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Buddhism as Critical Lens

***The Dharma Bums* as Social Criticism¹**

Kerouac's Asian transcendence – identified as his critical Buddhism – offers alternatives to the status quo by which individuals can live, grow, and interact with society. Specifically, Kerouac's Buddhism exemplifies a crucial social deviance, in which he rejects the superficiality and "supervision" associated with television and the cultural denial of our more authentic selves.

In his celebrated 1957 novel *On The Road*, Jack Kerouac dramatized his search for authenticity in a mid-century America that worshipped conformity and materialism.² This dramatization contributed to a distinctly American transcendence – a Whitmanesque revisioning of self, society, and purpose in the context of mid-20th-century America – as well as to a criticism and redescription of American cultural practices.³ Like Walt Whitman before him, Kerouac both celebrated and critiqued the nation that he loved in ways that angered some and inspired others in fundamental ways. In 1958, Kerouac published his next book, *The Dharma Bums*.⁴ Unlike *On The Road*, however, which became a prototypical American novel, Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* is a much more alien novel for an American audience, providing readers with an Asian (in particular, a Chinese) transcendence, one based on an Eastern spiritual mysticism. Such multicultural perspectives, while popular today in our postmodern society, were not widely embraced when *The Dharma Bums* first appeared. The United States is a much more culturally and politically tolerant society

1. The author would like to thank Katia Campbell, Dee Morgenthaler, and *The AnaChronisT* referee Judit Friedrich for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

2. Steve Wilson, "Buddha Writing': The Author and the Search for Authenticity in Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* and *The Subterraneans*," *The Midwest Quarterly* 40 (1999), p. 304.

3. Omar Swartz, *The View from On The Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999).

4. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

than it has been, and part of that tolerance (for example, racial and spiritual tolerance) is the result of authors like Kerouac who offered alternative ways of thinking and being.

In this essay, I argue that Kerouac's Asian transcendence – what I identify as his critical Buddhism – was a challenge to American culture, suggesting the importance of personal agency and independent thought in confronting the dominant culture. By “critical Buddhism” I mean Kerouac's idiosyncratic, yet heartfelt and serious engagement with an idealized Buddhist philosophy and his attempt to apply aspects of that philosophy to an American audience imbued with antithetical materialistic values. Kerouac's message, offering alternative ways by which individuals can live, grow, and interact with society, while inspiring to counter-cultural audiences in the late 1950s and 1960s (such as the Beats and Hippies), is also useful today for encouraging social critique and helping readers to question the normative assumptions grounding the social order – an order often situated in mass mediated manipulations and illusions.⁵ *The Dharma Bums* highlights (among other things) Kerouac's critique of television, a position informed by his critical Buddhism. While media studies has come a long way in the forty plus years since Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums*, a study of Kerouac's interpretation of Buddhism helps to frame current issues in critical studies by seeking standards of authenticity by which to define alternative (and more preferable) social constructions to replace the dominant manipulative ones that exist currently. In other words, while critical studies have become increasingly sophisticated and professional, there is something earthly and anarchistic in Kerouac's writing that scholars, I hope, will find appealing.

Kerouac's portrayal of Buddhism – or what can be understood as Kerouac's mystic naturalism (i.e., his ascetic embrace of a primordial holistic natural order of balance within nature) – is clearly the central narrative defining the persona of Ray Smith, Kerouac's protagonist in *The Dharma Bums*. Japhy Ryder's (Kerouac's character modeled on poet Gary Snyder) own understanding of Buddhism, one more hedonistic and social, largely exists for contrast, a foil against the backdrop of Smith's perspectives. Both senses of Buddhism and their relationship to Kerouac's writing have been discussed in many sources.⁶ Yet, as Alan L. Miller notes, “there is

5. See Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 2002) and Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).

