

Beat Vision: What Americans Don't See On the Road

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***Abstract:** Jack Kerouac's classic travelogue *On the Road* is a book about "America." The automobile-enhanced freedom enjoyed by the characters in the novel has been celebrated for decades, and it has been more critically interrogated in recent years. In this essay I want to reframe the question of the politics of mobility in *On the Road* as an ecological issue. In order to do so, I shall read the novel not only within the context of the rise of the automobile and America's increased fuel dependency, but also in terms of the national addiction to fast driving.*

*What is at stake in our obsession with road travel is a question of vision. Thus it is the matter of vision—the novel's vision, but also our collective, national vision—that this essay is ultimately about. Following Paul Virilio, I will suggest that something happens to our vision when it is inmixed with the violence of speed: "speed becomes ... a premature infirmity, a literal myopia." We can gauge the myopia of speed in *On the Road* by comparing the narrator Sal's powers of vision as he moves at different speeds.*

***Keywords:** automobile—America—driving—counterculture—Beat literature—phenomenology—speed—ecology—environmentalism*

The first time I read *On the Road* I was just out of college and playing in a band in Boston. I was travelling on a mid-winter ferry from Cape Cod to Nantucket, headed for a show my band mates and I would play behind chicken wire for drunken fishermen back on solid ground for the first time in weeks. The second time I read it I was teaching in Norway on a year-long grant, taking a break from duties at the college in Kentucky where I worked in order to see a little more of the world with my wife and two children. It was eighteen years later. Appropriately, I was reading Kerouac as a traveller again, but this time from a considerable geographical distance. It turned out to be a good opportunity to learn some new things about the novel, and myself.

I was learning new things about my country as well. *On the Road* is

a book about America, and in the end the rereading was part of my re-envisioning of the U.S. from another place. I was doing what you're supposed to do as an American scholar living abroad. I was learning to judge my country in a new way, from an acute angle. As far as the novel was concerned, my attitude toward it had changed quite dramatically the second time around. I had been attracted to Kerouac's hipster archetype Dean Moriarty straight out of college. But on rereading I saw him in a different light. I was more sympathetic with all the characters Dean alienates on the road and off the road. The gang shuns Dean in Denver. Old Bull Lee and his wife try to ignore him in New Orleans, and they are glad when he is gone. Galatea Dunkel and the rest of the girls cast evil glances at him in San Francisco. The offended mother of a girl Dean lusts for wants to kill him back in Denver. And Dean just giggles and rubs himself and sweats.

In Norway, Kerouac's novel started morphing into something distinctly different from the "Beat Bible"—and the focal point for this metamorphosis was Dean. I started seeing Sal's guru as a malign and threatening figure; or rather, I started seeing what Sal already sees in Dean but tries not to see, and what Kerouac himself both sees and doesn't see: that Dean is the very personification of postwar America in one of its most banal guises; that he is the very apotheosis of America's automobilization. My concern in this essay is both related to and different from contemporary analyses of *On the Road* in terms of its patriarchal practices of mobility.¹ It is indeed the politics of mobility that I wish to investigate here, but as a broadly ecological issue, and in terms of what we might call a phenomenology of fast driving. This essay, then, is about Dean; but mainly it is about cars, fuel, and speed.

2

In *The Beat Generation and the Popular Novel in the United States*, Thomas Newhouse writes, "[t]hrough Moriarty, [Sal] Paradise is shown the folly of rationalistic and materialistic impulses that reflect the dominant culture

1 Fine examples of such readings include Linda McDowell, "Off the Road: Alternative Views of Rebellion, Resistance and 'the Beats,'" and Jessica Enevold, "Men and Women on the Move: Dramas of the Road." While McDowell explores how "the wives and lovers of [male] travellers" (415) helped to challenge conventional attitudes towards gender difference in the 1950s and 1960s, Enevold evaluates how successfully two post-Beat narratives, Tom Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and Diana Atkinson's *Highways and Dance Halls*, regender the mythic American road adventurer.

