Through Roots and Routes: *On the Road’s* Portrayal of an Outsider’s Journey into the Meaning of America

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Abstract: Jack Kerouac believed that his French Canadian roots held the key to his knowledge, despite the fact that he became known as the “principal avatar” of a generation of American youth. In his bestselling autobiographical novel, *On the Road*, Kerouac splits his ethnic (French) and national (American) sides into two figures, Sal and Dean, to demonstrate the deficits and benefits of both parts of a hyphenated identity. Italian Sal sees himself as the eternal outsider, whereas Dean is America itself. Yet Sal uses his outsider qualities to connect with other outsiders whose “roots” are beyond the limits of nationhood. And Dean, despite the seemingly endless freedom of his “routes” across the country, is stuck in old tropes of Americanness that do not afford him new possibilities. Together, they create a vision of America that is full of its own grandeur, while refusing to be insular.

Keywords: Franco-American, Jack Kerouac, Beat Generation, Ethnicity, French Canadian

Résumé: Jack Kerouac était persuadé que ses racines canadiennes-françaises étaient à la base de ses connaissances, malgré le fait qu’il ait été reconnu comme le «principal avatar» d’une génération de jeunes Américains. Dans son roman autobiographique *On the Road*, un succès de librairie, Kerouac illustre son côté ethnique (français) et son côté national (américain) en deux personnages, Sal et Dean, afin de démontrer les avantages et les désavantages des deux parties d’origines différentes. L’Italien Sal se voit comme l’éternel étranger, tandis que Dean représente l’Amérique même. Malgré cela, Sal emploie sa marginalité pour établir des liens avec d’autres étrangers dont les «racines» vont au-delà de l’esprit.
national, et Dean, malgré l’apparente liberté sans fin de ses « routes » d’un bout à l’autre du pays, est figé dans les signes d’un système fermé d’américanité qui ne lui offre aucune nouvelle possibilité. Ensemble, ses personnages créent une vision d’une Amérique imbue de sa propre grandeur tout en refusant de demeurer discrète et isolée.

**Mots clés:** franco-américains, Jack Kerouac, génération paumée (Beat Generation), ethnicité, canadien-français

“You road I enter upon and look around! I believe you are not all that is here, I believe that much unseen is also here.”

—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”

**I. Introduction**

Kerouac, a man situated at the crossroads of two cultural traditions. He is simultaneously French America, hiding in the parish halls and the humble working-class neighbourhoods of a hundred milltowns, and the American Dream, conceived out of boundless space accessible to all, a dream that unfolds like a goldsmith taking possession of his precious metal, progressively appropriating an entire virgin continent. (Pierre Anctil, Preface, Un Homme Grand)

Jack Kerouac, whose *On the Road* (1957) has become iconic in American culture, was called “king of the beats” and seen as an insider to a way of life that became a chapter in American history. Though autobiographical in nature, *On the Road* focuses as much on an outsider—an unheroic character, a passenger on the road to the American Dream, as on the insider—a heroic figure. The heroic figure, Dean Moriarty, is the one to drive his way into the spotlight. *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism* writer Robert Hipkiss has called this figure the “new symbol of flaming American youth, the American hero of the Beat Generation” and “the most singular hero of the road America has ever had” (32–3, 42). The passenger, Sal Paradise, nonetheless, is the one to narrate the twin tales of *On the Road*—his own and that of the book’s hero. He narrates from a distance, as I demonstrate, perceiving himself to be different not only from the star, but also from the rest of his Beat buddies who “danced down the streets like dingedodies, leaving him to “shamble after” them (Kerouac, *Road* 5).
This distance makes Sal not quite a part of the dreamscape he travels, or rather, follows. He is a chronicler of this itinerant version of the American Dream which, as Pierre Anctil reminds us, seems to be “conceived out of boundless space accessible to all,” allowing both pioneers and latecomers to “progressively appropriat[e] an entire virgin continent” (xviii). But if it is accessible to “all,” Sal does not seem to know it. Throughout On the Road, Sal appears to be hovering in the hero’s shadow—in a liminal space that is both in and outside the spotlight, following the hero, Dean, in his conquest of the continent, but unable to appropriate the land as Dean does. As a result, Sal Paradise is both mirror-image and antithesis of the book’s cowboy-idol, Dean Moriarty. And this combination of same-ness and difference results from the fact that Salvatore is an American like Dean, but unlike Dean, as he is also Italian—a duality that he must negotiate. Like his author, Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac, the “French Canadian” or “Canuck”1 of Little Canada, Pawtucketville, an ethnic ghetto in Lowell, Massachusetts, Sal feels himself to be a mimic man—almost American, but not quite.

