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Keevil, Tyler (2016) A West Coast Canuck in the Land of Yankee Doodle Dandy: Bringing a Fresh Perspective to the Modern Road Novel. *Writing in Practice*, 2.

Official URL: <http://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/editions/writing-in-practice-vol.-2.html>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/4233>

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A West Coast Canuck in the Land of Yankee Doodle Dandy: Bringing a Fresh Perspective to the Modern Road Novel

Abstract

This essay explores some of the conventions of the modern road novel, as established by Jack Kerouac with *On the Road* (1957), particularly in regards to the background and nationality of the most well-known road narrators. It proceeds to compare how these conventions have been furthered by subsequent generations of road authors, including Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, and contrasts this with the author's own road novel, *The Drive* (2013). In so doing it seeks to highlight the ways in which *The Drive* brings a new and distinct narrative perspective to a well-established tradition.

Keywords: road novels, road story genre, *The Drive*, *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac

In 1957 *On the Road* established the conventions and codes of the modern road novel, and since then authors have been “repeating with some variation road patterns Kerouac had made popular, or trying to get out from under his influence” (Primeau 1996: 8). Thus, the road genre is now a ghostly highway where at any given time you might be passed, or surpassed, by the Beats in their classic cars, the Merry Pranksters in their bus, Thompson in his drugged out drop-top convertible, Wyatt and Billy on their choppers, or Thelma and Louise in their Cadillac. The list is endless, and seemingly overwhelming. Faced with this, as authors we might despair, give up, and opt to try another artistic route, since “drawing from an ongoing tradition can be discouraging or even intimidating” (Primeau 1996: 30). When navigating artistic terrain already “mapped” by other authors, one wonders if there is anywhere left to go, and we face the same problem in trying to live our lives. Trevor, the narrator of my own road novel, *The Drive* (2013), experiences this anxiety: he doesn’t tell his father about his intention to go on a road trip to get over his failed relationship, because he worries that his father will “get all cynical and skeptical” and tell him the idea is “a total cliché” (2013: 96). The implication is that Trevor fears his father may be correct, and that embarking on the well-trodden road may turn out to be a useless and ultimately unfulfilling enterprise.

Such a reaction is not inevitable, however. Knowing others have done something is not the same as undertaking it yourself: it will still be a new and worthwhile journey on a personal level, regardless of whether that journey is geographical or artistic. Perhaps for this reason, in general road authors tend to have a healthy relationship with their predecessors. They are willing and able to engage with those who have travelled the literary highways before them, and overcome the fear of creating something derivative or imitative. Ronald Primeau points out that there is often “a dialogue involving not only authors and readers but all those who have

taken trips themselves and read or written road stories of their own” (1996: 30). Katie Mills echoes this point, using similar terms, in stating that “road stories are always in dialogue with those that preceded them” (2006: 90). This kind of “dialogue” or engagement with one’s predecessors also occurs in other genres (and indeed most artistic media) but it is especially true of the road story, where the terms of engagement are more congenial and not as “combative”, often resulting in a “collaboration in which genre conventions recombine and emerge into new visions” (Primeau 1996: 30). New road authors are absorbing the knowledge gleaned by their predecessors, and learning from the trips others have taken in order to embark on their own. However, it is not enough merely to follow a familiar artistic path along the highways. Just as a traveller hoping to have an experience that is in some ways unique must be willing to ignore the guide books and get off the beaten track, so a writer hoping to create something original must be willing to “remap” established narrative routes and ideally bring a distinct perspective to the artistic landscape.

In this essay, I will look at some of the conventions of the modern road story that Kerouac established, and which have since remained integral to the genre. By adopting a critical approach to my own creative output, I will also demonstrate the ways in which *The Drive* establishes its “specific identity”, how it “shouts out its difference” (Mills 2006: 25), and how it relates to “the burden of the past” (Bale 1970) in a way that is liberating rather than cumbersome. In differentiating *The Drive* from some of the classic road stories mentioned above, it is worth looking in particular at the character of Trevor, the narrator and latter-day picaro who carries the story. In background and worldview he has some distinct characteristics that distinguish him from Sal Paradise and many other predecessors. To understand this difference, it is necessary to more closely examine Sal himself, as the original and prototypical road hero.

