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***On the Road: A Close Reading through the Perspective of Buddhism and the Significance  
of Movement***

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## Introduction

The publication of *On the Road* (1957) became a key point in American literature from which much analysis has spawned. The novel introduces Sal Paradise, the novel's main character and Kerouac's alter ego, moving across the territory in a sort of romantic quest in which spirituality becomes a constant presence in his relation with the characters. Being a road novel, *On the Road* presents the idea of transition from a place, escaping from the constraining effects of civilization —especially from the capitalist paradigm in America after the war. It is considered an autobiographical work of narrative that resulted from years of travelling and writing —during the late 40's—. There has been wide interest in the honest way Kerouac presents his experiences in the novel to the reader, naming the idea of young people moving around the country, the search for a spiritual experience, lust for music, casual sexual encounters, and constant drug-taking. The closeness between those concepts and Kerouac himself, and the details surrounding his writing of the novel in a time no bigger than three weeks in an uncensored flow of narrative removed Kerouac from a position of marginal writer and put him into the spotlight of pop culture. But there has also been a long-standing problem obtaining deep information concerning what the concepts mean, and where the roads in *On the Road* take to, not only physically, but also spiritually.

*On the Road* has entered the canon of higher culture —cult novel to classic—and been the object of appraisal but also of criticism from scholars. In terms of content, Vopat suggests a reevaluation of Kerouac's novel that would point out an implicit criticism of the Beats in the novel instead of support. She adds that instead of embracing life, the characters are escaping from it —and with it, important human processes such as “emotion, maturity, change, decision, purpose...” (5). She also adds that the main character, in contrast with the possible

first impression a reader might have, is actually afraid of his feelings and of other people (4), rendering him a passive figure instead of an icon of counterculture. Such ideas under the general purpose of a reevaluation are clearly oriented towards provoking the disengagement of the reader from the novel as it attacks aspects of content and deprives them of any value. Also, Holton also points out the criticism of other scholars upon *On the Road* —and the Beats, especially from Krim (Holton 5) —who stated that the novel has failed as a critical statement about American modernity, rather sinking into a decadence that is pointless (2), with that criticizing the content instead of noticing the more profound themes of the novel such as Kerouac's criticism of a capitalist society, and his appraisal of other ethnicities in the novel. Indeed, Holton, in an essay called "Kerouac Among the Fellahin: On the Road to the Postmodern" expands on social challenge through *On the Road* and issues of race through the image of "the imaginary racial other" (79), which contributes to the idea of Kerouac being a conscious writer who saw more value in establishing a relationship with other minorities in opposition to the mainstream dominant group.

However, there is a gap that this analysis attempts to clarify. Even though meaningful, these approaches do not exploit effectively one of the main themes in *On the Road*, which is the idea of movement. In fact, one of the questions some scholars leave unanswered is not what the meaning of the road is but what the *act* of getting on the road means. In other words, what the act of getting on the road implies, especially in terms of political discontent. Dardess evidences that idea of the progressive flow in the novel reflected in the transition from joy to discouragement (20) that occurs after an encounter with the road, which speaks of inner transformation and change; in addition, he states that the road is a place where not only the

individual changes but also the complexity of human relations do as reflected in Sal and Dean (21).

In fact, a closer reading reveals concepts that are yet to be explored such as the idea of movement, but in terms of spirituality not much is said. Thurman, in his introduction for Kerouac's *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*, states that no other writer contributed in bringing Buddhism into mainstream society in America like Kerouac did (1). The book contributes to the identification of Kerouac with the Buddha, which allows the reader to establish a connection between his faith and his novel. However, few make a serious attempt of connection between this later work and the road novels. Actually, *On the Road* also serves as an example of the link between Kerouac and his faith, but more importantly it is a work upon which Buddhism is latent and identifiable. Buddhism, then, is a constant in the novel in the author's quest, all the while criticizing a free market-driven America. But the link between criticism of the social configuration and a spiritual journey has little if not none consideration from scholars.

With this idea in mind, it can be stated that the novel arises as a response to an America full of limitations and structures which the individual seeks to run away from. Drawing a line between them and a dominant bourgeois, the characters escape to find life and spiritual illumination off society. Against the individualism, materialism and the comforting effect of settling down that composed the postwar American model, Sal Paradise starts for a quest both physical and spiritual, represented by his displacement into geographical locations in the very heart of America and in borders and his construction of a spiritual self that eventually will develop into a Buddhist one.

