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# Kerouac's Noble Savage: The Tragic Fate of the Primitive Man Trapped Within Modernity

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**Kerouac's Noble Savage: The Tragic Fate of the Primitive Man Trapped Within  
Modernity**  
Megan Reynolds

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Beat authors, attempting to tell their own stories and push against the Lost Generation that preceded them, wrote using the distinct roman à clef format and a confessional tone. These thinly veiled narratives tell fictionalized autobiographies but in such a way where the reader can easily identify the characters' real-life counter-parts. Unlike traditional autobiographies that can pass over certain periods in one's life, confessional narratives attempt to tell everything about the author's life, even the aspects mainstream society would consider taboo or shameful. Additionally, the confessional style still operates under the guise of fiction whereas the autobiography endeavors to tell the author's true-life story exactly as it happened; the autobiography eliminates any fictionalization, an element of storytelling that can impact the shape of the story itself. The confessional style Beat writers often employ, however, heightens the autobiographical feeling of the narratives themselves while still maintaining an element of distance between the characters and the author that allows the author to fictionalize aspects of the story when necessary.

Despite the small amount of distance that the confessional tone can create, this style of writing can result in a conflation between the author and the characters, a similarity that can also be likened to the "artist-novel." Maurice Beebe's study of artist-novels, *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts*, defines them not simply as a "portrait of the artist," but as the "artist as hero" (v). While many narratives do tell the "portrait of the artist" (as autobiographies do), the artist-novel differentiates itself by proclaiming the very artist of the portrait as the protagonist. Beebe indicates that biographical readings of such a genre usually lead readers and critics down a controversial, yet often travelled interpretive path; "when the novel is autobiographical, as most are, it is the story of the artist who wrote the book" (4). Although such a reading can misinform analysis due to questions of authorial intent which can blind some readers to elements of the

narrative that do not connect directly with the author's biography, looking at aspects of the author's life can also inform a deeper reading as long as the author's life does not direct the entirety of the interpretation. Analysis cannot ignore facets of the narrative that disagree with or seem incongruent with the author's actual life, but must instead tackle how these elements function within the larger framework of the novel itself. While biographical readings can produce misinterpretation and a false association between the happenings in the writing and the author's real life, Jack Kerouac relies heavily on his own experiences to tell that of his protagonist's in his influential novel *On the Road*. Kerouac, because of his mixed Franco-American ancestry, felt isolated within American culture. His gaze as a writer throughout *On the Road* is "from the periphery of society," a trait that he believes connects him with other minority groups (Amundsen 32). This outsider gaze, however, yearns for social belonging and acceptance, one that Kerouac hopes he can encounter in different minority Others. Other refers to a broad group of people, encompassing a variety of different social out-groups, who prove dissimilar to Kerouac. He looks to the Other in the hopes of finding a group in which he does not feel so very Other himself. The Other is different and that is ultimately its appeal.

Due to Jack Kerouac's own persistent feelings of alienation or social estrangement in American culture, his protagonist, Sal Paradise, often gravitates towards other socially ostracized groups as well. Kerouac's protagonist demonstrates his own outsider outlook, meaning that Sal feels as though he does not belong anywhere in America, or, at least, the America he has thus far encountered. This search for self, however, remains in keeping with Beebe's concept of the artist-novel. He remarks that a "[q]uest for self is the dominant theme of the artist-novel, and because the self is almost always in conflict with society...the artist-as-hero is usually therefore the artist-as-exile" (6). Throughout the majority of the novel Sal identifies with marginalized

societies, specifically Mexicans, African Americans, and the mentally insane. Sal appropriates other social out-groups' lifestyles to try and find his own place in the American cultural landscape. His descriptions, as noted by critics in Kerouac studies including Jason Haslam and Douglas Malcolm create stereotypical and appropriative portraits of different races. Recent scholarship points to these highly clichéd portrayals simply as racist depictions, but Kerouac uses these stereotypes to chip away at what racial identifiers actually mean. Such dramatic hyperboles of race cannot possibly hope to stand on their own, meaning that Kerouac deliberately creates ethnic foils with the intention of knocking them down. These supposedly racist characterizations actually point to the very fragility of using race as a culturally imposed social marker in the first place. Kerouac wishes to transcend race altogether, a desire present throughout *On the Road* that Kerouac studies up to this point have largely missed or ignored. His use of race is much more complicated than recent studies, which dismiss his ethnic caricatures as racist portraits or as desperate attempts to assimilate, seem to want to give him credit for. Sal's absurd descriptions of various races throughout the novel demonstrate his desire to transcend race altogether; he seeks a society in which racial markers vanish and everyone belongs equally.

When the racially alienated groups like Mexicans and African Americans inevitably fail to help Sal locate himself in American society because they remain firmly trapped in the ethnic categories he wishes to move beyond, he turns to those that even the ethnic out-groups tend to exclude: the mentally insane. By including frequent characters that Kerouac describes as "mad," he ventures into a new social group rarely explored in previous literature. The mentally ill represent a clear social out-group, a circle of people that exist outside of the American mainstream, and occupy a position that Jack Kerouac (as well as other Beat Generation writers) desperately wants to join. Although Kerouac does use mad characters to try and break free from

social norms, delving into such a personal and often times hidden experience matches the Beat Generation's confessional writing style; Kerouac wants to share all of his narrator's experiences during his various road trips across America as well as his attempts to transform into a character similar to Dean, the maddest of the Beats.

Dean's unique ability to not only transcend the societal ego that traps Sal but to also understand his own visions, sets Dean up as more than a mad figure. Serving as a teacher throughout Kerouac's novel, he acts as a potential guide to the originary state of man. He therefore functions as a representative of the primitive man and a connection to humanity's distant past, a past that exists without such strict racial and social boundaries, and a past Sal desperately wants to return to. The primitive man fascinates thinkers from all periods of time because he serves as an analogue to man in his earliest state. Marianna Torgivnick states that the primitive "exists for us in a cherished series of dichotomies: by turns gentle, in tune with nature, paradisaical, ideal – or violent, in need of control; what we should emulate, or alternately, what we should fear; noble savages or cannibals" (3). While some primitivistic theories regard primitive man as immoral and dishonorable, many, especially the ones that influence Kerouac's novel, uphold the primitive man as the pure and innocent precursor to modern man. According to these theories that proclaim primitive life better than modernity, modern man has fallen prey to corruption and de-individualization.

Sal's search for self, therefore, takes him beyond the racially ostracized, a concept imposed by society, beyond the ranks of the mad (although they start to move away from ethnic markers), to finally point him towards the primitive man. Just as Torgovnick claims that we continue to define the primitive using a series of dichotomies, defining them against ourselves as the Other precisely because they are not like us, Sal too defines himself not by what he is by

what he is not. He moves through the narrative, from one marginalized group to another, to discover that he belongs to none of them. His sense of identity and the very manner he goes about finding it is predicated on dissociative notions of identity in general. At the onset of the novel, because he feels uncomfortable in American mainstream society, Sal turns to the Other because they are not the mainstream, not because he actually identifies with that culture. Dean, as a noble savage and the ultimate Other, escorts Sal on a wild tour of America, one that ultimately results in Sal coming to terms with his own identity as a modern man even if that means trapping Dean in the primitive role Western society constructs for him.

### **Appropriating the Other**

The initial catalyst of *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, the death of Jack's father and a crucial connection to his familial heritage, spurs not only Jack's adventures to the West with Neal Cassady (the real life counterpart of Dean Moriarty), but also his confusion about his own place within American culture. Without his father, Jack loses not only his historical relationship to both his Franco and his American identities, but also a sense of belonging. His already unstable connection to his ancestral heritage breaks even further after his father's death causing Jack to feel outside of American society as a whole. The West represents a new beginning as well as a "flight from whiteness" for Jack, a chance to encounter his true identity now that he has lost his link to his own ancestry (Haslam 454). Consequently, his search for self begins before his creation of *On the Road's* narrator Sal Paradise, a character "burdened from the start with a mixed nationality," as Kerouac struggles to understand his own Franco-American identity in relation to the larger American culture that surrounds him (Beebe 81). As Justin Thomas Trudeau claims, "his affinity for the other as an alternative model of self-identity" explains why

Kerouac would begin his narrative with a loss of self and a search for a new sense of belonging (159). Kerouac's belief in his own ethnically diverse heritage "allows him to claim a sense of solidarity with racial others" (Keomany 239). Despite his status as a white male and a Columbia student, his writing still "attempts to map his marginal identity – as a member of a French-Canadian ethnic minority – onto the American Landscape by masking him in the racial attributes of African Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans" (Nicholls 525).

Kerouac's ethnic uneasiness and confusion manifest in his novel's protagonist Sal. Sal Paradise represents a young man of mixed heritage (Italian-American), a similarity that is "perhaps best read as a displacement in narrative" of Kerouac's own Franco-American genealogical history (Nicholls 534). It is, therefore, precisely Kerouac's own confusion about his mixed background that informs his creation and portrayal of Sal's interactions with minority groups, interactions that more often than not seek out rather than reject the racially ostracized. Both Kerouac and Sal, acting as Kerouac's fictional stand-in, are "particularly willing to identify with indigenous cultures" because they exist clearly outside of the American society to which Kerouac never felt fully accepted (Tytell 61). According to Karen E.H. Skinazi, "Kerouac's and Sal's outsidership in their own country helps them forge a bond with all the other out-groups they encounter" (96). Unlike other representations of the artist-hero, most notably the Romantic poets, Sal does not flee all society but instead desires company with "people of his own sort" (Beebe 78). By identifying as outsiders Kerouac and Sal pursue others in similar situations in the hopes that one marginalized group will understand and accept the plight of another.

Sal's identification with minority groups unfortunately involves invoking highly stereotyped views of the culturally ostracized "as a means of escape from [his] own 'disillusioned' identit[y]" (Haslam 455). "The West" Sal first encounters is not really the west at

all but an over-the-top recreation of “Wild West Week,” a caricature of the west that includes “Indian chiefs wandering around in big headdresses...solemn among the flushed drunken faces” (Kerouac 30, 33). Although this representation of the west proves superficial and staged, it sets the tone for the remainder of Sal’s cultural appropriations as other forms of spectacle. Even after he leaves the “Wild West Week” extravaganza (an event that glorifies alcoholic consumption and a lack of proper historical context) Sal mentions that “there were a lot of Indians, who watched everything with stony eyes” (33). Just as the chiefs in costume headdresses walked solemnly amongst the drunken revelers during the “Wild West Week” activities, these Native Americans watch their surroundings at a bus stop with cold eyes. Sal therefore “reproduces... certain racist stereotypes that are embedded in the discourse of the very culture that the novel ostensibly critiques” (Haslam 445). By including these strikingly similar descriptions, Kerouac blurs the distinction between Native Americans as a stereotyped figure in the “Wild West Week” spectacle and the true Native Americans who occupy the same time period and location as Sal; both representations meld into one, subsequently implying the performativity of race and culture instead of the reality of the race and culture as they exist as their own entities.