in favor of a more instinctive spiritual orientation" (60). This is the dominant interpretation of Dean, and in terms of its broader implications about Beat culture it jibes with the most widely read secondary literature on Kerouac and his novels.² It also jibes with Sal's own conception of Dean, expressed in an exemplary driving passage like this, with Dean racing down the highway and Sal sitting entranced at his side: "He took Berthoud Pass like a June Bug—same as Tehachapi, cutting off the motor and floating it, passing everybody and never halting the rhythmic advance that the mountains themselves intended, till we overlooked the great hot plain of Denver again" (174-75). For Sal, at least on this occasion, Dean's driving is an extension of nature. It is "instinctive," and "spiritual," recalling the words that Newhouse uses, and it is admirable for these qualities. He moves through the land the way the mountains themselves, could they speak, would command: "GO FORTH LIKE DEAN MORIARTY!" According to Newhouse, Dean's instruction has a bigger political dimension too; for Dean is teaching Sal how to resist the allure of dominant culture. Dean Moriarty, after all, is supposed to be a countercultural hero, the real Beat icon inspiring the imitation that Kerouac himself would become for 1960s American popular culture. (Dean Moriarty was based on Kerouac's real-life friend Neal Casady.) His rejection of social conventions and his refusal of any sense of obligation to friends or lovers is intended to figure as the outward sign of his countercultural credibility, his non-conventionality, his anti-bourgeoisness.

But how countercultural is Dean Moriarty really? If being impulsive, unreflective, and self-obsessed makes one countercultural then Newhouse has it right. But otherwise it seems to me that he gets it exactly backwards. Dean's message is thoroughly mainstream. What Dean gives Sal, who doesn't even have a license when the novel begins, is a driving lesson. He baptizes Sal into the American religion of conspicuous fuel consumption, and the dominant culture of automobile dependence. He gets Sal hooked on speed. There is nothing natural about it, and indeed, Sal frequently fails to find the pleasure in it. "With frantic Dean," he mournfully recognizes at one point, "I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it" (170). Before he takes his last mad trip with Dean, this time to the jungles

2 See, for example, Ann Charter's *Kerouac: A Biography*; Dennis McNally's *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, The Beats and America*; Tom Clark's *Jack Kerouac: A Biography*; For a different appraisal of the Beats influence on contemporary culture, see Jonathan R. Wynn's "Bobos on the Road, or Would Sal Paradise Have Supersized?"

of Mexico where his friend will abandon him to dysentery, fever, and delirium, 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. I saw his huge face over the plains with the mad, bony purpose and the gleaming eyes; I saw his wings; I saw his old jalopy chariot with thousands of sparking flames shooting out from it; I saw the path it burned over the road; it even made its own road, and went over the corn, through cities, destroying bridges, drying rivers. It came like wrath to the West. (212)

This remarkable passage recalls two previous passages in the novel. It recalls a dream that Sal relates to his friend Carlo Marx, Kerouac's fictional characterization of Allen Ginsburg. His dream description includes the first reference to "the Shrouded Traveler," "... a strange Arabian figure that was pursuing me across the desert; that I tried to avoid; that finally overtook me just before I reached the Protective City" (103). It also recalls a scene where Sal, after having desperately and fruitlessly begged Dean to slow down on the highway, gives up the front passenger seat and crawls to the back of the car in abject terror:

... I got down on the floor and closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep. As a seaman I used to think of the waves rushing beneath the shell of the ship and the bottomless deeps thereunder—now I could feel the road some twenty inches beneath me, unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds across the groaning continent with that mad Ahab at the wheel. When I closed my eyes all I could see was the road unwinding into me. When I opened them I saw flashing shadows of trees vibrating on the floor of the car. There was no escaping it. I resigned myself to all. (193)

Part of Sal's reverence for Dean involves an element of fear, like all reverence. Dean is the Shrouded Traveler, a destroyer of the landscape. Like Melville's Ahab, he is a helmsman, a driver of people. If Sal is small and vulnerable, though hardly innocent, Dean is a world historical figure, an embodiment of postwar peripatism and a harbinger of the American future. With this in mind, I would suggest that *On the Road* reflected not only the changing attitudes of disaffected young Americans who might have identified with the Beats politically and/or culturally. Also, and more importantly, it reflected the changing values and habits of middle-class America, which was fast becoming hooked on oil and speed and altering the world in the process. The hipster Dean had become in my mind a symbol for the auto-

mobilized millions; a nodal point representing, to borrow the postmodern theorist Paul Virilio's apt words, "*family drivers* who reproduce in their everyday getaways the dromocratic order of the great invasions" (113).