## Background

### The Author

In order to have a clear picture of Kerouac's fiction, it is necessary to consider that, mostly, his fiction was autobiographical. Kerouac sought to transmit his life experiences to others through his narrative as a way to create something artistic, reason for which in his novels he wrote directly and spontaneously. Indeed, in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" Kerouac expressed bluntly his vision of narrative as that resulting from an honest account of events, in a constant flow, with hardly any edition or revision at all (1), factors that according to Kerouac interrupted the building of a text and deprived the text of any significance and truthfulness. Charters, a scholar dedicated to the study of the Beats, reveals more details about Kerouac, among them the "adventurous" and "lonesome traveler" kind of personality Kerouac had (x) along with his "factualist" or "naturalist way of handling his ideas" (xiv). Along with details about Kerouac's writing provided by Charters, Theado mentions the purposes and influences Kerouac had in life, naming his close relation to his mother and family, Catholicism and Buddhism, the Beat generation, but more importantly the desire to become a good writer (9).

Jean Louis (Jack) Kerouac was born on March 12, 1922, in Lowell, Massachusetts, in a working-class family. Shortly after getting married, his parents, Leo and Gabrielle Kerouac moved from a rural area in Quebec to Lowell, where years later Kerouac was born and grew up a man devoted to his little family. Theado expands on Kerouac's influences during his adolescence years, but emphasizes the image of his brother; the last of three children, Kerouac grew close to his brother Gerard, whose death he lamented profoundly. Kerouac credited Gerard as a source of inspiration for his writing, of whom he thought of as "a holy figure more concerned with eternity than with the mundane life" (12). This hint of Kerouac's early belief

in transcendence shows how close Kerouac grew up with religiousness and spirituality. Indeed, Kerouac grew in a devoted Catholic family, but closer ties can be made between him and Buddhism as during his adolescence he sought answers in the Buddha for his obsession with death, suffering and mankind's pain (Theado 12). From then on, he would expand on his Buddhist vision of death and pain through his writing.

### The Beats

It can be said that Kerouac, in spite of growing a lonesome person, always believed in the development of the individual through the community, not only because of his affection towards his family, but also because of his constant movement between different groups of people, especially after meeting the people that comprised the Beat generation. During his football career at Columbia University, Kerouac became even more determinate to become a writer after he met a group of people that formed the core of what would be named the Beat generation. Through Edie Parker, then an art student, he met Lucien Carr, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and, later, Neal Cassady, who composed a group of young people that were lured to the criminality and drug-experimentation of the underground scene but also that aimed at finding values that would make sense of the world through literature (Charters xi). Theado expands on the relation between Ginsberg and Kerouac by expressing how similarly critical they were of America as they saw it on the "brink of a decline" instead of a place where they were "assured of a strong American future" (16). As a matter of fact, they shared a romanticized vision of America that was quite different from a postwar reality, which was all about "conservative movement," "state power" and "[social] hegemony" (Martinez 5). They formed a counterculture movement that struggled against the conformity and American

imperialism of the 50s (5). Their marginalized position in society as drug addicts and petty criminals gave them room to speak against the mainstream social group from the perspective of outsiders, eventually assuming religious beliefs such as Buddhism, and habits such as the constant moving around the country as opposed to the general ideal of settlement and materialism.

In fact, the sense of movement around the country, in combination with the new Beat ideas about spirituality and his criticism of capitalist American society, marked the start of Kerouac's most notorious novel, *On the Road*. Already introduced, and exchanging letters with each other, Kerouac found a partner in Cassady, a young Beat who wanted to learn how to write from him. In his search for his personal illumination as a writer, and also his voice and style, Kerouac had been keeping extensive notes on what he would include as material for his writing, mostly during his encounters with the Beats. Early in his career he conceived the idea of a hero on a quest, but it was always postponed whether was it by its relegation to other work of the author or by his dissatisfaction with the conventional way in which he was writing. Kerouac found enlightenment as a writer after his encounter with Cassady when recognizing in Cassady's letters the spontaneity and lack of restraint he wanted for himself, quite much — as represented in *On the Road* —in Paradise finding inspiration as a writer after meeting Moriarty (Johnson and Hemmer 248). He, then, started taking notes about his experiences and *beat* moments during his trips around America with (or without) Cassady-Moriarty for several years in the late 40s before settling down to actually write it. The story of Kerouac's trips with Cassady came out in a period of three weeks as a product of the combination of his heavy drug consumption and his influences in jazz for his spontaneous writing as Malcolm would point out about the latter when comparing them both in Kerouac's narrative style (97).



