ODYSSEUS' NEST: AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE OBSESSION WITH TERRITORIAL MOBILITY IN JACK KEROUAC'S "ON THE ROAD" AND "THE DHARMA BUMS"

Abdeljalil Melouani

Faculty of Letters and Humanities
Sultan Moulay Slimane University
Beni Mellal, MOROCCO

melouaniabdeljalil@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines the restless mobility at the heart of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" and "The Dharma Bums" as a cultural and spatial problem rooted in the American identity. The paper situates Kerouac's nomadic protagonists within a tradition where movement across space becomes both an act of resistance and a symptom of cultural schizophrenia. Kerouac's ceaseless East-West and North-South trajectories echo the Odyssean myth of return. Yet, the impossibility of a final home destabilises the very notion of belonging, mirroring the ambivalent nature of American identity itself. While previous studies have explored Kerouac through the lenses of exile, mobility, and nomadism, few have interrogated the schizophrenic dynamics of space and identity shaping his narratives. This article extends these approaches by employing post-structural and postcolonial theories—drawing on Lefebvre's production of space, Deleuze's becoming, Bhabha's hybridity, and Said's cultural critique—to reveal how Kerouac's restless cartographies expose contradictions at the core of American cultural production. By linking spatial movement to the politics of identity, exile, and resistance, the paper reveals how Kerouac embodies a minority position through the notion of space, where mobility transforms into both a critique of national myths and a search for alternative cultural geographies in literary expression.

Keywords: American literature, cultural studies, exile, mobility, myth, nomadism, return, space

INTRODUCTION

The United States, even before independence, has been shaped by the idea of exploring other territories since the earliest settlers

(*Britannica* 2025). This tendency of territorial navigation and identification, which still resonates in the 21st century, is an extremely cultural problem having to do primarily with the origins of the American identity. Space here is crucial for it lays the foundation to deconstruct the problematic. Putting culture and literature as "a noble means of investigation and change" into question (Ginsberg 2018, 26), Kerouac's novels *On the Road and The Dharma Bums* depict a restless search for home by moving from East to West and South to North in an endless circular way. This problem unveils the webs of the American dream by locating space as the centre of political and cultural discussion.

The mobility in Kerouac's novels entails an ambivalence that sticks the protagonists into the American world, but at the same time contributes to their restless travel towards a final im/possible home. This paper alludes then to the myth of Odysseus, known for his dream of a final return, while the final nest contradicts the nature of the mytheme, similarly to the American identity. This ambivalence mainly results in the obsession with space, be it political, schizophrenic, or exilic. The Beat generation in this regard has seen in space an outlet that promotes "the search for antidotes to their disillusionment with U.S. culture and politics of their time" (Adams 2009, 157).

This paper exploits the hypothesis of Turner in that the American frontier, since the early settlement, has forged the identity of the nation and the later generations (Turner 1963). Meanwhile, Melehy's adoption of a geographical reading of Kerouac's novels by linking him to the literature of Canadian exile and nomadic cartography opens the angle to situate Kerouac as a cultural minority's writer (*Jack Kerouac and the Nomadic Cartography of Exile* 2012); (*Literatures of Exile and Return*: *Jack Kerouac and Quebec* 2012). In this context, researchers Kherif and Al-khawaldeh (2020) analyse Kerouac according to a nomadic framework through Deleuzian dialectics of becoming. On the other hand, Cresswell links the Geographical reading of Kerouac to mobility as a motif for resistance and instant production (1993).

These works are pivotal in the reformulation of this paper's problematic; however, they do not geographically read Kerouac through the Schizophrenic nature of American identity in relation to the dynamics of space. This article extends and employs resistance and becoming mainly to recurring American cultural production. In order to understand authentically how the American mind works via literary representation, this paper deconstructs the novels using the post-structural and postcolonial approaches by taking concepts for analysis from Lefebvre, Deleuze, Bhabha, and Said.

FROM EAST TO WEST AND FROM SOUTH TO NORTH

In *On the Road* (1957), Sal Paradise leaves New York on the East Coast towards Chicago and then Denver. During seven years, the protagonist moves from the East Coast towards the West Coast and from North to South in a circular motion: New York City, Chicago, Davenport, Des Moines, North Plate, Cheyenne, Denver, Laramie, Salt Lake, Reno, San Francisco, Madera, Los Angeles, San Louis, Washington DC., etc. In the *Dharma Bums* (1958), the same cycle happens but inversely with Ray Smith, who starts his adventures from San Francisco, Los Angeles, Nevada, Washington State and the woods.

