



A Journey with no Destination: Anarchetypal Patterns in Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*

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Abstract: Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is one of United States's best known travel narratives, a novel that fictionalizes key moments and characters from the 1950s and wraps them in the typical bohemian aura of the Beat generation. However, besides discussing these historical elements and Kerouac's way of reimagining them in his work, the aim of this paper is to take the analysis even further and to examine the text from an original point of view, namely through Corin Braga's concept of the "anarchetype". Meant to represent the opposite of the archetype understood as a cultural imagine or as a way of perceiving the world, the anarchetype will be transposed into the terms of travel literature in order to demonstrate that *On the Road* is an important example of an anarchetypal pattern that reflects, on a geographical map, the vision and thinking perspectives of the postmodern subject.

Keywords: archetype, Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, journey, Beat generation, travel literature.

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Fact or fiction?

When it comes to literary works that present journeys taken within the North-American space, one can safely say that Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) is one of the most read and discussed representative of the genre. It is well known that the book is based on Jack Kerouac's actual travels across America with his friend Neal Cassady, and that the early drafts of the text contained the actual names (later changed at the request of the publisher) of many other friends of his and important cultural figures of the time. Among them there were William S. Burroughs as "Old Bull Lee", Allen Ginsberg as "Carlo Marx", Lucien Carr as "Damion" or John Clellon Holmes as "Ian MacArthur."¹ At the same time, between 1947 when Kerouac went west and 1957 when the novel appeared there was a period when "a new sense of American national identity was consolidating itself: both internally with respect to the possible full Americanness of Black men and women and externally with respect to its conflict with the USSR."² Spanning thus the first decade of the American National Security State and of the Civil Rights struggle, the novel belongs to the era of containment and "all the essential Cold War questions trouble [it]: What is America? Who are Americans? Are we the chosen or the damned? Kerouac need hardly address these questions directly, because the structure of feeling of *On the Road* is itself tempered by the Cold War, with its restless anxiety, its troubled optimism, its delirium and depression."³

When it comes to the book's similitude with an autobiography of the author, Robert Holton makes

1. David S. Wills, "Who's Who: A guide to Kerouac's Characters", *Beatdom*, 2010, <https://www.beatdom.com/whos-who-a-guide-to-kerouacs-characters/>.

2. Mark Richardson, "Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43, no. 2 (2001): 220.

3. *Ibid.*, 221.

some worth mentioning comments about how this affected the public's appreciation of the text as well. Many readers expected Kerouac to be like the characters he described and some of them even forgot that Dean Moriarty was not the narrator, thus expecting Kerouac to be a version of the always-on-the-move Neal Cassady. However, the writer was thirty-five in 1957 and no longer "the young adventurer whose wanderings and explorations are narrated there, whose mythic American vision seamlessly blended the innocent and the decadent, the aspirations of a romantic dreamer and the experience of a street-smart hustler." In addition, there was a beatnik craze which dominated popular culture for a while and which transformed Kerouac's set of critical positions, aesthetic choices and cultural attitudes into a trivialized subcultural accessory that brought him national attention and astonishing influence but not the serious readership he had hoped for.⁴

On the other hand, as far as the autobiographical part goes, there are many events and people from Kerouac's life that make no or only minor appearances, so what the novel actually is could be labelled as a "nonfiction fiction [that] subtly but clearly registers the slippage between the real and the imagined, between waking and dreaming life. *On the Road* equivocally offers itself as a document of America, but it is really a fiction of it."⁵ In *Jack Kerouac and The Literary Imagination*, Nancy Grace also notes that Kerouac based many of his writings on his memories, but the majority of them involved a process of constantly constructing and adjusting these "cognitive materials" that kept changing their composition and appearance throughout time. Far from being uninterpreted or unmanipulated copies of prior events and resembling "the language with which one reports them, memories mediate reality through creative processes basic to human cognition."⁶ Kerouac himself stated that he used to compose his chapters "mentally over long periods of time before transferring the ideas to paper, much of the story emerging whole cloth" after ample periods of daydream reveries.⁷

What he then achieves in *On the Road* is "a hybrid form of history and fiction – whether called fictionalized autobiography or autobiographical fiction [...] – resisting the impulse to rest firmly upon either."⁸ He did rely upon his experiences when writing, as well as on documentation for verifying them, but the historical accuracy of the text he was writing was less of importance to him than the simple act of telling that story. Moreover, when memory and language are used to recreate a real person or event, the resulting portraiture cannot overcome approximation because "the reality of the past experience exists only in partial form in any postexperiential construct"⁹. Situated on the elusive border between fact and fiction and capturing essential elements from both sides, *On the Road* is not just taking its readers on one long trip after another; instead, it documents "the physical, social, psychological, and religious strands of experience that make up any real journey,"¹⁰ presenting thus a fictionalized account of the American 1950s seen through the blurry lenses of a permanently moving Beat soul.