3

This is not the way we are conditioned to think of *On the Road*—not as an invasion narrative. As the blurb on the back of my ragged 25th Anniversary edition urges, *On the Road* is "an explosion of consciousness ..."; it "turned on a whole generation to the youthful subculture that was about to crack the gray façade of the fifties wide open and begin the greening of America." *On the Road* was published in 1957. My 25th Anniversary edition was published in 1982. By that time the Reagan Revolution was gaining momentum; the oil industry had just been deregulated by Congress; the environment was under assault by the EPA. By 1982 there wasn't much green left, so when I think of how *On the Road* might have had something to do with "the greening of America," I can't help thinking in terms of the other greening—not the blip of sixties counter-culture, or environmental awareness, but the increasingly lopsided orientation of American government towards corporate, moneyed interest—especially petroleum interest—and the virtual redefinition of the American Experience as a function of oil consumption.

But wait a minute! *On the Road* is not about the sordid quest for gasoline. It is about the heroic quest for raw experience, for pure, unmediated sensation in an increasingly processed, plastic, and oppressive postwar world. True enough. But the novel's distinction was precisely to supercharge the romantic pursuit of the real with leaded gasoline—to put the pursuit on wheels, and to show how the automobile's speed could intensify sensation, and how its velocity could heighten desire. If we don't typically think of it this way, it is because the car and the fuel pump are so central to our field of vision, and so fundamental to our whole way of seeing that they constitute a blind spot in our collective cognitive maps.³ I was seeing *On the Road*

3 For a cogent analysis of this problem from a public policy perspective, see Matthew Paterson's "Car Culture and Global Environmental Politics." The "use of cars is deeply embedded in the reproduction of global power structures" (257), he writes. Indeed, it is so deeply embedded that we typically fail to see how U.S. global hegemony depends on it, and has always depended on it. The early-twentieth century changes in production techniques, distribution, and labor relations that we call Fordism "laid the foundation for the projection of US global power in the mid-twentieth century" (261).

this way in Norway in part because I had no car. Whereas I had commuted ninety miles a day, five days a week at my old job in the United States, now I was walking to work. I walked to the grocery store, and to the post office, and to my kids' elementary school, and everywhere else if I wasn't riding my bicycle or taking the bus. All the walking I did made me think differently about all the driving I used to do.

The novel's vision, if we can put it that way, is organized around this blind spot too. Kerouac didn't see either that the petroleum fuelling Sal's endless road trips across America, which were at the same time flights *from* America—impossible flights attempted in order to escape from what America had become in the automotive/nuclear age; that petroleum was the same substance which in all its diverse transmutations and metamorphoses (gasoline, asphalt, plastics pesticides, herbicides, war weapons, fuel for war weapons) would make the new America so much worth fleeing from. As a concrete example of this blind spot, let us consider the following scene. After Sal and Dean and the gang leave Old Bull Lee's ramshackle estate in New Orleans, they drive in the black night through western Louisiana bayous. Kerouac infuses the scene with a southern Gothic creepiness, part Flannery O'Connor, part Edgar Allan Poe, and part William Burroughs:

We were surrounded by a great forest of viny trees in which we could almost hear the slither of a million copperheads. The only thing we could see was the red ampere button on the Hudson dashboard. Marylou squealed with fright. We began laughing maniac laughs to scare her. We were scared too. We wanted to get out of this mansion of the snake, this mireful drooping dark, and zoom on back to familiar American ground and cowtowns. There was a smell of oil and dead water in the air. This was a manuscript of the night we couldn't read. An owl hooted. We took a chance on one of the dirt roads, and pretty soon we were crossing the evil old Sabine River that is responsible for all these swamps. With amazement we saw great structures of light ahead of us. 'Texas! It's Texas! Beaumont oil town!' Huge oil tanks and refineries loomed like cities in the oily fragrant air. (131)

The first thing to notice is the highly stylized and staged quality of the representation: it includes a dark forest and slithering snakes; an eerie red light and a hooting owl. It is an unreadable manuscript of the night. Then the gang hits Beaumont—and here is the second thing to notice. Beaumont, the site of one of the biggest oil strikes in American history in 1901 (thus begetting the Gulf Oil Corporation, the Texas Company, the Sun Oil Company, the Magnolia Petroleum Company) is not the last prop in the frightful tableau that includes the hooting owl. It's not part of the mansion of the snake at all. Instead, it marks the return to the safety zone for Sal; it stands

on the other side of the threshold separating the terrible from the typical, the creepy from the quotidian. "I'm glad we got out of there," Marylou sighs as the refinery lights loom closer. Thus the gang find themselves back on home ground, gladdened by a ghastly sight as comforting to their beat souls as any dusty cowtown. They speed on through the great state of Texas, the very belly of the beast.

