Road Narratives as Cultural Critiques: Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, and William Least Heat-Moon

Jesse Gipko

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ROAD NARRATIVES AS CULTURAL CRITIQUES:
HENRY MILLER, JACK KEROUAC, JOHN STEINBECK,
AND WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Jesse Gipko

December 2014
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AND WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON

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ABSTRACT

ROAD NARRATIVES AS CULTURAL CRITIQUES:
HENRY MILLER, JACK KEROUAC, JOHN STEINBECK, AND WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON

By
Jesse Gipko

December 2014

Dissertation Supervised by Professor Emeritus Frederick Newberry

Since the advent of the automobile in the early twentieth century, Americans have been preoccupied, as they always have been, given the country’s history of exploration and expansion, with traveling the continent. The American road narrative began as an exploration of the beauty and diversity of the country and as a way to explore self, but it soon emerged as a vehicle for writers to examine the country and comment on change and progress—not always positively. As America transformed throughout the twentieth century, the hope of individuality and self-expression articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman morphed into a critique of the growing conformity, homogenization, and consumer culture that was equally feared by these writers. Thus a hope for the ideals inherent in America coupled with a disappointment when they fail to become manifest in the country are an integral part of
the road narratives in this study: Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, and William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*. These road narratives engage with and critique conditions in the post-Great Depression U.S. such as the aforementioned conformity and homogenization. The central issue for each of these writers involves ideals, which create a type of nostalgia that warps their views of the U.S. before they set forth on their journeys. These ideals become formed mainly from the writers’ reading in literature and history but also from their sometimes misplaced optimism in America as a land of freedom and originality. The resulting conflict between their ideals and the reality of the country they travel develops into an examination of the conflict between America’s promises versus failures, potentials versus shortcomings, and blighted opportunities versus occasional signs of a surviving optimism.
DEDICATION

For NJ
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Without Frederick Newberry, there would be no beginning or end to this project. As ever, I raise a glass to him. Magali Cornier Michael and John Fried have been thoughtful and attentive readers; John, especially, has been an essential source of encouragement. I am grateful to Belmont College for financial and intellectual support during the writing of this dissertation.

As always the support of my wife Chrissy is inestimable—her patience, understanding, and knowledge inspire me.

I would also like to express heartfelt appreciation to colleagues who provided advice and encouragement. Laura Engel deserves special mention as she provided crucial advice when I needed it most. Timothy Ruppert’s friendship and editorial skills were essential. Rob Rossi—writer, confidant, realist—kept me grounded and motivated. Emad Mirmotahari’s support and understanding aided me immeasurably through the final stages of this project. Un millón de gracias: vecino, colega, compay.

My appreciation extends to Irma Mayo who gave me a quiet place to work and tirelessly defended my editorial choices.

Finally, my love and appreciation go to David and Carol Arbuckle, whom I cannot thank enough for their unwavering support and confidence.
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Introduction

In the late 1940s, the television show *Inside the U.S.A. with Chevrolet* introduced the catchy tune “See the U.S.A. in Your Chevrolet.” This song would later become popularized by Dinah Shore in the early 1950s, who sang it during her weekly variety show sponsored naturally by Chevrolet, while the television screen would show happy motorists touring (always) scenic sites around the country—in effect, offering an optimistic corporate advertisement that proclaimed a trouble-free America. These advertisements promised that if consumers bought a Chevrolet they would see beautiful places—not people, not cities, but landscapes, always in perfect weather of course. These attractive images, designed to lure consumers into the showroom, also served to entice happy travelers out into the country. Advertisements like these played on Americans’ sense of wanderlust and the country’s history of exploration and expansion. Who would not want to travel through such a beautiful land and see the country, expressing the freedom inherent in the American spirit? Who would not want to discover America and, by so doing, discover self? Who would not want to travel in such a trouble-free country?

As is typical of most American advertising, this commercial broadcasts American ideals that pervade the culture but that also rarely exist in such a pristine form. The American consumer culture—supported by this kind of advertising and trumpeting the ideals of travel and conspicuous consumption—wants Americans to believe that all is just fine and dandy in the great old United States of America. But America is not that easy—it never has been and most likely never will be—and those writers who have jumped into
cars and buses and campers and vans to travel the country often encounter an American reality that clashes with ideals and nostalgia tempered by personal experience, popular culture, literature, history, and myth. Road travelers experience this conflict and end up critiquing their present-day America. The road narrative, a uniquely American genre made possible by thousands of highway miles and expanses of space, does not always begin as a journey into the past that reflects (almost always poorly) on the present; however, the combination of the writer’s experiences and idealistic urges often come into conflict with a radically different American society offered by the vapid corporate jingle. Although road journeys are often undertaken for purposes of self-discovery, the discrepancy between what a writer thinks of America and what he actually discovers results in a harsh assessment of American culture.

The American road narrative thus occupies a unique space in the long tradition of Western travel literature: it is the culmination of European exploration, American expansion, and American innovation. This tradition is defined by a wide range of texts that explain and explore all areas of the country from the local to the magnificent. Accordingly, these narratives have their own purposes and agendas. At times they report information, at times they satirize, at times they offer a way to understand the self in relation to unfamiliar environments, at times they register a desire to see the sights, and at times they relate the sense of adventure that comes with traveling in unknown parts of the country. Road narratives also encompass a combination of forms: fiction, nonfiction, journals, letters, logs, encyclopedias, guidebooks, poems, and essays depending on the purpose behind the writer’s desire to document a journey. Yet they also have similar preoccupations such as the search for national identity and the expression of social and
political commentary on divisive American issues like racism, conformity, and materialism.

While American travel narratives encompass a variety of forms and preoccupations, the books I focus on also diverge from this tradition in a variety of ways, particularly in their emphasis on and analysis of what Henry James called the American scene. Even though the narratives I study appeared in the aftermath of the Great Depression, they come from a tradition of American travel narratives that include colonial travel (Madame Knight’s *Private Journal of a Journey from Boston to New York in the Year 1704*), discovery of the natural world (William Bartram’s *Travels*), exploration (*The Journals of Lewis and Clark*), western expansion and settlement (Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*), river journeys (Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*), investigations of the American scene (Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”), and the exploration of new technologies and their relation to American space (Sinclair Lewis’s *Free Air*). These works analyze the discovery and possibility of America. Furthermore, the fascination with America as a subject stems from modernist preoccupations with America, examinations of its identity, and the problems of contemporary society. Modernists such as Lewis, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, and John Dos Passos, among others, wrote works concerned with travel in America. Yet, instead of embarking on a project of creating a national character/identity, these writers criticize what they perceive as shortcomings in the national culture (regionalism, apathy, consumerism, despair, pessimism, and the degrading influence of popular culture). The writers I examine—Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, and William Least Heat-Moon—belong to this tradition. As they examine the American scene, these writers turn away from an
Anglo-European travel narrative tradition and embark on a distinctly American tradition that combines elements of exploration and quest that ultimately result in a cultural analysis. Their narratives aim to “share a response to the idea of travel as a symbolic act, heavy with promises of new life, progress, and the thrill of escape” (Blanton 18), yet this “idea of travel” as possibility and freedom contrasts with the homogeneity and conformity these writers actually find in America. Their unique texts examine ideas of the individual in conflict with mass culture, and they analyze the role of nonconformity in understanding both the self and the country.

As many critics have pointed out (notably Chris Lackey, Ronald Primeau, and Rowland A. Sherrill), the American travel narratives I examine are more accurately classified as road narratives. Such narratives can be defined by two criteria. First, they are concerned with traveling the highways and back roads of America for self-discovery, cultural exploration, and critical inquiry. Second, road narratives also deal with motorized transportation, whether by car, motorcycle, van, or truck. These two criteria are interconnected, since the rise of the automobile led naturally to the construction of interstate highways. John B. Rae observes in The Road and the Car in American Life, “[T]he motor vehicle added to the pressure for road improvement. The motorist had an even stronger incentive than the bicyclist to get the country out of the mud; a mired car was more of a problem than a stuck bicycle” (34). Between 1900 and 1930, automobile registration in the United States climbed from 8,000 to over twenty-two million (Rae 50). Moreover, “Between 1904 and 1930 the mileage of improved roads increased by 330.5 percent, while the total road mileage was rising 40 percent; the proportion of surfaced
road grew from 7.1 to 23 percent and the proportion of ‘high type surface’ (paved road) from 0.1 percent to 18.1 percent” (Rae 68-69).

The rise of the automobile culture in America entails both a blessing and a curse in road narratives—it enables the freedom to travel but also creates a fast-moving culture that standardizes experience and panders to the lowest element of that culture—people who want the thrill of travel along with the comforts of home. In Rae’s words, “The people had to be taken care of as well as their cars” (103). Echoing a similar sentiment about the new auto-traveling American, Warren James Belasco in Americans on the Road claims, “As antimodernist gypsies, these tourists wanted simplicity, self-sufficiency, and comradeship; as modern consumers, however, they valued comfort, service, and security” (5). Throughout many road narratives writers observe the various ways many of the unique features of American life—small towns, regional industries, local culture—become subsumed into a larger market-driven consumer culture. The automobile also made possible a certain kind of travel—isolated, individual, free from the geographic confines of river or rail. Belasco observes that automotive travel also “meant escaping from modern problems associated with the railroad age. . . . The railroad was the industrial establishment—arrogant, impersonal, mechanical, and monopolistic” (Americans 19). In contrast to previous modes of transportation, the automobile gave the American consumer used to the freedoms granted by a democratic society unfettered movement through the extensive American space—a space that, as Charles Olson claims when discussing the great distance covered by the Pequod in Moby-Dick, Americans must conquer: “Space has a stubborn way of sticking to Americans, penetrating all the way in, accompanying them. It is the exterior fact. The basic exterior act is a BRIDGE.
Take them in order as they came: caravel, prairie schooner, national road, railway, plane.

Now in the Pacific THE CARRIER. Trajectory. We must go over space, or we wither” (114). This freedom transformed into a desire to travel beyond one’s own sphere of life, a desire to see and experience unfamiliar areas of the country. Yet once out on the open road, many travelers did not like what they saw.

But this was not always the case. Although American road narratives encompass many styles and narrative strategies, they all share one distinguishing trait: their emphasis on and analysis of the American scene. Many early road narratives, those published in the first part of the twentieth century, concerned themselves mainly with the logistics of making it across the vast continent with little or no drivable roads. Other narratives preferred to extol the virtues of automobile travel over rail travel, while also engaging in observation and social commentary. The first account of a cross-country road trip in a car was *From Ocean to Ocean in a Winton*, published in 1903 by Horatio Nelson Jackson (Lackey 1). Accompanied by his chauffeur, Jackson’s account describes the sixty-three day trip taken from New York to San Francisco (Lackey 1). Thomas and Agnes Wilby’s *On the Trail to Sunset* (1912) is a novelistic account of travels around the American Southwest. In 1915, Effie Prince Gladding published *Across the Continent by the Lincoln Highway*, the account of her trip across America’s first transcontinental highway, with rapturous descriptions of the natural beauties of the landscape such as Yosemite National Park and the Nevada Desert but also with signs of the growing roadside culture of motels and gas stations. In Mariposa, California, Gladding describes an old mining town now abandoned, the people having fled for better economic climes.
This is one of many similar descriptions of towns ravaged by evolving economies that will become familiar in the road narratives I analyze.

Theodore Dreiser’s *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916) describes his trip by automobile from New York to Indiana as a middle-aged man. He introduces many of the themes that Miller, Kerouac, Steinbeck, and Least Heat-Moon will later explore including a return to a writer’s past, an evocation of youth, the significance of nostalgia, and memory’s loss of illusions. Before achieving fame as an etiquette expert, Emily Post attempted to drive from New York to San Francisco with her son, an adventure she narrates in *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (1916). The conclusion of her trip—she had to abandon her broken-down car in Arizona and finish the trip by train—highlights the difficulties encountered by early road travelers. But Post also engages with problems in America including “New York apathy” (1) and the vanishing past in the “new” old West where the cattle industry becomes dominated by corporations. Sinclair Lewis’s *Free Air* (1919) is a road novel about Claire Boltwood’s journey from New York to the Pacific Northwest that shows how the freedom of the highway contrasts markedly with conformity in society. In 1919, Beatrice Massey was another early road motorist who crossed the country by car from New York to San Francisco, and her account of this trip was published in 1920 as *It Might Have Been Worse*, a title which speaks for itself. Winnifred Dixon’s *Westward Hoboes* (1921) echoes a familiar theme of road narratives: the rejection of routine and the search for the self, both of which become complicated when they get entangled with the paranoia of small-town America and the gritty industrial landscapes of big cities like Chicago.
As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, road writers became more preoccupied with the economic and social problems resulting from the Great Depression. These narratives comment on the troubles in America and highlight the idea that all is not well in a country dominated by capitalist interests. Dallas Lore Sharp, while attempting to enjoy beautiful western scenery and rolling plains, gets reminded of disparities in social class and economic status in The Better Country (1928). While Mary Day Winn’s Macadam Trail: Ten Thousand Miles by Motor Coach (1931) leans toward satire, Lewis Gannett’s Sweet Land (1934) laments over the commercialization of America’s natural wonders and resources, particularly Yosemite National Park. As the Great Depression worsened, Nathan Asch took to the road to document its effects in The Road: In Search of America (1937). Seeking to find the “reality” of the Great Depression, “he found that what he had to tell was so full of ‘reality’ that he could not say it in fiction” (Peeler 191). Similarly, Roland Wild’s Double-Crossing America (1938) documents the wanderings of refugees from Dust-Bowl Oklahoma, which confirms the dire straits of disestablished people in Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath.

After World War II, road narratives continued to examine economic and social issues while becoming more intent on analyzing America’s problems combined with searching for self-identity. Beth O’Shea, in A Long Way from Boston (1946), narrates a young woman’s growing sense of self and independence along the road but also details her engagement with capitalist culture as she must work along the way to finish the trip. A narrative “of postwar readjustment along western backroads” (Lackey 18), Richard Phenix’s On My Way Home (1947) follows Phenix’s travels around the country and toward a new awareness of self. The book also chronicles Phenix’s reactions to
conformity around the country and the vapidity of large cities like Los Angeles. Among other African-American writers who took to the road, Carl Rowan’s *South of Freedom* (1952) examines the hypocrisy of Jim Crow laws in the South. Clancy Sigal’s *Going Away* (1961) presents a novelistic account of disillusion with the crumbling of the political ideals of the Old Left—a dissolution that helped fuel the rise of the Beats but also presented a capitulation to conventionality, to everything that these writers think is wrong with America. Douglas Woolf’s novel *Wall to Wall* (1962) narrates the journey of Claude Squire, a car salesman’s son, as he drives from Los Angeles to Boston, offering a satiric look at American life, particularly Cold War paranoia and the lack of originality. Equally humorous is William Saroyan’s *Short Drive, Sweet Chariot* (1966), an account of Saroyan’s cross-country journey in a 1941 Lincoln limousine that becomes in his retelling of it a scathing attack on America, contemporary authorship, and the automobile culture. Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), an account of Ken Kesey and his Merry Prankster’s bus trip to New York, documents the countercultural revolution of the late 1960s as an alternative to what had become a homogenous America. Other road narratives respond to disparate issues in America like environmental concerns and the inability of citizens to live authentic lives. While echoing some of the eco-terrorist preoccupations in Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), Jim Harrison’s *A Good Day to Die* (1973) focuses on disillusioned outsiders as they race across the country to prevent a supposed dam from being built in the Grand Canyon. Richard Reeves’s *American Journey: Traveling with Tocqueville in Search of Democracy in America* (1982) is a multi-layered examination of the state of American politics and culture during the Cold War.
All of the above narratives are unique for their inventiveness, celebration of possibility, and commentary on an evolving American society. They also share common traits of travel narratives, what Bern Keating calls “the American genius: the itching foot, the willingness to take to the road for whatever reason, be it freedom, exploration, riches or a restless spirit” (7) and what Ronald Primeau calls “Getting away . . . a chance at a new start, a special time to discover self and country, glide through vast empty spaces and then come home to write or sing about the adventures” (1). This image of the lone American cruising down the highway, searching for America, searching for self, has developed into a stereotype of the rugged nonconformist cruising around the country at odds with the status quo. The perceived “romance of the road” attracts writers who want to immerse themselves in American culture and discover what it means to be an American, which involves writers coming to terms with the real problems facing America. This immersion in American culture develops into an examination of American society’s norms and values, which often seem at odds with the historical and literary ideals and myths that these particular writers either question or hold dear. Thus an inveterate nostalgia, idealism, or critical perspective about what America once was (or could be), whether real or imagined, plays an important part of the road narrative. These perspectives on the imagined or historical past become the basis for a critique of the present.

My examination of the American road narrative takes these previous narratives into consideration while also focusing more specifically on how the idealistic impulses of Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, John Steinbeck, and William Least Heat-Moon clash with the American reality they encounter in their individual travels. Thus my study focuses on
the American road narrative as a cultural critique of American society, closely considering authors’ conceived ideals in tension and confrontation with the exigencies of the present. I examine books published after 1939 as products of a post-Great Depression materialist and conformist society: Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* (1962), and Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways* (1982). One reason I chose these four road narratives is because they are, arguably, the most prominent road narratives. Another reason I chose these four, after all the road narratives I have read, is because, however different they may seem to be, their concerns more often than not are the same or at least overlap: what has happened to America and where is America headed?

When referring to a writer’s ideals or critical perspectives, I draw from several critics who attend in some way to the clash of the present with a perceived idealism located in the past. Typically this idealistic perspective becomes a type of nostalgia, suggesting at times that the past was better, more authentic, and less materialistic than the present. But this perspective is not completely nostalgic, not completely preferring the past, as writers purposefully construct their various ideals and critical perspectives from their reading in literature, broadly understood. On some level, though, Miller, Kerouac, Steinbeck, and Least Heat-Moon develop, as Wright Morris categorizes it in *The Territory Ahead*, “An implicit, understandable preference for the past” (20). They also develop, in the context of examining the U.S., a perspective that “the present typically is assumed to be inferior to the past—either actually worse, or worse by virtue of a collapse of previous hopes and expectations” (4), as Peter Clecak defines nostalgia in *America’s Quest for the Ideal Self*. Also germane, in reference to the increasingly frenetic pace of American life in the
period I examine, Belasco’s conception in “Commercialized Nostalgia: The Origins of the Roadside Strip” proves apt: “a return to the more humane pace and associations of earlier times and places” (108). Each of these critics highlights the struggle that the writers in this study confront: an optimism about the future growth of self and country that they evidently believe existed in the United States in an idealized past as discouragingly compared to their observations of and critical attitudes toward the nation in the present.

For the writers in this study, their ideals extend beyond just a yearning for a simpler past. They involve ideas about the past constructed from their reading in American history and literature, from personal experiences, and from cultural shibboleths involving America as a land of promise. Simple though it may sound, all of the narratives in this study were produced by literary people. Miller’s, Kerouac’s, Steinbeck’s, and Least Heat-Moon’s critical observations of and reflections on the America they travel arise from democratic or individualistic ideals such as autonomy from social expectations, possibility of cultivating self, originality in life choices—all of which clash with pervasive evidence of personal restrictions and social conformity that these writers encounter in their travels. Clinging to a hope in America as a land of freedom and opportunity, they negatively react to the conformity and restrictions they witness. Throughout their narratives, furthermore, one discovers elegies on a lost idea of American life where many of the unique features of the country—small towns, regional industries, local differences—have been subsumed into a larger market-driven consumer culture. Once out on the road and faced with this trend, the writers in this study attempt
to find people and places that can bolster their hope for American freedom and possibility.

Thus the most important conflict in the works examined here is the one between idealism and observed reality. For Miller, Kerouac, Steinbeck, and Least Heat-Moon, this particularly American idealism has its origin in the essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the writings of Henry David Thoreau, the poetry and prose of Walt Whitman (particularly *Leaves of Grass* and “Democratic Vistas”), among other writers such as Mark Twain and Jack London. Both Kerouac and Least Heat-Moon (who actually carries a copy of *Leaves of Grass* with him on his travels) are especially susceptible to Whitman’s idealism. Yet the reality of traveling the road—the homogenization of cultural experience, political apathy, and rampant consumerism—comes into conflict with literary ideals, the result being that the writers often witness the erosion of individualism, freedom, and opportunity.