His ethnic appropriations continue throughout the novel, specifically with his brief dalliance with Terry, a young Mexican woman. Sal exclaims “Hooee! It *is* the promised land” when describing the Southern California/Mexican lifestyle he briefly leads with Terry (Kerouac 91). In his depiction of Terry, she and her Mexican compatriots live carefree lifestyles with no regard for money or the future. Ponzo, Terry’s brother’s friend, continues to say that “Tomorrow, man, we make a lot of money; today we have a few beers” (94). Ponzo, despite the fact that Big Rosey “threw [him] out last night,” lives without anxiety about his future (94). Even though he cannot find work and has nowhere to live, Ponzo’s life appears easy and, most importantly,

happy, the kind of life that Sal wishes for himself. This life, however, relies on “depthless cultural stereotypes” that inaccurately portrays the Mexican culture, indicating that Kerouac never intended to actually understand the Mexican culture but to use it as an example of the Other (Holton 277). Sal has a fundamental misunderstanding of the Spanish language signifying that his efforts to assimilate into this minority group will never be successful. For Sal, “*mañana*,” a word meaning tomorrow, is a “lovely word and one that probably means heaven” (94). His misunderstanding could be construed as a willing blindness, a kind of joke, to racial realities meaning that Sal knowingly overlooks the true meaning of *mañana* and instead substitutes in his own idealized definition. Race for Sal serves less as a truly defining characteristic and more as a flexible spectrum he can use in an attempted performance, one that tries to mask his own whiteness.

Disconnected from the Spanish culture, but somehow thrown into what he perceives as the heart of it, Sal believes that cotton picking will be an easy way to make a living. Unfortunately, he only makes “approximately a dollar and a half...just enough to buy groceries in the evening on the bicycle” (Kerouac 97). In addition to his fundamental misunderstanding or ignorance of the Spanish language, is Sal’s misinterpretation of his own belonging in the Mexican culture. After an incident where “the Okies went mad in the roadhouse and tied a man to a tree and beat him to a pulp with stick,” Sal begins carrying his own big stick, an image that confuses what cultural group he wants to belong to (97). He claims that he needs it for protection because “[t]hey thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am,” but it also serves as an attempt to physically associate with the Mexican race (98). Even though he purposely misuses their language, he deludes himself into believing that he has joined the ranks of the Mexican culture because “he wants to relate to minority culture – and he happily accepts external

identifications that allow him to do so” (Skinazi 95). Yet Sal only mentions the big stick in association with “the Okies.” In claiming his “Mexican” identity and trying to demonstrate it nonverbally, he also associates himself with “the Okies,” or white Americans themselves, the precise group that he initially wants to escape. For Sal, the big stick signifies belonging. The question is to which group.

In addition to Sal’s slip from culture to culture in this episode with Terry, he once again confuses different racial out-groups. On his first day of cotton-picking, Sal notices an “old Negro couple” that “picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience as their grandfathers had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama” (Kerouac 96). Sal, “[a]lienated from the white mainstream,...[finds] models to emulate in all kinds of excluded groups, most notably perhaps African Americans” (Holton 266). Even while living amongst the Mexicans, Sal pines for yet another socially ostracized group. In doing so he “idealizes the lives of visible minorities because he believes they know who they are, and they are comfortable with who they are” (Skinazi 95). This kind of idealization continually occurs at a distance though, demonstrating that Sal does not truly understand the cultures he so longs to become a part of and that these stereotypical portraits of different cultures cannot possibly withstand close scrutiny; these racial foils fall as Sal attempts to close the gap between himself and others, revealing not Kerouac’s racism, but his insistence that Sal cannot change his race to fit another’s.

According to Norman Mailer’s essay “The White Negro” that insists the white man has appropriated the African American culture specifically, “it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin” (Mailer). Sal’s attraction to the African American culture stems from the very fact that they exist on the periphery of society and represent a possible form of escape from the American mainstream. Unlike Mailer’s essay

though, Sal seems less concerned with what racial Other he joins and more infatuated with the idea of assimilating into a racial Other in the first place. Instead of remembering the historical brutality of slavery, “[b]lack labour and physicality are here nothing but a bolster to white thought” that romanticizes the African American (Haslam 455). Sal deliberately “seems to appropriate the experience, without demonstrating any understanding of the harsh world that would have produced such expertise” (Malcolm 98). Imagining this Black couple’s ancestors not only disregards the horrific realities African Americans faced as slaves in ante-bellum Alabama, but also recalls a sense of rooted belonging within a single culture, something that Sal (and Kerouac) lack due their mixed heritage.

Although the edited version that originally printed of *On the Road* changes the opening from the death of Kerouac’s father to the breakup of Sal’s marriage, associating the African American couple with their ancestors emphasizes Kerouac’s lack of familial connection to his own history present in *The Original Scroll*. Instead Sal imagines an Edenic life for the old Negro couple, deliberately ignoring America’s troubled history with race, especially in the South, and tries to identify with them. Even before his observations of the African American couple, one of Sal’s one time travel companions calls him “Blackie,” indicating that Sal does exist on some periphery of society, but the sheer absurdity of calling a white man “Blackie” only draws attention to Sal’s lack of belonging; the nickname emphasizes not only Sal’s whiteness, but also signifies that he belongs to neither the white American culture nor the African American culture (Kerouac 30). The term also disregards the actual African American race in an attempt to distance Sal’s Italian-American heritage and appropriate an alternate African American one. Kerouac’s idealization of African American society continues throughout the novel. Perhaps the most famous example is when Sal openly wishes he “were a Negro, feeling that the best the

white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for [him], not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night” (179-180). Mailer’s essay once again resonates as he explicates the very language used by the “hipster” (the African American). The “language of Hip is a language of energy” and the Kerouac passage mentioned above includes language that does imply motion or energy (Mailer). Sal, however, uses these words and phrases like “not enough life,” “joy,” and “kicks” to suggest that that energy remains glaringly absent from his own life. Although Sal has never felt comfortable in the white American culture, he deliberately states his aspiration to transform into a different race, which signifies both his own outsidership from the American mainstream, but also his misperception of the lives of minority ethnicities.

He does, later on in the same passage, name other racially ostracized groups like a “Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap,” but he returns to African Americans at the end of the passage when he wants to “exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (Kerouac 180). Again, instead of trying to understand the realities of the African American race, Sal simply wants to switch places with them and live in his own idealized fantasy about their way of life. Just as he cannot ignore the Spanish language and imagines a romantic meaning for the word *mañana*, his fascination with the various minority cultures he describes throughout the novel is predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of the different out-groups’ realities. By yearning for any kind of cultural Other and not a specific one, like the uniquely white *negro* that Mailer argues for, Kerouac undermines the very roman à clef writing style that he originally relies on. The purely dissociative notion of difference indicates that Kerouac’s interest lies less with finding an intrinsically true or authentic sense of self in relation to race and more in the mainstream/Other (square/Hip in Mailer’s essay)

dichotomy. Cultural appropriation serves as a means to escape one group and join another and penetrates deeper into Kerouac's writing than simply Sal's attempts to assimilate.

The African American influence, undoubtedly Kerouac's strongest though not solitary form of ethnic guidance in *On the Road*, even exists beneath the text itself within the myth of the novel's construction. "The worlds described by Jack Kerouac and his manner of description were decidedly outside of the cultural mainstream of his time" and were highly inspired by the African American jazz movement, a movement spearheaded by minority groups (Amundsen 33). Although the content of *On the Road* clearly demonstrates Sal's attempts to transcend his own race and join another, Kerouac's method of writing, which he entitled Spontaneous Prose, was an "attempt to divine the essence of the experiences he was describing" without a filtered editing process (33-4). Despite literary antecedents who experimented with stream of consciousness and other unconventional techniques made popular by the Lost Generation, Kerouac's "literary experimentation was also modeled on his understanding of jazz improvisation" (Malcolm 85). His theory of Spontaneous Prose states that "[t]ime being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is an undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on the subject of the image" (Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" 743, original emphasis). Likening the writing process to music, Kerouac refers mainly to the idea of blowing, or "rhetorical breathing," to structure breaks in language; just as a jazz musician must stop to breath so too much the writer write until he has to come up for air within the language itself (744). Kerouac's use and appropriation of the African American jazz movement, however, is not entirely unsurprising because "as soon as jazz became popular in the 1920s, young men who considered themselves outsiders identified with jazz musicians' marginal social status" (Malcolm 97). Kerouac's own feelings of discomfort within the white American culture

drove him to seek refuge within other excluded groups, a drive that ultimately shaped his writing style.

Unfortunately, just as with Sal's descriptions of minority groups within the novel itself, Kerouac's development of Spontaneous Prose appropriates the powerful jazz movement without a true understanding of it. Douglas Malcolm writes that "[w]hile jazz does play a significant role in the novel, its impact lies in the music's ideological, behavioral, and semiotic implications – in particular their roots in African American culture – rather than in the direct application of its formal rules" (85). Kerouac demonstrates that the most important factor garnering his interest in the jazz movement is not actually the music but the culture making that music; the out-group social status of the African American is more appealing to Kerouac when shaping his novel's prose style than the actual particulars of the rising musical form. Once again, Kerouac appropriates an ostracized social or racial group's traditions to further his own perspective, a literary "approach [that] makes the writer more vulnerable to repeating cultural biases" (93). Using African American customs plays into a tendency with established roots in earlier American literary traditions, one in which the "legendary rebels and outcasts...are one by one redeemed," and one that reemerges time and time again throughout *On the Road* (Fiedler 34). For Kerouac, however, simply using the same types of minority groups as previous authors does not accurately portray his feelings of separateness. Even though 1950s and 1960s society struggles to accept the racial minorities that Sal attempts to appropriate throughout the novel, these out-groups still live, work, and function within larger American social constrictions. Kerouac's highly stereotypical descriptions create racial portraits that cannot possibly survive any kind of actual critical examination because Kerouac argues for an inclusion that goes beyond simple racial markers. Ultimately he must turn to yet another excluded group, the mentally

insane, to convey both his sense of social isolation, but also his sense social dissatisfaction in a group that exists beyond ethnic boundaries.

