

ON THE ROAD

JACK KEROUAC'S EPIC AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

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Jack Kerouac's classic mid-twentieth century novel *On the Road* has been noted as the decisive work of Beat Generation literature. As a *roman à clef* it describes in intimate detail the world of Kerouac's friends and acquaintances and their multifarious adventures and travels in the years from 1947 to 1950 when Kerouac was a young struggling writer. His urgent prose found a receptive audience with America's young people which has never completely waned. Beyond being a touchstone of the counterculture, *On the Road* is an ethnographic portrait of mid-twentieth-century America. The author's chronicle of his social milieu and its stance towards wider American cultural is an autoethnography: reflective, personal and connected to the social trends of his times. Kerouac, by describing his own life, tells us much about his time and place in a plangent iteration of what would become a broader movement of young people seeking transcendence.

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Key words: Kerouac, novel, ethnography, autoethnography, empathy

Introduction

On the Road marked Jack Kerouac's introduction to the mass literary scene in America. Not published until 1957, seven years after its initial completion, famously produced on a long teletype scroll, Kerouac's work has been hailed as an innovation that gave birth to a fundamental change in the mode of expression in a novel—the writer's celebrated 'spontaneous prose'. Yet, in rereading *On the Road*, I cannot help finding the text rather commonplace. Compared to a Joycean or Faulknerian sea change in the novel, *On the Road* is pretty ordinary. True enough, the edited version finally published by Viking had been modified to one degree or another by editors, but it is also now known that the legend of the book's production, so often cited in the cult of Kerouac, is not entirely true either (Cassady 1990: 29). The legend tells us that the book was written, in its entirety, in a flash of inspiration in three weeks while the young author was high on Benzedrine—unedited, unexpunged and straight from the 'first thought, best thought' mind of the King of the Beats. Allen Ginsberg enthusiastically promoted this version of events along with Kerouac's inspiration in literary form and expression from jazz. The truth is a bit more ordinary. Kerouac worked on *On the Road* for years, beginning as early as 1947, editing its prose, changing its content and form and signing off on the version of the novel published in 1957 (Amburn 1999).

Lost in the aforementioned lore of *On the Road* is its central quality. The book is a compelling ethnographic portrait of the United States in the middle of the last century. Kerouac's novel displays a common ethos with those anthropologists who seek epistemological openness based on experience and an absence of abstraction (Jackson 1989: 184). The immediacy of Kerouac's prose and its vivid, thick description of the life worlds he encounters creates a memorable ethnography of mobility and discovery. His emphasis on mobility positions *On the Road* in the vanguard of ethnographies of movement and transitory residence, a powerful theme in contemporary life. Kerouac's book can be seen as positioned in the long association between the disciplines of the ethnographer and the creative writer (Schmidt 1984).

Kerouac uses the methods of autoethnography. In so doing he not only presents a striking *roman à clef* of the lives of his friends, notably Neal Cassady as the novel's hero Dean Moriarty, but also a distinctive portrayal of an America largely ignored, and anathema in Cold War cultural and social life. This depiction focuses, through his character in the novel Sal Paradise, on the author's empathetic embrace of those outside the mainstream of American society with whom he clearly identifies, and his appreciation of ethnic and cultural 'others' both in the United States and in Mexico where the novel concludes. Kerouac was noted as the consummate artist, always scribbling in his notebook observations of people and surroundings, field notes which were the building blocks of *On the Road* and its ethnographic content. The novelist can be explicitly committed to truthful representations of people, events and social realities in the same manner as the anthropologist (Laterza 2007: 125). Kerouac's book fits within this framework.

Kerouac and autoethnography

On the Road is somehow a great book without being a very good novel. Most of the complaints about it and its author are hard to refute. *On the Road* has little to no plot, it lacks qualities normally associated with imaginative fiction, the authorial voice is naive and insouciantly celebratory of almost everything, the prose itself is of questionable value given the special place the novel has in American letters. All of this leads to the obvious question of *why On the Road* is a great book.