These four narratives cover a period of roughly forty years from Miller’s travels in 1940 to Least Heat-Moon’s wanderings in 1978, and they span such pivotal events as the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean War in conjunction with the McCarthy era, the Civil Rights movement, and the Vietnam War. Each essentially deals with a different decade: Miller and Kerouac in the forties and fifties, Steinbeck in the sixties, and Least Heat-Moon in the seventies. Given this historical span, it is important to bear in mind that, in the years following World War II, historians such as Howard Zinn and William H. Chafe have pointed out two major influences on American politics and culture: the Cold War and the rise of an American consumer culture. The Cold War created a culture
of paranoia and suppression, focusing America’s energies on an implacable enemy rather than on solving social or cultural problems. In the late 1940s,

a combination of the Cold War abroad and a politics of virulent anti-Communism at home helped to determine boundaries of political discourse that lasted at least until the mid-1960s. In this context the emergence of a new Red scare severely diminished prospects for significant progress toward social reform, postponing until the explosion of the civil rights movement in the 1960s any possibility for making issues of social justice a primary item on the political agenda. (Chafe 161)

Added to the looming threat of military action was the unthinkable possibility of nuclear annihilation that changed many Americans’ views of the scope and nature of warfare. In contrast to this fear and paranoia in the post-war years was the rise of a free-spending consumer culture. The production of the war years and its subsequent economic prosperity transformed American life. Chafe observes: “In this booming economy, meanwhile, real income grew as much from 1947 to 1960 as it had grown from 1900 to 1947. With education, jobs, and consumer goods proliferating, millions of Americans understandably turned their attention to the ‘good life’ that had suddenly become a possibility” (163). This was basically a culture that for the first time had attained widespread economic prosperity and had the leisure time to spend money. The consumption of goods and services, then, became a guiding principle of the post-war American society. People worked to get ahead so they could buy bigger and better things.
Despite the unprecedented economic, political, and social growth and associated changes, there were signs of unease other than the lurking threat of war. Although the economy grew faster than it ever had, enabling widespread homeownership and access to higher education, the civil rights movement became disruptive as it confronted segregation, challenging conventional notions about the place of black Americans in society at large. Then too, gender roles increasingly changed, in terms not only of employment opportunities for women but also of a “revitalized feminist movement” that aimed to alter traditional notions of women’s roles in relation to men’s (Chafe 159). Still, in the middle of these social changes, Chafe notes,

poverty remained an abiding national disgrace, with millions of women, blacks, and young people among the chief victims. Conflict over social and cultural values reached fever pitch in the late 1960s, as student, antiwar, and Black Power protesters challenged an “establishment” they viewed with contempt. And the foreign policy of anti-Communism that had dominated the country since 1947 suddenly came under attack. (159)

During this time of cultural transformation, the writers in this study travel the country attempting to discover reasons to be optimistic about America in the face of many troubling social, economic, and political issues.

This study draws from, extends, and argues against several critical works on the American road narrative. Most of these works examine the road narrative as a distinctly American genre concerned with issues such as history, popular culture, literary form, technology, and the role of democracy in modern culture. Rowland A. Sherrill’s Road-Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque (2000) connects the
American road narrative to the picaresque tradition in literature. Sherrill claims that the picaresque tradition has been absorbed by the American road narrative in an effort to deal with the changes in American culture in the last half of the twentieth century. He claims “that these American ‘road books’ not only appear as responsive to contemporary American culture but also represent a powerful reappearance and significant transformation of the old literary form of the picaresque narrative, a form apparently especially equipped for grappling with American life in the second half of the twentieth century” (3). In advancing this argument, Sherrill adopts a broad view of road narratives that not only encompasses the works in this study but also works as diverse as Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*, E. L. Doctorow’s *Billy Bathgate*, and Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. While I see Sherrill’s point that the peripatetic nature of the picaresque deals with rapid changes in American society, my study does not deal with the road narratives as picaresque. The road narratives in this study cannot be truly considered as picaresque because they all have purpose and designs and focus on an analysis of the American scene. That scene, as often as not, dominates the narratives, blurring the centrality of the authors’ personae. Moreover, contrary to the conventional picaresque, comedy rarely surfaces. Serious critical observations assume the forefront and thus far outweigh the importance of the authors as observers. With the intermittent exception of Kerouac, the authors do not, as in the conventional picaresque, become the picaro hero. Additionally, the picaresque, as a European invention, is ill equipped to deal with the exigencies of American optimism and examination in the last half of the twentieth century.
Focusing on motorized transportation, I also draw from Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach’s *In the Driver’s Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture* (1976), which looks at the transformative role of the automobile in modern American life and the crises that have emerged from an increased reliance on it as a mode of transport. Dettelbach examines the role of technology as both positive and negative, leading to dreams of “Youth, Freedom, Success, Possession. But dreams, as we know, are double-edged, comprising the negative extension of fear as well as the positive expression of desire” (5). The automobile comes to occupy a dominant place in American culture precisely because it draws together “space, romance, and technology” (5) that lead to the democratization of technology: anyone can have power and freedom behind the wheel. Yet the writers in this study struggle with the reality of that very freedom behind the wheel. More often than not this reality runs counter to their forthright or reserved optimism. They struggle to hold on to optimism, even as the freedom of travel exposes them to ever-widening evidence of what Dettelbach calls “negating reality” (6).

Other writers have also examined the nationalistic and symbolic patterns in the American road narrative. In *The Journey Narrative in American Literature* (1983), Janis P. Stout examines “patterns of road narrative already familiar in world literature and mythology—the quest, the migration, the homecoming, and the wandering” (12). She traces the ways in which the American road narrative transforms these traditional patterns into a unique American form and focuses on the preoccupation of American literature with journeys. Except for *On the Road*, the road narratives in this study present themselves as nonfiction (with varying degrees of success). I examine the preoccupation of American writers with the road and the road narrative as an extension of their own
sense of being not only writers but American writers. The road narratives here are not just quests or adventures but immersions into the American scene and the resultant commentary on that scene. They are not merely stories but social, cultural, and political analyses.

Ronald Primeau, in *Romance of the Road* (1996), specifically focuses on the four patterns of American road narratives: “protest, the search for a national identity, self-discovery, and experimentation or parody” (15). Drawing from the concept of genre memory, Primeau shows how each travel narrative rewrites or subverts old ideas into new texts. He also connects these narratives to the hero’s journey as elucidated by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). To a lesser extent, Primeau’s patterns prove useful in dealing with the idealistic impulses and resultant criticism of the writers in this study. But his adoption of Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey as a recurring motif does not take into account the complexities of the narratives in this study. This study classifies the road narrative as a complicated intermingling of quest for self, examination of America, and search for ideals influenced by literature, history, and myth with which Primeau’s work only partly deals.

Finally, Kris Lackey links road narratives to the transcendental impulse in American literature, where the desire for freedom and national identity remains important. His *RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative* (1997) also notes how these narratives struggle with ideas of nostalgia linked to westward expansion and, then, how writers believe they can rewrite their travel experiences into a new vision of America. In this study, though, I construe nostalgia to implicate ideals issuing from ideas and promises in a literary and historical past, ideals that clash with reality. In discussing a transcendental
impulse, I refer to the idea of rising above everyday life, how each writer constructs his notion of transcendence, normally based upon his reading. I also analyze the varied ways in which the writers cope with either the lack of or the momentary nature of the transcendence that they seek. Very rarely do the words of Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman hold true in the face of materialism and greed. Instead they become fading signs of hope. Thus, contrary to Lackey’s model, none of the writers in this study creates “a new vision of America.” Their narratives may more or less conform to Stout’s trajectory from quest to homecoming, but they clearly fail to suggest the author’s successful quests for self-discovery or a hopeful American identity.

While all of these writers analyze important aspects of the road genre, their works fall shy of examining fully road narratives as in-depth social critiques that stem from nostalgic and idealistic impulses. Nevertheless, their effectiveness as criticism of modern America results from these very impulses that allow readers to compare what America is with what it could or should be. All of the writers in this study engage in what Alison Russell, discussing William Least Heat-Moon’s PrairyErth: (a deep map) (1991), calls “multidirectional” (131) travel in Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature (2000). In other words, the road narratives I examine are also travels in space, both the physical world and the psychological world. This multidirectional travel makes possible analysis based upon perceptions of the quotidian realities of America in relation to how the writers’ minds move beyond those realities into history, literature, and memory.

Accordingly I take a literary and historical approach to these road narratives, examining the cultural milieu of each text. I draw from the literary criticism of the particular road narratives in my study and from historical studies and cultural criticism of
the time periods in which these narratives were written and published. I locate each book in its cultural and historical context and, because I examine the books as assessments of American society arising from nostalgic and idealistic impulses, my approach emphasizes the cultural issues and anxieties that the works evoke, comment on, and refract. In varying ways, all of the books take oppositional stances against dominant cultural myths and materialistic quests. All of the writers enumerate similar if not identical problems in American society and offer differing and no doubt impractical ways to counter or resolve those problems. My emphasis, then, is on the cultural-historical issues that these authors address as they struggle to make sense of a present at odds with their notions about and knowledge of former hopes and promises for the future. Because many of the texts I analyze are hybrids—fiction and nonfiction, anecdote and essay—a literary and historical approach takes into account the social and cultural forces behind the production of texts and leads to an understanding of the basic conflict between ideal and reality.

In chapter one, I discuss Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* as a conflict between his European expatriation and his return to America. Forced by the beginning of World War II to flee France, Miller reluctantly returned to the United States and vented his frustration on his home country, viewing America through the lens of his expatriate experience, his earlier experience in the U.S., and his reading. His indebtedness to personal experience and to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman infuses his optimism of what American society can and might be over and against what it is. In chapter two, I analyze Kerouac’s *On the Road* as an idealization of the counterculture contrasted with a concession to the dominant culture. Standard readings of Kerouac’s novel claim that the characters’ frantic travels around America are a reaction to and a breaking away from
bourgeois middle-class values. While this is true to a certain extent, the book also criticizes the characters for their eventual embrace of the very same values they claim to reject. In chapter three, I examine Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* as the struggle between a famous elder writer’s observations of the present and memories of his life as a child and young writer in Monterey, California. The alleged purpose of the trip—to get reacquainted with America—serves only as a pretense for Steinbeck’s effort to recapture the past, so he does not truly search for the country but rather for an idea of America grounded in personal history, myth, and reading. In chapter four, I analyze William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways* as a search for democratic ideals and identity along the back roads of America. By investigating small-town America, Least Heat-Moon hopes to rediscover where American ideals survive in contemporary mass culture. His discoveries scarcely lead to a promising view of America’s future, though the means by which the individual self might develop psychically and spiritually in oppositional relation to American culture seem to offer some promise.
Chapter One
Self-Discovery, Idealism, and Critique: Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*

Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945) is both a travelogue and a commentary on the state of U.S. society prior to World War II. Reflecting his ambivalence over returning to his homeland, the book chronicles Miller’s meandering trip across America from October 1940 to October 1941. It records his thoughts, impressions, and ultimate disapproval of the state of America on the verge of World War II. The book also examines how Miller’s inherent optimism and idealism, arguably the primary influences on his thoughts and commentary, interrelate and essentially write the road narrative. Even though he lived in Europe for ten years before reluctantly returning to his native country, Miller retained a measure of optimism in the possibility of the U.S. as a place where individuals and artists could foster their talents, live unique lives, and, ultimately, transform U.S. society. While commentators focus on *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, and much of Miller’s work, as a critique of the U.S., they do not fully define what that critique entails and tend to gloss over the complicated structure of his commentary. My argument builds upon and differs from others’ views of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* by focusing on Miller’s idealism as the driving force behind his critique instead of focusing on Miller as a “moralist” viewing “modern society as irredeemable, unchangeable” (Trachtenberg 139), as calling for “Total negation instead of total affirmation!” (Rahv 32), as viewing “the modern world [as] dehumanized and death-driven” (Wickes 35), as engaging in “sweeping condemnations of everything American” (Widmer 86), as having “divorced himself from his times” (Gordon 188), or
“yearning for a homogenous culture” (Baxter 153). Despite the seeming hatred of the U.S. and the capitalist system that surfaces in his previous works, Miller’s optimism for America draws from his reading and his ideals. For Miller, the past, particularly embodied in Transcendental writers, holds a promise for a different future from the materialism and conformity he encounters. His idea of the country originates in the optimism he derives from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, particularly their ideas of self and social transformation, their desire for change, and their hope for the future. Thus Miller’s optimism is grounded in American individuals, not American institutions, suggesting that the promise described by these writers remains possible even though it has not yet come to fruition. This paradox angers Miller but also propels him to travel the country looking for pockets of authenticity, embodied in individuals.

Idealism is the other dynamic influence that shapes Miller’s reaction to the U.S. Commentators focus on nostalgia as it relates to Miller’s road narrative without fully defining it or misrepresenting it. Alwyn Lee, for instance, claims inaccurately that “Miller, a true waif, achieved exile without nostalgia” (70), even though it is clear from Miller’s writings that he obsessively thought about America. Moreover Annette Kar Baxter asserts that “Miller’s multi-patterned nostalgia was thus a yearning for the unknown itself, rather than for any particular unknown” (37), despite Miller’s own proclamations of what he longed for in America’s past. With Miller, however, the term nostalgia does not quite fit. Miller is not nostalgic in the true sense of the word: a love for the past. Before writing The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, he already roundly criticized the country in Tropic of Capricorn (1939). So there is no time in Miller’s life
that was truly good, or that he can look back to and compare with the awful present in the
U.S. for nostalgia’s sake. Instead the majority of his ideals and dreams come from
reading, from literature. Idealism, as it relates to Miller’s road narrative, is multi-faceted
and encompasses his personal experience abroad, his memories, and his reading.
Throughout his travels, Miller’s ideals influence his disgust with American culture’s
shifting mores. *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* is a book of the imagination as much as
it is a travelogue. Miller found himself dreaming of America while in France, and he
dreamed of an America that had no basis in reality but instead resided in literature and his
imagination.¹ Like his optimism, Miller’s idealism about America derives from ideas
that he finds in earlier American writers, particularly Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman,
but it also stems from how these ideals clash with Miller’s own multifaceted experiences,
both past and present. His idealism, complicated by his Europeanization and ideals of
individual freedom, constantly imposes itself on his travels and affects the way he
responds to people and places. Being an expatriate brings with it attendant problems and
preoccupations involving, for Miller, all things American, and, while he searches for an
authentic existence, he also attacks the reality he encounters because it fails to live up to
this idealism.

This chapter examines how Miller’s ideals, based on his personal experiences, clash
with the reality of his travels across the U.S. This conflict, embodied in his critique,
dermines the narrative and produces, at times, paradoxical viewpoints. Miller uses the
road narrative as a means to explore contradictory elements of his thinking: his desire to
leave the U.S. coupled with his need to understand its people and places. He wants to
leave America because, of course, he has already left and found the freedom he desired in
Europe. He also wants to affirm the optimism he has in an America that fosters and nourishes self-actualization. Moreover *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* indicates that he wants to continue creating his life as if it were a work of art. Having a vision of the U.S. based on his idealism, he searches for individuals relevant to the vision. What infuriates Miller is the clash between his ideals and reality, and he finds that living in the U.S. impedes a life of art. What Miller means by this life-of-art concept can be gleaned from *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and other writings and it mainly involves the idea of freedom, the freedom to create one’s life as one feels it, which may well mean transgressing (if only passively) the routine life of everybody around. This transgressing does not mean harming anybody, since Miller, despite his reputation as a misogynist and misanthrope, was not violent but rather was essentially kind and generous. Creating life as art also means changing, always creating, always, as Emerson and Thoreau stressed, becoming. Art for Miller is always breaking boundaries, breaking away from former ways of being and thus always growing. He therefore increasingly views America in two contradictory ways: first, as it is, a repulsive nightmare of manic, materialistic activity; second, as an ideal that derives partly from personal experience in France and partly from home-grown encouragement provided by transcendental literature.

To examine Miller’s paradoxical viewpoints, I structure the chapter in four sections: a contextualization of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* based on Miller’s idealism, an examination of Miller’s trip as it reveals those ideals, an analysis of the individuals he seeks out, and an analysis of his overall critique of the U.S. based on his rejection of materialism and conformity as antithetical to his ideals. Section one considers Miller’s various viewpoints—his previous life in America, his life in France, his observations of
the U.S. upon his return, and the interrelation of these viewpoints with his ideals. Sections two and three analyze Miller’s road narrative as he searches for specific regions and individuals that will uncover his idealism. The South and Southwest, for Miller, represent areas where his ideals of individuality and artistic freedom thrive. These areas therefore breed individuals who uphold his ideals. Section four investigates Miller’s critique of America as reality clashes with his idealism. Miller’s revulsion for the U.S. relates to materialism, consumerism, and conformity. Only by understanding the complex relationship between Miller’s ideals and the reality he encounters can a reader begin to understand how Miller approaches the road narrative. Thus I defer coverage of Miller’s actual trip until the second section of this chapter, because the contextualization of his ideas and ideals bears directly upon how he approaches the road narrative itself.

I.

Four main outlooks influence Miller’s idealism and belief in individualism and art in America, and *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* reflects these vis-à-vis his previous experience in America, his experience in France, his initial observations of the U.S. upon his return, and the connection of these factors with his ideals. All four of Miller’s outlooks intersect in his search for authenticity—which for him means a life of creativity and transgressing routines and the habits of materialism—and result in the contrast between nightmare and ideal in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. Miller’s first major outlook comes from his pre-expatriate experiences in the U.S., which formed his anti-materialistic viewpoint. The economic and political reality of the U.S. was one from which Miller fled in the early 1930s (which can also be termed his past negative) and
which he critiqued in *Tropic of Capricorn*. Since he had already attacked the U.S. in *Capricorn, The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* offers an intriguing perspective on what is new in Miller’s critique of America, which mainly concerns his revived idealism as a result of his experience in France combined with his evidently temperamental optimism. Before he left to live in Paris, he was disgusted with the materialism and conformity he saw in New York City, especially in the lives of the poor, miserable, and unemployed people he dealt with in his job as a manager for Western Union. In this job, Miller “dealt continually with the sordid world of men who for various reasons are unemployable. He had to cope with men who drifted from job to job, with men who were unemployed for discriminatory reasons, and with immigrants. He knew their hardships at first-hand” (McCarthy 227). Miller is not a Marxist, however, but an anarchist, so he failed to empathize with these men. Instead he vowed not to live as they did and to strike out on his own in search of a creative life. Miller was not only disgusted with the way that the American system treats workers but also disappointed with the way the majority of men conform to degrading and mindless lives. These Depression-era masses felt compelled to labor in jobs that could barely support them, and, to Miller, they were indicative of the disparity in the capitalist economic model where great wealth for the few came at the expense of the less fortunate masses. His impulse was not to reform the system but to reject it and turn inward. In *Capricorn* he says that this period brought “A terrible sense of desolation. It hung over me for years” (54). It is this profound disillusionment that he attempts to slough off in France and later as he travels across the U.S.

Like Eliot’s and Fitzgerald’s before him, Miller’s critique in *Capricorn* also focuses on the U.S. as a cultural and spiritual wasteland, more concerned with industrial growth
and material goods than with art or the growth of the individual, what Emerson considered self-culture. The worsening of this condition, which he encounters upon his return to the U.S. and records in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, leads to anger and pessimism. “I can think of no street in America,” Miller claims, “or of people inhabiting such a street, capable of leading one on toward the discovery of the self” (*Capricorn* 4).

