

LIMINALITY ON THE ROAD: EXPLORING THE MARGINS OF POST-WORLD
WAR II AMERICA.

Master's Thesis

In North American Studies

Leiden University

By

Maxime Zech

S1601075

Date: 04 January 2016

Supervisor: Dr. Johanna C. Kardux

Second reader: Dr. Sara A. Polak

“The road is life.” – Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*.

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Introduction

“We were in the middle of an identity crisis prefiguring nervous breakdown for the whole United States,” Allen Ginsberg wrote in the introduction to William Burroughs’ *Junky* (1953) (qtd. in Holton, “Sordid” 16). Post-World War Two America’s national identity was in a state of flux, its youth leading the charge in a battle to gain control on the future. It was a time in which established structures were forcibly ruptured, creating a new, dynamic in-between state. That in-between state became the locus for a struggle that would result in either renewal or regression. The Beat generation occupied this space, giving it meaning and form, creating a commonality in which dissenting youths saw reflected their own fears and dreams. This thesis will reconsider this revolutionary era, its symbols and expressions as active sites of social and cultural negotiation, redefinition and criticism, by focusing on one of the most enduring texts that, like a time stamp, preserves and illuminates the zeitgeist of the Beat movement, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). Kerouac’s novel is inscribed with the social tensions of this movement and has been considered as a generational text.

Kerouac’s novel remains one of the most enduring texts even over half a century after its initial publication because underneath its address to its contemporary generation, it speaks in general terms to a universal feeling of disaffection. Despite the fact that Kerouac’s protagonist Sal Paradise is well into his twenties at the outset of the novel, the exuberance with which he seeks out and participates in youthful experimentation is accepted and sometimes emulated by individuals coming out of adolescence. Ana Sobral explains that “[b]eing young is then also a matter of self-

perception and of performance,” which explains why authors or artists belonging to the Beat generation are adopted by later generations for their ability to “articulate and even act out their oppositional impulses” (*Opting Out* 11). Kerouac’s novels are a chronological series of romans à clef, each of which exhibits a personal response to or appropriation of style, from an homage to Thomas Wolfe in *The Town and the City* (1950) to a conscious departure from Wolfe in *On the Road* and beyond. *On the Road* is a record of youthful experimentation not only with ideology, sexuality, drugs and philosophy, but also with literary style, form, and poetics. Drawing on my previous training in Anthropology, I propose re-viewing this text through British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s concept of liminality, which will enable us to explore the complexity of Kerouac’s view of the movement he was part of, as well as illuminate the universality of its exploration of self-definition.

On the Road is a picaresque narrative of zeitgeist ideals and experience set against political, social, and economic realities. The narrator Sal Paradise, a war veteran and author, and his companion Dean Moriarty, a car thief that takes on odd jobs, are the counter-normative protagonists in Kerouac’s dystopian but ultimately realistic and sometimes hyper-realistic world, who come to expose the social disconnect, hypocrisy and corruption of American society on a meta-level. By focusing on the margins, the author and his protagonists try to diagnose what ails America by looking inward to the self. Rather than constructing Jack Kerouac and the Beat characters in his novel as strictly *counter-cultural*, rebellious and deviant, however, I will aim to show the author’s participation in and membership of the culture that he criticizes and supposedly eschews through his “countercultural” ideology, by calling attention to the liminal aspects of the novel.

Victor Turner identifies the liminal stage as the interstitial position between the larger “structure of positions” that make up our society (*Forest* 93). He explains that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between” the positions assigned by social structure (*Ritual* 95). The social bond that exists in liminal phases and has its own set of symbols and ties is referred to as *communitas*, a different kind of social connectivity than the community that occurs outside the liminal phase. *Communitas* “presents a model of human relatedness other than what routinely prevails, one that contrasts with the mediated, abstract, and ultimately arbitrary nature of social roles and modes of relation established by law, language, and custom” (Rowe 128). Turner’s treatment and explanation of *communitas* is admittedly sparse compared to his repeated return to and elaboration on liminality. It does, however, make clear that there exists a mode of human relatedness within liminality that is crucial to our understanding of the ability of the liminal phase to affect the structure of society. Expanding on Turner’s formulation, I will argue that the counter-cultural movement that Jack Kerouac and the Beats were a part of, and the ideology of which is explored in *On the Road*, can be considered through the schema of liminality, as the novel investigates American society’s transition between different socio-political states. As Homi K. Bhabha has pointed out, the “in-between” spaces of socio-cultural development “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (2).

On the Road has been discussed before in terms of deviance and marginality, and through concepts such as Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque (e.g. Campbell), and Said’s Orientalism (e.g. Holton “Kerouac”; Wilson). A comprehensive analysis of the generational text through the theoretical framework of liminality can serve to widen

the perspective on how the narrative functions as a site of generational representation and counter-cultural discourse. Moreover, liminality can be seen as a crucial missing link between several schools of thought, including Bakhtin's Carnavalesque and Said's Orientalism. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that "Bakhtin's work significantly parallels that of Victor Turner...which puts carnival into a much wider perspective" (17; qtd. in Klapcsik 9). Although Turner's and Bakhtin's theories partly overlap, there are also fundamental differences between them. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, however, the primary goal here is not to explore the differences between theories, but to make the case that reading a work of literature through a modernized construction of liminality helps to highlight contemporary social struggles embedded in the narrative.

Some literary scholars working on the Beat Generation and Kerouac's *On the Road* have mentioned the relevance of liminality in passing (e.g., Ligairi; Martinez; Skinazi; Trudeau), but none of these critics have taken it as a point of departure in their analysis of Kerouac's novel, or systematically worked through the theory. I hold that analyzing the novel as a whole, and certain key passages in particular, systematically through the lens of liminality allows for a dynamic and complex reading of the characters, and their place in the social context. It not only allows for a microcosmic glance into the contemporary social politics of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the Beats' efforts to carve out a space for themselves between established and accepted social structures, preserved within Kerouac's blend of roman à clef, New Journalist, and stream-of-consciousness style, but it also illustrates the narrative potential of the liminal space. I believe that liminality can be especially useful within literature that deals with personal or social development, social malaise, post-War disillusionment, and other cultural processes. Victor Turner's concept of liminality is

a useful lens through which the ritual significance of countercultural literature can be reexamined and reassessed in order to demonstrate how these generational texts negotiate and symbolize social tensions and values from the counterculture's rise to its ultimate fall, and will help to situate these texts back into the society they are said to deviate from.

Chapter 1

Re-viewing Liminality: Modernizing the Concept

In his book *The Forest of Symbols*, published in 1967, Victor Turner considers and expands the work that anthropologist Arnold van Gennep conducted in small-scale African communities. Van Gennep's *rites de passage* are a class of rituals that "indicate and constitute transitions between states" (Turner *Forest* 93). Both Turner and Van Gennep consider society to be made up of a structure of positions. Rituals of passage occur in-between these structured positions, accompanying "every change of place, state, social position and age" (qtd. in Turner, *Ritual* 94). Van Gennep identifies three stages in a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation (*Rites* 11).

In the first stage, the "initiand" or neophyte is isolated from the rest of the community through a rite that separates sacred from secular time and space; during the transition, which van Gennep calls "margin" or "limen" (meaning "threshold in Latin), the initiand goes through an ambivalent social phase or limbo. During the final stage of incorporation or "reaggregation," the initiand returns to a new and relatively stable position in the society at large. (Spariosu 33).

Where Van Gennep confines his formulation of these *rites de passage* to small-scale, "simple" societies, Victor Turner is able to create links to a wider consideration of the term in larger societies by expanding the nature and characteristics of rites of passage. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Turner classifies the cultural properties of the liminal phase as *communitas*. *Communitas* is one of the two major "models' for human interrelatedness, juxtaposed and alternating" (96). The first, structure, can be simplified as the dominant, hierarchical society. The second, anti-

structure, appearing in the liminal period, “is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals” (96). *Communitas* is the relationship forged between individuals in the liminal phase where structured relationships do not exist. “[T]he distinction between structure and *communitas* exists and obtains symbolic expression in the cultural attributes of liminality,” Turner further explains (130).

Citing the examples of millenarian movements, Turner elucidates that manifestations of *communitas* include:

Homogeneity, equality, anonymity, absence of property [...], reduction of all to the same status level, the wearing of uniform apparel [...], sexual continence (or its antithesis, sexual community, both continence and sexual community liquidate marriage and the family, which legitimate structural status) (*Ritual* 111).

These manifestations can also be found in the literature produced by the counterculture, especially if one looks at the road itself as a liminalizing force, a gateway into a *communitas* that is different from the community of the structured, hierarchical dominant society that exists off the road.

This liminalizing road narrative is especially prevalent in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, in which the novel’s protagonists Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty escape structured society and enter into the *communitas* of the liminal road. It is crucial to note that the liminality in *On the Road* is not an effect of the ritual moment as it was proposed by Arnold van Gennep and, to an extent, Victor Turner, which is sanctioned by the larger society, and occurs only once at various stages in life. The liminality in Kerouac’s novel is of another nature, one that fits in with the modern society that has eliminated the traditional rite of passage, and is accessible at any stage in life through the road itself. In this sense, it retains some element of the traditional, as the road (or

the frontier in the American tradition) has been sanctioned by the larger society as a space for self-reflection and temporary removal, especially for young people. The road, in its purifying essence and its demand for continuous movement as Jack Kerouac constructs it, is the liminalizing force that allows Sal Paradise, a grown man, to perform the ritual of passage normally reserved for young people.

On the Road presents a “unique historical matrix that allows for a rich analysis of class, race, gender, and the cultural and political interstices through which they interact” (Martinez 5). Post-World War II America “saw the creation of a variety of social strategies” (Martinez 7). One of these social strategies is the Beat movement, of which Jack Kerouac was widely considered the leader and visionary. Kerouac’s novel depicts the Beat generation’s attempt to consolidate its position within a constricting dominant society that saw, as Martinez summarizes it, “the emergence of the civil rights movement, a broadening participation of women in the workforce, encroaching suburbanization, and a significant influx of Mexican workers” (24-25). It was a time, as Mark Richardson argues, in which “a new sense of American national identity was consolidating itself” (220). Simultaneously, as depicted in *On the Road*, the Beat identity was forming itself in this time as well. The counterculture attempted to eke out a heterogeneous space to dampen the effects of a World War II that “seemed to segue so seamlessly into the Cold War”, leaving “little room for the development of critical positions” (Holton, “Sordid” 14). Kerouac aims to develop precisely such a critical position, which utilizes the liminal space to explore alternatives to the restrictive status quo, with its politics aimed at consensus. Within the liminal space of the road, “[r]oles and rules that normally define acceptable conduct may be suspended or inverted, thus encouraging a range of behavior and expression not fully available

within the boundaries that conventionally organize and restrain daily life” (Rowe 128).

As Robert Holton points out, the socio-economic context of the time during which *On the Road* was being written and published, and during which the Beat movement gained momentum, was one of expanding corporate enterprise (“Sordid” 11). America’s modernistic drive was reaching further and further into Middle America, ironing out inconsistencies on the map. Holton makes a special note of the publication of David Riesman’s 1950 sociological analysis *The Lonely Crowd*, which argues that, in the contemporary consensus society, “the American character – indeed the human character – was entering a new inevitable stage of social evolution marked by a diminution of individuality and difference” (“Sordid” 12). The Beat generation was exploring ideas of spontaneity and authenticity, involving themselves specifically with difference and marginality as a contrast to the conformity demanded by mainstream society. In this sense, the Beat generation’s ethos can be seen as a willful attempt to “stop the machine” (*Road* 45), hold off that impending social evolution Holton describes, and attempt to sustain the peace of adolescence that the war complicated for them. Kerouac and other Beat writers aimed to expose the image of America as a nation of prospering, happy, middle-class families as false and instead depict a youth in limbo, searching for kicks and meaning amongst the bums, hobos and hustlers of the American night.

Reading *On the Road* in the terms of Turner’s liminality highlights the social shift attempted by the Beats as it is addressed in its literature. The liminal places and characters in *On the Road* allow Kerouac paradoxically to simultaneously deny and affirm the dominant culture, while also staying faithful to and modifying traditional American literary formulae. There is arguably little separation between Kerouac’s

fictional characters and the historical figures they were based on. Sal Paradise's vacillation between dominant society and the countercultural community of the Beats has been widely attributed to Jack Kerouac himself as well. On the surface, there are also very few differences between the original manuscript of Kerouac's largely autobiographical novel, and the published version of *On the Road*, in which most names were changed. Kerouac has played with narrative format and style in the published version, however, when the manuscript and published version are read side by side, the use of metaphors and other literary tools becomes obvious, as pointed out by Matt Theado in his essay "Revisions of Kerouac."

