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The Transience of Experimentation in Jack Kerouac's On the Road

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Dedicatoria

To Felipe, To Profesor Ferrada, Mariana, Fernanda, Felipe T. and Natalia, To my families and friends, Thank you

“One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” Henry Miller

1. INTRODUCTION

The general object of study of this work is the rise and effects of competing visions in the construction of the subjective personal American landscape in 20th century North American travel literature. The research and analysis done will follow the idea that there are different visions of America present at the same time in a given text-character. These visions, when affecting and transforming the travelling experience and, when contrasted to other's visions and compared between them, may allow for the appropriation of the landscape through the creation of a personal, intimate and polyphonic image of the same. In order to grasp this final vision characters must undergo a process with three stages that resemble an empiric scientific experiment. Is on the exploration of this experimental dimension from where we start this study.

I start from the assumption that when visiting a new place there are certain aspects or constituents that play a transcendental role in the experience. These aspects can be understood in terms of a logical process. First, we need the subject or experimenter, the one that is moving from point A to point B (if there is one at all). This subject follows a series of steps and rituals before engaging in a real physical movement and these steps play a significant role in the development and results of the experience, this stage will be simply called **Preparation**.

Then, we need an object, in this case the place or the land the subject is visiting and wants to grasp, once we have that we can move to our third element, travelling itself, the very operation of knowing the object. For the purposes of our study this stage will be simply called **Experiment**.

And finally, there is a last stage the operation, which in this case would be the construction and appropriation of the object, the construction of the personal world view, in other words the **Result**. These last two are the most important for an analysis of this type because, I think, it is the exploration of these aspects on which most travel narratives are focused and constructed upon.

From the aspects exposed above derive the rest of the objectives of this work. The first and most general have to do with the definition of the competing visions that may play a role in the process just described. What are the aspects that take part in the construction of the knowledge of a place? What does knowing a place means in the chosen novel? When does that knowledge is complete? How and to what extent do the visions, the different conceptions of the land, participate in the appropriation of the latter? What does appropriation mean? All these questions will be present in the analysis of the novel chosen and in the exploration of this, the first objective.

Another objective of the work is to explore the idea of how the polyphony as a concept applies to the last point in the process introduced above, to the result of the experience. To what extent does travelling transform the subject and how does the object is transformed by this newly changed subject? Is it possible, following Bakhtian concept of polyphonic novel, to say that being America treated as a text, the land itself suffers a fragmentation and loses the possibility of ever being a single unit? If such a thing as 'polyphonic landscape' exists, how many voices and different points of view are present in this point? Is it possible to ever

acknowledge them? If the land is understood in terms of its similarities to a text, if the land is known, in a first stage, *through* texts, is it possible to have a clean experience when getting there? Is it possible not to be influenced by all these previous voices?

A final objective, more particular will be the analysis of the role cars and highways play in the approach subjects (following the terminology exposed above) take on the object, and the influence these elements have in the construction of both the self and the group (social and topographical) in this novel. For this point in particular we will follow the concept introduced by Marc Augé in his Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity (1995) in which he explored, among other subjects, the existence of places of transience that, for some specific reasons that I will introduce and summarize later on, do not hold enough significance to be called 'places', e.g. hotels, bus stops, airports, highways and supermarkets.

All these objectives, aspects and questions will certainly have other sides that will lead to other objectives that will come along the road. Some of these will be analyzed, I hope, in one way or another but others, due to space and time restrictions, will not be treated in this work.

2. BACKGROUNDS

If we want to analyze Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a work that so prototypically falls into the subgenre of travel literature, we need first to acknowledge the background created by previous works on the same field specifically in America. In order to talk about the existence of a subgenre means there are certain characteristics that by convention have become important constituents in the configuration of a certain type of narratives. These characteristics become part of the genre's canon after being repeated for a period of time and after being accepted as transcendental, creating what could be understood as the process of formation of the subgenre. This process started, most notably and most closely related to our particular object of study, when the first European settlers arrived in America. The process of discovery that started in the old continent and ended with the birth of New England could be stated, in my opinion, as one characteristic of the subgenre in terms of a feeling anticipation to the object and creation of an emotional background that is to affect the results of the experience. It is said that America existed long before the discovery of the continent, in the minds of the many Europeans who dreamed about the place where, as Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury put it, "might be found Atlantis or Avalon, the Garden of Hesperides, the Seven Cities of Antillia, Canaan or Paradise Renewed."¹ This feeling can be also founded in Jack Kerouac's novel and will be part of the idea of "polyphonic landscape" discussed later and in the overall feeling of the need of the restoration of the lost connection between the land and its inhabitants, easily situated along the American dream.

Between the 15th and 16th centuries travel writings borned mostly out of the Puritan need for register and sharing experiences with others who were at that time not able to see the things for themselves. Travel logs and personal journals included topographical data in order to delineate the new found land, transforming these works into cartographical tools for the consolidation of their presence in this foreign place. These texts were filled with puritan subjectivity and helped for the construction of their collective imaginary. A clear example of this at times ideological move are captive narratives, stories of settlers who are taken by the natives and after they escape or are freed from the hands of the 'savages', they proceed to write their experience remarking the strength and help received by God and the horror and evilness of the Indian's behavior. These narratives smartly tried to take advantage of the adversities in order to firmly state the puritan point of view of religious matters in general, but in particular and closely related to the main line of this work, they tried to imprint their vision transforming and appropriating the landscape.

