WE’RE ON A ROAD TO NOWHERE: STEINBECK, KEROUAC, AND THE LEGACY OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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At first glance, John Steinbeck’s seminal Depression-era text *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) would seem to have little in common with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). However, like Steinbeck’s work of realism, Kerouac’s picaresque tale of mid-century fellahin hipsterdom serves also as a repository for the deep misgivings about America that the Depression sewed in the populace. For instance, both authors use tropes of the hobo-tramp, the road, and the American Dream—lasting and powerful concepts in twentieth century life—in startlingly similar ways. While it has proven convenient to read Kerouac’s characters and their bohemian adventures as symbols of freedom, possibility, and rebellion, perhaps more compelling is how Kerouac employs these signifiers in ways that echo Steinbeck’s renderings of limit, loss, and wandering. More broadly, *On the Road* is informed by Depression-era anxieties of what America represents as opposed to what it might and should represent. Kerouac’s novel is a text that can be seen as actively calling into question the myth(s) of America. Beyond the *joie de vivre* of the main characters and the freewheeling narrative style, *On the Road* engages critically with the psychological and geographical landscapes of the 1930s. Kerouac’s work serves as memory bank and moral conscience for victims of Depression trauma.

Equally compelling are the ways in which these novels each seem to respond to the socio-cultural and literary impulses of modernism. Indeed, it would be fair to say that Steinbeck and Kerouac, working within modernist aesthetic modes, produce works that are thematically antimodernist. Writing in decades that, when taken together, demonstrate perfectly the paradoxical nature of the American Dream, these writers nonetheless are in accord when it
comes to the ideological dilemmas attendant to modernity. The 1930s and the 1950s are both eras in which consolidation and cultural hegemony were sought at the expense of individualism (tempered by a sense of interconnectedness) and spiritualism. In one decade, salvation takes the form of progress (industrial, social, etc.) and a return to plenty is promised; in the other, progress is lived, as is the anxiety that it must be perpetuated to circumvent another disaster. In both cases, the answer to the problems of the day lay in the conquest of nature by technology. Working against the alienating forces of modernity, Steinbeck and Kerouac seek to restore human interconnectivity and an ethos of the divine (in the form of a universal or “world soul”). And while each employs modernist techniques in his prose style, the message is not consonant to the vehicle.

The Great Depression and the Fabulous Fifties are historical points at which the accepted wisdom of modernity operates at an accelerated pace. Increased governmental control, a turn toward mass over individual welfare, and the growth model of capitalism as the antidote for hardship inform the dominant sociopolitical philosophy of both eras. In light of such similarities, we can think about Steinbeck and Kerouac as antimodernist in their privileging of ideas that critique and counter the logics of hegemony. Cultural historian Jackson Lears elaborates:

The antimodern impulse stemmed from revulsion against…the systematic organization of economic life for maximum productivity and of individual life for maximum personal achievement; the drive for efficient control of nature under the banner of improving human welfare; the reduction of the world to a disenchanted object to be manipulated by rational technique. (7)

_The Grapes of Wrath_ and _On the Road_ attack the cold logic of modernity by creating characters who refuse to accept the particular worldview promulgated by the forces of control and who instead seek to recuperate a sense of enchantment or spirituality in the midst of an ideological lockdown. And while one was written in a time of cultural famine and the other in a period of hyperkinetic capitalist feasting, these novels mutually lament the price of existence paid by the individual in modern America and gesture toward an antidote for the incivilities of civilization.

It is obvious, though important, that Steinbeck and Kerouac prosecute their antimodernist campaigns from disparate subject positions and, clearly, in different literary modes. _The Grapes of Wrath_ is typically labeled a protest novel written predominately in the vein of American regionalism or realism (tinged, perhaps, with a certain primitivist romanticism). Sometimes using heavy pathos, at others a stark journalistic reportage (as in the intercalary chapters), Steinbeck gives the lie to modern ideas of progress and individual fulfillment. Kerouac’s experimental and improvisational novel develops a critique that echoes Steinbeck’s masterwork of social consciousness. In picaresque fashion, Sal Paradise adventures across the nation in a series of
episodes that seem as lighthearted and spontaneous as they are entertaining. However the story itself and the narrative of how it was composed both call into question precisely what the novel seemingly strives to celebrate. Kerouac employs the same symbolic lexicon found in *The Grapes of Wrath*, with the language of the young hipster replacing the vernacular of the dispossessed (and comparatively naïve) southerner. Moreover, the rather disjointed and impressionistic narrative structure of *On the Road* might seem to create a philosophical gap where only a stylistic lacuna exists. As does Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Kerouac articulates a space wherein ideas of agency and possibility in the first half of the American Century are examined as well as a space in which many of the assumptions of modernism are challenged. Ultimately, Kerouac’s objective is, like Steinbeck’s, a critique of the modern condition. These authors delineate cultural roads that lead at best to ennui and discontent, at worst to utter demoralization and the likelihood of psychic (or even literal) starvation. Whatever their differences in genre, tone and philosophy, when taken together, these novels share some interesting correspondences.

Born in 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts, Jack Kerouac witnessed firsthand the economic struggles of the 1930s. Indeed, the Great Depression hit Lowell early as Paul Maher, Jr. relates in his recently-released biography: “By late 1928, the portents were forbidding….In Lowell, textile and shoe factories began to lay off workers….Many Lowell families were compelled to pull their children from school to put them to work despite the scarcity of jobs” (25). Biographers tend to agree that the Kerouac family suffered less than did many of their Lowell counterparts. However, the frequent moves that took place almost annually throughout the 1930s provide a mapping of the family’s declining fortunes. Leo Kerouac, Jack’s father, owned a small printing shop that did a fair business until a disastrous flood wreaked havoc on Lowell in 1936 (See Maher 40-41). Leo’s ability to support his family was in irreversible decline and Jack’s teenage psyche was greatly affected by the economic collapse—one that has a nearly archetypal resonance with so many Great Depression tales of loss. Biographer Tom Clark explains how Jack began to have recurrent nightmares (they would continue well into adulthood) about a “Shrouded Stranger” pursuing him through the apartment and across vast expanses of wasteland. While Clark implies that the threatening figure is an embodiment of his father’s spiritual and economic ruination, the Shrouded Stranger might be more broadly read as the Great Depression personified with its mysterious origin and unjustified vengefulness infusing Kerouac’s active subconscious with myriad anxieties.