On the Road is not the literary expression of one long, ritual road trip but is composed of several trips over the course of several years. Still, Kerouac's characters are different on the road than off the road, because the road itself functions as a liminal gateway, a platform that facilitates the "separation" prerequisite before the liminal phase. It is a separation that occurs on a multitude of planes, including physical, social, political, economic, spatial, and in some cases temporal levels. The road, as will be made clear, is a liminalizing force which functions as a "temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order that constitutes any specific cultural 'cosmos' [or the traditional order of culture]" (Turner, "Liminal" 73).

Chapter 2

The Road as Liminal Gateway: Simulating Frontiers Old and New

“Perhaps this is our strange and haunting paradox here in America – that we are fixed and certain only when we are in movement”

- Thomas Wolfe, *You Can't Go Home Again*.

In Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the liminal phase of development between adolescence and adulthood is stretched out and maintained through movement, socio-economic instability, drugs, and avoidance of family commitment. Social lives, family structure, and stable jobs are disrupted by the characters' choice to go on the road. As Naomi Rosh White and Peter B. White argue, “[Travel] appears to act as a transitional time, providing an interval away from social pressures and new or different responsibilities and roles” (201). Once on the road, any previous socio-economic hierarchies fall to the wayside in favor of the “intense comradeship and egalitarianism” that characterizes *communitas* (Turner, *Ritual* 95). On the road, there is “room for everybody” (*Road* 22).

The road's permissiveness and anonymity when compared to the structured lives left behind is such that it affords a freedom of self-expression and discovery. Sal refers to it as “[t]he protective road where nobody would know us” (203), emphasizing the road's capability of offering a blank slate. As White and White point out, the construction of liminality within a framework of socio-cultural transition between youth and adult, between underdeveloped and socially molded, as a rite of passage, also finds meaning in the notion of travel as “transition” (201). The neutral time available on the road is not only taken to evade personal histories, or search for

individual meaning, but it is also a time away from familiarized constructions of *identity* within the established structure. “Like many young veterans after the Second World War, *On the Road*’s restless protagonist is searching for a place within the nation” (Larson 36).

The road has retained its mythic connection to national and personal identity throughout American history. For the Beats, the road became the road out of conformity and into a permissive space to pursue and explore alternative ways of life. In Kerouac’s novel, the road takes on a magnetic quality, always calling, giving Sal and Dean “the bug” (*Road* 6, 104). For example, in one instance, Dean and Marylou have a fight after living with one another for a while in New York. Rather than stewing in the negative atmosphere, they all decide to take to the road. Once Dean hunches over the wheel, in his element, Sal remarks: “we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one noble function of the time, *move*” (121, emphasis in original). Dean then says that the past, the “complications,” are behind them, “by miles and inclinations” (121). The road, then, functions as a disruptive yet purifying force, and it is a space that, for both Sal and Dean, does not accommodate the past, because it is a liminal zone between the past and the future, between the place left behind and the destination.

The first stage before the liminal is that of “separation.” Whenever Sal is about to leave friends in the structured social world to go into the unstructured liminal space of the road, there occurs a ritual of separation. Sal watches his friends “recede” as he drives away from them, which signals the physical as well as, perhaps, social separation occurring (141, 208, 243). Sal says that the feeling of separation is “the too-huge world vaulting us, and it’s good-by. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies” (141, sic). In another instance he watches Dean’s friend

Hingham “receding in the dark [...] just like the other figures in New York and New Orleans; they stand uncertainly underneath immense skies, and everything about them is drowned. Where go? What do? What for? – sleep. But this foolish gang was bending onward” (151). These figures are mired in the almost rhythmic day-by-day circle of doubts and questions and hesitations, whereas Sal and Dean are actually *moving* away from that to simply *be*. Sal watches the separation, but then determinedly turns his back on them and fixes his eyes on the liminal road ahead. Once in the liminal zone, the past self no longer exists; it offers opportunities to experiment with identity without consequences. Sal narrates that the road is a pure space (121), uninhibited by social constrictions. The road opens the “golden land” ahead “and all kinds of unforeseen events wait lurking to surprise you and make you glad you’re alive to see” (122).

Being in one’s “eternity at the wheel” (*Road* 255), as Sal puts it, establishes the road and the car as being a liminal gateway where time is slowed down and controllable, and space functions as a palimpsestic interlocutor to the past, the present and the future. When Dean purchases the Hudson, the “slow boat to China” (121), he is able to drive faster and more smoothly than anybody else. The fact that the ’49 Hudson was bought in 1948 is perhaps suggestive of its ex-temporal qualities. This is also the year in which Sal sees a change in Dean, whose madness had now “bloomed into a weird flower” (102). The “new and complete Dean, grown to maturity” is talking frequently about time: “we all know time!” (103). Dean and the Hudson seem to be fused, in some way a part of each other. “[S]ometimes he had no hands on the wheel and yet the car went straight as an arrow, not for once deviating from the white line in the middle of the road that unwound, kissing our left front tire” (105).

Dean's birth on the road on the way to Los Angeles (*Road 3*) is symbolic, creating a permanent tie between him and the road. He has a compulsive need to drive: "I just wanta ride, man!" (203). Dean also has a history of stealing cars, but only for joy rides, as Sal says (9). This is where Dean's permanent liminality becomes clear. He cannot leave the road because it is his home. Since the road is not a home according to the social norms, however, Dean cannot function in normal society, which will be explained further later. Sal, on the other hand, is "fearful of the wheel" and hates driving (109). His need for Dean's control of the road is evident when he gets the Hudson stuck in the mud on the side of the road (145), while Dean can "handle a car under any circumstances," (112).

The road seems to be the only place Dean has any control over life, as well as time. For time does not seem to work for Dean in the same way it does for others. When Dean drives, it is in "no time at all" that they arrive at places (209). Here, as Jason Haslam points out, Dean moves "so fast that, one could say, he propels the car into 'no time'" (450). Dean's ability to drive a thousand miles north and south in thirty hours to move Sal's sister's possessions from Testament to New York also shows his mastery of time through his control of the road (104). Dean's different sense of time also enables him to negotiate his way through thick traffic at 110 miles an hour without causing an accident.

He passed the slow cars, swerved, and almost hit the left rail of the bridge, went head-on into the shadow of the unslowing truck, cut right sharply, just missed the truck's left wheel, almost hit the first slow car, came out from behind the truck to look, all in a matter of two seconds, flashing by and leaving nothing more than a cloud of dust instead of a horrible five-way crash (*Road 215*, sic).

Dean's temporal liminality will be discussed later in more detail, but it is important to understand that this temporal liminality is the result of the liminalizing space of the road itself, with which Dean has a powerful relationship.

According to Ronald Primeau, the American highway, "as on the pilgrimage [...], prescribes its own rituals and codes" and "creates its own community of fellow travelers," which Primeau attributes to "the benefits of liminality on the modern road" (69). These rituals and codes correspond easily with Victor Turner's "communitas." Stephen Mennell uses Frederick Jackson Turner's description of the social (Americanizing) aspects of the frontier to explore the liminal aspect of that frontier. As Turner argues in his frontier thesis (1892), "In the crucible of the frontier... immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics. The process has gone on from early days to our own" (23). Mennell argues that Victor Turner might have said "that the frontier promoted a communitas, in which conventional differences of social class and ethnicity were played down in favor of a common quality of Americanness" (117). It is this "Americanness" that Sal Paradise hopes to learn from the road, as well as from Dean Moriarty. For Dean Moriarty, the road is where he lives; he was born on it, and he can control it, while trusting it to lead him wherever he needs to go. He even sleeps on the road in Mexico (*Road* 269).

Although I agree with Martinez that Kerouac employs symbols and narratives associated with the mythic American frontier, which Sal Paradise uses to inform his hopes for the road as well as its reality, I do not agree that Kerouac himself subscribes to it readily, as the narrative of Sal's gradual disillusionment with the mirage of American and Western experience reveals. On Sal's first road adventure, for example, he arrives in Cheyenne, Wyoming, at a Wild West Week in the historic Wild West

itself. He finds it commoditized and corrupted, however, by “fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire” (*Road* 30). Kerouac here symbolically disrupts the purity of the Western myth early on in the narrative, foreshadowing his later feeling of abandonment by Dean and exclusion from his frontier dreams. As “blank guns” go off, and the saloons are “crowded to the sidewalk,” the spell is broken (30). Sal says he is “amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (30). Furthermore, the mythic cowboys of the American landscape are not the pictures of self-sufficiency that Martinez suggests they are. The cowboys in Kerouac’s narrative affirm an exceptionalist American viewpoint, but significantly are out of touch with reality, stuck somewhere in a symbolic past. From this point, Kerouac embarks on a novel frontier, the old one proving inauthentic and stuck in the past.

Sal’s image of the West is a mere simulation of the West that he has constructed in his imagination, with the help of books, maps and films. Jean Baudrillard argues in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* that “the postmodern is an era of the hyperreal [...] As part of a media-saturated environment, an exchange system of signs has multiplied to the extent that it has become disconnected from the objective world” (qtd. in Ligairi 139-40). Sal’s initial fascination with the West of his future (*Road* 16) is disrupted by his realization that it is merely a construct, and is replaced by his renewed love for the east of his youth. “There is something brown and holy about the east: and California is white like washlines and empty headed – at least that’s what I thought then” (71). He continues to vacillate between the two poles throughout the novel, however, until they decide to venture south.

Dean embodies “an earlier American spirit,” which is that of the rugged individualist in search of new frontiers (Stephenson 158), but updated into the modern. Dean is the America of Carlo Marx’s phrase: “[w]hither goest thou America in thy shiny car in the night?” (*Road* 108). Gregory Stephenson notes that the irony and tragedy of this reading of Dean’s character are that, in industrial, suburban America, there are no new geographical frontiers for him to explore, which keeps him in a perpetual search with no goal (158). This resonates in Sal’s comment that San Francisco, the place where the frontier ended, is “the end of America – no more land – and now there was nowhere to go but back” (*Road* 70). Movement itself becomes the goal, the “one and noble function of the time” (121). The truly new frontier for both Sal and Dean, then, becomes Mexico, “no longer east-west but magic *south*” (241, emphasis in original). For Dean, Mexico is literally a new frontier, because he has never been there before. For Sal, however, it is new in the sense that he doesn’t have the symbolic references to give shape to Mexico. “I couldn’t imagine this trip,” he says (241).

Throughout the trip in Mexico, Sal makes references to American landscapes and culture. Dean, more readily than Sal, leaves America behind both physically and mentally, when he says: “the end of Texas, the end of America, we don’t know no more” (*Road* 249). Although Sal says that leaving America means leaving everything they had “previously known about life, and life on the road,” and that they “had finally found the magic land at the end of the road” (251), Sal is still informed by his American construction of the self. Dean tells Sal to leave everything behind as they enter “a new and unknown phase of things” and to be ready to “*understand* the world as, really and genuinely speaking, other Americans haven’t done before us” (251-252,

emphasis in original). Here, Dean wants to access the liminal space of Mexico, which is truly a *tabula rasa*, uninformed by his American nationality.

Dean's focus on the road in Mexico remains the same as it was in America, proclaiming that the roads in the two countries look the same (252), but that the Mexican road drives *him* instead of the other way around (254). Dean here doesn't seem to have the same control over the road as he does in America. For Sal, his focus on the landscape is also the same, except that he cannot engage fully with Mexico without comparing it to America. "Entering Monterrey was like entering Detroit" (254), or "[t]he strange radio-station antenna of Ciudad Mante appeared ahead, as if we were in Nebraska" (270). Sal is still informed by his idealized vision of individuality, thick with Americanized reference. For Sal, the Mexican road still resonates with American myth. He tells Dean that "this road [...] is also the route of old American outlaws who used to skip over the border and go down to old Monterrey, so if you'll look out on that graying desert and picture the ghost of an old Tombstone hellcat making his lonely exile gallop into the unknown, you'll see further..." (252). And where Sal sees this "further," Dean sees "the world" (252).