The author decided to use a continuous scroll of paper instead of individual pages, so as not to stop the continuous flow of the story. Kerouac found himself as a crafter of a style that has been labelled as spontaneous prose, the same way a jazzist spontaneously lets his music flow. He told the story of his trips just as they happened in real life (Charters xviii), which comprises the story in *On the Road*.

## **Theoretical Framework**

So as to have a clear idea of the study of *On the Road* (1957), is that an organization of the theoretical basis is needed. The structure in which the theoretical basis is presented also simplifies the task of the reader to conceive a critical opinion on the topic. As a result, the reader may have in knowledge the concepts used in the analysis beforehand and, from then on, the reader can evaluate on a critical light the theory supporting the analysis.

Considering the implications of concepts in Kerouac's novel, the concepts that are relevant for a study related to the sense of movement connected to the search of a spiritual self are presented as follows in three main groups.

### Postwar America

It is important to begin the analysis on Kerouac's work by exploring on what his characters represent. Larson mentions the freedom Kerouac gave to his characters from "capitalism, family kinships, adult contact, heterosexuality, race and nationality" (35), extrapolating the marginalized groups of counterculture from the normative American society's interests. As a matter of fact, the "America's dropping the atomic bomb on Japan to bring World War II to an end" (Charters xvi) marked the beginning of a time of "personal prosperity and some degree of affluence" of many American citizens (Cook 10), but also a time in which the population "was trapped in an intricate edifice of social conformity built of fear" (10) caused by the spreading Cold War frame of mind, under which "anything that was considered different was immediately suspect" (Swartz 171). This passive-aggressive attitude towards American population established a model for them follow, often prevailing the image of the "conventional...suburbanized family life...of American consumer culture" (Charters xxxiv).

This is what established the American bourgeoisie as dominants of the philosophy of the free-market in modern America.

In such context of subordination to the new American bourgeoisie, everyone was just an individual working so as to gain material comfort. But in general, that comfort and structure based on fear and mistrust of each other is what the Beats arose to oppose. In that light, poverty (for example) stands as something an American citizen would avoid while, as Matza expresses, poverty acted as a “commitment to primitivism” from the Beats so as to avoid the “corrupting influence of the commercial world” (as qtd in Elteren 84); thus, the counterculture activists assumed attitudes and habits that were in a great way different from the mainstream bourgeoisie. For this reason, and because of their (voluntary or not) portrayal as losers, they stood against the “Puritan work ethic ingrained in American culture (Maynard as qtd in Elteren 79). Against the search for a culture of unification and homogenization in America, those who dissent it must find shelter in chaos, optimism, openness of choices and possibilities, and contemporary plurality and multiplicity (Larson 1077). That is, the way to reject the advancing imperialism of American modernism is to assume a different stance by considering the multiplicity of possibilities and replacement of values. As such new postwar response began to spread, *On the Road* (1957) became a reminder of a general dissent for “a broad range of [mostly] young people from the political New Left” (Holton 4), who saw in the novel people that in their radical stance against postwar society assumed marginal, Beat values.

## Physical Mobility

As representatives of the counterculture movement, the struggle of the Beat generation was to fight a normative uniformity that was imposed on the masses (Larson 1073) by, as Lipton stated, “disaffiliating” from it (as qtd in Elteren 84). This implies that the answer for those Beats who longed to escape society was to estrange themselves from it. Larson posits the physical escape and sense of movement the road provides as opposed to America’s concerns (1081). In postwar America, cars became more popular and almost necessary for the life in the city. Going deeper concerning the sense of movement, in his analysis of *On the Road* Giamo expresses that the way to get out of the constant entrapment of a capitalist society—and the suffering it implies—is to keep moving (184), for which reason the road becomes the only place an individual may find freedom, justifying the frenetic action of the novel as the road to enlightenment in community, as opposed to the individualistic bourgeois.

During the middle of the twentieth century in America, “dropping out” (Ireland 476) from society became an outlet from a social structure, represented in a “modern capitalism’s cultural homogeneity” that, even though it “could not be overturned or reversed, it might at least be evaded” (Holton 61). Holton evidences the need to challenge the conformity and oppression—especially racial—that the American bourgeois laid upon (if a difference between people or social order has to be made clear) proletariats by alienating from it while standing for a principle of mutual support in the marginal community of the Beats (78).