This paper will show that, in On the Road, Kerouac reflects on what it is to be a Franco-American man—both American and not. His two central characters each embody one side of the hyphen linking Kerouac’s ethnicity to his Americanness. Dean is the American side: the proud, confident man who believes his place in America is as solid as George Washington’s or Benjamin Franklin’s. A representative of ethnic otherness, Sal, as modifier, is the man whose subjective experience is the filter through which readers come to discover Dean, and through Dean, America. Sal seems to play a subordinate role in Kerouac’s vision of ethnic Americanness. Sal manages, however, to tie his (real or imagined) outsider qualities to the America he immortalizes, to his roots beyond America, and to others’ roots as well. Kerouac’s duality, in other words, helps him create a vision of America that is full of its own grandeur while refusing to be insular: Through Dean’s routes across the nation (which Sal follows) and Sal’s roots beyond the nation, Kerouac constructs a cosmopolitan consciousness and an America that considers its place among the many nations and peoples of the world.

II. An Ethnic and an American

As an ethnic American, Sal is drawn to the mythology of the country he strives to be a part of. For Sal, the romance of the road is
alluring and symbolizes the country’s freedom. Mapped by Lewis and Clark, blazed by Daniel Boone, and sung by Walt Whitman, the road was travelled by great Americans before Sal’s time—and Sal, in his attempt to assimilate himself, follows in their footsteps. He is not, however, on the road for cartography or settlement. But poetry would certainly be among his reasons to “take to the open road.” Sal is primarily on the road because his hero is; and it is Dean—his personal American hero, a shabby but dynamic figure—whom he imitates in his peripateticism. Dean simply seeks "kicks," not land or money. By seeking as Dean does, Sal mimics his very idea of Americanness—a mobile (but not socially or economically mobile) and pure pursuit of happiness.

Sal cannot be Dean, and Dean seems to hold within him the real “beat” lifestyle that Kerouac made famous; Dean is both beat, as in, down and out, and beatific, a “new kind of American saint” (Kerouac, Road 38). Sal regards himself as an outsider to the Beat Generation both by virtue of his ethnicity(which makes him not quite American), and his comfort (which makes him far from down and out); the aunt to whom Sal repeatedly returns, is a mark both of Sal’s foreignness and of his sense of security in his home life, if not in his nationality. If the story of On the Road is one that exemplifies the Beat Generation, then there remains a distance between teller and tale.

By inserting this autobiographical, ethnically inscribed figure into his book, Kerouac tries to define himself as a partial foreigner, alienated by the very “American” stories he writes. Yet On the Road, an outsider’s romanticization of the America promised by the Beats, turned Kerouac into the “principal avatar,” as New York Times called him when On the Road was published, of the “generation Kerouac himself named” (Millstein 27). As in the popular view of On the Road and of its author, literary criticism often puts Kerouac at the centre of this generation—of this new America. Hipkiss sees in Kerouac’s writing the ultimate American fusion: “the individualism of the freeborn American with that great present-day extension of this freedom, the motor car,” a combination exemplified by his hero, who “extends himself literally across the continent in all directions” (42). Mark Richardson declares that On the Road “says ‘yes’ to America,” and reads the novel as concordant with the “new sense of American national identity” that was consolidated between the time Kerouac “went west” and the time On the Road was published (219, 220). And Douglas Malcolm carefully examines the role of jazz
in Kerouac’s writing; a distinctly (African-) American music form. Malcolm is following up on an assertion that Kerouac himself made in *The Paris Review*:

Jazz and bop, in the sense of a, say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement’s been made ... That’s how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind. (Kerouac, “Jack Kerouac” 26)

Malcolm concludes that jazz in *On the Road* “is important as an ideological, behavioral, and semiotic source for Kerouac’s vision of America” (107). With its pioneer spirit, westward movement, continental reach, contemporary sensibility, and jazz-cadence vernacular, *On the Road* ensured itself a place in American cultural lore.