### **Breaking Through Race: Mad Transcendence**

Sal's closest friends throughout *On the Road* are madmen, eccentrics that function outside of bourgeoisie and marginal social norms. His friend Remi takes him to see the "Banana King" and claims that "Until you learn to realize the importance of the Banana King you will know absolutely nothing about the human-interest things of the world" (Kerouac 72). Similarly, Sal describes a scene involving Carlo Marx, his friend and an unconventional poet based off of Allen Ginsberg (someone who suffered from very real psychological conditions):

In these days Carlo had developed a tone of voice which he hoped sounded like what he called The Voice of Rock; the whole idea was to stun people into the realization of the rock. "You pin a dragon to your hats," he warned us; "you're up in the attic with the bats." His mad eyes glittered at us. Since the Dakar Doldrums he had gone through a terrible period which he called the Holy Doldrums, or Harlem Doldrums, when he lived in Harlem in mid-summer and at night woke in his lonely room and heard "the great machine" descending from the sky. (130)

Much like Remi's "Banana King," Carlo Marx appears to understand something about humanity when he references "the great machine," a truth that he repeatedly tries to express but cannot. Despite Allen Ginsberg's Jewishness, Kerouac never mentions Carlo's racial identity like he does with previous ethnic groups that Sal attempts to join. Why does Carlo Marx escape the romantic idealization Kerouac subjects other racial out-groups to? The answer lies in Carlo's distance (or lack thereof) to Sal and Sal's ultimate goal of transcending race entirely. Naming the

Allen Ginsberg equivalent Carlo Marx hints at race in a much subtler way than the other ethnic groups Sal encounters. Referencing the ludicrous notion that Jews were somehow predisposed to supporting communism, Carlo Marx directly recalls the founder of Communism, Karl Marx. Yet Sal never comments on this connection. Unlike the other racially marginalized people that Sal dreams of joining, Carlo exists within Sal's personal sphere. Their friendship negates Sal's tendency to romanticize the ethnic Other precisely because their lack of distance means that Carlo, despite his Jewishness, is not an Other. Carlo Marx appeals to Sal because he does seem to transcend his racial identity. Instead of categorizing Carlo as a Jew, Sal admires him for his madness, a mental state that ignores ethnic markers.

Yet another of Sal's friends, Ed Dunkel, describes his own visions while in the car with Sal: "Last night I walked clear down to Times Square and just as I arrived I suddenly realized I was a ghost – it was my ghost walking on the sidewalk" (Kerouac 130). Ed, a few pages earlier, even admits that he has similar transcendent visions "all the time" (123). Michel Foucault, renowned French philosopher, social theorist, and literary critic, researched the development of society's response to madness throughout history in his book *Madness and Civilization*. Foucault claims that "[w]hile the man of reason and wisdom perceives only fragmentary and all the more unnerving images of it [universal knowledge], the Fool bears it intact" (Foucault 22). The madman therefore holds some form of human knowledge that the sane cannot grasp, a sentiment Kerouac echoes.

Through his descriptions of his psychotic friends, Sal not only depicts characters that exist outside of society's grasp but he also "locates madness in *an area of unforeseeable freedom*" (Foucault 76, original emphasis). Contrary to the minority cultures that Sal first attempts to join who still endure social constrictions, the figure of the mentally insane lives

outside of cultural boundaries in an almost unimaginable independence from the American mainstream. These irrational characters' visions "unveil the truth" and subsequently "expose Western society's shortcomings" (Foucault 30, Mettler 175). Kerouac's inclusion of madness expresses a "strong rebellion against [the] dominant American ideological patterns" (Raluca 247). Through his inclusion of the "mad" or mentally insane figure, Kerouac chooses a minority group that "appealed to the counter-culture as the ultimate non-conformist" (Mettler 175). In American literary tradition "images of alienation, flight, and abysmal fear possess our fiction," a fascination that shapes how Kerouac upholds the mentally ill as the champions of the socially shunned (Fiedler 143).

Although Sal portrays many of his fellow characters in *On the Road* as "mad," their mental illness is far from a handicap. In fact, the madman's very existence outside of social norms gives them a unique position to critique said norms. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's essay "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde," describes the Avant-Garde artist as someone who also seeks escape from mainstream culture. Like the madman, the Avant-Garde artist pushes against social norms to break away from them. Kerouac's portrayal and exultation of the mentally insane then relies precisely on the fact that society rejects him and prides himself "not only of being ahead of and further on than the others [non-Avant-Garde artist groups] but also of belonging to a distinguished minority" (Enzensberger 250). Sal's (and Kerouac's) confusion about "his race, his ethnic heritage, and his cultural identity" now admit him into an elite group of social critics (Nicholls 525). Instead of harboring shameful feelings because of his cultural exclusion, Kerouac, as an individual who did struggle immensely with his self-identity within society, "took delight in inferior social and economic positions, denying the empowered status of upwardly mobile professionals" (Raluca 247). He essentially uses "insanity as a cultural site of ideological

contestation” (247). Whereas Sal’s previous attempts at assimilation into other social out-groups rely more on his own feelings of inadequacy and irrelevance within the American mainstream, his deep connection with the characters he frequently describes as “mad” throughout the narrative seeks to push against the society that originally ostracized him.

Kerouac suggests that because “conventional ways of thinking were responsible for society’s problems” those who could best “provide new insights [are] those who were at times unable to think in conventional ways” (Mettler 172). Sal perceives conventional American norms as “massifying and de-individualizing,” indicative of a society that demands escape (Johnston 107). Beat counterculture sought less to create or define a new social movement than to rupture the preexisting one and used minority figures like the mentally ill that had been historically expelled from society to rebel against the “aggressive and stifling social ethos” of the 1950s and 1960s (104). Multiple times throughout the narrative, Sal expresses the feeling that it is “no different from where you get off a bus in Kansas City or Chicago or Boston” (Kerouac 83). Not only do completely different places mirror each other, an inherent sadness also pervades the lack of individuality Sal finds: the “floors of bus stations are the same all over the country, always covered with butts and spit and they give a feeling of sadness that only bus stations have” (34). Madness, therefore, transforms from a reprehensible illness into a “vehicle of escape for those surroundings” that suffocated the outsider (Johnston 116). Sal’s initial attachment to the mad figures he comes across stems from his belief that they “understood each other on other levels of madness” (Kerouac 4). Finally for Sal, it appears as though he has found a community to which he belongs, a group of social outcasts who see “madness as an alternative to assimilation into the American society” (Reynolds 158). Disillusioned with the current culture surrounding them, Sal latches onto the mad characters he encounters throughout the narrative, characters “whose

function [is] to shock the bourgeoisie into an awareness of what a chamber of horrors its own smugly regarded world really [is]" (Fiedler 135). Instead of feeling rejected by society at large for his mixed heritage, Sal, due to his association with the psychotic, can now willingly "throw off the established rule" and actually escape American culture entirely (Enzensberger 251).

While Sal originally gravitates towards the figure of the madman because they represent a minority that he could plausibly join, he remains fascinated by the mentally insane for their ability to successfully transcend American society entirely. Kerouac's novels, which "often center on attempts to escape the mundane," frequently use some sort of transcendental ability to do so (Johnston 118). Sal's and Kerouac's own feeling like "they needed to leave their own culture in order to see it and themselves more clearly" drives their preoccupation with the psychologically insane because the madman essentially exists outside of all society (Tytell 51). Because historical rejection of the mentally ill includes isolation from even society's out-groups effectively places them outside the realms of both mainstream and minority cultures, Sal's attraction to this particular psychotic subgroup seems to fit not only his desire to find his own sense of belonging but also his complicated feelings towards the larger society that caused these problems with identity in the first place. Unlike the *Original Scroll*, which severs ancestral ties at the beginning, the very first sentence of the edited novel depicts a break from social norms because Sal meets Dean "not long after my wife and I split up" (Kerouac 1). Marriage, a cultural convention, fractures at the onset of the narrative, setting Sal up for his journey away from society altogether. A simple divorce, however, does not provide the kind of all-encompassing break from the American mainstream that Sal seeks. His turn to the mentally ill members of society represents an attempt to participate in a "more complete break with conventional thinking," one that occurs at the fundamental level of the mind itself (Mettler 174). In the hopes

of not only critiquing the society he feels so apart from, Sal drifts towards his “mad” friends because they escape that society entirely.

Dean Moriarty, “the uncrowned king of the Beats” and the maddest character of all of Sal’s acquaintances, therefore becomes a kind of guide that Sal wishes to follow (Raluca 250). In addition to his outsider status, the madman also provides Sal with a connection to perceived lost truths about humanity as a whole. Throughout *On the Road*, Dean experiences visions that convey some form of knowledge that Sal has not yet learned. In one such episode “Dean tittered maniacally... ‘Little tinkling whirling doodlebells. Ah! Listen! We’ll all bend down together and look into the center of the music box till we learn about the secrets’” (Kerouac 119). Even in the middle of a gathering of other people, Dean’s vision bursts forth and inquires about the universal truths of human existence. It is the psychotic’s “altered mental state [that] grants them an unencumbered perspective on life” (Mettler 175). Without society’s stifling ethos strangling his thinking, the madman can successfully transcend American culture as a whole, an escape that includes breaking with the original racial minorities that Sal attempts to appropriate, and allows him to reach “a point at which [he] seem[s] to see [himself] from the outside” (Johnston 117). Just as the outsider perspective allows Kerouac to critique the American mainstream when he shows Sal trying to assimilate into other racial groups, madness takes one outside of all society thereby allowing the mentally insane to see all of American culture more clearly.

In many ways, “madness represents the only authentic American spirit” because it liberates the individual from an oppressive cultural ethos (Raluca 250). Significantly for Sal, this liberation reflects an “emancipated behavior capable [of reconnecting] the individual to the universal” (250). Dean’s transcendental visions do just that when he claims that “of course no one can tell us that there is no God. We’ve passed through all forms” (Kerouac 120). For Dean,

recognizing universal truths or establishing some kind of reconnection with the universal is simply a part of his character as a madman. Sal tends to see the madman, and especially Dean, as a “guardian of truth,” someone who foregoes society for the sake of ameliorating it (Foucault 14). According to Jason Haslam “a removal from society [is] the first step in any attempt to better that society” (445). Dean escapes society initially during his time in juvenile jail as a young teenager, then again breaks more successfully from the American culture as his madness continues to develop. At one point Sal describes him as “looking in every direction and seeing everything in an arc of 180 degrees around his eyeballs without moving his head,” a description that recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “transparent eye-ball” (Kerouac 114). As the “transparent eye-ball,” “all mean egotism vanishes” and Emerson “see[s] all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through [him]” (Emerson 217). Emerson’s unique idea of the “transparent eye-ball” aims to “transcend the ordinary, to become transparent even to the self’s own range of vision, and to see the world from the pure, unobstructed viewpoint of the soul” (Stiles 67). Dean, because of his ability to transcend both the “temporal and physical limits of the average man,” can see beyond the social constructs that haunt Sal and create a kind of “re-visioning of American transcendentalism” (Haslam 450, 445). For Sal, Dean represents a particularly enticing form of escape, one that allows him to strip away racial markers entirely and rise above his own problems with identity. Dean’s madness “marks such a detachment as holy” and Sal portrays it as a “connection to God” and the universal (Reynolds 159).

### **The Primitive and the Modern Man**

Dean, however, seems to embody a larger role than simply that of the raving lunatic with transcendental visions; he “occupie[s] a zone always allied with the primitive in the tropes of

primitivist discourse – the zone of madmen, the zone of the insane as cultural Other” (Torgovnick 85). Due to the overlap between these two categories, the madman and the primitive man often get confused. However, the primitive man represents something far more important to Kerouac: a return to humanity’s origins, humanity’s roots. Although Dean’s visions appear strikingly similar to those of the other psychotic characters present throughout Kerouac’s novel, Sal chooses to only follow Dean, to use Dean as his spiritual guide during their various adventures across the United States. Just like the madman whose visions allow him to transcend reality, so too can the primitive man unlock certain knowledge that a modern man would no longer have access to.