One aspect of Sal’s character that critics such as Mills and Primeau have noted is his position as easterner. *On the Road* opens with Sal in New York, among his East Coast friends, living the life of a would-be intellectual; he is feeling dissatisfied and thinks his “life hanging around the campus [has] reached the completion of its cycle and [is] stultified” (Kerouac 1972: 13). To Sal, the West is completely unknown, and mysterious. He can perceive it only via media images and imagine it only through textbooks and history books, which he admits to reading before he sets out:

I’d been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on... (1972: 15)

Thus even in the 1950s, Sal’s perceptions of the West are being influenced by the “Wild West” myth of pioneer days, which depicted it as a land needing to be discovered, explored, tamed, and developed. Originally this westward impulse was

inspired, at least in part, by the concept of Manifest Destiny, which propagated the idea that the American people were destined to expand West and conquer the continent. This was cultivated through advertising and the media, and summarized in the famous phrase, “Go West, young man, and grow up with the country”, which has somewhat mysterious origins but was most likely coined by Horace Greeley in a *New York Tribune* editorial (Fuller 2004).

Of particular interest is how the phrase links westward exploration with “coming-of-age” – both of the country and its youth – and the appeal of this worked its way into popular culture; it can be seen in a wide range of historical romances of the day, most notably James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo novels, including *The Last of the Mohicans* (1859).

Once the West was developed, the myth of Manifest Destiny faded, but did not completely disappear: it transformed into historical nostalgia for America during her more youthful years. We see the ongoing appeal of the myth in America’s fascination with the western genre, both in book and film form, perhaps best encapsulated by Spencer Tracey’s concluding voice-over narration to *How the West Was Won*:

The West that was won by its pioneers, settlers, and adventurers is long gone now. Yet it is theirs forever, for they left tracks in history that will never be eroded by wind or rain – never plowed under by tractors, never buried in compost of events...From soil enriched by their blood, out of their fever to explore and be, came lakes where once there were burning deserts, came the goods of the earth: mines and wheat fields, orchards and lumber mills. (Ford 1963)

Such romanticizing was not limited to mainstream cinema. On a more literary level, Robert Frost made use of similar sentiment in his patriotic sonnet, “The Gift Outright”. In the poem, the speaker claims that “She [America] was our land 100 years before we were her people”, and that Americans were withheld from their destiny by the fact that they “were England’s, still colonials”. It was not until they “gave themselves outright” to the land, “vaguely realizing westward” that they established their true American identity (Frost 1995: 316). Frost does not reflect on the fact that they were not only colonials, but also colonialists, and that their “gift” to the land would hardly have been viewed as such by the indigenous peoples. In the *Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Henry Miller adopts a somewhat different view of the “conquest” of the West by his American ancestors:

One of the curious things about these progenitors of ours is that though avowedly searching for peace and happiness, for political and religious freedom, they began by robbing, poisoning,

murdering, almost exterminating the race to whom this vast continent belonged. (Miller 1979: 22)

Elsewhere, Miller – whose trip begins on the east coast and heads west – further demonstrates his disdain for the myth of American identity by subverting Greeley's original maxim, reinventing it in bleakly comic fashion for the youth of America in the middle of the twentieth century, on the verge of entering the Second World War: “Go West, young man! they used to say. Today we have to say: Shoot yourself, young man, there is no hope for you!” (1979: 105).

Miller was decades ahead of his time in questioning the dominant American narrative of westward expansion, and it would be another thirty years before Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) forever changed the history of “how the West was won”. In the fifties, when Kerouac was setting out, the idea of the West as an untamed land waiting to be explored still lingered in the cultural consciousness, and in *On the Road* this clearly affects Sal's expectations of the journey. It is from this mythologized West that Dean Moriarty emerges, Sal's cowboy figure, a “western kinsman of the sun” (Kerouac 1972: 14) and a “side-burned hero of the snowy west” (1972: 8) who offers such a refreshing contrast to Sal's intellectual friends, so “bookish” in comparison to Dean:

Dean's intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. [...] it was a wild yea-saying outburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming. (1972: 13)

Dean is cast as an archetypal representative of the West, embodying its spirit, representing both freedom *from* and freedom *to*: freedom from the dry, intellectual life of the east, and freedom to move, to explore, to drive. Once he draws Sal out west with him, in search of “girls, visions, everything” (1972: 14), Sal views the western landscape and its inhabitants through the same wondrous and romantic goggles. He is like Dorothy in Oz, a Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, or Alice entering a seeming wonderland. We see it in his somewhat melodramatic declaration, “And for the first time in my life, the following afternoon, I went into the West” (1972: 17); we see it when he emerges from the movie theatre in Detroit, into the “strange Grey Myth of the West” (1972: 230); and we see it in the oft-quoted, famous line, when he reaches the Midwest, and proclaims, “I was half-way across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future” (1972: 20).

One of the traditions of the road story *On the Road* established is this “adulation for the landscape and values of the midwestern plains and prairies” (Primeau 1996: 40), and thus in part the “romance of the road” is actually the romance of the West. Sal himself is confronted with the negative side to this kind of romanticization

when he arrives in Cheyenne. His visit coincides with Wild West week, in which people dress up in classic western clothes and parade around town. Sal is indignant about this charade, and critical of it, saying, "I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition" (Kerouac 1972: 34). It is revealing to juxtapose this passage with equivalent moments in other road texts. For example, in Jim Harrison's *A Good Day to Die* (1993), the narrator comes across similar "cowboys" in the town of Jackson Hole, commenting that "All the bars had resembled various movie sets and you couldn't tell the gimcrack from the real cowboys, not that it mattered" (1993: 126). Henry Miller, too, notices this trend among eastern tourists out west; when he stops off at Bright Angel Lodge in Arizona, he notes that "some of them go Western when they reach the Grand Canyon and come to table with huge sombreros and boots and checker-board shirts" (Miller 1979: 144).

Both Harrison's narrator and Miller's narrative self, older and more jaded than Sal, accept the slight ridiculousness of it all with a shrug. Harrison's character even offers an ironic defence of these adults playing dress-up, asking "Why shouldn't a hard-working stockbroker from Boston be entitled to wear a costume once in a while?" (Harrison 1993: 126).

Sal, more naïve and judgemental in comparison, is positively irate: he is like the tourist who visits Venice and then complains that it is no longer authentic enough; the canal-side houses are owned by wealthy oligarchs, the glassware workshops now create kitsch to sell as souvenirs, and the gondoliers are men who commute from the mainland and dress up to provide tourists with a romantic Venetian experience. Similarly, the people in Cheyenne dressed up as cowboys are probably eastern tourists like Sal himself, or locals trying to cash in on the very romanticization of the West that Kerouac is partaking in, and contributing to, through the composition of his novel. *On the Road* is very much a book by an easterner and – arguably – for an eastern and "non-western" audience.

This is not atypical in road stories. In eulogizing the West, Kerouac was "setting the pace for road novels of the next 30 years" (Primeau 1996: 40). In *Blue Highways*, William Least-Heat Moon partakes in this tradition when crossing from Kansas City, Missouri, the "last Eastern city", into Kansas City, Kansas, the "first western one". He muses that "The true West differs from the East in one great, pervasive, influential, and awesome way: space" (Least-Heat Moon 2012: Pt. 4, Ch. 1, Par. 6) and in the lyrical passage that follows he ponders the effect this must have on its inhabitants. Tom Wolfe is similarly in wonder of the "awesome" West in the *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. Wolfe, like Kerouac, is an easterner, and finds an artistic muse in another westerner – Ken Kesey – who inspires his book, and "charges" it (as Dean does in *On the Road*) with a wild western energy. There is even the sense that Wolfe is deliberately imitating Kerouac's style, and borrowing his prose techniques. We see dashes of that in their first meeting, in which Wolfe (again like Kerouac) compares the "star" of his novel to a movie star: "He looks a

little like Paul Newman, except that he is more muscular, has thicker skin, and he has tight blonde curls boiling up around his head". And like Sal upon meeting Dean, Wolfe is struck by Kesey's "country accent, almost a pure country accent" (Wolfe 1989: 12). Clearly Wolfe is "in dialogue" with Kerouac before him, and this is even more pronounced in an article Wolfe wrote for the *World Journal Tribune*:

[Kesey is a] Western intellectual, Western US, that is. That makes him unique to start. There is no Western intellectual tradition. Intellectuals on the West Coast have been Eastern, at bottom, drawing upon the styles and concepts of the literary worlds of New York and Boston... Kesey's intellectualism includes a kind of Dionysian yea-saying tied in with the buoyancy of life on the West Coast. (Wolfe 1967: 12)

The parallels in diction and syntax between the two descriptions are striking (Mills 2006: 97-98). What is particularly significant for our purposes here is not just that Wolfe is borrowing Kerouac's style, or paying homage to it: it is that he is also adopting a similarly romantic view of the American West. To him and Kerouac, it is an unknown region, an undiscovered country – both geographically and intellectually. This is further emphasized in the finale of that first meeting with Kesey. Wolfe is speaking to him through a glass partition (Kesey is in jail) and it's clear this is symbolic of the East-West divide:

"No offense," says Kesey, "but New York is about two years behind."

He said it very patiently, with a kind of country politeness, as if... I don't want to be rude to you fellows from the City, but there's been things going on out here that you would never guess in your wildest million years, old buddy ... (Wolfe 1989: 13)

Part of the novel will involve Wolfe letting go of his somewhat uptight eastern perspective, and losing himself in the wild yea-saying, Keseyan culture of the West.

This is one way in which Trevor differs significantly from some of the most iconic road narrators. He, like Dean and Kesey, is not an easterner, but of the West himself. To him, the West is not unknown, but all-too-familiar. It is his home, and his realm. He has no need to romanticize it, or rush about in search of it. In fact, at the novel's start he finds it stultifying, and signifies this explicitly to the reader:

The evening air was ripe with the scent of brine and recent rain. I knew that smell so well. It was the stench of Deep Cove, of my home and childhood – rich and sweet and stagnant. (2013: 93)

The verb "stench" clearly has negative connotations, and though "rich and sweet and stagnant" is literally describing the air, the phrase is also describing how Trevor perceives his home environment. Trevor's journey-impulse therefore has a different purpose to Sal's or Wolfe's: an escape from, rather than a rush towards. This accounts in part for the stylistic differences between his narration and that of Kerouac's alter-ego or Wolfe's narrative self. While their prose is fast, often manic and in "full-flow", his is laid back and laconic, and – to borrow his own colloquial phrase – "fairly casual". What's more, he is cynical and sceptical about the western cultural milieu he is part of at the novel's beginning, with its "hipsters and indie filmmakers" who all wear "skinny jeans and scarves and beanies" (2013: 55). The modern, semi-pejorative term "hipster" is actually connected to the earlier label "beatnik", which was seen as an inauthentic "Beat" (Enck 2015). For Trevor, there is an inherent superficiality to the West Coast hipster "scene", and though feeling somewhat excluded from it at his wrap party, he still maintains (in typically exaggerated fashion) that he'd rather shoot himself "than wear a beanie" (2013: 55).

In summary, Trevor is not just all too familiar with "the West" and its new generation of imitative Beats: he is sick of it. In addition to the "psychic dislocation" (Sherrill 2000: 43) caused by the collapse of his relationship, his growing dissatisfaction with life in Vancouver is one of the things that sends him on the road. Once there, the sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction does not abate: in the early stages of his journey we don't get the feeling of exploration or excitement one finds in Kerouac. This is because in addition to being "of" the West, Trevor is also an experienced road traveller. He is perhaps not as road-weary as he would have us believe, but neither is he eagerly setting out on his first road adventure; he has crossed the border many times, in his youth and adolescence, and is actually following a route he took with his girlfriend Zuzska the year before. Every landmark – the ferry terminal, the border, the Space Needle in Seattle – is a waymarker filled with romantic memories:

We'd seen everything, done everything: sea lion caves and isolated surfing beaches, redwood forests and legendary vineyards, drunken dune buggy rides and Paul Bunyon's colossal, forty-nine foot statue. (2013: 79)

Trevor is not only grappling with the ghosts of previous road travellers, whom he acknowledges during his border grilling, but also the ghosts of his own past, present, and possible futures, including the "ghost" of his girlfriend, Zuzska; she even seems to physically appear in the car beside him at one point, and is only shaken once he turns inland, to the east, away from familiar terrain and the memories of her. Once he has done so, his real journey (both inward and outward) begins.