6. Notably, John E. Hart, “Future Hero in Paradise: Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*,” *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 14 (1973) 52–62; William Blackburn, “Han Shan Gets Drunk with the Butchers: Kerouac's Buddhism in *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Desolation*

no agreement among the critics regarding the depth or even the authenticity of Kerouac's Buddhism."⁷ Complicating matters are other sources who are dismissive or contemptuous of Kerouac's Buddhism (or of Beat spirituality, more generally). As Stephen Prothero notes, "Historians of American religion who have explored beat spirituality have tended to focus almost exclusively on the Beats' engagement with Zen and then to dismiss that engagement as haphazard."⁸ Even among Kerouac's supporters, authoritative statements exist that question Kerouac's Buddhist identification. For example, eminent Kerouac scholar Ann Charters maintains that Kerouac's Buddhism was merely a "discovery of different religious images for his fundamentally constant religious feelings," which were essentially Catholic.⁹ Philip Whalen, Kerouac's friend, Zen monk, and fellow Beat writer, questions if Kerouac "ever really understood Buddhism."¹⁰

Regardless of what "really" was the nature of Kerouac's Buddhism, the fact remains that he became an important interpreter of the Asian Buddhist tradition, making Buddhism accessible for many Americans at a time in which Asian culture was

Angels, *Literature East and West* 21 (1977) 9–22; Jeffery Miles, "Making it to Cold Mountain: Han-Shan in *The Dharma Bums*," in *Essays in the Literature of Mountaineering*, ed. Armand E. Singer (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1982), 95–105; Jacob Leed, "Gary Snyder, Han Shan, and Jack Kerouac," *Journal of Modern Literature* 11 (1984) 185–193; Robert S. Ellwood, "Conservative and Radical Themes in American Zen: Three writers," in *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1987), 147–160; Susan Kayorie, "The Ten Precepts of Zen in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*," *Moody Street Irregulars* 28 (1994) 18–20; Carole Tonkinson, ed., *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (New York: Riverhead, 1995); and Rod Phillips, "*Forest Beatniks*" and "*Urban Thoreaus*": *Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, Lew Welch, and Michael McClure* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001).

7. Alan L. Miller, "Ritual Aspects of Narrative: An Analysis of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9 (1999) 41–53, p. 43.

8. Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," *The Harvard Theological Review* 84 (1991) 205–222, p. 207. Two notable examples of this trend are Carl T. Jackson, "The Counterculture Looks East: Beat Writers and Asian Religion," *American Studies* 29 (1988) 51–70 and Alan Watts *Beat Zen, Square Zen and Zen* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1959).

9. Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973), p. 190. Kerouac was a complex man, and the commentary on his life and work grapples with this complexity. In this passage, at least, Charters is clearly discounting Kerouac's Buddhism, seeing it as an expression of his Catholicism. I disagree with Charters on this point.

10. Quoted in Jackson, p. 60.

considered antithetical to American values. As Susan Kayorie notes, Kerouac's version of Buddhism has become "so basic to the counter-culture that [it] no longer seem[s] counter-cultural at all, but familiar and as American as apple pie."¹¹ In contrast to the "Square Zen" of Alan Watts – an important source of traditional Buddhism in the United States – "the popular culture took Jack's book [*The Dharma Bums*] to its heart and it remains there still."¹²

There is nothing problematic, I argue, in Kerouac's appropriation and popularization of an important Eastern religion or philosophy, even if what comes to us through this medium is an Americanized and romanticized version of Eastern spirituality. From an anti-essentialist perspective, which I embrace, spiritualities have no essences; they morph and grow in response to the needs of the communities they serve. The truth of any spirituality is pragmatic – not ontological.¹³ Thus, instead of passing judgment on Kerouac's Buddhism *per se* – what his Buddhism *was* or was *not* – I assume Kerouac's Buddhism as *given* and argue in this essay that Kerouac's critical Buddhism can be a tool for contemporary cultural criticism. Such criticism involves an emphasis on the deleterious effects of the mass media, television in particular. Kerouac's persona as a Buddhist hero helps focus attention on the world that he is rejecting and his reasons for so doing. Many cultural critics share in the sentiment that television is a major cause of cultural malaise and a reinforcement of corporate values and consumerism.¹⁴ I repeat that claim here and demonstrate how, with Kerouac, we learn that, in addition to critical theory which comes from Western sources, a critical Buddhist perspective can aid us in constructing alternative critiques of the mass media. My thoughts on this subject are informed by the late philosopher Richard Rorty, who eventually gave up philosophy (i.e. normative analytical scholarship) and embraced literary criticism as an important reservoir for forming arguments of human meaning. I am quite sympathetic with his view, taking, as he does, "literature" in its widest possible sense. Thus, I derive the claim that Kerouac and the Beats, in general, are *useful* for helping us develop new frameworks, literatures, new visions and new definitions of authenticity. This essay is an exploratory attempt at this goal.