Kerouac distinguishes Dean from the other mentally insane characters Sal encounters by giving Dean an understanding of his visions and even an understanding of the world apart from his visions. Carlo Marx’s and Ed Dunkel’s visions access some kind of world beyond the modern American society, but they do not give any explanations for their visions nor do they seem to fully understand them themselves. After his vision that describes seeing himself as ghost, Ed Dunkel simply nods and offers no explanation, no analysis for what seeing himself as his own ghost could possibly mean. Carlo Marx similarly neglects to enlighten Sal as to what his poetry and visions about “The Voice of Rock,” “the realization of the rock,” or “the great machine” actually signify (Kerouac 130). Kerouac’s portrayal of Dean’s character, on the other hand, usually functions the opposite way; he falls into long elucidations about his interpretations of visions with an urgency that stems from his inherent desire to share the meaning of his own primitive knowledge. By alluding to Dean as a kind of primitive man, Kerouac insinuates that “‘the primitive’ becomes a means of access to the ‘essential’” (Torgovnick 151). The primitive, because of his connection to humanity’s origin, sees “most clearly the simple and fundamental

truths which man most needs to know” (Lovejoy 253). While alone in the car with Sal, Dean erupts into a long explication about his understanding of God:

“God exists without qualms. As we roll along this way I am positive beyond a doubt that everything will be taken care of for us – that even you [Sal], as you drive, fearful of the wheel” (I [Sal] hated to drive and drove carefully) – “the thing will go along of itself and you won’t go off the road and I can sleep. 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. We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side.” (Kerouac 121)

This particular quote establishes not only Dean’s primitive knowledge about the nature of the world, but also his sense of belonging in America, a feeling that Sal has never known. Unlike Sal, Dean “belonged to the world and there was nothing he could do about it,” a belonging that includes not only the bourgeoisie that originally excludes Sal, but also the various minority subgroups that Sal attempts to join (188). Once again, by following Dean Sal hopes he can reconnect with the land he feels so detached from and finally find some sort of home.

While not on the road, Dean feels at home in jazz clubs. Although jazz specifically recalls Sal’s attempted appropriations of African American culture, music in general evokes the primitive “importance of ritual for individual and group expression (rituals which often include dance)” (Torgovnick 21). Time and time again, in jazz clubs across America, Dean transcends himself through music. Sal describes one scene as

Uproars of music and the tenorman *had it* and everybody knew he had it. Dean was clutching his head in the crowd, and it was a mad crowd. They were all

urging that tenorman to hold it and keep it with cries and wild eyes, and he was raising himself from a crouch and going down again with his horn, looping it up in a clear cry above the furor. (Kerouac 197-198)

The tenor-man seizes something extraordinary in his playing, some knowledge or connection to the universe that Dean and the other spectators acknowledge enthusiastically. By using jazz as the music that Dean feels “wholly possessed by,” Kerouac hints at the primitivistic thought of Africa as “‘Edenic,’ a place of ritual intoxication” (Malcolm 101, Torgovnick 111). While that intoxication alludes to alcohol, it also signifies the altered state of mind that accompanies transcendental visions. Through the “lapsing of the self in the dance,” the jazz club represents a kind of primitive ritual that connects the individual with the universal (Torgovnick 171).

Not only does Dean lose himself in the music itself, the very atmosphere of the jazz club contributes to “a state that will transcend individualism” (Torgovnick 171). Douglas Malcolm writes that “in jazz clubs, audience and performers were not separated from one another; audience participation in the music was expected” (103). Sal’s description of the scene emphasizes the communal nature of the experience; everybody knows the tenor-man *has it* and they want him to keep it. Despite this apparent shared experience, it is Dean who the tenor-man locks on to. During the song itself “Dean was in a trance. The tenorman’s eyes were fixed straight on him” (Kerouac 198). Dean connects with the tenor-man in a way that no one else present in the club, no one else even listening to the same song and actively participating in the performance, can. By including this scene, Kerouac suggests that others recognize Dean’s significance as a primitive man with a unique connection to universal knowledge besides Sal. Instead of a subjective hero Sal tries to emulate, Dean represents a true primitive man even to those who do not know him personally.

Dean's heightened role in the jazz club implies that he occupies a special role as a transcendental figure, even in a situation that evokes specific primitive ritual. For Kerouac, Dean therefore represents a noble savage, a member of the golden race of man. According to Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, the primitive man possesses a "practical anti-intellectualism," a characteristic that Sal observes soon after meeting Dean for the first time (14). Sal notes that Dean is not unintelligent but that his "intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness" (Kerouac 7). Other figures that Sal encounters throughout the narrative, the figures he originally gravitates towards because of their madness, are rife with a haughty intellectualism. Carlo Marx, for example, has his "nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk" and Sal describes another, less explored character within the framework of the novel, as "Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist" (7). Sal settles on Dean because Dean understands the kind of knowledge he has and does not try to surpass it; he accepts himself while continuing to explore with wonder the world around him.

Not only does Kerouac connect Dean to the primitive through his anti-intellectual practical intelligence, he also refers to cultural primitivism's theory of the noble savage as the "model of human excellence" (Lovejoy and Boas 8). Sal does, in fact, describe Dean as "sprinting like a track star" when he works in the parking lot, an athleticism usually associated with the golden race of primitive men (Kerouac 6). At another point later on in the novel Dean and Sal turn to "feats of athletic prowess. Dean completely amazed me [Sal]" (154). Sal makes the point of explaining that Dean defeats him athletically despite Sal's own strong physical abilities: "Then I raced him down the road. I can do the hundred in 10:5. He passed me like the wind...nobody could go as fast as he could, and that's the truth" (154). Even though modern man may still be fairly athletically gifted, the primitive man proves "physically stronger and

healthier” (Lovejoy and Boas 239). Dean continually demonstrates not only his physical prowess, but also his great comfort in his own skin through his athleticism and by habitually opening doors “stark naked” (Kerouac 43). His physical abilities translate into a pride in his own physicality; he does not try to hide his body like modern custom dictates.

Through his sexuality Dean asserts another aspect of both his physical superiority and pride. A common association between “sexuality and irrationality” reinforces Dean as a noble savage because he displays moments of “mad genius” but also openly enjoys and seeks sex (Torgovnick 104). Like other primitivistic theories, the idea that primitives enjoy freer sex lives aligns with not only Kerouac’s descriptions of Dean, but also with the notion that primitive cultures proved less restrictive lives than modernity; it is a subsection of the “Theory of Progressive Degeneration” (Lovejoy and Boas 3). This theory in primitivism argues that primitive life was better than modern life and that modern society increasingly worsens with each new generation. Similar trains of thought have persisted in primitivistic thinking dating back as far as the Ancient Greeks. The Ancient Greek philosopher Tibullus admired primitive cultures for their “[f]reedom in love” (41). Fronto, another ancient thinker, emphasized “the free love of primitive days” (70). Even the Cynics believed that the “sexual impulse, since it is natural and universal, is not to be repressed, but on the contrary to be gratified as promptly and easily as possible” (121). Human sexuality, therefore should not be controlled, a defining feature of modernity, but instead acted upon.

Sal observes that for Dean “sex [is] the one and only holy and important thing in life” (Kerouac 2). Sex is not simply important for Dean, it is holy, a connection to something beyond the corporeal limitations of the body that modern society so tries to cover up and vilify. Sex establishes a connection between Dean and God in a way that modern man cannot achieve

because it establishes that Dean is somehow closer to God than modern man. Claiming that Dean has a close connection to God also implies that he is nearer to man's origin, closer to how man existed in a state of nature before the corruptive forces of time and subsequent deterioration ensued. According to Lovejoy and Boas, primitive societies often live in communities that share wives and childrearing and, "in [their] extreme form, sexual promiscuity" (14). In one scene, Kerouac attempts to recreate a similar kind of sexually open community; Dean asks Sal to sleep with his then partner, Marylou. Sal cannot comprehend why Dean would request that Marylou cheat on him even though Dean confesses, "he wanted to see what Marylou was like with another man" (Kerouac 131). Unable to follow through, Sal feels self-conscious and states that "[e]very time I realized he was there in the dark, listening for every sound, I couldn't do anything but laugh. It was horrible" (131). The idyllic, sexually open society that Dean envisages fails in the modern world.

Sexual freedom works both ways, however, meaning that Dean also sleeps with other women while in relationships. In another scene Dean tells Sal and Marylou to "go immediately to a hotel and wait for me to contact you in the morning as soon as I have definite arrangements made with Camille" (Kerouac 169). Definite arrangements, in this case, signify a rehabilitation of his sexual liaison with Camille while still maintaining his relationship with Marylou. Not only does Dean sleep with multiple women at the same time, he is also completely open about it. He does not try to hide his sexuality and feels no shame about his own promiscuity, a characteristic that aligns with notions of the primitive man. Kerouac asserts that modern society stifles individuality and sexuality and that the primitive man, because he exists outside of the aggressive, modern American ethos, escapes these social constrictions. Sexual freedom therefore serves as both a form of release but also as a channel to the same kind of freedom that the noble

savage experiences. Marriage “stands for the loss of freedom involved in permanent connection with a woman” (Fiedler 211). By forcing men and women into long-term monogamous relationships, binding and restrictive social conventions between one man and one woman, modernity strips man of his freedom to explore his own sexuality as nature originally intended and cuts him off from the rest of the society. Noble savages, due to their very transparency of sexuality and their connection with nature (man’s natural origins) that modernity progressively loses, “hold the key to sexual harmony and harmony with nature” (Torgovnick 169). Sexual freedom for the primitive man is not only natural physically, but also serves as a reconnection with the natural world they originated from; the Golden Age of man exists “essentially as a time of relaxation of restraints” (Lovejoy and Boas 67).

Modern man, conversely, continues to move further and further away from man’s natural state as he develops societies that hinge on corporate consumerism, de-individualization, and the repression of natural sexual urges. Sex therefore functions not only as a physical release but as an “instrument of spirituality,” one the noble savage uses regularly (Torgovnick 169). Bronislaw Malinowski, an ethnographer who studied a primitive culture in the Trobriand Islands in British New Guinea, upholds the notion that primitive peoples experiment much more openly with sex and exercise much more sexual freedom than modern societies do. He states that the

boy develops a desire to retain the fidelity and exclusive affection of the loved one, at least for a time. But this tendency is not associated so far with any idea of settling down to one exclusive relationship...A boy or girl wishes to pass through more experiences; he or she still enjoys the prospect of complete freedom. (Malinowski, *The Sexual Lives of Savage in North-Western Melanesia*, 63)

Noble savages enjoy relationships with no expectations of fidelity and the knowledge that whomever they choose to love changes constantly. This freedom to bounce from one lover to the next with no repercussions for pursuing multiple lovers at the same time implies, once again, that the primitive man “leads a happy, free, arcadian existence, devoted to amusement and the pursuit of pleasure” (64). While modern society condemns sex before marriage (a socially imposed commitment to another person), for the primitive man “intercourse out of wedlock is quite free from censure” (199).