4

Sometimes I imagine Allen Ginsberg's hauling ass through the dark Louisiana night and then hitting Beaumont. Post-war America had become the money-grubbing Moloch for Ginsberg, "Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone," as he writes in "Howl," the Moloch of "robot apartments" and "invisible suburbs" and "blind capitals" and "demonic industries" and "spectral nations." Then I think about a television documentary I once saw about Americans and their cars. I remember Dinah Shore snapping her fingers, smiling the biggest smile in the world, and joyfully singing the sponsor's jingle at the end of her popular 1950s variety program: "See the USA, in your Chevrolet! America's the greatest land of all!" For me, Kerouac in *On the Road* is somewhere in between Ginsberg and Dinah Shore, recognizing that the living in Eisenhower's America was better on the margins, in the middle of the night, in the intervals between one sad place and another; but nudging us to close up the intervals and collapse the expanse of the country through the speed of the Chevy. They encouraged us to believe that if you moved fast enough you could get more out of life. But there was a difference too. While Dinah Shore touted the comfort of the drive, Kerouac hinted that wrapping yourself in a metallic body and turning yourself into a gasoline-fuelled projectile is perhaps not the best way to "see the USA." You see differently moving at different speeds. The faster you move, the less you see, or the more you lose touch with, no matter what Dinah's Chevy jingle promised to the parents, or what Dean's benzedrine-laced philosophizing promised to the kids.

5

Ultimately, what is at stake in our lives on the road is a question of vision. What kind of vision are we afforded from a speeding car? How does our vision through the windshield condition our vision generally speaking? How

does driving alter our perception of place? How does it impact our thinking about environmental issues? Paul Virilio argues in *Negative Horizon* that the automobile mixes “indiscriminately what is close and what is distant” such that we must confront “a certain problem of perception.” As he further claims, “the function of high speed vehicles consists less in transporting the passenger than in causing physical reality to slide by, that is, to modify as with various lenses the surfaces of visual experience” (113). Indeed, in its affected transformation of the quality of our visual data, for Virilio the car is just as much a part of the information revolution as it is a part of the transportation revolution. As seen through the windshield the world becomes like a video game, “a game of transparency and transpiercing that the director drives as he sets off on the route ...” (107). Such comments help us to understand what Sal “sees” as he huddles with fear and nausea on the floor in the back of the car, with hopped-up Dean at the wheel directing the procession of images. When he finally musters the courage to open his eyes, Sal doesn’t see the trees per se flickering by. He sees “the flashing shadows of trees.” And he doesn’t see them out there under the western sky and over the western ground. Rather, he sees them as vibrating images projected onto the neutral “screen” of the car floor. If Dean’s experience of the simulation as seen through the windshield is the sharper image director’s cut, Sal gets stuck with the low bandwidth, allegory-of-the-cave version. But precisely because what he sees from the car is so far removed from what is out there, it helps us to better grasp Virilio’s central thesis. Something happens to our vision when it is inmixed with the violence of speed: it “distances us from sensible realities ... [so that] *speed becomes, in a certain way, a premature infirmity, a literal myopia*” (113).

6

Sometimes Sal hits the road on his feet, surveying the intervals in between destinations in slower motion. *On the Road* rarely moves at a walking tempo, so the scenes that feature Sal exploring the highways and byways outside of a car cabin are important in allowing us to compare Kerouac’s vision of the landscape at different speeds. (Indeed, I would argue that the enduring value of *On the Road* is in its speed differentials.) One really needs to read *The Dharma Bums* to get a sense of what Kerouac was capable of as an outdoorsy, wilderness writer. Yet in the walking scene that follows we experience something akin to the richer, more sensual vision