What is common to all these narratives, at this stage, was that the fictionalization of the events was not present, most likely due to religious restrictions regarding authorship and creation which impede or at least made more difficult to trace the presence of a poetics of place, i.e. the explicit use of the landscape's qualities with a dramatic and fictional function.

In the next century one book stood over the rest. *Two years before the mast* by Richard Dana published in 1840 tells the story of a real voyage starting in 1834. Because of the emotional richness, detailed, vivid descriptions and verisimilitude, this book was transformed into a landmark within the subgenre but foremost it became an American classic that most

¹ Ruland, Richard and Bradbury, Malcolm: *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, 1991, p.5.

certainly affected and influenced our object of study and served as the starting point for the popularization of these type of experiences helping for the development of a shared knowledge regarding sea voyages and the life of a common sailor.

Pretty much by the same time, 1838 the American writer Edgar Allan Poe published his only novel that also marked a threshold in the development of the symbolical approach to travelling experiences in literature, this is The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket. This novel inaugurates the beginning of the fictionalization of travelling experiences and their formal introduction to the field of literary creation.

Travelling, in The Narrative, is a constant fight between different forces. We have, in one hand, Nature, for instance and its all mighty force and, on the other, Men, and their omnipresent fears, insecurities and weaknesses. Travelling here is a constant 'making decisions' even though the role of the characters seems to be quite passive. Furthermore, The Narrative stands as a story of disappointment. From the Ariel's accidental and fast final to the abrupt ending of the novel we follow Pym, the main character, on his journey to the depths of the mind and to the extremes of the body. The object directly affecting the subject's integrity and the process, the act of knowing object becomes a life threatening activity. It could be said that travelling in The Narrative is associated with randomness. Characters, as ships, go along with the constant movement of the seas, always going where the wild wind will take them. Destination is unknown and characters go from point A to point B without a particular reason and apparently without them taking much part in the development and writing of their travel itinerary, as if moved by a higher omnipresent power and by a need that escapes physical and logical control. Chance plays a major role in the process of knowing the object and the process moves in unplanned and erratic way.

This is at least how things seem to be at first but we could think, idea given by the title page of its 1838 edition, that there is more elaboration and planning than what is explicit at first view, but where? or even more important, why? The title page displays a brief summary of the events and the story as an introduction for the reader to know what he or she is going to find on this narrative. This summary divides the plot into different sections: First, this is a narrative of the lives of certain people on board the *Grampus* "Comprising the details of a mutiny and atrocious butchery [...] the recapture of the vessel by the survivors; their shipwreck and subsequent horrible sufferings from famine"² then comes the rescue and we move to a different ship, this time a British schooner that after a "Brief cruise [...] in the Antarctic ocean " is captured and its crew massacred by the savages in the "eighty-fourth parallel of southern latitude", all of this together with "the incredible adventures and discoveries still farther south to which that distressing calamity gave rise." Anticipation is strong and we are eager to know more details about this story, but for our purposes this latter point in particular will be the one that is more fruitful for our this part of our background's analysis: "the discoveries to which that distressing calamity gave rise". With that single line we are told that apparently there was a reason for all these calamities and distress to happen, we get to believe that the process of knowing the object follows a certain specific pattern and that this pattern follows another pattern as well.

If we read The Narrative we could say that this "discovery", as is put in this cover, basically and most notably, the white as snow human-like figure that precedes the abrupt ending of this narrative. It seems to be as if the whole of the story and every single step took and every single threat was heading to that particular point, and we, as readers, are not prepared for such an apparition, why? Maybe the answer is because we have not undergone

² Poe, Edgar Allan: The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838), title page and table of contents on <http://www.eapoe.org/works/editions/pymbc.htm>

the necessary preparatory steps for getting to that point, to that enlightening image, white as snow and "very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men."³ And such an answer leads to many other questions and new possible interpretative paths to follow. One of this is has to do with the reading of this narrative as the telling of "a rite of passage" and is this reading the one that I believe allows for insights on the construction of the canon of travel narratives in this subgenre.

According to Kathleen Sands, "if the hero is one of the chosen, these rites may lead to shamanic initiation" and adds that "if survived, [the initiation rite would give him] insight into the inscrutable and power over the non-elect."⁴ The initiate (Pym) is being privileged, first, of having survived over the rest of his companions, companions that were better qualified for doing so under such conditions and on such extreme landscapes. Second, he, throughout most part of the Narrative (if not the whole) was the one that, apparently better understood and took most out of those situations, the initiate was undergoing a learning process, he was privileged of being conscious of what was going on. And third, witnessing the white image in such a far landscape, surviving and being able to tell the world about his experience, becoming a semi-messianic hero feeling the need of 'spreading the word', is the gift and privilege granted given his power and new position. Traveling has transformed Pym, the subject has been transformed by the process of knowing the object and surviving the same.

The Narrative, therefore, is not a story that has been left unfinished as some people may think. By introducing the white character at the end we accompany Pym to his successful illumination. If this is a story about the coming of age, about an initiation rite, and if this is a rite that has been sublimated by the appearance of different traces related to shamanic and messianic personae, this story should end along with the construction of the hero, when the construction of the character has been successfully accomplished. The myth and the construction of the hero through travelling. Travelling as an internal building journey.