These brief facts regarding the fate of his family in the 1930s suggest that Jack Kerouac’s vision of America—an ultimately ambiguous one, and one suffused with a melancholic mixture of possibility and disenchantment—was to no slight degree forged in the foundry of the Great Depression. Indeed, Kerouac remained throughout his life a “child of the 1930s.” His works are
products of a philosophical imagining of America that include the anxiety born of a youth spent in the throes of socioeconomic decline.

Kerouac’s firsthand experience with the byproducts of national crisis was considerably more arduous and humiliating than that endured by the author of what many critics call the definitive Depression-era text. *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to be read for its powerful evocation of America’s struggle in the 1930s as well as for its enduring humanist message. Yet Steinbeck was strictly an observer of the catastrophes produced by the economic emergency; he and his family never had to concern themselves with winding up in the tenements that proved the fate of the Kerouacs. Charles Shindo describes Steinbeck’s courting of a “typically spartan, Bohemian lifestyle” that was more pose than predicament. The author may have presented himself as a starving artist, but the Depression was not a personal reality for him: “Though his early days of writing saw many lean years and empty kitchen pantries, he never lived in life-threatening poverty...he and his wife lived rent-free in Pacific Grove, supported by a monthly allowance from his father” (58). Of course, the litmus test for quality prose works that engage the crisis of the 1930s is not one that measures the level of deprivation with which a given author was forced to contend.

In refuting the received wisdom that labels Steinbeck a protest writer, Morris Dickstein offers a line of comparison that can help us begin to think about *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* as intersecting texts. Steinbeck is to be linked not with proletarian writers or social realists, with whom he felt little affinity, but with the free-spirited explorers of low life like William Soroyan, Nelson Algren, and Henry Miller, whose heroes are anarchic individualists who live by their own code, by instinct, apart from the social values that constrain most other people. (112-13)

Described in this fashion, both Steinbeck’s creative inspiration and emotional life seem in keeping with those of Kerouac, whose most memorable characters are precisely the type of rebel Dickstein references and whose text, like Steinbeck’s, formally adheres to the experimental biases of modernism while generating an antimodern sentiment. Their characters are outcasts in the twentieth century who seem better suited to a different cultural moment—to a more open, embracing, and dynamic ideological space. Indeed, both authors are concerned with the “beat” individual—the character who makes his way along the tattered fringes of the American Dream. And the Great Depression delivered up an unprecedented number of such people onto the cultural landscape of the 1930s. Tom Joad has more in common with Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarity than we might initially care to allow; for Steinbeck and Kerouac create characters who, due to fiscal or spiritual insolvency, find themselves “suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming
and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way...beat, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction” (The Portable Jack Kerouac 559).

In tracing the literary arc connecting Steinbeck’s migrant-Okies to Kerouac’s hobo-tramp hipster, one must acknowledge the powerful legacy of the dispossessed figure from the 1930s in popular culture. Charles Shindo, for example, suggests that “[i]mages and descriptions of the dust bowl migrants proliferated in literature, music, newspapers, magazines, photo collections, films, and on stage,” and that “[t]he dust bowl migration to California evokes the Great Depression perhaps more than any other event of the 1930s, not only because of its pervasiveness but because of its representational possibilities” (2). The “representational possibilities” of the 1930s migrant are reflected in Kerouac’s Sal and Dean. If one can get past the seemingly vast social and economic chasms that divide the Depression years from mid-century, some interesting, if ironic similarities become discernible.

For example, the goals of the Joad family are not exactly converse to those of Kerouac’s main character. Sal admits to his friends that stability (both economic and emotional) is something for which he longs:

“I want to marry a girl,” I told them, “so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time—all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something.” (116)

In The Grapes of Wrath, characters ruminate over the idea of domestic stability. At one point, Rose of Sharon tells her mother,

“Well, we talked about it, me an’ Connie. Ma, we wanna live in a town.” She went on excitedly, “Connie gonna get a job in a store or maybe a fact’ry. An’ he’s gonna study at home, maybe radio, so he can git to be a expert an’ maybe later have his own store”….Ma suddenly seemed to know it was all a dream. (224-5)

The dream of the hipster and the dustbowler intersect here. And it is, of course, the American Dream itself. Writing in periods that differed greatly in imagining how it might be achieved, Steinbeck and Kerouac acknowledge the dream’s overwhelming power, especially for those living on the edges of society. They also exhibit a suspicion of its value as perceived by the conventional wisdom of their respective eras.

Collective memories of the Great Depression materialize in Kerouac’s text in the form of hoboes and Okies. Sal and Dean frequently encounter people who serve as walking scars of America’s struggle through the 1930s. Early in the novel, Sal bums a ride with one such character:

“During the depression,” said the cowboy to me, “I used to hop freights at least once a month. In those days you’d see hundreds of men riding a flatcar
or in a boxcar, and they weren’t just bums, they were all kinds of men out of work and going from one place to another and some of them just wandering.”