The reason it is a great is closely tied to its value as ethnography. What attaches so many readers to this book, if not some critics, is its engagement with the 'others' of society and adventure. Some of these 'others' are in the writer's immediate social circle; many are encountered in travels around the United States and Mexico in cultural meetings that involve ethnic minorities, tramps and others out of the social mainstream. The writer's gaze is from the periphery of society. The ethnographic method of self-imposed exile, marginality and penury, of bohemianism, can yield compelling accounts and social data of value (Campbell 2003: 215). Kerouac, educated, intelligent and clearly capable of making a good living in the booming economy of 1950s' America chose instead to search for the 'real' America through bohemian traveling. In doing so he created an extremely vivid and highly engaging work of art that connects his own social worlds to the culture and society of his time. This connection is meaningful and says important things about the time and place of creation and the people it describes. The America that Kerouac had

hoped to find in *On the Road*, an open, free, frontier America, had disappeared by the time he began writing it in the late 1940s. The era of big government, big business and cultural homogeneity was firmly entrenched in American society. The underlying sadness and nostalgia of *On the Road* can be understood as the author's realization of this fact. Kerouac's search for authenticity saw him embrace bohemianism, jazz, those outside of the mainstream of society and foreign travel, especially in Mexico.

Kerouac's autoethnography could be described as of historic importance in light of the fame he and his intimates achieved later. The nascent years of what would become the Beat Generation are the stuff of Kerouac's personal and reflexive autoethnography, where identities formed and worldviews congealed which would become iconic touchstones of American civilization. An autoethnographer is first and foremost a storyteller (Ellis 2004: 30). The autoethnographic method connects the autobiographical and personal to cultural and social worlds (ibid.). The success and value of an autoethnographic text can be understood by whether the story speaks to the reader about their experience or about the lives of others (ibid.: 194). Few books have connected with readers like *On the Road*. The ethnographic narrative should be evocative, disclosing hidden life worlds and emphasizing emotional experience (ibid.: 30). Kerouac's novel is highly appealing for its depictions of the lifestyles of bohemians, cultural 'others' and its emphasis on feeling.

Understanding *On the Road* as a work of ethnography is useful because it conveys an essential truth of the author's intention, which was a self-conscious effort to chronicle the life worlds of his intimates and to 'discover' America. This is an ethnographic task and appreciating it as such not only gets to the heart of Kerouac's motivations, it is an argument for the autoethnographic method of inquiry in general. Autoethnography as a method of increasing knowledge seeks to form an intimate bond between reader and writer and has been used as a way of telling a story that invites personal connection (Frank 2000: 354). Few novels draw in the reader like *On the Road*. Its impact on young people continues nearly 60 years after its publication and is hard to overstate. *On the Road* spurs cultural encounters and promotes travel, adventure and discovery. All four of these things are at the heart of ethnography.

What is most compelling in the ethnography of *On the Road* is its expression of cultural and social zeitgeist. Kerouac's autoethnography of his personal life reveals the origins of a hugely important literary and social movement as it bubbled beneath the surface of Cold War American society. The young people who enthusiastically embraced *On the Road* clearly wanted something different than what was being offered in the popular media of the time. The Beat Generation, led by Kerouac as its standard bearer (whether he wanted the job or not), and *On the Road* as its ur-text, spawned the hippies and counter culture that followed, whose impact on Western societies is hard to overstate. *On the Road* has spurred countless adventures.

Bohemia and anthropology are two of the main cultural projects through which Western culture has encountered its 'others' (Campbell 2003: 209). Kerouac's thick description of 'others' and his open-ended, energetic sense of discovery provides an engaging ethnography and compelling and reflexive autoethnography.

The worlds described by Jack Kerouac and his manner of description were decidedly outside the cultural mainstream of his time. His style of spontaneous prose, a sort of inspired 'getting it all down' unfiltered by the prism of his inner editor, was an attempt

to divine the essence of the experiences he was describing. In this sense, he was taking the novelist's autobiographical perspective to another level of interiority and the personal. This was not the abstruse stream of consciousness of Modernists like Joyce and Faulkner, but a more accessible and immediate prose inspired by jazz music. As mentioned above, the Kerouac myth, often supported by Beat Generation contemporaries, especially Allen Ginsberg, can obscure a more accurate understanding of Kerouac's method. Kerouac was the consummate observer, always scribbling notes and 'sketching' ideas in his journal. Carolyn Cassady, the wife of Neal Cassady—Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*—described the Kerouac 'method' in her memoir:

When we rode home together on the streetcar, he would intrigue me by his astute observations of the people and places in the passing streets. He'd often jot down these impressions in a little five-cent notebook which, he told me, he carried with him at all times to capture details for his books. (Cassady 1990: 29)

The 'spontaneous prose' Kerouac created in the moment of composition was the result of countless hours writing in notebooks, often in public settings like cafes where the flow of urban life is on display. In this sense Kerouac held much in common with the *flâneur* type in the arts, so often associated with Baudelaire and Poe (Baudelaire 1995 [1964]). Though there is no doubt that Kerouac's style was innovative, his prose was created in a process similar to other novelists. Kerouac was known to revise and edit his writing as all writers do.