Under this new perspective, we could draw some connections between Poe's narrative and Kerouac's road and see the progression on this sub-genre from puritan narratives by sea to beat highways and deserts. Progression that could be related to the geographical and psychological expansion of the frontiers in the United States from the East coast to the West. All in all both novels share a literary tradition that explores space and displacements as basic moments from where the narration of the event starts to be development.

It is interesting for the purposes of this research in particular to acknowledge the symbolic richness of the image at the end of Poe's novel in the sense that it functions as a physical illustration, as some kind of allegory, of the result of the experience of travelling/ knowing. If this is the result object of Pym's experience, what would be Sal's? I think, following what has been presented here, the result of Sal's experience would not be his change of position to the one of a hero/shaman, though, I repeat, this could be another interpretative move, but nothing more than the landscape appropriation, the creation of a personal America and the regained connection with his surroundings. We could even read the white image is America, the country, the continent, the people and the personal construction of the world. All these ideas will be further developed in the following chapters.

³ Poe, Edgar Allan: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, 1838, p. 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.14.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the corpus chosen will be done under the light of different theoretical and critical perspectives depending on the particular aspect to be analyzed. The election of these different works is not aleatory and it follows a particular, personal line of thought that I believe I had been developing since the beginning of this process. This line of thought is related to the question of how we mentally live our urban environments and how is this life represented in literature. When I say 'mentally' I refer to the many aspects that play a role in the perception we have of places, in specific those places we have not been to yet but here we will also need to include a 'social' aspect in the sense one of the aspects that will be analyzed here will be the presence and rise of non-places, a completely social construct of the space.

Each one of the different works that provide our theoretical and critical perspectives, as I said, are closely related to the different objectives and aspects present in this novel.

For the analysis of the novel in general I will not take into account external information, e.g. the author's biography, the named character's real lives, etc., as long as it is possible and it does not interfere with the development of the analysis. No matter how biographical *On the Road* could get, I will analyze it only in terms of what is present within the text itself. *Close reading* will be present throughout the analysis of this novel, even though I know that to draw connections to other's work may be at one point or another transcendental for the development of the same.

This interpretation and construction will be further permeated by a theoretical approach in particular, in this case Poststructuralism. In order to understand some points developed by this school of thought and that will be used in this work we need first to name some theoretical precedents that will help us in doing so.

In his *Cours de linguistique generale* Ferdinand de Saussure defined, in rough terms, language as a 'system of signs that expresses ideas'. This notion of language as a system, that was later to have an inner unchanging structure, was soon transferred to the field of literary theory. Literary Structuralists believed in the existence of these structures at the core of any literary work and that novelty and innovation in literary creation could only lie on the complete change of one of these structures for a new one.

Signs, in the *Cours* are the focus of de Saussure's linguistic investigation and are described, basically, as double entities made up of a signifier and a signified. The relationship between those two levels is arbitrary, i.e. there is no natural reason why a [CAT] is named "cat" and not "tree", "banana" or "trouser". In rough terms, meaning is just a matter of difference. If that is the case, it will always be scattered and constantly moving.

Following this line of thought and taking it to an 'extreme', poststructuralists, Barthes in specific, stopped treating literary works as stable units, with stable inner structures and embraced language's indeterminate meanings. This theoretical move, I think, has its clearest and most radical example in the blurring of the boundaries between literary texts taking them to the extreme of stating that all literature is intertextual, being every element a reworking of others that precede and surround it. For poststructuralists there is no such thing as literary innovation, all literary works fall into a continuum, a flux of words arranged and rearranged time after time.

Taking into account a concept just named above, the idea of intertextuality in literature, in this work I will try to move this concept from the field of linguistics and semantics to the idea of travelling as experiences in general. I think all travel experiences are intertextual, and I think we could even try to formulate an 'intertraveling' experience, one where other travelling experiences are present at the same time, a travel in which the influence of the travels before and after is transcendental in the development of the experience as a whole. I think this concept and this idea have a very specific reason to be, this is the fact that being the first contact to the land (object) by the traveler (subject) through written language (gathering of experiences through literature, hence the importance of the antecedents and backgrounds), and being the latter instable and interwoven as I had briefly introduced, I will later analyze the possibility of ever having a clean, completely personal approach to the object, in this case the highways, American landscape and, as an extension, the self. For the analysis of this point in particular I will use the concept of Polyphony as introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin.

3.1. Polyphony

On the first chapter of the book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, *Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature*, Mikhail Bakhtin explores what he calls the constant presence of a "number of philosophical statements by several author-thinkers"⁵ on the works of the author of *Crime and Punishment*. These author-thinkers create a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" which is, according to Bakhtin, "the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels."⁶ These multiplicity of voices, the presence of different characters each one possessing a different perspective, a different ideology, different from the author's, function in Dostoevsky's work as a medium for the destruction of what he calls the forms of the 'monologic and homophonic' European novelistic canon. Bakhtin later talks about "a consistently monologic visualization and understanding of the represented world"⁷ and is in this point where we can start drawing clearer connections to our object of study.