(20)

This passage is rather anomalous in *On the Road*, for it marks an instance in which the author deliberately drops the riotous speed and immediacy of his narrative to remind the readers of shared cultural trauma which might inspire reflection upon the troubling erasure of the Depression from national memory. More common are passing references that may be seen as doing the same work. For example, the reader encounters a saloon “where sullen Okies reeled to the music of a cowboy band” (93) or learns of how “[o]utside Tucson we saw another hitchhiker in the dark road. This was an Okie from Bakersfield, California, who put down his story” (167). And in putting down *his-story*, Kerouac gives testimony to the struggles of the 1930s migrant.

Indeed, hoboes and Okies are found throughout *On the Road*. These figures serve a dual purpose for Kerouac: they raise the specter of the Great Depression in the collective memory, and they help to explain the self-alienating subject position of the modern Beat. Critic Frederick Feied goes as far as to label Sal, Dean, and their compatriots hoboes in their own right. Kerouac’s refutation of the mid-century tale of plenty is signified in his empathetic evocation of the citizen who has been excluded from the American bounty. The Joads are a lasting symbol of such alienation, and Kerouac acknowledges their struggle against the fickle workings of a capitalist system.

A notable instance of this can be found when Sal’s work dilemma is considered alongside the struggle of Steinbeck’s migrants to eke out a living from California cotton picking. A surplus of labor means low wages and an atmosphere of competition among the hungry. People are not working to get ahead or thrive but rather simply to subsist at a point well below the poverty line. The cotton pickers are, quite literally, working for food, as indicated by Tom Joad’s giddy pronouncement: “Side-meat tonight, by God! We got money for side-meat! Stick out a han’ to the little fella, he’s wore out. Run in ahead an’ git us four poun’ of side meat. The ol’ woman’ll make some nice biscuits tonight, ef she ain’t too tired” (557). The ability to purchase meat for the night’s meal, even the cheapest of cuts, is cause for celebration. The migrant laborer is denied the luxury of pondering a better future—or any at all. The system has them locked in a hand-to-mouth existence. Kerouac echoes the complaint of Steinbeck’s exploited field worker, and shows that while the 1930s may be a fading memory for most, the clock has stopped for others who toil in a perpetual Great Depression. In an ill-fated attempt to save up some cash, Sal finds himself caught up in the cycle that ensnared the Okie refugees years earlier. Cotton picking is still a losing proposition:

At the end of the field I unloaded my burden on the scale; it weighed fifty pounds, and I got a buck fifty….I looked up at the dark sky and prayed to
God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something for the little people I loved. Nobody was paying attention to me up there. I should have known better....Every day I earned approximately a dollar and a half. It was just enough to buy groceries in the evening on the bicycle. (96-7)

While Sal initially muses, “I thought I had found my life’s work” (96), he soon realizes that he has become a cog in an economic machine that ensures his own poverty and seeks to block any escape to better opportunity. Kerouac seems to have the Joads in mind when he describes Sal’s neighbors in the tent encampment:

In a larger tent next to ours lived a whole family of Okie cotton-pickers....The grandfather had come from Nebraska during the great plague of the thirties—that selfsame dustcloud my Montana cowboy had told me about—with the entire family in a jalopy truck. They had been in California ever since....They were extremely proud of their tent. (95)

Kerouac’s semi-satiric tone here does not trivialize the migrants’ plight but rather foregrounds it. Portraying the lifestyle of the itinerant worker as a desirable mode of survival for any segment of the American population in the 1950s can only be read as ironic commentary on the postwar boom. The last line of the passage is as pathetic as it is humorous, considering the recent explosion of suburbia and the notion that home ownership was becoming very nearly a right of citizenship. “The Great Depression and WWII interrupted the strides being made toward universal home ownership in the United States. In 1945, at the conclusion of the war, about 40% of Americans owned homes...By 1960, 60% of Americans owned their own homes, a testament to the impacts of government largesse in this area” (Young 66). That people should be living, against their wishes, the tent life that Kerouac describes amounts to an authorial pot-shot at the widely-accepted notion that the Okies and other refugees of the Great Depression had found their own share of financial security in the general vitality of the postwar economy. Part of what On the Road does as a social text is remind the mainstream that the hoboes, Okies, migrants—the Joads of America—still exist on the borders of a society committed to a belief that the fallout from the Great Depression has long since dissipated and that the messages contained in books such as The Grapes of Wrath need not remain viable in the collective memory.

Another way Kerouac draws lines of connection to the struggles of the 1930s is through his portrayal of the forces of control—the police, highway troopers, and other authorities who interact with the hoboes, migrants, and other “undesirables” whose societal place lay outside of the mainstream. In periods of crisis, an atmosphere of fear and suspicion creates unique problems and opportunities for the hegemonic forces that patrol the boundaries of citizenship and the implied agency such a term carries. Outlawry in the Great Depression
was open to a broad range of interpretation, and the “crime of poverty” was often dealt with in shameful ways. When the Joads finally make it to their promised land, they quickly find out how the discomfort their presence inspires in the “native” population results in a bloodless pogrom against refugees seeking relief in California. Tom, savvy from his stint in the prison industrial complex, tries to tell Casy that all is not well in the Golden State:

Tom studied him with half-shut eyes and he put on his cap again. “Look,” he said, “this ain’t no lan’ of milk an’ honey like the preachers say. They’s a mean thing here. The folks here is scared of us people comin’ west; an’ so they got cops out here tryin’ to scare us back.” (342)

Steinbeck portrays the police as a paramilitary force comprised of both sworn officers and overzealous vigilantes. By blurring the line between legitimate and illegal martial power, he also obliterates the crucial line dividing the suppression of crime and the oppression of an innocent, if inconvenient, migrant population.

When, in On the Road, Sal reluctantly takes a job as a barracks guard in Mill City, California, he finds himself in the company of those who policed the Great Depression. In referencing his fellow-guard’s age and vehicle, Kerouac signals the man’s connection to the officers with whom the Joads had to contend:

The cop...was potbellied and about sixty, retired but unable to keep away from the atmospheres that had nourished his dry soul all his life. Every night he drove to work in his ’35 Ford, punched the clock exactly on time, and sat down at his rolltop desk. He labored painfully over the simple form we all had to fill out every night–rounds, time, what happened, and so on. Then he leaned back and told stories.