Competing views of primitive sexuality do still prevail throughout anthropological studies. In other interpretations about the Theory of Progressive Decline, a theory that “recall[s] of a past which is better than the present,” the situation appears to have flipped (Lovejoy and Boas 23). In *In the Laws*, Plato argues for a primitive culture that “was comparatively easy, though not without labor. This was no Golden Age of irresponsibility and indolence” (163). In this view of primitivistic thinking, a form called “hard primitivism” because it maintains that the world did not simply provide for the noble savage spontaneously and that primitives still had to work to survive, rampant intercourse did not exist. Instead, the primitive man is “puritanically chaste” and a high number of sexual relationships insinuated a “licentious, horrid promiscuity” that had to be rejected (Malinowski, *Sex, Culture, and Myth*, 94, 92). For this view of primitive peoples to be in keeping with the decline of the human race through time, “[s]ex and the freedom of sex have become important subversive forces” (91). Modern culture, because it fails to adequately repress these licentious sexual urges, remains a lesser age than the primitive Golden Age. Contemporary society’s inability to remain chaste and pure represents man’s gradual declination.

This competing view, however, cannot survive within Kerouac's conception of what the noble savage is and what he represents. Kerouac praises the human body and its ability to connect with another person both physically and spiritually. Even though Dean and Sal refuse whores at the end of the novel, we only get Sal's perspective from this moment. He states that "No, we didn't want girls now," but Dean remains suspiciously, and uncharacteristically, silent on the matter (Kerouac 299). Earlier in their trip in Mexico Sal points out that "not one of us had a sexual thought" about the native girls they happen upon, but once again, Kerouac does not give us this information in the characters' dialogue but as Sal's subjective interpretation (297). By even acknowledging that they did not have sexual thoughts about these young girls, Sal draws attention to the very fact that they could have. Sal deflects, almost as though he worries about how modern society would view them if they sexualized these young girls, a worry unique to the modern man. It sounds defensive, almost as though one of them did in fact have sexual thoughts about the girls, but Sal now wishes to cover that up. Kerouac creates a scene similar to what happens as history passes; the modern figure silences the primitive and imposes strict sexual restraints upon society as a whole, condemning those that refuse to adhere. He demonstrates the negative side effects that occur when a society rejects the noble savage's sexual openness. Part four concludes with Dean abandoning Sal, a metaphorical retreat from modernity, and returns to his previous state of sexual freedom as he joins Inez in Newark where they wed. That very night though, he "jump[s] on a bus and roar[s] off again against the awful continent to San Francisco to rejoin Camille" (303). Once Dean and Sal separate, Dean can once again return to his home on the road and practice his old way of living because he distances himself from Sal's modern influence.

Kerouac includes repeated issues with a sense of home or belonging, most notably Sal's feeling of detachment from the society he feels almost commanded to call "home." Home for Dean, however, functions as a tie to the entirety of the American landscape. Sal says that "Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he was actually born on the road," meaning that he was born into a kind of movement and restlessness (recalling Mailer's notion that Hip language thrives off of energy and movement), but also into a feeling of belonging anywhere in America (Kerouac 1). Sal suggests that Dean's identity is not fixed to one place or one ethnicity, but actually encompasses all of the United States. Even though Dean's various wives repeatedly throw him out (a similarity he has with minor character and idealized minority figure Ponzio), he "know[s], [he] *know[s]* everything will be all right" (186). His profound trust in the universe stems from the fact that Dean feels at home anywhere because, for him, "the road is life" (212). Dean's constant movement also implies his nomadic nature, a trait often associated with primitive peoples. Sal, conversely, lives with his aunt, which means that despite his problems with identity as someone of mixed descent he still has some sort of anchor to a specific location. After a disastrous dinner with Remi, Sal exclaims that "there was nowhere to go but back" and leaves to return home to his aunt's house (Kerouac 77). Unable to transcend his physical ties, Sal retreats to the only place he can associate with a kind of home.

Similar cycles of adventure, collapse, and subsequent return reappear repeatedly during Sal's journeys across the United States, either with or without Dean, which lend the book a "circular structure" (Haslam 446). Kerouac includes language like "[e]verything seemed to be collapsing," "everything began to collapse," "[e]verything was falling apart" consistently throughout the novel to indicate the end of Sal's different cross-country journeys (Kerouac 56, 73, 77). This structure of a cycle continually restarting and culminating in collapse recalls yet

another theory in primitivism called chronological primitivism. Chronological primitivism, which tries to access when the “most excellent condition of human life, or the best state of the world in general, must be supposed to occur,” contains two main thought processes: 1) finite or 2) infinite (Lovejoy and Boas 1). Finitist theories hypothesize that the “history in question is assumed to be a succession of events having a beginning at some more or less determinable past” (1). Infinitist theories operate in much the opposite way – instead of time progressing from a set beginning to a set end it can continue on indefinitely creating cycles of time. Both these chronological theories can argue either the improvement of later generations (“*The Theory of Continuous Progress*”) or their decline (the “Theory of Progressive Degeneration”) (3, original emphasis).

The repetitive cycles throughout *On the Road* indicate a version of an infinitist theory, “*The Theory of World-Cycles*” (Lovejoy and Boas 4, original emphasis). This theory dictates that the “succession of changes which constitute history is conceived as an endless reiteration of essentially the same states of the world as a whole, in precisely the same order” (4-5). The cycles of adventure, collapse, and subsequent return in *On the Road* mimic the larger cycles of world history and each cycle plays out in much the same way every time: Sal sets out from his aunt’s house on an adventure, Sal’s adventure collapses and falls apart, Sal returns to his aunt’s house to await the next adventure. The locations of Sal’s various escapades may change, but the general pattern repeats consistently throughout Sal’s narrative. Kerouac therefore uses primitivism to not only shape his hero character Dean, but to also mold the very structure of the novel itself. The small-scale cycles that occur represent microcosms of the larger earth cycles that shape world history itself. Kerouac’s novel cannot conceivably cover thousands of years of

earth's history according to infinitist primitivism theories so he must create cycles that occur repeatedly throughout Sal's journeys to convey a similar sense of historical progression.

It is imperative to recognize that inspiration for Kerouac's circular nature in *On the Road* also resulted from his exposure to *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler. Spengler's book reinterprets previous primitivistic theories and combines both the finite and infinite hypotheses of earth history. *The Decline of the West*, which inspired not just Jack Kerouac but many Beat Generation writers, states that civilization is "a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming...an end, irrecoverable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again" (Spengler 24). Essentially, Spengler argues that human history culminates in civilization but that civilization is the end-point of society entirely. Although his theory may sound optimistic it actually just redefines the primitivistic idea of progressive decline. According to Spengler's theory, instead of steadily improving and creating more and more powerful civilizations until we eventually reach our zenith, the "West is not a limitless tending upwards and onwards for all time towards our present ideals, but a single phenomenon of history, strictly limited and defined as to form and duration" (30). Despite the apparent end date for human history, Spengler's theory also incorporates elements of the cyclical nature of world history in his concept of "wave cycles," a process he likens to the "age-phases of the individual man. Each [culture] has its childhood, youth, manhood, and old age" (73, 74). Civilization in this context equates with society's decrepitude in old age. The cyclical element arises in the fact that multiple cultures exist in different phases of their wave-cycles at the same time throughout the world – as one civilization wanes another waxes in a natural rhythm.

Sal and Dean's interaction therefore symbolizes the meeting of two figures from different phases in history. Dean, as a representative from the primitive era in the world cycles, exists later

into the future than his prescribed time otherwise he would not be able to interact with Sal, who represents man further along in the cycle. In terms of Greek philosophy, Dean and Sal each represent two different ages – “that of Cronus (Saturn) and that of Zeus, the former being that of fortunate primitive man, the latter that of unfortunate ‘modern’ man” (Lovejoy and Boas 43). Kerouac’s portrayal of Dean suggests that he believes that the primitive man is humanity’s golden race of people, that the noble savage exists earlier on in the cycle of degeneration when the “world is at its best” (79). According to Greek philosophy regarding humanity’s origins, a world cycle begins with the Golden Age, a time when humans were happier and healthier and “grows progressively worse until the cycle reaches its term” (79). To demonstrate this in his novel, Kerouac compresses the world cycle to have it repeat throughout, but by doing so he also forces different historical ages to coexist. Due to Dean’s role as Kerouac’s noble savage, he still understands the primitive Golden Age to which he belongs, but his fellow travellers do not. The madman, because of his ability to transcend society in visions but his inability to fully comprehend or translate those visions, represents a kind of in-between generation that fills the gap between Dean, as the primitive man, and Sal, as the modern man.

### **Giving Language to the Primitive: Paradoxes of Articulation**

Dean, unlike Sal and the mad figures in-between the primitive and the modern, occupies a space outside of time, a space that is historically past but is still his reality. He tries to explain his own understanding of time to Sal on multiple occasions, claiming that “now is the time and *we all know time!*” but his concept of time is fundamentally different than Sal’s (Kerouac 114, original emphasis). Sal views “Dean’s ability...to transcend the linear necessities of time” as indicative of Dean “rising to a higher state” (Haslam 450). Living outside of time, Dean, like the

madman isolated from society (although still trapped in temporal progression), gives Dean a unique understanding of it, the ability to “escape from time,” and to “blur the specificity of the past, to confuse the line between past and present (or future) as distinct periods” (Haslam 456, Rainbow 250). By placing the noble savage figure in the modern present, Kerouac creates an “illusion of time and sense in which the primitive is both eternally past and eternally present” (Torgovnick 186).

Dean, however, never actually explains what he means when he claims that he knows time by disconcertingly using time as the excuse itself: “we both understand that I couldn’t have time to explain why I know and you know God exists” (Kerouac 120). Examining Spengler’s statement that “[f]or the primitive man time can have no meaning. All of us are conscious as being ‘aware’ of space only, and not of time. Time is a discovery which is only made by thinking” can help explain this apparent paradox (Spengler 77, original emphasis). Remembering Sal’s observation that although Dean is intelligent he is blessed without intellectualism, time would only be a problem for an intellectual, someone like Sal who does want to become an author who can survive off of his writing and therefore his thinking. Dean may know time, but only in so much as he is aware of himself as he occupies different spatial locations. He does not partake in the same type of progression through time that Sal does, which is why he constantly reiterates that “we know time” and then refuses to expand on what exactly that means because he will “never have TIME to tell you” (Kerouac 120, 305, original emphasis).

Kerouac includes other subtle hints that indicate Dean’s existence outside the forward march of time: Dean’s youth. Sal characterizes Dean as “simply a youth tremendously excited with life” (Kerouac 4). The association between the primitive and the youthful is not unique to Kerouac. Art historians and collectors often study primitive art “in relation to children’s art” and

the longstanding traditional line of thought that “children represent man’s primitive condition” continues to persist well after the end of colonialism and into modernity (Torgovnick 94, Lovejoy and Boas 344). Conflating the primitive with the childish relies on theories of chronological primitivism. In Greek philosophy and mythology, Gods first created the golden race of humans “in the condition in which [they were] intended to remain” (Lovejoy and Boas 193). Dean therefore represents man in his original and youngest state in terms of human history. As man moves away from that starting point and further into world history, human generations become increasingly older (because they are moving away from the original human ancestor – the primitive) and increasingly more corrupt. Although Dean cons for a living, Sal maintains Dean’s purity while also emphasizing his own modern man’s immorality by saying that Dean “only conn[ed] because he wanted so much to live and get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him” (Kerouac 4). He describes Dean’s cons not as premeditated crimes but as a way to connect with those around him; his motives themselves are pure even if his actions follow modern man’s immorality.