Critical views: (an)archetypal elements

To assemble a list of all the critical interpretations that this book has been a subject of would call for a separate article altogether, but I think it's important to mention at least some names in order to get a general picture of its reception. As Gregory Stephenson puts it, the literature of the Beat generation has started to get the recognition it deserves only recently. Attacked by critics and reviewers during the late fifties and the early sixties, then dismissed and neglected in the following years, these writers seem to finally begin to be acknowledged for what they have always been: "heirs to and bearers of the essential American traditions of advancing the boundaries of the frontier and of sustaining the ongoing process of revolt and renewal."¹¹

Jack Kerouac and his *On the Road* had roughly the same fate, facing the same hardships when it

4. Robert Holton, "Introduction," in *What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 3.

5. Richardson, "Peasant Dreams," 226.

6. Nancy M. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.

7. *Ibid.*, 33.

8. *Ibid.*, 9.

9. *Ibid.*, 34.

10. Hilary Holladay, "Preface," in *What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), ix.

11. Gregory Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys. Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 15.



came to publication and critical reception. In Dennis McNally's words, "to understand *On the Road* one somehow needed an affinity for the intuitive and the sensual, for the romantic quest as opposed to the generally analytic realm of the critics. Since most critics had never experienced anything like the *Road*, they denied its existence as art and proclaimed it a 'Beat Generation' tract of rebellion, then pilloried it as immoral."¹² Kerouac eventually found an editor (Malcolm Cowley) who had both experienced something like *On the Road* and created, in *Exile's Return*, a road narrative about his own rebellious, "lost generation,"¹³ thus understanding the value of his writing and agreeing to publish him, but the critics' opinion remained unfavorable.

It is true that the first review received by the book – in the 5 September 1957 issue of the *New York Times* – had quite the opposite character, Gilbert Millstein saying that "the novel bore a relation to the Beat Generation much like that which *The Sun Also Rises* had to the 1920s"¹⁴, but the following mentions of it maintained a negative tone.

"The book was variously panned for its writing style, its structure, its tone, its intelligence, and its morality. [...] Among the postwar cultural establishment, a consensus began to emerge that, far from being an important statement about American modernity and the cultural possibilities it afforded, the book was a descent into pointless decadence produced by a naïve author who was both out of his intellectual depth and lacking in basic talent"¹⁵.

Tim Hunt, a well-known Kerouac scholar, also lists some of the ways in which *On the Road* was initially perceived, suggesting that all of them "rule out the possibility that Kerouac might have been dealing with his material critically or in a spirit of literary exploration", and that, consequently, they should be ignored. One such comment maintained that the novel was just a naïve autobiography, "identifie[d] Kerouac with Sal, conclude[d] that the book reports events without reflection and reduce[d] it to the mores of a particular bohemia." Another one saw the book as a "controversial best-seller of little merit or as inspired testament", a perspective that rendered "the books as a pop culture artifact". Finally, with the claim that the *Road* was "a harbinger of a new confessional literature free of past constraints on form and subject matter," some critics "elevate[d] the book to the status of testament for a new generation," seeing it as "a product of a communal consciousness and insist[ing] that the book advocate[d] a way of life."¹⁶

Consequently, despite the increasing public fascination with the book and Kerouac's persona, his refusal to participate in what was understood as the "dominant literary tradition" or abide by its rules¹⁷ caused his writings to remain outside the interest of academic circles. However, there were some extensive critical studies which appeared even during the attitude of general neglect towards the Beat literature from the '70s – '80s, and afterwards their number has continued to grow.

Among these, the majority of papers agrees on what I would like to call an "archetypal interpretation" of Sal Paradise's journeys. Through this concept I understand a type of analysis that focuses on how a narrative is centered around the finding of a meaning, as well as on how its characters are shaped and evolve through a series of experiences and episodes that are well organized and follow an initiatory pattern. These characteristics transform such a text into a meaningful quest, a type of journey that goes as far back as the (fictional) medieval attempts to find and return to the Earthly Paradise. Following this logic in Kerouac's case, there is Regina Weinreich who "views the novel as a quest-narrative that moves toward 'increased despair and desolation'; likewise, Warren French believes that the novel 'proves a traditional cautionary tale [that] promises the reader nothing but disappointment

12. Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel. Jack Kerouac, The Beat Generation, and America*, eBook edition (New York: Hachette Books, 2020), ch. XIII.

13. Adam Gussow, "Bohemia Revisited: Malcolm Cowley, Jack Kerouac, and *On the Road*," *The Georgia Review* 38, no. 2 (1984): 295.

14. Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 68.

15. Holton, "Introduction," 2.

16. Tim Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road. The Development of a Fiction*, with a Foreword by Ann Charters and a New Preface (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010 [1981]), xvi-xvii.

