the Buddhist teachings. At the same time, however, they also spend an awful lot of time in transit. In fact, the story begins nowhere else than on the (rail)road.

When we first encounter the narrator, named Ray Smith here, he is just "hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955" (3). That is all we ever learn about where he is coming from. Although at this time, he is not yet acquainted with

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[35] Allen Ginsberg, Introduction, *Visions of Cody*, by Jack Kerouac (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972) x.
[36] Tytell, Naked Angels 174.
[37] Ibid., p. 173–174.

the dharma, the Buddhist concept of truth, he already considers himself a religious wanderer, a reflection that is to grow in importance as he meets his future mentor, Japhy Ryder. Together, Japhy and Ray set out on numerous trips with the vision of reconnecting with nature in their progression towards the fulfillment of their spiritual mission. As Stephenson observes, the road they follow "alters from railroad to highway to forest and mountain trails; but whatever the route, the Eightfold Path of the Buddha is the true line of travel in the story."[38]

The relationship between the two main characters in *The Dharma Bums* offers the same kind of duality as is present in *On the Road*. Both novels display a narrative situation where the focus is divided between two protagonists – the narrator and his travel mate. In both cases, it is not the narrator who takes center stage. Instead, the spotlight falls on the leading figure – Dean and Japhy, respectively. This is no innovation on Kerouac's part but a literary strategy often used by American novelists before him. Gair argues that by applying this narrative mode, the author merely "replicates the 'classic' American literary pattern of the relationship between, for example, Ishmael and Ahab,[39] or Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby."[40] I would also add the classical case of the relationship between Huck and Tom in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Following the example of all of these predecessors, Kerouac again proves to be a faithful adherent to the American literary tradition.

While the two novels in question employ the same kind of narrative technique, the nature of the relationship between the narrator and the companion is unique in each case. This is not only due to the fact that Dean and Japhy are based on different real-life characters from Kerouac's life (Japhy Ryder is the fictional representation of Gary Snyder) but also because they have contrasting functions within the plot. Shortly after their introduction, Sal becomes fascinated by Dean's inexhaustible energy and his zeal for life on the road. This fascination gradually grows into a warm friendship that is to last for the rest of the book, despite the fact that its endurance is challenged on several occasions. It is a reciprocal kind of relationship, although one might argue that its benefits are not distributed equally. Nevertheless, both participants have something to learn from the other. According to Jenn McKee, "the two men

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[38] Stephenson 38.

[39] Speaking of *Moby Dick*, it is worth mentioning that Kerouac makes a direct reference to this paramount piece of American literature by comparing Dean to Ahab in *On the Road*. During one of their trips, Sal makes the following observation: "I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel" (235).

[40] Gair 42.

seemed to sense in each other what was lacking in themselves."[41] While Sal is trying to adopt Dean's unrestricted way of life, the latter hopes to assume some of his friend's writing skills. To what extent are these aspirations eventually fulfilled, or considered desirable, remains questionable. The important thing here is that both friends might potentially benefit from this connection.

In *The Dharma Bums,* the situation is somewhat different. While Japhy has a lot to teach his new acquaintance, Ray seems quite incapable of returning the favor. This is not to say there would be nothing for Japhy to learn from Ray, but the former simply shows no signs of interest in acquiring any such knowledge. Instead of a mutually profitable exchange, the relationship between the two of them is of a hierarchical nature, with a strong resemblance to that of a teacher and his pupil. Giamo describes this relationship in the following terms: "Smith draws sustenance and guidance from Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder), who is the true cultural hero of the novel. Ryder, the number one dharma bum of them all on the West Coast, becomes both a companion and mentor, teaching Smith the knack of casting himself away amid the breeding booming confusion of the world."[42] The difference between Dean and Japhy is thus that of an idol versus mentor. What they have in common, apart from the striking energy and irresistibility to women, is that they become idealized in the eyes of their followers.

Tytell takes this comparison a step further and contrasts the two protagonists in terms of their productive potential. According to him, "Ryder's energy is directed by a sense of purpose that Dean's speeded lust for change cannot contain." As a result, "Ryder is always constructive while Moriarty is destructive, Ryder creates harmony in his environment while Moriarty thrives on chaos."[43] This brings us back to the theme of spiritual quest, the presence of which in *The Dharma Bums*, as opposed to *On the Road*, is only made possible due to Japhy's constructive mentorship. Thanks to that, Ray is afforded a spiritual growth that was never available to Sal in his hectic relationship with Dean. The development of Ray's character is the more prominent, as his instructor has accomplished full confidence in his own conviction. In contrast to Dean, with his uncertain past and problematic relationship to the present, Japhy is depicted as a spiritually content human being at the height of his Buddhist learning. With such a comparison in mind, Tytell concludes that "Jaffe [sic] Ryder is a

[41] Jenn McKee, *Jack Kerouac* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004) 59.
[42] Giamo 184.
[43] Tytell, Naked Angels 170.

fulfilled version of Dean Moriarty."[44] Perceived in this light, there cannot be a better guide for Ray's spiritual quest.