The stories that the semi-literate officer tells are tales of senseless brutality. He offers to take Sal to places where he and his cohorts delivered beatings to unarmed men whose blood left “stains on the wall” (66). Kerouac conjures a policy of intimidation and violence that was fairly common in the 1930s. It is this unlawful brand of policing that Tom Joad lashes out against. He describes the state of injustice by first mentioning what could easily be a younger version of Kerouac’s cop:

“Did you ever see a deputy that didn’ have a fat ass? An’ they waggle their ass an’ flop their gun aroun’. Ma,” he said, “if it was the law they was workin’ with, why, we could take it. But it ain’t the law. They’re a-workin’ away at our spirits. They’re tryin’ to make us cringe an’ crawl like a whipped bitch. They tryin’ to break us.” (381)

The physical violence that the police use to manipulate the migrant populations is part of a larger project of psychological domination. Tom is not afraid of
being beaten or shot, but he is terrified of having his will broken. Echoing Tom, Kerouac says, “The American police are involved in a psychological warfare against those Americans who don’t frighten them with imposing papers and threats. It’s a Victorian police force; it...wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes don’t exist to its satisfaction (OTR 136). The main function of authority in these texts is the quelling of difference and experimentation. Kerouac and Steinbeck champion their characters who challenge authority and the status quo just as they themselves accept that a main function of literary modernism is to challenge, through experiment, authoritative ways of writing. In this way, both authors engage in the aesthetics of modernism while simultaneously working against the cultural authority of modern progress.

Steinbeck and Kerouac are both interested in how nomadic existence disrupts the concept of family. This simultaneous embrace of modern aesthetics and antimodern themes is also evident in their treatment of the family unity. The Depression fractured countless families who were forced to break up in order to improve their chances for work, and therefore for survival itself. Arthur G. Neal observes that “[t]he economic hardships of the Great Depression fell disproportionately upon the family unit” and that “[c]onditions of crisis surface when parents lack the resources to adequately serve as providers and caretakers for their children and for each other” (48-9). When the only option becomes putting the family on the road to a strange and unknown destination, problems are compounded. As the Joads exemplify, older members often could not adapt to a life of migrancy and basically became casualties of the economic disaster. Grampa and Granma, for instance, literally die on the road to California. And later in the narrative, when Tom insists that he must break from the family in order to save it, his mother bursts with a litany of familial sufferings fostered by the Great Depression: “Tom! They’s a whole lot I don’ un’erstan’. But goin’ away ain’t gonna ease us. It’s gonna bear us down.” And she went on, “They was the time when we was on the lan’. They was a boundary to us then. Ol’ folks died off, an’ little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing—we was the fambly— kinda whole and clear.” (536) The loss of boundaries—both property lines and those that demarcate roles of family members—has thrown the migrants into a state of disorder. Gender roles have broken down and longstanding patterns of life and death have been interrupted by the Depression. But even in families less stricken than the Joads, the 1930s marked a period of despair and domestic turmoil. A major disturbance in American family life took place in this era, and it seems logical that the nation would wish to disavow such painful memories. As a result, the modern cultural impulse to restore and reinscribe familial roles was operating on a comprehensive level by the time Kerouac was drafting his road novel.

The mid-century decade’s obsession with the nuclear family, the appliance-laden kitchen, and the frozen dinner is a representative strategy for repressing
cultural memories of how the Great Depression (and, of course, WWII) disoriented the family unit. Television shows of the late 1950s, like *Father Knows Best*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Make Room for Daddy*, and *The Donna Reed Show*, labored to restore the family by modeling an unrealistic, syrupy dynamic. Social historians William H. and Nancy K. Young describe another component of the campaign to fix the American home: ‘Do it yourself’—instead of letting outsiders do it for you—emerged as a catchphrase eagerly embraced by suburban families everywhere. As long as the family operated together, all was well with America, or so ‘togetherness’ would have it” (7-8). The idea of self-containment is a 1950s trope that exposes distrust of the new cultural paradigm. Despite the proliferation of commodities in the marketplace and America’s emergence as world leader, people were closing themselves off from one another. Kerouac’s characters in *On the Road* represent the opposite impulse. Sal and Dean wish to embrace their fellow-Americans and convince them that conformity and its ironic corollary, isolation, is not the answer. This gesture is culturally antimodern in that it deconstructs the fable of tranquil suburbia in which millions of families live together separately, enjoying a uniquely American admixture of community and solitude.

Moreover, Kerouac battles against collective amnesia regarding the Great Depression by reminding readers how the tribulations of the 1930s fractured families and destroyed the security of hearth and home. Sal Paradise recalls when he stayed “with the Okie family”:

The mother was a wonderful woman in jeans who drove coal trucks in winter mountains to support her kids, four in all, her husband having left her years before when they were traveling around the country in a trailer. They had rolled all the way from Indiana to LA in that trailer. (214)

This illustration of dysfunction recalls the Depression migrant family’s struggle to hold together on the road. Gender roles have been inverted and the traditional father-provider has fled. Such a portrait flies in the face of the mid-century idealization of the family unit. Kerouac offers these examples as history lessons and antidotes for a stultifying modern moment—a distinctly antimodern gesture aimed at debunking moral conformity.