The similarity in orientation and difference of start in both novels is very significant and symbolic rather than geographical in political terms. Initially, it is necessary to say that Kerouac's profile has been fascinated with the notions of East and West from his beginnings as a young American man from the Atlantic Shore. In his Correspondence with his sister Caroline Kerouac and brother-in-law Paul Blake in a 1947 letter on March 20th, Kerouac says: "Incidentally I may not go by N.C. in June on my proposed Western trip gotta get back East for our summer vacation a month later, don't I? And Nin, if you can come here this month, great!—Mom is

always dying to have you around and I'm always dying" (*Selected Letters* 1996, 106).

From his words, there is a general sense of enthusiasm and confusion at the same time about East and West that he does not keep to himself but instead shares with his closest people because of extreme excitement that might be interpreted as deep spatial desire by people who are not familiar with him. This excitement, at the same time, comes along with the feeling of death, the depressive death that culminates in staying in a single place for his whole life. Death as a symbol of space appears to be purely abstract, but in fact, it is quite contributive to American life. Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* confirms that representations of space are certainly abstract, but they also play a part in social and political life (Lefebvre 1991, 41).

Sal Paradise similarly exemplifies the same attitude with his swaying mobility between East and West across the years. In 1947, he decides to leave New York and start a trip towards the West: "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that, I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off" (*On the Road*, 3). The protagonist here directly admits that he wants to discover the general state of the country, and that his life has not started until the event of Dean, who introduces him to active being.

Sal then finds himself in a situation of death where his modus operandi is deactivated on the East Coast. The East, then, represents a place of stagnancy and death, where animus is postponed without a possibility of change until the appearance of the mad who plays the role of the destabilising force. The West, on the other hand, forms a dream of the protagonist to achieve within his dead life. A dream of this kind immediately opens up the horizon of possibilities of seeing and experiencing what is absent on the East Coast.

The title of the novel itself, *On the Road,* is symbolic of a definite ongoing process of mobility, but whose destination is unknown. It

is reasonable to say that the road meant here is the one on the West side, the known road of dreams and the countryside for Sal. However, the image for an Eastern man like Sal is blurred by a notion of vagueness and the absence of planning to reach the West. Therefore, the East again is a source of a disarrayed image that does not hinder itself from tormenting Sal, the freedom lover, paralysed within that location. The problem here becomes one of image production, or as Lefebvre describes, the realm of *representational space* (Lefebvre 1991). The ambiguity of a definite point of arrival arises because of the abundance *of associated images* and *symbols* that the American scene produces about space. In other words, it is not the realm of the perceived or the conceived, but the lived space of political control framed by a borderline.

The American scene, based on this, has two split mirrors of the same country, Eastern and Western, that both create a desire to move to the other side. The road in this regard does not start with the first step of leaving New York towards Chicago, but instead it has been underway since the first sparkle of awareness by Sal about the nature of the region where he lives, *representational space*, and the necessity of motion as a symbolic political act of progress. The character has created by his imagination a conflicting binary that influences immigration on a popular scale at the beginning of the travel process.

Different than Sal, Ray moves from South towards North looking for a new adventure: "Hopping a freight out of Los Angeles at high noon one day in late September 1955… my duffel bag under my head and my knees crossed and contemplated the clouds as we rolled north to Santa Barbara… and I intended to sleep on the beach at Santa Barbara that night and catch either another local to San Luis Obispo the next morning or the first class freight all the way to San Francisco at seven p.m." (*The Dharma Bums*, 4). The act of moving from South to North depicts a sense of lack covered by a dream to see the prosperous promised place.

For a man who comes south in a first-class freight towards San Francisco, travel provides an incentive for change during a period

of fall. The month of September embodies the state of germination and death towards a new beginning of life. The individual here undergoes the stage of death, where it is mandatory to pass from the moribund sphere into the creative one. Simultaneously, the idea of putting one's duffel bag under one's hand suggests a strong conviction by the author to highlight the obsession with mobility that an American individual like Ray engulfs within his consciousness.

The obsession of chasing the ideal dream, even when the economic state is not comfortable the thing that imposes on him travelling with goods on a local freight towards the destination. The imperative of commodification during the passage aligns with the same ambiguity Sal Paradise suffers from as the clouds hover above Ray's head, the thing that mirrors his blurred vision about his future within his current place. This bleak vision reflects a castrated *political space* (Lefebvre 1991) that does not establish itself in the absolute form, but is made up of capitalistic, scattered elements of physical dominance.