11. Kayorie, p. 20.

12. Kayorie, p. 20.

13. Richard Rorty, "Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God," in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Nancy K. Frankenberry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 57.

14. For example, Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

Before discussing Kerouac's contribution to a new vision, his critical Buddhism must be understood in the context of the anti-Asian prejudice that existed in the United States during the period in which Kerouac was writing. This context is important because Kerouac's evocation of Buddhism was *in-and-of-itself* a critical act, serving as a catalyst for social critique. The subsequent popularization (in the late 1960s) of Asian culture was an important and much needed development in popular cultural resistance to American racist and corporate practices. While, as mentioned above, the contemporary United States has become significantly less overtly racist, the U.S. is *more* corporate today than it was in the 1950s, thus Kerouac's critical Buddhism has utility for contemporary cultural analysis.

Anti-Asian Prejudice in the United States

Anti-Asian (particularly anti-Chinese) sentiment has always been palpable in the United States and was, for many decades, the most discernable prejudice embodied in the U.S. immigration code.¹⁵ While tens of thousands of Chinese citizens were imported into the United States in the mid-nineteenth century for exploitation in the construction of the U.S. railroad system, many thousands were deported when their utility was depleted.¹⁶ Federal legislation was also enacted to bar future Chinese from entering the country.¹⁷ This exclusion was enforced through the 1950s, when it was modified to appease the Kuomintang government, a wartime ally of the U.S. which controlled Taiwan after 1949, and considered by the U.S. to be the only "legitimate" China.¹⁸ An important exception to the exclusion of Asians as a result of the Chinese Exclusion Acts was Imperial Japan, which had the diplomatic and military clout to petition for favorable treatment. Consequently, there were hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans in this country by the start of World War II. These Japanese Americans had been interned, *en masse*, during the war and their property was con-

15. See Charles J. McClain, "The Chinese Struggle for Civil Rights in Nineteenth Century America: The First Phase, 1850–1870," *California Law Review* 72 (1984) 529–568 and Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1998).

16. See *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*, 149 U.S. 698 (1893), upholding the Chinese Deportation Act of 1892.

17. Kitty Calavita, "The Paradoxes of Race, Class, Identity, and 'Passing': Enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Acts, 1882–1910," *Law and Social Inquiry* 25 (2000) 1–40.

18. Philip S. Foner and Daniel Rosenberg, eds., *Racism, Dissent, and Asian Americans from 1850 to the Present: A Documentary History* (Westport: Greenwood, 1993).

fiscated.¹⁹ The war against Japan fueled the flames of a racial hatred toward what many Americans considered to be the “indiscernible” Asian.²⁰ The successful Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949 further evoked images of Asian “hordes” and the prospect of a Third World War.²¹

The actual Korean War during the 1950s (a significant part of which was fought against Chinese troops), and the political stalemate that resulted in an increased Chinese diplomatic strength, further underscored the “threat” from the East.²² Moreover, the French war in Vietnam was just starting to intensify, and the seeds were being laid for the U.S. war against the communist North.²³ Given this context, Kerouac is provocative when he has Ray Smith state that “East’ll meet West. . . . Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it’ll be guys like us [i.e. he and Japhy Ryder] that can start the thing. Think of millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their backs tramping around the back country and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody” (203). Passages such as this evoke Edgar Snow’s description of optimism surrounding the Chinese revolutionaries in Yen’an in 1936 during the most idealistic phase of Chinese communism.²⁴ By the 1960s, Chinese communism was widely respected by counter-cultural and dissident groups (such as the Black Panthers and the Weathermen) in the U.S.,²⁵ and with that a positive interest in Chinese culture more generally.