By focusing on the “American” elements of Kerouac’s writing and on the vision of Dean, many critics have failed to recognize the impact of the viewer, who is an expression of Kerouac’s ethnicity. Yet Kerouac’s ethnicity permeates all his work, and it is no surprise that so many writers from Quebec use *On the Road* as inspiration—among them, Jacques Poulin, Guillaume Vigneault, Nicole Brossard, and Kenneth McGoogan. Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, a writer determined to reclaim Kerouac as a significant figure in québécois literature, claims that, although Kerouac’s “reputation as a writer was built around [the Beat Generation],” it was a “[p]rofound misunderstanding” (48). Beaulieu insists that Kerouac’s stories can only be understood in the context of Franco-American history. His classification directly counters that of Werner Sollors. Sollors argues that relegating Kerouac to the category of Franco-American or French Canadian literature, with its “emphasis on a writer’s descent”—his biological makeup—“all but annihilates art movements such as the Beat Generation” (15). Kerouac himself felt that his artistic impulses arose from precisely the descent that Sollors finds irrelevant in Kerouac’s work. “All my knowledge rests in my ‘French-Canadianess’ and nowhere else,” Kerouac wrote to Yvonne Le Maïtre, a critic for *Le Travailleur*, the Franco-American newspaper of Worcester, Massachusetts (qtd. in Lapierre 446). When Le Maïtre noted that, in *The Town and the City* (1951), Kerouac’s first (and some say only) novel, the importance of French Canadianess was muted, Kerouac made a promise to Le Maïtre: “I shall write a French-Canadian novel, with the setting in

Did Kerouac keep his promise? *On the Road* followed *The Town and the City*, and it would be quite a stretch to call it a “French Canadian novel.” Unlike *Maggie Cassidy* (1959), which was published two years later (although written earlier), *On the Road* seems devoid of French culture altogether. “America” appears to trump all; when Sal is told, “Ah, Sal, if you could sit with me high in the Basque country with a cool bottle of Poignon Dix-neuf, then you’d know there are other things besides boxcars,” his response is to defend those boxcars—not show admiration for the European utopia his friend depicts (Kerouac, *Road* 40): “It’s just that I love boxcars and I love to read the names of them like Missouri Pacific, Great Northern, Rock Island Line” (41). Later, he deliberately puts down a French book, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, because he “prefer[s] reading the American landscape” (101). Frenchness was intrinsic to the author, and references to it appear in *On the Road*. In creating an Italian-American narrator for this book, however, Kerouac chooses to shift the focus away from the “Canuck” identity so prominent in *Maggie Cassidy* (which begins by introducing the characters through their ethnicity—“the boys were all French Canadian” [1]) and onto the lens that is held, perhaps, by any ethnic or immigrant American.2 Italian American would have been a more recognizable ethnicity at the time. Of *The Town and the City*, Kerouac scholar Ann Charters argues, “By changing the background of the family in the novel from French-Canadian immigrant to vaguely Irish-Catholic, Kerouac suggested a blander stereotype of the American family, more centered with the framework of his romantic fiction” (64); and the same could be said of the choice in *On the Road*. By making the Italian-American lens central to the story, Kerouac manages simultaneously to keep and to break his promise to Yvette Le Maître of never hiding his French-Canadianness again.

Italian American Sal/vatore goes on the road and time after time returns to the road because of Dean (“[T]he bug was on me again, and the bug’s name was Dean Moriarty and I was off on another spurt around the road”) (Kerouac, *Road* 115). He is not satisfied until he finds and discovers Dean. On his first venture, he heads straight for Denver and asks repeatedly, “But where is Dean?” (39). This question resonates throughout the narrative.
Similarly, Kerouac’s objective in *On the Road* is to find and discover America. He looks from the outside-in at Americans of all forms and from right across the country. The book unfolds as a poem in prose to the cowboys of the West and the intellectuals of the East and, of course, to the romance of the road in between. It is overflowing with the “grand wild sound of bop floated from beer parlors … mixed medleys with every kind of cowboy and boogie-woogie in the American night” and “stucco houses and palms and drive-ins, the whole mad thing, the ragged promised land, the fantastic end of America” (87, 83). It is an America that is repeatedly made manifest in the figure of Dean Moriarty, who looms as the ideal insider, despite a reform-school and skid-row background that makes him an outsider to most Americans.