In addition to Trevor's West Coast perspective, there is a more obvious and more significant difference between him and the majority of road travellers who have come before: one of nationality. All of the most famous road narrators are American, and are providing an American perspective on their own country and culture. This goes some way to explaining why there is a shared belief among critics, many of whom are also American, that one of the primary purposes of the modern road story is to "rediscover" America, to take stock of it as a country, or to re-establish its cultural identity. Robert Sherrill returns to this theme again and again, since it fits well with his premise of the road novel as a new picaresque. He compares twentieth century America, as a world superpower in flux, to sixteenth century Spain, also going through a period of transition and upheaval. He sees modern road heroes as performing the same function as traditional picaros:

the picaro thus becomes a kind of megaphone through which various aspects of muted America shout themselves into objective existence, as the picaresque becomes a form of cataloguing the infinite, confused variety of America (Sherrill 2000: 46).

He also asserts that, even if the picaro heroes don't always find it, they nonetheless "enter onto the road seeking the terms of a unified culture 'rediscovered' by way of the highway or a country somehow 'recovered' by way of narrative presentation" (2000: 211). These sentiments are echoed by Primeau, who believes the road has become a place where people can assess "how the American Dream [has] gone wrong" (Primeau 1996: 49), and possibly salvage or recover it. He goes on to proclaim that "The literature of the highway wants to find or create – and ultimately to celebrate – an American identity" (1996: 67).

Mills is somewhat more even-handed in stating that "road stories serve as vehicles for Americans' sense of the self as autonomous and mobile" (Mills 2006: 3), while also acknowledging that the Beats "believed that they were exploring an America they were simultaneously creating, for their spontaneous writing – like the road trip – was equally a form of inventions and discovery" (2006: 35). The word that occurs and recurs in critical discussion of the genre is "discovery", in its various forms and guises.

To some extent, critics are picking up on cues put in place by the artists themselves. The slugline for *Easy Rider* (1969), boldly displayed on the film's poster, was "They went in search of America..." Steinbeck, who had his own road adventure in the form of *Travels with Charley* (1962), was also straightforward in stating his purpose, since the subtitle of his book, displayed on its cover, is "In Search of America". Kerouac, in his letters, similarly claimed that this was one of his goals in journeying across America, and writing about it:

Dean and I embarked on a tremendous journey through post Whitman America to FIND that America and to FIND that inherent goodness in American man. (Kerouac, cited in Mills 2006: 39)

In light of this, it must be acknowledged that “discovering” or “rediscovering” America may indeed be a central part of many road narratives. The more rebellious road stories mock this impulse: near the end of Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, when the narrator announces that he has somehow “found” America, his friend looks at him in disbelief and asks, “Seriously? You actually found America?” (Thompson 1993: 191). The moment highlights the absurd impossibility of such an undertaking.

Even so, such subversions don’t go very far in questioning the urge to “find” America, and thus still make use of the tradition, albeit in a humourous way. This single-minded focus on America, and the desire to “find” or “celebrate” its national identity, seems to reflect the culture’s Americentrism, and the belief in American exceptionalism – a modern variation of the belief in Manifest Destiny discussed above. This ideology may have been manufactured in America, but it has since been exported to the rest of the world: one of the side-effects of globalization, and the global village, is that the majority of us are now as fascinated with America as the Americans themselves. One could argue that in some ways the majority of us *are* now American: we eat American food, watch American movies and TV shows, listen to American music, wear American clothes, drive American cars, and drink American beer. And when we visit America, we want to go on an American road trip – just as Trevor does, in seeking to merge his self-image with that of the American road heroes such as Kerouac.