In an important manner, the Chinese (or Asians in general) – racially dissimilar to Euro or Anglo Americans – were seen as much more of a threat than the Soviet Union, which shared common cultural and ethnic heritages with the West. In other words, hatred of Russia and Russian satellite countries were largely ideological and

19. Wartime Relocation Commission. *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

20. Kevin R. Johnson, “Race, the Immigration Laws, and Domestic Race Relations: A ‘Magic Mirror’ into the Heart of Darkness,” *Indiana Law Journal* 73 (1998) 1111–1159.

21. For my analysis of anti-Chinese imagery in U.S. Cold War rhetoric see Swartz, “The ‘Faith of Freedom’ vs. the Freedom of Faith: Exploring the Totalitarian Discourse of J. Edgar Hoover,” *Speaker and Gavel* 33 (1996) 59–73.

22. James Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

23. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1991).

24. *Red Star Over China* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978). See Franklin W. Houn, *A Short History of Chinese Communism* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

25. Max Elbaum, “What Legacy From the Radical Internationalism of 1968?” *Radical History Review* 82 (2002) 37–64.

the product of Cold War conditioning and geo-political realities, while hatred of Asians was visceral and racist, exasperated perhaps by ideology, but certainly pre-dating it. Compare, for instance, the treatment of Germans and Japanese by Americans during the Second World War. While both nations were at war with the United States, the German enemy was portrayed as *Nazis* and the war was portrayed as against Nazism. Germans, to the extent they were not Nazis, were not considered a threat.²⁶ In contrast, the United States was at war with Japan, and *all* Japanese were considered the enemy.²⁷ Where the Nazis were positioned as ideologically mistaken Germans, the Japanese were considered genetically inferior, a threat as defined by the eugenic pseudo-science popular at the time.²⁸ Caucasian racism helps explain the difference in attitudes, and ultimately, in treatment of Japanese and German soldiers, citizens, and their descendants living in the United States.

Critical Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums*

The Dharma Bums begins with Ray Smith declaring himself a “perfect Dharma Bum” and a “religious wanderer” (5). Smith wanders from North Carolina to Washington state via Northern California and several places in-between, stopping in any one place only long enough to meditate and pray. Unlike Japhy, who experiences his Buddhism through more mainstream and social activity (“I wanta be enlightened by actions”) (169), which includes both productive labor and physical activities like hiking and sex, Smith prefers to sit and commune with nature. The lengthy middle portion of the novel is comprised of Smith sitting in the North Carolina woods for a year meditating.²⁹

Japhy frequently criticizes Smith for his detachment (and for his excessive drinking, which Smith models on classical Chinese poets who had a reputation for

26. Benjamin Alpers notes that President Franklin Roosevelt’s dependence on political support from white ethnic groups “led the White House to shun representations of the European war as a battle against German-ness. Officially, at least, World War II was an ideological, not a national conflict” (*Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy 1920s-1950s* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003], p. 189).

27. Peter H. Irons, *Justice at War: The Story of the Japanese-American Internment Cases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

28. Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1996).

29. Detailed in Alex Albright, “Satori in Rocky Mount: Kerouac in North Carolina,” *The Southern Quarterly* 24 (1986) 35–38.

alcoholism). Japhy, who sees Smith's behavior as anti-social, asks, "How do you expect to become a good *bhikku* or even a *Bodhisattva Mahasattva* always getting drunk . . . ?" (190). One day, when Japhy barges into the shack where he and Smith are staying, he demands, "Why do you sit around all day?" (180). Smith responds, "I am the Buddha known as the Quitter" (180). In another passage, Japhy asks Smith, "Why do you sit on your ass all day?" Smith responds, "I practice do-nothing" (175), *wuwei* in Chinese philosophy. Even Alvah Goldbook (modeled on poet Allen Ginsberg) comments on Smith's detachment: "Don't you think its much more interesting just to be like Japhy and have girls and studies and good times and really be doing something, than all this silly sitting under trees?" (33).

