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# **Bohemians, Vagabonds, and Wanderers of the “Ragged Promised Land” in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road***

Jack Kerouac in his most famous novel portrays a multitude of characters and situations that the main protagonist Sal Paradise encounters during his travels. The journey itself into the “ragged promised land” (Kerouac 1998, 80) of America in *On the Road* can be first and foremost seen as an escape. It is an escape from one’s own roots and heritage and from the American postwar society with its greed and conformity (Kirsch 128). Robert Stone claims that “The overwhelming gratifying element in *On the Road* for its contemporary readers was the dream, the promise of life more abundant available to the young American adventurer, the intrepid traveler” (542). Sal seems to confirm this thesis by saying in *On the Road*: “we said quick good-byes . . . and stumbled off towards the protective road where nobody would know us” (Kerouac 1998, 210). Spatial anonymity provides the protagonists with a possibility to escape from social responsibility and family ties. All that in order to find temporary satisfaction and fulfill the need for new experiences. Being on the road leads to new exciting interactions and enables the young travelers to undergo a repeated socialization, this time as adults. Through that they are also able to see the multiple and diversified ways of living on the American continent with its landscape not only seen as geographical places, but also or maybe first and foremost, people and experiences that all together form what is the “ragged promised land” (80).

Sal discovers new borders for personal desires that are contrasted with his family life, his home where he financially depends on his aunt while working on a novel, attending college classes and taking part in family gatherings. He describes his domestic life:

One day when all our Southern relatives were sitting around the parlor in Testament, gaunt men and women with the old Southern soil in their eyes, talking in low, whining voices about the weather, the crops, and the general weary recapitulation of who had a baby, who got a new house. (105)

In Kerouac’s opinion the American Dream in the end is left crippled and dying on the unwelcoming white-picket fences that deny entry to anybody not willing to conform, and the vagabond existence that follows such exclusion is presented as necessary if not preferable to the sadness of settling into mainstream American life. The characters are reckless in the sense that their desires are completely natural, representations of an undeniable cool because they firmly grasp hold of their identities and do exactly as they please in direct opposition to stuffy convention.

Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* claims: “I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing” (99). Kerouac portrayed the American journey westward in his novel. Through that the changing American landscape can be perceived literally, but also metaphorically.<sup>1</sup> The elements of the landscape are selected to represent a lifestyle coming to an end in the postwar boom. They are pictures of a world not yet changed by postwar affluence and consumerism. However, the sadness that is portrayed in Kerouac’s novel comes from the certainty that this world is dying. Edward Halsey Foster argues in his book *Understanding the Beats*, quoting Ginsberg: “Kerouac’s realization of the fact that something really

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1 Compare Kirsch, 127–128.

hard and terrible was coming to America was the realization that the open road was no longer open for the wandering hobo saint" (40). This coincides with reading *On the Road* as a novel portraying nostalgia for America's loss of local vistas, as in 1956 the construction of 40,000 miles of new interstate highways was authorized. This gave visible proof to the feeling that the American landscape was going to change forever (Mofford 17).

The novel is also a pilgrimage to a utopia that cannot be found. Sal Paradise searches the outposts of the American Dream for the mysterious Dean Moriarty, whose character is based on Neal Cassady, who occasionally turns up, hitches a ride with his friend and drives Sal to yet another lost paradise while readers follow this hopeless pilgrimage (Stephenson 175–176). It is a fast, exciting and heart-warming journey, driven by Kerouac's romantic ideals, and his beautiful literary sketches of the American landscape consisting not only of the natural scenery, but also of the native people, the Fellahin, and other pilgrims like Sal and Dean. In Jack Kerouac's "The Vanishing American Hobo" in *Lonesome Traveler*, his short story collection from 1960, he discusses the image of himself as a hobo as well as the portrayal of the hobo itself. Kerouac mentions his literary efforts as something that separates him from the true hoboes along with the fact that he still has hope for other things beyond simply getting by. The American Dream is reflected in Kerouac's hobo through classifying him as "the American Hobo" as well as characterizing his journey as an "idealistic lope to freedom" (Kerouac 1989, 172–173). Along with identifying the hobo with the American Dream, Kerouac also uses language that emphasizes the almost universal language of the hobo such as "universal brother" or "the original hobo dream" (172–173). Furthermore, Kerouac lists America as the "motherland of bumdom" (178). He also makes a distinction between hoboes and bums. This difference for Kerouac comes with a sense of pride or lack thereof. Once a hobo loses his pride, he becomes a bum. This discrepancy parallels that of the one between searching for the American Dream as a bohemian, vagabond or wanderer and simply living and having an established role in society.