## Spiritual Mobility

The idea of mobility that is clear in studies about *On the Road* is related to the spiritual movement into a Buddhist self. Besides from being a devoted Catholic, Kerouac himself was interested in Buddhism from an early age. According to Theado in his essay called “*Tristessa, Visions of Gerard, and Buddhism*,” Kerouac had been exploring on Buddhism’s traditions even before his first novel the *Town and the City*, which means that it was not just a temporal trend in his life but rather something significant in his life to which he dedicated several studies (123). As a matter of fact, Kerouac wrote *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha* so as to have into account the story of Buddhism and its main exponent in Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, which means “the awoken one” (Wake Up). Thus, Kerouac would consolidate his link to Buddhism through his narration of the life of the Buddha, corroborating possible doubts by including Buddhist imagery on his most famous novel *On the Road*.

Buddhism influenced not only Kerouac’s life but also his writing. One of the most important influences of Buddhism in Kerouac’s life was the idea of abstinence (Theado 126). Kerouac did not approve at all the sexual behavior of those surrounding him, but his search for inspiration with his Beat contemporaries, along with his disapproval of 50s America, made him follow in resignation. In fact, Buddhism was a refuge he would find from the materialism of America’s free-market mentality, similar to what Tonkinson expressed when she said: “cold war catchwords [...] were rendered meaningless...And Buddhism’s advocacy of a mendicant, homeless life also suggested that practical alternative to the rapidly accelerating cycle of work-produce-consume that was the engine driving fifties’ culture” (as qtd in Theado 127). In denouncing the society he lived in, he would even draw a comparison between Buddhism and Catholicism as life in both precepts is about suffering (Giamo 184, Theado 125). In this sense,

Kerouac avoided the disappointment and resignation he found in real life, and sought a meaningful experience of life through his writing, in which he declares honestly of his melancholy, purposeless existence (at a time), his experiences with the community of the Beats and his enjoyment of life.

## Close Reading

A close reading of *On the Road* will be carried out so as to identify instances in the novel where certain concepts mentioned in previous sections are present. The idea presented in this analysis of Kerouac's *On the Road* is concerned with the deep influence of Buddhist thought in the novel while, through the use of the articulating the image of movement, opposing to a postwar American bourgeois ideal. It can be said, then, that the physical geographical movement outside civilization motivated by this rejection is mirrored by the path to a Buddhist self and Paradise's full identity as a writer.

The transition from a state of comfort to one of inner doubts and questioning of life in the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, is present in *On the Road* from the very beginning of the novel. The narrator begins by telling how his life turned from happiness to melancholy, and his desire to depart for far lands. Sal Paradise, in his account of events, tells the reader of his current situation when he says that he just overcame a state of implied depression "after the miserably weary split-up" with his former wife and his "feeling that everything was dead" (3), so his desire to leave (and his justification for writing the novel) is evident, as much as the idea that his settling down in society has failed. But it is with Dean Moriarty's arrival that Paradise feels a sort of enlightening spark that pushes him to eventually engage in actual travelling. Moriarty wants to become a writer, and in order to do so he befriends Paradise, who has written. In connection to Buddha's story of life as told in *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*, a comparison can be drawn: Siddhartha sees that everything around him is meaningless and longs for a signal of meaning, for which reason he leaves his position in society, just like Paradise does in the novel.

In fact, early in the novel the reader learns of Kerouac's Buddhist influence in *On the Road*. Religious imagery of Buddhism is present in the narrative voice when Paradise explains his interest in Dean. In the story, while Sal Paradise sees the joy with which his friends Carlo Marx (Ginsberg) and Moriarty behave, he says:

“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 (...)” (7)

Dean Moriarty and Carlo Marx being compared to the light of a candle matches the Buddhist conception of the human soul as that of a candle whose end is the nirvana (*Wake Up*). Through their conversation, Paradise's friends are exploding into existence by reaching mutual enlightenment through talking, time during which Paradise stands as a mere spectator. This is a clear reference to Siddhartha's humbleness (and desire to be no one special); it expresses Paradise not seeking the spotlight, rather assuming the position of a follower. Therefore, through this brief description of Paradise, this section marks another early connection to Buddhism.