Material progress rewards those who conform but extracts a great price from those who resist, who try to live according to the self-reliant ideals of Emerson and Thoreau. A person must either contribute to what is perceived as the well-being of the economic system or the system will grind him down until he surrenders and joins the work force. In this oppressive system of work and material gain, the individual becomes implicated in the nightmare of mechanized industry:

> I think of all the streets in America combined as forming a huge cesspool, a cesspool of the spirit in which everything is sucked down and drained away to everlasting shit. Over this cesspool the spirit of work weaves a magic wand; palaces and factories spring up side by side, and munition plants and chemical works and steel mills and sanatoriums and prisons and insane asylums. The whole continent is a nightmare producing the greatest misery of the greatest number. (*Capricorn* 4)

The communal vision of harmony espoused by American business and political leaders leads to an automatism that clashes with the American ideal of individual liberty, and the dissonance between the desire for freedom and reality leads to dissatisfaction and despair, the “quiet desperation” (*Walden and Resistance* 5) remarked upon by Thoreau. In *Tropic
*of Capricorn*, the people Miller encounters in his job, including himself, are trapped in an endless cycle of meaningless labor.

Miller’s frustrations with the U.S. in *Tropic of Capricorn* derive partly from his own involvement in the destructive economic system. For Miller, America is a spiritual vacuum because the capitalist system drains the souls from normal citizens by placing the focus on money and power and shifting it away from the cultivation of individuals. *Tropic of Capricorn* describes Miller’s mind-numbing and soulless routine in corporate America. As the employment manager for “the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company of North America” (9), he is in charge of hiring and firing messengers. He has money and stability but they are not enough to convince him that the business world is anything but a destructive system. The futility of the capitalist business model, which uses men for profit, appears absurd to him: “It was a slaughterhouse, so help me God. The thing was senseless from the bottom up. A waste of men, material and effort. A hideous farce against a backdrop of sweat and misery” (*Capricorn* 12). The longer he works at his job and the more misery and pain he sees, the more he becomes convinced that the entire enterprise is corrupt and deadly. Dealing with an endless stream of men and women looking for work, Miller thinks, “My office at Sunset Place was like an open sewer, and it stank like one. I had dug myself into the first-line trench and I was getting it from all directions at once” (*Capricorn* 13). The image of the trench perfectly illustrates Miller’s predicament: he wants to be above the striving masses, but corporate and economic responsibility bury him. The pain and suffering he deals with day-to-day is significant and, in the end, not worth the pain or effort of anybody involved in the system. The workers either starve or quit, and Miller is overwhelmed with financial obligations that
mount with the more money he makes: “I owed so much money all around that if I were to work for twenty years I would not have been able to pay it back” (Capricorn 20). Neither could he live the creative life he desired, since he is himself caught in the cycle of earning money to pay debts with little time left over for art.

Despite it all, Miller clings to an optimistic vision of self-creation, perhaps the incipient project in Tropic of Cancer (1934) and The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, a critical affirmation of a life led against the grain. Seemingly a pessimist, Miller is really a romantic: who else would go abroad with only ten dollars in his pocket? Even in the U.S., he manages to find “the miracles that make a posture of despair untrue for him,” even if at times his disillusionment in the face of reality is too severe, even for a “yea-sayer” (M. Allen 103, 101). While he does not fully despair, constantly encountering the difficulty of creating an authentic life over the years diminishes Miller’s belief in American possibility, something akin to what Fitzgerald meant in The Great Gatsby by “romantic readiness” (8). Unlike Gatsby, however, Miller really has a nonmaterialist version of the American Dream. In Capricorn he champions the common person in the street, and he advocates the self-reliant attitude of U.S. culture that helped to create a nation out of a howling wilderness. He believes in the fundamental potential of the individual despite hardship: “And beneath the terrible poverty there is a flame, usually so low that it is almost invisible. But it is there and if one has the courage to blow on it it can become a conflagration” (Capricorn 20). For Miller, it is incumbent upon the individual to affect change both in himself and, by extension, in others. The main way to accomplish change is to focus on the self’s creative potential despite the national fantasy embedded in the capitalistic model: “Of what use was it to prove that I could be what
was expected of me when I did not want to be any of these things? Every time you come to the limit of what is demanded of you, you are faced with the same problem—to be yourself!” (Capricorn 328) Miller ends Capricorn with a fitting metaphor describing the unfettered soul of a traveler: “I am like an explorer who, wishing to circumnavigate the globe, deems it unnecessary to carry even a compass” (332). Each individual needs to strike out on his own and escape the cycle of work and spending, just as Miller himself did by sailing to France to pursue his art.

Miller’s second outlook on the U.S. comes from his living and writing in France from 1930 to 1939 (past positive). Indeed, his pessimistic attitude toward the U.S. on his return can be considerably attributed to his positive experiences abroad.³ Even though, as Malcolm Cowley acknowledges in A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation, Miller was older than most writers of the Lost Generation (240), arriving in Europe later than Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and others, his writing there became an important influence on the American counterculture, which later found its popular voice in Kerouac and other Beat writers. The longer Miller stayed in Europe, the less he liked America. Along with its cultural pedigree, Europe, and specifically France, became imprinted in his mind as a place of freedom to create and grow as a writer. His ten years in Europe offered what he never experienced in the U.S.: “For one thing, I suppose I found a freedom such as I never knew in America. I found contact with people so much easier—that is, the people that I enjoyed talking to. I met more of my own kind there. Above all I felt that I was tolerated. I didn’t ask to be understood or accepted. To be tolerated was enough. In America I never felt that” (“Art of Fiction” 143).
France became the ideal for creating life as art since he was liberated from the crushing conventionality of the U.S. Miller could write and publish the work he wanted to in France. His first major books were published there (Tropic of Cancer in 1934, Black Spring in 1936, and Tropic of Capricorn in 1939), but these books were banned in the U.S. until 1961. Conversely, New York represented “failure and rejection” since only one of his books, The Cosmological Eye (1939), was published there by New Directions, failing to do well (Dearborn 208). His disappointment was more than personal, however. Miller associated New York with his failure as a writer precisely because it reflected a larger failure within America generally to support and nurture art and the individual. In Miller’s eyes, the liberté extolled by France proved to be true, contrary to the freedom extolled by the sweet land of liberty and ironically represented by the statue in New York harbor donated to the U.S. by France.

Miller’s attraction to Europe also derived from his appreciation of European literature, which corroborated his ideas about individuality and art. The influence on Miller of European writers and movements has been examined in many works, including Gay Louise Balliet’s Henry Miller and the Surrealist Metaphor: “Riding the Ovarian Trolley” (1996) and Paul Jahshan’s Henry Miller and the Surrealist Discourse of Excess: A Post-Structuralist Reading (2001). Miller’s reading, though heavily weighted by European authors, is also more varied than either Balliet or Jahshan record, given their focus on Miller’s surrealist and stylistic issues. More importantly, in The Books in My Life (1952) Miller reports on the writers who most affected him, citing as his “genealogical line” Europeans such as Boccaccio, Petronius, Rabelais, Maurice Maeterlinck, Romain Rolland, Friedrich Nietzsche, Knut Hamsun, D. H. Lawrence,
James Joyce, Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Arthur Rimbaud, Blaise Cendrars, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, the Dadaists, and the Surrealists (124-25). From some of these writers, particularly Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1922), Miller further develops a pessimistic streak that tempers the optimism he finds in other European writers, thereby leading him to view his travels and experiences dualistically. In many ways, these writers and artists advocate concerns similar to those of Miller:

- the love of life itself, the pursuit of truth, wisdom and understanding, mystery, the power of language, the antiquity and the glory of man, eternality, the purpose of existence, the oneness of everything, self-liberation, the brotherhood of man, the meaning of love, the relation of sex to love, the enjoyment of sex, humor, oddities and eccentricities in all life’s aspects, travel, adventure, discovery, prophecy, magic (white and black), art, games, confessions, revelations, mysticism, more particularly the mystics themselves, the varieties of faith and worship, the marvelous in all realms and under all aspects, for “there is only the marvelous and nothing but the marvelous.” (*Books* 125)

Weaving through this list are common themes: freedom, spirituality, autonomy, intemperance, and escape. They all concern the efforts of an individual to engage imaginatively and authentically with the world in order to discover ways of living creatively. This engagement, however, leads to struggle as the person who would live authentically confronts conformist thinking and numbing routine, leading to self-doubt. Miller claims: “But the struggle of the human being to emancipate himself, that is, to liberate himself from the prison of his own making, that is for me the supreme subject” (*Books* 125). These words also provide clues as to Miller’s own hyperbolic style and his
inherent optimism, especially the words “humor,” “eccentricities,” “discovery,” and “the marvelous,” which describe the mindset with which he approached the road trip. If you can discover the humor in America’s eccentricities, he almost seems to say, then you are on your way to creating an alternative to the way things are.

With the onset of World War II, however, Miller realized that he would have to leave France. Not wanting to leave, though, he spent time in Greece with Lawrence Durrell. Miller’s fear seemed to be that he would lose his artistic freedom, the headway he had made as a writer; and he began to think of ways to reclaim both in America. One way to do so was to recreate America in the image of Europe. As Jay Martin observes in his biography of Miller, *Always Merry and Bright: The Life of Henry Miller,*

He knew that he would soon be going back to America, and he was already creating the American scene in Grecian terms. Greece, he told himself, was what America needed, and Greece was what the American dream aimed at. He believed that he now understood the possibilities of his own country and he even began to look forward to a return to America, the still primitive land. Moreover, everywhere he went in Greece he ran into Greek men who had spent a few years in Chicago, Detroit, or New York and now wished to be back in the States.

Certainly, that gave him a certain amount of hope for his native land. (362)

But what these men found in the U.S.—economic opportunity and prosperity—is not what Miller looked for in his native country. He did not want to return to America and reclaim his place among the working masses. Rather he wanted to recreate the artistic freedom he found in Europe. By no coincidence, therefore, during the final months in Europe, Miller thought about traveling around the U.S.: “He began to develop the idea of
an American tour; just as in America he had been transfixed with European place names, so in Paris did he long to visit places with names like Chattanooga and Tuba City” (Dearborn 199). Miller’s situation was similar to that of Theodore Dreiser who, though remaining on American soil, experienced comparable feelings upon returning to his native Indiana after living in New York City for many years, a road trip related in A Hoosier Holiday (1916). Dreiser recognizes how nostalgia has clouded his view of the past, but he also speaks with the arrogance of experience. Upon reencountering the reality of small-town America, Dreiser says, “And in that time what illusions had I not built up in connection with my native state! Who does not allow fancy to color his primary experiences in the world?” (14). Miller’s reentry into American life was abrupt: by December 1939, “the American Minister to Greece ordered all United States Citizens to leave the country before January 1st, 1940” (Ferguson 267).

Miller’s third major outlook on art and life involves his reaction to the U.S. upon his return. The critique of the U.S. in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare is partly governed by his disappointment over leaving Europe. Now his former negative impressions of the U.S. are exacerbated by his positive experiences abroad. Unlike the Dutch sailors at the end of The Great Gatsby, at the beginning of his book Miller recalls disgust upon first catching sight of the American coast: “When I came up on deck to catch my first glimpse of the shore line I was immediately disappointed. Not only disappointed, I might say, but actually saddened. The American coast looked bleak and uninviting to me” (Nightmare 11). The sight of New York reinforces his despondency: “Sailing around the Battery from one river to the other, gliding close to shore, night coming on, the streets dotted with scurrying insects, I felt as I had always felt about New York—that it is the
most horrible place on God’s earth” (Nightmare 12). The people in America are mindless, inhuman even, compared to the people Miller associated with in Europe—artists, writers, astrologers, and vagabonds—people vibrant and creative. Miller’s immediate reaction is to consider that the U.S. is worse than he portrayed it in Tropic of Capricorn. If anything, people seem to have become more conformity-minded, more unquestioning, resulting in the deterioration of American democratic ideals.\(^5\) Of course, this reaction has more to do with Miller’s being forced out of his beloved France than with observations he already made in Capricorn. The U.S. is not exactly the same as when he left it in the early 1930s, its particular blend of optimism—embodied in the myth of American exceptionalism and in the hope offered by Roosevelt and his New Deal programs—appears tarnished and Miller projects that it will become bleaker still:

> A great change had come over America, no doubt about that. There were greater ones coming, I felt certain. We were only witnessing the prelude to something unimaginable. Everything was cock-eyed, and getting more and more so. Maybe we would end up on all fours, gibbering like baboons. Something disastrous was in store—everybody felt it. Yes, America had changed. The lack of resilience, the feeling of hopelessness, the resignation, the skepticism, the defeatism—I could scarcely believe my ears at first. And over it all that same veneer of fatuous optimism—only now decidedly cracked. (Nightmare 13)

With his facing such a dire prospect, it somewhat defies comprehension that Miller would seem to retain a measure of optimism, the one recorded in Nightmare, wherein he sorts through the margins of American culture in search of people dedicated to individuality and art. Yet he finds encouragement in memories of Paris. In a 26 July
1947 letter to J. Rives Childs, Miller admits: “on that hallucinating trip about the country I was more in France than in America” (qtd. in Wood 8). As recorded in Nightmare, after a restless night wandering the streets of Ruston, Louisiana, Miller has a dream:

I woke up and thought I was still in France, somewhere in the provinces perhaps. I soon realized, however, that I was mistaken. And then I fell back and with eyes wide open I began dreaming of my life in Paris. I began at the very beginning, with that first humble meal on the sidewalk of the Boulevard St. Germain, knowing not a word of French except oui and non. When I look back on it now it seems as though I packed a thousand years into that brief decade which ended with the war. (Nightmare 64-5)

Later, when Miller walks the streets of Los Angeles, he remembers his friend Alfred Perles’s desire to visit America, and he wonders if the reality of America would conflict with Perles’s idea of the country. “It would be a pity to disillusion him,” Miller remarks, as if he does not want to inflict on a friend the disappointment he feels (Nightmare 256).

Miller’s comments indicate his approach as he travels across America, or, more accurately, how his memories of Europe function as an oppositional commentary on America. Reflecting on Perles’s imagined American travels, Miller concedes, “And yet who can say? He might enjoy it hugely. He might not see anything but what he chose to see” (Nightmare 256). Indeed, a selective focus on encouraging sights and people is precisely what Miller incorporates in Nightmare. In other words, the optimism is more important to Miller than the negative critique. When he traveled with Perles to Vienna, Miller recalls, “Certainly it was not the Vienna I had dreamed of. And yet today, when I think of Vienna, I see the Vienna of my dreams and not the one with bed bugs and broken
zithers and stinking drains” (*Nightmare* 256). The major keys sounded in *Nightmare* are surely negative, but here and there can be heard the minor keys that register the chords of optimism that Miller carefully orchestrates in counterpoint to nightmare America.

The fourth major outlook that influences Miller’s ideas about individuality and art derives from his reading in transcendental literature, particularly Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman,6 and the influence of the American ideology of individualism as expressed by the anarchism of Emma Goldman. Beyond New York City, Miller hoped to locate some sign or remnant of an America that these writers seemed to promise if not proclaim. As he says about his desire to take the trip: “My one thought is to get out of New York, to experience something genuinely American. I want to revisit some of the spots I once knew. I want to get out into the open” (*Nightmare* 12). So he sets off somewhat buoyed by transcendental ideals, looking for places and people that can reaffirm his idea that the U.S. is not completely lost in the nightmare of conformity and materialism. Although Baxter claims that “Throughout all his work . . . Miller has insisted that he does not wish to appropriate a particular tradition, but instead to create a personal vision of the past that would subsume a variety of traditions” (43), Miller is quite clear that his vision of the American past is dominated by the idea of becoming fully a self as set forth in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Miller knows that these three American writers addressed a culture less appreciative of art than did their counterparts in Europe. Indeed, he understands that he will not find examples of his ideals in the busy cities and hives of production like New York and Boston that he initially visits. Instead he searches for what has been called “a healthy alternative America” (Ferguson 274),7 but which is, in reality, Miller’s search for individuals who live out an artistic and/or spiritual vision.
Of course, Miller is aware that his favorite transcendentalists were not only optimistic about but also critical of the U.S., just as Miller is. They confronted and critiqued the same problems that Miller does, particularly materialism and conformity. In “Democratic Vistas” (1871) Whitman warned about the ill effects that “the highly artificial and materialistic bases of modern civilization” (1015) would have on the individual. What Miller admires in their work are ideas of self-realization, spirituality, and art that transform individuals into self-reliant free thinkers with the ability to recreate themselves and perhaps, in turn, society.  

Remarking upon what has become the dominant view of Miller in relation to the Transcendentalists, Edward J. Rose says, “America was supposed to be the place where every citizen, every individual, was to be, as Thoreau says, a higher and more independent power than the state. For Miller, as for Thoreau or Whitman or Emerson, such an individual was a law and a world unto himself. The ideal state, the idea of America, is a community of such individuals” (13). While American myth and folklore may proclaim this ideal along with the transcendentalists, the reality of the U.S. clashes with these ideas. Miller, because of his experiences with the capitalist business model, fights his pessimism with optimism, reflected in his continued travels across the country. Thus Miller’s solution, which he accepts as a right and duty, is to protest against society’s problems since they limit the possibility inherent in Emerson’s concept of the “active soul” (57) in “The American Scholar” (1837), Thoreau’s “life without principle,” and Whitman’s “Strong and content” life of the open road (297).

Miller’s views in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* become consistent with and redefine an ideal American tradition, associated most closely with the Transcendentalists,
of pursuing an individualistic life. In the preface to *Stand Still Like the Hummingbird* (1962), Miller defends himself against critics who charge that his work is a direct challenge to the American tradition:

> I’m even more American than you, only against the grain. Which, if you will think a moment, serves to put me in the tradition. Nothing I have said against our way of life, our institutions, our failings, but what you will find even more forcibly expressed in Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson. Even before the turn of the century Whitman had addressed his fellow Americans thus: “You are in a fair way to create a whole nation of lunatics.” (viii)

Claiming to continue where Emerson and company left off, Miller, like William Carlos Williams, places himself in a direct line of literary descent that includes a long history of questioning America’s purpose and core values. He dwells on the promise of an Emersonian kind of individualism that leads to community self-culture and, by extension, national culture. Emerson’s concept of the individual, whom he defines in “Culture” (1860), is one who realizes his own potential and not one who serves a money-making master: “A man is a beggar who only lives to the useful, and, however he may serve as a pin or rivet in the social machine, cannot be said to have arrived at self-possession” (1030). Miller’s indebtedness to transcendental writers, especially Whitman, is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact the he kept notes of his travels across the U.S. in a printer’s edition of *Leaves of Grass* (Martin 376)—his attempt to transcribe a *Leaves* for a contemporary, though unreceptive, America.

Fueling an American ideology of individualism, the Transcendentalists also influenced another of Miller’s great idols, the anarchist Emma Goldman. Affected by
“the language of the homegrown American rebel” (Gornick 5), like Thoreau and Whitman, Goldman’s belief in the primacy of the individual had a lasting impact on Miller’s thinking and writing about America. During a trip West in 1913, he attended one of Goldman’s lectures and met her, and afterward he discovered anarchism as “a kind of anti-philosophy that somewhat formlessly blended cynicism with idealism and a deep suspicion of authority” (Dearborn 51). This experience seems to have never left him, as he claimed in a 1977 interview: “I’ve got a whole education listening to her lectures” (qtd. in Jones 212). Many of Miller’s pronouncements in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare sound as if they could come from the pages of Goldman’s essays, particularly when they concern her thoughts on the primacy of the individual and the role of the American artist. Concerning the individual, she wrote, “My lack of faith in the majority is dictated by my faith in the potentialities of the individual. Only when the latter becomes free to choose his associates for a common purpose, can we hope for order and harmony out of this world of chaos and inequality” (Goldman 44-45). Much of Miller’s project in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare concerns his searching for and support of individuals who have achieved an original life in the U.S. Additionally, Goldman’s thoughts on the plight of the artist are also echoed in Miller’s book: “The true artistic genius, who will not cater to accepted notions, who exercises originality, and strives to be true to life, leads an obscure and wretched existence” (Goldman 72). While Miller chronicles the lives of such obscure artists in America, by doing so he seeks to reclaim the importance that a life dedicated to art can have in a civilized society. Mainly, this importance involves creating self-sustaining individuals capable of critical thought and forward thinking and, thus, of leading America in a new, less materialist direction.
II.