And how does mobility contribute to the fulfillment of this quest in *The Dharma Bums*? First of all, it removes the protagonists from the chaotic world of cities into the serenity of nature – only in such conditions can they fully focus on themselves and their spiritual calling. In the *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac suggests that "no man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden self."[45] Secondly, mobility also has the potential to transform the beholder's perception of space and point out its intrinsic sanctity. As P. J. Johnston observes, "there is something about journey itself that makes it possible to perceive the omnipresent sacred where one had previously seen the commonplace."[46] In accordance with this view, Kerouac once wrote in his journal: "I had intense visions of the sheer joy of life . . . which occurs for me so often in travel, coupled with a grand appreciation of its mystery, & personal wonder."[47] And finally, quests have always been associated with mobility. In fact, unless one feels an inherent need to travel for the sake of movement itself, just like Dean Moriarty did, there is always some kind of quest in mobility. After all, even Dean's trips sometimes involved little missions, such as to pick up someone, transport a piece of furniture or help move Sal's aunt from one city to another, although he mostly used these reasons as excuses to get behind the wheel. Even as such, every journey might be considered a quest, with various degrees of ambition in its objective or with the goal not always clearly delineated.

As opposed to *On the Road*, most of the mobility in *The Dharma Bums* occurs within the world of nature. The road, in this case, becomes a mountain path – an environment proper to a spiritual quest. According to Stephenson, "Kerouac employs mountains as natural, traditional symbols for spiritual knowledge and attainment."[48] Over the course of the story, the heroes undertake several excursions to the mountains. In fact, *The Dharma Bums* is the first novel to depict Kerouac's two-month stay on Desolation Peak, where he performed the

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (New York: Grove Press, 1960) 128. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses in the text.

[46] P. J. Johnston, "Dharma Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 33 (2013): 178, JSTOR <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43185117> 3 Nov 2018.

[47] Jack Kerouac, *From the Journals 1949–1954*, published in *Road Novels 1957–1960:* On the Road, The Dharma Bums, The Subterraneans, Tristessa, Lonesome Traveler, From the Journals 1949–1954 (New York: The Library of America, 2007) 815.

[48] Stephenson 38.

duty of a fire lookout and which turned out to be one of the most forming experiences of his entire life. This episode will reappear in several of his subsequent novels, including *Lonesome Traveler* and *Desolation Angels*, bearing the adventure in its title. What is rather curious about this particular chapter from the author's life is that each of these books depicts it in quite a different light. As Giamo observes, "the aesthetic form of enlightenment and romantic idealization realized in *Dharma Bums*, with its sense of well-defined spiritual stages, is very different from Kerouac's actual experience recounted in *Desolation Angels*."[49] In the latter novel, the author no longer hesitates to confess the disagreeable sense of solitude and craving for civilization he experienced while on top of the mountain, nor does he keep secret the unpleasant message he discovered there about himself: "I learned that I hate myself because by myself I am only myself and not even that (...) Desolation Adventure finds me finding at the bottom of myself abysmal nothingness worse than that no illusion even."[50]

This realization might have come as a surprise to the young Kerouac, but his immediate circle of friends expected nothing else. In her autobiographical novel, Carolyn Cassady gives the following account of Kerouac's lesson from the top of the mountain: "The solitude affected him just as we had predicted. Although there were moments he cherished, he nearly went mad with loneliness and boredom, and he knew he'd never go back. He was further disillusioned at having to face this truth about himself."[51] It seems to be the case that when Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums*, he was not yet ready to face it. Only after several years was he able to revisit this adventure in *Desolation Angels* and give the real account of it, inspired by the journals he kept while living on Desolation Peak. This change of perception of that experience and its portrayal in his later novels bespeaks a certain transformation of his approach to spiritualism as such. Indeed, his positive outlook on Buddhism eventually waned and, towards the end of his career, he rejected it altogether in favor of a return to his Catholic roots.

But it is not the purpose of the present study to discuss Kerouac's religious background. Let us, therefore, come back to the notion of mobility as a means of spiritual quest. One of the possible reasons why his stay on the top of the mountain was not quite as Kerouac had envisioned it is that he was finally forced to remain static for a given period of time. While most of his former adventures had involved motion, the job of a fire lookout

[49] Giamo 192.

[50] Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) 68. All future page references will be to this edition and will be included in parentheses within the text.

[51] Cassady, Off the Road 279.

required a temporary settlement, and it was not easy for him to come to terms with such a limitation to his freedom. It was an opposite kind of extreme situation to what he experienced in *On the Road*. With Neal Cassady behind the wheel, Kerouac had scarcely any time to contemplate his life and make any significant progress. On Desolation Peak he had nothing else to do but ponder and it did not turn out too pleasing to be suddenly confronted with oneself to such a great degree. In the end, he was forced to seek some middle way, some compromise that would allow him to keep his equilibrium while among his friends; to remain emotionally static while physically in motion. And that is exactly what he proposed after the depiction of his mountain-top adventure in *Desolation Angels*: "I now wanted a reproduction of that absolute peace in the world of society but secretly greedy too for some of the pleasures of society" (245). As Giamo concludes, Kerouac "now seems to want both the road and the hut embedded within the same accessible landscape."[52]

Reading his other novels, one gets the impression that Kerouac never found this compromise. For him, it was always one or the other – the static solitude or the wild road. While his literary career began with the latter, towards the end of his life he opted for a solitary settlement. In *Desolation Angels* he thus wistfully declares: "A peaceful sorrow at home is the best I'll ever be able to offer the world" (366).