Because the book emerges from both Kerouac’s ethnic sensibility and his love of America, *On the Road*’s protagonist is essentially bifurcated into two figures—all-American Dean Moriarty and ethnically inscribed Sal Paradise, who are both, in some ways, representative of the author himself. Through this division, the book is able to embrace and perpetuate iconic images of “America” while simultaneously undermining them. In his ode to boxcars and drive-ins, Kerouac allows his ethnic otherness and its attendant anxiety to seep into every corner of the book. *On the Road* begins with a man poring over the books of the pioneers and following Route 6 with his finger on the map, filled with dreams about his voyage west. He quickly discovers, however, that he is “stuck” on his “northermost hangup” (10). He wants to be a part of the American Dream, but he cannot get on the right road. *On the Road* is a novel that both captures the westward movement that is the foundation of American myth—and yet, resists it. At every point that Sal wants to consume America through apple pie and ice cream, with the “pie bigger, the ice cream richer” the further he goes, the more unsure he is of his place in a country that tells him, “sroom for everybody” (15, 22).

As one critic suggests, the “underlying pun of *On the Road* is that Paradise is ‘lost’” (Poteet, “Little” 5). Furthermore, “his loss of self-identity occurs in places of French toponymy—Des Moines, Idaho, and New Orleans, Louisiana” (6). In Des Moines, Sal says, “I didn’t know who I was” (Kerouac, *Road* 15). He becomes disoriented:

I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I’d never seen … I looked at the cracked high
ceiling and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn’t really 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. (15)

In the middle of America, Sal becomes a “ghost,” and he later encounters another lost and disoriented ghost just like him: the Ghost of the Susquehanna, “a shrivelled, little old man with a paper satchel who claimed he was heading for ‘Canady’” (104). Even though the Ghost of the Susquehanna is as lost as Sal, the Ghost commands Sal to follow him. The Ghost is going the wrong way, but Sal learns from the Ghost’s errors. The Ghost cannot find his home because he has not learned to recognize the home within.

This episode echoes a story that Kerouac’s biographer, Gerald Nicosia, tells of Kerouac’s plan to go to Canada:

In his last years, Jack Kerouac often argued with skeptics about the necessity of believing in spirit. Once, after failing to convince artist Stanley Twardowicz, Jack said, “I’m going back to Canada” and left Stan’s studio. When he got home, a few blocks away in Northport, Long Island, he returned to the long-unfinished novel about his Canadian ancestors. And though he would never finish it . . . he had proved a point. It was the point he had spent his life proving: that the past is the root of the future, and that a man cannot live without the continuity of both. (21)

Without needing to go any further than “a few blocks away,” Kerouac could go “home”—but within that home was his writing that spoke of another home. Ultimately, for Kerouac, home could be divided into two parts—two nesting eggs, with Canada ensconced within “America,” distancing him from America even as he resided in it. “I am the descendant of Jean-Baptiste LeBri de Duluoan old gaffer carpenter from St. Hubert in Temiscouata County, Quebec, who built his own home in Nashua N.H.,” declares Jack of Kerouac’s Vanity of Duluoz (111). “Jack” has the double consciousness of the Franco-American, the American who is firm in his American present, while sure, too, of his Canadian past. By the time he wrote Vanity of Duluoz, Kerouac did not have to split his consciousness in two—the ethnic and the American.
III. Following Roots and Routes

Kerouac’s routes—his journeys into the meaning of America—seem predicated on his relationship to his roots. In *On the Road*, roots forever tug on the “Americanness” of the narrator, on his right to say, “This is the story of America” (Kerouac, *Road* 68). Sal makes his journey halfway across his country by following the routes of pioneers, eating apple pie, finding the smell of the “raw body of America itself” in Mississippi and meeting the human matter of America—mothers and truck drivers, students and hobos, ranchers and cowboys. Why is it precisely here, engulfed in the sounds and sights and smells of America, that he says, “I didn’t know who I was . . . I was just somebody else, some stranger . . . a ghost” (13, 15)? He is uneasy in his body. He notes that he is called “Blackie,” as though the word alone could interpellate him into another sense of otherness, different from his own subjective experience (30). He wanders about, wishing he was someone other than who he is—even the complete stranger “Joe,” whom he hears called out at a later point in the novel. “I wished I were Joe,” he writes, but this wish is unfulfilled: “I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad” (180). Never called out himself, he cannot seem to find Sal Paradise’s place in America.