Kerouac's greater innovation lay in his description of worlds not being considered by mainstream media and society in Cold War America. In a nation of general affluence and a popular, believable and attainable American Dream, Kerouac actively courted life on the margins. Here his antecedents can be gleaned: Thoreau, Emerson and the Transcendentalists, the often mentioned influence of Whitman and the less noted inspiration of Jack London. London's realism and his relationship to the poor in muckraking works like *The People of the Abyss* but especially *The Road* can be seen as a kind of template for the adventurer/writer persona which Kerouac exemplified. London, the avowed socialist and pseudo social scientist, was political, didactic and self-consciously philosophical in ways that Kerouac never was (London 2009 [1913]). But the notion of the poor and down and out as useful subjects for a novel, and of the writer immersing him or herself in this world as a character/narrator was a method of London's that resonated with Kerouac. Here also can be seen the seeds of Kerouac as an ethnographer, as a voice for the voiceless in a nation of putative inclusiveness, general wealth, wellbeing and consumerism.

It has been argued that by embracing those outside the mainstream, Kerouac was placing himself in opposition to the prevailing cultural and political values of 1950s America (Cresswell 1993; Swartz 1999). This reading of *On the Road* as a novel of 'resistance' implies that the work was in some sense a consciously political project. Omar Swartz (1999), for instance, asserts that '*On the Road* begins with the narrator's immediate rejection of the world that American culture has to offer him'. He ties Kerouac's 'vision of social deviance' with the label of 'moral deviant' for those who lived outside the prescribed norms of paranoid, McCarthyite, Cold War America. The political right and a healthy proportion of the liberal establishment found much to dislike in the lifestyles and art of

the 'know nothing' Beats (Podhoretz 2001, 481). This says more about the reactionary political and cultural actors in mid-twentieth-century American life than it does about Kerouac and his novel. Kerouac's book is primarily an ethnography of experience and a great *celebration* of American cultural life. It is an inclusive ethnography, embracing what it finds in the travels and episodes of its heroes. Like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (2007 [1855]), *On the Road* is a kind of love letter to America, both panoramic and particular, and a pilgrim's chronicle.

The episodic and mobile nature of *On the Road* lends itself to an appreciation of the author as an improviser describing the life worlds he finds while lurching from one event to another. In this sense Kerouac holds common ground with the 'episodic' focus of some anthropologists of phenomenology, who see human action as less a product of intellectual deliberation and conscious choice than a matter of continual, intuitive and opportunistic changes of course (Jackson 2005: xii). For Kerouac and his friends these changes are, of course, pathways to experience and encounters with the 'other' of mid-twentieth-century American society. Kerouac's focus on jazz and its black musicians is the most obvious and oft-stated example of his celebration of alternative cultural forms. This wasn't the jazz of Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller but the 'authentic' jazz of Bop artists like Charlie Parker, a genius, heroin-addict, alto saxophonist, for whom Kerouac had so much affection. It wasn't just black America and its music that held fascination for Kerouac. Tramps, bums and hoboes of all kinds people his work. He celebrates the rural and urban with equal enthusiasm and insight, both in the people who live in these places and their landscapes. Kerouac's most intimate ethnography, however, is in the study of both his friends and himself who could have been bankers, policeman, insurance salesman and the like. They were not. They were car thieves, poor writers, gay poets, 'loose' women, drug users, vagabonds and the generally reprobate. Because he wrote about these people and wrote about them lovingly and honestly Kerouac was considered 'counter culture' and in some sense at least, 'political'. Yet a closer reading of Kerouac and *On the Road* finds an apolitical writer in search of authentic experience and spiritual insight: the 'it' so often mentioned in the book. If the stance of Kerouac and his friends in this search put them odds with society's norms, it was simply because conventional lifestyles and pursuits could not help in this search. It is more useful to look at what Kerouac stood for than against.