It can be argued that the quest of *On the Road* is precipitated and driven by a search for family—or at least the memory of one. Dean Moriarty is continuously inquiring after and searching for his father, with whom he weathered the 1930s in utter squalor. In this fashion, the Great Depression runs like a subtextual stream beneath the adventures that the two young men pursue haphazardly across the nation. Every now and again, Dean is struck with a memory bolt and is compelled to share it with his travel partner: “NOW, I have IT—I have to tell you the time my father and I and a pisspoor bum from Larimer Street took
a trip to Nebraska in the middle of the depression to sell fly swatters.” It proves a tale of tragic debauchery, violence, and a return to Denver, where Dean’s “old man was arrested and I had to plead at court to the judge to let him go because he was my pa and I had no mother. Sal, I made great mature speeches at the age of eight in front of interested lawyers…” (207). Once again, the broken family, homelessness, and a switching of roles connotes the damage done by the Depression. Kerouac undermines the modern ideal of the fedora-headed family man by presenting a dispiriting portrait of a broken American home. He reminds his contemporary audience that cultural propaganda is not reflective of more complicated realities and that father does not always know best.

Unlike 1950s mainstream America, Kerouac’s characters thirst for memory rather than an obliteration of it. In a Denver bar, Dean Moriarty waits to meet a cousin whom he has not seen in a long while. Sal wants to know how he plans to scam the cousin, but Dean assures his friend: “‘No pitch, man, I only want to know what’s been happening in the family–I have a family, remember–and most particularly, Sal, I want him to tell me things I’ve forgotten in my childhood. I want to remember, remember, I do!’ I never saw Dean so glad and excited” (216). The memories he wants to retrieve are important for Dean’s self-identity. He wants to know himself as completely as he can and thereby understand how all things are ultimately connected. To “know time,” as he repeats again and again in On the Road, is to comprehend all.

The quest to locate Dean’s father unfolds erratically across the American landscape because it mirrors the itinerant lifestyle his father leads (the life he had shared with Dean throughout the 1930s). There is no telling where the old man is, or even if he is still living, but his son imagines him everywhere: “Dean was very quiet and preoccupied, looking at the old bums in the saloon that reminded him of his father. ‘I think he’s in Denver–this time we must absolutely find him, he may be in County Jail, he may be around Larimer Street again, but he’s to be found. Agreed?’” (190-1). Of course, the quest is never fulfilled, and Sal parts ways with Dean without ever having located Dean’s father. Yet Kerouac ultimately asserts that the refusal to forget the past, even a particularly sad and cruel one, is crucial for Dean and America alike. To break ties with history is to resort to living in a compromised present—one whose meaning and value is tenuous and mutable. Kerouac ends his novel with a poignant, thrice-repeated tribute to the act of memory: “I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (310). This is one of the tenets of literary modernism—the nostalgic search for a unified past. Kerouac understands this impulse, yet denies his character the ability to retrieve, reorder, and find solace in the past, thereby once again adopting modernist aesthetics and suffusing them with an antimodern critique.

The search for Dean’s father and all the other (mis)adventures that Kerouac’s characters involve themselves in unfold on the American road. And
the quest/exodus framework of the novel serves to keep a 1930s zeitgeist alive in *On the Road*. America’s obsession with movement requires no explication here, nor do the ways in which the advent of the automobile augmented and accelerated this need. The tropes of the broad highway and the car have become central to defining what it means to live in this country. The road is a highly symbolic space in which history and future intersect. It embraces the vague ideologies of American exceptionalism along with the disconcerting consequences of manifest destiny. Therefore, it would seem hardly remarkable that Steinbeck and Kerouac move their characters, and their narratives, across the American landscape in the ubiquitous automobile. Yet the way the road signifies in these texts—as symbols of possibility and its opposite—is germane to how the legacy of Great Depression culture resonates in Beat literature.

The conventional reading would assert that *On the Road* is about the ecstatic liberty afforded by the archetypal car screaming, almost aimlessly, across the undulating body of the nation. This same reading would position the celebrated Route 66 in *The Grapes of Wrath* as something of a problematic golden road—a path of escape from destitution to an ambiguous Californian deliverance. At bottom, it might be argued, both of these novels are quest narratives, and the American highway system provides the terra firma upon which the spiritual component of the quest gets played out. And what is searched for and what is found—or not—by the characters in these books has much to do with the socioeconomic devastation of the Great Depression years.

Certainly, Kerouac identified with and longed for a (perhaps somewhat romanticized) version of the hobo-tramp lifestyle from an early age: “A couple hoboys from Lowell had become rather famous for traveling across country and back, and Jack told his friend Albert Blazon he could wish no better life for himself” (Nicosia 51). Life on the road sounds exciting as an adventure of one’s choosing. But the Okies and other dispossessed who adopted a nomadic existence in the 1930s were compelled to do so by degraded economic and environmental conditions. For all of the dreaming that the Joads engage in, for all the talk of a California promised land, there exists the unrelenting suspicion that they are moving simply because they can do nothing else. For all they really know, the road is a circuitous route that will deliver them not to a land of milk and honey but to a situation that reproduces their pitiable life in Oklahoma.

In certain respects, Kerouac’s road mirrors the doubtful path to better things that the Joads traveled. Leslie Fiedler finds that *On the Road* is less about the opportunity to arrive somewhere new than it is about the impossibility of escaping mid-century American culture. He is critical of “Kerouac’s way out for his ‘saintly’ vagrants, that ‘road’ from nowhere to nowhere with homemade gurus at the way stations” (196). Yet another antimodern aspect of the novel comes to light here. Kerouac likens contemporary culture to a maze or closed
circle from which even the enlightened cannot extract themselves. Despite Fiedler’s ungenerous tone, he references another way Kerouac expresses repressed memories of the 1930s.