Sal calls his road adventure a "pilgrimage" (*Road* 125). The road is "pure" (121) and "holy" (125), and though in his first pilgrimage, Sal's relationship with Dean develops from that of dependence to the realization that Dean is a "rat" (276), and his view of life becomes more clear, he wishes in the end to go on a separate pilgrimage on foot by himself (277). According to Turner, pilgrimages and rites of passage are similar in that they both employ symbols of death and the dead.

This is partly because both pilgrims and initiands are undergoing a separation from a relatively fixed state of life and social status and are passing into a liminal or threshold phase and condition for which none of the rules and few of the experiences of their previous existence had prepared them. In this sense,

they are “dying” from what was and passing into an equivocal domain occupied by those who are (in various ways) “dead” to quotidian existence in social systems (*Process*, 121-22).

Sal’s ability to communicate with the dead will be explored later. For now, however, it is important to note the road’s liminalizing function as well as its capacity to maintain a space in which initiands and the dead are able to communicate. Sal’s visions of ghosts and specters and even his visions of his father occur specifically in the liminal space of the road, and not in the structured space of his home life. The road’s unstructured, egalitarian space allows the characters to assume the positions of the marginal, and communicate with symbols of liminality, such as the dead. As will become clear in the next chapter, the liminal stages that Sal and Dean go through are different, in that Sal is temporarily liminal on the road, while Dean is stuck in a permanent liminal loop.

Chapter 3

Negotiating the Fellahin: The Search for Authenticity

“Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!”

– Allen Ginsberg, “Howl.”

The function of the liminal countercultural figure is keenly echoed within the schematic symbolism of the frontier and Western expansion’s functionality as a safety valve for the pressures of structured society, as theorized by Frederick Jackson Turner (*Frontier* 63). As explained in the previous chapter, the frontier itself plays a role in the liminality of *On the Road*. The specific “safety valve” function of the frontier is also evident most notably in the character of Sal Paradise, whose travels are an escape from the boredom of a structured and conformist life. Sarah Gilead sees the liminal figure as a “moral representative” of the greater social group, while simultaneously serving “the social structure from which he seems to have been separated. The liminal figure provides for his audience a vicarious experience that offers a kind of safety valve for the hostility or frustration engendered by the limitations of structured life” (“Liminality” 184). For the Beat figures depicted in *On the Road*, life *on* the road and the road’s permissive, fluid, and ambiguous social parameters offer a safety valve from the perceived constrictions of mainstream, conformist, domesticated, and hierarchical life *off* the road.

Sal Paradise, the first-person narrator and focalizer of the novel, introduces his adventures as a cure for his discontentment with the state of his life. He tells the reader that he “had just gotten over a serious illness,” and of the “miserably weary

split-up” with his first wife, and his “feeling that everything was dead” (*Road* 3). This is clearly what Victor Turner would call a time of “life crisis” for Sal, and a place from which the character may proceed into the liminal phase, so as to progress to a higher state of personal being. As Turner asserts, the rites that make up society’s reaction to change can be life-crisis rites, or “calendrical” rites. Life-crisis rites mark the transition into a higher status, for example during puberty, marriage, or death, whereas calendrical rites pertain to phenomena that affect the society collectively and on a calendrical basis such as drought, the passage of seasons, or when a whole tribe goes to war (*Ritual* 168-169). Sal wants to temporarily escape his life, and sees Dean Moriarty as the perfect antithesis to, or even a cure for, his “stultified” present life now that “hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle” (*Road* 9).

From the beginning, Sal perceives the petty thief Dean as a welcome contrast to all his other current “intellectual” friends, who borrowed their ideas from Nietzsche and surrealism.

Dean’s intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his “criminality” [...] was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy, it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long-prophesized, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides) (*Road* 9, sic).

As Gregory Stephenson puts it, Dean “represents for Kerouac a fulfillment and a culmination of American identity and an evolutionary step” (159). Sal and Dean embark on their journey through America to discover an authenticity they believe is a cure for the grind and insincerity of capitalism. Sal believes that Dean will be able to guide him to this authenticity, because he believes Dean to be a concentrated version of an authentic “Americanness” that Sal desperately wants to access, as it poses an

exotic counter-narrative to the predictability of the mainstream adult life that Sal is not ready to commit to, despite sentimentalizing and dreaming about it. He tells Dean at the start of Part Four of the novel, for example, that he hopes that they will live on the same street with their families and grow old together that way (*Road* 231). From the beginning of the novel, Dean represents for Sal “a psychological and spiritual reorientation, a new pattern of conduct, and a new system of values including spontaneity, sensuality, energy, intuition, and instinct” (Stephenson 156). Sal initially looks to Dean as mentor to his disciple, adept to his neophyte (156).

Dean represents to Sal the key to the mythic American ideal of rugged individualism. Sal’s first impression of Dean “was of a young Gene Autry – trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent – a sideburned hero of the snowy West” (*Road* 4). Sal sees mirrored in Dean all the marginal, down-and-out, working-class characters of America:

His dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn’t buy a better fit from a custom tailor but only earn it from the Natural Taylor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses. And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drowsy doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills (*Road* 9, sic).

Just as youths absorb readily the rugged individualism, and the accompanying American Dream that flavors dime novels, idolizing the hero of the frontier, so too does Sal idolize Dean and take in the perceived promise of hungry-for-life adventure and authentic American experience. “Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me” (*Road* 10).

Sal hopes his time with Dean will counteract the effect of his Eastern, New York friends who “were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society” (*Road* 9). Sal wants to learn from Dean how to become excited again about life. Furthermore, Sal doesn’t necessarily want to “opt out” of society, as Ana Sobral puts it, but he wants to temporarily remove himself from his social position, to become a blank slate, a liminal character unburdened and un-tethered by social hierarchies and in this way blend in amongst the lower class, marginal populations of America. Sal doesn’t escape society for purposes of meaningless wandering, simple tourism or pure escapism, but also to improve his craft. “I was a young writer and I wanted to take off,” Sal writes (10); he “needed new experiences” (9). His escapes are therefore not an opting out, but an effort to gain some greater understanding that may improve his standing in and understanding of society and the world.

Along the road, Sal finds himself, consciously or subconsciously, growing farther and farther distant from what is both spatially as well as socially, physically and temporally, familiar to him. Setting off on the road by himself for the first time, Sal arrives at a moment in which he accesses a liminal state that the road opens up for him: “That was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn’t know who I was – I was far away from home [...] and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn’t scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost” (*Road* 15). Sal is at this juncture the “*tabula rasa*” that Turner prescribes as the ideal neophyte in liminality, “a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group, in those respects that pertain to the new status” (*Ritual* 103). From this point in Sal’s travels, he is able to absorb the “knowledge and wisdom” of the Beat and other marginal, liminal, characters that he will encounter on the road. Sal is at this point

“betwixt and between” (*Ritual* 95) his old life and his new one, and between “high” and “low” society, precisely “halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future” (*Road* 15-16).

Sal’s separation from society to facilitate the liminal phase continues with his pulling away from the friends that have already found their positions in society. When Sal first arrives in Denver, he is unable to reach Dean and Carlo Marx, and has to go through his friend Chad King to find them. Chad, however, is part of a group of Sal’s old friends who the protagonist sees are distancing themselves from the “gang” at this stage of the novel; they are “generally agreeing to ignore Dean Moriarty and Carlo Marx,” and Sal finds himself “smack in the middle of this interesting war” (*Road* 35). Sal’s separation from his “intellectual” friends works on the meta-level to distinguish the Beats from other social thinkers of the time, as well as from the Lost Generation of disaffected American writers that preceded them. Here, Kerouac places his protagonist “smack in the middle” of the contemporary social context in America, in the liminal place between those who are “Hip” and those who are “Square.” In his controversial 1957 essay on hipster culture “The White Negro.” Norman Mailer illustrates these binaries:

One is Hip or one is Square (the alternative which each new generation coming to American life is beginning to feel), one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed (“White Negro” 284).

Sal is torn between these two worlds of the hipster and the square American. Within Sal’s own “gang,” the division between those satisfied with inheriting and advancing the conventions of the older generation and those who want to start something new is exemplified in Sal’s inability to communicate with the former

group. Roland Major, the second of the gang's members Sal tries to stay with before finding Carlo and Dean, is stuck on imitating Ernest Hemingway in writing as well as his Europhilic lifestyle, appropriating the malaise of the earlier Lost Generation to give form to his own sense of disaffection. The novel he is writing speaks about two travelers who come to Denver to find that "the arty types were all over America, sucking up its blood" (*Road* 37). As the Beats were part of the wider avant-garde arts movement, Major is here referring to types such as Dean and Carlo.

Sal claims that Major and he are great friends because "he thought I was the farthest thing from an arty type" (37). Where Sal gets excited about watching boxcars go by in America, Major waxes lyrical about the wines of France. From a socio-economic standpoint, moreover, Major is living in a "really swank apartment" with Tim Gray (36) whereas Carlo, whose residence becomes Denver headquarters for his friends, is staying in "a basement apartment" which according to Sal symbolizes "most beautifully" the "underground monsters of that season in Denver" that Carlo and Dean were (35). Sal's decision to stick with Carlo and Dean and leave Major behind is symbolic of the Beat Generation's choice to move away from the mainstream intellectuals and the *majority*, allegorically represented in Roland Major, and revel in their own artistic expressions, which, as the 1957 obscenity trial over Ginsberg's poem "Howl" demonstrates, the dominant society saw as monstrous. The fact that Carlo's apartment is underground represents Kerouac's feeling that Allen Ginsberg (Carlo Marx's literary stand-in) and Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty's literary stand-in) were deeper and more profound than his other acquaintances.

At this juncture, after a wild night on the town with Carlo and Dean, Sal loses his keys standing on his head, and is then refused entry back into Tim Gray's apartment by Roland Major (*Road* 41). Besides losing the keys, Sal now also finds

himself “alone in the street with no money” (41). Turner writes that liminal personae “have nothing” and that “their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty” (*Forest* 98-99). In *The Ritual Process*, Turner uses specifically the Beat and Hippie movements to illustrate this acquired condition of poverty, writing that they “acquire the stigmata of the lowly, dressing like ‘bums’” (112). “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (97). This is symbolically represented in Sal’s choice of shoes for the road, which even early on in the trip were becoming ragged, “the bits of colored leather sticking up like pieces of a fresh pineapple and my toes showing through” (*Road* 27). One of Sal’s companions on the truck that takes him to Denver for the first time, Montana Slim, asks Sal whether if he put the shoes in the ground “something’ll grow up?” (*Road* 27). This suggests that Sal has uprooted himself from his life, but also that if he does root himself down one day, something new might grow out of it. Indicating Sal’s continuing attachment to his roots, it foreshadows his eventual re-entry into society. The very act of traveling is to root oneself up from one’s familiar habitat to go somewhere new. This is both a physical as well as mental and sometimes even spiritual act. A traveler is nowhere while in transit. He has no fixed home. He is a potential blank slate, onto which he may construct a new version of himself, which are Sal and Dean’s hopes for the road as well.

“Among the benefits of liminality on the modern road is the opportunity to start over and discover one’s inner resources and potential” (Primeau 69). It isn’t only Sal’s own “inner resources and potential” that he is looking to tap into, but also those of America. One of the ways in which Sal’s search for authenticity is explored is through his immersion in and identification with marginal Americans, who are

encountered living liminal lives on the road themselves, or are found during the nighttime hours in which the “work” of middle-class life gives way to the “play” sought in bars and jazz. Throughout *On the Road*, the narrator exults in the company of migrant laborers, bums, and ethnic minorities. He idolizes Dean for wearing the social markers of marginality so gracefully, and joins Dean in “digging” African Americans on the streets, in bars, on stages playing jazz, and harbors wishes to sexually dominate women of color. Helen McNeil argues that Kerouac constructs America as a female body.

On the Road is a love story, but it is about love between two men, both of them meanwhile being in love with the womanly body of America [...] Actual historical women encountered along the road are puny avatars of this great continental body, having only its sex functions, displayed by their bodies (188-89; qtd. in Nicholls 525-26).