Kerouac depicts mentors and heroes that Paradise encounters along the way. They are, among others, tramps and hoboes, ragged wanderers and the Fellahin of Mexico, as well as his partner and companion Dean who is a true vagabond. He is described in those words:

standing in front of everybody, ragged and broken and idiotic, right under the lightbulbs, his bony mad face covered with sweat and throbbing veins, saying, 'Yes, yes, yes', as though tremendous revelations were pouring into him all the time now, and I am convinced they were, and the others suspected as much and were frightened. ... What was he knowing? He tried all in his power to tell me what he was knowing, and they envied that about me, my position at his side, defending him and drinking him in as they once tried to do. (Kerouac 1998, 183–184)

In contrast to the sterility and absurdity that Sal associates with the American lifestyle of his time, he experiences something true and meaningful among those living on the margin of society. The revelations of the unconscious mind and the experiences gathered on the road are of vital importance to the protagonist (Stephenson 23), as they were to the members of the Beat Generation.

One of the wanderers encountered during this vagabondage is the Ghost of Susquehanna. When Sal reaches Pittsburgh, he states “I was wearier than I’d been for years and years” (Kerouac 1998, 99). He has a dime in his pocket and three hundred and sixty-five miles left to hitchhike to his aunt’s house in New Jersey. Outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania he meets the Ghost, “a shriveled little old man with a paper satchel who claimed he was headed for ‘Canady” (100). Sal first sees him as a “semi-respectable walking hobo” (100) and follows him when the Ghost claims he can lead Sal to a bridge that will shorten the trip. As the Ghost gives Sal a stream of disconnected details of the past, Sal gradually realizes the man’s insanity, abandons him, and hitches a ride only to find he has been traveling west not east, back to the world of the road, and not toward home. For Sal, the encounter with the Ghost becomes an experience of terror, he speaks of it in those words:

We were bums together. We walked seven miles along the mournful Susquehanna. It is a terrifying river. It has bushy cliffs on both sides that lean like hairy ghosts over the unknown waters. Inky night covers all. Sometimes from the railyards across the river rises a great red locomotive flare that illuminates the horrid cliffs. (100)

The landscape described upon meeting the Ghost is a visualization of Sal’s fear of the unknown. Apart from that, the constant disappointment of missed rides, aimless wanderings, and isolation are not an escape across the bridge, but a shortcut to insanity and death. Sal comments on it: “I thought all of the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of Susquehanna showed me different. No, there is a wilderness in the East” (101). There is also wilderness in the self, in America, society and history, and that discovery drives Sal to despair:

That night in Harrisburg I had to sleep in the railroad station on a bench; at dawn the station masters threw me out. Isn’t it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father’s roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked with the visage of gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life. I stumbled haggardly out of the station; I had no more control. All I could see of the morning was a whiteness like the whiteness of the tombs. (101)

Sal’s encounter with the Ghost puts in question his reasons for traveling west. In imitating Dean, Sal in effect parodies what is perhaps the classic American story. He flees the constrictions of the East hoping to find freedom and regeneration in the West. But his vision of the West is childish and superficial. He refuses to recognize the possibility that his actions may involve cost to himself or others. As Sal travels west, he is convinced he can make it on his own and that the world will shape itself to his dream. By the time he encounters the Ghost on his return, Sal has begun to see the consequences of this attitude.

Understanding the Ghost, one can see the importance of chapter four of part one, where Sal hitches “the greatest ride in my life” (26) and meets

other vagabonds I like himself. He rides with “two young blond farmers from Minnesota” who haul farm machinery on their flat bed truck from Los Angeles to the Midwest and then pick up whoever they pass on their return. On the truck Sal finds, in addition to the two drivers, “two young farmer boys from North Dakota”, “two young city boys from Columbus, Ohio”, “Mississippi Gene and his charge”: a “tall blond kid. . . running away from something”, and “a tall slim fellow who had a sneaky look” called Montana Slim (26–27). Mississippi Gene, his charge and Montana Slim are of interest to Sal, and his failure to understand the contrast between Gene’s and Slim’s responses to being on the road is the center of this story. Gene is patient and soft-spoken, he accepts what comes his way and makes the best of it. He exists outside of society and he epitomizes the ragged and the sacred at the same time. He carries transcendental freedom with him, his homelessness and lack of belonging are not tragic, but rather noble as he connects them with absolute freedom and a sense of wisdom. When Sal asks about his charge, Gene explains: “He got into some kind of trouble back in Mississippi, so I offered to help him out. Boy’s never been out on his own. I take care of him best as I can, he’s only a child’. Although Gene was white there was something of the wise and tired old Negro in him” (29). Slim, on the other hand, is “all insinuation” (27), a loner who feels no remorse about using people. He boasts that he always knows where to get money, and when Sal asks him to explain, Montana Slim replies: “Anywhere. You can always folly a man down an alley, can’t you?” (27). Kerouac carefully contrasts Gene and Slim in order to understand that being on the road can have different effects on people who travel:

Gene was taking care of [his charge], of his moods and his fears. I wondered where the hell they would go and what they would do. They had no cigarettes. I squandered my pack on them, I loved them so. They were grateful and gracious. They never asked, I kept offering. Montana Slim had his own but never passed the pack. (32)

In spite of the contrast between Gene and Slim, Sal declines Gene’s invitation to go to Ogden with him and aligns himself with Slim, who uses Sal’s money and leaves him in the Cheyenne bus station. Sal is not yet ready to accept Gene’s example. He intuitively recognizes that Gene’s ease and gentleness are a result of how little he demands from the world, but Sal is too optimistic and too sure of his own self-reliance to accept Gene as a guide or to accept his gentle ways. Sal cannot deal with Gene’s well-intended question about where he is going. When Gene sings what Sal takes to be “the prettiest song”, Sal offers: “I hope you get where you’re going, and be happy when you do” (34).

Sal does not understand that Gene is always wherever he is going and, because he is without goals, able to respond calmly to whatever comes his way. His reply “I always make out and move along one way or another” (34) is finally too simple for Sal, and so he follows the more exciting, but destructive Slim, a comrade who does not offer anything to him. Sal’s search for excitement and the fear of responsibility make him unable to share a relationship of true comradeship (Hunt 19–20). Sal also does not understand that while being on the road, one can give up like Gene, turn sly like Slim or, like the Ghost, escape into insanity. However, he rejects all three options, but all are relevant to his fantasy of America and the West.

The reader can easily see a pattern that Kerouac used in creating the storyline of his novel. Sal Paradise goes west in spring and returns in the fall when nature is slowly decaying. He is alone during his first travel west. From the second trip on, when Sal wants to escape the cold winter in New York, him and Dean Moriarty travel together, though Sal is alone on the bus back from San Francisco on the second trip and from Mexico City during the fourth trip. Douglas Brinkley in his essay "The American Journey of Jack Kerouac" argues: "*On the Road* protagonists Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise were intended as the automobile-age equivalents of Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid" (112). "Beyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West", Kerouac wrote in 1951 while typing out *On the Road*. "I had to go" (Kerouac 1998, 57). Nonetheless, during his journey, what Sal learns about life on the road is that it has no destination, that beyond Denver there are San Francisco, Los Angeles, etc. That one belongs anywhere, and, thus, nowhere at all. Soon after arriving to the mythical West, all dreams about Western cities turn into nightmares. Sal claims that "L.A. is the loneliest and most brutal American city" (82–83). While the journey west is a celebration of going on the road, of the simple people Sal meets, and of the vastness and raw beauty of the country stretching from coast to coast, the descriptions of the return trip are full of dark images and a feeling of defeat.

Throughout part one, Sal is essentially alone. Early in part one, Sal finds himself halfway west. Behind him is already the college world of his past, of which Sal is reminded when he hitches a ride with two University of Iowa students who "talk of exams" (19). They drop Sal in Des Moines, where he takes a room in a gloomy "old Plains inn of a hotel by the locomotive round-house". There Sal experiences a revelation:

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. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon. (19–20)

Sal understands the need of a new identity, which coincides with Kerouac's view on that topic. In America, the future lays always in the West and this becomes a source of hope for Sal. He experiences a temporary loss of identity, his self dies and is reborn as he is on the boarder of what was and of what is yet to come. In that moment the journey through America in *On the Road* becomes a metaphor of the journey into one's own soul. As Stephenson argues: "The geographical distances he has traversed have had their corresponding measure in his psyche" (22).