What America is it that he is not quite a part of, though? For Sal, it is the Myth of the West—the notion of the virgin land—that entices and intimidates him. This West is writ glorious and incorruptible: he justifies Dean’s criminality by claiming that “it was a wild yeasaying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains” (7–8). He treads in the afterglow of the Nebraska farmer, who appears to him not as a worker of the earth but “the spirit of the West right next to me . . . Whooee, I told my soul” (19). This glow cannot quite encompass him, though. When Sal arrives in the West, his fascination with the spirit of America as embodied by the Myth of the West suddenly oppresses him, and he feels a deep and sudden desire to return to his (ethnic) roots. “There must be a lot of Italians in Sausalito,” the Italian-American character remarks to the delight of his friend, who shouts, rolls on the bed, almost falls off, and declares Sal Paradise the funniest man in the world (62). But for Sal, the comment is not a joke.

Dean takes possession of America through his language and actions. He says, “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” (120). He steals cars, not as a criminal, but to exercise his right of the pursuit of happiness. Sal views the country as Dean’s, too. When they arrive in the west (again), it is “Dean’s California” (168). Dean is even “America.” Carlo asks him, “Whither thou goest, America, in thy shiny car in the night?” (119). Sal, however, never uses the language of possession for himself, nor does anyone else use it to describe him. He is out of place. He asks, “What was I, a stranger, doing on the West Coast this fair night? I recoiled from the thought” (195). In Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan’s 1975 study, *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, they write that as Americans assimilate, they “become more ‘American’ and less ethnic all the time”; however, “in the course of participating in this process, they may also—simultaneously—become more ‘ethnic’” (16). Having made three trips across the country and two back, having drunk on the roof of America, inhaled the river smells of old New Orleans at the washed-out bottom of America, watched the river pour down from mid-America by starlight, and arrived in the land where everybody resembled an old movie star, Sal says, for the third time, and with finality, “We’re going to Italy” (Kerouac, *Road* 195).

His roots, in other words, inform his routes, and while he never does make it to his ancestral roots, one repeated route he does make is home to his aunt, who feeds and comforts him. Sal’s aunt has a three-part function: she is Sal’s immediate, real family (as opposed to Dean, who is “like” a brother) who cares for him; she is the home for him to return to (the physical roots for the wandering character); and she is also the link to his heritage (through food and language). “‘Poor little Salvatore,’” Sal’s aunt says, and Kerouac deliberately adds, “she said in Italian.” Her words are of worry: “‘You’re thin, you’re thin. Where have you been all this time?’” (107). With each trip Sal takes, he knows he is not rootless; he is rooted in the culture that his aunt embodies—in the culture of his descent.

Kerouac is not limited by a narrow definition of roots. With Sal, having foreign roots means solidarity with others whose roots are foreign as well. Analysing Kerouac’s sexualization of women of colour, Brendon Nicholls notes,

> Kerouac’s fiction attempts to map his marginal identity—as a member of a French-Canadian ethnic minority—onto the American landscape by masking him in the racial attributes of
African Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans. In fact, Kerouac’s race changes and his cultural appropriations form part of an attempt to meld a structure of national belonging. This structure carries traces of the exchange of the *joual* dialect for the common currency of the English language, the American lingua franca. By symbolically blacking up, Kerouac fantasizes a self that consolidates his marginal Americanness and fleetingly stabilizes his volatile sexuality. (525)

Whereas Nicholls reads this “blacking up” primarily in terms of “racial desire” (which he reads as a basis of American identity, following Michael Rogin), one can also recognize the simpler desire of Kerouac, a Franco-American, fearing perhaps, what his fellow Franco-American writer, Jacques Ducharme, believed—“This is the land of the Puritans, to whom Frenchman and Papists were abominations” (8).

Like his creator, Sal, an Italian American, wants to relate to minority cultures—and he happily accepts external identifications that allow him to do so. Thought at one point to be Mexican, Sal says, “in a way I am” (Kerouac, *Road* 98). Like the Mexican workers of the earth, he is a worker of the earth—and therefore a part of their world, almost. Enthralled by their labour, Sal says that Mexican people are one of the “great fellahin peoples of the world” (98). Sal tries to unite with those people of America, who, like him, are outsiders. He says he wishes he could be “a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap,” or he “could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (180). In these wishes, he idealizes the lives of visible minorities because he believes they know who they are, and they are comfortable with who they are—a comfort he has not quite found. But doing so, he frankly reveals himself to be totally naïve—or wilfully ignorant—about the United States’ systemically racist laws and practices (180).