Brendon Nicholls expands on McNeil’s position to argue that Kerouac’s America is an elusive, dark body (526), which is also essentially authentic. “The female racial subject’s authentic link to the land provides Kerouac with a pastoral America that remains untouched by the otherwise unchecked progression of modernity” (Nicholls 535). In this reading, Sal’s abortive attempts to sexually overpower black women in the novel once again underscore his inability to become American, as well as his perception of the racial other as somehow more pure and authentic than his white identity, while at the same time inherently inferior and subject to domination.

While Dean is something new and exciting for Sal, he is also something old. Dean opens Sal up to “a kind of nostalgia for the vanishing American real’ embodied in African Americans and other racial minorities” (Holton, “Kerouac” 275; qtd. in Schryer 128). When they pass an old African American man with a mule wagon along the road, Dean urges Sal to “consider his soul,” saying “there’s thoughts in that

mind that I would give my last arm to know; to climb in there and find out just what he's poor-ass pondering about this year's turnip greens and ham" (*Road* 103, sic). Dean, of course, is unable to know what is happening in the African American man's head, despite living a similarly disenfranchised life. Dean's whiteness separates him socio-economically and ideologically from black Americans, and his white gaze elevates him above them. Dean's gaze denigrates the black minority to "poor-ass," and "other," despite the fact that the African Americans he meets could be more wealthy and "square" than he is. Sal's idealizing narration, however, makes it seem that Dean is able to communicate with black individuals, especially musicians, on a different, spiritual level due to his liminal position.

Sal is also fascinated by ethnic and racial minorities, saying he wishes he were "a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (*Road* 163). As Haslam has argued, Sal "critiques his whiteness as a means of gaining a sense of autonomy from the 'incompetence' of the dominant culture" (455). Even earlier on, Sal's craving for authenticity is expressed in his willful adoption of a socially and culturally marginal lifestyle. He meets Terry, "the cutest little Mexican girl in slacks" on a bus to Los Angeles (73). Once there, he sticks with her and becomes a migrant laborer, taking on odd jobs while trying to provide for Terry and her son, whom he eventually embraces in a pseudo-adoptive way as his own, completing his would-be socio-economically marginal and ethnically "other" family.

Working as a cotton-picker, Sal embraces the marginal lifestyle: "sighing like an old Negro cotton-picker, I reclined on the bed and smoked a cigarette" (*Road* 88). Not much later, he believes that the other Mexican workers think of him as Mexican, "and in a way I am" (88). Sal never truly and sincerely moves into the racially and

economically marginalized niches that he experiments with throughout the novel, however. Firstly, he cannot be part of this niche because he is white, and secondly, he does not seem to sincerely *wish* to stay with these people and become one of them, abandoning Terry after two weeks. He can't be a Negro cotton-picker, attributing his failures to his body, which is simply too slow to work with the same "God-blessed patience" that the Negroes of his imagination do (87). In truth, however, Sal's nostalgic desire for the menial labor of the cotton-picker was only fleeting, and he promptly returns to the comforts and benefits of his middle class mobility. Moreover, Sal's "attempt to find free will in the face of an overly constrictive society, is placed in relief by and gains its moral and ethical force from the stereotypical, racist portrayal of silenced black [and other racially "other"] characters" (Haslam 455).

In his attempt to find authenticity in these experiences, Sal finds himself mired in Baudrillardian simulations of them. Rachel Ligairi also argues that Sal "participat[es] in the simulation of race," rather than engaging in progressive politics (148). Sal's appropriations of racially and ethnically marginal positions can be read as an attempt of the liminal character disembodied from his social as well as ethnic body, looking for meaning and identity. Of course, Sal's dismissal of these marginal lives after having lived them for only a short while demonstrates his continuing dedication to the middle class existence that awaits him after his road travels. As much as Kerouac seems to champion the counter-cultural cause, his racial and sexual politics conform to the dominant majority. Sal wants to escape from his middle class whiteness in his search for the authentic, but "the only other discursive options he sees are shaped by racist stereotypes that are themselves part of the tradition he is trying to escape" (Haslam 458).

Sal's appropriation of the position of racial and ethnic minorities is in a sense a form of performative masking, which is made possible by separation from the social body during the liminal phase. Sal thinks that the "story of America" is that "everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do," in other words, playing the roles they think they have been assigned in life (*Road 61*). Jack Kerouac once wrote to Neal Cassady:

One of the big routines in society is to "look right." Old men with white hair and black-ribbon lasses "look right"—no cop, no prick dares question their freedom. It's all an evil game. *I change faces a hundred times a day in knowledge and aversion of this.* For too long you've let your aversion and defiance to the cheap rules of society rule your actions... You must begin to protect yourself by playing the game [...] (Kerouac *Letters* 213, emphasis added).

As Kerouac's biographer Ann Charters points out, Kerouac's identity was always fragmented; he never truly knew where he was or what he was to become.

"Throughout most of his life Kerouac played games with himself, giving himself new roles and identities, vanities as he called them in his later years" (*Kerouac* 21).

Kerouac's "game," then, is played out in Sal's mimicry and simulation of non-white marginality, donning the "masks" available to him from his liminal position, in which his identity is in a state of flux and his "blank slate" status allows him to temporarily mark his body with his imagined idea of "others."

Justin Thomas Trudeau draws inspiration from Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity to illustrate what makes Sal's "masking" himself possible. Butler writes that gender is "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [...] a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 187; qtd. in Trudeau 151). When Sal describes himself as "sighing like an old Negro

cotton-picker” or brandishing a tire iron to protect Terry and the other Mexicans against the angry Okies, he engages in a “stylized repetition of acts” according to his white construction of African American and Mexican identities. Kerouac here appropriates what Toni Morrison calls the “Africanist” narrative in American literature, in which “the experience of being bound and/or rejected” is used “as a means of meditation – both safe and risky – on one’s own humanity” and provides “opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, and to speculate on fate and destiny” (Morrison 53; qtd. in Haslam 455).

Dean doesn’t have to mask himself in order to obtain some access to the experience of “otherness” in the same way Sal does. As Dean says, “I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do. We give and take and go in the incredible complicated sweetness zigzagging every side” (*Road* 109). His whiteness allows him to physically slip through the socio-political traffic of the white majority, including Sal’s middle- and upper-class circles. Arnold van Gennep has articulated this social invisibility as a feature particular to liminality, or novitiate, as well.

During the entire novitiate, the usual economic and legal ties are modified, sometimes broken altogether. The novices are outside society, and society has no power over them, especially since they are actually [in terms of indigenous beliefs] sacred and holy, and therefore untouchable and dangerous, just as gods would be. Thus, although taboos, as negative rites, erect a barrier between the novices and society, the society is helpless against the novices’ undertakings. [...] During the novitiate, the young people can steal and pillage at will or feed and adorn themselves at the expense of the community (*Rites* 114).

This characteristic untouchability of the liminal is evident in the many instances in which Dean is seen stealing items from stores without anybody seeing him. “Nobody noticed; nobody ever notices such things” (*Road* 199).

Kerouac's choice of naming Neal Cassady's literary stand-in Dean *Moriarty* points to the character's socio-economic invisibility. Dean's last name is reminiscent of the Victorian parlor game "Are You There, Moriarty?" The game involves two players who are blindfolded, who clasp each other with the left hand and use the right to whack their opponent with a rolled up newspaper after calling "are you there, Moriarty?" They are also meant to predict the direction of the opponent's newspaper and dodge it. Just as the game involves some deception and bluff, so is Dean Moriarty rarely in the same place for long, always moving and shifting. Sal describes Dean as a "con man." Sal acknowledges this in the first chapter: "He was conning me and I knew (this has been the basis of our relationship), but I didn't care and we got along fine – no pestering, no catering; we tiptoed around each other like heartbreaking new friends" (*Road* 6). The "bluff" of the game is mutual, as Dean is conning Sal, but Sal is also conning Dean, who comes to him wanting to learn how to write (5). There is no evidence in the narrative of Dean's learning to write or producing any writing, however.

Mexico becomes for Dean the antithesis of America. People in Mexico "don't bother with appearances," he tells Sal (252). "There's no *suspicion* here" and everyone "looks at you with such straight brown eyes and they don't say anything, just *look*, and in that look all the human qualities are soft and subdued and still there" (253, emphasis in original). Sal narrates here that, "schooled in the raw road night, Dean was come into the world to see it" (253). This is the genuine world, the world that is missing from America. Where Sal wants to find identification with America, Dean recognizes himself in Mexico, where "he had found people like himself" (255). In Mexico, Sal and Dean find that "it was hard to come around without a common language" (259), making it difficult to decipher what the locals truly think about

them. Instead, what ties together the ostensible tourists and the locals is being high, when everyone just “enjoyed the breeze from the desert and mused separate national and racial and personal high-eternity thoughts” (259). Sal, though, keeps seeing America in the Mexican landscape, as has been shown.

Dean, as a more permanently liminal character than Sal, and therefore closer to the anachronistic figures that exist beyond the structures of normal, contemporary society, is able to communicate somehow with a local man, Victor, who leads them to the brothel, as well as with the Indians in the mountains (*Road* 256, 272). In the unstructured space of Mexico, Dean gets around just fine. As Dean says, entering Mexico: “[w]e’ve finally got to heaven. It couldn’t be any cooler, it couldn’t be grander, it couldn’t be *anything*” (253). For Dean there is no frame of reference in which to place Mexico, and he cannot simulate Mexico in the Baudrillardian sense. Dean can access Mexico perfectly well from his permanent liminality, whereas Sal is encumbered by his frequent comparison of Mexico to America.

In Mexico, Sal and Dean discover the “Fellaheen,” “the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity” that live along “the equatorial belly of the world” (*Road* 255). Fellaheen, sometimes spelled as Fellahin, is a term designating so-called primitive indigenous peoples that Jack Kerouac borrowed from Oswald Spengler whose work *The Decline of the West* (1926) reflects on the concept. “In [Spengler’s] interpretation, the people who lived in these ‘primitive’ and declining societies [i.e., Fellaheen] existed on the periphery of a fallen civilization waiting for its eventual recreation” (Martinez 80). Sal believes that these Fellaheen are outside history, and will remain so “when destruction comes to the world of ‘history’,” for when “the Apocalypse of the Fellahin returns once more as so many times before, people will stare with the same eyes from the caves of Mexico as well as from the caves of Bali,

where it all began and where Adam was suckled and taught to know” (*Road* 256). “For Spengler, the Fellaheen were the common people who lived at the margins of civilization and thus survived its downfall” (Belgrad 32). Sal’s perception and imagination of Mexico is of this great, pure place, where he and Dean “would finally learn ourselves among the Fellahin Indians of the world” (254). He foresees, or hopes for, a revelation and a climax to his ritualized road journey, then. This culminates in Sal contracting dysentery, and resigning himself to being abandoned by a Dean he no longer knows, realizing “what a rat he was” but promising not to say anything (276). In Dean, Kerouac expresses what Stephen Schryer calls “his reversal of [Oswald] Spengler’s negative valuation of the Fellaheen” (128). While Spengler attributes a meaningless, post-apocalyptic existence to the Fellaheen, “Kerouac, in contrast, consistently claimed that the Fellaheen enjoy a close connection to the earth no longer available to white Americans” (Schryer 128).

For Sal and Dean, Mexico is a heterotopian space where there is equality amongst men of different ages, races, and even (in the case of the Indians living in the mountains), of different times. Michel Foucault defines a heterotopian space as one in which hegemony doesn’t exist; it is a space of otherness, a “counter-site, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, “Other” 3). Mexico is a “specific elsewhere” (*Road* 249) in the sense that it was never a place envisioned in the “pilgrimage” envisioned by either Sal or Dean. Mexico does not feature in Sal’s desired sense of belonging or meaning, which is largely constructed within America. Instead of east or west, Mexico is the “magic south,” an unknown space. Sal’s comment that Dean had found people like himself in Mexico points to this feeling. In reality, however, Sal and Dean are of course white,

privileged males as well as tourists. They may also be on a significant amount of drugs, which serves to confuse the social codes exchanged between themselves and the locals. The heterotopian space they envision only exists in their imagination.