Miller’s critique of the U.S. issues from his positive experiences in Europe and from his refusal to relinquish an idealism about America that focuses on self-actualization and the multiplication of others experiencing the same. Thus Miller’s journey across the U.S. is less one of journalistic discovery than of searching for people with transcendental principles who will affirm his conception of the U.S., whether good or bad. “Miller rages,” George Wickes says, “because he is truly American, because he believes in the national ideal with a fundamentalist fervor” (35). Yet this statement, typical of many general statements made about Miller’s critique and/or optimism, fails to consider that Miller does not believe so much in a “national ideal” as he does in an ideal that will enable him and others to create the self and life into art. Given Miller’s penchant for France, it is difficult to classify him simply as an American; yet his optimism about what the outsiders in the U.S. can accomplish does place him in an American tradition, one belonging to what Daniel Aaron describes in *Men of Good Hope* (1951). By the time Miller writes, however, he does not see the U.S. through the eyes of an American only but also through the eyes of someone who has been abroad and has experienced other ways of life. His critique in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* differs from those in the *Tropic* books and *Black Spring*, because it is infused with recollections of his life in Paris, where he wrote those books and became friends with artists of several kinds. Thus, as with Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, Miller’s advocacy of individuality and self-actualization has a counterpart in community, even if that community should turn out to be separated by hundreds of miles. The importance is that these individual pockets of what Thoreau considered a majority of one should exist, thereby helping to offset the
materialism and conformity mistakenly predominating in America. To search out and link isolated examples of such a nonconformist community lies at the heart of Miller’s cross-country trip as recorded in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*.

Miller’s reactions to the areas he visits along the road reflect his disenchantment with the U.S. but also his paradoxical connection to the land and its people, a tension that both angers him and gives rise to much of his writing. At the same time that he abhors American industry and mindless people, he sees and experiences much that he likes while routinely retreating into his imagination whether to undermine his observations or uphold his ideals. As a student of Whitman, Miller would have appreciated the irony in the last sentence to the 1855 preface of *Leaves of Grass*: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (Whitman 26). Others have noted that Miller is simultaneously “outside America while in it” (Widmer 82), and this is obvious with even a cursory reading of the book as Miller conducts his investigation, carefully viewing the U.S. and its people, intermingleing observations with memories of the past, and desiring to be elsewhere.13 This dislocation produces what J. D. Brown calls “ambivalence and confusion” (66) in Miller’s examination of America’s potential in relation to its reality. More accurately, Miller is neither ambivalent nor confused but rather deeply disturbed about the soulless circumstances in the U.S. that are antithetical to a creative life and that he vociferously dislikes.

Miller’s main reason for taking to the road is to discover whether the U.S. remains as bad as he fears and to find whether there are pockets of hope. He wants to see, explore, and expand on ideas of individuality and creativity. He uses the road to correlate his conflicting viewpoints, but, ultimately, the disparity between ideal and reality undermines
his attempt. Yet he also has practical reasons for taking the trip, including his desire to escape New York City, his lack of money, and his need to fulfill a publishing contract. Unlike his previous critiques of the U.S., he is not the disconnected observer simply recording his impressions. Instead he is the returned expatriate verifying his pessimism with first-hand experience. He originally left New York for France partly to flee his stultifying personal life and the demands and frustrations of his family, but now that he is home again he confronts those problems all over again. His mother and sister irritate him and he is afraid of running into his first wife, to whom he owes child support (Dearborn 212-13). Additionally, he received a contract and an advance to write a book about America and “record his impressions” (Dearborn 213). Although Doubleday only offered him a $750 advance (J. D. Brown 65), which was not enough to live comfortably on, the contract offered a practical excuse to escape his troubles and travel the country, to see for himself to what extent other places in the U.S. were like or different from New York City and what alternative experiences they might offer. These economic considerations to take the trip ironically bind him again to the very capitalistic system he critiques. He exploits the system, however, to pursue his ideal of life as art.

Essentially, though, Miller’s reason for traveling the country is a self-deceiving romantic urge, a Whitmanesque quest largely bound to fail. His lover’s quarrel with two-faced Columbia—the idealized beauty versus the ugly reality—cannot be reconciled. As he states at the beginning of The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, he has mixed motives for the journey:

I felt the need to effect a reconciliation with my native land. It was an urgent
need because, unlike most prodigal sons, I was returning not with the intention of remaining in the bosom of the family but of wandering forth again, perhaps never to return. I wanted to have a last look at my country and leave it with a good taste in my mouth. I didn’t want to run away from it, as I had originally. I wanted to embrace it, to feel that the old wounds were really healed, and set out for the unknown with a blessing on my lips. (*Nightmare* 10)

The urge to reconcile with the U.S. emphasizes the personal nature of the trip, but it mostly disappears during the course of the journey. Instead the focus becomes Miller’s search for community and the resulting private struggle with his native land.\(^\text{14}\) While, as Wickes claims, “The very notion of a transcontinental odyssey is in the best native tradition, with unexpected adventures and excursions off the beaten track a part of the pattern” (35-36), this opinion does not fit with Miller’s various intentions, which are clear in their aims to shed American influences and to find an artistic alternative to the dominant, homogenous U.S. culture. Wickes’s views are more in line with a road narrative like Emily Post’s *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (1916), which differs drastically from Miller’s whose narrative focuses far less on a comprehensive geographical description of his trip than on his reaction to people and places. While at the outset, the trip seems as if it “would be a fresh start, a reunion, and an exploration all in one” (Kishton 25), Miller has no intention of starting anew in America. There is, however, a paradox in Miller’s reasoning, as his words reflect his desire to find a place to create his art in America while remembering that it is a place antithetical to art. The “wounds” that he wants to heal are the frustrations with and revulsion over the American way of life that he has already rejected and does not want to be a part of again. The “blessing” that he
seeks is the validation of his belief that America is far less a place for individuals than it is for buying and selling goods. Despite his stated objectives, however, Miller’s pessimism is still not enough to override his optimism at times.

The structure of *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, created as it is out of a series of essays, allows Miller to imaginatively record the impressions of his trip based on specific people and places that interest him and to analyze them in relation to his ideals of individuality and artistic freedom experienced in Europe. The overall organization follows Miller’s journey from east to west, resembling the journey of pioneers and explorers but without their sense of hope. The main areas of the U.S. he travels through are the Midwest, the South, the Southwest, and Southern California; and, as he heads West, he fluctuates between pessimism and optimism. While he physically finishes the trip in Los Angeles, he ends the book with an extended essay on the South, the place he thinks has the richest history and fosters an individualism that he admires. For Miller, Los Angeles is not the promised land proclaimed by many settlers but, instead, the embodiment of the nightmare. The duality of physically completing his trip in California and concluding the book imaginatively in the South highlights Miller’s lack of resolution, establishes the dichotomy of his thinking as he travels throughout the U.S., and further details his struggle with the significant lack of art in the country. That he saves, out of the actual sequence of the road trip, the promising part for the end shows that a fragment of his idealism remains intact.

The free-ranging essay structure of the book adapts itself to Miller’s fluctuating concept of the road and allows his mind to wander through time and space, selecting those subjects he wants to discuss, particularly conformity and art, and only rarely
commenting on the details of highway travel. Driving through the country enables him to confront some of his major preoccupations, including his development as a writer and how best to further it. While Leon Lewis identifies Miller’s preoccupations as “the very American concerns with land, SPACE and the possibilities of transcendence for the self” (48), he fails to consider fully the extent to which the journey helps Miller realize his personal potential as an individual and artist.

Miller views the road in three ways, each of which allows him to engage in his multiple pursuits. First, it allows him to escape the smothering environment of New York City.16 Taking to Whitman’s open road with his friend the American painter Abe Rattner, Miller flees “the rat trap” (Nightmare 12) and joins those travelers before him who have escaped “Out of the dark confinement” (Whitman 306) to the wide-open spaces offered by the American highways. While Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach’s In the Driver’s Seat: The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture qualifies that the highway does not always lead to freedom but sometimes to aimless visions and homogeneity, that “the open road seals shut and the nightmare of confinement hangs heavy” (42-43), the road enables Miller to escape those areas that confine his sensibilities. After breaking away from the congestion of New York and Newark, Miller symbolically heads to New Hope, Pennsylvania, reveling in the promise offered by the road: “In another hour, however, we were in open country, the traffic almost nil, the air tangy, the scenery promising. We were on our way!” (Nightmare 15). Second, while it offers the expectation of freedom, the road also plunges him into the mundane aspects of U.S. culture. Upon entering the Holland Tunnel, Miller declares, “It was a nightmare. The beginning of the endless nightmare, I should say” (Nightmare 15). Third, the road
leads to discovery, offering Miller the opportunity to experience the U.S. according to what he would consider Whitman’s “whim.” The episodic nature of the book mirrors the episodic nature of adventures on the road in the tradition of the picaresque novel; Miller has the mobility to go where he wants and to meet the people who interest him. He perfectly captures, though, the paradox of highway travel, admitting sardonically, “The only way to see America is by automobile—that’s what everybody says. It’s not true, of course, but it sounds wonderful” (Nightmare 14). The idea that the auto offers freedom but also confinement is a trope of many road narratives, and Miller evades this problem by extensive interaction with people and places that appeal to him.

The areas of the country Miller travels through reflect his fundamental conflict between the nightmare of conformity (in the Midwest and Southern California) and the ideals of art and individuality (in the South and Southwest), or, as he puts it in a notebook he kept during his trip, “‘Maps versus Reality’” (qtd. in Baxter 138). He encounters the nightmare in urban areas like Chicago and Los Angeles, where wealth and poverty exist side by side, and they become for him a symbol of the distortion of the American Dream. Touring the Mecca Apartments located on the South Side of Chicago, Miller observes the desolation that is the underbelly of the American Dream: “There are acres and acres of vacant lots here on the South Side... Reminds me of a diseased jawbone, some of it smashed and pulverized, some of it charred and ulcerated” (Nightmare 51). African-Americans are the inheritors of this wasteland, afforded freedom in name but not in fact: “I wonder what the great Emancipator would say if he could see the glorious freedom in which the black man moves now. We made them free, yes—free as rats in a dark cellar” (Nightmare 53). Miller contrasts the South Side with the Wrigley Building, which
represents the wealthy in the U.S. who become successful with the help of the aspiring middle class and, ultimately, at the expense of the lower class. Miller remarks, “Of course if you walk on a few blocks you can see the other side of the picture—the grand façade of Michigan Avenue where it seems as if the whole world were composed of millionaires. At night you can see the great monument to chewing gum lit up by flood-lights and marvel that such a monstrosity of architecture should be singled out for special attention” (*Nightmare* 52).

Southern California, where Miller encounters the emptiness of Americans with money and their misguided ideals, reinforces his negative ideas about the artificial nature of life in the U.S. In Los Angeles, he feels even more like an outsider because he rejects the greed, jingoism, and complacency that he thinks are all antithetical to art but that he finds in most of the people he meets. He spends his first night in Los Angeles at a Hollywood party with strangers who embody the worst aspects of U.S. culture, “wealthy people, people who were bored to death” (*Nightmare* 247), who argue the greatness of American democracy and Franklin D. Roosevelt. These people are so far from his ideals of life and art that they do not even warrant identities: “I had no idea where I was, whose house I had been in or whom I had been introduced to” (*Nightmare* 255-56). But Los Angeles is the end of the road for Miller, and he has shed connections to false ideals and people, symbolized by his isolation at the dinner party. What he finds embodied in the people in California clashes with his transcendental ideals. Sunset Boulevard, where he encounters a plethora of goods and services, provokes a litany of the residents’ self-indulgence:
Eurythmic dancing, ball room dancing, tap dancing, artistic photography, ordinary photography, lousy photography, electro-fever treatment, internal douche treatment, ultra-violet ray treatment, elocution lessons, psychic readings, institutes of religion, astrological demonstrations, hands read, feet manicured, elbows massaged, faces lifted, warts removed, fat reduced, insteps raised, corsets fitted, busts vibrated, corns removed, hair dyed, glasses fitted, soda jerked, hangovers cured, headaches driven away, flatulence dissipated, business improved, limousines rented, the future made clear, the war made comprehensible, octane made higher and butane lower, drive in and get indigestion, flush the kidneys, get a cheap car wash, stay awake pills and go to sleep pills, Chinese herbs are very good for you and without a Coca-cola life is unthinkable. From the car window it’s like a strip teaser doing the St. Vitus dance—a corny one. (Nightmare 257-58)

Miller finds the outlandish life in Los Angeles discouraging, and, at the end of his travels, he fully realizes that homogeneity and mediocrity saturate U.S. culture. Kingsley Widmer, who conducted the first full-length critical study of Miller’s work, writes, “The Millerian catalogue of oddities, leveling religion and Coca-cola, fusing the Marquis de Sade and right-wing Americanism, linking the faerique and the neon, provide the reality of Sunset Boulevard” (83), but it is a reality of false ideals that Miller rejects. Accordingly, Miller’s pessimism is confirmed in California, and he concludes, “Los Angeles gives one the feeling of the future more strongly than any city I know of. A bad future, too, like something out of Fritz Lang’s feeble imagination” (Nightmare 257). The physical trip ends with a negative assessment, but Miller concludes the book by
opposing his criticism of Los Angeles with an appreciation of the South—a testimony to idealism. He sets up this contrast to demonstrate that he is not a pessimist and to reiterate that his idealism lives, just as Emerson’s, Thoreau’s, and Whitman’s lived on, despite their incisive criticism. The South is a delight compared to the nightmare he encounters elsewhere in the country because here individualism and art reside in the midst of the materialistic gods of American society: “This world of the South corresponds more nearly to the dream life which the poet imagines than do other sections of the country” (Nightmare 284). But Miller’s views of the South are problematic and, at times, misguided. True, he sees much to admire in the South, particularly its fostering of individuals, but he also evades the South’s history of racial strife and oppression. In fact, for one so concerned with personal freedom, Miller distressingly glosses over the issue of slavery by minimizing its impact on the people and culture of the South. He claims that, with time, “slave culture” could have advanced civilization: “[I]n our Southern States that culture known as the ‘slave culture’ had exhibited only its first blossoms. We know what the slave cultures of India, Egypt, Rome and Greece bequeathed the world. We are grateful for the legacy; we do not spurn the gift because it was born of injustice” (Nightmare 286). Because of his idealism, he ignores the negative, not wanting to be a pessimist. His idealism lives, the way Emerson’s, Thoreau’s, and Whitman’s lived on, despite their incisive criticism. Despite these problematic views, Miller relates life in the South to that in Europe because its culture focuses less on production and more on nourishing uniqueness. He respects the “old South” (Nightmare 288), which, in his mind, offers a combination of history and myth: “the atmosphere is charged with magical names, epoch-making events, inventions, explorations, discoveries.
Rice, tobacco, cotton—out of these three elements alone the South created a great symphonic pageant of human activity” (Nightmare 288). Despite what he views as the South’s distinctiveness, it is an area traditionally viewed by other areas of the country as racist and backward.

Miller’s ideal view of the South is largely historical, however, and the present he encounters lacks vitality. He views the present in contrast to the positive historical cultures that he thinks valued art. The new South Miller encounters never recovered from the Civil War and Reconstruction:

The South is still an open, gaping wound. The new Atlanta, sprung from the ashes of the old, is a hideous nondescript city combining the evil, ugly traits of both North and South. The new Richmond is lifeless and characterless. New Orleans lives only in its tiny French quarter and even that is being rapidly demolished. Charleston is a beautiful memory, a corpse whose lower limbs have been resuscitated. Savannah is a living tomb about which there still clings a sensual aura as in old Corinth. (Nightmare 284-85)

Miller’s pessimism qualified by his optimism is evident in this passage, and he thinks that the history of the Old South will yet have an influence on the present. As he notes, “It is all over now. A new South is being born. The old South was ploughed under. But the ashes are still warm” (Nightmare 288). Since Miller appreciates this unique area, he criticizes that it is being destroyed by the spread of a mass culture that homogenizes the individual charms of regional America. He taps Walt Disney as the patron saint of this mass culture: “He’s the master of the nightmare” (Nightmare 40), and Miller, after all his domestic and international travels, foresees very little to slow this proliferation.
As Miller sees more to criticize in the South, he turns increasingly to his dreams of freedom and individuality as a bulwark against reality. When reality becomes too depressing, he recreates memories of a more hopeful time to color the present with optimism. His reactions to Jacksonville, Florida, and Mobile, Alabama, demonstrate how his past experiences in the U.S. and Europe, laden with idealism, influence his views of the U.S. In each of these Southern cities, he reacts against the artificiality of the present by modifying it with memories of the past. In the “Vive la France!” chapter, Miller contrasts his experience with “the dregs of humanity” (Nightmare 60) in Jacksonville with memories of the French countryside. “Of all the little man-made parks,” Miller writes, “I think the one in Jacksonville, Florida is perhaps the meanest, drabbest, shabbiest. . . . It reeks with tuberculosis, halitosis, varicose veins, paranoia, mendacity, onanism and occultism” (Nightmare 60). Perhaps remembering a failed trip to Florida in the late twenties when Miller thought he could make his fortune in real estate (Kishton 24), he escapes his disgust with this failed capitalistic venture by retreating in his imagination to memories of his ex-wife, June, and an idyllic bicycle trip through Auxerre, France. Contrasting life in France with life in the U.S., he says, “In America we had known nothing but hardships and misery. And now suddenly we were free and all Europe lay before us. . . . We would see everything” (Nightmare 67). The two pictures in Miller’s mind offer a stark contrast: the depressing park in Florida embodies the past while the French countryside represents the future. France, as always, is part of the ideal past for Miller, where he freely pursued his art as a way of life. This way of life then becomes art itself.
Another instance where Miller’s ideals of art conflict with reality in the South appears in the chapter “My Dream of Mobile.” From the obscure past, Miller constructs an imaginary place that is more evocative than real because he creates it from fragments of memory, actual and imagined history, and literature. Widmer claims, “Another way of being outside America while in it—the apparent therapeutic function of much of Miller’s writing—is to see only the dream of America” (82). Widmer sees Miller retaining his idealism (a view I agree with), but he fails to recognize that Miller’s views are not “therapeutic” because even the dream of America, at times, is not enough for him—he searches for an alternative. True, Miller in this chapter creates an idealized portrait of Mobile, Alabama, a place he has never visited, to create a sense of America while an expatriate in Paris. But he questions his relation to his native country because his friend, Alfred Perles, continually asks Miller to describe it, which raises doubts: “Naturally when a man has such an unbounded enthusiasm for a place you are familiar with, a place you think you know, you begin to wonder if you do know” (Nightmare 185). His vision of Mobile does not result from any first-hand experience but from impressions gathered from literature and half-remembered history. As he confides, “The Mobile I knew was thoroughly imaginary and I wanted to enjoy it all by myself” (Nightmare 185). Yet he questions the memory based on history: “How did I visualize Mobile? To tell the truth, it’s all quite hazy now. Hazy, fuzzy, amorphous, crumbling. To get the feel of it again I have to mention the name of Admiral Farragut. Admiral Farragut steamed into Mobile Bay. I must have read that somewhere when a child. It stuck in my crop” (Nightmare 185-86). The Mobile of his mind satisfies Miller to such an extent that he does not even bother to visit the city while he is in the South, as if he might fear discovering its failure
to coincide with his fantasy. Nevertheless, the dream, the fantasy, as Widmer suggests, conforms to Miller’s ideal visions of America that periodically appear throughout *Nightmare* and helps to reinforce his threatened idealism.

The Southwest is another area of the U.S. that represents how Miller’s preoccupation with an illusory or visionary past warps the reality of his travels. Journeying through Arizona and New Mexico, for Miller, is like delving into his imagination as he looks for the myth beneath reality, calling the Southwest a magical land, “Yes, a land of enchantment, not so much because of what is visible as because of what is hidden in the arid wastes” (*Nightmare* 202). He finds the prehistoric ruins of the Southwest attractive because they reflect the romance of France and Greece and not the U.S.’s relatively short history. His comments are comparable to the way he views the South, focusing on historical perspective, a people’s promise cut short (as in the ruins of the cliff dwellings), and the celebration of art in life. He claims that “Only in the cliff dwellings of the Southwest, perhaps, does the work of man here in America arouse emotions remotely analogous to those which the ruins of other great peoples inspire in the traveler” (*Nightmare* 287). Because the land is full of unspoken mystery and, in its isolation, unburdened by the material concerns of contemporary America, Miller thinks that “Perhaps the secret of the American continent is contained in this wild, forbidding and partially unexplored territory. It is the land of the American Indian par excellence. Everything is hypnagogic, chthonian and super-celestial. Here Nature has gone gaga and dada” (*Nightmare* 239).²¹ Miller appreciates most of all that the Southwest is untouched by the commercial pandemonium and monetary obsessions that define urban life in the
The Southwest is unwritten for him, a place that offers freedom, just as France does.