Once the trip has begun as an answer to a social urge for a change, negative feelings of sadness and depression, influenced by the physical place in America where Paradise lives in, are left behind when Paradise experiences a spiritual epiphany. In this sense, mobility starts to



be related to Buddhism as physical mobility allows the spiritual experimentation of Paradise. The main character takes the opportunity of seeing the West when he receives a letter from an old preparatory school friend called Remi Boncoeur inviting him to aboard a ship and sail together (Kerouac 10), and, indeed, he sets out for the West almost immediately. For him, this represents an opportunity to save some money and find new material for his book, but also it evidences the necessity to be isolated from mainstream society and get in contact with his friends, who are also alienated. For this reason, Paradise gets on the road and after being stranded on Bear Mountain (13) and spending a beat night in a YMCA in Des Moines (15), in which he feels like “somebody else, some stranger, and [his] whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost,” and in that state of self-denial (*Wake Up*), he can have a clear perspective of his objective in life “at the dividing line between the East of [his] youth and the West of [his] future...” (Kerouac 16). That experience makes Paradise realize that he needs his friends, and he knows that his friends, the rest of the beat people he is friends with, are far from the East.

From then on, Paradise engages in relations with others so as to count with not only his experience but that of the others that he finds. He sees the blessing of Buddhism in the runaways he encounters on the road just before he has a glimpse at an advancing capitalistic, meaningless, money-making society. Riding on a truck belonging to a couple of farmers on their way to California, he finds in a group of poor people escaping from the grip of bourgeois society the enthusiasm he is looking for. Even the Minnesotan drivers are “having a hell of a time [...] they liked everything [...] they never stopped smiling” (24). Paradise, like Siddhartha Gautama, chooses to live immersed in the community, living on the food others give to him (*Wake Up*), which evidences the transition from a state of individualistic comfortability in society to one of communal interrelation that, although in uncomfotability, occurs in a ride he

evaluates as “the greatest ride in [his] life” (22). But in the middle of this time of self-discovery, Paradise senses the advancing capitalism in the form of the “Wild West Week” in Cheyenne. It consists of a festival recreating the old American Wild West days but with exacerbated cultural representations and stereotypes, of which Paradise felt surprised, and at the same time he “felt it was ridiculous” as he was audience of “what absurd devices [the West] had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (30). Paradise becomes, then, a witness of the touch of capitalism, which transforms everything into a profitable event, often making use of raw material that, in this case, is culture itself.

Because the presence of the American East is associated with “repression and a silencing of Sal’s enthusiasm” (Hemmer 249), Paradise looks to find his voice as a writer in the company of marginal ones. Kerouac was resentful with the East’s New York publishing industry, which he believed had deprived his first novel *The Town and the City* of all originality with extensive editing and consequential poor sales. This provides room for a comparison between the individual and the novel, as this is an example of mainstream society cutting out what is not important, changing what is not understood and manipulating the individual so as to make him or her fit on it. For this reason, Paradise finds company in alienated beats. Once Paradise arrives in Denver, what he does first is to look up for Moriarty through his contacts in the city, just to find out that his Denver friends Chad King and Roland Major have marginalized Moriarty (Kerouac 35). In this war “with social overtones,” Paradise opts to keep in touch with King and Major, who represent the society in Denver, but most definitely he chooses to keep searching for “the underground monsters of that season in Denver, together with the poolhall gang” (35), who are downgraded to the level of bums but with whom Paradise expects to find inspiration. Different from King and Major, both with permanent jobs and a

comfortable situation, Marx and Moriarty share intimate moments of drug experiments in which sexual acts are implied (43), in a session in which Paradise witnesses a conversation that lasts the whole night. Carlo Marx calls Paradise “Wolfean” (44) which represents the “heterosexual, all-American types” in opposition to the “homosexual, cosmopolitan” non-Wolfeans (Hemmer 249). Paradise, however, sees the honesty and constant flow of ideas between the two as deeply inspirational, which speaks of the true source of inspiration Kerouac found in life for his writing.

It is after a spiritual transition that Sal Paradise has a better perspective of the materialistic, free-market influenced America. After getting closer to the minorities in America, with whom Paradise shared spiritually intimate moments, he returns to the East and becomes aware of how avariciously banal everything in mainstream society is. Sal meets a beautiful Mexican girl named Terry (73) to whom he becomes attached, even working together as cotton pickers in order to save money. He mingles with other Mexican workers, of whom he felt one of their own (88), similar to his experience with black American minorities in Mill City as “the only community in America where whites and Negroes lived together voluntarily; and that was so, and so wild and joyous a place I've never seen since” (53). But although seemingly happy in this place, Paradise abandons Terry justifying himself with the idea of not being able to play a supportive man for her and her son, but also with his desire to return to New York to write. This is an important connection to Buddhism in the way Paradise sacrifices his carnal love, “following the path of self-denial” and abstinence (*Wake Up*) for Terry in order to put his inspiration in paper. Through the physical state of starvation, Paradise has a vision of America once he gets to New York.