This idea of a monologic, one-sided visualization of the world represented in novels is, for me, an illusion. This homophonic treatment helps for a simpler understanding and construction of the world represented but fails in acknowledging the 'real' value and complexity that our understanding of places have, the many 'voices' present in that process in a reading of that type would be lost. I believe it is possible to translate this concept from the reading and interpretation of a literary work to the reading, interpretation, construction and overall experience of an urban setting, in other words is this multiplicity of perspectives and voices the one that I refer to when I talk about a polyphonic landscape and its presence as a result in the overall experience of travelling in the novels of this subgenre in general and of *On the Road* in particular.

⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.5.

⁶ Ibid, p.7.

⁷ Ibid, p.8.

3.2. Non-Places

Marc Augé explores on his book Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity the rise and preponderance of generic spaces in our *supermodern* societies. These places take very specific forms and functions that put them into a new category that Augé tries to explore and analyze. He follows the idea that if a place can be described in terms of being relational, historical and concerned with identity (he talks about anthropological places and monuments), a non-place would be the opposite, a place which is not relational, not historical and which is not concerned with identity in the same terms as in anthropological places. These non-places are the result of the *supermodern* condition of our societies and are easily identifiable because they work as points of transit and are provisionally occupied. The clearest examples would be hotels, hospitals, refugee camps, malls and, here is where we can start making closer connections to our object of study, transportation and highways.

A non-place never ceases to be constructed and Augé quotes Michel de Certeau and his definition of *place* and *space* by saying that, unlike him that opposes *places* (an anthropologist's tool) to *non-places*, Certeau does not oppose *place* and *space* but sees one as constitutive of the other. *Space*, for him, would be a 'frequented place', e.g. in our novel cars and hitchhikers would transform the streets of America from *places* urbanistically and geometrically defined to *spaces*.

4. ON THE ROAD

Jack Kerouac was born Jean-Louis Kerouac in Lowell, Massachusetts, on March 12, 1922. He attended Columbia College on a football scholarship, published 17 novels, 4 books of poetry and died in Saint Petersburg on October 21, at the age of 47, of an abdominal hemorrhage. The year 2007, the 50th anniversary of On the Road, four of his road novels between 1957 to 1960 were included in the catalogue of The Library of America: On the Road, The Dharma Bums, The Subterraneans, and Tristessa plus Lonesome Traveler, a collection of travel essays. This edition was edited by Douglas Brinkley and marks the final moment in the total inclusion of Kerouac's work into the American collective imaginary and academy because included in the LOA's editions are "America's best and most significant writing."⁸

Inspired by his road trips and following the idea of "spontaneous prose" Kerouac typed On the Road, supposedly, on a single roll of paper in three weeks. The novel was first published in 1957 and, according to a review written by Gilbert Millstein and published in The New York Times that year, On the Road is "the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as "beat," and whose principal avatar he is."⁹

In this novel, a roman à clef¹⁰, we follow our narrator, Salvatore "Sal" Paradise, on his three-year road trips across the vastness of The United States and Mexico. Bus rides, hitchhiking, landscapes and crazy people gather to build the novel at the rhythm of bop pregnant with a young raw, personal and simple style without falling in the purely descriptive nor in the purely contemplative.

⁸ Library of America. November 18, 2009. <<http://www.loa.org/splash.jsp?s=about>>

⁹ Millstien, Gillbert. *Books of the Time*. The New York Times Book Review. September 5th, 1957

¹⁰ A roman à clef (French for Novel with a key) is a novel that portrays the life of real people, sometimes famous people, whose identities have been more or less disguised (the use of invented names is the clearest characteristic, at least in On the Road)

5. THE TRANSIENCE OF EXPERIMENTATION

As I said, there are three specific stages in the process of travelling: Preparation, experimentation and result. It is important to understand here that these three stages have fuzzy boundaries and that they interconnect at various points in the novel. We will move now to the first.

5.1. Preparation: Reading, idealizing, get going

The reasons given by Sal for the journey to start, at least in the first travel, where the reasons are clearer, are basically the need for getting a job, earn some money for him and her aunt and to see and feel the world by his own, gathering experiences that will later help with the understanding of America, his writing and by extension himself.

Before Sal starts his road trip he undergoes a process of intellectual preparation in order to approach the object. "I'd been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savouring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on,"¹¹ these last two rivers are part of the many mentioned throughout the novel taking an important symbolic role in the novel because of the prototypical wild characteristics these have and how these can be related to the characters' personalities and ways of seeing. It is also interesting here to note the fact that rivers are accidents, events in the land that break the terseness of its face, that separate but also connect the midlands to the coast and the other way around.

Sal continues later with his preparation, noting that "on the road-map was a long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles."¹² He was about to follow that route "filled with dreams of what I'd do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran."¹³ Here the idea of emotional anticipation and intellectual preparation I mentioned above is clear. The character is undergoing a process of itinerary formulation through the reading of different types of literature. These different texts, maps and books start building a mental image of the object that will be later experienced, "I'd often dreamed of going west"¹⁴ Sal says as if making explicit the fact that there is an important weight of the emotional in the process of travelling, emotional prior to even starting the travel itself. The object starts being imprinted with an emotional and intellectual mark that changes and affects the three elements in the process, the object, the experienter and the resultant.

¹¹ Kerouac, Jack: *On the Road*, 1957, p. 15.

¹² Kerouac, Jack. Op. Cit. p.15.