However, as has been noted above, Trevor’s interest in doing so is only half-hearted, and at least partly ironic. He is not actually entering America with such a naïve and romantic view – of road trips, or America itself. What’s more, as a Canadian, he is not interested in “finding” America, in expressing his dismay at the wrong turns taken on the road to the American Dream, or in redeeming it in any way. His first view of the country sets the tone for this, and reveals his blasé attitude towards America:

I got out of the car and hopped up on the hood and stood with my hands on my hips, surveying the landscape on the US side of the border. I saw a few low-lying buildings, a grassy verge, and some mud flats leading to the sea. Blaine (Washington) didn’t look much different from Surrey (British Columbia)... (2013: 45)

The fact that America looks so similar to Canada, and somewhat generic, is realistic (Trevor is only a few miles from his home, after all) but also symbolically significant; in truth, many Canadians view America as a reflective foil for their country, and the kind of place they worry Canada could become. Due to living in

such close proximity, Canadians have what might be called a cheerful suspicion of their neighbours to the south. The essence of Canadian culture and media – TV, books, film, and radio – is protected by Canadian content laws, which stipulate that 40-60% of broadcast material must be produced at home; it is a small (and most likely ineffectual) means of protecting Canada from the tide of pop culture flooding over the 49th parallel. A recent *Esquire* article somewhat facetiously called this “unbearably smug sense of superiority” (Marche 2013) into question, but it nonetheless remains a prominent feature of the Canadian cultural landscape.

This national divide is highlighted in the aforementioned scene in Thompson’s novel. The friend he is talking to is the Canadian musician Bruce Innes, who is performing in Vegas with his band as one of the many musical acts on endless rotation in the casinos. Thompson notes that Innes – unbeknownst to the management or drunken clientele of Circus Circus – is singing rebellious counter-culture songs using anti-American rhetoric. Thompson then reminisces about another Innes gig, where he and Innes were confronted by a famous astronaut (left anonymous), who angrily demanded, “What kind of nerve does a goddamn *Canadian* have to come down here and *insult this country?*” (Thompson 1993: 192).

Americans, it has to be said, don’t always take kindly to criticism of their national identity or beliefs. Perhaps for that reason, even of the rebels who wander the roads outside of society proper, very few truly lift the veil of the American dream in order to look at what lies beyond, and question its very existence. Again, that task is left to Miller, perhaps because – as a long-time expat recently returned to the country – he is not blinded by patriotism, nostalgia, or cultural bias. As a result, his conclusions regarding the state of the nation are scathing, and nowhere more so than upon his first sight of Boston upon arriving to begin his road trip:

It was a vast jumbled waste created by pre-human or sub-human monsters in a delirium of greed. It was something negative, some not-ness of some kind or other. It was a bad dream and towards the end I broke into a trot, what with disgust and nausea... (Miller 1979: 10)

For Miller, as we deduce from his title, the American dream is a nightmare, the nation a failed experiment, and the people a “vulgar, pushing mob” (1979: 16) who are at best ignorant and narrow-minded, and at worst aggressive, threatening, and dangerous – though among the mob there are unique individuals who “by their creative resilience stand in opposition to the crass materialism of our time” (1979: back cover).

In the modern socio-political climate it has become common practice for left-wing artists to adopt a negative view of American culture. Often this automatic anti-American sentiment over-simplifies very complex issues, and reduces the nation’s

complexities. In *The Golden Door: Letters to America*, A.A. Gill condemns this “view of the New World” as “not just a caricature but a travesty, an invention” (Gill 2013). *The Drive* does offer a more balanced view of America in the novel’s third section – as discussed below – but in the book’s initial stages Trevor’s own experiences of American culture aren’t entirely positive, to say the least. His is not just a post-modern road trip but a post-9/11 road trip, a post-War on Terror road trip. Trevor enters an America of monstrous traffic jams, ravenous diners, suspicious border guards, belligerent police officers, excessive consumerism, macho swaggering, and abandoned, post-industrial towns like Sprague; throughout his travels he frequently comes across people who are lost, ignorant, or dangerous. After the confrontation with the old man at the reservoir, he says to his cat, “I haven’t met a single normal person on this trip” (2013: 263). Winnemucca is depicted as a desolate place where young women are exploited; Reno is a cesspit of capitalist despair. He has entered what Ursula Le Guinn calls “America, our city in ruins” (2013) and must navigate through the rubble.