As a concluding note, I would like to reemphasize that although I have chosen to focus on some of the later works of Kerouac's oeuvre, the theme of mobility as a spiritual quest was present already in his earlier novels, including *On the Road*, as many critics confirm. After all, the two protagonists keep running after this ill-defined "IT," which is, as Joshua Kupetz argues, quite "inconceivable through thought or language, but knowable through experience,"[53] and which might as well be their own interpretation of providence. Even their mobility itself seems to be endowed with some divine quality, judging from the way the narrator depicts it. Just because their journeys have no tangible aim, it does not indicate they are completely devoid of meaning, or that one could not derive some kind of a spiritual lesson from them. In his travel diaries from the years 1948–49 (part of the period recorded in *On the Road*), Kerouac reminds us there is always a religious side to his travels: "We follow the turn of the road and it leads us on. Where? To actuality; ourselves, others and God."[54] In support

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[52] Giamo 198.

[53] Joshua Kupetz, "'The Straight Line Will Take You Only to Death': The Scroll Manuscript and Contemporary Literary Theory," *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, by Jack Kerouac (New York: Penguin Books, 2008) 89.

[54] Jack Kerouac, *Travel Diary 1948–49*, qtd. in *A Creative Century: Selections from the Twentieth Century Collections at the University of Texas*, by Andreas Brown, et al. (Austin: Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, 1964) 35.

of this claim, Laurence Coupe argues that "to ignore the spiritual connotation is to do the [Beat] movement an injustice: certainly it is to misread Kerouac."[55] Indeed, the writer frequently complained that the central theme of his most popular novel had been misunderstood and that the quest embedded within the story was a spiritual one, to be sure. He would have been thus more than content with Nancy M. Grace's claim that "*On the Road* is a narrative that is just as much about finding God as it is about finding freedom and America."[56]

4.3 The road of social protest and liberation

I cannot overemphasize how crucial freedom was for Jack Kerouac and his friends. They needed their independence at all times and any prospective limitation to it caused them great anxiety. In his novels, Kerouac maintained that freedom was always to be preferred to any other state of being. To give an example, in *The Dharma Bums* he suggests that it is "better to sleep in an uncomfortable bed free, than sleep in a comfortable bed unfree" (123). As one of the most elemental values of American identity, freedom enjoyed a great presence in the literature of the Beat Generation.

For Kerouac and the other Beats, freedom became an imperative, a necessary condition for life itself, and an essential requirement for the fulfillment of their creative impulse. This had its inevitable implications for the people around them and the nature of the relationships they were able to form. Carolyn Cassady was one of those to feel the impact of this condition the hardest and, as much as she desired both her husband Neal and her lover Jack to settle down and turn into responsible family supporters, she was well aware of the incompatibility of her wish with their inherent need for autonomy. Despite all the difficulties it posed to her and the family, however, she respected this side of their characters, at least when it came to art. Discussing Kerouac's early literary aspirations, Cassady insisted: "He had to write, and in his case, to do so he had to be mobile and free—free of responsibilities that would tie him down until he became a success."[57]

[55] Laurence Coupe, *Beat Sound, Beat Vision: The Beat Spirit and Popular Song* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007) 76.
[56] Nancy M. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 2–3.
[57] Cassady, Blind 165.

As Cassady suggests, it is both freedom and mobility that is required in Kerouac's life as an artist. His literature is a testimony to the fact that there is a direct link between these two and that they can hardly go without each other. Yet again thus Kerouac perpetuates the American literary tradition as he incorporates what Kauffman labeled "the most enduring motif in our literature: the journey in search of freedom."[58] Even when it seems their travels have no other purpose, this vision gives the characters of his novels reason enough to continually hit the road. The truth is they don't have to go very far to find their objective. As Andrew Daigle remarks, "Kerouac's travelers enjoy freedom in movement itself, regardless of the stasis – traffic, working-class routine, formal schooling – they observe in everyday American life."[59]

The nature of the freedom they seek involves liberation from any kind of responsibility, financial concerns, family ties, and, above all, from society. Although there were signs of conformism in Kerouac's life and literature that kept increasing as his career progressed, he always stood up for his independence from the basic requirements and expectations of the American social order. As much as he loved America, his autonomy was dearer to him. This he expressed both in his literature and through his own circuitous mobility. It is clear that the very nature of spatial movement he and his heroes perform carries in its message a spiteful social commentary. Stevenson well captured their skepticism as he asserted that "they find it almost, but not quite, meaningless to compete for grades in college, to marry and to breed in a suburbia of a thousand gadgets, to drown forever in their rites of neighborhood religion, business golf, weekend cocktail parties, upper-middle-class romantic adultery."[60] It is the objective of their aimless wandering to point out the futility of these manifestations of the American Dream and to promote their own way of dealing with the senseless reality of postwar America. As Cresswell remarks, "in exuberant resistance to hegemonic ideals of home and family they find their meaning in mobility."[61]

It was not only the ideals of domestic life within the American Dream that bothered the members of the Beat Generation. What they also found disagreeable about the present state of society was the dehumanizing nature of its economy. Although I have previously criticized the tendency to approach Kerouac's literature through the lenses of politics, a brief

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[58] Kauffman 166.

[59] Andrew Edward Daigle, *Defining Highways: Regionalism, Routes and Circuits in American Road Literature*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2016: 119, English Graduate Theses & Dissertations <scholar.colorado.edu/engl_gradetds/82> 12 Dec 2018.