17. Marco Abel, "Speeding Across the Rhizome: Deleuze meets Kerouac *On the Road*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 2 (2002): 230.

and disillusionment"¹⁸. Similar affirmations appear in the works of Ben Giamo (2000), Omar Swartz (1999) John Lardas (2001) and many others as well, thus allowing the idea of a spiritual quest for meaning to be associated with the plot of *On the Road*. Even the narrator's name, Salvatore Paradise, could suggest the travelling nature of his life and his desire to reach salvation and paradise, therefore giving way to Stephenson's claim that "*On the Road* is a sort of modern *Pilgrim's Progress* expressed not as allegory but as a picaresque narrative."¹⁹

Moreover, the concept of the archetype is used when describing the book's characters too: Kerouac seems "to perceive others as a 'type' in a sort of grand historical play" and he is thus populating his books "with types from simple jolly waitresses, angry middle-class housewives, pure peasant girls, and lonely young women looking for love to buffoonish young men, sweet Mexican boys, silent Buddhist poets, Negro jazz musicians, and hobos"²⁰. In the same manner, Dean can be seen as "the archetypal cinema cowboy who gets by on wits, charm, and luck"²¹ or as an ambiguous figure, "a hedonist and a mystic, an embodiment of the irrational energies of the unconscious, both destructive and regenerative."²² Always acting in tune to instincts that don't take into account the restrictions of reason or consciousness, Dean cannot be catalogued as belonging solely to one category of characters, the good or the bad one, but operates instead at an energetical level that draws its cues from both the positive and negative halves of his being. In other words, Dean could be regarded as an embodiment of the shadow figure from the Jungian psychology, serving as Sal's shadow in the novel and, in a larger context, representing "the shadow of postwar American society."²³

Although agreeing that some characters fit indeed into certain archetypal categories, as well as identifying some stages from the structure of the archetypal story (an initial inferior status and a situation of crisis which Sal leaves behind when he starts his adventures, together with all the trials that he later goes through and the experience he gains thanks to them), my interpretation will try to demonstrate that these elements do not create a cohesive story altogether, thus transforming the protagonist's "quest" in an endless pursuit that could go on forever. As Stephenson also argues, "the objects of the quest (selfhood, love, God, community) are elusive; they are grails that appear and vanish, are recovered and lost again", which means that "despite the degree of renewal and reorientation experienced by Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, his quest, as the elegiac ending of the novel suggests, remains ultimately unfulfilled."²⁴ A closure will be reached in his case only as the series of novels that Kerouac wrote with his alter-ego as the protagonist will also reach its last volume. Consequently, in order to analyse this dismantled structure of the story I will use the concept of the "anarchetype", defined by Corin Braga as being

"made up of three Greek etymons: the prefix *a*, *an* ('a-', 'anti-', or 'contra-'); *árkhaios* ('old,' 'original,' or 'primitive') or *arkhê* ('beginning' or 'principle'); and *týpos* ('type' or 'model'). Grouped in pairs, these roots can be found in 'anarchy' (comprised of *an* and of the verb *árkhein* – 'to lead' or 'guide') and 'archetype' ('first type,' 'original model'). Depending on how we combine all three of them, the anarchetype would denote, then, either an 'anarchic model' of text, which rejects and destroys structure, or an 'anti-archetype,' to wit, an 'exploded' or fragmented archetype"²⁵.

It is very easy to see the difference between the archetype and the anarchetype within literary works as well. Whereas a narrative with an archetypal structure behaves "in an organized, centered, and unified manner", resting on a finite, homogeneous and complete scenario and generally following the rules proposed by Aristotle about the "unity of place, time, and action", its opposite type of plot behaves "anarchically and chaotically", without adhering to a central, totalizing meaning and "developing

18. Ibid., 249.

19. Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys*, 21.

20. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, 49-50.

21. Ibid., 52.

22. Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys*, 21.

23. Ibid., 158.

24. Ibid., 22-24.

25. Corin Braga, "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'," in *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the 21st-Century Conceptual Commons*, ed. Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 122.



instead in surprising and contradictory directions that cannot be subsumed under a single scenario."²⁶ Starting from these definitions, the purpose of this paper will be to examine the particular form these characteristics took when placed in the context of the 1950s' American culture, as well as *On the Road's* similarity to former archetypal journeys.

A tumultuous period: America in the 1950s

The almost two decades when the artists of the Beat Generation were present on the American cultural stage (1944 – 1962) overlapped with a rather tumultuous period of North American history. Until then, during the 1930s-1950s, the United States had been the background of countless political, social and economic changes that left a deep impact on the Americans' mind and life perspectives due to their intensity. In the middle of the 1930s they saw (un)employment and government's lack of economic efficiency as their biggest problems, but by 1944 Americans feared that another depression was going to come after World War II, and during the late 1950s their greatest concerns turned towards the implications of the Cold War: the atomic bomb, domestic problems, Communists, integration, race, inflation, fear of Russia etc²⁷. In other words, the Beat Generations seemed to have reached their peak in a moment when the world was undergoing one of its most complex transitions, a "period of conflict and upheaval when a new world was emerging, but the old one maintained a significant presence" through traditional values such as family and religion.²⁸