As he does, he shows no real anxiety about the state of the nation, or trying to pick up the pieces. His casual disinterest in America, both as nation and concept, is best symbolized in his accidental shooting of the country’s national bird, the bald eagle. In so doing, he is turning one American symbol – the firearm – on another:

It was sprawled on its back, with both wings extended, as if in mid-flight. A bullet hole, rich and red, gaped in the middle of its chest. Blood had pooled in the pine needles beneath it. (2013: 138)

It is a shocking moment, and all the more so because it is partially played for laughs. Beneath that comic absurdity, the incident is hugely important to Trevor’s character development (the bird becomes his personal albatross) and also revealing in terms of the novel’s outlook. *The Drive* makes use of such symbols only when they are representative of the narrator’s situation and state of mind. Put another way, the apparent significance of America in the text is not as America at all, aside from some descriptive trappings and the occasional moment of humour generated by cultural discord; true purpose in the text is as an “other” country, like the fantastic land a fairy-tale hero must enter in order to discover a treasure, vanquish some foe, and meet the goddess – all things that Trevor actually does, in his own distinct way.

Despite Trevor’s seeming indifference to America as a nation, it is still necessary for him to head south over the border, rather than, say, heading east or north on his road trip (clearly west, for a novel that starts on the West Coast, is not an option). There are a number of reasons for this. For one, the Canada/U.S. border acts as what Joseph Campbell called a “threshold” on the route of the hero’s journey, and signifies Trevor’s transition into a new realm and different psychological state. In addition, there is symbolic significance to the fact that he is heading south. When looking at a map like the one Trevor uses, south is down, and

“down” is implicitly connected to sleep, the unconscious, dreaming, and the “lower” depths of the human psyche. This most likely arises from the metaphor we live by, “CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN”, which is based on the fact that “humans and most other mammals sleep lying down and stand up when they awaken” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 15). Thus, in some ways, the America of *The Drive* is a dreamscape, and an extension of Trevor’s psyche, which he must navigate and “map” in order to develop and mature. In that way Trevor’s purpose is actually not so different to the American road heroes who have come before, but while they were trying to find or recover an American identity, Trevor is trying to find, or recover, his own.

There is an interesting coda to this analysis. One could argue that in *The Drive* the impulse to find America is not entirely jettisoned, but rather retained in a modified form. Trevor is, after all, seeking his old friend Beatrice – an American herself, and a Beat so true that the term is embedded in her name. He meets up with her in San Francisco, the epicentre of the original Beat movement. Beatrice acts as an authentic contrast to the faux-Beat artistes Trevor left behind in Vancouver, and her presence also balances out the novel’s depiction of Americans, and those he meets in Parts I and II. As the daughter of a Nez Perce healer and a Basque immigrant, she seems to represent both the continent’s indigenous peoples and the country’s melting pot culture, as well as its contemporary liberal tradition. Moreover, like Ken Kesey and Dean Moriarty, Bea is energized by a distinctly western “yea-saying” and zest for life, symbolized in her tendency to affect a cowgirl drawl, and epitomized in her celebratory cry, “Yee-haw!” (2013: 294).

Since it is only through Beatrice’s guidance that Trevor is able to come to terms with his failed relationship and reconnect with his own identity, one could argue that America, both as country and concept, is more vital to the novel’s primary purpose than it first seems. Put another way, like Sal Paradise and so many other road heroes, perhaps Trevor *is* seeking to find America, albeit unconsciously, and from a cultural vantage point that is distinctly his own. Even so, it is quite clear that the “America” he is seeking, as embodied by Beatrice, is neither the contemporary country, nor its historical antecedent of pioneer days. It is, rather, something that hearkens back much further, and resonates more widely: through the landscape, through the people, through himself.

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