I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream-grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City. (96)

After his experiences in the American East, especially those in the communities of those stranded from mainstream society, Paradise has a new perspective of the environment he used to live in. Paradise expresses of American materialism, criticizing the bourgeois struggle for money and lack of personal ties to each other. Given his support for spirituality, he implies a criticism of America as a place of non-spirituality in which materialism and profit rule.

The ruling classes impose their status of predominance through their armed body in order to force those with different views and values to refrain themselves from any social movement. The police embody the active attempt of society to restrict the mobility of the individual, and restriction of movement leads to a stop of the spontaneous flow of writing and experience. The centralized power in society oppresses those not belonging to the bourgeois by the omnipresent use of certain tools such as the standing army and the police (Engels, Marx 58). In *On the Road*, the oppressive force is related to the stop of all sense of motion in the episode in which a police officer tickets Dunkel, Moriarty, his girlfriend Marylou and Paradise for money they do not have for driving over the speed limit (Kerouac 122). This forced stop is precisely what Kerouac avoided in his narrative, stating that the end of the flow of words

deprives the narrative of spontaneity (Kerouac 1). Kerouac rants against the police oppressive nature when he says

The American police are involved in psychological warfare against those Americans who don't frighten them with imposing papers and threats. It's a Victorian police force; it peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes don't exist to its satisfaction.” (123)

Also, Paradise would criticize and notice the police state mentality of America during his time as a part-time guard-policeman. Paradise sees the futility in the policemen's pride of their jobs and their love for guns (59). This instance is connected to America's aristocracy imposing order and structure through the use of their armed proletariat. As Paradise later says “it was embarrassing [...] this is story of America [...] everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do” (61) as a way to express that those executing power do so without any conscious reason. The police execute the move that is the most convenient for the powerful class in America: to avoid the individual to move, physically as well as socially. But more importantly, to stop moving implies the comparison to stop writing; in both situations the continuous flow of experience ends abruptly when authority from an external centralized society interferes.

Dean temporarily embodies the effects of the ruling society's materialism and Paradise is forced to depart as his condition does not suit the ambitions of mainstream culture's needs; however, the bad experiences give room for personal illumination and a connection to his inner self to happen. What society longs for is the settlement and comfortability that profitable

enterprises and dependable inversions bring, as they secure a life without the needs that society itself creates upon the community. As soon as Moriarty arrives in San Francisco “bursting to see Camille and find out what had happened,” he abandons Paradise and Marylou and rushes to see his other lover Camille (154). Stranded and without money, Marylou and Paradise wander through the streets searching for something to eat. In addition, after a couple of days, Marylou abandons him too and Sal experiences the “beatest time of [his] life” (Kerouac 155), period in which he gets closer to personal ecstasy and illumination. Because of extreme starvation and need, Paradise goes through hallucinations that have similar imagery to Buddhism

And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiancies shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven. (156-157)

First, the image of climatic ecstasy experienced by paradise is object of comparison to Buddhism in the way it evidences a state of inner exploration. Buddhism’s way to find enlightenment is “through meditation, which is Satori (enlightenment) in Samadhi (meditation)” (Liang 754). Paradise finds satori after his loneliness, despair and physical need overcome him and force his mind to drift and eliminate all fear, trouble and evil. In order to make this point more evident, the expressions “timeless shadows” and “the sensation of death

kicking at my heels to move on” show a state where time does not exist but death is still lurking; coincidentally, one of the objectives of the Buddha Gautama is to escape death by getting rid of time (Wake Up). Sal Paradise has done otherwise; he has got rid of time and death is threatening his mortal existence. However, the image of the Lotus flower is one connected to good and enlightenment. In Buddhist tradition the lotus flower symbolizes “the all-important symbol of creation” which denotes the “essence of enlightenment of those who have meditated” (Ward 135). In this sense, the presence of the lotus flower in Paradise’s perception means a spiritual blessing upon him in contrast to his decaying physical state. So, Paradise stands for walking a difficult way through need and self-sacrifice that leads to a personal illumination, as opposite a way Moriarty assumed that leads him to be influenced by mainstream society to settle down.