Together with these socio-political changes came a new male ideal as well: men were expected to be impersonal and unemotional, logical, efficient and cool-headed. "There was no place for the excitable, intense, and independent personality exemplified by frontier America"²⁹. And this is precisely the point where the tensions between the conservative values of the older generations and the new perspective of the Beats hit a climax. The latter grew up during times when they got influenced by all sorts of outlaws like the hipsters, bohemians, radicals, Dadaists and surrealists, so they dismissed most of the cultural, religious and social values of their age as obsolete and not fit to their new vision of the world. In fact, what they saw as the core of the Western civilization's crisis, with its decay of ideals, its slaughter of the world wars, its spiritual sterility and its breakdown of values, was "our culture's misguided faith in rationality and materialism, in the analytical faculties of the mind [...] and in our identification with the conscious self, the ego. To redeem and revitalize the life of our culture and our individual lives, the Beats propose the cultivation of the energies of the body and the instincts, of the unconscious and the spirit."³⁰ We will analyze in detail, throughout the following sections of the paper, the type of writing that Kerouac used in order to create according to the above-mentioned "energies of the unconscious and the spirit", but for now let's close this subchapter about the conflicting period of history that corresponded with the Beat era by focusing on the actual state of the highway system that served as a map for Sal Paradise's travels.

In this regard, Lars Erik Larson's study entitled "Free Ways and Straight Roads: The Interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950s America" argues that these American highways were subject to the same state of tensioned transition that governed the post-war period from a social and economic point of view as well. The previous system of interstates, constructed after the First World War, was starting to become dilapidated with age; its design was getting outdated and unsafe due to dramatic increases in traffic flows, and the various headlines about murderous hitchhikers and mobile thieves contributed to "a general social suspicion of the road's openness and a desire for new forms of standardizing, surveying, and regulating conduct in its spaces." At the same time, by 1953 "seventy-two million Americans, or one-half of the country, were devoting at least part of their vacation to trips on the road", so this recreative use of the roads contributed as well to maintaining the ambivalence between a ludic and a suspicious view of the American highways during the period that Kerouac presented.³¹

26. Ibid., 123.

27. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, 21.

28. Tim Cresswell, "Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac's *On the Road*," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, no. 2 (1993): 254.

29. Foster, *Understanding the Beats*, 8.

30. Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys*, 8.

31. Lars Erik Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads: The Interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950s America," in *What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 36-37.

What the United States needed, then, was a national space that would simultaneously fulfil “desires for childlike freedoms and responsible regulation”, as well as granting anonymity “without shading too far into alienation.”³² The answer came with the Interstate Highways project implemented by Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, which consisted of a “forty-one-thousand-mile circulatory system of limited-access, divided, isotropic road engineered for seventy-mile-per-hour travel.” However, despite the various restrictions, the system was also offering American citizens “a place for nervous motion, spatial freedom, and encounters with the heterogeneous”³³, so a duality between “a capacity for the Dionysian” and “an Apollonian capitulation to control”³⁴ could be the concept that best describes *On the Road*'s characters' understanding of and attitude towards the American highway system.

Nevertheless, besides fulfilling pleasures and creating an indispensable network of communication routes across the enormous surface of the United States, the system of American highways and the principle of continuous movement across them are connected to the essence of American culture at a much deeper level, one that Kerouac understands and describes thoroughly in *On the Road*. Having thus the purpose of examining the way in which this continent shapes its travels, the following section will take a closer look at Sal's “zigzagging” journeys across America as well as bringing into discussion the anarchetypal character of their structure.

“Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?”

As Brian Massumi accurately describes humanity's relation with the principle of mobility, “there is movement everywhere, from as far back as we can see, and nowhere is it linear. [...] There is a principle of unrest that traverses human history,”³⁵ and the American continent makes no exception. One of the many critical studies that identify mobility as a central characteristic of the American culture, Wilbur Zelinsky's *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (1992), does so by demonstrating how it's reflected in the landscape of motels, highways, drive-ins and fast food. Another scholar also notes that “in America, a nation constructed by movement into and beyond flexible frontiers, the journey into the unknown has served to define national history and identity. [...] From Pilgrims to frontier explorers, from John Smith and Lewis and Clark to Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett, American heroes have been travellers,” and there is a freedom of movement that always corresponds with a freedom of identity in American origin stories.³⁶

All these ideas are clearly expressed in *On the Road*, where mobility is one of the central themes as well. Tim Cresswell's study, “Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac's *On the Road*,” shows how mobility takes a dual function in Kerouac's novel: besides being a very important part of the mainstream North American culture, it also represents a form of resistance to the era's social conformity, “a geographical expression of discontent with the hegemonic culture of the United States in the nineteen fifties – a culture ensconced in the family/small-town/home-ownership nexus of the ‘American Dream’.”³⁷ In addition, Cresswell identifies two main elements that compose the theme of mobility and that create a pattern throughout the book: “the disillusion with places and fascination with ‘just going’.”³⁸ There is a certain confusion and nonsense that characterizes the urban space and that is replaced, during the road trips, by the thrill and joy of simply being on the move. In this way, “the road becomes so important that it becomes their meaning – a symbol of holiness and purity inhabited by mad angels, hungry for experience.”³⁹

In fact, the whole generation of the Beats was characterized by a strong desire for movement and a deep sensibility for the “Go!” imperative. “We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing

32. Ibid., 55.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid., 36.

35. Brian Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest. Activist Philosophy in the Expanded Field* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2017), 7-8.

36. Mary Paniccia Carden, “Adventures in Auto-Eroticism: Economies of Traveling Masculinity in *On the Road* and *The First Third*,” in *What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 78.

