

*What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road.*  
Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton, Editors.  
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Is it the end of the road for criticism of *On the Road*?

Yes, one might say, based on the recent missed opportunity to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1957 publication of the novel.

True, we now have a published version of the 1951 “scroll” typescript (Viking 2007)—a fascinating text, without a doubt, but insufficiently edited. Its companion volume, John Leland’s *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road* (Viking 2007), doesn’t move *Road* scholarship forward.

*What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, edited by Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton, is intended to remedy some of these deficiencies, as Holladay claims in the volume’s preface: At the time of Kerouac’s death “the vocabulary and theoretical structures didn’t yet exist to describe and probe all of what he was doing in *On the Road*,” . . . but “[f]rom our current vantage point, we are able to discuss his 1957 breakthrough in ways that were not available to earlier generations” (xiii).

Kerouac scholarship craves such a turn. Unfortunately, *What's Your Road, Man?* comes up short. And it does so for several reasons. The first is the editorial misconception regarding the availability of critical tools. Granted, in 1969, the date of Kerouac’s death, scholars did not have access to the manuscripts necessary to construct a thorough composition history of *Road* – but that is an intellectual property rights issue, not one of critical methodology. By 1969, readers had more than sufficient critical tools to probe *Road*, including structuralist, psychoanalytic, reader response, Marxist, Freudian, film studies, and feminist perspectives and methods.

There is nothing wrong with an anthology designed to address *On the Road* through the lens of contemporary literary theory. In fact, Joshua Kupetz suggests as much in his slim but provocative essay that serves as an introduction to Viking’s publication of the 1951 typescript. But *What's Your Road* doesn’t follow this conceptual framework, struggling, in fact, to find a device to link coherently the ten featured essays. The preface and introduction provide little grounding to explain why these and not other approaches and topics are included – most of the essays themselves remain mute on that point as well.

Some of the essays rehash old arguments, such as the erotic nature of Sal and Dean’s relationship, Sal’s apparent racism, and the irreality of Sal’s Mexico. Some are poorly

researched and some so far afield as to suggest that *Road* can no longer generate discussion on its own merits. Regina Weinreich's essay on the filming of *Road*, for instance, devotes more words to David Lynch and David Cronenberg's oeuvre than to Kerouac's. Even more tangential is Holladay's comparison of *Road* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Comparative analyses can be illuminating (see Daniel Belgrad's "The Transnational Counterculture: Beat-Mexican Intersections"), but in this case, identifying shared themes such as white ambition, seeking the other, and identifying with cars does not justify the pairing via shared aesthetic, political, or Beat genesis. No convincing case is made that Plath identified with Beat culture, and her protagonist, Esther Greenwood, never ventures the Beat moves that Joyce Johnson dares for Susan Levitt, her protagonist in *Come and Join the Dance*. The essay also ignores the tough but necessary analysis of the gender and sexuality issues that ground the two narratives.

Despite these problems, several essays stand out. Matt Theado opens the volume with an artfully engaging history of Kerouac's composition of the novel and a meticulous expose of the two typescripts that followed the 1951 version prior to the 1957 published text. His use of Kerouac documents to validate a second typescript in which Kerouac voluntarily changed names and edited sexual content persuasively calls into question Isaac Gewirtz's version of the typescript history presented in *Beatific Soul* (Scala 2008). Theado also includes a useful update on the contemporary history of the 1951 typescript, something Howard Cunnell does not do in his introduction to the Viking edition.

Robert Holton aims a Marxist eye at the novel, investigating the "lumpen-bohemian subculture" through *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852) and the philosophy of Pierre Bourdieu. His close reading relies somewhat heavily on a search for rag references, based on "lumpen" as a German term for "rag." Nonetheless, the approach provocatively explains the Beat subculture as endemic of American sectarianism yet non-essential to Marxist and capitalistic visions of history as progress, while effectively problematizing the often-unquestioned trope of Kerouac's archetypal Beat as a twentieth-century version of Oswald Spengler's static fellaheen.

R. J. Ellis tackles *Road* in relationship to *Visions of Cody* and the 1951 typescript. The essay shifts unsteadily from a study of the Kerouac's revision of *Road* via *Cody* to his revision of the typescript via *Road*, and his arguments that Kerouac crafted his narratives and that *Road* is a precursor of postmodernism are not new. However, it's truly refreshing to see the 1951 typescript foregrounded. Ellis's reading elucidates essential features of Kerouac's complex process of composition, while taking seriously Kerouac's contention that his writing constituted the continuing saga of Jack Duluoz.

Complementing Ellis's essay is Tim Hunt's exploration of *Road* as an imaginative and aesthetic experience for a reader—boldly defying the still too-prevalent critical view that Kerouac simply recorded his life story outside the rhetoric of fiction. Advancing the work he did in *Kerouac's Crooked Road* (Archon Books 1981), Hunt presents

Kerouac's style as "an aesthetic of enactment," which draws upon jazz improvisational techniques to emphasize process and performance to enact/re-enact the past through what he calls "typetalking," or the performance of the act of oral storytelling in a literary context. The narrative configures the past as a "fluid text shaped by the simultaneous processes of recalling and presenting it in the real time of performance" (181). The performance enables the narrator not only to reflect on the past from a privileged position in its future, but more significantly to experience the past in new ways. Hunt's complex argument, which occasionally threatens to break free of his critical grasp (fortunately, it doesn't), effectively accounts for the novel's continued fascination for generations of readers.

Even with these contributions, as good as they are, the collection remains uneven. Lack of a comprehensive bibliography renders the volume somewhat difficult to navigate. Then too, more careful editing might have caught factual contradictions, such as Mary Carden's use of Ellis Amburn's Kerouac biography to claim that Kerouac changed character names in *Road* only to please his publisher (85), which is persuasively rebutted by Theado's essay (22), as well as other published research.

The volume also begs the question about what direction *Road* analyses should take. Perhaps we need a collection of the best essays on *Road* written over the last fifty years to showcase the early criticism as well as the advances made over the decades. Perhaps, as Ellis suggests (135), it would be a volume that uses 1972, the year when *Cody* came into print, as an anniversary date to introduce bold essays that read *Road* and *Cody*, along with other elements of the Duluoz Legend, to reconceptualize Kerouac's novel.

*On the Road* definitely deserves such scholarly and editorial considerations.

### **Works Cited:**

Belgrad, Daniel. "The Transnational Counterculture: Beat-Mexican Intersections." *Reconstructing the Beats*. Jennie Skerl, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.