The myth of America includes the idea that when present circumstances become intolerable, one need only start fresh—by taking to the road—to create a new Eden in a new corner of the land. Steinbeck and Kerouac wrote during periods in which this myth could be questioned and ultimately dismissed. In the 1930s, the economic impact was felt nearly everywhere—at least the mass media portrayed the crisis as absolutely comprehensive. The mighty and the meek were both laid low by an economic disaster that made no distinctions of class, creed, or race. With all options seemingly closed out, people forced to take to the road had to acknowledge on some level that they were running in place across the American landscape. Such nomads were reduced to grasping at mythic, spiritual, or political straws to bolster a flagging belief that good times were around the corner. Part of Steinbeck’s project is to sustain a belief in a rehabilitation that appears far off and perhaps even implausible.

On the Road, written in a period that seems the perfect inverse of the Depression years, contains a subtext that would be hard for 1950s America to swallow. The mass media and a majority of the populace were in agreement that happy days had returned and things were better than they had ever been. Yet the Beats were struggling to show Americans that the nation was in a cultural lockdown. The dangers were no longer obvious and economic but subtle and ideological. For Kerouac and the Beats, the highway is an escape route from repressive cultural conditions just as it is for the Depression migrant. Sal and Dean flee from gray flannel suit conformity and the Joads from a shattered domestic—a home that is no longer home due to economic chaos on the national level. Sal proclaims: “We were all delighted, we all realized that we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move” (133). As refugees from a suffocating social situation that places unreasonable demands on the individual, the hipster-nomad’s only option is flight. Steinbeck’s characters share this sense of desperation even though it emanates from a different cultural abscess: “The family met at the most important place, near the truck. The house was dead, and the fields were dead; but this truck was the active thing, the living principle” (GW 135). Movement is all the Joads have at their disposal; their previous way of life is “dead” in every respect. They may seem more desperate than Kerouac’s characters, but this is an arguable point when we consider the spiritual component of the physical journeys that the characters undertake in both books.

Steinbeck wants to instruct his readers that a belief in human interconnectedness, in a universal soul, can help allay the tribulations of the Great Depression. This idea that we are all one is partially product of leftist ideology, but it is also a humanistic appeal to all Americans. If people would
look out for one another, the dreadful economic storm could be weathered. Casy, the fallen preacher, serves as mouthpiece for Steinbeck’s sociopolitical philosophy concerning the world soul. When asked if he will accompany the Joads to California, he offers an esoteric response to a literal question: “The preacher still stood looking into the coals. He said slowly, ‘Yeah, I’m goin’ with you. An’ when your folks start on the road I’m goin’ with them. An’ where folks are on the road, I’m gonna be with them’” (77). Later in the narrative, he is made to repeat the idea: “Somepin’s happening. I went up and looked, an’ the houses is all empty, an’ the lan’ is empty, and this whole country is empty. I can’t stay here no more. I got to go where the folks is goin’” (127). A universal sense of togetherness, Steinbeck seems to suggest, can heal the fractured nation.

A generation later, and in a time of economic prosperity, Kerouac felt the message was still viable. Even though Sal and Dean are fleeing from Cold War paranoia, racial unrest, and the demand to adapt to a disturbing status quo, they are also repeating the psychological journey that millions of Americans made in the 1930s—the attempt to come to terms with the disturbing anomalies of a capitalist system. The antidote for the Great Depression and the suffocating 1950s is the road and the universal soul. At various points, Kerouac uses the Tao and Christianity interchangeably to help him articulate the notion of oneness:

Solomon never showed up so we roared out of Testament. “Now you see, Sal, God does exist, because we keep getting hung-up with this town, no matter what we try to do, and you’ll notice the strange Biblical name of it, and that strange Biblical character who made us stop here once more, and all the things tied together all over like rain connecting everybody the world over by chain touch….” (137-8)

Despite the bleak situations described in their novels, Steinbeck and Kerouac continuously offer the universal soul as an antidote to social decay and disappointment. Reverend Casy muses on the spiritual road while he and Tom walk a literal one:

“I figgered about the Holy Sperit and the Jesus road. I figgered, ‘why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,’ I figgered, ‘maybe it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit–the human sperit–the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.’ Now I sat there thinkin’ it, an’ all of a sudden I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it.” (32-3)

Steinbeck sees the “Jesus road” of conventional American Christianity as incapable of helping people to endure the miseries of national crisis. However, the social consciousness that informs The Grapes of Wrath is less political than it is moral. That is, Steinbeck is not prescribing communism or any other
ideological paradigm as balm for the Depression. (See Dickstein 123.) His conception of what is missing from life in America is therefore not far removed from that of Kerouac. Socioeconomic extremism—whether of the feast or famine variety—can be offset by human interaction and interconnection. This impulse, one that clearly attempts to recover some of the spirituality jettisoned by modernist aesthetics, can be considered a neo-Romantic gesture.

A mystic Dean Moriarity weaves his own philosophy on the human “sperit” as he and Sal blaze down the highway:

We passed a little kid who was throwing stones at the cars in the road. “Think of it,” Dean said. “One day he’ll put a stone through a man’s windshield and the man will crash and die—all on account of that little kid. You see what I mean? God exists without qualms. As we roll along this way I am positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us—that even you, as you drive, fearful of the wheel” (I hated to drive and drove carefully)—“the thing will go along of itself and you won’t go off the road and I can sleep.” (120-1)

Dean’s idea of the universal road is not one that provides guarantee against tragedy but one that embraces collectivity. Americans are essentially the same everywhere, and this fact provides a degree of comfort even in the most difficult of circumstances. Part of the Beat philosophy is about embracing life in all its variety and drawing from each experience something genuine and redemptive.