For the other characters in *The Dharma Bums*, much of this "doing something" involves sex ("believe me I get more of a *satori* out of [having sex with] Princess than out of words," states Alvah; 34), something for which Kerouac's Buddhist persona has little use. As Smith declares, "Pretty girls make graves" (29). Working from this assumption, Smith attempts (although not always successfully) to sit through the novel's drunken naked revelries (and orgies) with his eyes shut. As he explains, "I was really sincerely keeping lust out of my mind by main force and gritting of my teeth. And the best was to keep my eyes closed" (178). Thus, while sexual activity is prominently displayed in the book, Kerouac clearly downplays the transformational qualities of sex that he celebrated in *On The Road*.³⁰

Kerouac's Buddhist persona, I argue, is an important reason why many readers who were enthralled with *On The Road* found *The Dharma Bums* disappointing. In the mid 1960s, *The Dharma Bums* became more popular when former Beats such as Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg imported Eastern perspectives into the counterculture (i.e., spiritual support for the Vietnamese struggle against French and later U.S. colonialism), respect for nature, and communalism. As such, *The Dharma Bums*, which is ironically associated in the public mind with Kerouac's advocacy of promiscuous sex, does little more with the topic than to anticipate the sexual abuse that was rampant in the 1960s, when many women were raped in the name of the "free love." As Robin Morgan, a feminist activist at the time reflects, "[M]y actual experience of the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies – like that of most other women – felt depressingly more like rape than revolution."³¹

30. See Swartz, *View From On The Road*, pp. 74–81.

31. *The Word of a Woman: Feminist Dispatches, 1968–1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), p. 31.

Japhy repeatedly tries to help Smith “mature” as a Buddhist thinker, but Smith, who learns the technique of mountaineering and wilderness survival from Japhy, is not transformed by Japhy and rejects Japhy’s Buddhism as academic and intellectual (i.e., book learned).³² Consequently, Smith and Japhy disagree about religion throughout the novel.³³ Thus, while Japhy is ostensibly “the number one Dharma Bum of them all” (9), he is ultimately dispensable for Smith, who insists on his own experiential interpretations of Buddhism. At the end of the novel, when Japhy goes off to Japan for formal study in a Japanese monastery, Smith retreats to a mountain perch on Washington’s Desolation Peak and happily lives a liminal existence. Smith, not Japhy, is the liminal character of the novel, the one whose experiences allow readers to gain a new perspective.³⁴ While ostensibly describing Japhy in the following passage, Kerouac enunciates his romantic vision of himself and the hobo he frequently idealized:³⁵

I clearly saw a crowded dirty smoky Chinese market with beggars and vendors and pack horses and mud and smoke pots and piles of rubbish and vegetables for sale in dirty clay pans on the ground and suddenly from the mountains a ragged hobo, a little seamed brown and unimaginable Chinese hobo, had come down and was just standing at the end of the market, surveying it with an expressionless humor. He was short, wiry, his face leathered hard and dark red by the sun of the desert and the mountains; his clothes were nothing but gathered rags. . . . I had seen guys like that only seldom . . . beggars who probably live in caves. But this one was a Chinese twice-as-poor, twice-as-tough and infinitely mysterious tramp and it was Japhy for sure. Maybe he’ll leave that monastery and just disappear and we’ll never see him again, and he’ll be the Han Shan ghost of the Orient Mountains and even the Chinese’ll be afraid of him he’ll be so raggedy and beat. (208)

32. See Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 494–496.

33. See Prothero, p. 218.

34. Liminality is a concept, originally from anthropology, that designates a position between two social categories. It is the space that a person occupies when he/she is neither X nor Y and who, consequently, has a special insight that derives from the freedom of being outside of constraints. See Swartz, “Kerouac and Liminality,” in *The View From On The Road*, pp. 94–102.