Modernity’s corruption sets them apart from the primitive man and creates a gap that modern man wishes to close. Following the primitivistic pattern of progressive degeneration, Kerouac demonstrates that the modern man is incapable of reconnecting with the lost originary knowledge that Dean possesses. Using Dean as a representation of the primitive man and a model for emulation, Sal desperately seeks escape from the modern society, a “pernicious system [that] proved all encompassing,” that he currently inhabits (Mettler 174). Kerouac continually portrays Dean as a youth, which not only references the very Beat movement that is “animated by youthful, nonconforming impulses” Kerouac himself would spearhead, but also further develops Dean as a noble savage figure (Tytell 50). He associates Dean’s ability to transcend

society, the “possibility of transcendent knowledge – beyond these specifics of time and place,” with an innocence found only in children (Haslam 458). Seeing the pure and innocent in the child constantly emerges in all genres of literature and “this ‘boyish’ theme recurs with especial regularity in American fiction” (Fieldler 37). Equating childhood with innocence and especially substituting childhood with earlier stages of humanity’s development, however, also occurs frequently in supposedly scientific anthropological studies as well. As early as the Ancient Greeks, philosophers posited that “certain implications of the term [nature] tended to suggest that the ‘natural,’ and therefore the normal, could best be observed in the child” (Lovejoy and Boas 254). Due to their young age, children remain free from society’s corruption and closer to the natural world. Proximity to the natural world, or a “natural” way of life suggests that children are somehow closer to humanity’s ancestors, the golden race, than adults and older members of the community. By using the child as an example, philosophers hypothesized that “the same was true of the race” itself and that the “happy times are ruled by a youth” (254, 90). Dean’s age and consequently his youth appear unchanging. Even after a year apart, Sal still describes Dean as a “weary young fellow” (Kerouac 109). Portraying Dean as a noble savage and reminding the reader of his youth throughout the novel insinuates that Dean’s youth makes him inherently purer, inherently closer to the Golden Age of human history than Sal and the rest of modernity.

The primitive, however, occupy a strange temporal space; they seem to exist both as a youthful generation, a symbol of man’s earliest ancestors, but also as a symbol of great age or “weariness” simply because they precede all subsequent generations of man. As Lovejoy and Boas explain, “primitivism of the combined chronological and cultural type has thus had characteristic moods both of age and youth” (8). Considering Dean’s seemingly eternal youth and his profound transcendental knowledge, Kerouac creates a character that represents an old

soul within a young body. Dean, once again, steps across temporal boundaries and paradoxically exists in both modern times as an ancestor and as a picture of the childish innocence modernity associates with the noble savage.

Symbols of primitive innocence and purity exist elsewhere in the novel beyond Dean's youth. Sal finds himself attracted to and romantically involved with two women with small children. First, during his love affair with Terry, Sal worries about her young son:

That night Terry and I went to bed in the sweet night air beneath our dewy tent. I was just getting ready to go to sleep when she said, "You want to love me now?"

I said, "What about Johnny?"

"He don't mind. He's asleep." But Johnny wasn't asleep and he said nothing. (Kerouac 95)

Sal instantly fears Johnny discovering the sexual nature of his relationship with his mother; he does not want to corrupt Johnny's childhood innocence in any way. Yet, he still has sex with Terry, an indication that although Sal expresses certain qualms about Johnny witnessing sex at such a young age he still gives into modernity's corruptive powers. After Terry, Sal begins a new relationship with a young woman named Lucille, who also has a very young child. Sal admits, "I was willing to marry her and take her baby daughter and all if she divorced the husband" (125). Sal again finds himself attracted to a woman with a child, to the innocence so often associated with those precious young years. Unfortunately, even this example demonstrates modernity's corruption. Sal's relationship defies strict morality; it's an affair, an illicit relationship that breaks society's moral codes, but also something that seems absolutely normal to Sal. In fact, Sal blames his and Lucille's eventual breakup on not having "enough money to get a divorce," not

on the fact that their relationship damages a moral vow (125). By avoiding marriage, Sal once again resists entering into a social convention that could potentially restrict his personal freedom, but his relationship in general demonstrates modernity's ethical shortcomings.

In addition to his attraction to women with children, both symbols of the beginning of a new generation and of the youthful purity that he so desperately seeks, Sal points out youth throughout *On the Road*, with special regard to youth connected with minority cultures. In the same iconic scene in which Sal wishes he were an African American, he notices a few African American children who "sat like sages in ancient rocking chairs" (Kerouac 180). Kerouac once again mixes both youth and age, and doing so with respect to children from a racial minority draws a connection to the same kind of childhood innocence that primitive peoples possess. These "Little children" seem to have some understanding about humanity, some deep ancestral knowledge, similar to that that Dean displays during his transcendental visions (180). They serve as present day reminders of man in his primitive state, the condition closest to original human nature.

Sal notices youth most prominently in Mexico though. Mexico "seems quite deliberately innocent" in Kerouac's portrayal (Tytell 62). Sal's perception and subsequent description of Mexico is that of an underdeveloped country, or a kind of precursor to America – a less modern brother to the United States. As he, Dean, and their friend Stan, arrive in San Antonio, almost to the American-Mexican border, they feel that they are "almost out of America and yet definitely in it and in the middle of where it's maddest" (Kerouac 271). Madness, as previously stated with the figure of the "mad genius," indicates a loosening of social restraints or at least an attempt to move beyond those constrictions. The closer they get to the edge of America and the beginning of a new culture, the more pronounced madness becomes until finally they reach "the magic land

at the end of the road” (276). For Kerouac, Mexico represents a land lost in time and therefore a place to reconnect with the primitive, or what he refers to as the fellahin.

As symbols of the primitive man, the fellahin peoples “would more likely locate themselves in the soul because of their childishness,” meaning that like Dean, the individuals Sal and Dean encounter in Mexico possess a profound connection to the earth and its history (Stiles 86). Sal, upon seeing Dean’s excitement over the native cultures they find, explains that Dean “had found people like himself” (Kerouac 279). Ostracized and often rejected outright in the modern civilization of the United States, Dean finds, if not exactly noble savages like himself, cultures closer at least to his own primitive ancestry than those inhabiting America. High in the mountains, Dean and Sal come across a native culture: “a nation in themselves, mountain Indians, shut off from everything else but the Pan-American Highway” (296). These natives, almost entirely cut off from modern society, represent Spengler’s idea that the “*peasant is eternal man, independent of all culture*” (245, original emphasis). Kerouac describes these cultural and ethnic Others in much the same way he portrays the “mad” characters and the American minorities; they exist outside of the consumer and cultural machine present in the United States. Due to their isolation, the fellahin people, a people more closely related to the primitive origins that Dean represents, occupy a “more real and vital space beyond the confines” of the stifling American ethos (Holton 268). Sal also expresses “a kind of nostalgia for the vanishing American ‘real’ which increasingly, he feels, can only be located in the fellahin” (275). The innocence and spiritual vitality that Sal admires arises from their perceived youth in terms of cultural development. When describing a few fellahin girls trying to sell them crystals, Sal says their eyes “were like the eyes of the Virgin Mary when she was a child” (Kerouac 297). Just as he does with other marginalized populations, Sal equates distance from modernity as a

childlike innocence and connection with the world, an understanding that he himself unfortunately lacks.

His attachment to Dean therefore serves as an attempted reconnection with the primitive. During his first meeting with Dean, Sal characterizes him as “a sideburned hero of the snowy west,” a figure to look up to and emulate, but also a form of salvation (Kerouac 2). Despite the fact that Dean asks Sal to teach him writing, on his various adventures Sal actually “began to learn from him” and looks to Dean as his “closest link to the soul” (Kerouac 4, Stiles 85). Kerouac describes Dean as a hero multiple times throughout *On the Road*, emphasizing Dean’s role as a “spiritual/literary muse” (Amundsen 35). Sal’s search for identity and belonging throughout the novel serves as a quest for “transcendental signification in his life,” a quest that he hopes Dean can lead him on and eventually show him the way to transcendence (Malcolm 102). Sal “locates the ‘real’ in the fellahin” because they are the living remnants of the Golden Age and therefore the closest figures to humanity’s pure origins (Holton 272).

The location of these origins lies to the West for Sal. Kerouac’s strategic use of the West as the place that continually calls to Sal mirrors ancient Greek thought that the Islands of the Blest lay “to the West” (Lovejoy and Boas 291). In his search for transcendence and a return to his origins, Sal seeks out places where he believes “the life of the Golden Age continued to be lived” (290). Journeying west represents a symbolic and spiritual return to the primitive, one that Sal imagines takes him “beyond the glittering street” of his modern world, into “the darkness” that follows the street, and finally past the darkness into the West (Kerouac 59). The “Myth of the West – the notion of the virgin land,” attracts Sal because it functions as a “metaphor of finding a home,” a common structure used throughout texts concerning primitivism (Skinazi 93, Torgovnick 185). The yearning for the west extends throughout literary history as the idea of an

“absolute West” and serves as a “place of refuge beyond the seas, to which the hero retreats to await rebirth” (Fiedler 36). In constantly looking westward for new life, Sal hopes to encounter not only a kind of home, but also a renewed spiritual life. By finding the closest physical link to Dean’s homeland, Sal aspires for rebirth into the same kind of noble savage figure as Dean.

Simply going West does not necessarily bring Sal any closer to his goals of transcendence though. While the other socially marginalized groups he attempts to appropriate do represent out-groups, people that have been neglected from modern society, Sal requires a more definite connection to the primitive self – the noble savage. Trying to connect with Dean, Sal imagines their own relationship growing so close that they resemble brothers, individuals who share the same genetic makeup. Immediately Sal intertwines himself with Dean by saying “somehow in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother” (Kerouac 7). Even later on in the narrative when Sal is “mad and disgusted with Dean,” he still adopts him and confirms for others that “yes, he’s my brother” (227). Their fraternity implies that they share some sort of familial bond, a genetic connection that cannot be rewritten. For Sal, this bond signifies the type of belonging that he has searched his whole life for as well as a bond that cannot be broken, one that is not superficial; they are connected by something larger than race or culture or mental state – blood. The fact that neither of them has a father anymore, that they are orphans together only enhances their bond. They each lack that paternal connection, meaning that their brotherhood can exist without a shared father and they come to adopt each other. By describing them as long-lost brothers, Kerouac “introduces an element of choice and retracing of genealogical connection” (Fischer 214). Without a firm father figure in either of their lives, they are free to decide their own familial bonds, a decision that Sal believes will finally allow him to belong in a kind of makeshift family, one that reciprocates that decision.