[60] Stevenson 200.

[61] Cresswell, Resistance 254.

mention of this aspect is inevitable here. If there ever was any political edge to his novels, as much as he was reluctant to grant its presence, it would be the somber view of capitalism and consumption his protagonists often demonstrated. The consumer culture brought about by America's great economic prosperity did not leave a good impression on the Beats as it clashed with many of their own ideas and values. It was especially during the period of Kerouac's great enthusiasm for Eastern philosophy that he altogether rejected the property-driven ambitions of his fellow Americans. This is most accurately represented in *The Dharma Bums* through Japhy Ryder's vision of the rucksack revolution:

> the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks… (97)

As might be observed in this description, mobility is again an indispensable part of the grand scheme of things, the means to pursue this alternative version of existence. Indeed, the word "rucksack" already carries the potential for immediate removal, but it also requires a minimum of material possessions. As opposed to an average American consumer, Japhy Ryder and, by extension, Kerouac himself, perceive these as unnecessary or even detrimental to personal satisfaction and fulfillment. The same goes for their interpretation of money and its effect on happiness. Still within *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac allows one of the truck drivers that the narrator befriends the following observation: "Here I am killin myself drivin this rig back and forth from Ohio to L.A. and I make more money than you ever had in your whole life as a hobo, but you're the one who enjoys life and not only that but you do it without workin or a whole lot of money" (129). The author's somber views of certain aspects of capitalism are thus articulated through the speech of more than one character in the book.

Literary critics have noticed that there is more social and political commentary in *The Dharma Bums* than the author would be willing to admit. The contrast between Japhy's conception of society and the real state of affairs in contemporary America manifests, in yet another way, the "geographical expression of discontent with the hegemonic culture of the

United States in the nineteen fifties"[62] that Cresswell assigned to the directionless mobility of the two heroes in *On the Road*. Unfortunately, this way of showing their antagonism toward the dominant value system of the country exposed the Beats to a flurry of negative criticism, which accused Kerouac and the others of being too harsh with society while offering no better alternative and merely running away from their civic responsibilities. I would object that their critique of the mainstream American way of life was not, after all, so unconstructive. If they were not able to suggest any better mode in which society should operate and that would be agreeable to all (a task that is hardly in anyone's capability), at least they found an alternative for themselves that allowed them to retain their freedom through the refusal of a permanent settlement, the basic component of a stable existence. Ireland affirms this productive side to their complaint when he argues that Kerouac's protagonists "reject societal modes of behavior and instead assert their own moral code in terms of their sexual relationships with others, their attitude toward the law, the work ethic, the government, and finally, toward the American Dream itself."[63] I would only add that most of these aspects are, in one way or another, connected to or directly affected by their choice of mobility as a means of and the road as the stage for their social protest.

Traveling, whether with or without any specific aim in view, thus enters Kerouac's plan for liberation from the constricting expectations of society. While the road offers a way of escape, the destination is not so much a concrete geographical location as rather a particular state of being. This is definitely the case with the characters in *On the Road*, if not with all of Kerouac's protagonists. As Daniel Talbot argues, "part of Sal's motivation for traveling the roads of America involves his belief that 'the road must eventually lead to the whole world' (230). Sal's references to the 'world' allude to the interconnectedness with a natural and socially non-restrictive existence."[64] That this kind of reality should turn out to be somewhat lonely at times is quite anticipated and it constitutes, in my own estimate, a fair price for freedom. Kerouac had his share of this solitude, not only during his fire lookout job on Desolation Peak but in many cases also along the road. Some of these solitary moments brought him great satisfaction, such as, for example, during his transit at the beginning of *The Dharma Bums*: "Happy. Just in my swim shorts, barefooted, wild-haired, in the red fire dark, singing, swigging wine, spitting, jumping, running—that's the way to live. All alone and free

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[62] Ibid., p. 257.
[63] Ireland 480.
[64] Daniel Talbot, "On the Road Again," *The New York Times* (November 27, 1960): 38, accessible online <movies2.nytimes.com/books/97/09/07/home/kerouac-lonesome.html> 15 Mar 2019.

in the soft sands of the beach by the sigh of the sea out there" (7). At other times he felt utterly miserable and wished for a return to his circle of friends, who are not always at hand when one spends such a significant portion of his time in motion. But it is a matter of priorities, after all, and for Kerouac, it was always freedom that occupied the first place.

To be fair, the Beats did not always seek liberation from society only, but sometimes also from themselves. This interpretation of their aimless wandering is suggested by Patton, who informs that "the open road has always ministered to the American flight from self. (...) Speed begins as a flight from identity—an attempt to outrun the past."[65] Such endeavors might be located in many of Kerouac's novels. One of the reasons why Sal always follows Dean on the road is because he is desperately trying to be more like his friend and less like himself. The same goes for Ray Smith, who gets inspired by Japhy Ryder's spiritual wanderings and by imitating these aspires to become a bit more like his mentor. Another reason for his feelings of discomfort on Desolation Peak is the fact that there he could not hide from himself for he had nowhere else to flee to. Being confronted with his own identity at all times is something that rarely occurs to him during his travels, which is a part of their appeal.