The sense of uncertainty Kerouac's protagonists feel amidst their travel process reflects a general sentiment of geographical loss in their stagnant environment. The first symptoms of this cultural American obsession with infinite space begin with this phase, where travel merges with individualism around spatial political reformulation and geopolitical signification.

FROM WEST TO EAST

The significance of directions is always in flux for characters and changes across the narrative scheme in the novel. Sal develops a contradicting vision that makes him reminisce about the East that he has always sought to leave:

> (…) and before me was the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent; somewhere far across, gloomy, crazy New York was throwing up

> its cloud of dust and brown steam. There is something brown and holy about the East, and California is white like washlines and empty-headed. (*On the Road*, 71)

Sal finds himself in front of the bitter reality that the West is no better than the East, and immediately, he has to admit his new findings. Within the implications of geography and distance, the West now, for Sal, does not invite intellectualism and elitist ambition as imagined before, but instead it is a place of a brainwashed and empty-headed society.

The East now is a synonym of production and activity, as he labels it 'brown'. The use of colours like brown and white to designate the sacred against the empty is a strong initial symptom of the mad individual state. However, to understand the aspects of the mad traveller here, it is important to stop at the ambivalent shift of truth for Sal and the manner in which he deconstructs his narrative on his own. The binary of colours indicates the instability of signification as time goes by, with the discovery of other states by Sal, who is shocked by what California finally represents, but the issue here lies in 'The American continent'.

The ambiguity that the signification of directions portrays about East and West seems, by the end, to unveil the state's real unproductivity and passivity in general, either in East or in West. In other words, Sal's confusion about the truth of places by swaying from East to West and vice versa is only a mirror of the country's real hideousness by the end. Sal's obsession with the distant border and ignorance of actual place is not only a symptom of the mad behaviour, but also a dangerous alibi of the schizophrenic mentality of the travelling American individual within the no-direction land.

Sal is lost between East and West without knowing he is schizophrenic by nature. This is because he belongs to a world where production and creativity governs the human desire and dreams. Deleuze and Guattari explain this schizophrenic's obsession with the never-ending beginnings: "Production as process overtakes all idealistic categories and constitutes a cycle whose

relationship to desire is that of an immanent principle. That is why desiring-production is the principal concern of a materialist psychiatry, which conceives of and deals with the schizo as Homo natura" (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* 2009, 5).

Deleuze then aligns with Kerouac in that the concept of desire lies in the heart of the schizophrenic, who is the synonym of the mad in Sal's case. The confusion of directions produced is itself the cycle that governs production and desires within the economic system of the country. That is to say, the constant mobility between East and West, looking for enlightenment, is itself a process that feeds the capitalistic system. Otherwise, stability would put the country into a state of stagnation.

The confusion apparent within Sal is the same tendency that made American mobility in the 1950s contagious among American states' borders. Deleuze is quite accurate in using the expression 'Homo natura' for describing madness as a natural phenomenon in this context. The relationship between mobility, production, desire, and Capitalism is one based on the notion of production that schizophrenia stems from, while sticking to a final direction, as an aspect of sanity is somewhat the symbol of death.

Deleuze also confirms the equation by saying: "Putting an end to the process or prolonging it indefinitely… is what creates the artificial schizophrenic found in mental institutions" (2009, 5). In other terms, the social psychiatry, according to Deleuze, is the one responsible for the infinite desire of exploring the American territory by Sal. This engine binds together machinery and animalism regarding travel as a mirror of life for Sal, who remains an unconscious desiring character.

Similarly, Ray voices the same confusion about directions when, together with his friend Japhy are invited to a big intellectual gathering by their beatnik friends. The two meet Alvah Goldbook and Warren Coughlin, who engage in a discussion about East and West. Ray instantly takes the opportunity and says:

> (…) also by strange, unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures, that's what I like about you, Goldbook

> and Smith, you two guys from the East Coast, which I thought was dead. We thought the West Coast was dead!" (*The Dharma Bums*, 49).

The core of identity for them lies essentially in the idea of freedom. What seems to come for Ray and Japhy as a desire to meet the ideal compatriot is undoubtedly the realisation of ubiquitous death across all regions. More precisely, their journey as Sal's reveals a moribund confusion about East and West that ends with a negative conclusion. Following their vision, the reader does not accurately know which place is the real source of death or whether the death of states is real. They, however, indirectly describe a general national state of a 'Terra Incognita' where the political sovereignty governs a national gloom with the coasts as territorial borderlines for individuals.