The themes established in part one – the search for identity, the relationship between comrades, and the belief in the West – come together for Sal in

the figure and the icon of Dean that Sal has created, and finally, in the three trips Dean and Sal take in the later parts of the novel. In *On the Road*, Sal voices his liking of “the mad ones”, and his role model Dean embodies those qualities (Kerouac 1998, 11). He possesses the instinct, innocence and energy of a modern hobo saint, his vagabondage challenges the square, conformist society.<sup>2</sup> Even when he is looking for his father, his identity and personal history, Dean focuses mainly on himself and his present. He is also a bohemian and vagabond because that is what he was intended to be, it seems to be his destiny that he does not question or challenge. He was born when his parents were on their way to Los Angeles, as a boy he traveled America hitching trains with his father all over the West of the United States. Finally, he grew up without the awareness of social roles that he should fulfill; he does not know how to be a responsible father, a loyal husband providing for his family and a trustworthy friend. Dean states: “...we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do. We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side” (115). Dean’s view of life does not negate the heterogeneity of America, but much rather it acknowledges the sense of security, being at home, living in pluralism while being on the road. When Dean is asked: “What’s your road, man?”, he answers: “holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow” (237). With those words he emphasizes being a part of the heterogeneity of America, he sees beauty in the lack of a defined, constant and stable identity.

The West is the land of the frontier and the wilderness, but it lies for Sal Paradise not merely in the form of vast spaces, but also, in the sublime. Dean Moriarty evokes in Sal a nostalgia for the frontier and a longing to escape from adult responsibilities. In Sal’s opinion: “all my New York friends were in the negative nightmarish position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn’t care one way or another” (13–14). In spite of Dean’s less attractive aspects, his essential vision, especially his affirmation of life, is the very quality that Sal desires for himself. When they start their journey together Dean is not yet defeated, he is an active figure, who for Sal: “...reminded me of some long-lost brother; the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic” (13). Finally, Dean projects an aura of understanding the meaning of life that Sal comes to feel might offer a way beyond the despair of his encounter with the Ghost of the Susquehanna and the other wanderers met on the road. The experiences from part two portray distinct stages in Sal’s understanding of the images associated with Dean; but again, each trip shows a specific pattern. Sal begins by breaking out of an established order in search of what he calls kicks and what can be perceived by the reader as a quest for experience and wisdom. He escapes the order of his aunt’s home, enters the disorder of the road, and returns at the end of each trip to sum up his losses and gains. As early as 1949, Kerouac thought of *On the Road* as a quest or pilgrimage (Stephenson 17). Stephenson elaborates on that topic: “The objects of the quest (selfhood, love, God, community) are elusive; they are grails that appear and vanish, are recovered and

2 See Ligairi, 144.

lost again, but toward whose final possession the quester approaches nearer and nearer" (22).

However, it is only Sal, not Dean, who reaches the moment of vision on each trip. Dean gives Sal a focus for his search, but he does not grow the way Sal does. His trips end in defeat, there are no gains, only losses. In a way, Sal's first trip with Dean, resembles part one of the novel. Sal must learn firsthand that the romanticized image of his comrade comes at a cost. Sal admits: "I lost faith in [Dean] that year" (Kerouac 1998, 162). Every next travel enables Sal to understand the myth of the road more and more. It teaches him how to perceive time, space, interpersonal relations and physical sensations. Together with a companion like Dean, they are focused on what is present and immediate, as being on the road offers them a separation from what is stable and defined, from a restrictive attachment to adult life and its obligations. Kerouac clearly idealizes the road, freedom, carelessness, he focuses on movement while describing each trip.<sup>3</sup>

Still, for Kerouac wandering and vagabondage are portrayed not only in his fellow Beats and nomads met during travels. He also connects it with his French-American heritage and language.<sup>4</sup> Kerouac always felt distant from the French language, as he was unable to write it, but surprisingly, he found comfort from the pain of exile in language, as it is a mobile entity. Thus, language can be called a vehicle of nomadism created by Kerouac through his experience. He comments on it in one of his letters from 1950: "Because I cannot write my native language and have no native home any more, and am amazed by that horrible homelessness all French-Canadians abroad in America have" (Kerouac 1996, 228).