That much of Kerouac's writing expresses a spiritual quest and that the writer himself was living after the manner of a troubadour or pilgrim is important to understanding the man and his mission as a writer. At the end of his life, while Kerouac was being interviewed for a piece in the *Paris Review*, he famously exclaimed 'All I write about is Jesus!' (Berrigan 1968: 16). His appreciation of Dean Moriarty in his novel as an American saint also makes Kerouac an acolyte. Moriarty (Neal Cassady) is the spiritual/literary muse of his pilgrimage. Kerouac is an emic ethnographer in *On the Road*. He is in the field doing participant observation in what is in essence a pursuit of meaning, of *how* to live. The novel is about young people trying to answer this question, and since all young people are confronted with this problem, the appeal of *On the Road* to adolescents and young adults is understandable. Kerouac, like Dostoevsky whom he so often references in this context, understands human suffering in the religious context

of his idiosyncratic Christianity. Kerouac empathizes with the 'sad' America; exploited, drug-addled black musicians, bums, criminals of one sort or another, unconventional women, Okies, Mexican immigrants and all classes of those outside the mainstream.

Traveling, being 'on the road', is a perfect metaphor for the author's liminality—travelers are not at home, nor are they at their destination. They are in a process. The landscapes seen from the road emphasizes the liminal state: frequently understood in light of the destinations ahead, but never definitive. The journey is the point. The travelers never arrive. If *On the Road* describes a rite of passage, as the term liminal originally denoted (Turner 1969), then the novel's heroes never pass through to the other side of the initiation. Kerouac has been appreciated as something of a man-child, a perennial adolescent who never accepted the responsibilities of adulthood. The episodic nature of *On the Road* is redolent of Nietzsche's doctrine of 'eternal return' (Nietzsche 2001 [1882]). Nothing really changes or moves into the realm of the meaningful and defined. The characters of the novel ceaselessly go here and there, enjoy moments of pleasure or discomfort and head off elsewhere. There are moments of epiphany that quickly fade. Friendships and relationships are ephemeral. The search for 'it' continues. The novel's characters are lost in both the figurative and literal sense: a trope of modern life and modern fiction. But for Kerouac and his alter ego Sal Paradise, the lodestar of his journey is his Christian empathy. When Kerouac uses the word 'sad' to describe his fellow liminal travelers he is showing this empathy, which is the primary coloring of the novel.

On the Road

The narrative voice of Kerouac's novel is in the first person as his alter-ego Sal Paradise. The reader immediately notices the masculine sensibility and gaze of the narrator. Of special concern to the authorial voice is the female as an object of desire or potential love interest, his chums and learning through travel and reading. The narrator is clearly a producer of texts as he mentions from the outset he's keen on writing and is working towards completing a novel. Particular attention is paid to the character of Dean Moriarty, the pseudonym of the most important person in Kerouac's life, Neal Cassady. From an ethnographic point of view, Cassady is the primary informant in the project that is *On the Road*, a search for the truth of mid-twentieth-century America. Kerouac's novels, really thinly veiled retellings of his own life worlds, often centered upon a person, usually male, as a source of inspiration. This 'muse' is frequently described as a 'saint' or some kind of redeemer. Moriarty is portrayed in just such terms in *On the Road*.

About Neal Cassady, Kerouac once said, 'He taught me everything that I now do believe about anything that there may be to be believed about divinity' (Berrigan 1968: 11). This convoluted utterance, which hints at doubt, nevertheless expresses the author's assertion that whatever he knew of the spiritual came from his relationship with Neal Cassady. Cassady, as Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*, is Kerouac's source of spiritual insight as well as literary inspiration. Kerouac describes Moriarty as 'the holy con man with the shining mind', mentioning 'a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his excitement and visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see

the overexcited nut' (Kerouac 1957: 4). Moriarty is a shaman that allows for meaningful experience and insight in Kerouac's novel.

It is interesting also that Kerouac applied a theoretical category to his friend and hero of *On the Road*. Kerouac and other Beat Generation writers were admirers of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, especially his concept of the 'fellaheen' or uprooted of the world (Prothero 1991: 211). The word is Arabic in origin and simply means a farmer or peasant. In Spengler's book, however, the fellaheen denotes those on the margins of history, unchanging, and individually a 'ranging animal, a being whose waking consciousness restlessly feels its way through life, all microcosm, under no servitude of place or home, keen and anxious in its senses' (Spengler 1918: 89). Both Kerouac and Ginsburg portrayed Cassady as a mythological man who had come to redeem a spiritually stagnant American culture. His personal history and natural talents were soon connected with Spengler's description of the essential Fellaheen type (Lardas 2001: 125). But the fellaheen were also to be pursued in trips to Mexico and Tangier, where life and people were more authentic than in the increasingly plastic civilization the Beats found on the road in America. The Beats saw the aboriginal peoples of the world as a kind of collective original humanity inhabiting the warmer zones of the planet, the first progenitors of mankind and in many ways spiritually and ethically superior.