Space is extremely attached to the idea of death, for Ray insists on the notion of 'living creatures' and 'eternal freedom'. These desires depict a distorted map of the American political class imbued within the American individual who is dismembered from life and freedom across all regions. Within the same scheme, Ray declares through the vision of Japhy: "the hall is the blue sky, the rooms are vacant and empty, the east wall strikes the west wall, at the centre not one thing" (*The Dharma Bums*, 51).

Ray gives the metaphor of a construction to portray the social petrification of the United States, where the space of breathing is only "the blue sky", and narrowness suffocates existence within the American domain. Ray indirectly, through narrating the words of his dear friend Japhy, violently hammers the peculiarities and centrality of American Geopolitics. That is to say, East and West are the same within a country where what lies in the centre is not different from the two coasts, and, additionally, the idea of the centre reflects the absence of a solid construct, as in "not one thing".

Heading South for a New Horizon

On the Road's directions diverge with Sal and Dean deciding to go

South and explore what goes behind the American State. South represents the distant and closest symbol to inferior cultures in the American consciousness; hereby, it is the space of the exilic, as Edward Said coins (*Reflections on Exile*, 1994). By going South, Sal and Dean deconstruct the structure that has always shaped the East versus West dichotomy. This binary is what constantly keeps the dialogue of a unified nation alive, as it has been shaping American history for centuries:

> We note that the frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people. The coast was preponderantly English, but the later tides of continental immigration flowed across to the free lands. This was the case from the early colonial days. (Turner 1963, 44)

As Turner provides, the history of East-West dialogue has started since the colonial period. Yet further than this, history has developed to include the internal mobility that *On the Road* encompasses through Sal and Dean, who, as mentioned before, shatter the historical structure of American frontiers.

By detecting the incentive that drives the American identity with the notion of "the free lands", as Sal, together with Dean, chases freedom, the South represents now a chance of evasion for them from the American world and its monotony towards other possibilities of unknown horizons. It is not East that meets West in this context, but East and West leave the stage for South. The south for them now is a "magic vision" that exceeds the boundaries of reality. The new target of the compass is the new nexus of consciousness that overpasses the predetermined mobility towards a transnational universal awareness whose exilic drives are undermined by the loss of something left behind forever. The nomadic drive, thus, is subject to the political hegemony in the north in that "the power of the nomad's mobility is often remarked upon as an important strategy in the evasion of power" (Adey 2009, 85).

The idea of flying down towards other horizons while the nation's rockribs down the Tierra del Fuego symbolically seems to call for an anti-national feeling of resentment towards internal

politics and the structure of American society overall. However, the sentiment here is not anti-national but rather transnational in order to establish a new ground for the concept of freedom. This transnational process seeks not only abandon the American world and its characteristics but also find new embodiments of the ideal state that the American consensus appears to miss, leading to the problem of exile.

The state these mad young men try to implement resembles an ideal illusive world like the Eldorado, but is struck by the harsh exilic reality. Their vision overlaps with the same political ambition staged in Plato's *Republic*. Following the political nature of the United States regime, Plato's republic (*politeia* in Greek) similarly followed a system of independent city-states (Roochnik 2005, 8). The concept of freedom that Plato criticises leads to a political system where chaos is dominant, and that is what is really happening in Sal and Dean's country, which is primarily founded on the idea of the "free state".

The two characters then try to evade excessive freedom by desiring to head south and towards other worlds that contain 'less freedom' according to the typical essentialist American perception. Ironically, Sal seems superficially to be obsessed with the notion of freedom, but his loss of the compass indicates a strong alignment with Plato's rejection of the 'free' democracy that weakens the city as a metaphor for the state. The rejection of American directions signifies a strong absence of choice and, consequently, the presence of political determinism.

It is systematically an act of spatial reformulation itself to reject the American understanding of the word of freedom and instead follow the patterns of reason and wisdom through the process of travelling, which indicates his conscious choice of exile. However, Sal is very aware of this determinism and that the realisation of his vision of a wise understanding of freedom by his American fellows cannot supersede the imagination by solely the individual "I couldn't imagine this trip" because this I is determined to fail if alone. Instead, the vision he strives to achieve comes only through the collective "and us flying down the curve of the world".