35. For Kerouac’s idealization of the hobo, see Frederick Feied, *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac* (Falls Church: Writers Club Press, 2001).

Smith rejects formal Buddhist lectures and study, which Japhy, as a student of Chinese language at the University of California, Berkeley, embraces. Smith's Buddhism, consequently, is idiosyncratic, choosing his own way by mixing various strands of Buddhism, Catholicism, and the philosophical individualism of Henry David Thoreau, making it particularly appealing to the U.S. counterculture. Whether Smith is hopping freights or returning from two months alone on a mountain, he is an "old-time *bhikku*" (wandering monk) who transverses the "immense triangular arc of New York to Mexico City to San Francisco" (5) rejoicing in the freedom he gains from his lack of possessions, his hobo status, his rejection of station and responsibility.³⁶ Utilizing such liminality, Smith declares himself "a future hero in Paradise" (5). This heroic persona is reinforced later in the book, when, in a vision, a Buddhist saint tells Smith, "You are empowered to remind people that they are utterly free" (239).

To actualize the above freedom, people must learn to reject the world of *samsara* (or illusion). This is the same world, although in a different cultural context, that the youthful Brahmin rejects in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.³⁷ In rejecting illusions, Kerouac forcefully rejects the corporate consciousness that is the root of many cultural illusions (and alienation) in U.S. society. This rejection of corporate consciousness is most clearly articulated in Kerouac's critique of television (or the television mentality), as when Kerouac worries that Americans have been desensitized by television against the part of them that is human and joyful – that is, animal, pure, free, and unsupervised, like his romanticized Buddhist heroes of ancient China. Kerouac, in other words, anticipated (as well as inspired resistance to) the surveillance society, a society in which monitoring has increasingly come to mean, in a Foucaultian fashion, *self-surveillance*, in which the watched and the watcher are frequently the same person. With Kerouac's critical Buddhism, we can learn to watch the watchers and ascertain our own complacency in a system that is dependent upon us to be its willing accomplices.

Throughout the novel, Kerouac makes frequent references to the stultifying effects of television on people's ability to live authentic and critical lives. Television, as positioned by Kerouac, is the antithesis of the *Dharma* (the Truth or the Way). As Ellwood notes, Kerouac accuses "the average samsaric person of just wanting everything he's told to want by the high priests of consumerism, while he sits watching the

36. See Ellwood, p. 155.

37. Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: Bantam Classics, 1982).

same TV pablum and thinking the same thoughts as everyone else.”³⁸ The fact that limited programming existed at that time is beside the point – the contemporary existence of cable, satellite TV, video, and similar technologies does little to counter Kerouac’s critique – television style may change, but its substance remains vacuous and commercial: in Ben Giomo’s words, “TV is the insidious extension of consumer capitalism into the living room and bedroom.”³⁹

An early example of Kerouac’s critique of television culture occurs when Smith and Japhy are walking through the U.C. Berkeley campus. Smith, while contrasting the “manliness” of Japhy with the neutered students he sees, criticizes college life for its sterility, its forced categories and its abstractions that have little to do with real experience. For Kerouac, the college experience is little more than the drabness of middle-class life exemplified in the crew cuts and preppy clothes of the students. As Smith remarks:

[C]ollege being nothing but grooming schools for the middle-class non-identity which usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origins of the faceless wonderless crapulous civilization. (39)

Notable in this passage is Smith’s emphasis on “sameness,” the result of television, which is contrasted with the spontaneity and animality of Japhy – he “prowls” in the “wilderness” and pursues “dark mysteries.” This animality, our primordial health as found in Buddhist mysticism (which rejects the pretensions of the intellect by which many humans position themselves metaphysically as being *above* the animal kingdom, as created in the image of God), is caged by the walls of living rooms and by the projections of illusion that radiate from television screens. This sense of animality, caged or denied, is something Kerouac often describes with different language strategies.