### Studying the Noble Savage

Sal's makeshift family remains arbitrary and although he constantly seeks outsider groups, he struggles to actually belong to one. Fiedler explains that "the typical male protagonist of [American] fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid 'civilization'" (26). Running from civilization, the American society that rejects him time and time again, Sal fails to join the racially marginalized even though he "expresses the desire for some sort of racial transformation" (Keomany 240). Sleeping with Terry represents Sal's efforts to join the ethnically Other because he believes that "through his sexual, physical relationship with her [he] is brought closer to racial others" (240). Unfortunately, racial identity cannot transfer through a physical relationship and when Sal finally meets Terry's family "[h]er two sisters giggled at [him]," indicating that Sal is still an outsider from this minority group (Kerouac 99).

Failing to achieve a racial transformation, Sal can feel the "pull of [his] old life calling [him] back" (Kerouac 98). As previously mentioned, Sal then turns to the figure of the "mad genius," but even here Sal cannot fully participate because he is not actually insane. Remi's insistence on the Banana King's significance baffles Sal and he even admits that he "was completely bored" (72). Both Remi and Carlo Marx demonstrate that in spite of Sal's attempts to join the ranks of the "mad" he simply exists outside of even this social out-group; there is something about the madman's way of thinking that Sal does not understand much like he jokingly misinterprets (due to his lack of comprehension) mañana, a symbol of ethnic belonging. In the oft-quoted passage at the beginning of the novel, Sal

shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me,  
because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live,

mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles, exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!” (5)

Crucially, Sal shambles after the mad figures he admires, but he does not become one.

In an effort to understand the madman’s and the noble savage’s transcendence, Sal undergoes forms of self-induced madness through the use of drug and alcohol use, and even his escapist road trips. For Sal, “any means, including drugs, are good to the extent that they help the individual destroy his human reason and ego” (Beebe 143). In one instance with Marylou, Sal recounts a vision to her about the “big snake of the world that was coiled in the earth like a worm in an apple and would someday nudge up a hill to be thereafter known as Snake Hill and fold out upon the plain a hundred miles long and devouring as it went along” (Kerouac 171). Sal immediately undermines his own vision after he tells Marylou about it, admitting he “was out of [his] mind with hunger and bitterness” (172). In an unnatural mental state, Sal’s vision falls short. Later on in the narrative, Sal believes he “had finally found the castle where the great snake of the world was about to rise up” and even though this utterance seems reminiscent of some of Dean’s visions, Sal precludes the vision by confessing, “[w]e were fumingly drunk” (264). Sal therefore reaches these moments of “transcendence” indirectly through self-imposed mediums like drugs and alcohol. He concedes that his “madness would lead nowhere. I didn’t know what was happening to me, and I suddenly realized it was only the tea we were smoking” (128). His madness does not arise naturally and instead relies on “the madness they put in [him]” and not his own inherent ability to escape time (125). Unlike Dean’s ability to access fundamental truths about humanity’s origins on his own, Sal relies on stimulating substances

“with an inevitable impact on consciousness and perspective” to activate a kind of transcendence (Tytell 52). This transcendence, unfortunately, proves flawed and unsustainable.

Coupled with Sal’s mistrust of his own visions, visions that arise from manufactured self-induced bouts of madness, he also cannot comprehend Dean’s. During the scene in which Dean expresses his own feelings of belonging in America, Sal tells the reader, “[t]here was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant to say was somehow made pure and clear” (Kerouac 121). Although he recognizes that what Dean attempts to explain to him is important, he cannot understand what exactly that is. In an effort to discover Dean’s particular brand of transcendence, Sal follows after him like he does the mad figures. However, because of Dean’s privileged position as a noble savage, someone who can “be regarded as solely in ‘accordance with nature,’ and therefore as alone in keeping with an objective standard of truth and morals” and in whom “the really universal elements in human nature are to be seen in their simplicity and purity,” Sal chooses to follow Dean more closely than other mad figures throughout the novel (Lovejoy and Boas 112). Sal therefore takes up the role of a modern ethnographer studying the primitive man. Kerouac’s language consistently places Sal outside of Dean in an almost scientific sense. The “underplaying of action is made up for by an overplaying of feeling,” signifying that Kerouac is much more interested in studying Dean as a primitive figure and his connection to man’s original nature than crafting a purely plot-driven novel (Fiedler 108).

Dean, however, remains an enigma throughout *On the Road*, partially because Sal cannot comprehend his originary knowledge and partially because Kerouac shapes his character that way. As Gérard Genette states, “narrative can furnish the reader with more or fewer details, and in a more or less direct way, and can thus seem...to keep at a greater or lesser *distance* from what it tells” (162, original emphasis). Kerouac’s choice to tell this story from Sal’s perspective,

an outsider looking in, creates distance between both Dean and Sal and what Dean knows and what Sal wants to know. Kerouac effectively demonstrates Sal's position on the outside in the scene where Dean enters a trance in the jazz club. In this scene, Dean and the tenor-man connect on an incredibly profound level, but the rest of the audience also actively participates in the musical display. Sal, however, observes. When he mentions that "[t]hey were all urging that tenorman to hold it and keep it," he deliberately uses *they* instead of *we* (Kerouac 198). Sal's language excludes himself. The narration style, which places Sal on the outside and then uses his perspective to try and uncover universal human truths from Dean, also "permits an author to leave the feelings of the other [character] almost completely in shadow, and thus to construct, at little cost, a mysterious and ambiguous personality" (Gennette 201). Kerouac therefore depicts Dean not only as an enigmatic primitive person that Sal must try and figure out, but shrouds Dean in mystery for the reader as well; we explore Dean's role as the noble savage through Sal's adventures with him. Sal acts as our guide to discovering Dean and hopefully the secret to returning to the "idyllic picture of an earlier and simpler society" (Lovejoy and Boas 155).

To truly understand Dean, Sal must observe him. But because he cannot fully infiltrate Dean's way of thinking, Sal sets out to study it, much as an ethnographer would. The ethnographer seeks the outsiders because those are the groups that society has thus far neglected to examine and because these seemingly lost groups of people can be construed as "living replicas of the character and life of the civilized man's ancestors" (Lovejoy and Boas 9). By introducing multiple outsider groups in *On the Road*, Kerouac wants to make "the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian" (Clifford 2). In other words, he wants to flip modern society by making the familiar to the modern man unfamiliar thereby demonstrating the superiority of the primitive world and how far modernity has fallen. Sal's role in the novel, due to his own

proximity to Dean, reflects that of a participant-observer ethnographer; he steps into primitive society aiming to study it from the inside.

The participant-observer, however, exists in a strange liminal state in-between belonging to the group and remaining fixedly outside of it. Studying Dean using participant-observation “presuppose[s] a standpoint outside – looking at, objectifying, or somewhat closer, ‘reading,’ a given reality” (Clifford 11). It also requires a “standpoint from which to see without being seen,” a position that requires a simultaneous closeness and separateness to the subject they study (12). Sal admits moments of this close-distance throughout the narrative, constantly claiming that “I didn’t want to interfere, I just wanted to follow,” but also that Dean “tried all in his power to tell me what he was knowing, and they envied that about me, my position at his side, defending him and drinking him in” (Kerouac 132, 195). On another one of his adventures with Dean, Sal says that he “only went along for the ride, and to see what else Dean was going to do” (129). To properly study Dean, Sal must remain close enough to observe him, but far enough away so as not to interfere. He “often sits in silence and simply listens, without taking part in the discourse. Nearly invisible, he can stay on the edge of a group” and absorb his surroundings without interfering (Skinazi 98). He desperately wants to understand Dean’s primitive “‘IT,’ [the] ecstasy,...the promise of being able to reduce time and space to smaller and smaller increments until they disappear altogether,” so he follows Dean, studying, observing, trying to assimilate into Dean’s way of life as a noble savage without disrupting it (Dardess 203, original emphasis).

Writing for Sal, and for the ethnographer in general, represents a crucial way to try and understand the culture they study. According to Clifford, “writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists do both in the field and thereafter” (2). Kerouac’s decision to make Sal a writer therefore reflects a conscious decision to draw attention to language and the crafting of a text.

Sal's attraction to Dean as a redemptive figure "wasn't only because [he is] a writer and needed new experience," but because he wants to learn from Dean, to watch him (Kerouac 7). Writing therefore serves as an attempt to exhume and preserve a "largely...oral culture" (Fischer 220). A significant similarity between ethnographic studies and Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose is that they both remain unedited. The ethnographer cannot edit their work without compromising their initial observations. Kerouac's guidelines for Spontaneous Prose specifically call for "*no revisions*" ("Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" 744). Having Sal tell the story from his own point of view, however, silences the primitive and "[v]oiceless, it lets us speak for it" (Torgovnick 9). Dean requests that Sal teach him how to write, but Sal conveniently never does so leaving Dean without a way to communicate his own experience. Even though Sal includes supposed dialogue with Dean, he still mediates it through his own voice. As James Clifford states, "[t]he writer's 'voice' pervades and situates the analysis," meaning Sal cannot possibly remain objective in his descriptions of Dean (12). Instead the author once again "renders the foreign familiar and gives meaning to the meaningless. He decodes the message. He interprets" (Crapanzano 51). Sal wishes to illuminate the significance of the noble savage for the modern society that moved away from him, but does so in a way that effectively eliminates the noble savages' personal descriptions of their experiences.

### **Trapped in Different Ages**

Attempting to become like Dean and to escape his own modern times, Sal uses his ethnographic studies about Dean as the noble savage to try and return to the Golden Age. Unfortunately, his efforts prove unsuccessful. Dean, as Kerouac describes him, appears forever youthful yet Sal continues to age, something that Dean himself points out. Early on in the novel,

Sal says that he is a “young writer,” but we only hear Sal say this about himself, casting doubt upon the accuracy of the statement (Kerouac 8). When Dean mentions, “you’re getting a little older now,” he disrupts Sal’s perception of himself and voices Sal’s own concerns: that he ages while Dean remains young and healthy (213). He cannot become a noble savage like Dean for reasons beyond his advancing age; he also cannot comprehend his own visions on the few occasions he does have them and even then they “are always falling apart” (Haslam 456). After Marylou and Dean abandon Sal in San Francisco, Sal steps across time and experiences what resembles a true transcendental moment:

And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiances shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven. (Kerouac 173)

What Sal imagines is a return to origins, a retreat through time until he reaches the beginning of man and is reborn as a noble savage himself. His vision consumes him though and Sal loses himself in the food he smells around him (the ahistorical present moment). He falls into the vision entirely, losing his bearing on a sense of time, and cannot come back to reality.

By including ellipses at the end of this vision, Kerouac insinuates that Sal would have remained lost and ungrounded had Dean not come back and “finally decided [Sal] was worth saving” (Kerouac 175). Even though Sal does experience some kind of transcendental moment

on his own, he cannot control it with the same precision that Dean can and loses his bearing on reality. Essentially, Sal still needs Dean to guide him. Unlike Stiles who argues that the freedom Sal experiences “is transitory” or that “he has the ability to transcend that identity [his modern identity] and return to bliss,” Sal’s transcendent moment would have completely destroyed him had Dean not secured him once again in reality (Stiles 82). Sal would have remained trapped in his vision, stuck outside of time and reality, unable to return to either the past that he wishes to reach or the present that he knows.