¹³ Ibid., p. 15

¹⁴ Ibid. p.7.

The recollection of literary data prior to the experiment transforms the approach to the object in the sense that the information gathered will be later applied to the object, i.e. the places and situations, what will obviously force a comparison between the fictional and the 'real'.

***“All winter I'd been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of course now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn.”*¹⁵**

Here we are explicitly informed of the existence of a prior reading about places in general and certain events in particular, in this case the great wagon parties. The comparison mentioned above has two different possible results, one is the reaffirmation of what was thought to occur, the expected and the other is the change in the idea one has of the concept. The latter is what occurs in the previous and is part of the process in general. In the novel is this second result the one that gives it at times a feeling of frustration and it canalizes the characters in their quest for the lost America.

In the preparation for the travel we can see the importance of prototypes in the idea of the place to be. “My 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.”¹⁶ said Sal when remembering the time when he met Dean in the first pages of the novel. The importance given to prototypical characters present in the American imaginary and the imprint these have in people and places transforms them with their presence as if pop-culture ghosts present in the construction and development of the travel.

Later on, in the same part of the novel, we are informed of the other way around but functioning in pretty much the same manner, in this case how someone from the West imagined the East Coast and how that conception was there in the present, “she sat there on the edge of the couch with her hands hanging in her lap and her smoky blue country eyes fixed in a wide stare because she was in an evil gray New York pad that she'd heard about back West, and waiting like a longbodied emaciated Modigliani surrealist woman in a serious room.”¹⁷

This fact that the idealized vision coexists with the real is crucial for the purposes of this study and needs to be kept in mind. It is also important to note here that this process is by no means finite and delimited but, on the contrary, is an ongoing intellectual/emotional preparation. This preparation leads to the experiment, the travel per se which later develops into a result. Once the result has been established there is a need for sharing the experience. This need and the medium for the sharing are stated from the very beginning so they form part of the preparatory stage. “The things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell.”¹⁸ Says Sal and before we know that he is looking for experiences to reflect in writing.

That last point is very illustrative for the understanding of the approach the land will later have. If the characters start the travel with that idea in mind, of translating experiences into writing, into literature, the landscape and the people who live in it are to be treated as the elements that help the beginning of the text to-be, as illustrated by the subsequent:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20

¹⁶ Kerouac, Jack. Op. Cit. p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

"I had a book with me I stole from a Hollywood stall, "Le Grand Meaulnes" by Alain-Fournier, but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing."¹⁹

The road is both the medium and the end of this reading/writing process and this is a conscious decision. The landscape and the people, we could say then, gain a textual dimension. This dimension and its treatment is clearer in the following stage, in the exploration and in the process of the travelling itself, in other words and following the line introduced so far, in the Experiment.

5.2. Experimentation: Sample recollection, comparison, expansion

This stage is the one that takes most of the formal, symbolic and narrative development in the novel. This could have some specific reasons: this is where most events happen, which are charged with an emotional power and a narrative flow, characteristics allow for a wider exploration of the characters' psychologies, the experience of travelling and for a richer elaboration of the novel.

Before the process of preparation starts to be less marked (as I said, these never really stop) starts to appear a feeling of excitement and anticipation for what is to happen. "I tingled all over; I counted minutes and subtracted miles. Just ahead, over the rolling wheat fields all golden beneath the distant snows of Estes, I'd be seeing old Denver at last."²⁰ We repeatedly face an exercise of mental imaginary displacement in the sense that the different characters imagine themselves in other places different from the one they are at the time of speaking as illustrated in the following quote from the same chapter:

"I pictured myself in a Denver bar that night, with all the gang, and in their eyes I would be strange and ragged and like the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word, and the only Word I had was "Wow!"²¹

This last quote has double importance because it throws some light on two different aspects. First, on the psychological displacement from the moment of speaking to a future or past time. This displacement would affect the characters creating a feeling of detachment from the events; this detachment allows them to move with more freedom and would stand in the core of the way they had to approach the object. Second, there is the image of the Prophet. The prophet who stands here as the spokesperson for the propagation of a vision that will later be given to him. The medium chosen, as I said, is a novel. The Prophet Sal Paradise walks across the land and brings the dark Word, this is illustrative of the beatific aspect of Kerouac's writing, the feeling that there is the need for a beatific vision that changes the ways of seeing. In this novel in particular I believe this beatific moment, this beatific vision is closely related to our Result and the characteristics that will be discussed later but in a few words, is related to the American landscape and its embracement. The only way to experience this beatific moment, to witness a beatific vision is, in this case, through the exploration of the land. The only way is by making an experiment.

¹⁹ Kerouac, Jack: *Op. Cit.* p. 98.

²⁰ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 38

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38

Arthur K. Moore in *The Frontier Mind* (Moore, 1963) examines the lives and motivations of the first group of people who settled in the trans-Appalachian frontier, Kentucky. When these explorers moved west they first of all started looking for trees and animals in order to test the quality of the soil. We could say the same occurs in *On the Road*:

“The sun goes down long and red. All the magic names of the valley unrolled -- Manteca, Madera, all the rest. Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries. I stuck my head out the window and took deep breaths of the fragrant air. It was the most beautiful of all moments.”²²

In the quote above, Sal, while traveling enumerates the characteristics that particular place has. These characteristics are covered and permeated with a sensorial veil; the place is grasped through the senses and this affects both the perception and more importantly the verbalization of what is being seen. This would also be characteristic of the manner in which they approach the object. We could say then that the process of knowing the country is being approached from an empiricist perspective, a perspective that applies perfectly to the whole of the Beat generation and the quest for *kicks* and “the heightened sensory awareness that might be induced by drugs, jazz, sex, or the disciplines of Zen Buddhism.”²³ That awareness is exercised in this part, a part we could call of ‘Sample Recollection’, following the argumentative line exposed so far.