If Moriarty is the man of action in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise is the pensive scribe. Kerouac, throughout the short time of his productive life, was the chronicler of his social milieu, the ethnographer of people he found far more interesting than himself.

But then they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes 'Awww!' (Kerouac 1957: 5)

For the most part Kerouac, as Sal Paradise, shambles after men. Kerouac's sexuality is too big a subject for this article, but we do know that he was bisexual and his social milieu might best be described as pan-sexual (Amburn 1999: 43). In the above quote the fellows who 'danced down the streets like dingedodies' were the characters Dean Moriarty and Carlo Marx. Kerouac is describing the real life homosexual affair of Neal Cassady and poet Alan Ginsberg. With Sal Paradise, the reader is given the compensating 'butch' Kerouac; drinking, roustabout, after dames and good times. His casual misogyny reinforces the male voice and gaze of the *flaneur*.

'And where's Marylou?' I asked, and Dean said she'd apparently whored a few dollars together and gone back to Denver—the whore!' (Kerouac 1957: 3)

Kerouac's primary ethnography in *On the Road* is of his friends. For the most part, the *roman à clef* is particularly well suited for ethnographic writing; it reveals the author's sympathies and, since this kind of writing is not the author's wholly invented elaborate fantasy, concrete people and situations emerge. The concealed nature of this narrative style also encourages the author to be honest while allowing for creative coloring that adds depth and realism in concert with artistry.

It is safe to say that Kerouac loved Neal Cassady and this comes through in his analysis of his social group and why the character of Dean Moriarty is so special.

All my other current friends were ‘intellectuals’—Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk, Old Bull Lee and his critical anti-every-thing drawl—or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same, sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the *New Yorker*. But Dean’s intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare 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 the other, ‘so long’s I can get that lil’ ole gal with that lil’ sumpin’ down there tween her legs, boy,’ and ‘so long’s we can *eat*, son, y’ear me? I’m *hungry*, I’m *starving*, let’s *eat right now!*’—and off we’d rush to eat, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, ‘It is your portion under the sun’. (Kerouac 1957: 6)

The above quote is telling both of the author’s point of view and his social group. Kerouac was an Ivy League-educated Columbia dropout. His friends were his peers at Columbia. Their place of meeting was New York City. His wider circle of friends in New York included poets and writers at the fringes of society. They all were ‘intellectuals’, a term which Kerouac clearly held in some distaste. Those who feel Kerouac was politically minded or that his book is somehow a politically-oriented screed against American society should make note especially of this passage: ‘Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons’ (Kerouac 1957: 6). Contrary to the reading of *On the Road* as a book of ‘resistance’ it is far more a work of ‘acceptance’. Sal Paradise is a sort of troubadour, loving, ‘digging’ what he finds in his travels.

Dean Moriarty promised something better than intellectualism—joy: the pursuit of unfettered sensory and sensual experience; apolitical, amoral, unstructured. Moriarty feels his way through life, improvising, ‘digging’ what is there to be dug. In the author’s imagination and theoretical category, he’s Spengler’s fellaheen, living in the moment, free of the bonds of ordinary work and home-life. The flip-side to this freedom were the burdens of poverty and homelessness, problems which wreaked havoc in the Beat Generation milieu. Drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, criminality, penury and marginalization plagued the Beat Generation as perhaps no other literary movement in American history.

Kerouac’s quote above is a who’s who of famous Beat Generation personalities and is representative of his friends at the time. Carlo Marx is Alan Ginsberg who, faring better than most of his contemporaries, was a gay, Jewish, communist poet in McCarthyite America. Old Bull Lee is William S. Burroughs, heroin addict, radical anarchist and uxoricide. Elmer Hassel was Herbert Huncke, criminal, street hustler, drug addict, queer poet. Jane Lee was Burroughs’ wife, drug dependent and killed by her husband (Morgan 2010). The Beat Generation enthusiast, who finds the movement inspiring or romantic, may wish to ask themselves if they would like to have anything to do with people like this. But Kerouac, like Whitman in his *Leaves of Grass* which celebrates everything in its panorama of America, loves these people. And like Whitman, they are the stuff of his art.

Aside from his immediate milieu and especially the close study of his friend Neal Cassady, the author chronicles what he finds on the road. Salvatore Paradise goes looking for America alone, hitchhiking. Kerouac was, despite a wide circle of friends, a loner,

continuously following the vast triangle of New York, Mexico City and San Francisco (Kerouac 1991 [1958]: 3). What really happened on these solo journeys is unknown but for what the man himself tells us. We have to take his word for it: the explorer with a notebook.