Kerouac depicts the devastating consequences of when Dean leaves Sal to navigate a transcendental moment for himself when they venture down to Mexico. Sal has another vision where he steps across time and into what he considers the same kind of transcendence that Dean as a noble savage possesses:

Nothing stopped; the streets were alive all night...This was the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city that we knew we would find at the end of the road. Dean walked through with his arms hanging zombie-like at his sides, his mouth open, his eyes gleaming, and conducted a ragged and holy tour that lasted till dawn in a field with a boy in a straw hat who laughed and chatted with us and wanted to play catch, for nothing ever ended. Then I got fever and became delirious and unconscious. Dysentery. (Kerouac 301)

In his vision, Sal imagines time stretching on indefinitely and associates himself with youth, with the beginning of humanity in its purest form. But, of course, the vision ends. Sal’s greatest attempt to return to the primitive is also his greatest fall. Whereas during his earlier vision he simply would have mentally floated off, he actually gets physically sick after his episode in Mexico and Dean has to check him into the hospital. Even though Dean also undergoes a

transcendental moment during this scene, he can pull himself free and recognizes that he must “get back to [his] life” (301). Attempting to regress through time not only proves impossible for Sal who returns every time to his same state as a modern man, it also appears dangerous. Despite his claim that he is “always ready to follow Dean,” Sal also realizes that “[n]ow it was too late,” that he cannot return to the childish innocence he imagines the noble savage possessing (262, 180). Just as Spengler argues that “no *one* art of any greatness have ever been ‘reborn,’” Sal cannot regress back to the primitive time, he cannot be reborn (116, original emphasis). Once Sal finally realizes that his ethnographic study of Dean can never return him to the same primitive state in world history, he begins to return to modernity and accept his role as a modern man.

After Sal’s sickness, Dean leaves him in Mexico, a sign that Sal and Dean begin to separate more permanently. In realizing that time cannot regress but can instead only march forward, Sal simultaneously understands that he cannot actually learn what he wants to from Dean. Although Sal feels “strange and lost in a far-away, disgusting place” in the modern world at the onset of the novel, he slowly progresses towards a form of belonging near *On the Road*’s conclusion (Kerouac 83). He moves from feeling isolated and alienated within modern society to accepting his role in the world cycle by recognizing his inability to assume the role of Other. Once again, Beebe’s concept of the artist-novel accurately predicts this very return to society by claiming that even though “the artist-hero claims individuality in that he is different from the majority of men, his quest for his true self usually ends in the discovery that his is very much like other artists” (6). A crucial example in which Sal recognizes his own fate appears in the contrast between Dean and Sal’s driving. Whereas Dean drives at “110 miles an hour and never hesitate[s],” Sal realizes too late that another “driver [is] on the wrong side of the road and didn’t know it. [Sal] swerve[s] at thirty into the mud” (Kerouac 237, 159). Even though Dean takes

greater risks while driving, Sal's cautious attempts still result in getting stuck in mud. Something stops him for trusting in the road in the same way Dean does – his own recognition of mortality. While Dean drives incredibly fast Sal cannot help but remember “that a famous bop clarinetist had died in an Illinois car-crash recently, probably on a day like this” (237). Instead of transforming or regressing into an everlasting and youthful noble savage like he initially hopes he will, Sal must confront the possibility of his own death. This confrontation signifies that Sal can never attain the kind of originary knowledge about humanity that Dean possesses; Sal can only study him and try to carry on what little he learns into his modern world.

Sal's return to the modern, however, ultimately isolates Dean and traps him in the primitive world he inhabits. Although he tries to assimilate to the modern world by returning to his “most constant, most embittered, and best-knowing wife Camille,” Dean's last meeting with Sal is “under sad and strange circumstances” (Kerouac 306). Sal rushes off to attend a Duke Ellington jazz concert at the Metropolitan Opera when he runs into Dean. While jazz at the onset of the novel represents a connection to the primitive, by the end Kerouac transforms it into something mainstream and modern. It no longer takes place in underground clubs where the audience can actively participate but instead at the Metropolitan Opera, a setting that distances the audience from the musician and the performer from the type of environment that allows for spontaneous experimentation. At the Metropolitan Opera people pay to see the performance thereby implementing certain social restraints upon the artist's ability to improvise and create in the moment; the audience expects the musician to uphold a certain quality of music.

Sal is on his way to one such performance but Dean stands “outside the widows [of the Cadillac] with his bag” (Kerouac 306). Kerouac deliberately places Sal inside a symbol of modernity, a Cadillac, and not even simply modernity, but “the picture of conformist, stable

1950s America” (Skinazi 97). Dean, on the other hand, stands firmly outside of that world thereby creating a stark dichotomy between Sal and Dean, the modern and the primitive. He literally looks in through the windows of the car that separate him and Sal but cannot cross the threshold. Asking Sal if he “can ride to Fortieth Street with [him],” Dean essentially asks to be let inside the modern world, to abandon his status as a noble savage and join Sal on the forward march of time through the world cycles (Kerouac 306). Unfortunately “Dean couldn’t ride uptown with us and the only thing [Sal] could do was sit in the back of the Cadillac and wave at him” because accepting Dean into the modern would vacate the role of the Other once again creating the need for an outsider to push against (306). Sal’s last encounter with Dean ends with him driving away in a symbol of the modern from his vision of the noble savage who “walked off alone” (306). Kerouac abandons Dean at the end of the novel, trapping him in the primitive past that Western society builds around the notion of noble savage, but upholding the figure of the Other he needs to maintain his newfound identity.

Western depictions the primitive are inherently one-sided, meaning that Dean had to disappear from the story at the end because the story is ultimately not about Dean as the noble savage, but about how “ethnography encounters other in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other” (Clifford 23). Kerouac’s novel that begins as a search for self therefore concludes once again as a search for “a sense of self and a community” (Fischer 197). Just as Sal turns to various minority groups throughout the novel, “seeking in the other clarification for processes in the self,” he also uses Dean as a way to resolve his own belonging within the greater American culture (Fischer 199). Once he reconciles his place within that society he no longer needs to associate himself with the Other. Dean’s function in the novel no longer relates to Sal’s ultimate goals, proving that “the primitive can – has been, will be (?) – whatever Euro-Americans want it

to be” (Torgovnick 9). Because for “Euro-Americas, then, to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other,” the primitive cultures studied are always seen through a distinctly Western lens (Torgovnick 11). When Sal reminisces about Dean at the conclusion of the novel he says, “nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty” (Kerouac 307). Yet Dean never shows any signs of visible aging throughout the narrative meaning that Sal’s conclusion that the only constant in life is growing old and inevitably death references himself and not Dean thereby misrepresenting Dean as the noble savage entirely. Additionally, even though Dean’s youth marks him as a noble savage, it also insinuates that his development has “been arrested at some very early stage...and no hope of its reversal can be entertained” (Lovejoy and Boas 18). Similarly to how Sal wishes to regress but fails, Dean too cannot advance past his primitive state.

Kerouac firmly traps Dean in past, not just through Sal’s return to modernity and his misrecognition of Dean’s reality as the noble savage, but by also switching to present tense in the final paragraph. Although both “Sal and Dean go their separate ways,” the use of the present tense at the end signifies a more permanent detachment (Dardess 202). Just as they never found Old Dean Moriarty, Dean’s homeless and nomadic father, so too does Sal’s Dean slip away into memory. Sal, on the other hand, continues on in the modern world. Kerouac forces Dean into a primitive role and then refuses to let him advance, keeping him in the past, a past that Sal shapes, even within the narrative itself. The fact that Kerouac only gives the reader Dean through Sal’s Western lens makes Dean “unable to escape [his] subordinate states as [a] symbol, inspiration, and literary device” (Reynolds 168). Sal’s adventures with Dean “are shown to have, if not order and meaning, then at least significance” because “the search for coherence is grounded in a

connection to the past” (Crapanzano 54, Fischer 196). Sal uses Dean to rebuild his lost connection to the past then discards him, once again demonstrating that Western society builds the primitive into whatever it most needs at a particular time. Dean, tragically, remains trapped within the past and in a representation of himself mediated and controlled by the modern man.

Western society uses the Other, not to create a well-rounded picture of humanity as a whole including its different outsider groups, but to define itself against these Others. Just as the true focus of many of the primitivistic studies is on how these minority groups are different from the mainstream American society, *On the Road* demonstrates that the modern American man cannot define himself without defining himself against another group. This dissociative relationship damages not only the society as a whole as it relies on minority groups to uphold its own sense of self but also damages the minority groups themselves. Mainstream American society creates an unbreakable cycle of racism and exclusion in order to maintain its own identity. Kerouac demonstrates that the cycle goes beyond racism, however. The pernicious system that Kerouac depicts in *On the Road* needs to marginalize all cultures that do not conform. Any individual who does not adhere to the bourgeois way of thinking immediately marks himself as Other and therefore as something to be pushed against in order to maintain to prevailing status quo. Had Dean been able to cross the threshold and join modernity the cycle may have been broken; an Other may have finally bridged the gap between the mainstream and the marginalized and prompted a revolution in how Americans define themselves.

This way of imagining an alternate ending to the novel proves unrealistically optimistic. Unfortunately, even if Dean had been able to join modernity nothing may have changed. Instead, he may have crossed over and assimilated into the modern thought pattern that demands dichotomy. Dean would have lost his status as the primitive man thereby losing the aspect of his

identity that originally attracted Sal to him but also the facet of his identity that isolated him in the first place. In assimilating, Dean would have jumped from his status as Other to one of bourgeois, a figure that relies on the Other in order to clarify their own identity. But Kerouac's novel does not end with Dean getting in the Cadillac. Sal abandons him on the side of the road still very much in his role as noble savage. Dean's abandonment reinforces the social cycle that Kerouac creates throughout the novel; a loss of identity spurs a journey of rediscovery, the key point here being the re of *rediscovery*. The original character, in this case, Sal, finds himself again by finding what he is not. The process of locating identity does not occur as the affirmation *I am*, but as the assertion *I am not*. By leaving Dean, yet still mentioning him at the end as a figure Sal continues to think about signifies that Sal continues to affirm his reestablished identity that depends on the contrast between what he is and what he is not. Western society demands that primitives' stories be mediated through a Western lens in order to uphold the dissociate relationship it thrives on. Kerouac, by choosing to leave Dean in the same role he begins the novel in, demonstrates that nothing for the marginalized has changed, but that modern man has used the Other to establish a sense of self. Sal cannot transcend race; he cannot deconstruct the social conventions he fights at the beginning of the novel because he belongs both in and outside of those social conventions. By not being able to fully leave the modern world behind, Sal cannot adequately define himself against the Other of modernity because he still exists in that Other himself. In order for Sal to finally come to terms with his own identity, he must leave Dean tragically trapped in his marginalized role as the primitive man. Unable to fully leave his modern role behind because he cannot regress through time and join Dean as a noble savage, Sal must use Dean as the Other to push against to maintain a stable sense of self.

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