As Patton pointed out, running away from identity also involves liberation from the past. This notion was heavily advocated by Arthur, who associated Kerouac's flight from the self with his alleged rejection of roots and local affiliations. While relying on his heritage as a source of self-identification would bring the necessary outcome of being closely tied to his family and place of origin, releasing himself from these roots provided the freedom to build his own character according to his own achievements and desires. Although, as his biographers maintain, Kerouac was significantly marked by his childhood traumas and the experience of alienation caused by his French-Canadian roots, he spent his life in trying to dissociate himself from these predestinations. According to Arthur, "such is Kerouac's version of American freedom—a freedom from roots."[66] And what better way to achieve this than through mobility? By removing himself from his native city of Lowell, Massachusetts, and repeating this move with all his subsequent temporary homes, Kerouac was able to secure that "wealthy kind of poverty—a poverty based on the freedom from local ties,"[67] which Arthur singled out as one of the most controversial aspects of his literature.

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[65] Patton 250.
[66] Arthur 31.
[67] Ibid., p. 32.

Soon after he set off on his first trip as described in *On the Road*, Kerouac was indeed forced to observe that parting with his family might turn out to be a double-edged sword. The truth is that denying all your background might easily result in the realization that there is nothing else left for self-identification. And so it happened that when Sal woke up one day shortly after the beginning of his trip in a nameless hotel room by the railroad tracks, a very unusual experience forced itself upon his consciousness:

> I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. (15)

Despite this moment of uncertainty and a couple of initial miscalculations during his early adventure, Kerouac immediately fell in love with mobility and the sense of independence it produced in him. In his biography, Amburn related Kerouac's first impression of traveling as follows: "On a bus to Washington, D.C., he reflected on the momentous step he'd taken. 'I was on the road for the first time,' he later wrote, and he loved the taste of freedom."[68]

I have shown that there were different kinds of freedom Kerouac envisioned for himself and his heroes. In the end, what mattered the most to him at any given point in time was his own gut feeling, often unrelated to the external nature of reality. Just as the narrator claims in *The Dharma Bums*: "I felt free and therefore I *was* free" (138) – a partial result of his meditative practices. As a way of concluding this section that observes mobility in Kerouac's novels in the light of its liberating potential, let me quote Stephenson's sanguine proclamation that "in this dark and desperate era of human history, *The Duluoz Legend* represents and affirmation of the liberating, creative, redemptive forces within humankind, a prophecy of the universal heart and of the victory of the human spirit."[69]

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[68] Amburn 57.

[69] Stephenson 49.

4.4 The transformative forces of mobility

It is held as a general truth that mobility carries the promise of progress and change. This belief goes all the way back to the ancient past where the dimensions of space and time were considered as correlative. Due to their potential interchangeability, Stout explains, geographical movement was perceived as a highly symbolic action and journey as "a metaphor for the passage of time or for a penetration into different levels of consciousness."[70] With this connection being established, and since the progression of time must necessarily involve some kind of development, it follows that mobility itself is endowed with transformative potential. Such was the case with many travel narratives before Kerouac, and such is the case with his own stories of travel. As Johnston observed in relation to his novels, journey is used there as the "primary means of transformative experience."[71]

Although a certain degree of personal transformation is an inherent component of all our lives, traveling seems to accelerate and shape this process in a significant way. Whether this is for the better or for worse depends on each individual case, but the Beats generally perceived change as both necessary and desirable. William Burroughs was once heard to say that "the most dangerous thing to do is to stand still," meaning both in the physical and spiritual sense. There was no place for stagnation in the philosophy of the Beat Generation, which might be part of the reason why the actual movement was of such a short duration. Nevertheless, in the few active years it enjoyed, a whole range of transformations occurred in the characters of its principal members.

As a founder of the Beat Generation, its major representative, and a fervent advocate, Kerouac was hardly a stagnant type of person. However, he was also one on whom traveling and boisterous lifestyle left a deep and almost tragic effect. Besides tracing his many adventures, *The Duluoz Legend* might be read as an overview of Kerouac's development both as an artist and as a human being. While the early works in this collection, including *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, witness the narrator as an energetic young man full of curiosity and zeal for life, his other novels display all the cynicism and despair of his late disillusionment and exhaustion. The most conspicuous book in this sense is definitely *Big Sur*, "Kerouac's novel of breakdown,"[72] as Tytell distinguishes it, in which the author rejects "the

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[70] Stout 14.
[71] Johnston 177.
[72] Tytell, Naked Angels 24.

enthusiasm for life that his own prose had suggested to so many others."[73] Indeed, there is no more place for such enthusiasm in the life of the aging, alcohol-driven writer.

That his drinking problem should be part of the reason for his sudden disgust with the world around him is beyond doubt. According to Amburn, excessive alcohol abuse, which was present in his life ever since early adulthood but the effects of which were felt especially in the latter part of his life, "turned him into the kind of bully he'd always hated."[74] Such bad temper was just one of the many manifestations of Kerouac's deterioration. Another instance was his changed perception of mobility. Although *Big Sur* still involves a lot of traveling from place to place, the narrator no longer seems to enjoy these transitions, for he now considers them as necessary rather than gratifying. For him, movement turns into a means of reaching destinations; the road into a stage for dislocation. This might be illustrated in the example of Jack's attempt to hitchhike his way back from Lawrence Ferlinghetti's cabin in Big Sur in the first half of the book. When he fails to secure a ride (for reasons explained later in this section), the narrator is forced to perform the rest of the way to the nearest point of civilization on foot, which soon turns into an agonizing experience instead of the pleasant walk he initially imagined: "My feet are ruined and burned, it develops now into a day of complete torture, from nine o'clock in the morning till four in the afternoon I negotiate those nine or so miles when I finally have to stop and sit down and wipe the blood off my feet…" (47). This should not come as a surprise to an experienced traveler, who had previously complained in his journals from 1949–54 that "travel is travail."[75]