37. Cresswell, “Mobility as Resistance,” 257.

38. Ibid., 254.

39. Ibid., 255.



to talk about anymore. The only thing to do was go⁴⁰ says Kerouac in the novel. Nevertheless, it's important to note how these journeys meant more than just physical distances covered on a map. The Beats did travel "from coast to coast across the United States and from border to border, to the subarctic, to Mexico, to the jungles of South America, to Europe and North Africa, to India and the Orient", but the journey also took place inward, like "a passage through the arid zones and waste tracts, the wildernesses and nether regions of the self."⁴¹ Knowing that this perpetual need of "going" was connected to the idea of going with the flow of inspiration, of discovering and bringing forth "the latent powers of the deeper, truer self"⁴², there is the risk of forgetting that, despite their real energy and faith, *On the Road's* protagonists "are not so much searching for vision as they are attempting to avoid certain realities of their lives."⁴³ The complexity of the novel resides in the fact that Sal and Dean keep avoiding attachment to places and people on one level, but they also keep "seeking the core of another place – America – on another scale."⁴⁴

However, this American essence is often associated by Sal with no one else than his road companion, Dean. "The original American character that had by the twentieth-century been rendered impotent,"⁴⁵ representative of "a traditional American ethos more fundamental than any Protestant work ethic,"⁴⁶ Dean "is a stark warning to Americans that they are on the verge of losing faith in a wild and innocent individualism that once recognized will be their strength and salvation."⁴⁷ At the same time, the dubiety of his character makes him resemble even more the continent on which he so furiously drives: "promise and piety on the one hand, wickedness and fraud on the other."⁴⁸ Moriarty reflects the American culture just as *On the Road* also does, "in the way it opposes fluidity and form, ecstasy and reason, individual and society, East and West, frontier past and urban present."⁴⁹

All of these concepts are strongly tied together and experienced simultaneously by Sal and Dean due to their perpetual movement between the two spheres. However, this movement is not at all linear, as the journeys that take people from point A to point B usually are. As it will be demonstrated in the next section of this paper, the type of mobility that *On the Road* brings forth through the road trips of its characters is an anarchetypal one, one where both the events that happen and the places that are being visited could be reordered, as the meaning of the novel would remain the same.

"You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?"

Particularly useful for my demonstration is Deleuze's and Guattari's "rhizome," a concept that is characteristic to America both as a historical and a geographical space. The continent is not entirely "immune from domination by trees or the search for roots", a thing which is "evident even in the literature, in the quest for a national identity and even for a European ancestry or genealogy", but all the important things that have happened around the middle of the 20th century seem to have taken the route of the rhizome: "the beatniks, the underground, bands and gangs, successive lateral offshoots in immediate connection with an outside." Even the directions' cultural associations are reversed within this territory:

"the search for arborescence and the return to the Old World occur in the East. But there is the rhizomatic West, with its Indians without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers. There is a whole American 'map' in the West, where even the trees form rhizomes. America reversed the directions: it put its Orient in the West, as if it were precisely in America that the earth came full circle; its West is the edge of the East."⁵⁰

40. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991 [1957]), 119.

41. Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys*, 12.

42. *Ibid.*, 13.

43. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 28.

44. Cresswell, "Mobility as Resistance", 260.

45. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, 81.

46. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 22.

47. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, 54.

48. Richardson, "Peasant Dreams", 219.

49. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 52.

50. Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 19.

The Northern American continent is thus regulated by norms that go against the usual linear understanding of a geographical space, and Kerouac's alter-ego learns this soon after the beginning of his first trip: "It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes."⁵¹ From that moment on, Sal will approach his trips with more spontaneity and flexibility, being carried by the whims of hitchhiking "in erratic but thrilling zigzags across the nation"⁵², precisely because "America will not turn out to be a single reality but a series of conflicting realities."⁵³

There are many scholars who noted this fragmented and discontinuous structure of the narrative: while the development of action was swinging "back and forth between East Coast and West Coast like a huge pendulum,"⁵⁴ in the initial version of the text, in the published one there is still a sense that "chapter length and pace, the speed of the latter created by the alternating of short and long sentences coupled with the piling on of serial descriptors like small pearl necklaces themselves, create an episodic quality in which a preponderance of language is devoted to describing what happens rather than to the analysis of the actions"⁵⁵. Moreover, the same Nancy Grace examines how some readings claim that this leads to a "lack of physical and psychological progress – a sense that nothing ever really happens in the story, that Sal is not going anywhere" because all of his trips represent just "a continuum of motion through time and space with some moments more intense than others, but the whole a repetition of action and thought". However, she argues that this approach resonates with Kerouac's perspective from the late forties and early fifties that "wisdom is an ever-changing reality acquired slowly through repetition."⁵⁶