As other road narratives have done before his, Miller’s ideas about the Southwest also involve romanticized notions about the place of Native Americans in U.S. history and their supposed freedom, however much in conflict those ideas may be with reality. To Miller, Native Americans embody the freedom and possibility inherent in the Southwestern landscape. He ignores their marginalized position in the U.S., celebrating instead their originality and freedom to pursue their unique cultural life. Zephine Humphrey, in a touristic account of her cross-country trip, Green Mountains to Sierras (1936), has similar romantic notions of Native Americans in Taos, New Mexico, that are tempered by criticism: “Intensely I understood and envied the simplicity and serenity of their lives. Here was a people which had always known and had never abandoned the economy of adjustment which our burdened, extravagant, unhappy generation is striving so feverishly to discover” (76). As Miller sees it, while most people lead complicated, ever-changing lives, “the Indian lives very much as he has always lived, unconvinced that we have a better way of life to offer him” (Nightmare 228). This oversimplification summarizes Miller’s stance that an individual must pursue an ideal in order to live an authentic life in a capitalistic U.S. Earlier in his travels, he contrasts an American Indian with an American worker:

Do you think it would be easy to get him to change places with one of our steady workers? What sort of persuasion would you use? What now could you promise him that would be truly seductive? A used car that he could drive to work in? A slap-board shack that he could, if he were ignorant enough, call a home? An
education for his children which would lift them out of vice, ignorance and superstition but still keep them in slavery? A clean, healthy life in the midst of poverty, crime, filth, disease and fear? Wages that barely keep your head above water and often not? Radio, telephone, cinema, newspaper, pulp magazine, fountain pen, wrist watch, vacuum cleaner or other gadgets ad infinitum? Are these the baubles that make life worthwhile? Are these what make us happy, carefree, generous-hearted, sympathetic, kindly, peaceful and godly?” (29)

This litany of accusations, embracing as it does an idealized conception of Native Americans as the “noble savage” apart from civilization and its evils, highlights the tensions that Miller encounters in different sections of the country, each with its own preoccupations but each antithetical to his ideals. Native Americans therefore represent self-reliance and optimism, an incongruous view based on an imaginary reversal of U.S. history, which mainly involves their subjugation and failed efforts to assimilate them. Miller thinks the Native American way of life will outlast any perceived improvements of industrial society:

He [the Native American] waits stoically for the work of self-destruction to complete itself. When we have grown utterly soft and degenerate, when we collapse inwardly and fall apart, he will take over this land which we have desperately striven to lay waste. He will move out of the bad lands which have turned into Reservations for the Untouchables and reclaim the forests and streams which were once his. It will grow quiet again when we are gone: no more hideous factories and mills, no more blast furnaces, no more chimneys and smoke-stacks. (Nightmare 228-29)
This outlook is strongly influenced by Miller’s reading of Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, especially the conception of the “Fellah type” that remains after civilizations disappear: “The whole pyramid of cultural man vanishes. It crumbles from the summit, first the world-cities, then the provincial forms, and finally the land itself. . . . At the last, only the primitive blood remains, alive, but robbed of its strongest and most promising elements” (2: 105). Miller prefers the primitive because it is devoid of false progress, or what he views as nothing more than an empty desire to buy and consume goods.\(^2\) The simple life of Native Americans, who respected and lived in harmony with the land’s rhythms, represents a nonmaterialistic ideal that Miller can respect because it is punctuated by nonconformity.

Although Miller adores the Southwest, it is not the ideal place for the creation of art and individuality that he thinks it is, because he also encounters there the banal tourist culture that he elsewhere tries to escape. The space and open terrain offer the perfect place for his imagination to wander and create, but his thoughts are interrupted by encroaching mass culture, often in the form of tourists who arrive on the very road he uses to escape. Reacting to a woman’s negative comments about the Grand Canyon at sunset, Miller says, “But if she had looked at the ground beneath her feet she might have observed that it was flushed with a beautiful lavender and old rose; and if she had raised her eyes to the topmost rim of rock which supports the thin layer of soil that forms the plateau she would have noticed that it was of a rare tint of black, a poetic tinge of black” (*Nightmare* 220). Miller derides American tourists who visit famous landmarks as if they were adding items to a resume of places visited, rather than appreciating the aesthetic experience he aims for during his travels. He regrets that most Americans cannot
appreciate nature on its own terms, or, “God himself in all his glory, manifesting his grandeur without the aid or intervention of man” (Nightmare 222). Miller mocks them precisely because they arrive in a never-ending stream, appearing to see the sights, leaving after a day or two, and then replaced by more vacationers eager to say they visited the Grand Canyon. America is not a land of opportunity but a scam, drawing the most people in for the greatest gain: “Nobody raves about the salt in the ocean. One goes there to swelter and stew and be honestly gypped by the most expert gyppers in the world” (Nightmare 222). Experiencing nature truly and on its own terms as might a Transcendentalist seems to be Miller’s aim in these passages, but, because of commercial distractions, he ultimately does not find that communion even in the areas of the country that most appeal to him.

III.

As Miller’s search for a like-minded community continues on the road, he turns his attention to individuals who uphold his ideals. In contrast with the banal reality of America, Miller applauds those individuals who break free from the dominant culture, mainly artists and primarily people in the South and Southwest. These are the people who have created artistic lives within the deadening routines of conformity. They have taken the little hint of freedom America offers and created an original life from it. In The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America, John A. Jakle notes that, unlike most tourists, Miller “deliberately traveled to cultivate other people. In recollecting trips, he identified the most beautiful woman, the most masterful individual, the best adjusted person, the person happiest in his work” (9). Miller does not select such people for
“sociability” (9), as Jakle suggests, but rather for confirming his own artistic vision. Miller’s virulence shifts to delight when he finds original thinkers or artists in the U.S., though his optimism is tempered by the larger social and political reality in which they live. Like Tocqueville before him, Miller finds that those who go against the grain are, usually by choice, marginalized, but he also discovers that they have to be marginalized in America in order to live the way they wish. Miller’s optimism surges when he discovers these individuals, who embrace the freedom available in the U.S. that the majority, the dominant culture bent on the material, forgo in their conformist, herd mentality. Commenting on the South, Miller says, “Here there are more eccentric, bizarre characters, I imagine, than in any other part of the United States. The South breeds character, not sterile intellectualism” (Nightmare 108), and the Southwest is a land of “enchantment, sorcery, illusionismus, phantasmagoria” (Nightmare 239), a virtual breeding ground for originality. As he moves west across the country, Miller seeks out people who have the courage to make an original life for themselves, to carry on despite the nightmare. In short, they create their own reality. These people are individuals who embody the spirit of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. While his list of individuals includes luminaries such as photographer Alfred Stieglitz, painter John Marin in New York City, and muralist Hilaire Hiler in San Francisco, it also includes eccentrics like occultist Albert Pike and William Hope Harvey, whose dream was to build a pyramid at Mount Ne, Arkansas. Four other individuals—Weeks Hall, Dr. Marion Souchon, Edgar Varese, and the “Desert Rat”—each fulfill a transcendental ideal associated with developing the self through intuition. Miller’s optimism for the future of the U.S. and his desire to create life as art lies in these figures.
One of these individuals is Weeks Hall, an ex-painter who, much like Thoreau, has made his life a work of art. Owner of “The Shadows,” an old mansion located in New Iberia, Louisiana, Hall is what most people would call an eccentric, who forges a unique life on the outskirts of traditional U.S. society much as Thoreau did at Walden Pond. Miller champions his uniqueness and imagination: “[H]e was a character, a rich, amiable personality” (Nightmare 96). Hall collects people, particularly artists, giving them space to work. He is also a great conversationalist in the tradition of the South, talking until his guests have retired for the evening and then calling people on the phone until the early morning hours. He is a generous host and entertainer: “Everything had to be done in a prescribed way, not because he was domineering or tyrannical, but because he wanted his guests to derive the utmost from every situation or event” (Nightmare 96). Miller appreciates Hall because he focuses on cultivating a creative space in which to foster his individuality, and, like Thoreau, he “wished to live deliberately” (Walden and Resistance 61). He is an individual who has managed to carve out a distinctive life that does not rest on the false ideals of work, materialism, and consumption.

Another artist figure Miller celebrates for his Emersonian cultivation of the self is Dr. Marion Souchon of New Orleans. When Miller meets Souchon, he is a successful surgeon of seventy, who began painting at sixty and thus “can escape the tread-mill” (Nightmare 118) of American society by passionately pursuing his art. Dr. Souchon connects directly to Miller’s ideals of individuality and self-sufficiency necessary for artistic creation: “But there is a class of hardy men, old-fashioned enough to have remained rugged individuals, openly contemptuous of the trend, passionately devoted to their work, impossible to bribe or seduce, working long hours, often without reward or
fame, who are motivated by a common impulse—the joy of doing as they please”
(Nightmare 117). Miller is attracted to artists like Dr. Souchon precisely because they have the courage to act in opposition to a conformity-minded society. In Miller’s Emersonian definition, “An artist is primarily one who has faith in himself. He does not respond to the normal stimuli: he is neither a drudge nor a parasite. He lives to express himself and in so doing enriches the world” (Nightmare 118). Because artists like Dr. Souchon are scarce and lack influence in America, Miller wants to give them a voice. Their voice is raised against American pragmatism: “Nothing comes to fruition here except utilitarian projects. You can ride for thousands of miles and be utterly unaware of the existence of the world of art. You will learn all about beer, condensed milk, rubber goods, canned food, inflated mattresses, etc., but you will never see or hear anything concerning the masterpieces of art” (Nightmare 157). Dr. Souchon is one who creates art in the midst of the chaotic demands of U.S. society.

While driving through the Southwest, Miller searches for another kind of artist, one who might startle people out of their complacency. While not actually encountering this particular artist, Miller extols the virtues of the French-born composer Edgar Varese, who spent much of his time in the U.S., particularly New York City, Santa Fe, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Thinking of him as he crosses the desert, Miller links Varese to his ideals and the landscape. The function of artists like Varese is to “awaken the world” (Nightmare 167), echoing Thoreau’s purpose in Walden, and he fills that role in Miller’s opinion by acting “like dynamite” (Nightmare 166). Varese’s avant-garde compositions create new paradigms by which new ways of thinking can emerge. Individuals like Varese are exactly the kind of artists the U.S. needs to show that there are alternatives to
the norm: “If it weren’t for this constant struggle on the part of a few creative types to expand the sense of reality in man the world would literally die out” (Nightmare 169). Like Whitman, Varese heralds a new art form that also speaks to a new vision of America.

In the “Desert Rat,” Miller finds a man who creates an art of living. Miller fittingly recognizes this original American, who has no proper name, simply by what he is, for, to paraphrase Emerson, a true individual must “not do, but be.” The Desert Rat is “self-contained” (Nightmare 218) in Miller’s estimation, needing only himself for guidance. He has “the active soul” (57) that Emerson discusses in “The American Scholar” (1837) and rejects the restlessness associated with modern culture. The Desert Rat claims, “Everything was too easy—nobody wanted to fight and struggle any more. Men were getting soft. Nothing could satisfy them any more” (Nightmare 222). So the Desert Rat thinks, and Miller agrees, that one way to attain individuality is to reject consumerism and cultivate one’s gifts in solitude. Miller disagrees with another road writer, Lewis Gannett, who finds in his trip across the country that “Desert dwellers, we had gathered from the books, were misanthropists, deliberately lonely, fleeing the society of fellow man, and inclined to be a bit mean spirited when fellow man forced his society upon them. We did not find it so” (79). Living alone in the Southwest separates the Desert Rat from the temptations of the regular work-a-day world and connects him directly to nature. Like Thoreau, The Desert Rat confronts the essential facts of existence: “He went on about the virtue of living alone in the desert, of living with the stars and rocks, studying the earth, listening to one’s own voice, wondering about Creation and that sort of thing”
(Nightmare 223). He becomes for Miller, along with Thoreau and others, the ideal for creating life as art.

Miller realizes, however, that American society accepts what has been accepted, and so Miller’s critique of the U.S. arises out of his optimism for individuals who embrace transcendental ideals and the creative impulse but who are ignored or rejected by society.\textsuperscript{27} For Miller (in keeping with Emerson), art is revolutionary, it breaks boundaries, but narrow-minded thinking in the U.S. rejects such change. As J. D. Brown observes, “Insofar as art becomes a means to discover and express individual autonomy and personal joy . . . it is antithetical to modern institutions” (72). For Miller, though, art functions as much more than joy: creating art is synonymous with creating life, and this goal of art also is antithetical to modern individuals who would rather accept the status-quo than change their lives. According to Miller, America has ways of crushing the influence of the artist, the appeal of money as an obstruction to leading a deliberate life being the strongest of them all: “If he has any talent he’s doomed to have it crushed one way or another. The American way is to seduce a man by bribery and make a prostitute of him. Or else to ignore him, starve him into submission and make a hack of him” (Nightmare 156-57). American society rewards those who are useful to a school or a business and who contribute something of value like time and labor, who make money and have things, and it looks down on those who do not do so. Miller asks, “Is it that the great goal of American manhood is to become the successful business man? Or just a ‘success’, [sic] regardless of what form or shape, what purpose or significance, success manifests itself in and through?” (Nightmare 129). Americans are unable to appreciate art, according to Miller, because real art insists on change, on seeing things in new ways:
“Aesthetically we are probably the most conservative people in the world. . . . We have been educated to such a fine—or dull—point that we are incapable of enjoying something new, something different, until we are first told what it’s all about” (Nightmare 166). But Miller finds that creative people, because of the dominant social climate, are mostly absent, forced to conform or be crushed by society’s dominant values. As long as American society continues to reward those who are successful by economic standards alone, the individual and the artist will continue to be marginalized.

IV.

Perhaps what best exemplifies the nightmare/ideal dichotomy in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare is Miller’s vituperative undermining of the false standards of materialism and conformity in the U.S. that conflict with his desire to create life as art. The nightmare is the condition of the American materialistic juggernaut. The ideal is represented by people he meets along the way, mostly artists. Miller experiences the nightmare in industrial cities like Pittsburgh and Detroit, symbols of production and power responsible for perpetuating the materialistic system. In a hotel room in Pittsburgh, he complains, “I am in a small, supposedly comfortable room of a modern hotel equipped with all the latest conveniences. The bed is clean and soft, the shower functions perfectly, the toilet seat has been sterilized since the last occupancy . . . soap, towels, lights, stationery, everything is provided in abundance” (Nightmare 26-27). The end result of this materialism is consumerism—goods and services that enhance uniformity and lifelessness, producing a sterility antithetical to art and individuality. What Philip Rahv calls Miller’s “progress-hating and machine-smashing” attitude (29) reflects Miller’s
belief in the absence of personal growth in the U.S. Miller does not hate progress or machines as such; he hates that Americans become complacent about progress and machines. Just as Thoreau inveighed against the factory system of production in Walden, so Miller critiques the system in Detroit, which symbolizes the soul-crushing isolation of art in the U.S.: “You wouldn’t suspect that there was such a thing as a soul if you went to Detroit. Everything is too new, too slick, too bright, too ruthless. Souls don’t grow in factories. Souls are killed in factories” (Nightmare 42). Pittsburgh fares no better. Jakle claims, “Pittsburgh, to Miller, was too utilitarian. Certainly, he did not find the place picturesque, and it lacked romantic qualities; but, above all, it seemed to be a self-destroying habitat. Miller’s view of the role of man in his environment had been violated and he felt violated, accordingly” (48–49). Jakle’s notion of utilitarianism as destructive fits with Miller’s views about art, since he is concerned mostly with creating a self-sustaining environment where he and others like him can thrive. He does not find this in industrial centers. This culture consumes goods and selves in the name of happiness, but it leads to a vapid existence, empty at the core, without a soul.

The pervasive pursuit of material goods in America, for Miller, develops into a consumerist nightmare that either ignores or rejects the individuality he thinks is necessary for self-reliance. He tried to escape the nightmare by living in France but, encountering it again, Miller observes how pervasive it seems to be. Consumerism goes against Thoreau’s dictum in Walden—“Simplify, simplify” (62)—and Emerson’s warning in “Man the Reformer”—“We spend our incomes for paint and paper, for a hundred trifles, I know not what, and not for the things of a man. Our expense is almost all for conformity. It is for cake that we run in debt; ”t [sic] is not the intellect, not the
heart, not beauty, not worship, that costs so much” (143-44). Miller reviles the American habit of looking outward for personal satisfaction rather than inward. The American focus on acquiring goods and maximizing comfort minimizes or stifles the desire for individuality and art. What Americans fear most in considering the approaching world war is that it may interrupt a way of life with which they have become comfortable. Most Americans are caught up in the mad pursuit of material goods, and they have become adapted to narrow views of the world instead of exploring other ways to live. They have lost the art of self-reliance, which, as both Emerson and Miller make clear, assumes opposition to conformity and consistency, with the resulting gravitation to material rather than spiritual matters.28 But war will disrupt the familiar indulgence in physical gratification:

Our world is a world of things. It is made up of comforts and luxuries, or else the desire for them. What we dread most, in facing the impending débâcle, is that we shall be obliged to give up our gew-gaws, our gadgets, all the little comforts which have made us so uncomfortable. There is nothing brave, chivalrous, heroic or magnanimous about our attitude. We are not peaceful souls; we are smug, timid, queasy and quaky. (Nightmare 17)

In opposition to the dominant U.S. culture, Miller views an against-the-grain search for an authentic life as bringing peace instead of the conventional comfort of job and home.

As Miller travels west, he continually confronts the catalyst for Americans’ complacent attitudes. Notwithstanding the ideology of free enterprise, capitalism has undermined the individualistic spirit of America and created instead inequality and disparity. Traveling the U.S., Miller confronts more symptoms to critique, particularly
the fact that free enterprise offers false hope to those not in positions of power. While Stephen L. Starck claims that “Belief systems focused on capitalism and material benefits—people believe in the value of commodities, they believe in the importance of fashion—fail to produce faith in the future” (232), Miller is prepared to trade the future for the present and the development of personal possibility. The entrepreneurial spirit that drives the capitalist economy has resulted in a complex society of great wealth and extreme poverty along with a comfortable middle class that aspires to more. Pittsburgh, once again, symbolizes modern industrial America, “the symbol of brutal power and wealth” (*Nightmare* 26). This inequitable system creates a desire in those who do not have much money to move up the ladder of wealth by accumulating goods, a never-ending phenomenon that Thorstein Veblen labeled “pecuniary emulation” (22) in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Miller’s critique of capitalism owes a debt to Emma Goldman, who early in life influenced his thinking and development as a writer. After meeting her Miller admits that it was “something that altered the whole course of my life” (*Nightmare* 243-44), he remembers. Of course Miller was attracted to anarchism because of his innate nonconformity and wariness of authority (Dearborn 51), but he was also attracted to the freedom of thought and action advocated in anarchism, which opposes conformity and homogeneity. Conformity results in people striving to attain standards of living comparable to friends and neighbors, and thus it subtracts from the primacy of the individual. The older he gets and the wider he travels, the more Miller realizes that the country is increasingly bound to popular opinion. Americans, in Miller’s view, do not live up to the sentiments expressed by the founders of the country or the transcendentalists; they are not free, not democratic, but a senseless, faceless mob:
We are accustomed to think of ourselves as an emancipated people; we say that we are democratic, liberty-loving, free of prejudices and hatred. This is the melting-pot, the seat of a great human experiment. Beautiful words, full of noble, idealistic sentiment. Actually we are a vulgar, pushing mob whose passions are easily mobilized by demagogues, newspaper men, religious quacks, agitators and such like. To call this a society of free peoples is blasphemous. (Nightmare 20)

Although he values the idea of America, Miller abhors the practice and exposes the fundamental flaw in democratic thought: that Americans want to be part of a group, or what Tocqueville called the “tyranny of the majority” (250). In other words, “The land of opportunity has become the land of senseless sweat and struggle” (Nightmare 20).