This sample recollection is clear in many parts of the novel, mostly when the characters feel the need of going from one place to another searching the possibility to experience different situations that may enlighten their understanding of the country and its people. We will see the practical effects of this need later but for now it is important to show a particular section in which this sample recollection is strictly associated with the geographical understanding and physical comprehension of United States:

“I decided to leave. I went out on the porch. “No, dammit,” I said to myself, “I promised I wouldn’t leave till I climbed that mountain.” That was the big side of the canyon that led mysteriously to the Pacific Ocean.”²⁴

Here Sal has reached the farthest point in the West part of the country. Here he forces himself to get to a specific mountain before he moves from San Francisco in order to see what we are told later:

“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.”²⁵

His presence in that mountain in particular allows a visual appreciation of the American continent, *his* American continent in general but also of home, New York at the other extreme. This moment is very important because as we will see later, is through the movement from one extreme to the other, through the experiences in the farthest point

²² Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 77.

²³ " Beat movement ." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 6 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/57467/Beat-movement>>.

²⁴ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 76

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76-77

from home that the characters, especially Sal Paradise, achieve another perspective of the start. He later continues:

“There is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like washlines and emptyheaded - at least that's what I thought then.”²⁶

First, it is present what has been discussed above, the feeling of rediscovery of a familiar place, home, and second there is what can be simply understood as comparison. This constant comparison of one place with another is present in order to stress similarities or note differences but, more important, as part of the experiment in order to understand and grasp the ‘true’ America. Through the comparison of the elements and the information that has been gathered so far it is possible to confirm or dismiss the image that has been created in the previous stage.

This comparison can be of various types. First we have what we have seen above, the comparison of the characteristics of one extreme of the continent with the other. Second there are instances of comparison of one particular city in the United States with another in the same country, as in the following:

“I never felt sadder in my life. LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities; New York gets god-awful cold in the winter but there's a feeling of wacky comradeship somewhere in some streets. LA is a jungle.”²⁷

As we have seen so far, the elements with which the objects are approached and analyzed are the physical senses. In this case Sal compares two cities, each one standing as the epitome of what is understood in general as West and East. He compares them not regarding topographical, economical or demographical characteristics that can be regarded as objective but his comparison of them is based in how he felt at a particular time in a particular place.

Third, there are some instances of comparison that go beyond the frontiers of the United States, as in the following:

“We got a brief ride from a wealthy rancher in a ten-gallon hat, who said the valley of the Platte was as great as the Nile Valley of Egypt, and as he said so I saw the great trees in the distance that snaked with the riverbed and the great verdant fields around it, and almost agreed with him.”²⁸

This is an interesting stance of comparison that helps with the creation of that personal America we have been discussing so far. A man compares the valley of the Platte in the United States with the Nile Valley of Egypt. Sal, the experimenter, the one who is carrying the experiment and the one who is telling about his particular experience receives an emotional set of beliefs from somebody he has just met, and he almost agreed with it. This is very important because it helps to understand the way in which the many other *experiencers'* views affect the protagonist's and the fact that at the end the decision of accepting and incorporating these images lies on him.

The American landscape in *On the Road* is also compared with elements of popular culture as in the following:

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77

²⁷ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 82-83

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22

“Then it was a fast walk along a silvery, dusty road beneath inky trees of California - a road like in *The Mark of Zorro* and a road like all the roads you see in Western B movies.”²⁹

Where Sal moves through sites that could were used as sets for filmmaking or resemble those actually used. He later mentions another movie, this time *Sullivan’s Travels*:

“The bus arrived in Hollywood. In the gray, dirty dawn, like the dawn when Joel McCrea met Veronica Lake in a diner, in the picture *Sullivan’s Travels*, she slept in my lap.”³⁰

This time with a more personal approach, not only talking about physical characteristics of a place that resemble those seen in film, but to emotional characteristics that create a connection between mass media and the intimate.

The fact Kerouac chooses to include this movies into his recollection of events could be very illustrating of the manner in which he approached the experiment, his travel, his lifestyle and the position he has in the overall order of America, especially Preston Sturges’

*Sullivan’s Travels*³¹ which is also related to the approach we are taking in the analysis of *On the Road*.

According to the Encyclopædia Britannica’s article on the *Sullivan’s Travel*, this movie is about “a pampered Hollywood director who decides to make a film about the downtrodden of society” and he does that by experiencing the events firsthand, just like Jack Kerouac’s Sal. The article continues with “He researches the subject by setting off with only a dime in his pocket.” Making a reference to the terminology used in this our study and to the, let us say, *semi-scientific* approach taken. John Lloyd’s experiment (interpreted by the actor Joel McCrea³²) leads to the identification “with the masses and their everyday struggles through the disastrous string of events that befall him”³³, an aspect that is also present in the results Sal Paradise’s experiment has as we will see in the following.