Perhaps Sollors is correct in his assessment that “all writers can view themselves romantically as members of some out-group so that combining the strategy of outsiderism and self-exoticization can be quite contagious” (31). Kerouac’s view of himself as an outsider, by virtue of his French Canadian heritage, and by extension, Sal’s, through his Italian heritage, seem as romantic as they are inconsequential, especially compared to the “Denver Mexican,” “poor overworked Jap,” or “ecstatic Negroes.” This stance is still,
however, a useful tool. Kerouac’s and Sal’s outsiderness in their own country helps them forge a bond with all the other outgroups they encounter.

In fact, this very form of connection is what allows the self-proclaimed Canuck to convincingly create an Italian-American protagonist. Kwame Anthony Appiah, explaining that cosmopolitanism gives one the freedom to create oneself, shows how freedom is not limitless but is socially constructed: “[I]t is social life that endows us with the full richness of resources available for self-construction . . . a new identity is always post-some-old identity” (98). Of all the self-creations that fiction or even fictionalized autobiography could offer, Kerouac continued to choose to create selves that reflected his own position in America: an outsider who used his outsiderness as his way in.

IV. The Road to Americanness

In Kerouac’s first book, *The Town and the City*, Kerouac’s national allegiances are played out by two brothers: the “all American” Peter and Francis, the Francophile. When *Le Travailleur*’s critic, Le Maître, identified Francis as a fictionalized Kerouac, the author became deeply offended. “I am not Francis Martin,” he writes in his letter to her (qtd. in Lapierre 446). Furthermore, Kerouac adds, “Francis is the weakest character in the book . . . I never acted like a Francis. I was always with my gang . . . Francis was my villain” (446). For Kerouac, Francis’s complete outsiderness becomes isolation. While Kerouac uses outsiderness as a trait in his characters repeatedly, it is as a way of seeing inside. Francis is too much the foreigner to see the very culture and country he is born and raised in. Peter is perhaps the more fitting character than Francis for Kerouac to “be,” but another way of thinking about the position of the author in *The Town and the City* is in the space astride the two. As he later does in *On the Road*, Kerouac fully engages an insider/outsider paradigm through the use of two very different brother-figures.

The tension between insiderness and outsiderness is always present in *On the Road*. Sal suggests repeatedly that he is outside much of the action of the novel, despite his active involvement in the sex, drugs, poetry, and rolling down the open road. According to his construction of the narrative, the driving on the road novel is Dean’s, and Sal is a passenger. The women are Dean’s—all agree that Sal should have an affair with Marylou, Dean’s first wife, but
Sal discovers this: “The understanding had been that Marylou would switch to me in Frisco, but now I began to see they were going to stick and I was going to be left alone on my butt at the other end of the continent” (135). When he finds a woman on his own, he needs to comprehend his relationship through Dean’s, though Dean is not even there—“You could have all your Peaches and Bettys and Marylous and Ritas and Camilles and Inezes” (83). When Ed turns to Sal for advice, he is looking for an extension of Dean—“one Dean wasn’t enough for him” (122). In short, the drama is all Dean’s.

The novel is set up so that Sal’s world appears to begin with, end with, and be wholly contingent upon his relationship with Dean Moriarty. “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up,” reads the first line of On the Road. And only with these words can action ensue—“With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (Kerouac, Road 1). Although Dean’s presence is immediate, the reader does not even learn Sal’s name until the sixth chapter. In the last lines of the book, Sal is driven off to the Metropolitan Opera in a Cadillac—the picture of conformist, stable 1950s America. Yet this very separation from his life on the road is marked by the image of Dean, whom he has abandoned on Seventh Avenue, “ragged in his moth-eaten overcoat” (306). As readers take their leave of Sal Paradise, he looks out over America and sees its glorious immensity—“all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast” (307). Examining the land, he contemplates his own symbol of the American Dream, a sad, forlorn and “ragged” figure—“ragged” like “the whole mad thing, the ragged promised land”; and he thinks of the figure’s own dream and pro-creator: “I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (83, 307). In the end, even apart from Dean, he is still dreaming second-hand dreams—“the” father “we” never found was Dean’s father.