Paradise sees more valuable features in those not belonging to the white ruling class as they are connected to true spiritual inspiration. Thus, Paradise considers his lack of spiritual wealth the reason for his subordinating to the racial minorities. Wandering alone in the city of Denver, Paradise looks for something to do. It is in his strolling around Denver’s “colored section” that he realizes how alone he is, expressing how different he is from everybody else

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I was a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered me was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. (163)

Everything positive that Paradise wanted for himself he sees denied as his condition of ‘white man’ led him only to have “white ambitions” (164) and, therefore, worry about mundane

substantial things. It is in this poor neighborhood that he sees in the racial other the life and joy he does not have, which he considers the factors that put the others above him. It is evidence that the kind of wealth Paradise wants in life is spiritual. An example of this admiration for black Americans is the character of Slim Gaillard, an old black musician famous among “young semi-intellectuals” in San Francisco whom Paradise calls a god (160) and another young black who coincidentally looks like Carlo Marx (183). Not only does he praise the black American –especially jazz musicians –but also he puts himself below Mexicans or even Japanese people, emphasizing the importance of Mexicans in his regret for abandoning Terry (164). In his self-identification with the white population, he implies a generalized vision of white people having meaningless, sorrowful lives in contrast with black Americans and other minorities in America, who in real life are the ones subordinated as a consequence of not having the enough social weight to impose power.

In order to escape from death and despair, the individual in movement sees himself forced to accept the influence of society upon him and find comfort in settling down otherwise death is imminent; on the other hand, Buddhism proves to be an alternative route. Paradise witnesses Dean Moriarty’s despair being the trigger for his reckless actions that would lead, eventually, to death. Moriarty meets with a cousin who tells him that the family wants nothing to do with him (Kerouac 197), episode after which Paradise stays with him in support. However, this new sense of abandonment drives Dean to be a reckless criminal in a “car-stealing rampage” (Hemmer 253). Considering this just another of their ‘kicks’, Moriarty pushes his need to keep moving on the road as a desperate way to feel once again excited. Paradise provides accounts of instances when they almost got shot (199), hints of a car crush (206) or, even worse, imprisonment (201). Contrasting this despair-driven man, Paradise sees in spirituality the



answer to the suffering life brings. He discovers that the meaning of life can be found in being passionate about the things one wants (221) and not the things one does, as compared to the “Gray Myth” of the West and the “dark Myth” of the East respectively (222). What this shows is that while the West represents passion, the East is representative of a ‘osmotic’ experience in which everyone duly does the same. With a job, a new girlfriend called Inez, and a child on the way, Moriarty has overcome his despairing recklessness just to be slowly assimilating in mainstream society in the East complying with the bourgeois model. On the other hand, Paradise expresses his need to go on pilgrimage on the road again (Hemmer 253), seemingly rejecting his actual comfortable position in New York. Similar to the Buddha Gautama, whose objective was to reach another birth through pilgrimage. Paradise longs to keep doing what he passionately wants in life. Stillness will not help him to exploit his passion for writing and living. Settlement will not grant answers for existential questions of the individual as mobility does, but even though Buddhism stands for a peaceful life, it represents another path to take different to the self-destructive recklessness on the road and the numbing effect of the East upon the individual..

Paradise’s spiritual trip ends when he experiences rebirth in the Buddhist nirvana product of his search for self-marginalization far away from society. After realizing how materialistic and focused on the making of profit everything concerned with society is, Paradise travels to Mexico in order to escape “from the self, civilization, and their discontents” all the while longing “to discover life as it was [...] before being molded into self or society” (Vopat 14). For this reason, Paradise flees to Mexico along with Stan Shepard, a young man from Denver, and the returning Dean, who plans to get “a Mexican divorce, cheaper and quicker than any kind” (238) as a solution for “his tangled legal and social obligations” (Hunt 65) that opposes

to Paradise's original idea of travelling so as to find the primitive identities among the ancient Mexican people.

The closer they get to Mexico, the more sensitive their senses get: "Meanwhile Dean and I went out to dig the streets of Mexican San Antonio [...] it was fragrant and soft -- the softest air I'd ever known -- and dark, and mysterious, and buzzing" (248). Paradise describes Laredo, another town in the border, as "the bottom and dregs of America where all the heavy villains sink" (249) in contrast to the "magic land at the end of the road" (251) that they find across the border. Paradise sees the aboriginal people who share a different place even outside Mexican society. He describes them as "unmistakably Indians" who

were not at all like the Pedros and Panchos of silly civilized American lore -- they had high cheekbones, and slanted eyes, and soft ways; they were not fools, they were not clowns; they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it. (255)

In this appreciation, Paradise disposes of any American stereotypical image of Mexican *Pedros* and *Panchos*, and continues with a respectful account of their primitive status and authority over the land. Moreover, by attributing to these peoples the transcendence over the end of the world (256) and evidencing a connection to spiritual rebirth without the craft of a creator or an all-powerful being (Wake Up), Paradise makes a connection to Buddhism.