For example, our denial of some essential human part of ourselves can also be seen in the above passage with the descriptor “crap” (as in “crapulous”). “Crap,” de-

38. Ellwood, p. 154.

39. Ben Giomo, *Kerouac, the Word, and the Way* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 139.

scriptions of the anus, and fixation with excretory functions are frequent tropes in Kerouac's lexicon, as is the case throughout much Beat literature. As David Sterritt notes, "Kerouac draws on the oral, anal, and genital levels of activity not merely to offer a string of suggestive metaphors, but to invoke verbal creation as an act of physical exchange and interpenetration with the world outside the self."⁴⁰ This orality is exemplified by the following typical passage where Kerouac describes a lackadaisical afternoon party:

[W]e picked mussels right off the washed rock of the sea and smoked them in a big woodfire covered with seaweed. We had wine and bread and cheese and Psyche [a member of the Party] spent the whole day lying on her stomach in her jeans and sweater, saying nothing. But once she looked up with her little blue eyes and said, "How oral you are, Smith, you're always eating and drinking." (181)

The flip-side of such consumption is excretion. Kerouac notes how easy consumption has become in the United States and how we have come to ignore the implications of our consumption (both literally and environmentally). Thus, with the "crap" trope, in particular, Kerouac focuses upon the symbolism of our denial of our nature. Crap is something natural, human, an essential part of life and ourselves. Yet we find excretion dirty, embarrassing. Thus, we deny and hide that essential part of ourselves in an attempt to escape our animality or to escape responsibility for our actions through a "toilet bowl" mentality in which we flush away our problems. Kerouac rejects this game, considering the denial of our animality as part of our larger social suppression of spontaneity and freedom – an extension of our compulsion to surround ourselves with an unreflective material comfort (anathema to Buddhism). In this way, Kerouac strives to break down our pretensions; he reminds us of how human we are. Many of us, he notes with derision, are "eager young men in business suits going to work in insurance offices hoping to be big Harry Trumans some day" (131). Yet, as Kerouac reminds us:

All these people . . . they all got white-tiled toilets and take big dirty craps like bears in the mountains, but it's all washed away to convenient supervised sewers and nobody thinks of crap any more or realizes that their origin is shit and civet and scum of the sea. They spend all day washing their hands with creamy soaps they secretly wanta eat in the bathroom. (39)

40. David Sterritt, "Kerouac, Artaud, and the Baroque Period of the Three Stooges," *Mosaic* 31 (1998) 83–98, p. 88.

In this passage we are confronted with an important nexus between “crap” and “supervision.” To the extent that we must defecate, we have to process it, sanitize it, and manage it as we manage the rest of our lives. Similar to our sex drive, or our compulsion for healthy communities, we have within ourselves a nature that does not fit with the packaged suburban life of middle-class America. Supervision, therefore, is essential – even self-supervision – for otherwise we may allow our “dark side” to creep forward, as liberation movements (or the counterculture) threatened throughout the Cold War period. If that were to happen, then we would risk unleashing a real “rucksack revolution,” a greening of the world and a renaissance in our thinking of the place of self in society. Such revolt, unthinkable in our managed, profit-driven society, is explicit in Kerouac’s critical, Buddhist-informed perceptive. For example, later in the novel, Smith is told that he cannot sleep outdoors because such activity is “against the law.” Sulking, Smith observes: “The only alternative to sleeping out, hopping freights, and doing what I wanted . . . would be to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a madhouse, where we could be ‘supervised’ ” (120).

In the “madhouse,” all aspects of our life are controlled. We see nothing but the bars, the white walls, the gowns and pale flesh of the other inmates, the sterility, the enforced sameness, the insistent blinking and insect-like humming of the fluorescent lights, the sedations of television and medication, and, above all else, the management (or mismanagement) of our emotions and life-tendencies.⁴¹ Such institutions are as much about the “supervision” of excretion as are our sewers. We manage our excretion the same way we “manage” ourselves. Each of us has our own “place,” and the organic wholeness of human life and its interconnectedness with others is lost. We become judged on our “utility” to the system, to the profits of others; whatever or whoever does not fit in is disposed.