Miller’s exposure to these attitudes are made possible, of course, by his automobile. The road narrative is complicated by Miller’s reliance on the automobile, which signifies involvement in the material culture he despises. The automobile has elevated the standard of living but also homogenized the lives of average Americans. For Miller, it is both a blessing and a curse: it is a means of escape into the margins of American culture but also a symbol of materialism, comfort, and movement without real progress (real progress in the sense of self-culture). Appropriately enough, the automobile represents the loss of identity that the foolish desire for goods wreaks on an individual, or, as he says, “The automobile stands out in my mind as the very symbol of falsity and illusion” (Nightmare 33). Yet he is implicated in the cycle of material acquisition as he too must buy, operate, and maintain an automobile, which breaks down several times in the course of his journey. The delays and stress Miller associates with owning a car—a trope of most road narratives—are memorably characterized by Claire Boltwood, the heroine of
Sinclair Lewis’s road novel *Free Air* (1919), who must battle poor roads and a failing engine as she travels from New York City to Seattle, Washington. In the chapter “Automotive Passacaglia,” Miller describes his fascination with the intricate engine after watching a mechanic in Albuquerque, New Mexico, repair his car’s temperature gauge. “There’s just one thing to remember about driving any automobile apparatus and that is this,” he concludes sarcastically, “when the car begins to act as though it had the blind staggers it’s time to get out and put a bullet through its head” (*Nightmare* 217).31

Besides conformity, Miller finds that another problem in the capitalist economic system arises when the contribution of the worker is no longer considered comparable to his worth, further leading to the devaluation of the individual. Across the country he encounters people who labor at the expense of personal fulfillment. With an interpretive ideal of the past derived from his nostalgia, he claims after traveling through the industrial Midwest, “We have degenerated; we have degraded the life which we sought to establish on this continent” (*Nightmare* 30). Referring to the practice of most businesses and industry to disregard American workers who are past their age of usefulness, Miller concludes, ironically, that living as an automaton for most of their lives has by then ruined them: “It must be admitted in passing, of course, that the average worker who has functioned from adolescence as a robot is about ready for the scrap-heap at that age. . . . So far as true vitality goes, beyond forty-five we are a nation of derelicts” (*Nightmare* 117). Such an automatism extends to the rest of the world, even to his beloved Europe. Workers may think they want the life and apparent advantages of the American worker, but they do not recognize what the average American sacrifices to attain even the transitory well-being of the middle class:
They don’t realize that when the American worker steps out of his shining tin chariot he delivers himself body and soul to the most stultifying labor a man can perform. They have no idea that it is possible, even when one works under the best possible conditions, to forfeit all rights as a human being. They don’t know that the best possible conditions (in American lingo) mean the biggest profits for the boss, the utmost servitude for the worker, the greatest confusion and disillusionment for the public in general. (*Nightmare* 33)

Up to a point, these views reflect Marxist thought in that Miller is against the abuse of workers in the capitalist economic model, but he holds to individualist and artistic ideals, not to those of the collective state.

Another problem with the capitalistic economic model is that the American people look to false values in order to obtain a sense of freedom and security. Reliance on material well-being, in what Gannett in his road narrative *Sweet Land* (1934) described as a “machine civilization” (144), becomes an end in itself and does not embrace ideals such as egalitarianism and equality implicit in Miller’s ideals. Writers, taking up this idea, recognize that Miller thinks the U.S. is becoming increasingly artificial, that “Americans were creating a new order, but it was of a machine world in which there was no place for man, much less the gods” (Martin 366). What Miller encounters, more accurately, is that the U.S. creates new gods of the plastic world, gods that are not based on any kind of spiritual concept of man. Indeed, Miller conceives of the industrial brawn in the Pittsburgh region as a hellish symbol: “an Inferno which exceeds anything that Dante imagined” (*Nightmare* 28). Furthermore, passing through the industrial towns of Scranton, Bethlehem, and Youngstown, Miller concludes that
There are two things in life which it seems to me all men want and very few ever get (because both of them belong to the domain of the spiritual) and they are health and freedom. The druggist, the doctor, the surgeon are all powerless to give health; money, power, security, authority do not give freedom. Education can never provide wisdom, nor churches religion, nor wealth happiness, nor security peace. \((Nightmare\ 29)\)\(^{34}\)

After his return in 1940, Miller realizes that the country reinforces this nightmare of consumer culture. The country is recovering from the Great Depression, already engaged in war production, and reemerging as an industrial force.\(^{35}\) With the stock market crash of 1929 and the resulting failure of many banks, the American public lost considerable faith in the democratic and capitalist system. Echoing Dante, Hugh Brogan observes, “To most Americans the disaster of the Depression had come as an earthquake, without warning destroying their old lives so totally that they lost all their self-confidence. Their lives and their country were suddenly, it seemed, equally and entirely beyond their helping: they were lost in a dark wood” (522). For the most part, the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1933 and the initiation of his New Deal programs restored the public’s optimism in American governmental and financial institutions (Brogan 522). Through his many legislative initiatives, Roosevelt saved “American democracy, the American Constitution and American capitalism (Brogan 549). Saving the established American way of life had the ironic effect of restoring the same unfair and unequal capitalist system that Miller found disgusting in the first place. Howard Zinn elaborates on this problem:
When the New Deal was over, capitalism remained intact. The rich still controlled the nation’s wealth, as well as its laws, courts, police, newspapers, churches, colleges. Enough help had been given to enough people to make Roosevelt a hero to millions, but the same system that had brought depression and crisis—the system of waste, of inequality, of concern for profit over human need—remained. (403-04)

The nation still emphasized wealth over individuality, but, in 1940, the American people cheered the restoration of the unfair economic system because it offered them the promise of security. Additionally, even though the U.S. was not yet involved in the war, the war machine was in full swing in late 1940 and early 1941. During this time, two moves insured that American industry and military would benefit from the conflict. First, Roosevelt “set up an Office of Production Management to shift American industry from peacetime production to military production,” and, second, the Lend-Lease Act, passed by Congress at the beginning of 1941, allowed Roosevelt “to give what military aid he liked to whom he liked” (Brogan 560). Both of these steps helped American industry to make money at a time when France, England, and other European countries were being overtaken by Nazi aggression. Thus these moves increased the industrial juggernaut with the blessing of a quasi-socialistic sponsorship. For Miller, it did not matter who was president or what changes may have occurred over the years; America was no better in 1940 than it was in 1930.

Overall, then, Miller’s critique of consumer culture and his defense of artistic individuals ultimately reveal how his several outlooks clash with the prevailing American
reality. Tied to his critique of America are his assumptions about American freedom and individuality that connect to American countercultural traditions. Miller believes that the outsider lifestyle associated with artists can reclaim the lost American ideals that he seeks. Alan Trachtenberg in “‘History on the Side’: Henry Miller’s American Dream” notes,

This redemptive function Miller assigns to his artists is a familiar idea with roots in nineteenth-century antibourgeois sentiment. Miller’s artist is often the free bohemian, whose life on the fly is a deliberate slap at the order and routine of respectable life. But he is also something more. With all the eclecticism of Miller’s thinking about art, and the important influence of European ideas, especially Surrealism, at bottom he is still attached to the idea of a particularly American function for his artist, or for personal liberation as such. To be sure, the idea does not often reach the surface of his writings, but there are enough clues to suggest that Miller hopes for a specifically American redemption—indeed, we discover, a return to traditional or mythic national values. (140)

Miller does not truly want to return to these values, however, as much as he wants to create new ones that support art and individualism. These “mythic national values” such as economic and social mobility lead to Miller’s preoccupation with both his past and America’s history, and, most importantly, with how history and narrative blend together into an idealized personal vision with far-ranging social implications. Ultimately Miller travels as an unlikely tourist in his own country. Instead of an expatriate returning home, he feels more like a visitor surveying the cultural landscape. The increasing materialism of the U.S. contradicts the ideal he has constructed while away. Ironically, after his
travels, he settles in the fairly remote and sparsely settled Big Sur in 1944, remarking, “When first I beheld this wondrous region I thought to myself—‘Here I will find peace. Here I shall find the strength to do the work I was made to do’” (Big Sur 402). The road is Miller’s way of shedding and picking up in little pieces what is vital, what is sustaining about how to live a life of art in the U.S. He ends up in Big Sur because he has to shed completely predominant American influences. The main problem Miller reacts against in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare remains: that American society rejects art and artists. If the function of the artist is indeed to “awaken the world” (Nightmare 167), than the America Miller finds prefers to sleep, not in dream but in nightmare.
Chapter Two

“Joyous alleys full of promise”: Literary Memory, Artistic Ideals, and American Manliness in On the Road

Published in 1957, twelve years after Miller’s The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, Jack Kerouac’s On the Road is a semi-fictional chronicle of several trips his characters make across the U.S. and one into Mexico between 1947 and 1950. In the context of this study, it is the only road narrative that does not have a clearly delineated start and end point, since the characters desperately move about the country on impulses looking for authentic experiences over a period of several years. The novel follows the adventures of Sal Paradise (a fictionalized Jack Kerouac) and Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady) as they move from New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Denver, San Francisco, Mexico City, and numerous small towns in between, carousing, talking all night, listening to jazz, and seeking enlightenment (or an experience approximating spiritual enlightenment). Many writers and critics read the novel as an examination of Beat culture and a celebration of the freedom of the road, with its attendant problems and misguided notions. While these readings of the novel provide necessary literary and historical backgrounds and connections, it is also important for biographical, literary, and historical reasons related to the American road narrative to read the novel as a chronicle of Kerouac’s problematic idealistic vision of post-World War II America, given that the novel also shows that the U.S. is dominated by socio-political events such as the growing consumer culture, the Cold War, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. While on one level the novel encompasses a prototypical riotous road narrative, with its emphasis on “kicks” and
aimlessness, it also presents itself as an anti-road narrative as the characters wander with baseless aims, engage in mindless pursuits, and learn nothing about themselves since the America they look for does not exist except in their imaginations fostered by literary texts and imprudent ideals such as nonattachment and “kicks.” It is a country, as Miller already found out, that continues to make it difficult for individuality and art to thrive.

More specifically, Sal uses the freedom of the road to search for a place in America where he fits in as an artist and a man, which is similar in many ways to Miller’s desire to find a place so that he can create art as life by completely shedding American influences. In his role as both an outsider and a conformist in American society, Sal becomes a modern American picaro who journeys mainly because of his skill at adaptability. Crisscrossing America, Sal moves in and out of communities, searching for models of masculinity and individuality. His journeys take him into a culturally anomalous America, yet, because the quest for a pluralistic America proves insufficient to live up to Sal’s ideals, On the Road turns into a critique of America. During his travels in On the Road, Sal struggles with the reality of the U.S. against which his ideals clash and finally concedes the conflict in the final section of the novel. The ideals of individualism, community, and marginality clash with the conformist and materialistic mindset of post-war U.S., leading Sal, at times, to adapt his views to those accepted by the majority, which is represented in the novel by family members, friends, wives, lovers, businessmen, or anybody with a full-time job and responsibilities. Unlike Miller, Sal does not ultimately reject the materialist U.S. culture but rather embraces it because any alternative lifestyle he finds does not fulfill his dreams of America. As a road narrative, therefore, On the Road rewrites the genre into one not of hope for the future but of
hopelessness for the pursuit of art and individuality. Miller retains a measure of his optimism; Sal does not. For Sal, the series of journeys he takes in *On the Road* are failed investigations into finding a place for himself in America.

My argument in this chapter is that Sal’s idealism (influenced by Kerouac’s own idealism) with respect to American individuality, masculinity, and diversity leads to what I call an implicit critique as it clashes with the reality of the U.S. and pessimistic attitudes in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I choose to focus on ideals rather than nostalgia in my analysis of *On the Road* since Sal is too young to fully experience nostalgia (he is in college when the novel begins), and he actively creates ideals based on his reading and the stories he hears from other characters. Each journey he takes becomes an oblique critique that is shaped by his misguided sense of community and individuals and his futile search for a transcendent ideal—the much-discussed “IT.” Within Kerouac’s novel, critique operates on two levels: Sal’s critique of the U.S. and the novel’s implicit critique via its presentation of Sal’s disillusionment. This argument differs from others’ views of *On the Road* by focusing on ideals as a major influence on Kerouac’s critique of America instead of looking at the novel as a romantic joy ride across the U.S. (Fyfe 197-98), a religious odyssey (Boyle 19-21), a paean to the “cult of high experience” (Swartz 18), an “elegiac romance” (Weinreich 36), or a celebration of Beat counterculture (Tytell, *Angels* 158-59). Rather the novel engages in a critique of post-World War II American values and mores that derives from Sal’s split attraction/repulsion impulses toward America. In making this argument, I expand upon Erich Fromm’s ideas of the “infinite malleability” of man (18) in *The Sane Society* (1955). This malleability allows man to adopt different ways of life, but it also causes him to “react” when confronted with
tyrannical governments or mistreatment (E. Fromm 18-19). Man can react because of reason, which, even though it is “man’s blessing, is also his curse; it forces him to cope everlastingly with the task of solving an insoluble dichotomy” (E. Fromm 24). Thus, according to Fromm, “We are never free from two conflicting tendencies: one to emerge from the womb, from the animal form of existence into a more human existence, from bondage to freedom; another, to return to the womb, to nature, to certainty and security” (27). Fromm thinks that all actions of man can fall under an attraction/avoidance dichotomy: “All passions and strivings of man are attempts to find an answer to his existence or, as we may also say, they are an attempt to avoid insanity” (29). Of course, Fromm takes a psychological and humanistic approach, while I take a historical, cultural, and literary approach to Sal’s contradictory behavior throughout the novel. In light of these ideas, I analyze certain episodes in the novel as they map and recreate Sal’s shifting identities and ideals about America. In Part I, I focus on the construction of Kerouac’s own ideals based on his family history, his personal experience, and his reading. Part II briefly looks at the political and social situation in America during Sal’s travels. Then in Part III, I analyze Sal’s attraction to marginal communities and in Part IV I look at male individuals who serve as guides into manhood and artistic creation both of which, at times, fuel his optimism. Finally in Part V, I analyze the novel’s implicit critique through Sal’s avoidance of the reality of the U.S. that he encounters in his travels. In sum, what Kerouac does with the road narrative is turn it into a clash between the possibility inherent in the freedom of the road and the historical reality of the post-war U.S., focusing on how that conflict manifests itself in Sal’s failure to realize his optimistic (if immature) ideals.
I.

In order to fully understand both Sal’s and the novel’s critique, I first examine which of Kerouac’s ideals and desires he recreates in Sal and which inform his attraction/repulsion traits and subsequent critique of America. As a writer who writes about another writer traveling the country, Kerouac created Sal’s American idealism out of his family history, personal experience, and reading. These elements map Sal’s ideas of American masculinity, especially the role of the individual artist and man’s role in communities. Sal’s conception of masculinity is conflicted and follows a historical struggle identified by Michael Kimmel in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*: “In the 1950s American men strained against two negative poles—the overconformist, a faceless, self-less nonentity, and the unpredictable, unreliable nonconformist” (170). I will also examine the historical situation during Kerouac’s travels to show the specific events and mores to which his critique responds. *On the Road* negotiates a conflicted world looking for alternatives and, in that sense, is a continuation of Miller’s project in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. Like Miller, Kerouac is optimistic about America’s potential. In fact, Sal’s idealism has roots in Kerouac’s own optimism about what he will find on the road and how projected discoveries relate to his sense of what it means to be an American man and artist. That sense includes negotiating American individuality, the diversity offered by the immigrant experience, and the positive effects of finding communities of like-minded individuals. Joyce Johnson, Kerouac’s girlfriend at the time *On the Road* was published, experienced Kerouac’s optimism first hand and described it in her memoir of the beat life, *Minor Characters*: “In 1957, Jack was still traveling on the basis of pure, naive faith that always seemed to renew itself for his next embarkation
Kerouac’s memories of a lost, better America derive from his family’s immigrant experience, one of movement and displacement. This America is Kerouac’s reconstruction of the past based on memory, which is how he often dealt with his childhood. Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, the son of French-Canadian parents. His first language was joual, or Quebec French, and, as a first-generation American, he struggled to integrate into New England working-class culture (Charters, “Past” 182-84). As it was for many immigrants in the U.S., the myth of the American Dream was an early influence on Kerouac’s life as his parents worked in various blue-collar jobs to establish a comfortable existence for their family. The dream of “unlimited freedom and opportunity” (Charters, “Past” 185) presented not only to immigrants but also to middle-class Americans often clashed with the reality of homelessness, destitution, and disappointment in America. While Kerouac’s family struggled (his father was a failed businessman and his brother Gerard’s death haunted him throughout his life), as a teenager, Kerouac excelled at sports and had a tight circle of friends from his neighborhood even if he was a loner at school (Nicosia 39-45). Kerouac’s memories, therefore, could produce what Mark Richardson calls a “very American mood of elegiac optimism: a mixture of regret for what is missing, and fond anticipation of what, according to our covenant with the gods, is supposed to lie ahead” (230). But what memories truly engender in the novel are confusion and hopelessness, what Sal,
articulating Kerouac’s view, characterizes as feeling “so lonely, so sad, so tired, so quivering, so broken, so beat” (*Road* 81). The root of Kerouac’s own dichotomous thinking, then, partially derives from memories of his family and childhood.

While Kerouac’s optimism led him to focus on a positive, more personal American experience, the hope for limitless advancement, it also led him in his work to create his own constructed version of the past when the present did not live up to the cornerstone of his ideals. Lawrence Ferlinghetti remarks upon this tendency in Kerouac’s novel: “When you read *On the Road* closely, you see he really wasn’t observing the reality in front of him. He was doing this being on the road at the very end of the forties, or the early fifties, and the America Kerouac saw was the 1930s, a pre-World War II America. That’s why there’s such nostalgia” (qtd. in Codrescu 186). On one level Ferlinghetti has a point: Kerouac’s vision of America is rooted in a type of longing for an older America, an America of the freedom that he had or imagined he had in his youth in Lowell. In 1932, Kerouac’s family moved to the Pawtucketville neighborhood in Lowell and, while the 1930s were not necessarily a perfect time for Kerouac, the move “began the ‘beautiful childhood’ Jack later wrote about” (Nicosia 31). In particular, he wrote about his childhood as a sustained dream in *Doctor Sax* (1959), which begins as a dream and has the narrator, Jack Dulouoz, declare, “Memory and dream are intermixed in this mad universe” (5). On another level, however, Ferlinghetti misses the mark, since Kerouac is not “seeing” a 1930s America but rather avoiding the reality based on his imaginative and optimistic ideals. In *Road*, there are few glimpses of the real U.S. that Sal and Dean traverse in the late forties and early fifties. Descriptions of the American landscape in the novel focus on the country and back roads. There are few descriptions of industry and
suburban living, or of the growing industrial/military complex that Eisenhower warned about in his 1961 farewell address. When Sal, again standing in for Kerouac, chooses to see reality—as he does when passing through Washington, D.C., during Truman’s second inauguration, viewing “B-29s, PT boats, artillery, all kinds of war material that looked murderous in the snowy grass” (*Road* 135)—he does not fully analyze the impact of these tools of annihilation; instead he avoids reality by speeding down the highway.

Avoidance becomes both Sal’s and the novel’s implicit critique that I will analyze in Sections III and IV.