Stephen Mennell sees *perception* as the key to envisioning and engaging in spaces as liminal zones. In his essay on liminality and the myth of the American frontier, he argues that the image of the frontier as a rite of passage was only constructed through Americans' later perception, "culminating in the successful completion of the transition to a new phase of the national life-cycle" (112-113). It is *perception* that becomes key to the narrative climax that occurs in Mexico. Although both Sal and Dean do feel a greater authenticity and greater freedom in Mexico, it seems to be more of a placebo cure, or a product of perception, than anything real. Though they can play music as loud as they want, and have more experiences (*Road* 261), it is only because they have money, and the "Fellaheen" peoples of Mexico know that they are "[o]stensibly self-important moneybag Americans on a lark in their land; they knew who was the father and who was the son of antique life on earth, and made no comment" (256). Sal is also still engaged by his frontier myth, but acknowledges that the frontier has been pushed down to Mexico. Indeed, the "primitive" mountain tribes have also been affected by the American frontier, in the form of the Pan American Highway system that runs through the mountains, and "partially civilizes" the nation on this road (271).

Sal and Dean seem to envision these Indians as being among the primitive and pure Fellaheen existing outside history, but they seem to have been drawn in to the capitalism of civilization all the same, selling goods on the side of the road. Though Sal and Dean see Mexico as untainted by capitalism at first, they become part of the problem, spending money in all the wrong places and even corrupting the "pure"

Fellaheen with the meaningless symbols of capitalism, time, and money, represented in the exchange of Dean's wristwatch for a crystal (*Road* 272). Sal and Dean are therefore not able to be pioneers in Mexico, because they are only traveling a route already laid out for them. The division between the "selves" of Sal and Dean and the "other" in the form of the tribespeople remains in place, and there is nothing that Sal and Dean do about it. They never make an attempt to place themselves among the Fellaheen, or try to be on the same level as them, because they cannot cross that threshold. They maintain their liminal positions, partly because the Fellaheen Mexico that they see is merely a perception or, in Baudrillardian terms, a simulation. As Rachel Ligairi points out, Mexico is experienced as hyperreal (150), a simulation of their desires. Both Sal and Dean "project their own desires onto Mexico and, not surprisingly, see their dreams reflected in its landscapes, institutions, and people [...]. In this sense, Kerouac uses Mexico as a blank screen upon which simulated images of Beat desires flicker, masking the complexity of the world behind" (151). Simulations exist in the tension between the "real" and the "represented" or perceived, and therefore belong to some extent in the liminal stage.

This is where the meaning of the name, Sal Paradise, also comes in. It is at the same time an ironic reference to the notion of a lost paradise and a nod to the immigrant search for the American Dream. As Sal is of immigrant descent, it could point to his constant yearning for a paradise that doesn't exist, formulated in the non-existence, corrupt nature, or death of the American Dream, or a paradise that existed only in his own and America's past. He tries to *salvage* it, but cannot. He sees its embodiment in Dean, whom he can't save either. Allen Ginsberg, in his introduction to Ann Charters' biography of Jack Kerouac, calls him the "American lonely Prose Trumpeter of drunken Buddha Sacred Heart" (*Kerouac* 9), calling to mind Walt

Whitman's poem "The Mystic Trumpeter," in which the poet hears "some wild trumpeter, some strange musician" who "hover[s] unseen in air, vibrates capricious tunes to-night," a ghostly trumpeter, whose "pensive life/Was fill'd with aspirations high, unform'd ideals" (Whitman). The trumpeter here resembles both Kerouac and Sal, making attempts at success and stability, but failing, and uncertain of their path in life.

For both Sal and Dean, the road in general, and the Mexican road in particular, is constructed as a heterotopian space in which they could discover an authenticity they believe lacking in the contemporary mainstream American society. At the same time, however, *On the Road* problematizes Spengler's redemptive solution towards Fellaheen peoples by incorporating the Fellaheen into the "civilized" capitalistic power structure that Sal and Dean bemoan yet endorse by having them dwell along the highway, and exchange goods, partaking in capitalism. Furthermore, the novel does not allow Sal and Dean entry into the perceived safety Fellaheen marginality provides, retaining them as tourists to the Indians, on their way back to middle class dreams of upward mobility. They don't commit to the Fellaheen utopia.

Chapter 4

Countering the Mainstream Culture?: Consolidating Identity Through
Temporary and Permanent Liminality

“I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the
inexhaustible variety of life.”

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Like Jack Kerouac himself, Sal Paradise struggles with his ethnic identity. Kerouac, born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac, was French Canadian but began speaking English and “Englishizing” himself at the age of six (Kerouac, *Letters* 228-29). In his essay “The Makings of Paradise,” Michael Skau dissects Kerouac’s own identity crisis, and finds parallels between the author’s expressions of this struggle and those of the characters in his novels. Sal Paradise, or Salvatore Paradise, is of Italian descent. The novel chronicles Sal’s desire to become part of something. He yearns to be part of the group, but doesn’t ingratiate himself with them, saying that he only “shambled after as [he’s] been doing all [his] life after people who interest [him]” (*Road* 7, sic), or that he “only went along for the ride, and to see what else Dean was going to do” (116), and that he “didn’t want to interfere” but “just wanted to follow” (120). Sal is perpetually caught between his old life and the new one that Dean promises, unwilling to commit to one direction, because “everything was being mixed up, and all was falling” (113). The notion of a “collapsing” world is Sal’s running mantra, underscoring his reluctance to choose a life to which he can commit himself. Whenever Sal leaves home, he becomes sentimental about what he leaves behind. “I was three thousand two hundred miles from my aunt’s house in Paterson,

New Jersey,” Sal remarks, always looking back (53). Here it becomes clear that Sal’s liminality is temporary, in keeping with the configuration of the liminal rite of passage as outlined by Van Gennep and Turner. With Sal, there is a clear separation, and he retains a connection to his structural social life off the road, whereas with Dean, as will become clear, his liminality is more permanent, with no clear ritual of separation or re-aggregation.

Indeed, Kerouac metaphorically represents Sal’s connectedness to his past and to his home by having him watch people become smaller in the rear-view mirror of the car. Throughout the narrative, however, there is never a clear settlement in either camp, which Sal admits when he says, “I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion” (113). While the road takes Sal away from the people that he loves, the life that he is trying to live, and the “stone” that Carlo Marx says everyone eventually comes “staggering” back for (117), he also knows that the road will bring him that “pearl” he seeks. The road leads to “all the golden land” ahead, and “all kinds of unforeseen events wait lurking to surprise you and make you glad you’re alive to see” (122).

Sal’s belief in the frontier as an Americanizing experience is important for his journey to define himself. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier “promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people” (22). Sal is very much inspired by American myths and cultural symbols, despite his Italian heritage. Perhaps, in his own imagination, Sal is the director of his very own Spaghetti Western. Part of Jack Kerouac’s identity crisis between his French and American identities is expressed in Sal’s wish to access the myth of the American West. As Sal says early on in the novel, he had been “poring over maps of the United

States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on” (*Road* 11). Sal distances himself from his European culture throughout the novel, for example when he puts down a French novel, *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier, preferring to read “the American landscape [...]. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing” (93). Like *On the Road*, *Le Grand Meaulnes*, translated into *The Great Domain*, or *The Great Estate*,¹ is also about the restlessness of youth, and particularly about the liminal state between childhood and adulthood. Julian Barnes writes that Fournier turns the perceived double negative of that phase – not being allowed to be a child but not yet able to be an adult – around by creating “a dreamland where these double negatives become a positive.” He writes that the novel’s definition of freedom is “the impossible dream [...] of a life in which we may stay children and yet run things – to play at being grown-up” (“Meaulnes”). In the same way as *On the Road*, Fournier’s novel splits the pull of adulthood and that of childhood into two separate characters. Karen E.H. Skinazi writes that this “bifurcation” of the novel allows it to “embrace and perpetuate iconic images of ‘America’ while simultaneously undermining them” (91). “*On the Road* is a novel that both captures the westward movement that is the foundation of the American myth – and yet, resists it” (91).

As much as Sal Paradise is in-between identities, so, too, is Dean Moriarty. He is the epitome of the wild and free Cowboy American whose rugged individualism and hypermasculinity Sal Paradise idealizes, but he is also a child from a broken home with a skid row and reform school background, making him an outsider to the mainstream conformist American society of the time that worshipped the ideal of the

¹ There are various English translations of the novel, including *The Wanderer* (1928), *Meaulnes: The Lost Domain* (1959), *The Wanderer or The End of Youth* (1971), *Le Grand Meulnes: The Land of the Lost Contentment* (1979), and *Big Meaulnes* (2012).

nuclear family immortalized on screen in shows such as *Father Knows Best* and *The Goldbergs*. Dean is an economically marginal character who wants to enjoy simultaneously the comforts of domestic life and the thrills of life on the road. He is liminal in the sense that he continuously tries to engage in middle class respectability, getting married, having children, and eventually settling with Inez in New York, but is prevented from doing so by the magnetism of the road. However, Dean is also a victim of the myth that his “disciples” shroud him in (*Road* 177), which he is unable to escape. His “disciples,” especially Sal, need Dean to be in his liminal position as a marker and guide for their own liminal escapades. They also need him to function as a permanent safety valve, a possibility, and a reminder that their choice of a middle class existence does not eliminate the existence of what Dean represents.

Arpad Szakolczai discusses the concept of “permanent liminality” as a phenomenon of modern global society. Victor Turner also touched on the possibility of permanent liminality, especially in the context of monastic religions (*Ritual* 107). Expanding Turner’s suggestion, Szakolczai argues that “liminality becomes a permanent condition when any of the phases [in the sequence of separation, the liminal period proper and re-aggregation] becomes frozen” (*Reflexive* 212). This “freezing” of a phase can, for example, result in an individual being permanently stuck in separation rites. The liminal phase can also become permanent, forcing individuals to wear their masks forever, in the end becoming the character they play. Szakolczai describes a frozen re-aggregation phase as a state similar to that of interrupted reconstruction after a war, in which fighting has ceased but healing has not yet been completed (*Reflexive* 214-15). Dean Moriarty seems to be stuck in the routine of performing separation and the liminal phase proper. Sal Paradise to a

certain extent is in a similar loop for much of the novel, but achieves re-aggregation in the end, whereas Dean does not.

Kerouac first has Sal believing in Dean Moriarty as a guide to something essential in life, but Sal loses faith in Dean as he becomes the doomed hero of his nightmares. As Schryer argues, Jack Kerouac did not celebrate Dean's "alienat[ion]" from the cultural attitudes of the traditional working and new middle class. Rather than depicting this dual alienation as an act of resistance, Kerouac depicts it as a tragic flaw – an inability to become, as he puts it, "middle class just like you" (Schryer 124). Indeed, in his later years, Kerouac came to resent his public image as a leader of the Beat movement, taking fault with the direction the movement was taking politically. The last time Sal sees Dean is at the very end of the novel. The scene brings to a close and renders mute the very essence of what Dean represented for Sal, which is Beat culture, marginal life, and the liminal escapism that Dean's readiness for the road allowed. Sal and his new girlfriend Laura are going to a Duke Ellington concert in a Cadillac, which is the picture of a consumerist, middle-class leisurely outing. Their company is none other than Remi Boncoeur and his girl. When he first landed in San Francisco and stayed with him several years earlier, Sal had disappointed Remi by ruining a dinner with Remi's step-father, whom he very much wanted to impress. Sal and Major had gotten drunk and been rude to Remi's stepfather, and Sal had slipped out of Remi's house in the night to join Dean and Carlo in the South.

At the end of the novel, Sal is determined not to "start all over again ruining [Remi's] planned evenings" and denies Dean a ride with them in the car (*Road* 280). Watching Dean walk away seems to close for Sal forever that chapter of his life, and render him acceptable to the middle class that Remi stands for. Nonetheless, despite

the fact that Sal goes to the concert draped in all the signs of a respectable middle-class existence, his mind is still in-between two worlds. Even though he goes to the concert, he has “no stomach whatever” for it, and thinks of Dean all the time (281). Turner argues that, in the “re-aggregation” or “re-incorporation” stage of the rite of passage, the *communitas* of the liminal phase is abandoned in order to re-enter the structure of hierarchical society.

The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and “structural” type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (Turner, *Ritual* 95).

The very last sentences of *On the Road* casts Sal’s full acceptance of his middle-class position into doubt, however, as he still feels the need to look back to Dean as a reminder of what he represented to Sal at the beginning, that is, a safety valve and antidote to the feeling of impending doom encapsulated in the “coming of complete night” and the uncertainty of anything except “the forlorn rags of growing old” (*Road* 281). Dean becomes for Sal less of a person and more of a symbol, “the epitome of emancipation,” representing “the possibility of choosing a different way of living” (Sobral, *Opting Out* 86).