The conditions of the “madhouse” are in contrast with the Buddhist “lunacy” of Kerouac’s vision. In one passage, Kerouac details his dissatisfaction with the mindlessness and mental castration of the world created by television and consumerism:

But there was a wisdom in it all [meaning Japhy’s “Zen lunacy”], as you’ll see if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence

41. This is a point highlighted dramatically by Ken Kesey in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (New York: Viking, 1973).

in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of on wheels. You'll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way and the Zen Lunatics have long joined dust, laughter on their dust lips. (104)

Kerouac's critical Buddhist world is, for him, the authentic world, where people do not need automobiles for mobility, where people think different and original thoughts, and where the iridescent, luminous, eerie and ghoulish glow of the television is replaced by crisp moonlight and the intoxications of the mountain air that Kerouac describes in his novel. What American culture celebrates as "freedom" and "security" resemble, according to Kerouac, control and placation for "the millions and millions of the One Eye" (104). Simply, the American multitudes suffer from misplaced priorities (deadly in the atomic age), alienation, and pacification – the result of a materialistic culture. Kerouac, therefore, wants to remind "people digesting dinners at home that all [is] not as well as they [think]" (188).

Discernible in *The Dharma Bums* are two senses in which people are pacified. First, people are literally suckled by the electronic breast, trading adult independence for a child-like dependency upon simple amusements. Second, they are pacified in George Orwell's sense – they have been rendered politically impotent, militarily subdued, and psychologically castrated.⁴²

Kerouac contrasts these sedated, "supervised," and peaceful television viewers with an image of Japhy: "I see him in future years stalking along with full rucksack, in suburban streets, passing the blue television windows of homes, alone, his thoughts the only thoughts not electrified to the Master Switch" (104). Toward the end of the novel, Smith is camping in a thicket outside of Eugene, Oregon, on his way up to Washington to work as a fire-look-out. He lays in his sleeping bag across the road from "cute suburban cottages that couldn't see me and wouldn't see me because they were all looking at television" (219). Kerouac's comments highlight how television bestows a singularity of sight, a focused vision which, as a paradigm, understands only that which it can accentuate or collapse literally into a box. Some things, however, are outside the range of the camera, do not fit into the box, or are off the radar screen and are thus unperceivable – as is Smith contemplating the night. As such they (and he) become invisible (the more authentic, the more invisible to the television audience). For a world nurtured on illusion, the presence of Truth is easily overlooked – this is a foundational assumption in Buddhism.

42. See George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *Propaganda*, ed. Robert Jackall (London: Macmillan, 1995), 423–437.

Conclusion

As suggested in this essay, the more Kerouac's critical persona becomes manifest in *The Dharma Bums*, the more anomalous and alien Kerouac becomes to his American audience. At the same time, Kerouac's persona is suggestive of a cultural corrective to the alienation endemic to American society. His shadowy figure, lurking in the darkness outside our homes bright with the glare of television, challenges us to turn off the television and to open our minds to other ways of existence. Following Kerouac we understand that we have the power to author our own lives. We learn that the status quo reifies "garbage" and calls it Truth because garbage is all we expect. Once we understand this we can live in a different world. This is not a radical change. When we assume that there is nothing "deep" to human beings that we can appeal to through language or faith it is not as difficult to change as we think (although it does require an increased sharing of resources and a willingness to enact humanistic and progressive values). Kerouac, and the counterculture of the 1950s and 60s, I believe, can be appreciated in this manner. The time is long overdue for a Kerouac-like vision of critical spirituality (Buddhist or otherwise) to grow and to spread across the nation and the world. It would be tragic if the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s, inspired to a large extent by Kerouac's writing, constituted the *end* of America's moral growth as opposed to its *beginning*.