Kerouac’s personal experience, particularly his association with the Beats and his reading, also informs Sal’s dreams in the novel. Even though he became labeled “King of the Beats,” Kerouac did not embrace that title and his complex relationship with the Beats infuses *On the Road*. After the publication of *On the Road* in 1957, Gilbert Millstein in the *New York Times* hailed the novel as “the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as ‘beat,’ and whose principal avatar he is” (27). Yet this designation had an ambiguous connection to Kerouac, and he rejected it on several occasions, most notably in “After Me, the Deluge” (1969) where he rails against 1960s liberals, declaring, “I think I’ll drop out—Great American tradition—Dan’l Boone, U.S. Grant, Mark Twain—I think I’ll go to sleep” (577). Kerouac did not become associated with the Beats to become a spokesman for a literary generation, but he was attracted to their subversion of proper social mores and the possibilities inherent in community. Other critics have analyzed how the Beat Generation belongs in the tradition of American dissent that springs from Whitman and Pfaff’s Saloon (Parry xxv) and includes the Lost Generation,
the proletarian writers of the 1930s, John Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Miller, and other writers. These critics have also documented how the Beat writers of the late forties and early fifties are widely considered as reactive against and an alternative to the “gray flannel” conformist lifestyle of that period or, in Ginsberg’s evocative phrase, as wanting to avoid being an “American Egghead who’s getting paid now & has a nice job & fits in with the whole silly system” (qtd. in Kramer 175). The Beats took it upon themselves, as a community of like-minded individuals, to fulfill the promise of the U.S. found in the writers that precede Kerouac: Whitman, Thoreau, London, Sinclair Lewis, Wolfe, William Carlos Williams, and others.

The point, and the attraction, for Kerouac is that the Beats tried to create unique lives within the dominant culture, lives with which to create their works and comment on society, and thereby showed their sympathy with the nonconformists of the U.S. The Beat counterculture is thus similar to Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond or any number of American Utopian experiments (including Brook Farm and the Hopedale Community): to discover a way of life different from the dominant U.S. society. Thoreau, of course, was alone in his experiment, but his goal was similar—to step aside to find out who he was in some elemental way, to discover what life had to offer besides the conformity of neighbors, and then to reintegrate into society with the knowledge of the experience. Thoreau’s experience suggests that removing oneself from community encourages individuality and, upon reintegration into society, the individual has a more authentic position from which to lobby for a new kind of community, incorporating the diversity of voices that can transform the political and social landscape of the U.S. As early as 1943, Kerouac was writing of such ideals in his letters. To his childhood friend
Sebastian Sampas, he wrote, “I do understand the fact that we were uniting in a
 Progressive movement of our own, and as to that, I’m not adversed [sic] to such an idea.
 That’s allright; it’s been done before and wrought good results” (Letters 48). The ideal
 result of this search is that others attracted by similar ideas will likely join and create a
 new way of life. This community building is evidenced in much of U.S. history from the
 Revolutionary War through the utopian movements in the nineteenth century to the
 communes of the 1960s. It is what would become the counterculture in opposition to the
 “technocracy” (xlii) as described by Theodore Roszak in The Making of a Counter
 Culture (1968). The problem in On the Road is that most attempts at building a
 nonconformist community in America struggle because of overwhelming social and
 economic pressures of the large conformist majority.

 Another major influence on Kerouac’s ideals is his reading. Since Kerouac is a
 writer, books and writers influence his quest to find a place where he can live an
 authentic, artistic life (or one that is relatively free from any kind of political or social
 constraints). As with Miller, literary antecedents such as the Transcendentalists, Jack
 London, and Thomas Wolfe also distort his conception of the U.S. in On the Road, and
 this awareness is also complicated for Kerouac by the influence of and his reliance on
 literary antecedents. Many critics note the parallels between On the Road and
 Huckleberry Finn (1885), especially Sal and Dean’s rejection of civilization or a regular
 life.8 But, even though Huckleberry Finn has become a prototype of the American travel
 narrative and has similarities with On the Road, these critical readings misrepresent
 Kerouac’s novel on a fundamental level.9 Part of Kerouac’s critique (which he imparts to
 Sal in the novel) is aimed at what he views as an unfair and unequal power structure,
much as Twain took aim at U.S. society in the nineteenth century. But while Huck is a social outcast, unable and unwilling to accept civilization, Kerouac’s characters differ from Huck because they either are part of society or willingly return to it after each trip. As Kerouac’s stand-in, Sal typically ends his trips by rejecting the road and opting for stability: “I had my home to go to, my place to lay my head down and figure the losses and figure the gain that I knew was in there somewhere too” (Road 106-07). Kerouac himself returned after each of his travels to the safety of his mother’s house and, in fact, lived with her for most of his life.

Other American writers than Twain have a much stronger influence on Kerouac’s ideals in On the Road. Kerouac’s knowledge of and the influence of the American literary tradition was a strong shaping force in his early years as a writer and helped to form his opinions about the role of the American writer in a diverse democratic society. In Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954, a selection of his journal entries written while he worked on his first novel The Town and the City (1950) and On the Road, Kerouac passionately discusses many American and European writers. His sense of what it means to be an American writer, as evidenced in many journal entries, derived from his reading Jack London, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, and others, and these writers pervade Sal’s thinking during his journeys. For many writers of Kerouac’s generation, Hemingway loomed large, along with F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Saroyan. These writers focus on intensely-lived experiences, and their paradoxical embrace/rejection of American values shaped Kerouac’s early work and adventures. First among his antecedents was Thomas Wolfe. Kerouac noted that The Town and the City was heavily influenced by the older writer’s work. In an interview, he claimed,
“Wolfe was a torrent of American heaven and hell that opened my eyes to America as a subject in itself” (qtd. in Berrigan 66). According to a number of critics, Wolfe’s romanticized, though critical, view of small-town life in the U.S. in Look Homeward, Angel (1929) finds its way into Kerouac’s writing. Although Kerouac in On the Road can be rhapsodic and romantic, he usually tempers the descriptions of Sal’s various travels with reality gained from experience as when Sal arrives back in New York and proclaims, “Gad, I was sick and tired of life” (Road 106). Even though Kerouac was originally attracted to Wolfe’s prose and his autobiographical tendency, he created a traditional novel in The Town and the City that he would break away from in On the Road by changing the focus of his memories from a local point of view to a sweeping vision of America. During the writing of On the Road, Kerouac noted in his journal, “As I go along (and especially during tonight’s definitive work) I find that I want a different structure as well as a different style in this work, in contrast to T & C . . . Each chapter as a line of verse in the general epic poem, instead of each chapter as a broad-streamed prose statement in the general epic novel” (Windblown 241; ellipsis in orig.).

A further literary ideal that informs Kerouac’s view of American nonconformity and individualism (as it does Miller’s) derives from his reading of the Transcendentalists. Critics have argued that Kerouac’s connection to transcendental writers, by way of Modernists such as Pound, Eliot, and Williams, contributed to the development of the Beat Generation as a countercultural alternative to mainstream America. Rewriting this tradition as conservative, for example, Manuel Luis Martinez, in Countering the Counterculture, claims: “The Transcendentalist-Modernist-Beat lineage suggests a logic evident in American literature, by which the individual can act and move freely, yet
craves ceding ultimate power to a stabilizing, regulating structure, whether it be Emerson’s corporatist individualism and the Oversoul, Thoreau’s pantheism and his eventual return to the city, Whitman’s kosmic consciousness” (94). This argument, though, neglects the liberating example of these writers on Kerouac and the intellectual stances he learned from each, and it also misdiagnoses the “ceding” of power. Kerouac’s characters do not give in to the system because they want to; rather, they give in to the system because they are forced to do so. That is not conservative; it is merely surrender. Emerson led Kerouac to concepts of the self as dynamic and evolving, Thoreau showed him that the individual can pursue an authentic life away from the confines of society, and, finally, Whitman led him to the openness of the road and to new conceptions of self and community. Kerouac’s characters are bound not by their intellectual stances, which free them and lead them to the road, but by the larger U.S. power structure represented at times in the novel by “The American police [who] are involved in psychological warfare against those Americans who don’t frighten them with imposing papers and threats” (Road 136). By having Sal and other characters reject the road for home, Kerouac suggests that they do not cede intellectual independence but instead political independence.

Another idealistic literary influence for Kerouac is Jack London, particularly the account of London’s hobo days in The Road. This book informs Kerouac’s concept of the possibilities and troubles that the road offers. As is evident in the novel and his other writings, Kerouac’s ideas of the American hobo, however, emphasize the tension of an individual at odds with a society that will subjugate his identity, which On the Road characterizes. London’s depiction of the hobo lifestyle is a celebration of an unfettered
life and a reaction against the mundane, dull routine of a steady job. His rejection of the work-a-day world contrasts with the anti-establishment views of Sal and Dean because London expresses strong convictions in the nonconformist lifestyle that Kerouac’s characters do not—a contention I will demonstrate in the rest of this chapter. Sounding much like Kerouac wants to sound, London admits, “I went on ‘The Road’ because I couldn’t keep away from it; because I hadn’t the price of the railroad fare in my jeans; because I was so made that I couldn’t work all my life on ‘one same shift’; because—well, just because it was easier to than not to” (*The Road* 120). For London, as for Kerouac, the mutable opportunities of the road, the uncertainty that each day brings when one travels, offers the prospect for personal change: “Perhaps the greatest charm of tramp-life is the absence of monotony. . . . The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment; hence, he lives only in the present moment. He has learned the futility of telic endeavor, and knows the delight of drifting along with the whimsicalities of Chance” (*The Road* 54). Kerouac’s own conception of the hobo, one that he discusses in the essay “The Vanishing American Hobo” from his collection of travel essays *Lonesome Traveler* (1960), is derivative of London and Whitman, but he also sees the hobo in the American tradition “of footwalking freedom going back to the days of Jim Bridger and Johnny Appleseed” (173). These are specific references infused with the positive ideals of American manliness and individuality: Bridger was the quintessential rugged mountain man and Appleseed the inveterate wanderer of America. They are also references that influence Sal’s conception of masculinity in his travels.
II.

While Kerouac’s background and influences offer analytical pathways into his construction of Sal, the historical context of the travels also provides evidence of what Kerouac lived through and Sal critiques in his narrative. This historical context becomes the basis for the reality that Sal later critiques. In this section, I briefly examine the historical and political context that shaped Kerouac’s views of his travels. This information demonstrates the milieu and events against which Kerouac reacts and which he ultimately critiques, including post-war prosperity, conformity, and Cold War paranoia. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Kerouac traveled through a U.S. shaped by prosperity and military power. During this period, “America . . . was abounding: her total gross national product had gone up by 35 per cent since 1941” (Brogan 584). Since the U.S. was spared the destruction wreaked on Europe and Japan during World War II, the Allied victory quickly translated into peace and stability at home. But peace also led to complacency and conformity. Wanting to avoid the hardships of the war years, Americans looked inward and focused on their own happiness. When Kerouac began his travels in 1947, he experienced the beginning of what would become an interconnected and, thus, more homogenized America: “Interstate freeways sliced across the Great Plains and through the vast spaces of the West, bringing with them the homogenized culture of American capital and conformity. Franchised hamburger stands replaced rickety roadhouses” (Leavitt 211). John A. Jakle also notes that, “By 1949, 55 percent of the rural roads in the United States had been improved, although slightly less than 200,000 miles had been hard surfaced in concrete or asphalt” (189). The influx of GIs returning from World War II created a large, ready-made market for goods and services.
Along with highways, the suburbs began to grow and with this growth came the demand for goods that would eventually become ubiquitous in new houses by the late 1950s and early 1960s: “washing-machines, washing-up machines, hi-fi systems, plug-in telephones and of course video systems and colour televisions” (Brogan 638). This consumerist mentality led to the homogenization of society, as everyone wanted the same wares and companies such as Ford, Westinghouse, and General Electric were happy to oblige. These historical changes manifest themselves in the novel at various points—for instance, when Sal denigrates Salt Lake City as “a city of sprinklers” (Road 59), and Dean says, “‘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’” (Road 120-21).

Despite this optimism in the economy, the Cold War between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. fostered an atmosphere of fear and suspicion at home and prompted the government to adopt a permanent state of war production. As Howard Zinn notes, “In a series of moves abroad and at home, it [the U.S.] established a climate of fear—a hysteria about communism—which would steeply escalate the military budget and stimulate the economy with war-related orders. This combination of policies would permit more aggressive actions abroad, more repressive actions at home” (425). In international affairs, the U.S. used the Truman Doctrine to combat the communist takeover of Eastern Europe after World War II, a move that was meant to contain the spread of Communism but instead led to costly military interventions (Zinn 426), culminating (some would say it is still culminating) in the Vietnam War. In asking Congress to approve aid to Greece and Turkey to fight a possible communist takeover, Truman claimed that the U.S. should assist “‘free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by
outside pressures’” (qtd. in Zinn 426). Keeping with this doctrine, Truman sent troops to Korea in 1950 to protect South Korea from the socialist North. In national affairs, the government focused on capturing supposed communists on American soil. In January 1950, Alger Hiss was convicted for lying under oath about being a Russian agent and, in February of the same year, Senator Joseph McCarthy began what would become a “great witch-hunt” for Communists at all levels of government (Brogan 597-98). The supposed freedom won by defeating fascism in Europe and the Pacific was soon replaced by other, more sinister types of control, and the political climate suggested Americans were not safe from rogue elements in their own government. This paranoia appears many times throughout On the Road, most memorably when Sal visits Old Bull Lee in New Orleans, who claims, “Man ain’t safe going around this country any more without a gun” (Road 146). The historical circumstances were therefore at odds (somewhat) with Sal’s and Kerouac’s ideals: the U.S. was poised for great social change but cultural, political, and military events created a homogenous and paranoid country.

III.

Into this homogenous and paranoid country comes Sal armed with his dreams and his optimism. The next two sections demonstrate how Sal’s attraction to communities and like-minded males infuses his optimism before that optimism clashes with reality and turns to negativity in a pendulum effect. When Sal at the beginning of his cross-country journeys says, “Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me” (Road 11), he infuses his trips with idealism rooted in the hope of America as a cornucopia of possibility. By
relying on optimistic thoughts, though, he also creates the basis for his avoidance of the American social and political scenes. This avoidance is based on a desire to shape reality. Fromm mentions man’s need “for orienting himself in the world intellectually,” which he does through reason (63). Man, therefore, uses reason to mediate reality: “The further his reason develops, the more adequate becomes his system of orientation, that is, the more it approximates reality. But even if man’s frame of orientation is utterly illusory, it satisfies his need for some picture which is meaningful to him” (E. Fromm 63-64). In the context of these ideas, Sal uses his ideals to justify his attraction to certain misinterpreted communities and individuals in America. Before I proceed any further, however, I will note that the connection between Kerouac and Sal is problematic, since Kerouac wrote the first drafts of the novel based on his travels and used the real names of all those involved. In my analysis, I separate the two personas based on Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s ideas of the “autobiographical ‘I’” (71). In other words, Sal is “not a flesh-and-blood author, whom we cannot know, but a speaker or narrator who refers to him- or herself” (Smith and Watson 71). I make this distinction between Kerouac as author and Sal as narrator in the rest of this chapter, since Kerouac creates and uses Sal to engage in a critique of America and the novel to critique both America and Sal. Also in the remainder of the chapter, I work through selected episodes in the novel twice: first to analyze the novel in relation to dreams and how the influence of reading—optimistically—informs Sal’s attraction, and second to read episodes in the novel to demonstrate the implicit critique of the U.S. based upon Sal’s avoidance. Sal is attracted to like-minded communities and nonconformist individuals. During his journeys, Sal’s search for community focuses on marginal cultures and his relationships
with other men, especially Dean Moriarty and Old Bull Lee. The road allows Sal to gain access to these groups or individuals that serve as guides for defining his idea of manhood and for acting on his artistic ambitions. Thus Sal uses his travels to transition between compelling identities, to transform himself when encountering new subcultures such as the working class and minorities. Traveling with vague plans is precisely the kind of free existence Sal wants because it takes him beyond the strictures of capitalist America, and so he is free to write the kind of man and artist he wants to be among people living what he thinks is a more authentic life. Kerouac’s literary ideals particularly inform Sal’s ideas of American manhood and individuality—even though he, like Miller, does focus on the ideal at the expense of not acknowledging fully America’s problematic class and racial history. In this section, I focus on Sal’s optimistic travels in the U.S. as he continually changes his identity to play act with different communities and seeks out American individuals in an effort to be a prototypical American man. That man is, in Kimmel’s (citing Fromm’s) definition, “the ‘market orientation’ of American men, through which the sense of self becomes anchored in activities and accomplishments and measuring up to social norms and standards. As a result, emphasis rests not on who the person is but on what the person has: It is what other people think of us that counts most” (173). Finally I will look at his search for transcendental ideals as that search relates to his process of continually becoming a man and artist.

First I consider the structure of the novel because Sal’s critique hinges on the pendulum effect of his travels: from attraction to repulsion and back again. Kerouac structures the novel around Sal’s journeys away from his mundane bourgeois existence (college, living with his aunt, writing his novel) and his journeys back to familiar things.
He rushes from one side of the continent to the other, having fleeting adventures as he flees responsibility, but, when his avoidance can no longer cover up the reality of the U.S. and he becomes overwhelmed by it (realizing that the freedom and nonconformity he seeks is hard won and even more difficult to retain), Sal returns to his regular life. For both Kerouac and Sal, the road is temporary but home is stable. This pendulum movement highlights Sal’s avoidance of cultural problems in the U.S. and, thus, it becomes a critique by pointing to negative elements in the country. The main reason for Sal’s retreat is that he grows tired of looking for an alternative to an economic and cultural system that exacts a high price from those who do not conform. One view of the novel is that Sal fails because “people have limitations that make it impossible to sustain this life of irresponsible kicks” (French, Jack Kerouac 39). Sal certainly has physical and mental limitations in the novel, including exhaustion, hunger, depression, disappointment, and hallucinations. These limitations do not force him back home, however, but rather what I call an ideological conflict forces him home: his attraction to outsider America does not hold up in the face of the reality he actually encounters. So he continues to return to New York and the “established routine or order” (Hunt 23) that he uses as a crutch to deal with his disappointments, but the crucial aspect of Sal’s character is that it craves this routine. He tells Bull Lee in Louisiana that his travels are temporary: “‘I’m coming back to school’” (Road 145). And later in the novel, he mentions thoughtlessly, considering America’s history of racial strife, “All my life I’d had white ambitions” (Road 180). The search for kicks and the transcendental “IT” transforms into the search for a stable lifestyle. His critique of the U.S. and its prevailing lifestyle of bland conformity wavers as he adopts the trappings of the culture he first rejects but then
joins. After his return from the first trip out west, Sal rejoins his aunt and the materialist/conformist lifestyle: “My aunt and I decided to buy a new electric refrigerator with the money I had sent her from California; it was to be the first one in the family” (Road 107). Later, during his third trip across the U.S., Sal wants to settle in Denver and live a version of the American Dream: “I went to Denver, thinking of settling down there. I saw myself in Middle America, a patriarch” (Road 179). Stability and order prove attractive to Sal after the disorder of his travels and the chaotic adoption of other identities. He returns home to learn to be himself.

During the course of the novel, Sal goes from being an immature writer—justifying his journeys by claiming, “I was a young writer and I wanted to take off” (Road 11)—to being a published writer. But, unlike Miller, Sal does not travel as an attempt to live a life of art nor does he necessarily learn how to write on the road. While he gains experiences that he can write about on the road, Sal develops as a writer in the stability and tranquility of home. Yet to enrich his life and art he seeks disaffected wanderers, subsistence wage earners, migrant farm workers, and iconoclastic madmen. He searches for those forgotten or ignored in consumerism and the urge for upward mobility. While pursuing his ideal of male writer, he also seeks marginal communities for authentic experiences, but they also attract him because he thinks they embody American ideals like freedom, originality, hard work, diversity, individuality, and transcendence that inform his notions of post-war masculinity. His fluid movement through the communities of hoboes, New York City Beats, subsistence wage earners, and Mexican Americans/Mexicans allows Sal to change as a man and artist and experience his ideals in the reality of a diverse America. In other words, his personality changes during his
travels when he is around certain groups and he can try out his ideals in reality and not just write about them. Another way to look at his attraction, then, is through the lens of the constructed “I” that Sal presents throughout the novel, or what Smith and Watson call the “narrating I” (72). In their definition: “[T]he narrating ‘I’ is an effect composed of multiple voices, a heteroglossia attached to multiple and mobile subject positions, because the narrating ‘I’ is neither unified nor stable. It is split, fragmented, provisional, multiple, a subject always in the process of coming together and of dispersing” (74). So contrary to typical views of the novel that claim Sal travels “searching for an antidote to the materialism and conformity that he sees around him” (Blanton 24), I believe that Sal uses his travels through other cultures to learn how to be an American man who should be working and buying things and who can achieve the stability that materialism and conformity offer. As he does so, he picks up and discards elements of each of these cultures, transforming his voice and personality along the way. In essence, Sal’s constructed “I” throughout the novel shows how easily influenced he can be and thus sets the stage for his ultimate capitulation to the dominant culture.