Alone, Sal Paradise encounters an interesting cross-section of folks on the roads of the vastness of America. His love for America's cultural forms is evident, especially jazz, here encountered in Chicago:

At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. The fellows at the Loop blew, but with a tired air, because bop was somewhere between its Charlie Parker Ornithology period and another period that began with Miles Davis. And as I sat there listening to that sound of the light which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about. (Kerouac 1957: 9)

As Sal Paradise improvises, like the jazz music he loves, through America he happens upon its great sites and the love he feels for the American landscape is evident. He is full of admiration for the people and things he encounters.

And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up. (Kerouac 1957: 9)

The Mississippi River, beloved in the narrator's imagination, is discovered by the neophyte traveler. And the traveler is discovering himself as well. Sal Paradise's self-narration reveals his liminality. He is going through a rite of passage, on the road, in the midst of an ordeal which he has yet to pass through. In the narrator's improvised *flanerie* throughout the novel, epiphanies are sought and found. Not all are pleasant, some are disorienting. In a squalid hotel room in Des Moines, Iowa Sal Paradise has what appears to be a schizophrenic break.

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 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. (Kerouac 1957: 11)

A better description of the ethnographic sense of liminality in a rite of passage would be hard to capture.

Hitchhiking toward his pals waiting in Colorado Sal Paradise makes the acquaintance of an old criminal type and his 'boy' in the back of a speeding truck while passing a bottle of whisky. For Sal Paradise this was 'The greatest ride in my life (...) in a truck, with a flatboard at the back, with about six or seven boys sprawled out on it' (Kerouac 1957, 18).

His encounter with Mississippi Gene is illustrative of Kerouac's ethnography of hobos, with which *On the Road* is replete. For whatever reason, Kerouac was fascinated by tramps. He seems to have been determined to find value in the human flotsam that society values least, an aspect of his unique Christian sensibility. It can also be seen throughout Kerouac's oeuvre that he equates tramping with freedom. Hitchhiking, railroading and walking

were the stuff of Kerouac's mobile bohemianism, of his *flanerie* and the discoveries which informed his writing from personal experiences. Kerouac, like few other novelists, wrote almost exclusively of events from his own life.

Although Gene was white there was something of the wise and tired old Negro in him, and something very much like Elmer Hassel, the New York dope addict, in him, but a railroad Hassel, a traveling epic Hassel, crossing and recrossing the country every year, south in the winter and north in the summer, and only because he had no place he could stay in without getting tired of it and because there was nowhere to go but everywhere, keep rolling under the stars, generally the Western stars. (Kerouac 1957: 18)

Kerouac discovers links with Mississippi Gene and other hobos he's known. There's kinship and camaraderie on the road. It turns out Mississippi Gene was a friend of Big Slim Hazard, a 'hobo by choice', that the narrator had known in the merchant fleet. 'Yessir, I know Big Slim pretty well. Always generous with his money when he's got some' (ibid.: 20).

Mississippi Gene is a singer of old hobo songs, which Sal Paradise finds fascinating and touching.

And Mississippi Gene began to sing a song. He sang it in a melodious, quiet voice, with a river accent, and it was simple, just 'I got a purty little girl, she's sweet six-teen, she's the purti-est thing you ever seen', repeating it with other lines thrown in, all concerning how far he'd been and how he wished he could go back to her but he done lost her. I said, 'Gene, that's the prettiest song'. (Kerouac 1957: 21)

Kerouac's ethnography of the men and women of the road is a generous one. He's interested in the likes of Mississippi Gene and his songs, ways of speech and mutual hobo acquaintances and records his findings. Kerouac's interlocutors inform his understanding of America and his art.

But Kerouac is also searching for himself in *On the Road*. Although the book wasn't published until the author was 35, its contents clearly reference a much younger man for whom identity was malleable and not established. As in the aforementioned episode in the Des Moines hotel room, Kerouac's Sal Paradise has another 'ghostly' encounter with himself on Market Street in San Francisco.