Before Kerouac rose to fame with *On the Road*, in December, 1952 he wrote over thirty pages of a story he entitled *Sur le chemin*, which can be translated to *On the Road*. But it tells a different story than what we know as *On the Road*. It is a story about French-Canadian Leo Duluoaz and his son Ti-Jean, a nickname that was given to Kerouac when he was a boy (Melehy 37), who drive from Boston, and Dean Pomeray, a drunk who drives from Denver with his nine year old son, a character based on the person of Neal Cassady. They meet in New York City and continue on their journey together (Kerouac 1996, 395–396). This story can be seen as a departure from Kerouac's French-Canadian ancestry. Furthermore, the idea of a son being taken by his father to the city can be connected with the fascination with America that Cassady and William S. Burroughs planted in Kerouac (McNally 89). One can draw some conclusions from the two stories that were named *On the Road* by Kerouac. One is in a dialect of French, *joual*, and the other in English. One is connected with the French-American heritage, and the other with the US-American one. Already those qualities give the readers an understanding that the place where Kerouac grew up in, namely Franco-American New England, really was a home in exile as it planted in Kerouac two identities at the same time. In 1972, the author Victor-Lévy Beaulieu devoted a piece to Kerouac entitled "*Jack Kerouac: a chicken-essay*", a piece of writing that shows the unique quality the author's heritage had on his work. In this essay, Beaulieu presents the contradictions of Kerouac's character, divided between "backward-looking French Canada and the forward-looking American". He goes even further, calling Kerouac "French-Canada's best writer of powerlessness" (170).

3 See Tytell 1979, 419–430.

4 See Charters 1994, 20–23.

It was not in his native community of New England, nor during his travels through the United States, but during his stay in Mexico that Kerouac became aware of the exile of the French-American community in the USA and realized for the first time his non-belonging to either of those groups.<sup>5</sup> This feeling was probably evoked by moving south of the border, just like his people did moving from Quebec to the United States.<sup>6</sup> It could also be provoked by being outside of his comfort zone, away from everything that he has seen so far and thought about as familiar and domesticated. His fascination with being on the road, with movement, just like he writes in *On the Road*, “But no matter, the road is life” (Kerouac 1998, 199) is an awareness of the exile of the members of his community. David Amram states: “Kerouac loved America but felt more at home somewhere else. The small and the personal just felt increasingly worthless in America” (Atkinson 42). This attributes the feeling of constant exile to the changing American reality, an idea which was already mentioned. Through the realization of the lack of belonging the understanding that literary images are themselves nomadic becomes apparent, as they are travels into the English language. This exactly is the means by which Kerouac set himself apart as carrying foreign elements into the English language and the American culture in order to bring forward the foreign elements that both, language and culture tried to conceal. This led the writer to creating *On the Road*, in which the vagabondage became an integral part of the poetics of exile. Robert Stone in his autobiographical essay “American Dreamers: Melville and Kerouac” claims: “For him, like for me, the road to America suggested a transcendent journey toward an ineffable reality that was somehow our lost birthright” (541). Kerouac understood the importance of detaching oneself from one’s roots, as well as cherishing the vitality of the idea of wandering because the origins one had as a child were no longer available, thus, further wandering became necessary.

The author romanticizes the various ethnic groups in the American landscape. The Fellahin, the Mexican cotton picker Terry, and the evocations of lives of African Americans, as well as comparisons made between those groups awaken in Sal a sadness for the vanishing American real and simple life. Outsiders themselves, the wanderers of *On the Road* identify with the outcasts found as a part of the American landscape. Also, the idea of beat becomes in Kerouac’s *On the Road* a way to express the idea of nomadism and lack of belonging. It challenges the square, conformist American culture. It can be most clearly seen in border regions where more than one ethnic group are visible, and where those present mix and mingle with one another. By mentioning those spaces of heterogeneity, Kerouac’s poetics of exile take place (Foster 43). This can be seen in fragments like this:

Cheyenne again, in the afternoon this time, and then west over the range; crossing the Divide at midnight at Creston, arriving at Salt Lake City at dawn – a city of sprinklers, the least likely place for Dean to have been born; then out to Nevada in the hot sun, Reno by nightfall, its twinkling Chinese streets; then up the Sierra Nevada, pines, stars, mountain lodges signifying Frisco romances. (Kerouac 1998, 58)

<sup>5</sup> See Kerouac 1996, 381.

<sup>6</sup> See Kerouac 2000, 209.

The vastness, greatness, and diversity of the landscape, the open, endless country, the plains, deserts, forests, cities form a mosaic of sights and emotions where the elements become virtually impossible to distinguish. The multiple journeys of the protagonists resemble each other, even though the choice of route varies. Sal Paradise leaves his own culture and encounters nomads, wanderers and vagabonds connected to a global culture, finally becoming one of them.