Although Sal would probably seem to be a part of his group to someone on the outside, he refuses to acknowledge his participation, saying, “I only went along for the ride, and to see what else Dean was going to do” (129). He describes the actions of his friends and points out his own role as observer: “I came in days and watched everything” (130). He explains his actions, or lack thereof—“I didn’t want to interfere, I just wanted to follow” (132).
Sal often sits in silence and simply listens, without taking part in the
discourse. Nearly invisible, he can stay on the edge of a group,
absorb the words of, say, Carlo and Dean, and keep them for
posterity. When he becomes visible, they are amazed—’He’s been
awake this whole time, listening. What were you thinking, Sal?’”
(50). His answer is Kerouac’s: his book, On the Road—a rendering of
this moment in time, too precious and unique to be forgotten.
Listening carefully and taking note of his surroundings, Sal recog-
nizes and captures the image of “the man with the dungeon stone
and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of
America, a new beat generation” that he was “slowly joining” (54).
Always part in and part out, never entirely blending in, he stands
eternally on the precipice of the world he describes.

Hidden in Kerouac’s endless American road are hints that Sal is not
sure the road is actually his at all. Try as he will to own the road, Sal
fails. Not only does the narrator of the road tale hate to drive, he
also cannot seem to get where he is going. In Sal’s failure, we read
the lure of his author’s roots, Kerouac’s northern “descent” pulling
his character away from his westward “consent.” This west is the
American imaginative spatial archetype ratified by Frederick
Jackson Turner in his 1893 address, The Significance of the Frontier
in American History. According to Turner, the American character is
built from that encounter between primitivism and civilization only
found in westward expansion. Sal first attempts to go in the way of
America—west—but discovers, “I was only moving north
instead of the so-longed-for west” (10). Later, he is told, “I was on
the wrong road” (105).

When Sal meets the “Ghost of the Susquehanna,” who is heading
for “CANADY,” the ghost turns Sal around. This Ghost
of Susquehanna is a motif that haunts Kerouac’s road characters,
beckoning them to the north. He reappears in Pic, also heading to
“CANADY.” Yet, the search for Canada, it seems, is always within
the United States. It is an internal search. Pic learns that the ghost
has been “lookin for Canady in Virginia, West Virginia, West
Pennsylvania, North New York, New York City, East Arthritis
and South Pottzawattomy for the last eighty years . . . He’ll never
find the Canady and he’ll never get to Canady because he’s goin the
wrong way all the time” (Kerouac, Pic 229). The Ghost could not
find his way to Canada because, as Slim and Pic realize, as Sal
realizes, and as Kerouac tells us, the Ghost is not walking north,
but west. The search for Canada is in the United States, for the north
in the west. He wants to go home, yet despite his northward movement, he remains in the United States.

In *On the Road*, the Ghost of Susquehanna teaches Sal a valuable lesson about American frontiers. For the Franco-American who has created in his “Western” character Dean—the classic American hero, the lesson that his peripheral character can teach is actually one of self-consolation—a reckoning of the dualistic soul. It is that Americanness is made in more than one place. Sal joins himself to the Ghost, saying “We were bums together” (Kerouac, *Road* 104). Earlier he had believed that he lived the “life of a ghost” (15). But when they diverge—the hobo-ghost still headed to Canada and the narrator headed north—Sal confesses, “I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the Susquehanna showed me different” (105). Of the book’s two heroes, it is Sal, the atypical hero, who gets a glimpse of the true scope of the quest, even as he hits the borders and rebounds like a pinball (“Here I was at the end of America—no more land—and now there was nowhere to go but back”) (77).

It is the book’s classic American hero who is mired in The Myth of the West. Created in the mould of American fictional heroes like Leatherstocking and Ned Buntline’s dapper dime novel, Buffalo-Bill-type heroes who slay thousands of Indians, hunt thousands of buffalo, and charm thousands of women, Kerouac’s “Marlboro Man” Dean Moriarty—the handsome, dirty but graceful, energetic, intellectual, loud, cursing, holy con-man cowboy—travels across the country on the road he was born and bound to live on. The western hero of the western tradition, however, rings hollow here; it had already spawned simulacra of simulacra of simulacra in Hollywood’s studios that were filled to the brim, by Kerouac’s time, with Wells Fargo stagecoaches and wooden saloon sets. It is fitting, of course, that Dean does not resemble a cowboy as much as an actor who played one. “My first impression of Dean,” says Sal, “was of a young Gene Autry—trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent—a sideburned hero of the snowy West” (2). Later he calls Dean “the chief hero of the Western” rather than the “West,” again glazing Dean’s skin with the silver of celluloid (126). Dean, despite his “real” Oklahoma accent, is mostly an actor.