There is indeed a common pattern of excitement, exploration and disappointment that constructs each of Sal's journeys: he starts by running from an established routine in order to search for "kicks" and knowledge of time, and then he goes through "a series of road experiences that end in vision, exhaustion, and a return to the established order. Sal flees the order of his aunt's home, enters the disorder of the road, and returns at the end of each trip to figure his losses and gains."⁵⁷ He is therefore caught between the West that lures him, but offers him no home, and the East which he doesn't consider as a proper home either, thus preferring to always be in between them rather than sit tight somewhere⁵⁸. But it's in this perpetual movement when "varied countryside and cities flash by – the faster the better – [that] Sal is at his most excited or content. When he slows down enough to actually see America in detail, he finds that what had previously excited or contented him was yet another simulation of sorts, that movement merely blurs the constructedness of the entire country."⁵⁹ Towards the end of the book, Sal realizes that the essence of America, the mysterious "IT" they have been searching for throughout the entire novel, emerges only on the road and as the road itself rather than as an object that can be attained or an end-point on a map. This is also the reason why "most of the book takes place neither at the East Coast nor West Coast, but in the country's middle, on the road, in-between, where rhizomatic becoming occurs."⁶⁰

If we go back to Braga's characterization of the anarchetype, we can see that, contrary to an archetypal text where the narrative episodes "succeed one another and build up to a totalizing meaning, no such straightforward arrangement and predictable conclusion can be found in an anarchetypal work, where each scene or setting may be self-sufficient, fully integrated, and meaningful."⁶¹ This is a point that stays valid if applied to *On the Road* as well: each of Sal's and Dean's journeys is valuable and meaningful on its own, each of them is filled with experiences and encounters that could be reordered or multiplied

51. Kerouac, *On the Road*, 13.

52. Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads," 40.

53. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 12.

54. Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987 [1973]), 223.

55. Grace, *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, 85.

56. *Ibid.*, 86.

57. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 23.

58. *Ibid.*, 58.

59. Rachel Ligairi, "When Mexico Looks Like Mexico: The Hyperrealization of Race and The Pursuit of The Authentic," in *What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, ed. Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 145.

60. Abel, "Speeding Across the Rhizome," 243.

61. Braga, "Anarchetype," 125.



without really affecting the final meaning of the novel. That is also because we can look at Kerouac's prose "as constituting a literary machine that produces affects, not a signifying, representational system that requires an interpretative search for hidden meanings."⁶² Of course, the book's narrative strategy is still rather traditional when we compare it to later postmodern works (Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example) or to other anarchetypal journeys (Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or much earlier works such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Lucian of Samosata's *A True Story*), or even when we put it next to Kerouac's following texts, but it is important to note that *On the Road* still "constitutes a significant aesthetic achievement by means of the introduction of repetition as a narrative strategy that permeates through Kerouac's entire oeuvre, both in terms of his composition habits and regarding the characters' actions."⁶³

Another essential aspect of this novel is that the journeys' anarchetypal character is also reflected in the type of language used by Kerouac to describe these things. His poetics seems to demarcate "a new form of writing: not the slow, deliberate sentence of the dominant modernist tradition, but the speedy, visceral, combinatory, over-exuberant conjunction of words that form sentences radically different from their predecessors."⁶⁴ In this type of creative process that resembles typing more than writing and that could be seen as a feature of many other postmodern novels from American literature, sentences "endlessly wind along and bifurcate space like the rhizomatic roads that [Kerouac's] characters travel."⁶⁵ In its turn, this also leads to an "oddly impersonal" writing that is in tune with the other forces that shape Kerouac's poetics. "The speed generated by the process of typing, paralleling the speed accumulated by Dean and Sal's perpetual motion, [...] produces a certain flatness of the reading experience. There is too much 'outside' to describe for Kerouac to worry too much about the inside of his characters."⁶⁶ And yet, rather than criticizing his lack of interest for creating psychologically well-rounded characters or saying that his characters "move so quickly that they miss the supposed depth of the American landscape", I agree with Abel's claim that their speedy travelling should be regarded "as an intensifying, immanent response to the material they encounter – the American earth in all its extensiveness."⁶⁷

If the Northern American space is therefore consisting of conflicting realities that fascinate in their coexistence but disappoint when examined up close, it means that movement, chaos, disorder and multiplicity are the values that, rather than stability, order and centrality, are best fitted to describe the essence of this space. Sal's comments often hint "at the chaos and structural looseness of a life lived on the road"⁶⁸, and as a result, the type of inhabitants that such a space requires matches the characteristics of the decentered postmodern man: "Unlike the modern subject, who was concerned with securing and guaranteeing an essential, single-cell, unique identity, contemporary man no longer feels the threat of schizoidity with the same fear and reticence. The evolution of the current subject can be defined as a pulverization of personality, moreover, as a programmatic assumption of multiple identities"⁶⁹. In *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty fits this description perfectly. Just as a Deleuzian nomad who is "mentally free to drift or 'deterritorialize' beyond law, contract, or institution,"⁷⁰ he refuses "to stick to any kind of personal or spatial loyalty" and he is "a product of circulation itself: born on the road [...], he was shuttled around the west by his traveling tinsmith father and was raised unfamiliar with mainstream American identities (responsible father, stable husband, loyal friend, breadwinner). Circulation seems to have freed him from traditional social roles,"⁷¹ as well as making him feel at home instead of alienated in the vastness of America. When 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,"⁷² he doesn't deny the continent's heterogeneity but rather welcomes its inherent plurality as a familiar space where he can fully exert his need of always being in movement.