Going on the road causes Steinbeck’s Casy to embrace a worldview that rejects restrictive Christian mores in favor of unrestrained expression—an idea close to that of the Beat search for “kicks” that mainstream society condemns: “[A]nd I’m gonna be near to folks. I ain’t gonna try to teach ‘em nothin’. I’m gonna try to learn. Gonna learn why the folks walks in the grass, gonna hear ‘em talk, gonna hear ‘em sing. Gonna listen to kids eatin’ mush. Gonna hear husban’ an’ wife a-poundin’ the mattress in the night. Gonna eat with ‘em and learn” (128). The social confusion brought on by the Great Depression has precipitated a spiritual awakening in the fallen preacher. What truly matters is not an unthinking obedience to the Christian God but an uninhibited embracing of the quotidian—the very things that make us human. The poetry of everyday life is what Casy longs to hear. And what is “holy” for Steinbeck seems to dovetail with the Beat understanding of the term. Holiness is where one finds it, and the way to find it amidst the confusion of the 1930s or the 1950s is on the highway. That the Joads and Sal Paradise never find paradise is, in a certain sense, beside the point. The act of moving, of trying to plumb the depths of the universal soul, is both strategy and goal. There is always more road, more Californias, and more new life to encounter. Dean acknowledges that the road is never ending and that the spirit of humankind is to be found at every turn: “Yes! You and I, Sal, we’d dig the whole world with a car like
this because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world. Ain’t nowhere else it can go—right?” (230). Late in On the Road, Dean, the “holy goof,” comes to gain strange spiritual insight into what the road means for those willing to commit to it in every way: “He was reaching his Tao decisions in the simplest direct way. ‘What’s your road, man?—holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow. Where body how?’” (251).

Perhaps the path of escape from bad times into the serenity of universal soul that Dean takes is similar to the one discovered by the much-suffering Rose of Sharon. In the last line of The Grapes of Wrath, as she offers her breast to a dying stranger, she seems to spy the meaning that lay at the end of Kerouac’s eternal road: “She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously” (619).

When twentieth-century writers engage with the literal and psychological meanderings of the American road, it becomes difficult to avoid the inscrutable presence of the Dream that shimmers above the pavement at horizon’s edge—seemingly achievable yet always a destination deferred. It hardly requires mentioning that the American Dream took a rather brutal beating during the Great Depression, although people needed the myth perhaps more than in any other period in the nation’s history. Finally, then, is how similar Kerouac’s portrayal of the Dream is to Steinbeck’s. Both authors eschew the deluded optimism that accompanies a fervent belief in the American myth and instead move to draw poignant conclusions as to when and how the promise gets fulfilled. Their critique prompts readers to ask hard questions about the supposed advances and benefits that are believed to accompany modernity—to ask at what price these things have been won.

As its author repeatedly asserts, On the Road is a novel about the West. Sal is still influenced by mythic tales from his childhood about the adventures to be had in unsettled frontier towns and on the open prairie. The idea of Manifest Destiny is a major component of the American Dream, and Kerouac connects Dean Moriarity’s (and to a lesser degree, Sal’s) ecstatic obsession with wandering to a childlike conception of the Old West. More to the point, the author locates the drive for wide-eyed adventure in his own memories of Depression-era escapist entertainment. Sal relates that his “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” (5). A young Gene Autry would be a 1930s Autry—the singing cowboy who helped allay Depression woes by providing a fantastical version of nineteenth-century America. And just as audiences allowed their worries to be temporarily swept away by the matinee idol, Sal hitches his wagon to the swaggering, charming, slightly dangerous Wild West show that is Dean Moriarty. Dean is the temporary curative that eases Sal’s own depression, which obtains from his rejection of 1950s value systems.
And it is Dean’s refusal to conform to mid-century cultural norms that proves so attractive to his friend. Dean is not a malicious breaker of laws; he is more a habitual juvenile offender, his main offense being his insistence on remaining a juvenile. In postwar, law-and-order America, Dean is out of place. With his sense of disorganized rebellion and love of the automobile, he is Clyde Barrow minus the murderous streak. Sal tells us that Dean’s “‘criminality’ was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains” (10). Dean is not the brooding, skulking, contemplative rebel that his name would imply. He is a Coca-Cola cowboy, a Depression-era antidote for the disease of gray-flannel conformity.

In his recent collection of Kerouac’s journal entries from 1947-1954, Douglas Brinkley reafirms the deep affinity the author felt for the Western tales of his 1930s childhood: “He writes with romantic verve about the Texas sagebrush, Arizona mosquitoes, and North Dakota snow” (xxvi). Young Kerouac is a Zane Grey disciple enamored of nineteenth-century frontier life. Sal Paradise goes West to find America and to find himself. The trope of striking out for the frontier as antidote for unsatisfactory personal and social circumstances is as old as the nation itself (finding perhaps its most enduring representative in Mark Twain). That Kerouac traces his path back to the Old West through the Great Depression of his childhood and the mythic figures who offered a palliative to the troubled psyche of mass culture underscores yet again how Kerouac uses literary modernism to flog modernity itself.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is also a story about the West. Steinbeck covers well-tread ground in depicting this region as promised land—as the geographical seat of the American Dream. The Joads enact a centuries-old ritual of seeking more room and easier living on the nation’s western peripheries. Ma and her family enjoy dreaming about the life that awaits them out west: “But I like to think how nice it’s gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An’ fruit ever’place, an’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees” (124). Steinbeck’s characters falsely believe that the Great Depression holds no dominion in the Eden of California. Sal indulge in his own western fantasies while en route to the Golden State. Like Ma Joad, he contemplates a perfection so complete that the only response can be the primal scream of ecstasy: “We were on the roof of America, and all we could do was yell…” (55). Steinbeck and Kerouac both depict their characters’ Whitmanian attempts to imagine the West (or the entire country) as one sweeping mass containing endless possibility. Sometimes vague, sometimes with the clarity of a photograph, these fantasies serve to drive the protagonists onward, despite the uncertainties, to a place of hoped-for (spiritual and economic) reward. The Joads, on the verge of abandoning the modest parcel of land that has been their entire universe for generations, pause to consider what lay ahead:
They saw the shed take shape against the light, and they saw the lanterns pale until they no longer cast their circles of yellow light. The stars went out, few by few, toward the west. And still the family stood about like dream walkers, their eyes focused panoramically, seeing no detail, but the whole dawn, the whole land, the whole texture of the country at once. (154)

The promise of escape that the west symbolizes in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *On the Road* is ultimately not fulfilled. The cultural and economic evils of the day do not evaporate into the realization of the American Dream. To their great disappointment, the Joads find the Great Depression wreaking havoc in California. As such, the end of the novel finds the Joads scattered, homeless, penniless, and without food or hope for the future. Steinbeck has smashed the notions of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream. The only way out of the Great Depression is human contact—men and women must learn to seek one another’s well-being as they attempt to ensure their own.