The feeling of being immersed in a brotherhood, the understanding of United States as a community and the identification with the *downtrodden of society*, all are present both in the experiment and in the results of the same. This feeling has two different, among many, practical effects. On the one hand characters could take for granted this close relationship, not even noticing it, and on the other hand characters could feel the urge of exercising, strengthening and sharing these bonds. The latter is what we see most in this particular novel, characters become aware of the existence, or the possibility, of a community of men and women and try by all means to experience it in order to apply what could be learned to the construction and founding of the resultant object. ““We’re all in this together!” yelled Ponzio. I saw that was so -- everywhere I went, everybody was in it together.”³⁴That is one

²⁹ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 62

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80

³¹ The name of this movie was taken from Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726)

³² Also in movies like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), George Stevens’ *The More the Merrier* (1943) and Cecil B. DeMille’s *Union Pacific* (1939). The latter about the railroad across the American West and its building.

³³ " **Sullivan’s Travels** ." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 8 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/664582/Sullivans-Travels>>.

³⁴ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 88

of the moments of the realization that there is indeed an underground community of fellow Americans who are undergoing similar experiments looking for similar results as Paradise's.

Once they have recognized the existence of a community they need, as with the landscape, to shape it in order to fully grasp it and become members of it. One of the ways chosen to do so is by 'sample recollection' again, as in the following:

“Wild Negroes with bop caps and goatees came laughing by; then long-haired brokendown hipsters straight off Route 66 from New York; then old desert rats, carrying packs and heading for a park bench at the Plaza; then Methodist ministers with raveled sleeves, and an occasional Nature Boy saint in beard and sandals. I wanted to meet them all, talk to everybody, but Terry and I were too busy trying to get a buck together.”³⁵

Here he enumerates a list of *characters* that coexist in America and mentions the urge of meeting them and talking to them. This quote is interesting because it throws a light on an aspect that so far I have been leaving intentionally aside, the countercultural side of the Beats. What could be interpreted from this quote is the failure of capitalism in the sense that the need of creating a community, the need of reinforcing the bonds between the people of America is frustrated because of economical reasons, the need to *get a buck*. We could say, then, that this is one of the many points in the novel in which we can easily point this sense of rejection to the established social order and the thirst for economical expansion over spiritual and communal growth.

It is not easy to mark the point in which this experimental stage ends; it is even more difficult than with the previous but, in the novel, there are certain hints that tell us that we are getting closer to, if not an end, a decisive point in which the events will take a turn.

One of these moments of some kind of insight into the future is helped by the use of drugs, as seen in the following:

“I didn't know what was happening to me, and I suddenly realized it was only the tea that we were smoking; Dean had bought some in New York. It made me think that everything was about to arrive -- the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever.”³⁶

We could relate this effect *tea* has in the experimenter to the allegedly consciousness expansion this drug has and how it can be related to the need of recollecting samples in the experiment by all necessary means. He thought everything was about to arrive. He felt the experiment is about to have a decisive point, “when you know all and everything is decided forever”³⁷ This moment of feeling that the experiment is about to end is also repeated many times in the last part of the novel, as they get closer and closer to last trip to the frontiers with Mexico and beyond. Before that, they feel as if everything that they had suffered, all the events that took place in these trips was worth it, that these had a reason. This reason, at times, is the experiment itself more than the possible results the same could have. As seen in the following:

³⁵ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 83

³⁶ Kerouac, Jack. *Op. Cit.* p. 122-123

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 123

“We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move.”³⁸

To move is seen as the most important aspect of the experiment. Movement and landscape recognition. This idea later changes, when they get closer to Mexico but is maintained, in general, by other experiencers who are undergoing their own experiments:

“There were two young city boys from Columbus, Ohio, high-school football players, chewing gum, winking, singing in the breeze, and they said they were hitchhiking around the United States for the summer. “We’re going to LA!” they yelled. “What are you going to do there?” “Hell, we don’t know. Who cares?””³⁹

The quote above is taken from the one of first chapters of the novel. This reflects the change in the manner in which the experiment is approached throughout the experiment itself. There is a change in the way in which they understood the process, from moving from what we have been seeing just now, where the result is not as important as the process to what we will see later in the Result, where the quest of the lost America and the lost connection with both nature and its children is the motivation that lies beneath the experiment, as both the end and the catalyzer.

The effects the experiment has in the construction of the personal America, how the sample recollection mentioned above transforms the way in which the landscape is understood, and how is America perceived both physically and symbolically after the overall process ends is what we will see now, when we move to the next stage in the experiment, the results.

5.3. Result: Non-road, polyphony and symbolic appropriation

Once gathered all the elements in the two previous stages, the ideas and views the characters had are undoubtedly changed when they get to the final part of their journeys.

There are a few conclusions we can draw from the interpretation of the previous stages, all of which have to do with the type of resulting object and its characteristics.

One of the most outstanding aspect of this novel, in comparison to others of the same subgenre, is the remarkable little presence of closed fixed spaces (e.g. houses, caves, buildings, etc.) as compared to the continuous presence of open spaces (e.g. beaches, parks, mountains, etc.) which most of the times are transitory (e.g. highways, motels, bars, transportation, etc.). The latter, as we have briefly seen in our theoretical framework and following the phrase coined by Marc Augé, can be referred to as non-places because, among other characteristics, they do not hold enough significance to be referred to as places proper.