62. Abel, "Speeding Across the Rhizome," 229.

63. *Ibid.*, 249.

64. *Ibid.*, 232.

65. *Ibid.*, 234.

66. *Ibid.*, 238.

67. *Ibid.*, 239.

68. Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads", 50.

69. Braga, "Anarchetype", 247.

70. Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads", 56.

71. *Ibid.*, 41.

72. Kerouac, *On the Road*, 120-121.

But if we return to the way in which the very language used by Kerouac to narrate Sal's journeys reflects the book's sense of unrest, its speed and structural looseness, we must also mention how Kerouac planned to write *On the Road*. Despite complying to the editors' multiple requests of editing it once it was done and publishing it several years after its completion, the writer is quoted to have said that "I'm going to get me a roll of shelf-paper, feed it into the typewriter, and just write it down as fast as I can, exactly like it happened, all in a rush, the hell with these phony architectures – and worry about it later."⁷³ Using typical stimulants for long-distance drivers – "coffee and furious speed,"⁷⁴ Kerouac created an intentional physical connection between the actual road and his writing method: in a letter to Cassady, he describes how "I've telled all the road now. Went fast because road is fast... wrote whole thing on strip of paper 120 foot long (tracing paper that belonged to Cannastra.) – just rolled it through typewriter and in fact no paragraphs... rolled it out on floor and it looks like a road."⁷⁵ This is still visible in the many sections where his writing takes the shape of an "impressionistic frenzy": "in descriptions of driving, Kerouac uses complex and breathless sentences, unconnected observations of passing scenes, pile-ups of adjectives, exclamations and an emphasis on verbs (rather than nouns) – all to complement his novel's effort to portray an American road of energy and freedom."⁷⁶ Another critic, Tim Cresswell, comments upon this aspect by saying that "the zigzagging of the plot [was] matched by the zigzagging of the language. [...] Kerouac was attempting to create a non-stop statement of an experience that kept moving, using language with enough energy to break through the limitations of conventional notions of sentence form. [...] The sentences reflect the blowing and breathing of a saxophone solo,"⁷⁷ an affirmation with which we can move the discussion towards the ways in which *On the Road's* tone and composition matches other particularly anarchetypal arts: jazz music and Action Painting.

Notes and colours

In his 1999 study entitled "Jazz America: Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," Douglas Malcolm mentions a substantial list of critics who have discussed the influence of jazz on Kerouac's prose (Mike Janseen, Bruce Cook, Robert Hipkiss, Malcolm Cowley, Regina Weinreich etc.), but he also notes how they tended "to explicate Kerouac's goals rather than to ask fundamental generic questions about what constitutes jazz and whether it might reasonably serve as a literary model". The fact that both the writer and the critics use very little formal terminology when it comes to speaking about jazz is the reason why Malcolm connects the significant role of this type of music in the novel to its "ideological, behavioral, and semiotic implications [...] rather than [to] the direct application of its formal rules."⁷⁸

While also drawing inspiration from Whitman's or Rimbaud's poetry, which encouraged personal and spontaneous styles, Beat poetry and fiction had its main origins in hip culture and in the jazz music it so highly valued⁷⁹. When he explained his theory in a "Paris Review" interview in 1968, Kerouac formulated his principles of spontaneity in the following manner: "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."⁸⁰ A text constructed in this way obviously plays with the traditional linear development of the plot and *On the Road's* narrative flow particularly "move[s] the reader across the pages at a fast pace as the central characters race across the land."⁸¹ With passages that contain "rhythms and cadences and internal sound systems in the manner of prose-poetry derived from jazz," we can even argue that "the

73. John Clellon Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1967), 78.

74. Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads," 48.

75. Jack Kerouac, "Selected Letters: To Neal Cassady, May 22, 1951", in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Viking, 1995), 606.

76. Larson, "Free Ways and Straight Roads," 48.

77. Cresswell, "Mobility as Resistance," 256.

78. Douglas Malcolm, "Jazz America: Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*," *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. 1 (1999): 85-86.

79. Foster, *Understanding the Beats*, 13-14.

80. Regina Weinreich, *Kerouac's Spontaneous Poetics. A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001 [1987]), 9.

81. Cresswell, "Mobility as Resistance," 256.



only thing linear about the plot is its temporal progression" and that the whole novel "is a reflection of the speed, mobility and restlessness of youth in a modern industrial society."⁸²

There are many passages in the book where Dean and Sal are listening to live jazz music, but the latter's descriptions about it or about the musicians aren't really underlining their innovations or formal musical advances. Instead, Kerouac focuses on their vitalism and their particular way of thinking, regarding the music's apparent madness and its restless energy as the essential symbol of the America of his generation.⁸³ Moreover, if we return to the behavioral aspect of jazz that guides Kerouac's narrative and creates such a rhizomatic journey across America that we can include it in the category of anarchetypal works, we notice that this frantic movement goes beyond its physicality and is not present only in how the characters travel, but also "in their drug experiences, in their conversations, in their relations with each other and with women"⁸⁴. One can think of the way in which a jazz refrain works: the themes build up layer upon layer and so does Kerouac's writing, "page upon page [and] experience upon experience, piling up words and sentences until a threshold is reached at which the entire structure crashes." However, rather than producing a negative outcome to the narrative flow, this part of the writing and musical process behaves like an entity that "rhizomatically grows from the middle, [...] acquiring a momentum that simultaneously reaches a blockage – a consistency – and explodes."⁸⁵

On the other hand, although we've established that the novel's frantic movement also influences other levels besides the characters' physical travels, the impact on this part is also important due to how Kerouac's poetics of repetition creates a whole new map of the American landscape.