While Sal Paradise is never in danger of sharing the Joads’ fate, he is forced into the realization that paradise is not a spot on the map, a specific sparkling locale. He learns that no Eden lay on the Pacific shore:

> The bus arrived in Hollywood….I looked greedily out the window: stucco houses and palms and drive-ins, the whole mad thing, the ragged promised land, the fantastic end of America. We got off the bus at Main Street, which was no different from where you get off a bus in Kansas City or Chicago or Boston—red brick, dirty, characters drifting by, trolleys grating in the hopeless dawn, the whorey smell of a big city. (82)

And it is not just Los Angeles that fails to live up to its mystique. Throughout *On the Road*, Sal’s naive expectations about the pure qualities of various regions and cities are torn asunder and he is forced to reconcile the often disappointing realities (See also *OTR 77-8*). Ann Charters claims that “Kerouac was our last writer to believe in America’s promise” (*A Biography* 7). This is a problematic claim for a variety of reasons, but it especially needs refining considering the tone of *On the Road*. While we should not be tempted to read this novel as an attack on the American Dream, we can note how Kerouac’s mid-century conception of America is connected to Steinbeck’s Depression-era tragedy. In both instances, for social and economic reasons, the characters run up against a country whose propaganda, however powerfully exuberant, does not fit the reality.

The Joads’ exodus from the middle-American wasteland does not deliver them into the land of milk and honey. Instead, the nation seems to be contracting under the weight of the Great Depression, and no region is spared the economic turmoil that defines the age. America is often imagined as a land so vast that any misfortune or blight might simply be outrun. But as Steinbeck’s anonymous pessimist asserts: “It ain’t that big. The whole United States ain’t that big. It
ain’t that big. It ain’t big enough. There ain’t room enough for you an’ me, for rich and poor together all in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat. Whyn’t you go back where you come from?” (163). The novel ends without the reader learning if the Joads retrace their steps and return to the land that bore them. However, this is precisely what Kerouac’s protagonist does when he is faced with few options in an inhospitable California: “Here I was at the end of America—no more land—and now there was nowhere to go but back” (88). Sal’s search for the American Dream, or at least his version of it, eventually takes him out of America altogether; the final great adventure of the novel unfolds in Mexico—an alternative space that is wide open in every sense of the word and that allows for the exploration and expression that Kerouac’s characters so deeply desire.

*On the Road* and *The Grapes of Wrath* both end on a note of loss inflected with hope. Sal poignantly muses over “the father we never found” and also over the essence of America that seems to have eluded him despite his manic crusade to capture it. The Joad family, its members reduced in number and scattered, serves as testament to the Great Depression’s power to tear away at the bonds of the American family. Near the end of his novel, Kerouac has Sal encounter a lonesome traveler who is probably God, but who could easily be the old Reverend Casy himself or some such other 1930s refugee. The cryptic diktat he recites is an informing principle for the philosophies of both Kerouac and Steinbeck:

> I was standing on the hot road underneath an arc-lamp with the summer moths smashing into it when I heard the sound of footsteps from the darkness beyond, and lo, a tall old man with flowing white hair came clomping by with a pack on his back, and when he saw me as he passed, he said, “Go moan for man,” and clomped on back to his dark. (306)

That Kerouac includes such a sentiment while writing in an age of great optimism and economic growth is worthy of consideration. There was not much to moan (or *HOWL*) about in the mid-century decade—or at least that is the perception we are left with today. Yet, as these novels similarly attest, Steinbeck and Kerouac believed that the story of “man” is, in good part, a tragic one. The way to find value in life is to focus on the things that connect us all. A compassionate understanding can save us from both the deprivation of socioeconomic collapse and the disease of conformity that masquerades as solidarity. The Joads and Sal Paradise suggest a path of resistance—a romantic, antimodern road guide for making a stand against the austere minions of modernism.
NOTES

1 Much recent Kerouac criticism labors to unpack the myth of automatic writing and the once widely-held notion that the author rarely outlined, revised, or thoroughly edited.

2 Hobos (or Tramps) and Okies were distinct groups of people traveling the highways and railways of 1930s America, but these categories are by no means mutually exclusive. In his study, The Hobo As American Cultural Hero, Frederick Feied explains the differences and, interestingly, traces how the Great Depression helped spawn a new migrant culture—one whose main source of conveyance was not the train but the automobile. The images of the rail-riding Hobo-Tramp with which On the Road is peppered are nostalgic, if not mythic, visions and remembrances from the author’s boyhood. As such, they operate also as synecdoche for the Depression itself. The 1930s Hobo is, arguably, the ultimate beat figure. (The Joads signify as both Okies and Hobos in that they move about in the prototypical jalopy and for a time they live in a boxcar while harvesting cotton.)

3 Kerouac’s hipster-hoboes come under the same suspicion as the Joads, and for similar reasons: “The police are suspicious when gangs of youngsters come by in new cars without a cent in their pockets and have to pawn watches” (OTR 166). The non-presence of capital earns the antipathy of those sworn to keep the peace.

WORKS CITED

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