Poteet translates Kerouac’s Dean/Gene along genetic lines: “‘Gene Autry’ means, in French, ‘Jean Autre’ or ‘Jean Other.’ Twins” (Poteet, “Little” 6). And indeed, the book appears to be about
twins: travelling the road, getting their kicks, and living like madmen in the sad, mad night. Sal and Dean, the two heroes, are twins. “He’s my brother,” Sal says of Dean, more than once (Kerouac, Road 220, 227). Like the Martin brothers in The Town and the City, these brothers appear as the manifestation of the formulation: An American and An Other. One is “Jean” (the French, and birth, name of Jack), visibly marked by foreignness (“I took a straight picture that made me look like a thirty-year-old Italian who’d kill anybody who said anything against his mother,” says Sal), and mentally marked by the opportunities offered by multiple roots (6). The other is “Gene”—American, English, stuck in old tropes of Americanness and the routes that cross the country back and forth and back again. Conjoined, they are the definitive Ethnic American hero: full of the past, and full of the future.

On the Road, ultimately, reveals Kerouac’s love of possibility. As is evident from his autobiographical writing, Jack Kerouac, icon of the American Dream, and self-dubbed “Canuck,” was, nationally, culturally and linguistically, many things. He was, like most Franco-Americans of New England, from the working class. He was not, however, the son of a millworker, like the typical Franco-American, but a printer. His life was filled with the written word. His mother tongue was an American joual: New-England French Canadian French. He believed his ancestry was Iroquois (Kerouac, “Jack Kerouac” 12). He lived the American rags to riches story—ghetto life to Ivy League. Kerouac, who saw himself as a convergence of multiple vertices of identity, had many and no real homes. His spiritual home was France; his birth home was the United States; his ancestral home was Canada.

Together, Sal and Dean, like their creator, know what it is to feel part of the world they inhabit. To be at home everywhere—citizens of the world and of the United States—Kerouac’s nation and narration. And yet, to be a citizen of everywhere is to be marked by difference—to have a home nowhere in particular.4 In On the Road, this paradox plays out as movement. Near the end of On the Road, Sal rides the bus across the “endless poem” and sings about himself, his place and placelessness in that ragged promise, America—Home in Missoula, Home in Truckee, Home in Opelousas, Ain’t no home for me. Home in old Medora, Home in Wounded Knee, Home in Ogallala, Home I’ll never be. (Kerouac, Road 255)
Notes

1 The language is Kerouac’s own. Unless I am referring to Kerouac’s terminology, I will employ “Franco-American,” a term that recognizes both his French roots and his American birth.

2 In The Rites of Assent, the prominent Canadian-born American Studies scholar, Sacvan Bercovitch, explains the impact of the Canadian–American lens on American Studies. On coming to America, Bercovitch declares, “I felt like Sancho Panza in a land of Don Quixotes” (29). Bercovitch uses this comparison—the comparison between a “Canadian skeptic” and a land of myth to generate a set of interpretive tools for examining American culture (29). As Bercovitch learned, the scholars of American Studies found unity and consensus in their pictures of American history and literature. For Bercovitch, the “America they revealed appeared out of nowhere” (10). He believes that American Studies analyses by Americans are problematic because they are myopic, the insider’s view. “The analytic tools of American Studies,” writes Bercovitch, “consisted of the same materials, the same patterns of thought and language, which Americanists had set out to investigate” (10) He concludes that despite the “range and force” of these great thinkers, ultimately, their analyses were a “celebration of mystery” (10). What American Studies needed, instead, was someone who could position himself outside the ideological constructs of the discipline. Someone who, in a liminal space inside the discipline but outside the discipline’s power of nationalism, could see the constructs for what they were. Bercovitch finds his model in D. H. Lawrence’s Studies in Classic American Literature: “a fascinating mixture of outsider’s perspective, [and] insider’s mystifications (e.g. ‘spirit of place’)” (10). This mixture can be found in Kerouac’s writing as well.

3 See Henry Nash Smith’s famous study, Virgin Land.

4 This idea is strongly taken up by Douglas Coupland, whose late twentieth-century Generation X characters wander North America and proclaim, “Where you’re from feels sort of irrelevant these days” (4). Coupland’s characters, like Kerouac’s, appear rootless, but they are often rooted in Canada—or exude a sense of Canadianness within the United States. See Skinazi, “A Cosmopolitan New World: Douglas Coupland’s Canadianation of AmLit.”

Works Cited