I could spend the rest of this chapter providing further examples from *Big Sur* of Kerouac's transformation from a cheerful young lad into a peevish middle-aged man (although the narrator was not even in his forties, yet), but there is hardly enough space or reason to do so. That the writer underwent some development in his attitude to everyday reality and its representation in his writing is quite evident, both from his books as well as from some of the non-fictional sources mapping his life. Suffice it to say that, as Victor-Lévy Beaulieu observed, "after a dozen Beat years there was nothing left but the debasement of Jack, who was tired of his legend and wanted nothing but the peace of Lowell (...). There's no more sun at Big Sur."[76] Despite this dismal tone of the novel, *Big Sur* actually ends on a hopeful note, with the vision of the Holy Cross as a symbol of final deliverance from earthly

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[73] Ibid., p. 207.
[74] Amburn 54.
[75] Kerouac, Journals 779.
[76] Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, "A Chicken Essay," *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture*, eds. Holly George-Warren (New York: Hyperion, 1999) 148.

sufferings. This shift from his previous interest in Buddhism back to the homegrown Catholicism bespeaks another instance of Kerouac's transformation, this time with no negative side to it (although it does suggest some loss of his youthful naiveté). It should be mentioned that this closing episode of the novel is widely praised among literary critics, some of whom regard *Big Sur* as Kerouac's greatest artistic accomplishment. Richard Meltzer, for example, identifies the novel as "his actual bloody masterpiece, one of the great, great works of the English language."[77]

Desolation Angels is another novel that was heavily marked by the author's growing weariness with life. On several occasions throughout the book, the narrator expresses his craving for a peaceful kind of existence in place of the turbulent lifestyle of the previous years. In fact, he attributes this "complete turnabout in my feelings about life" (245) to his adventure on top of Desolation Peak. As soon as he descends from the mountain back to civilization, Ray insists: "I knew now that my life was a search for peace as an artist, but not only as an artist—As a man of contemplations rather than too many actions" (245). The disappointment of the subsequent adventures with his friends in San Francisco, by that time the heart of the Beat movement, serves only to reassure him in this conviction. After several wild incidents, reminiscent of those in the early novels, the narrator is again forced to admit that he is no longer fit for such an intense way of life. What he suggests instead, much to the surprise of all the youngsters he had inspired to ceaseless wandering, is to "stay home, give it all up, get a little home for me and Ma, meditate, live quiet, read in the sun, drink wine in the moon in old clothes, pet my kitties, sleep good dreams…" (337). It seems beyond belief that the leading representative of the rebellious Beat Generation should utter these words, and yet they are as much Kerouac's own as his statement, in *On the Road,* that "the road is life" (212). By the time he gets to work on *Desolation Angels*, the author had enough road in his life, I would assume. In any case, not long after his declaration of the need for settlement in the latter novel, the narrator decides it is time "I told my Desolation Angels goodbye" (366). And, to be sure, he did.

Kerouac initiated his dissociation from the Beat movement shortly after the success of *On the Road* in 1957. The sudden attention that descended upon his person, both from the literary sphere and from popular media, proved to be quite suffocating and he got soon fed up with the increasing armies of young followers, who expected him to live up to the myth he had created. Most of them were not even interested in him specifically. What they were

[77] Richard Meltzer, "Another Superficial Piece About 158 Beatnik Books," *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and American Culture*, eds. Holly George-Warren (New York: Hyperion, 1999) 72.

looking for was the inextinguishable passion of Dean Moriarty, which he was never able to provide. As a matter of fact, at this point, Kerouac was no longer even Sal Paradise. Ten years separated him from the young man full of expectations that he used to be at the beginning of the period covered by the story. By the time his new fame reached him, he had traveled the continent through and through and was no longer excited by the prospect of more such adventures. This state of exhaustion he depicted in *Big Sur* as a justification for his removal to the secluded cabin on the Pacific coast: "I'm supposed to be the King of the Beatniks according to the newspapers, so but at the same time I'm sick and tired of all the endless enthusiasms of new young kids trying to know me and pour out all their lives into me so that I'll jump up and down and say yes yes that's right, which I cant do any more" (109).

In addition to this weariness, he was also experiencing a sense of disappointment with the other members of the Beat Generation. I have already suggested that, with increasing age, Kerouac tended towards conformism and subsequently felt more and more affiliated to his fellow Americans. This was not the case with the rest of the Beats – a fact that contributed to their detachment. According to Brinkley, "he may have provided the rides for Ginsberg's signature poem 'Howl' and Burroughs's defining novel *Naked Lunch*, but Kerouac had no interest in maintaining any literary associations with them when they denounced the U.S. government and sneered at average working-class Americans."[78] Although his own works were not without instances of negative social commentary, as in the case of Japhy's antipathy towards the materialistic nature of the American society in *The Dharma Bums*, by this time Kerouac found it no longer fit to antagonize the country that gave them all the opportunity for their self-expression. The ongoing hostility of his old friends towards America might not have been the only reason for his withdrawal from the Beat Generation, but it had its undeniable share in the isolation that characterized the latter part of his life.