Sal Paradise is stuck between the East of his youth and the West of his future, as he says, and oscillates continuously between on the one hand the maternal world of his aunt in New York and the wives, girlfriends, and lovers he leaves behind, and on the other hand the paternal pull of maturity represented by economic success and self-sufficiency. The East of his youth, then, is symbolized by the aunt to whom he looks back with childlike nostalgia, while also sending her money, with which she buys the first electric refrigerator in the family, a symbol of domesticity (*Road* 97). The West

of Sal's future is symbolized by its connotation of the masculine frontier, a place of risk and danger yet also freedom and adventure. Stephen Schryer has pointed out that Kerouac's critique of the politics of the family structure and the sociological paradigms prevalent in 1950s America preceded the discourse of teenage delinquency and the study of the impact of domestic instability on behavioral development in a radical way.

Any clear linkage to the fathers of characters in *On the Road*, is obfuscated, however, creating an effect in the narrative that mirrors that of Kerouac's age, in which the Norman Rockwellian fathers are imaginary. Schryer cites the research done by sociologist Talcott Parsons in 1947, finding that fathers in the 1950s were either missing entirely or missing so much that it came down to the mother to "act as chief agent of socialization, administering discipline" and epitomizing the good behavior and conformity demanded by the "respectable adult world" (136-37). The father's absence from the home, due to work or other reasons, makes him, in contrast to the mother, a "weak model for male identification" (137). According to Schryer, Parsons found that delinquency in boys as expressed by hyper-masculine behavior and deviancy arises when they are forced to "disidentify with their mothers and flee the feminine domestic sphere in order to conform to their adult roles as masculine breadwinners" (137).

Despite the Beat generation's drive towards a way of life removed from the perceived social constrictions of the mainstream, the sexual experimentation that valued mutual pleasure, and the fact that there were many female Beat writers; the gender politics that worshipped domesticity is still evident in Kerouac's novel. The construction of femininity in *On the Road* is representative of the contemporary pervasive belief that domesticity pressures men to settle down. The mothers of the

male protagonists, for instance, are visibly present, despite the insistence of the counterculture to separate themselves from the older generation. For example, when Sal Paradise first reaches Denver, he calls up his friend Chad King, but it's Chad's mother who answers and is able to "locate" his friend (*Road* 34). Chad's mother also wants to know "Why, Sal, what are you doing in Denver?" (23). This could be construed as either a friendly query, or a parental insistence to gain control of the situation and of the boys, who were reaching adulthood at the time (Jack Kerouac himself being twenty-five when the road trip began in 1947).

According to the mid-century delinquency studies that Schryer refers to, an overbearing mother figure and an absent father (even one absent by being at work) can lead to rebellion away from the domestic mother figure without the balancing work ethic instilled by the father. The influence of this patriarchal psychological theory is partly reflected in Dean. He was born on the road, to an unemployed alcoholic father and never saw his mother's face (119). After going from school to school, from detention center to detention center, he is unable to settle in one place, with one job, and with one woman. Sal's family background, however, is more obscure. In Jack Kerouac's original manuscript, he writes that he meets Neal shortly after his father dies and while feeling that "everything is dead." In the published version, however, Sal meets Dean after splitting up with his ex-wife and becoming ill from it. Only towards the end of the novel does the reader understand that Sal's father is dead (243). Sal sends his aunt money and updates whenever possible, requiring him to take on jobs and retain a modicum of that domesticated life that he periodically turns away from. In the original scroll, it is his mother who waits for him at home. The fact that Kerouac obscures a normative nuclear family life as background for Sal Paradise opens the narrator up to the detachment of the road.

Maternal figures represent domestic structure on the road. This can be seen in the running theme of Sal and Dean picking up hitchhikers with promises of aunts who own grocery stores who could give them a couple of dollars for gas. When they have been duped by this story repeatedly, Dean half-ironically says, “We’ve *all* got aunts,” but he nevertheless agrees to take the hitchhiker, who is returning home from a job that his uncle promised him, but which fell through (149). Kerouac’s portrayal of fatherhood in the novel rarely depicts the paternal figure as part of a close-knit nuclear family and having a clearly defined and socially structured position. Kerouac’s fathers are instead figures of failure. “America, for Kerouac, is a nation of absent fathers who have bred a generation of wandering sons” (Schryer 138). In *On the Road*, fathers or paternal figures are either peripheral, given a less clear and visible position than mothers and maternal figures. By marginalizing paternity, Kerouac inhibits Sal from finding a stable father figure who will “help him break free from his latency stage and settle into a mature economic role in middle-class society” (Schryer 142). While Schryer is here talking about Kerouac’s later novel *Dr. Sax*, it pertains to *On the Road* as well.

Sal’s connection to women is more stable and correlative to the dominant norm than that of, for example, Dean, who has multiple destructive relationships with women across the country. “Every new girl, every new wife, every new child was an addition to his bleak impoverishment” of never having seen his mother’s face, Sal narrates (119). Sal’s relationship to patriarchy is complicated, however, as he doesn’t have a father nor any strong male authority figure in his life. Sal finds in Dean a mutual yearning for the stability of a father figure. Dean’s relationship with paternal figures is dystopian. His own father is a failed entrepreneur turned permanent bum lost in the hobo jungle. Where Old Dean Moriarty has been unreliable all of his life,

Dean's stand-in father figure, his cousin Sam Brady, is to Dean "[t]he one man in the family who took tender concern" for him (*Road* 196), but he eventually abandons him as well, writing him out of the family, along with his father, in a manner so abrupt and cold that the "tender concern" Dean believed Sam to have for him seems to have been imagined (197). Even the countercultural father figure of Old Bull writes Dean off as a doomed figure, telling Sal in the psychological jargon of the time that he is "headed for his ideal fate, which is compulsive psychosis dashed with a jigger of psychopathic irresponsibility and violence" (133).

Dean's pattern of abandonment by paternal figures and his inability to form stable relationships with women leave Dean dangling in-between, unable to grow up. Dean retains many of the traits of youth, and permanently dwells in a liminal state between youth and adulthood, unable to move either backwards or forwards. On the road, Sal and Dean find themselves subconsciously searching for the paternal guidance they need. Their adventures are those of "the children of the American bop night" (*Road* 218), trying to learn from the road and the night. At the same time, Dean wants from Sal the familiarity and security of family. Dean reminds Sal of "some long-lost brother" (9), despite the fact that Sal has a brother whom he visits in the narrative, and seems not to have a problem with. The brotherly affection Sal feels for Dean is different in that it seems like a more spiritual connection. Sal narrates that Dean "had brothers on his dead mother's side" but that "they disliked him" (35). When Sal finds out that Dean's cousin is writing him out of the family, Sal tells Dean "Remember that I believe in you," taking the position of brotherly protector (*Road* 197). In the very next chapter, in fact, Sal is the one to get Dean out of trouble for pestering a farmer's daughter by throwing pebbles at her window and frightening her. When the girl's mother threatens to shoot Dean, Sal steps in as a mediator between

the two worlds. He quells the conflict by saying: “He won’t do it again. I’ll watch him; he’s my brother and listens to me” (199).

In fact, this is the kind of brotherly relationship that Dean demands, one in which a brother stands by and advises, scolding Dean when necessary, while also loving him in that Whitmanic sense of “robust love,²” which is hinted at in Dean’s insistence on including Sal in his relationship with Marylou (118). Dean’s requirement of a brotherly protector is evident when they visit Ed Wall, who lives on his parents’ ranch, where Dean came on probation after being in prison. Sal recognizes that Ed “used to be Dean’s older brother” (*Road* 208). Sal narrates: “Ed Wall had lost faith in Dean just like Sam Brady” (208). Dean accepts Sal’s position as older brother, and believer, and even adopts some of Sal’s comforts as his own. He comes to rely on Sal’s aunt as a moral compass, just like Sal does. He pays her the fifteen dollars he owes her eventually, even though she probably never expected it back, and he listens to her advice about his having to settle down and take care of his children (231).

Sal sticks by Dean’s side but rarely makes his true feelings verbally known to others, merely thinking about what he should have said. When Galatea Dunkel decides to call Dean out for being a con man and for abandoning his wife and children, Sal narrates that he knew better and that he “could have told them all” but that he doesn’t “see any sense in trying it” (*Road* 176). Sal takes his position by Dean’s side as a point of pride, and imagines that everyone envies this about him, “defending him and drinking him in as they once tried to” (177), but in fact Sal’s friends look at Sal as “a stranger” and he imagines them wondering what he was

² Whitman used the term “robust love” or “robust American love” in several poems.

“doing on the West Coast this fair night? [He] recoiled from the thought” (177). Sal wants the best of both worlds, and believes up until the last moment in the narrative that this is possible. He wants to be loyal to Dean and feel that loyalty reciprocated whilst never bringing into jeopardy his social standing in the world. He wants to keep a foot in both the East of his youth and the West of his future, to remain in that liminal position and reap all the benefits from it. In a letter to Neal Cassady dated July 28, 1949, Jack Kerouac admits this wish to be in a place where having the best of both worlds is possible:

I was standing in my yard looking at the great heat lightning over the plains, and to the west over the mountains. I thought the lightning seemed more intense in the mystic east (New York, Allen, etc.) and strangely wild over the mountains of the west (Frisco, you, etc.) I had a desire to go in both directions at the same time (Kerouac, *Letters* 211).

In a sense, of course, *On the Road* is the narrative result of his experiment to do just as he desired that summer day in Denver writing that letter to Neal.

Sal’s insistence on maintaining his pristine image of Dean is evident in the moments when Dean wants to come to terms with the complications of his own domestic life, and Sal disrupts the process if not physically then narratively. In fact, the Dean that Sal wants to believe in is a construct. Sal and Dean both believe in the beauty of the marginal, and enjoy the journey rather than the destination. Before Sal came along, however, Dean ironically seems to have been headed for the secure “conformist” life that Sal is wishing to temporarily escape. The very first words the reader hears from Dean are about his plans for the future with Marylou, telling her that they have to “postpone all those leftover things concerning our personal lovethings and at once to begin thinking of specific worklife plans...” (*Road* 4). That

night, while drinking beers with friends in New York, Dean suddenly decides that “the thing to do was to have Marylou make breakfast and sweep the floor” (4).

Although it seems that Dean isn’t negotiating domestic life with a sure foot, he is trying; as he says, “we’ve got to get on the ball, darling, what I’m saying, otherwise it’ll be fluctuating and lack of true knowledge or crystallization of our plans” (5). The moment Marylou leaves, however, Dean is back to rushing around with Sal and eventually takes off for Denver, where Sal promises he will meet him. In Denver, Dean is still hung up on performing or simulating “respectable” middle class life, by bustling around and ordering his and everyone’s life into a schedule. This “respectable” Dean comes back in Part Four when he visits Sal wearing a “tweed suit with a vest and watch chain” and politely greets everyone (237). He uses this watch, however, to note the time he has to pawn off another watch. With this money he will travel to Mexico to get a cheap and quick divorce from Camille, hereby once again confirming his inability to commit to a domestic life (237-238).

Dean’s fluctuating comes back at intervals throughout the narrative, showing that he is as much in-between worlds as Sal is. At the start of Part Four, Dean realizes that his life in New York is becoming predictable, as he stays faithful to Inez. Dean complains to Sal: “[T]his only happens to me in New York! Damn! But the mere thought of crossing that awful continent again – Sal, we haven’t talked straight in a long time” (*Road* 228). Here, it seems as though Dean may finally be able to give up his road-lust for a life with Inez, and perhaps Sal as well, in New York. Sal immediately disrupts this development in Dean’s life. “It somehow didn’t seem to fit Dean,” Sal narrates. “He looked more like himself huddling in the cold, misty spray of the rain on empty Madison Avenue at night” (228). Sal sees Dean being “reduced to simple pleasures,” listening to basketball games on the radio at home or enjoying

the “coming-home pleasures” of smoking marijuana in a hip-length Chinese silk jacket, or “jumping around frantically with crowds of friends at drunken parties” (227, 228). These snapshots of Dean’s home life with Inez look like what Sal later calls “stabilized-within-the-photo lives,” which belie what Sal hopes their lives outside the photos amount to: “the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road” (231).