The Dharma Bums ends with Ray alone in the desolation peak with his new job as a fire lookout. He concludes his trip by contemplating nature and saying:

> Everywhere awful icefields and snow straws; one blade of grass jiggling in the winds of infinity, anchored to a rock. To the east, it was grey; to the north, awful; to the west, raging mad, hard iron fools wrestling in the groomian gloom; to the south, my father's mist (The Dharma Bums, 117).

Ray confirms the same idea that consists of the individual against their political cold environment by using the metaphor of the icefields and the single jiggling blade of grass in the wind. Ray has a bleak vision of what is going on in the country, and he sees himself swaying in the winds of infinity, far from the American *habitus* as exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past (Said 1994, 140).

The winds symbolise the same political loss of compass that Sal suffers from, while the "rock" stands for the United States, which represents the disobedient fate for Sal. Ray settles his travels with a sense of despair alongside an awareness of his predetermined American fate, the one of a wild freedom that is rampant everywhere, and the chances of change are low. The gloom ascends with his perception of his generation, who socially compete within a national state of melancholy in either the east, west, or north. Ray sees his vision as infinite, while the nation's is finite and determined to vanish with time. The compass again is broken, with East not giving any signs of hope, while north and west are eaten by the trend of wild freedom.

The protagonist faces, at this final stage, the hard-to-grasp reality that his being fails to accept the land, yet he is obliged to inhabit that environment as the word "anchored" suggests. However, within the same paradox, Ray tries to evade the paradigm of the East that has been historically influenced by Europe, while the West is immersed with fanatic liberalism. He is stuck in the void between a completely imported European ancestral conservatism inhabiting the East, as in the metaphor of "the father's mist", and an insane liberal

orientation that does not align with the American political dream of an ideally governed state. The south again, in another sense, incarnates the political dream Ray feels he has to carry, but faces a disarrayed scenery that hinders the dream from germinating.

The travels of Sal and Ray alongside the development of their travel perceptions hide a mad process of struggle about political signification as American young men. They realise in the beginning that the East is not suitable for meeting their dreams of freedom and thus head towards the West. This representation ideologically anchors in the Eastern consensus since East represents the point of Germination of the United States, and it is itself an unconscious mad attachment to a single linear orientation. However, using Bhabha's concept (*The Location of Culture* 1994), both characters surf in the *in-between* and *third space* as their body is still inside the US despite the mind erring elsewhere, which drowns their existential condition into an *exilic third space*.

Kerouac's protagonists embody the transnational by embracing an alternative vision that tries to transcend their imposed reality towards other horizons (the south and other worlds); however, their vision does not correlate with the nation's paralysed visions. On the other part, their orientation unconsciously aligns with the origins of the American spirit, no matter how nomadic they try to be, which is behind the establishment of the United States. Therefore, they carry inside what they are evading. Sal and Ray reject the American spaces with all its political and cultural aspects, but travelling is the only inadequate insatiable solution, which results again in an unrestful cultural loop.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the beginning, the American identity through the works of Kerouac reveals a mad, insatiable attachment to space. This attachment certainly appears to germinate from the earliest nexus of the country's history. By swaying from East to West, South

to North, West to East, and again North to South, Kerouac's protagonists embody a sense of schizophrenic spatial loss that never settles down, being purely American. Despite transcending the imposed political space towards the unknown horizons, Sal and Japhy are pregnant with an unreachable American dream, and thus indirectly carrying the American mobile tradition. Identity here is paradoxically complex and ambivalent as it sways between the abysses of imaginary space, political schizophrenia, and exilic third-space.

Kerouac successfully paints the schizophrenic mirror of American culture, being the centre of the American identity. The latter, shaped by historical travel and negotiation of borderlines, internally operates even among the very rebels. Kerouac uses space not only as a ground for his narratives but also as a political and cultural expression that reveals what it means to be American. His works in this context are an allegory of American ideology and culture that should be evaluated from a historical perspective (Jameson 2019, 176).

The allegorical has a persistent dimension in the literary and cultural texts, reflecting the fundamental collective thinking and collective fantasies about history and reality (Jameson 1983, 19). Kerouac then succeeds in reviving the myth of Odysseus through his symbolic narrative that depicts a contradictory political and cultural American identity, being lost in spaces but still framed in a geographical background. With this tragic ambivalence, Homer's lines anchor the unrestful American pendulum:

> The good Odysseus now awoke from sleep on his native soil. After so long an absence, he failed to recognise it, because the goddess Pallas Athene, Daughter of Zeus, had thrown a mist over the place. (*The Odyssey* 2003, 174)

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