This evolution from a rebellious Beat idol to a conformist middle-aged American took many of his followers by surprise, as well as most of the Beats themselves. The more shocking change it was as it occurred at such a young age. Kerouac was only in his late thirties when he disconnected from the Beat aesthetic, and his alcohol addiction found him dead before he could turn forty-eight. It seems to be the case that the years of Kerouac's accelerated existence on the road, with Neal Cassady at his side, hasten his whole life and run him down before he could reach an actual old age. That, in fact, he never did.

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[78] Brinkley 110.

To be fair, the transformations Kerouac underwent were not always so unequivocally tragic. In fact, there are many, including myself, who believe that if it was not for all his adventures as well as misadventures, he would never become the great artist he is now considered to have been. Besides, his travels did not bring him disappointment only and, rather than rejecting humanity, he developed an unshakable faith in its inherent goodness. Stephenson recognized this positive change in his conviction by asserting that "the vital difference, of course, between Duluoz [the fictional representation of Kerouac in many of his road novels] before the road and after the road resides in his inner transformation from desperate doubter to determined believer."[79] Through his literature, Kerouac was able to communicate this belief with the whole world. Regardless of his late skepticism, he went on reworking and publishing novels that depicted his travels all the way until the bitter end. Despite all the changes in his values and priorities, it seems that he stayed true to at least some of the aspects of the Beat philosophy, including the need for "intense conviction"[80] and freedom. If, due to his increasing health problems (physical as well as psychological), he was not able to retain the full use of his independence, one might hope he did enjoy it at least through his persistent literary efforts.

One more thing we may learn from reading his novels is that Kerouac was not the only one to undergo such a dramatic transformation over the course of his lifetime. Indeed, the country itself that made this life possible changed beyond recognition. This was caused by the dynamic nature of the age that found the United States participating in numerous foreign wars as well as in its own domestic conflicts. As Grace informs, "Kerouac's America, then, was in the midst of invigorating yet unsettling, if not terrifying, transformations."[81] The situation after World War II and during the Cold War demanded that American society reconsiders its values and finds improved meaning in everyday reality, to which the new form of the American Dream was an answer. For certain members of society, however, it did not turn out to be a satisfying one. The fact that the Beat Generation was, in many ways, a reaction to all these social changes in postwar America was already discussed in the previous chapter. What remains is to investigate how these were represented in Kerouac's novels and what role they played in the characters' mobility.

Christopher Gair gives us the positive affirmation that reading Kerouac might teach us a lot about the historical development of the country. In his own words, *The Duluoz Legend*

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[79] Stephenson 46.
[80] Kerouac, Aftermath 24.
[81] Grace 21.

provides "a personal chronicle of the rapid transformation of the United States between the 1920s and 1960s, and illustrates the manner in which Sal and Dean's adventures from the 1940s would have been impossible in the changed world of the late '50s to early '60s, which perceived the Beats to be such a threat."[82] The reason why these adventures would not be possible anymore is the same as the reason why, in *Big Sur*, the narrator could not get a ride from the wilderness of the Pacific coast back to civilization. Although Kerouac openly admitted his hatred of hitchhiking and always preferred other means of transportation, he did consider it a potential way of traveling at the end of the 1940s, when he and Neal Cassady crisscrossed the country, gathering material for *On the Road*. That many of his attempts at hitchhiking were unsuccessful already back then did not stop him from trying it again and again, always with a renewed supply of positive anticipation. By the time he got to the events represented in *Big Sur*, which took place at the beginning of the 1960s, the situation was very different and getting a ride became next to impossible, especially for a solitary hobo-looking traveler like himself. This new state of affairs was not brought about by any particular change in the government of the country, nor by any amendments to America's legal system; it was simply a change in the people themselves, a transformation of the dominant lifestyle and its outlook on social outcasts including Kerouac and his associates.

It is the new prototype of the American family that complicates the situation surrounding wandering hobos and other kinds of solitary travelers. There is no better way to describe it than through Kerouac's own observations during his failed attempt at hitchhiking his way back from the cabin in Big Sur:

> This is the first time I've hitch hiked in years and I soon begin to see that things have changed in America, you cant get a ride any more (...) Sleek long stationwagon after wagon comes sleering by smoothly, (...) the husband is in the driver's seat with a long ridiculous vacationist hat with a long baseball visor making him look witless and idiot—Beside him sits wifey, the boss of America, wearing dark glasses and sneering, even if he wanted to pick me up or anybody up she wouldn't let him—But in the two deep backseats are children, children, millions of children, all ages, they're fighting and screaming over ice cream, they're spilling vanilla all over the Tartan seatcovers—There's no room anymore anyway for a hitch hiker… (44–45)

[82] Gair 43.