I walked around, picking butts from the street. I passed a fish-'n-chips joint on Market Street, and suddenly the woman in there gave me a terrified look as I passed; she was the proprietress, she apparently thought I was coming in there with a gun to hold up the joint. I walked on a few feet. It suddenly occurred to me this was my mother of about two hundred years ago in England, and that I was her footpad son, returning from gaol to haunt her honest labors in the hashery. I stopped, frozen with ecstasy on the sidewalk. 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. (Kerouac 1957: 110)

Kerouac goes on to describe an epiphany in which he realizes deep mysteries: reincarnation, the illusion of space and time, the way of all flesh and the Universal Mind, adding, 'I was too young to know what had happened'. This short section of *On the Road* reveals a source of some its appeal: portrayal of the transcendent realms available to those who take the path of Kerouac and his friends. But also, it is indicative of the author's ethnographic

sensibilities, in this instance autoethnographic reflexivity. One could argue that Kerouac's later mental health battles were prefigured in some of the reflexive writing in *On the Road*. It is worth remembering that Kerouac was discharged from the navy as a 'borderline' personality and that some of the episodes in *On the Road* reveal the author's personal struggles, inner contradictions and dilemmas, even if they are couched in novelistic form. Coming to terms with the spiritual and hedonistic aspects of life in a transitory 'road' existence is the primary autoethnographic content of the novel.

Mexico

The final and in many ways ultimate adventure of *On the Road* is the Mexico trip at the novel's conclusion. 'We drove around aimlessly awhile...' Kerouac says as Sal, Dean and their friend Stan hover around San Antonio waiting for their entrance into Mexico. It's a threshold moment, another liminal set piece where a boundary is about to be crossed in a rite of passage. Aimlessness is the stuff *On the Road*, but it is the aimlessness of the *flâneur*, who walks in search of what he is looking for. It is an edifying, open ended and improvised mobile education: a master's class in driving around, walking around, loitering and significant encounters with the 'others' of society. 'And now we were ready for the last hundred and fifty miles to the magic border.'

Kerouac's entrance into Mexico was an important event in American letters. Mexico was not only a setting for much of his later writing, it was a place of rest and inspiration and, importantly, away from America, which Kerouac found a difficult place to be after he'd achieved fame (Amburn 1991: 315). In Mexico he could be an anonymous gringo and enjoy the sensual and sensory delights of this 'exotic' land: beautiful, unaffected girls, delicious food and cheap alcohol. A bohemian until the end, despite his popularity, Kerouac never escaped financial concerns. But now, with his chums, he's a neophyte traveler full of expectation.

The main street was muddy and full of holes. On each side were dirty broken-down adobe fronts. Burros walked in the street with packs. Barefoot women watched us from dark doorways. The street was completely crowded with people on foot beginning a new day in the Mexican countryside. Old men with handlebar mustaches stared at us. The sight of three bearded, bedraggled American youths instead of the usual well-dressed tourists was of unusual interest to them. We bounced along over Main Street at ten miles an hour, taking everything in. A group of girls walked directly in front of us. As we bounced by, one of them said, 'Where you going, man?' (Kerouac 1957: 174)

This quote provides an excellent and appealing ethnographic snapshot of a small Mexican village in the late 1940s. It also hints at the 'erotic' Mexico that so enamored Kerouac and foreshadows the final adventures of *On the Road*. Sal, Dean and Stan find their greatest kicks in Mexico in a brothel, but not before scoring some marijuana from an eager young liaison.

And as we waited in the car Victor got out and loped over to the house and said a few words to an old lady, who promptly turned and went to the garden in back and began gathering dry fronds of marijuana that had been pulled off the plants and left to dry in the desert sun. (Kerouac 1957, 177)

Acquiring marijuana from Victor's mother is normative in the magic land of Mexico.

Victor proceeded to roll the biggest bomber anybody ever saw. He rolled (using brown bag paper) what amounted to a tremendous Corona cigar of tea. It was huge. Dean stared at it, popeyed. Victor casually lit it and passed it around. To drag on this thing was like leaning over a chimney and inhaling. It blew into your throat in one great blast of heat. We held our breaths and all let out just about simultaneously. Instantly we were all high.

(Kerouac 1957: 177)

Victor guides them to the brothel. 'We came to the whorehouse. It was a magnificent establishment of stucco in the golden sun'. In the whorehouse Sal is as enamored of the music as the girls, and Kerouac possibly coins the term 'world beat' to describe what he's hearing.

The drums were mad. The mambo beat is the conga beat from Congo, the river of Africa and the world; it's really the world beat. Oom-ta, ta-poo-poom-oom-ta, ta-poo-poom. The piano montunos showered down on us from the speaker. The cries of the leader were like great gasps in the air. The final trumpet choruses that came with drum climaxes on conga and bongo drums, on the great mad Chattanooga record, froze Dean in his tracks for a moment till he shuddered and sweated; then when the trumpets bit the drowsy air with their quivering echoes, like a cavern's or a cave's, his eyes grew large and round as though seeing the devil, and he closed them tight. I myself was shaken like a puppet by it; I heard the trumpets flail the light I had seen and trembled in my boots.