One of the interesting aspects of the novel is not the presence or absence of these non-places, but rather how these affect the mental construction of America and what is the standpoint taken towards them by the characters.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 127

³⁹ *Kerouac, Jack. Op. Cit.* p. 26

Regarding the first point, one of the characteristics of non-places is, in simple words, to be nowhere but everywhere at the same time. This characteristic would be directly connected to one of the conclusions characters draw from their travels across America; *"Furthermore we know America, we're at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it's the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do."*⁴⁰ That feeling of resemblance and connection between scattered places along the northern country is obviously reinforced by the similarities existing between one motel and the other, one gas station and the other, one car and the other, and so on. Non places, then, allow for the reinforcement of a sense of unity, community and 'homeness'.

The relationship, then, between the experiencers and non places is contradictory. On the one hand they feel the urge to fight back the supposedly alienating effects of such places, the destructive effect these have in our culture and how these help undermining our identities with that hypermodernity filled with restrictions and industrialized economic order but, at the same time, they acknowledge these places' capacities to create community.

Regarding the latter, Dean represents the perfect example of a character who refuses to accept non-places as such but at the same time is being immersed in them, Dean is constantly using these not as places for transition but as destination. "Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he was actually born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles."⁴¹ From that point on we could say that the relationship he has with these places, in particular with the road because most of us have been born in a hospital, a non-place, but the relationship he has with the road is different, more organic and natural.

Dean is always choosing non-places as his favorite spots, for job or for any other reason. Some of these fall prototypically into the category of non-places and it is interesting to note here the use he makes of them. For example, in the first part of the novel we are told he has got a job at a parking lot and that he had no place to live. He was in Sal's words "the most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world"⁴² and later continues with a description of the way in which he would jump from car to car and the way he would park them. The presence, use and understanding of these non places affect the result in the overall travelin experience.

They talk about road-eyes, a change in the way of seeing the world tht is only acquired through a road experience. This new way is marked by innocence but also by some kind of rebirth and both emotional and intellectual growth. The latter, in the sense of a better understanding and comprehension of America in general but, more importantly, home.

"Suddenly I found myself on Times Square. I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream -- grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City."⁴³

⁴⁰ Kerouac, Jack. Op. cit. p. 115

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴² Ibid., p. 12

⁴³ Kerouac, Jack. Op. Cit. p. 102

Following the line of thought being introduced in this work so far, we could say the perception (and reading) of a familiar place (the object now treated like a text) to the experienter (or reader) has been affected by the experiment. This effect goes in both ways; from the experienter to the object, and the other way around.

In the image that is finally constructed, after the traveling process, there are a number of perspectives, a number of writers and readers present at the same time, each one with a personal mental representation of the object. These voices affect the object, conflict with each other and never cease to practice their presence in the final perception.

The multiplicity of voices in the experienter does not permit a clean, pure appreciation of the American landscape. As we have seen, movies, literature, other people's opinions and lives, feelings, nostalgia over the past, maps, texts, the present and the future, all are present in every movement of the experienter/reader through the object and affect the construction of the . We could say, then, and following Bakhtian concepts, that the effect of these many voices in the object is such that the result is a plural, intricate, polyphonic landscape.

The symbolic appropriation of the country, the pearl given to the characters, is possible only through the recognition of the relationship between the various authoritative voices present in the object; to acknowledge this spatial, geographical and symbolic polyphony is the path that has to be followed in order to finally construct the personal America.⁴⁴ To destruct the "monologic visualization and understanding of the represented world"⁴⁵ and to construct the resultant polyphonic image of the same is the main object of the whole process of travelling understood as a reading/writing experiment.

⁴⁴ And, given the double dimension of this process of discovery, to construct a personal America is at the same time to construct the personal image of the self.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.8.

6. CONCLUSIONS

One of the goals of this work was to analyze the ways in which traveling served for the construction of a personal landscape and how that was transferred to literature. The analysis was done by marking three different stages in the process, establishing which were the most important characteristics of them and how important they were in the overall development. The results of the procedure were recognized and we applied the concept of polyphony to them and considered the importance of non-places in the final construction of the result.

The establishment of three marked stages was useful for the purposes of this work and allowed for a better organization of the same. Nevertheless, during the writing process I encountered many problems with the focus and objective of this study, most of which made me reflect on the polyphonic nature of the writing itself and the presence of various voices in my own interpretation of the various voices, creating an interesting, personal game of crossed references in what I would call 'metapolyphonic writing'⁴⁶.

I believe the findings of this research could be expanded by applying the same pattern of analysis to other travel novels, from the same author or others', comparing them and looking for which are the aspects that repeat the most. I believe that it is possible to apply the "experimentation pattern" to many other novels, and it would be interesting to see how far it can get. This comparison would only enrich the interpretation of the process on these novels in general and on each one of them in particular.

I am impressed of how intimate and personal sharing a reading process could be. It is a bit difficult, to share something like this with strangers, it is like a small part of my life has been made public. The process at the end became a highly personal reflection, on the writing and reading processes but, most importantly, on me. This is me, reading. This is me, sharing the experience.

⁴⁶ Please do not take this too seriously.

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