As is often the case with Kerouac's prose, this description goes on and stretches over a couple of pages. However, the passage I have included here is sufficient to show that it is not just the author's cynicism but also the refusal of his fellow countrymen to sanction this way of life that made Kerouac's travels in the sixties much more difficult while much less enjoyable than ever before. As Gair concludes, "*Big Sur* charts the extension of the standardised citizen's domain far beyond anything imagined by Kerouac in *On the Road*."[83]

Other aspects that affected life on the road in the second half of the twentieth century included the state's control over its highways and the attitude of the police toward any wandering suspects. Kerouac describes this state of things at the very beginning of the section of the *Lonesome Traveler* aptly entitled "The Vanishing American Hobo": "The American hobo has a hard time hobboing nowadays due to the increase in police surveillance of highways, railroad yards, sea shores, river bottoms, embankments and the thousand-and-one hiding holes of industrial night" (764). Besides that, the narrator finds American society increasingly hypocritical in its regard of travelers like himself, who, in fact, greatly contributed to the formation of the country in the past: "Western towns (...) are now so prosperous they dont want old bums anymore.—'Man dont want no pack rats here even though they founded California'" (764). And he also observes the further injustices these so-called "rats" have to withstand from the authorities: "In America camping is considered a healthy sport for Boy Scouts but a crime for mature men who have made it their vocation" (765). All of these factors are the outcomes of the great transformation the American society underwent in the two decades since Kerouac's first journey. A few years after this trip, the writer already finds it difficult to justify his solitary presence on the road. When, in *Desolation Angels*, the police ask the narrator where he is going, he sadly remarks: "Just as you cant explain to the police, you cant explain to society 'Looking for Peace'" (247).

In addition to all these changes in society, the landscape itself witnessed a definite metamorphosis. As I have shown in chapter two, the 1950s brought a new network of American highways that forever altered the nature of long-distance mobility within the country. The truth is that the adventures of Sal and Dean would be very different in nature if they were conducted on this new highway system. For all the immediate fans of *On the Road*, this transformation made it almost impossible to recreate the experience of their Beat idols already at the very moment of the novel's publication. Daigle also recognized this difficulty when he declared: "Ironically, for the aspiring late-1950s road rebel, flight from the repetition

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[83] Ibid., p. 44.

and banality of mainstream life increasingly required use of the Interstate System, the very innovation that reformed the nation's roadscape into its present innocuous form."[84] Judging from all of these observations about the United States in the fifties and sixties, I would argue that not only Jack Kerouac but also America itself traveled a long way since the day the writer set his foot on the road for the first time. And as he maintained, "no matter how you travel, how 'successful' your tour, or foreshortened, you always learn something and learn to change your thoughts."[85]

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[84] Daigle 203–204.

[85] Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris*, in *Satori in Paris and Pic: Two Novels* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988) 43.

5. Conclusion

Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.

– Albert Einstein, in a letter to his son Eduard[1]

The literature of the Beat Generation had its undeniable share in the shaping of the American literary tradition. At the same time, it was also greatly inspired by it, as the authors often employed the themes and strategies of their predecessors. One of the most vital influences on their work was the poetry of Walt Whitman. For Kerouac in particular, it was especially the "Song of the Open Road" from the paramount collection *Leaves of Grass* that found reflection in his literature. In this poem, the speaker expresses his attitude toward the ubiquitous element of the road: "O public road, I say back I am not afraid to leave you, yet I love you / You express me better than I can express myself, / You shall be more to me than my poem."[2] Whitman thus illustrates the degree of significance the road motive assumes in American literature and culture.

In the present study, I have shown how mobility and the road entered the American consciousness and how they became constitutive elements in the nation's identity. It follows that the predominance of these subjects came to be reflected in its literature. On the example of Kerouac's novels, I have analyzed this reflection and identified some of the recurrent themes associated with mobility in twentieth-century America. The purpose of this research was to illustrate and argue for the fundamental nature of the author's contribution to the American literary canon as well as to the formation of the American identity itself.

While trying to meet this objective, new questions arose that invite for further research, although these are mostly of a speculative character: is America going to keep on the move? And which direction is it going to take on its future course? In fact, these questions are the echoes of Kerouac's own inquiry: "Whither goest thou America in thy shiny car at night?"[3] While I hardly feel entitled to make any decisive prophecies about the future of the United States, I will only say that with the contemporary, tourism-driven nature of our

[1] Quoted in *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, by Walter Isaacson (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) 367.

[2] Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Emory Holloway (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1947) lines 46–48.

[3] Kerouac, Journals 777.

society, the importance of mobility seems only to increase, not in America exclusively, but all over the world. No matter how much money and energy we invest in constructing our homes, we are always ready to give even more to escape them. As Whitman insisted:

> Allons! we must not stop here,
> However sweet these laid-up stores, however convenient this dwelling we cannot remain here,
> However shelter'd this port and however calm these waters we must not anchor here,
> However welcome the hospitality that surrounds us we are permitted to receive it but a little while.[4]

Compared to its restless beginnings, the American nation seems to be quite content in their present abode. However, for a society that was built upon mobility, there is no permanent settlement. Along with the rest of the modern world, America will thus probably remain on the road, whether it will lead across the ocean or to the moon. In support of this notion, Ireland declares: "the frontier in the American mind will continue to stay 'open.'"[5]

It is in this context that authors such as Walt Whitman and Jack Kerouac continue to be read. Just as the road remains a vital symbol of the perpetual importance of mobility in the American culture, the two writers survive in our sensibility as its most ardent advocates. With the numerous journeys in his life, Kerouac has often been considered a modern-day pilgrim. However, his legacy goes on not only because he reenacted the voyages of the past within the modern context but also because he recorded the contemporary attitudes toward mobility in his originally constructed fiction and thus secured a spot among the most influential authors of postwar America.

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[4] Whitman 120–123.
[5] Ireland 484.

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