of *The Dharma Bums*. Here Sal is heading back to the east coast after his first trip out west. He is somewhere near Harrisburg, Pa. on a “soft, Indian-summer rainy night.” He meets a little old hobo he calls “the Ghost of the Susquehanna.” Like the other great walker in the novel, Hyman Solomon, the Susquehanna ghost is mad in a way that recalls Dean’s encroaching madness, though without the hint of violence that marks Dean’s character. This hobo “covered the entire Eastern Wilderness on foot,” and he clearly inspires Sal to experience the land in a much different manner than he experiences it with Dean: “We were bums together. We walked seven miles along the mournful Susquehanna. It is a terrifying river. It has bushy cliffs on both sides that lean like hairy ghosts over the unknown water. Inky night covers all. Sometimes from the railyards across the river rises a great locomotive flare that illuminates the horrid cliffs” (87-88). It is not quite as good as Ray Smith on his way to the Matterhorn in *The Dharma Bums*, with “red, pristine shafts of sunlight coming in over the hill and slanting down into the cold trees like cathedral light, and all the way around the giant secret roar of tumbling creeks ...” (41)—but it’s close. Unlike Ray up in the rafters of the world, however, for Sal, ever with his nose to the floor, there are no escaping signs of the violence of speed. Hence the belching flare of the train engine, ancestor to the car, just as a reminder. Likewise, there is no escaping in *On the Road* the threat that our desire for speed poses to the “wilderness”—the intervals we can’t help but lose sight of from fast cars. If the bushy cliffs of the Susquehanna appear horrid to Sal, it is partly because he sees them in light of the lurid locomotive flare (a danger flare recalling the lights of Beaumont), just as Ray sees the cold trees of the Sierras in pristine, cathedral sun, and values them according to that light.

But if the cliffs were merely horrid, there would not have been much point in plucking Sal out of the car and setting him square on his feet to walk with a ghost. With the old hobo beside him, Sal sees the land in a different way:

I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the Susquehanna showed me different. No, there is a wilderness in the East; it’s the same wilderness Ben Franklin plodded in the oxcart days when he was postmaster, the same as it was when George Washington was a wild-buck Indian-fighter, when Daniel Boone told stories by Pennsylvania lamps and promised to find the Gap, when Bradford built his road and men whooped her up in log cabins. There were not great Arizona spaces for the little man, just the bushy wilderness of eastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, the backroads, the black-tar roads that curve among the mournful rivers like Susquehanna, Monongahela, old Potomac and Monocacy. (88-89)

Along the banks of the Susquehanna, one of the most ancient rivers in the world, Sal is gripped by a feeling he doesn't experience much anywhere else. Call it a sense of place. While the vast expanse of the western wilderness is made nearly invisible by Dean's speed, back in the eastern wilderness that he never knew existed Sal finds something connecting him to the earth: stories, legends, yet more ghosts. Walking in the open, in the dark, beside an ancient river, traces of the past filter to the surface of Sal's consciousness. Granted, it is the national past, and the hallowed names Sal utters—Bradford, Franklin, Washington, Boone—are all connected with the history of nation-building and westward expansion/invasion; they are all connected with the history of movement and speed. Nevertheless, these figures speak to him in a place that suddenly stops floating beyond history precisely by virtue of the power of such names to lend human value and shared meaning to place. Behind the national heroes with their road building and mail delivery and restless westward movement are the indigenous names of the rivers. They possess a talismanic charm for Sal; and though the spell might not last long—Sal is back in Times Square by the end of the page—for at least a little while he pauses to think about what lies in between the urban spaces where most of the action of the novel occurs. For at least a little while, one of the intervals is rescued from oblivion, and *On the Road* becomes a different kind of book—less Mad Max and more John Muir.

7

After my grant year I sold my house and two cars in the U.S. My family and I liked Norway, so we decided to follow a job opportunity and move. Now I think about how fortunate I am to be living here as an American expatriate. For better and worse, I get to see my country in new ways. I get to watch what a Norwegian friend calls "blue-eyed American politics" unfold from a distance that makes it somehow seem both more alien and more comprehensible at the same time.

As I walk along a road in the blue-lite glow of November I also think about whether I should buy a car. It would make getting the groceries a lot easier. Yet in a country where mass transit is generously subsidized by the state, and where urban and suburban spaces are designed to accommodate walkers and cyclists as well as drivers, the car is not one of life's necessities. I am not trying to paint a false picture: Norwegians depend on their

cars too, though they drive them far less than Americans do. Moreover, Norway is a major exporter of crude oil, hardly above the melée of world petroleum politics. But from here one can more easily see how cars, fuel, and speed have driven America to a dangerous brink.

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