When Sal and Dean meet, their worlds temporarily merge into one, and they influence each other greatly. Sal’s narrative focalization makes his own idolization of and tutelage under Dean more obvious than what Sal comes to mean for Dean. Without Sal, Dean would have been less likely to attend all the parties thrown by Sal’s friends, nor would he have been able to go to the brothel in Mexico, which Sal sets up. Dean is benefiting from Sal’s money, which Sal knows and accepts. What is less obvious is that Sal is conning Dean as much as Dean is conning Sal. At the start of the novel, Dean is described as the epitome of the rugged individualist, self-contained survivor in the jungles of the American capitalist state.

Before Sal came along, then, Dean was doing well living day-by-day. However, Dean soon begins to dream of meaning something more in the world, wanting to learn how to write and “digging” Sal for his focus on building a family and a structure around him (*Road* 105). He comes to rely on Sal to teach him how to enter into the middle-class world. In the end, however, Sal lets Dean down by refusing him entrance into the Cadillac limousine Remi hires for the night to go to a concert in, a symbolic vehicle for the high life of capitalist materialism. Dean, “ragged in a motheaten overcoat he brought specially for the freezing temperatures of the East” does not belong here (280). Dean is a “western kinsman of the sun” (10) and “the chief hero of the Western” (114). These images of Dean are, however, only in Sal’s

imagination and serve to permanently liminalize Dean, situating him in American mythology.

Rather than giving him mobility to move out of his liminal position, Dean's relationship with Sal is one of mutual destructiveness. Sal finally only wants to *think* of Dean. He doesn't want to make efforts to *be* with him anymore. In fact, in the end, Dean becomes in Sal's mind a figurative ghost of himself, one that Sal eventually merges with the figurative ghost of Dean's father. Sal's liminality belongs to the ritualized rite of passage that both Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep recognize in structured societies. He separates from the structure, and also becomes a liminal "ghost" of his former self on the road, and in the end rejoins society having learned valuable lessons. Dean's liminality, however, is less voluntary and more permanent. It is, moreover, imposed by Sal through Sal's mythification of Dean as some symbol of the frontier spirit. Dean's multiple attempts to make a respectable and stable socially accepted man of himself is disrupted not only by Sal, but also by the call of the road. The road is home for Dean. He was born on the road, sleeps on the road, and is in his element behind the wheel of a car. Always moving on, then, Dean's life is left behind in the wake of his movement.

Chapter 5

Death and Temporal Liminality: Living in the Moment.

“You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment”

– Henry David Thoreau, *I to Myself*.

According to Justin Thomas Trudeau, the theme of death and ghosts in *On the Road* is a literary trope that Kerouac uses to illuminate racial subjectivity. Whiteness, as the dominant or the normative in the racial power structure, is the invisible truth (Trudeau 160). Turner argues that invisibility and death are connected to the liminal phase in that the “structural obligations” of the social structure are removed in death or invisibility, and initiands are “temporarily undefined” (*Liminal* 59). In *On the Road*, whiteness is made visible as spectral beings that haunt the characters of the novel. Sal’s liminal position makes it possible to performatively embody other races, and “places [him] too in close connection with asocial powers of life and death” (Trudeau 59).

As noted earlier, the liminal initiand is able to connect to both life and death, and he is also often compared “with ghosts, gods or ancestors” (Turner, *Liminal* 59). Sal’s encounter with the Ghost of the Susquehanna (*Road* 94) is, as one scholar has proposed, a meeting with Sal’s potential future, forever lonely and traveling the wrong way (Vopat 16). The fact that the ghost is headed for “Canady” reflects Kerouac’s own roots in Canada. The fact that the ghost is headed the wrong way also alludes to Kerouac’s rootlessness, played out in Sal’s distancing himself from Europe, and his foiled plans of going to Italy with Dean. Moreover, the inability of the Ghost

of the Susquehanna to lead Sal to the bridge that would allow them to safely cross the Susquehanna river also foreshadows Sal's future failure to pass into maturity (*Road* 94).

The theme of rivers and the bridges that cross them in the novel is a narrative theme that Kerouac employs to symbolize the liminal rituals of life. In one of Jack Kerouac's early, journalized versions of *On the Road*, "Rain and Rivers," he writes:

For this is mortal earth we live on, and the River of Rains is what our lives are like—a washed clod in the rainy night, a soft plopping from drooping Missouri banks, a dissolving (Ah—a learning), a spreading, a riding of the tide down the eternal waterbed, a contributing to brown, dark, watery foams; a voyaging past endless lands & trees & Immortal Levees (for the Cities refuse the Flood, the Cities build Walls against Muddy Reality, the Cities where men play golf on cultivated swards which once were watery-weedy beneath our Flood)...
(*Windblown* 329; qtd. in Matt Theado, "Revisions" 16).

For Sal, rivers are the essence of life. The Mississippi River "smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up" (*Road* 13). Crossing bridges is sometimes referred to as crossing "eternity" (141). The crossing of waters is performatively mirrored in the road journeys taken, evidenced by the variable references to the boat as being like a ship, and the road being like a body of water. Moreover, when Sal drives he is in his "eternity at the wheel" (255).

As Turner claims, "liminality is frequently likened to death," and he has found abundant imagery of death in the rites of passage of the African tribes he studied (*Ritual* 95, 100). This is because death is an ambiguous state, and it removes markers of individuality according to the structure of his society. At the same time, liminal initiands "are also associated with life and death [...] simultaneously, since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life, and being born and growing into new ones" (Turner, "Liminal" 58-59). Imagery of death is also prevalent in *On*

the Road. Within the contemporary political context there is, of course, the existence of a nuclear bomb that “could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce [people] to jumbles” (*Road* 273). Death in *On the Road* is the only certainty, and it foregrounds the eagerness for life that flows through all the wild, crazy antics pulled in the novel. Sal’s very reason to go on the road with Dean is to alleviate the feeling that “everything was dead” (3). On another level, however, the characters also often exclaim that they “almost died,” not on a meta-level but in the immediate moment they experience.

These multiple references to dying and death in *On the Road* also perhaps refer to an experience of life that is so concentrated that it almost speeds up time, as if there is an allotted amount of enjoyment allocated to each human being by God. Perhaps this is again where an element of the Beat generation, as well as the location of the “IT” that Dean prizes, is defined. When listening to Jazz performances, the greatest excitement comes from the player on the wind instrument, not the drums or the piano necessarily. Instead, the access to “IT” is acquired after encouragement and insistence from the crowd, including Dean, to “‘blow, man, blow!’” (*Road* 178). These musicians are concentrating their life essence into their instruments, forcing air out of their lungs to create and hold a tune, figuratively bringing themselves close to death. “To sing a note he had to touch his shoetops and pull it all up to blow, and he blew so much he staggered from the effect, and only recovered himself in time for the next long slow note” (180). Sal later describes another musician sitting spent in the corner of a bar.

The hornman sat absolutely motionless at a corner table with an untouched drink in front of him, staring gook-eyed into space, his hands hanging at his sides till they almost touched the floor, his feet outspread like lolling tongues, his body shriveled into absolute weariness and entranced sorrow and what-all was on his mind: a man who knocked himself out every evening and let the

others put the quietus to him in the night. Everything swirled around him like a cloud. (183).

This description of the hornman in the bar echoes many of Sal's descriptions of Dean at certain points on the road after driving non-stop, or at a later stage in life when he has been "performing" in front of friends, and all of a sudden comes to a standstill. "Then Dean suddenly grew quiet and sat in a kitchen chair between Stan and me and stared straight ahead with rocky doglike wonder and paid no attention to anybody. He simply disappeared for a moment to gather up more energy" (239). Here, Kerouac makes Dean's life the equivalent of a jazz performance. Where jazz performers explore their music by trying "everything up, down, sideways, upside down, horizontal, thirty degrees" (180), so too does Dean approach life in that manner. "He went up and looked closer, he backed up, he stooped, he jumped up, he wanted to see from all possible levels and angles" (239). And it is in this precarious, liminal state between life and death that the "IT" is accessed in jazz performances, as Dean tries to do in his way of life in general.

Contemporary reviewer Norman Podhoretz's complaint about *On the Road* is that there is no intellectual content to Kerouac's work, and that there is too much emphasis on "unremarkable and commonplace" events (491). Podhoretz does not see the value in what he himself calls "a man proclaiming that he is *alive* and offering every trivial experience he has ever had in evidence" (491). However, the post-WWII society of Sal's America is shrouded in darkness, the coming of the morning made uncertain by Cold War tensions. The immediacy of the moment, therefore, has become so important that even the "trivial" minutiae of the day are recorded and remembered. Sal after all must find life in a world of uncertainty, in which God himself is equated with misery. As Dean says, "Troubles, you see, is the generalization-word for what God exists in" (*Road* 108). Dean teaches Sal that misery

will prevail, implying that God is alive and well and making the world go the way that he has intended it from the start. The manifest destiny of the world is to be forever miserable, Dean suggests, so why not enjoy life and the time we have left? In this sense, God, or the idea that there is little sense in worrying about the future because life and destiny cannot be controlled, can be considered as a guide through the liminal phase. Arpad Szakolczai points out that, during the liminal rite of passage, “everything is done under the authority of a master of ceremonies, who is practically equivalent to an absolute ruler” (Szakolczai, “Liminality” 148; paraphrasing Turner, *Forest* 99-100). In the context of Sal and Dean’s modern context, however, there is no social figure who performs the ceremony, because Sal and Dean’s rite of passage is *counter-cultural* and not sanctioned by wider society.

Sal sees Dean as someone who lives completely in the moment. The early Dean, who simulated domesticity and the capitalist middle class, disappears in Part Two. “Dean, grown to maturity,” as Sal narrates, is when “[f]ury spat out of his eyes when he told of things he hated; great glows of joy replaced this when he suddenly got happy; every muscle twitched to live and go,” and he was “looking in every direction seeing everything in an arc of 180 degrees around his eyeballs without moving his head” (*Road* 103). To Sal, Dean is, in Gregory Stephenson’s words, “an embodiment of transcendental primitivism” (170). For Dean promises everything that the American Dream failed to deliver, or neglected to mention. “The promise of Dean’s potential is immensely sexual, spiritual, and transcendent” (Swartz 91). Omar Swartz sees Dean as a representation of the breakdown of white morality, “accentuating its hypocrisy and the false sense of self-importance that it cultivates” (89).

Trudeau uses Peggy Phelan's configuration of the theatrical liminal trickster to define Sal and Dean's being haunted by white patriarchy, which has been detailed earlier. As Phelan observes in her book *Mourning Sex*:

[a]s an art form whose primary function is to mediate on the threshold that heralds between-ness, theatre encourages a specific and intense cathetic response in those who define themselves as liminal tricksters, socially disenfranchised, sexually aberrant, addicted, and otherwise queerly alienated from the law of the father (qtd. in Trudeau 154).

Phelan's articulation of the liminal trickster is also useful in understanding the character of Dean Moriarty. It finds meaning in the way that Sal sees Dean towards the end of the novel, almost a ghost of a human being, more of a "HOLY GOOF" (*Road* 176). Yet at the same time, Sal sees a "W.C. Fields saintliness" in Dean (109), especially during those times in which there seems to be no place for him in society. W.C. Fields was a popular television actor during Kerouac's generation who played down-and-out characters who kept a cool head throughout all the curve balls life throws at them, maintaining a positive attitude even when everything seems to go wrong, a "cosmic optimism" as Gregory Stephenson puts it (*Daybreak* 157). As Victor Turner argues, "Liminality is an unstructured, chaotic state, a 'blend ... of lowliness and sacredness'" (*Ritual*, 96; qtd. in Klapcsik, *Liminality* 13). Sal's application of saintly attributes onto this image of W.C. Fields, which he then ascribes to Dean, also gives an air of permanence to Dean's liminal situation. He became a holy person through his troubles. A holy person is no longer able to go back to normal, however.