As mentioned before, the wanderers, bohemians and the rural nomadic peoples, whose values differ radically from those of American middle class society, form the core of the novel and provide material for the vividness of the plot. However, it is not only the Fellahin that rivet Kerouac's attention, as those are also the African Americans. In *On the Road*, we read: "I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violent dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange words with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (170). Even if the adjectives attributed to the "Negroes of America" are adolescent and highly emotive, the affections they reveal are true and show Sal's need for simplicity and a sense of belonging to America. Kerouac has many times been accused of exoticizing some communities in his novel. That can be seen as a rhetorical setup for a more harsh look at reality and it is performed by engaging a naïve narrator. The romanticized and dreamlike atmosphere in parts of the novel matches the beatific dreaming which became directly linked to the path through the USA and a personal awareness of identity (Foster 41).

Sal describes how he starts perceiving Dean: "by virtue of his enormous series of sins, [he] was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot" (Kerouac 1998, 182). Paradise later claims, "He was BEAT – the root, the soul of Beatific" (184). For the author the acts of being weak, empty, tired, suffering from loss and defeat lead to a state of being blessed and saintly, as the ego no longer influences one's actions, thus, the individual is open to true spiritual wisdom and the sublime. He also states about Dean: "Bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness – everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being (184). Not only the characters in *On the Road*, but also members of the Beat Generation, like Herbert Huncke, William S. Burroughs, and, finally, Neal Cassady chose a mode of what can be called downward mobility (Holton 64). This idea provides a sense of transcendent freedom and liberation that is partially similar to the freedom hoboes, wanderers and other marginalized groups that were already mentioned were able to obtain. In that way this kind of social mobility challenges the American Dream, which traditionally is a movement upward. They personify the ragged and the bohemian, the beaten down, but also the beatific, as they are part of the American landscape.

The finale of *On the Road*, the trip to Mexico, challenges the ideology of self-satisfied American culture because it shows entering another world as a clash between cliché and reality, namely that cultures continuously affect one another, creating a feeling of being in between while not being anywhere at home (Foster 43). In the novel, Sal presents the border crossing as the boundary of all what has become familiar to him and Dean:

But everything changed when we crossed the mysterious bridge over the river and our wheels rolled on official Mexican soil, though it wasn't anything but car way for border inspection. Just across the street Mexico began. We looked with wonder. To our amazement, it looked exactly

like Mexico. It was three in the morning, and fellows in straw hats and white pants were lounging by the dozen against battered pocky storefronts. (Kerouac 1998, 258)

This passage also shows the clichés that at first dominate the reality the characters encounter. Kerouac claims that knowledge is unable to understand most cultural phenomena, and thus, resorts to the idea of cliché. Also, the vagabondage affirms the vitality which is unavailable and impossible to earn in rooted culture, and thus, resigns from the previously used clichés (Melehy 44–46).

Finally, *On the Road* evokes in the reader a feeling of what is a blend of America's past and present, and which is hope for the future, and nostalgia for the past. This summarizes Sal's mismatch between his romanticization of the past world order of simplicity and stability, and his desire to participate in the new world search for individual ecstasy. Kerouac in his *Belief & Technique for Modern Prose* sets up a list of essentials for writing, and as the fourth point he mentions, "Be in love with yr life" (Charters 1992, 59). Thus, the protagonists of the novel are romantics, they dream of a new beginning, setting new borders and boundaries. Kerouac also presents a marginal possibility of heterogeneity in a homogenous postwar America. This coincides the views of the Beat Generation, as heterogeneity meant artistic freedom. Sal Paradise, Kerouac's alter ego in the novel, states: "They were like the man with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining" (Kerouac 1998, 53). Travels, apart from new experiences, do not provide Sal with a knowledge of geography, topography, architecture, history or culture. However, what they do provide is a knowledge of space, an ability to cope under any circumstances among the hoboes, wanderers and vagabonds and while being away from what is known and familiar. Being on the road enables the protagonists to combine their identity with the spaces and landscapes of the American continent, especially those they would not have access while staying in regulated social structures. Upon the end of the novel, Sal states that knowing the landscape and the spaces provides a sense of tranquility and happiness:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old... (291)

Movement, both upward and downward, outward and inward, physical and metaphysical, was the guiding principle of the Beats and "go!" their imperative. Kerouac wrote: "We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about anymore. The only thing to do was go" (114). And, again:

“We were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one noble function of the time, *move*. And we moved!” (127). Geographically the Beats traveled considerable distances: from coast to coast across the United States and from boarder to boarder, to Mexico, etc. The real journey, though, was always inward, a passage through the wilderness of the self, the true “ragged promised land”.

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