"His jazz-like, energetic composition forces language to such an extreme that it leaves behind the level of representation – the classic sense of writing. Instead, it gives the impression [of] writing akin to the itinerative sound of the jazz saxophone, of the 'go, go, go' of Dean's mad cheering – and of the incessant and speedy clicking and clacking sounds of the typewriter. Kerouac's map produces a real map of America that is as strikingly unfamiliar to most readers as it is dissimilar to what American literature thus far had to offer about the geography of the country."⁸⁶

Of course, all the abovementioned elements resonate with the contents of what would later become *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, as Kerouac began writing it in 1953 at the request of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs as some sort of systematization of his methods, but published it only shortly after *On the Road*. As a consequence, most critics agree that this type of aesthetic developed only later, reaching its peak in the rest of Kerouac's novels, so they refrain from analyzing *On the Road* solely based on this reference.

Last but not least, another artistic practice that can be brought into discussion as a parallel to Kerouac's type of writing is Jackson Pollock's Action Painting. Tim Hunt has a particularly extensive take on this argument, claiming that in this type of art,

"the artist becomes a performer even though the viewer never sees the performance as it takes place, but sees instead the record of the performance, the record of a dance that took place in colour and the texture of paint. Pollock does not represent objects or interpret them. His performance, the interplay of emotion, imagination, and an intense focus on the medium of the art itself, results in an object that has something of the same density, complexity, and even arbitrariness of natural objects, and the objectlike quality of the canvases can be seen in the importance of scale and texture to their effect. Ultimately, it seems that Pollock's genius has something to do with his sense of how to approach time through space, and motion through inanimate object."⁸⁷

Resembling "a dance in language" just as a Pollock canvas resembles "a dance in colour,"⁸⁸ Kerouac's

82. Ibid., 256-257.

83. Malcolm, "Jazz America," 96-97.

84. Ibid., 102.

85. Abel, "Speeding Across the Rhizome," 236.

86. Ibid., 237.

87. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 144.

88. Ibid..

prose takes its readers across the north American highways following an improvised trajectory that reflects his characters' desire to simply be in movement rather than arrive at a certain destination. Additionally, if traditional narratives are made of episodes that belong together in the order chosen by their writer and help the reader arrive at the final meaning of the book through their progression, in the case of anarchetypal works each episode (or each journey, in *On the Road*) bears full meaning on its own and it could therefore occupy almost any other place in the narrative without affecting its course. What Tim Hunt affirms about works from Action Painting or from jazz music could thus be easily validated in an analysis of *On the Road* as well:

"The paintings of a Pollock or the recordings of a [Charlie] Parker form an impressive body of work, but each body of work is essentially a collection. Even though Pollock's painting shows development, there is no inevitable structure that determines that one canvas must be dealt with before or after another. Each canvas is an independent performance, and this is also the case with Parker."⁸⁹

Conclusions

This paper's analysis of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* has examined the degree in which the novel fictionalizes (or not) the historical period, the events and the characters it discusses, then it took the book through a socio-historical context and through themes like its rhizomatic structure, the way in which it reflects the American culture and essence and its connections to jazz music and Action Painting. Additionally, I put Corin Braga's concept of the "anarchetype" in connection with all these elements in order to demonstrate *On the Road*'s belonging to the literary category of rhizomatic narratives that take the form of journeys without a particular destination. In the end, the findings of this research showed that, despite the presence of some archetypal characters and narrative stages, the novel's structure gets caught in a larger anarchetypal pattern that becomes even more visible if the book is viewed alongside the other works from Kerouac's oeuvre.

On the Road is filled with some key elements from other flexible-structured arts (such as jazz music or Action Painting), namely repetition, improvisation and experimentation, which create a particular effect when combined with the speed of the characters' road trips, the rhizomatic way in which they crisscross America and Kerouac's own speed-typing of the whole story. Without having to reach a certain destination and desiring only to be permanently in movement, Dean and Sal continue a long tradition of literary anarchetypal journeys that goes as far back as the alexandrine novels, including also genres such chivalry novels or the picaresque novels, the adventure novels, the travelogues or the extraordinary voyages of early modernity. However, their perspective differs by bringing forth aspects that reveal America's essence, thus transforming *On the Road* into a narrative that not only maps the United States' territory in a disordered, plural and decentered way, but also shows the American soul's deep connection to such a way of thinking, travelling and living.

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89. Ibid., 146-147.



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