This sacredness again pertains to Sal's perception of road travel itself as something holy. As noted earlier, the journey takes on the characteristics of a pilgrimage, which has liminal aspects. Within Sal's pilgrimage narrative, Dean is

portrayed as a saintly figure. Sal paints him as the epitome of Beat. He has been beaten by life, but is beatific despite of it, or perhaps even because of it. Stephenson writes that “Dean is protean, as powerful, and as unknowable as the human subconscious mind with which he may be identified – as a votary, a prophet, and as an embodiment of its energies and mysteries” (158). Sal sees Dean’s holiness in his ability to remain excited by life despite the fact that life seems to have no place for him, and drowns him in “complications.” It is incumbent upon Dean to retain his saintliness, then, by remaining in his liminal position. From this liminal place, he may remain a mystic guide to those wishing to understand the source of his saintliness, and those wishing to find authenticity. For Dean is able to see through the fool’s gold sheen of capitalist enterprise, and seems to dismiss that road as ultimately false. The religion that Dean is the prophet of is that of the elusive and indescribable “IT,” that phenomenon when “[t]ime stops” and whoever has “IT” is “filling empty space with the substance of our lives” (*Road* 187). Rather than some interminably out of reach material goal or a heaven that is distant and abstract, Dean’s perpetual search for “IT” is “the transcendence of personal, rational consciousness and the attainment of a synchronization with the finite” (Stephenson 157).

An early glimpse of Dean seems to contradict the first impression the reader gets of him as the wild, Western con man. Dean keeps to an obsessive schedule, which may be the effect that cities have on Dean. On the road, he is less constrained by the passage of time and merely jumps between spontaneous activities, whereas in the cities, he feels he has to make schedules and make it seem as though he’s a busy, important man. On the road, Dean “knows time,” and is able to negotiate it by adjusting the speed of his car, whereas in cities he has no control over it. As Haslam argues, “The emphasized phrase ‘*we all know time*’ suggests Dean’s ability (in Sal’s

eyes) to transcend the linear necessities of time, rising to a higher state where time as a whole can be seen and understood” (450). Dean takes to his goofing like a job, and in fact commodifies his time, sharing out parcels of it to various people throughout the day. In the mountain pass in Mexico, Dean exchanges the time of consumerism and capitalism in the form of his watch for the Indian one in the form of a crystal, which accrues value only over time (*Road* 272).

Dean’s transcendence of time is, according to Erik R. Mortenson, “an attack on the corruption of time by capitalism” (52). Both Dean and the Indian girl who sells him the crystal are exchanging time as a commodity here. Sal’s comment brings out the irony in this exchange, for when he says that the Indians “had come down from the back mountains and higher places to hold forth their hands for something they thought civilization could offer, and they never dreamed the sadness and poor broken delusion of it,” the illusion goes both ways (273). Sal and Dean hope to glean some “dense, dark, ancient” quality from these people, as much as the Indians apparently hope to gain something from civilization (273), but in both cases this is an illusion. As Haslam points out as well, “Both Dean’s escape from time (the removal of his watch) and his gaining of purity and sweetness are reliant on a racialized and gendered other who is both infantilized and voiceless outside of a relationship of (white, male) America” (456).

Dean lives in the moment, which makes “time,” at least in the modern conception of it, non-essential and of no value to him, as it neither contains nor controls him. This reinforces Dean’s permanent liminality, for he is neither informed by his past, nor impelled by his future. Discussing configurations of temporality in Kerouac’s novel, Mortenson argues that, when Dean speaks about time, God, and his certainty that “everything will be taken care of,” he does not necessarily believe in

fate. “Dean’s belief in living life in the moment need not mean that life is predetermined. Dean still retains personal agency within the moment; his faith is that his actions will inevitably be the right ones for that particular present” (Mortenson 56-57). Mortenson ascribes the liminal attributes of Dean’s persona to his living out of time, as well. Mortenson argues, “To exist in historical (‘inauthentic’) time is to exist as nobody and thence, Heidegger’s logic goes, to act like an immortal or at least like someone able to pretend that one’s finitude is not absolute and that it can be mediated by various means” (57). This is Dean’s temporal liminality, to “continually move in order to stay in sync with time, to always live on its perpetually unfolding edge” (Mortenson 58).

When Dean is at the wheel of a car, the road seems to be in tune with him, and he is able to weave through traffic unhindered and to no consequence for other drivers. After a wild night listening to jazz in San Francisco, for example, Dean “hunched over the wheel and blew the car clear across Frisco without stopping once, seventy miles an hour, right through traffic and nobody even noticed him, he was so good” (*Road* 182). The road facilitates Dean’s insistence on perpetual movement. Dean can “handle a car under any circumstance,” and Sal is never afraid when Dean is at the wheel (112). Nevertheless, towards the end of Part Three, Sal’s distrust shows through, and he warns Dean not to drive too fast in the daytime after another driver had taken dangerous chances, being overly excited to race them. Dean’s driving is becoming too much for Sal, who is beginning to see Dean’s destructive force.

Dean came up on lines of cars like the Angel of Terror. He almost rammed them along as he looked for an opening. He teased their bumpers, he eased and pushed and craned around to see the curve, then the huge car leaped to his touch and passed, and always by a hair we made it back to our side as other lines filed

by in the opposite direction and I shuddered (*Road* 212-213).

This image of Dean as the Angel of Terror is repeated when he comes to visit while Sal prepares to go to Mexico. Sal has “a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating toward me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed, pursuing me like the Shrouded Traveler on the plain, bearing down on me” (236). Earlier, Sal and Carlo thought the Shrouded Traveler, “a strange Arabian figure” who haunts Sal’s dreams, pursuing him across a desert and overtaking him before he reaches “the Protective City” may be death, or, as Dean puts it, the longing for “pure death” (112). Now, however, it become clear that Dean has become the Shrouded Traveler incarnate. This is foreshadowed by numerous allusions to Arabian stereotypes: Dean quips that he and Sal are Arabs come to blow up New York (106); Dean drives with a scarf-wrapped head (126). In Part Four, Sal envisions Dean in a jalopy chariot, burning a path over the road, “destroying bridges, drying rivers. It came like a wrath to the West [...] Behind him charred ruins smoked” (236). Nevertheless, Sal is “always ready to follow Dean” (238).

As Klapcsik points out, quoting Charles Jencks, “Instead of progress and teleology, liminality evokes an endless, oscillating movement, aimless, rambling flow, ‘a space extended infinitely without apparent edge’” (Jencks 87; qtd. in Klapcsik 13). Dean’s focus on the moment is evidenced by the fact that he is not overtly nostalgic about his past, or truly attached to anything. According to Turner, during the liminal stage “the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun. There is an instant of pure potentiality when everything trembles in the balance” (“Liminal” 75). Sal remarks that Dean drives right by “the birth country of his forebears without a thought” (102). For Dean to feel comfortable relating events of the past, he needs the details. Otherwise, he avoids

going into it by exclaiming “Oh man, the things I *could* tell you!” (147, emphasis added). He rarely reminisces about the past if he is unable to dwell in the details of that moment. Dean seems to acquire the skill of learning all the details of the present moment in the blink of an eye, as when he is able to describe in detail a Biblical scene of shepherds and their flock in the mountains of Mexico despite having taken only one glance at it before falling asleep (*Road* 273).

Victor Turner has touched on this mastery over time and its relation to the liminal using Mihali Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow.” Quoting Csikszentmihalyi, Turner argues: “Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement”; it is “a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part” and in which “there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present, and future” (Csikszentmihalyi qtd. in Turner “Liminal” 87). Turner’s use of Csikszentmihalyi’s extended theories of flow, which assert that, during flow, the past and the future are disregarded in favor of *now* (87), finds resonance in Dean Moriarty’s insistence on the full experience of the present moment.

Dean’s ability to live “outside” time, or transcend it, combines with his socio-economically marginal status to allow him to communicate more easily with seemingly a-historic, anachronistic and marginal characters. The liminal space of the road is an equalizing force, as has been explained, and Dean’s permanent liminality affords him this easy interface. When they finally reach Mexico, Dean finds “a people like himself,” and seems able to communicate with locals, even across the language barrier: “Dig that, Sal, I’m speaking Spanish” (*Road* 256). Gregory Stephenson attributes Dean’s “mystic” ability to communicate with “surrational” people such as

jazz musicians and people whose language he doesn't know to the fact that he "operates beyond the boundaries of rational consciousness," (158). This "surrational" communication is facilitated by Dean's liminality, which allows him to engage in cross-cultural relationships. Simultaneously, he seems to have some connection with the Fellaheen, who live outside history. For instance, when one little girl comes up to Dean, speaking her native language, Dean replies, "Ah yes, ah yes, dear one" (272).

Dean's permanent liminality has made him an almost evolved liminal character, and is therefore much more receptive to temporally and spatially liminal phenomena than Sal is. As much as Dean fluctuates between the middle class hierarchies of his friends and the unstructured freedom of the road, and between the two women in his life on the East and West coasts of America, the myth about Dean and the idea of him in the imaginations of those around him is also in a constant state of flux. As Stephenson notes, the Neal Cassady figure in the various novels and other works by different authors that represent him "is profoundly ambiguous, manifesting both positive and negative aspects, inspiring admiration and disapproval on the part of the other characters in the works, on the part of the author, and on the part of the reader" (155).

The use of death as a metaphor for ambiguity and transcendence above the social structure in *On the Road* represents the novel's clear engagement with liminality. Moreover, the knowledge of death impels a heightened desire for concentrated experiences of life, which is expressed in Dean's religious pilgrimage after "IT," and overall insistence on living in the details of the moment. Living in the "flow" of the moment, then, parallels the temporal transcendence that permanent liminality allows.

Conclusion

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* not only defined a generation, but it continues to speak to a particular sense of wanderlust catalyzed by a feeling of disaffection that is recognized particularly by young people decades after the novel was first published. The novel's ability to encapsulate this feeling and make it resonate even in the technologically advanced twenty-first century indicates that the novel holds some universal truths. The wish to escape the status quo, and find a space in which to locate and explore the essence of the self, as well as gain a greater understanding of the mechanisms of civilization, so as to move up in society with more confidence is universally recognized, but there seems to be no institutionalized, socially sanctioned ritual through which individuals may do so. Jack Kerouac's protagonists, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, attempt to stop the machine of society, and force just such a space to open for them, searching within it for alternatives to the disheartening state of middle-class society. This space corresponds with what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner has called the "liminal," because it is neither here nor there, neither high society nor low society. It is instead an unstructured space, in-between the structures of the society temporarily left behind. Within this liminal space, Sal and Dean seek life-affirming grass-roots authenticity to challenge their perception of dominant society's "stultified" and futile drive to conformity.

The road, then, is the starting point of the liminal phase in *On the Road*; it is where the narrative, as well as the characters, separate themselves from their city lives and take off into America. It is a spatial door to different worlds and spheres of being. It isn't just part of an interstate highway system that transports consumers, tourists

and other travelers who, in taking to the modern highway, are trapped in the master narrative of capitalist consumption. Part of the countercultural ethic is to reveal the underbelly of the consumerist road, to expose alternate narratives, such as those of migrant workers and other marginal individuals living on the road. At the same time, however, Kerouac's novel not only depicts the narrator's separation from his social sphere and his negotiation of the ensuing liminal space, but it also presents a conscious re-entry into the society previously abandoned. Kerouac's purportedly *counter-cultural* narrative actually portrays a willing subscription to the social and cultural values of the dominant class including class distinction, racial hierarchies, and gender inequality.

Liminality has traditionally been a concept that pertains to small-scale tribal societies as studied by Van Gennep. Victor Turner made the step to consider its usage in modern, post-industrial contexts, and scholars such as Arphad Szokolczai and Sandor Klapcsik have shown that it not only applies to modern contexts, but it is also useful in unlocking the social strategies articulated in cultural productions such as literature. The concept has overcome the burdens of theoretical debate to be applied usefully in the contextualization of identity politics during such modern phenomena as mass migration by war refugees and environmental migrants (e.g., Leung; Ramirez; Traphagan; Weeks).

Reading *On the Road* in the context of liminality reveals the novel's socio-cultural discourse on the failure of the American Dream by highlighting the social disparities prevalent in the margins of the nation. Kerouac nuances the fluidity and ambiguity of identity and belonging by using the notion of liminality to allow his protagonists to shift temporally, ethnically, and culturally as well as physically into "other" spaces. *On the Road* gave voice to a generation that, in the ebb of World War

II and the flow of the Cold War, found themselves with a limited space of freedom from a society growing more constricting, to search for themselves. In the interstices of those destructive wars, Kerouac's liminal road beckoned.

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