Mexico is also the land where he senses enlightenment in the Buddhist nirvana. Already an official outsider from America, Paradise sees that everything is different: "the cops are

benign, the whorehouses are exciting, drugs are readily available, and expenses are ridiculously cheap” (Hemmer 254) which prompt them to try to experience everything at their fullest in bars and whorehouses in small Mexican towns. Mexico City, however, becomes the point where Paradise reaches the Buddhist nirvana when he collapses ill with dysentery. He lies in bed unconscious for several days raving and dreaming in a physical condition that matches D.T. Suzuki’s assertion about Buddhists trying to reach the enlightening experience of the nirvana through the cancelling of passions and the enshrouding of the mind in ignorance (as qtd. in Giamo 185). Therefore, Paradise pushes his desire for experience as far as his physical body allows him to, and once it can hold no more the individual experiences the almost full state of unconsciousness, equaling his state of physical displacement with his mental displacement.

Therefore, it can be said that so as to oppose the comfortability and complacency of America, the individual sets out in a quest with spiritual Buddhist undertones. The sense of movement takes Paradise to relate himself with others who are or feel also stranded from mainstream society in order to stand for the opposing forces to society. Paradise experiences an epiphany that influences his search for self-marginalization, after which he comes up with a new perspective of America, in which materialism rules over and the police serves the social elite. After this discovery, Paradise sets in motion once again to isolate himself even further, changing the direction of his journeys and going south for Mexico so as to reach a total outsider status. Buddhism marks the end of the journey as Paradise reaches a state of full immobility after his restless escaping, highlighting the sense of enlightenment the experience means as a starting point for the writing of novel. So, through his experiences during his trips,

Paradise comes up with a spiritual enlightening experience all the while standing as an opposite pole against society's material focus.

## Conclusion

Through *On the Road*, Kerouac represents the idea of opposition to mainstream society. Paradise chooses to keep moving in opposition to America's ideal of social settlement and material comfort. It is in this sense of mobility that Paradise gets in contact to his Buddhist spiritual self. *On the Road* combines the strong influence of Buddhism throughout the story with the process of self-marginalization Paradise experiences so as to oppose the model of postwar American society.

Indeed, the idea of mobility is what sets the story in motion, with Paradise representing the ones dissenting what American society had turned into: a society of materialistic homogenization in which fear of what was different ruled over. Through movement, Paradise self-marginalizes from mainstream society and gets in contact with the different other, often appraising the ones belonging to ethnic minorities. Often choosing the West as the objective for his trips, Paradise does not discard it as a place of corruption and consumerism, for which reason the state of movement becomes the end in itself. Assuming an identity of opponent to society through a state of constant and spontaneous mobility, Paradise has a better perspective of America and sees the flaws of the configuration of the postwar American society.

The novel's connections to Buddhism start from the beginning, as Paradise emulates the steps of the Buddha Gautama to personal illumination. Through the story, the reader can see how Paradise chooses the wrong path to an early death in Bear Mountain before turning in the right direction after his experiencing an epiphany. From then on, Paradise walks the path of the

Buddha as his romantic view of the road leads him to search for what is authentic in life. In the novel the reader can see how Paradise escapes the spreading materialistic primary concern of society. Paradise is progressively building his spiritual self the more he moves, while Moriarty, on the other hand, is an individual whose concerns start being those imposed by the American bourgeoisie. However, the alternative for Paradise is still the spiritual road, as a consequence of which he keeps moving on physical roads to places far away from America. Mexico, then, becomes the final point of the story as well as for Paradise as he contracts dysentery, which renders him unable to wake up until a few days later. This later section in the story is strongly connected to Buddhism as it marks the state of unconsciousness Buddhism links to enlightenment.

Therefore, through the experiences of Paradise what Kerouac is stating as his alternative for the suppressing effect of society upon the individual, also expressing his strong Buddhist background in the imagery of the story. The ubiquitous image of movement, along with the state of spiritual and mental Buddhist illumination, becomes the expression of the individual's dissent of the American ideals and social structures based on the fear of the different and the economic pressure from the bourgeois on people.

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