(Kerouac 1957: 180)

For Sal, Stan and Dean, crossing into Mexico is breaking a boundary, the literal border between the United States and its southern neighbor, but more importantly the figurative barrier of novel experience. These are young men with their first taste of foreign travel, of foreign women, of exotic music and strange landscapes. Anyone who is from a temperate latitude can remember their first taste of the tropics; the heat, the heavy air, the sultriness. For Kerouac the jungle is the like the other side of the world and it changes him.

For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same. Soft infinitesimal showers of microscopic bugs fanned down on my face as I slept, and they were extremely pleasant and soothing. The sky was starless, utterly unseen and heavy. I could lie there all night long with my face exposed to the heavens, and it would do me no more harm than a velvet drape drawn over me. (Kerouac 1957: 185)

Here is where Kerouac's ethnography is most compelling: in its reflexivity. Kerouac's autoethnography tells us important things about what it's like to be a young man experiencing life events for the first time. Here the subjectivity and naiveté of the author become a benefit in the ethnographic content of *On the Road*. This aspect of the book is highly engaging for readers and his thick description of people, landscapes, culture and personal worlds are vivid ethnographic portraits. As the cultural worlds Kerouac describes recede from living memory, the ethnographic value of *On the Road* will only increase.

Conclusion

Kerouac's novel is one of the most inspiring books of the last century. Having taught Kerouac's works in university literature courses, it has become apparent that the connection and impact of his writing for young people is far more significant and immediate than that of the more 'serious' writers in the canon. There are many things to criticize about *On the Road* as a novel, but one thing is certain; it grabs the readers' attention and engages them. For writers of ethnography this is clearly also something to aspire to. Autoethnography emphasizes storytelling as a means to critique and understand culture, eliciting an intimate connection with the reader to achieve this aim. On this level *On the Road* is remarkably successful. The book is clearly describing worlds, situations and people that make sense to readers. That this connection has been made again and again over generations speaks to the work's value.

On the Road is an example of autoethnography worth emulating. Kerouac's novel captures the excitement of discovery and promotes cultural understanding and empathy for different types of people. These are ethnographic goals and his book is a laudable example of the autoethnographic approach. Few writers have celebrated the lives of those outside the mainstream with as much honesty, *joie de vivre* and compassion as Kerouac. *On the Road*, as a *roman à clef*, is well disposed for ethnography. The novel is based almost entirely on the author's personal experiences and intimate friends. Kerouac, the perceptive observer, used the emic perspective of the insider, participant observation and field notes to create his books. Thus *On the Road* is a significant ethnography of mid-twentieth-century America.

Jack Kerouac was an important voice for the voiceless in American society. He showed the reading public the 'other side' of 1950s culture. A society seeking safety and conformity and a plastic civilization of bland cultural forms was confronted with the liminal landscapes of reprobates, minorities and outsider artists. A real and immediate America was presented in *On the Road* which is still striking nearly 60 years after its publication.

Though Kerouac has been lauded by the politically minded as an author critical of America, a close reading of *On the Road* reveals no such sympathies. The truth of his text is that of a troubadour seeking to find the country he loved and celebrating what he encounters. The author's emic voice is honest and open. He clearly did all that hitchhiking, railroading and walking. There are strong links in *On the Road* to the Transcendentalists Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman. Kerouac distinctly falls within this American tradition.

The author's appreciation of jazz is a strong current throughout *On the Road*. Kerouac's love and understanding of this cultural form made his observations particularly useful. Though much has been made of jazz contributing to his writing style, it is the author's ability to capture its atmosphere and meaning in his social milieu that is most striking. Jazz was the 'light' for the Beat Generation and its greatest hope for transcendence in the search for 'it'.

That grand wild sound of bop floated from beer parlors; it mixed medleys with every kind of cowboy and boogie-woogie in the American night. Everybody looked like Hassel. Wild Negroes with bop caps and goatees came laughing by; then long-haired brokendown hipsters straight off Route 66

from New York; then old desert rats, carrying packs and heading for a park bench at the Plaza; then Methodist ministers with raveled sleeves, and an occasional Nature Boy saint in beard and sandals. I wanted to meet them all, talk to everybody... (Kerouac 1957: 55)

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