The marginal group that attracts Sal in terms of his ideal of freedom (and that he becomes involved with if only accidentally) is that of hoboies. The original impulse for his journeys comes in the symbolic spring when Sal wants new experiences and freedom: “[M]y life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified” (Road 9-10). Hoboies are attractive to Sal because they represent freedom from money-hungry America, and he thinks that they possess antiestablishment knowledge of how to attain and keep that freedom. But, in On the Road, the hoboies Sal encounters are economic casualties and alienated refugees in the post-war U.S., and they act as a
contrasting commentary on the broader narrative of American superiority during these years. For all its military and monetary might, there exists in the U.S. economic inequality that crushes the less fortunate. While America has always had disaffected wanderers fleeing society’s rules and expectations, the hoboes Sal encounters act as a counterforce to the economic growth of the U.S. because they desire a simple lifestyle uncomplicated by the plethora of goods and services. In *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac*, Frederick Feied focuses on the estrangement of the hoboes of the forties and early fifties: they “appeared as one of the first concrete manifestations of a movement of wholesale rejection of contemporary values, and Kerouac’s use of the theme dramatized the sense of alienation of large numbers of his contemporaries. . . . They reflected a growing uneasiness in America, a gnawing sense that all was not well in the richest land in the world” (58-59). Sal does not focus, however, on the economic implications of the hoboes, who may have been forced on the road as punishment for not making it. Instead he focuses on the freedom of choice associated with the lifestyle, of living on one’s own terms, which comes off as a clichéd response of a young writer experiencing the freedom of the road for the first time. The prototypical hobo figure that Sal meets along his first journey west and who embodies the ideal of freedom is Mississippi Gene. Sal views Gene as a wise man of the Western plains and describes him as sitting in a “Buddhistic trance” (*Road* 30), embodying the outsider knowledge that helps one to negotiate the difficulties of the road (loneliness, hunger, persecution, arrest). The mention of Buddhism, consistent with the Beats’ embrace of Eastern religions, suggests that Sal views Gene as embodying transcendental knowledge, further placing him outside of the
dominant American culture where white masculine ways of negotiating the road are not sufficient enough (at least from Sal’s perspective). Gene travels as London’s hoboes travel, “because he had no place he could stay in without getting tired of it and because there was nowhere to go but everywhere, keep rolling under the stars, generally the Western stars” (Road 28). Sal’s perception of Gene sounds like someone who has read one too many pulp novels about Western heroes and restless wanderers—men like the tracker Kit Carson, the explorer John C. Fremont, or any number of cowboys who roamed the West looking for work. These men, including Gene, represent a life lived in the open and with the concomitant outlaw knowledge (or knowledge outside accepted norms) that comes with such a life. This knowledge is not necessarily criminal—though it certainly can include the vicissitudes and dangers of life on the road. Sal links this knowledge to outsider groups, as when he describes Gene as an African-American or New York street hustler: “Although Gene was white there was something of the wise and tired old Negro in him, and something very much like Elmer Hassel, the New York dope addict, in him, but a railroad Hassel, a traveling epic Hassel, crossing and recrossing the country every year” (Road 28). As he does with his reference to Buddhism, Sal removes any racial or cultural boundaries on Gene and, by doing this, suggests in his own puerile way what attracts him to Gene. Once out into the space of America, beyond regular society, this outlaw knowledge is essential for the hobo’s survival and continued freedom, but it is a knowledge suppressed in materialist America because it has nothing to do with how to navigate suburbs or grocery stores. Sal, blinded by ideals, appreciates a figure like Gene precisely because he represents a way of life not respected by the
greater U.S. Interestingly, he does not try to become a hobo as he will try to duplicate traits of other cultures/groups in subsequent journeys.

While Sal finds the hobo lifestyle attractive because of a perceived freedom, hoboes are, after all, a random collection of individuals and their depiction in the novel derives more from Sal’s creative impulse than from reality. The community that mainly feeds his ideals of autonomy and an artistic lifestyle is the Beat counterculture of New York City, Denver, and San Francisco. During his travels, he seeks out Beat communities so that he can share his ideas and enthusiasms and, by so doing, achieve a nonconformist version of the American dream that is not possible in the regular world represented by “New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream—grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying” (Road 106). Sal’s first journeys before he even heads out West, however, occur when he leaves his aunt’s home in Paterson, New Jersey, to seek out new people and experiences in New York, and he attempts to transform his personality to match those of the people who appeal to him in the city. Surrounded by his city friends, he anticipates the excitement of his journeys: “The whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then; it would mix up all my friends and all I had left of my family in a big dust cloud over the American Night” (Road 8). Sal’s friends are thinkers, lowlifes, or antiestablishment characters who think they stand in stark contrast to the conformity of American life:

All my other current friends were “intellectuals”—Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk, Old Bull Lee and his critical anti-everything drawl—or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same,
sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the *New Yorker*. *(Road 10)*

The chief diversions of Sal’s friends are drinking, talking, and displaying antisocial behavior, behavior that poses as searching for an alternative to the workaday world but sounds more like the posing of the pseudo-disaffected youth. This unflattering description of Sal’s friends also serves as ironic commentary on his own behavior in the city: “hanging around the campus” *(Road 4)*, sitting in friends’ apartments, and chasing women. Such behavior is reminiscent of apathetic college students rather than ambitious artists and intellectuals. Of this group, only the poet Marx (Allen Ginsberg’s stand-in) appears as serious, as “the sorrowful poetic con-man with the dark mind” *(Road 7)*. Indeed, even though there is a sinister element in this description that makes a reader wonder what Marx is truly like, Sal comes to him on several occasions throughout the novel for guidance and advice.

In Denver, Sal meets up with more friends who share similar intellectual and social interests to those of his New York friends. There is Chad King, “a slim blond boy with a strange witch-doctor face that goes with his interest in anthropology and prehistory Indians. . . . [H]e has the beauty and grace of a Western hotshot who’s danced in roadhouses and played a little football” *(Road 37)*, Roland Major who works on “his latest Hemingwayan short story” *(Road 40–41)* while Sal is in town, and others including Dean and Marx. More than just a representation of the Beat life, Sal’s frantic rushing about in Denver with these men demonstrates his attempt to transform himself into one of the group, whether like King they are serious about being writers or like Dean only interested in women and “kicks.” No matter how complicated life becomes in Denver,
with arguments or confusions or, in Sal’s words, “as W. C. Fields said, ‘fraught with eminent peril’—and mad” (Road 40), he relishes the romantic impression of life in a western town: “The air was soft, the stars so fine, the promise of every cobbled alley so great, that I thought I was in a dream” (Road 43).

Another aspect of the Beat culture that attracts Sal is the masculinity, the camaraderie, and the male bonding displayed by Dean and Carlo Marx. When Sal first meets Dean, he is part of Beat culture, having come East in search of a new life like many of Fitzgerald’s characters. Dean, who arguably will become the most important guide to masculinity and individuality for Sal, attaches himself to Marx, who perhaps represents the intellectual voice of reason in the novel: “A tremendous thing happened when Dean met Carlo Marx. Two keen minds that they are, they took to each other at the drop of a hat. Two piercing eyes glanced into two piercing eyes” (Road 7). Seeing in each other masculine and intellectual equals (with homoerotic undertones), they leave Sal out of their discussions and force him to catch up at being a man. Sal’s subordination around these two suggests a lack of confidence and displays his ambiguous male identity while at the same time demonstrating blind attraction. Trailing Marx and Dean one night, Sal says,

I 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!” (Road 8)
In rewriting Walter Pater, Sal identifies the models for man and writer as they relate to nonconformity and philosophical gravity. In Denver, Marx writes a poem he calls “Denver Doldrums” (Road 47), and Dean, as he will do throughout the novel, is involved with two women, his soon-to-be ex-wife Mary Lou and a new fling, Camille. When Marx and Dean are together, Marx tells Sal that they, in an attempt to transcend intellectual constraints, are “trying to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on our minds. We’ve had to take benzedrine” (Road 42). Linking this fearless openness to drug use indicates a kind of outlaw masculinity. To be a free man in America is to push the edges of acceptable behavior. In these instances, Sal does not transform himself but instead takes a wary step toward how to be a man in an outsider culture. Clearly, he cannot identify himself as one of these individuals, for he largely lives vicariously through them. He is the burgeoning writer, observing the actions of others, following them for whatever stimulus to his creativity they can provide.

Thus, overall, even though he is attracted to hoboes and the Beat community, Sal has difficulty fully fitting into those groups. They are a beginning, however, to Sal’s immature quest throughout his later travels where he seeks communities with different value systems from his own to learn how to be an American man and artist. The other communities he encounters demonstrate Sal’s adaptability as a narrator and character. This world of subsistence workers and racial outsiders functions as a kind of “contact zone,” a term I take from Mary Louise Pratt and that designates “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (6). My use of the term,
however, does not involve strictly “colonial encounters” but focuses more on the marginal areas in the U.S. where cultures overlap and influence each other. In On the Road, Sal, in the role of the dominant white man, attempts to take on the identity of a marginal culture and thus subject himself to poverty, racism, and abuse. He chooses to adapt this way for two purposes. First, adapting to the culture of another meets his ideal of a community of like-minded individuals in which men and women can escape the consumer-minded, upward-mobility-driven America. Second, these marginal groups attract Sal because of notions of American masculinity that involve work, competence, and autonomy, or as Kimmel describes, “Real men were breadwinning men” (177).

These groups also attract Sal because he views them as living a simple life, stripped bare of modern complexities, much as, in Sal’s view, humans’ earliest ancestors lived. Like Miller, Kerouac steals his ideas from Oswald Spengler’s The Decline of the West and has Sal identify these cultures—especially the Mexican people—as “Fellahin,” which he uses specifically because the term denotes a pre-historical existence where, in Sal’s words, “people will stare with the same eyes from the caves of Mexico as well as from the caves of Bali, where it all began and where Adam was suckled and taught to know” (Road 281). Sal’s description of an exotic time, “of antique life on earth” (Road 281), is a dream of escape from state control and conformity that mingling with other cultures will supposedly achieve. Ignoring, again like Miller, the historical specificity of the cultures he labels Fellahin, Sal wants to identify with the otherness of these cultures and tries to join them in order to remove himself from what he knows of America and, further, to gain the experiences that will aid him in becoming an alternative American man. He moves in and out of these other cultures seeking the guidance he needs to
negotiate the conflicting views of the dominant culture. Wandering through the black section of Denver, Sal naively wishes, “I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. . . . I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned” (Road 180). While Sal might be depressed and white, he has the freedom to move about the country—a freedom not many minorities could claim in the post-war years. While to a contemporary reader Sal’s ideas are naïve, his views of these marginal cultures highlight his idealism and his refusal to deal with the reality of the U.S.

Sal’s involvement with the working poor, Mexican Americans, and Mexicans demonstrates how his attraction to imagined ideals warps his identity, causing him to childishly play act at notions of American masculinity: he can be the stable head of family or the rebel on the margins of society. His search for diverse communities becomes an additional reason he takes to the road. In his desire to adapt new identities in the U.S., Sal’s first attempt at transformation comes with the working poor when he stays with his friend Remi Boncoeur in Mill City, California. He uses this first trip to California to switch his identity and pretend to be the male wage earner he is not back East. His reason for going to Mill City involves Remi’s promise to get them jobs “on an around-the-world liner” (Road 11). It is only fitting, then, that Sal’s first impression of Mill City is romanticized:

Mill City, where Remi lived, was a collection of shacks in a valley, housing-project shacks built for Navy Yard workers during the war; it was in a canyon, and a deep one, treed profusely on all slopes. There were special stores and
barber shops and tailor shops for the people of the project. It was, so they say, the only community in America where whites and Negroes lived together voluntarily; and that was so, and so wild and joyous a place I’ve never seen since. (Road 60)

Even though Mill City seems like a working-class ghetto where people are marginalized by the dominant society both economically and physically (the project is isolated in a deep canyon shrouded by trees), Sal’s youthful enthusiasm creates Mill City as a place where the marginalized can exist apart from contentious U.S. issues like racism and income inequality. Sal obviously sees elements of freedom and the unconventional even within a ghetto. Nowhere is this tendency clearer than in Sal’s descriptions of laughter in Mill City. The possibilities for personal growth in such a place is represented by his reaction to Remi, who, despite his surroundings, “at least had learned to laugh almost better than anyone in the world, and I saw all the fun we were going to have in Frisco” (Road 62). Then there is Remi’s neighbor, Mr. Snow: “The strange thing was that next door to Remi lived a Negro called Mr. Snow whose laugh, I swear on the Bible, was positively and finally the one greatest laugh in all this world” (Road 62). Here Sal is rewriting this experience taking the stereotypical “happy Negro” and applying it to an ideal of blissful men living in shacks. There is no mention of Mr. Snow’s occupation, suggesting that Sal is attracted to him as a symbol, not as a reality. He also idealizes Remi’s role as a male worker—waiting for his ship, working as a security guard, and living with his girlfriend Lee Ann who “had a bad tongue and gave him a calldown every day” (Road 61)—by creating him as cheerful and confident even though “he had fallen on the beat and evil days that come to young guys in their middle twenties” (Road 61). Significantly, this rewriting of Mill City occurs on Sal’s first cross-country trip when his
ideals and desires especially influence his perceptions, resulting in an immature version of reality.

Once in Mill City, Sal loses little time in immersing himself in the role of writer and male wage earner. Doing so involves two types of jobs, the one artistic and the other working class. The first scheme Remi develops for the two men to make money is for Sal “to stay in the shack and write a shining original story for a Hollywood studio. Remi was going to fly down in a stratosphere liner with this harp under his arm and make us all rich” (*Road 63*). Sal energetically pursues this plan with youthful vigor: “So the first week I stayed in the shack in Mill City, writing furiously at some gloomy tale about New York that I thought would satisfy a Hollywood director” (*Road 63*). Underneath this description one hears the echo of Horace Greeley’s optimistic imperative, “Go West, young man,” but this description also reflects the misguided plans of so many who move to the West Coast to make fortunes that never materialize. Yet Sal’s naïve belief in this plan fades quickly, and he turns to more practical ways to earn money. Convincing Remi to help him get a job as a security guard, he transforms into a member of the working class but also a figure of authority armed with a flashlight and a pistol, a role that ill suits his youth and search for freedom. He physically changes appearance for this role, borrowing Remi’s too-big uniform and looking like he has donned a ridiculous costume: “I went flapping around like Charlie Chaplin to my first night of work” (*Road 63*). As he does when he experiences other communities, he quickly rewrites the experience so that it is attractive for him and, in this case, imagines a mythic Wild West out of cinema. Going to his job on the nightshift, Sal walks “along a silvery, dusty road beneath inky trees of California—a road like in *The Mark of Zorro* and a road like all the roads you see
in Western B movies. I used to take out my gun and play cowboys in the dark” (*Road 64*). This pantomime seems like a ridiculous boyhood fantasy, yet it clearly demonstrates the naiveté that shapes Sal’s ideas of his first travels through the West. Whenever the pendulum swings to the negative, Sal pushes it back to a more attractive version of reality. Although he is ill-suited to this type of work—Sal admits, “I gulped at the prospect of making an arrest” (*Road 64*)—he also expresses his desire “to make a living” (*Road 64*) and does his best at it so that he can support himself and his aunt: “I was making fifty-five bucks a week and sending my aunt an average of forty” (*Road 71*).

Thus Sal becomes a wage earner, taking care of his family, even though his nights are spent “reading *Blue Book* adventures about Oregon and the north country” (*Road 64*) and engaging in childish antics like stealing ice cream. What Sal wants to experience here—earning money and gaining responsibility—is truly no more than a sophomoric attempt to fund more misguided adventures. This guise as wage earner, though, lacks any romanticism based as it is on practical matters like earning a living. Thus Sal laments, “Where was my slow boat to China?” (*Road 75*), effectively swinging the pendulum back to reality.

Sal comes closer to fulfilling his ideals of manhood in the next marginal group into which he tries to assimilate: Mexican-American migrant farm workers. This group presents Sal with the chance to shed his white self and adopt the identity of the other and thereby further demonstrate how his play acting serves to recreate his masculine notions of marriage and work. As shown by his existence back East and his lack of discipline when it comes to his security guard job, he does not know how to be the typical husband and supporter of a family. Yet he dreams of achieving the stability of wife and home,
asking himself in San Francisco, “Oh where is the girl I love?” (Road 79) and sounding like any American teenager more attracted to the idea than the reality of love. Sal hitchhikes to Bakersfield, California, dreams literary dreams through “Saroyan’s town” (Road 80) and Steinbeck territory, before meeting an idealized lover, Terry, and deciding to live with her and her son in the San Joaquin Valley and become a migrant farm worker. Sal’s attraction to Terry is rooted in his earlier romantic reveries, and he creates her—a Mexican woman fleeing her abusive husband to live with her sister in Los Angeles—as the maltreated woman who needs protection, and he arrives as a savior in his eyes: “I felt like putting my arms around her right away” (Road 82). His attraction to Terry develops further because she is a social and racial outsider—“a Pachuco wildcat” (Road 89) in his words—and she provides him with an opportunity to become a surrogate husband, father, and provider by joining her community and pretending to be a man and race he is not. Sal wants to view his life with Terry as idyllic: “The thought of living in a tent and picking grapes in the cool California mornings hit me right” (Road 89), and this retreat to an imaginative life frees him from thinking about any problems or troubles he has encountered on the road in the early part of the novel or experiencing the reality of being cheap migrant labor on a large farm. In this supposed rural paradise, living with wife and child, Sal thinks he is free from the social and economic entanglements of the regular world and is thus unaccountable for his actions. Robert Holton, speaking of Kerouac (but these sentiments could easily also apply to Sal), expresses the majority opinion that “Kerouac searched in those areas of the social world that appeared less able or less likely to embrace (or be embraced by) modernity and its streamlined processes, for people less likely to appear as consumers or laborers in
franchised freeway restaurants: hoboes and drug addicts, the ‘perverted’ and the insane, the visionaries and the artists” (*American Journey* 6). Applied to Sal, though, this desire is not completely accurate (especially in this episode and its proximity to Los Angeles) because Sal is never far in his travels from modernity and franchises, the “screaming frenzy of cars” (*Road 86*), and “the populated district” (*Road 88*) of cities and towns. He merely attempts to ignore them at times by focusing on what he wants to see and experience. In this episode, however, Sal may be overdoing the idealizing by insinuating himself into a culture of work about which he has very little experience or knowledge.

Much like his initial responses in Mill City, Sal takes to his new masculine role with passion. As many travelers have done before him, he idealizes California and proclaims after a night with Terry in Sabinal, California, “‘Hooee! It is the promised land’” (*Road 91*); and he adapts to his new role as surrogate husband and father, hopeful in his abilities to provide for wife and child. In this episode, Sal surrenders his white identity and adopts Terry’s Mexican identity, even going so far as to think of himself as Mexican and personally react to violence against Mexicans in the worker camp: “From then on I carried a big stick with me in the tent in case they got the idea we Mexicans were fouling up their trailer camp. They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am” (*Road 97*). The conditional phrase “and in a way” suggests he is aware that his actions are conscious attempts to become another person. Additionally, the switch to the present tense, “I am,” suggests that Sal, as he composes the novel that will become *On the Road* still feels compelled to defend past actions. Despite his attraction to a life with Terry, he signals that he might be aware of the tenuous nature of identity creation and the pendulum swing back to reality. He also romanticizes exhausting fieldwork, naively
imagining he is one with the earth in a misplaced fantasy: “My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. . . . I thought I had found my life’s work” (Road 96). Sal, traveling and morphing into a different identity, emphasizes his displacement in American society and a desire for stability represented here by the literal and symbolic act of digging in the earth.

One aim of travel, surely, is to experience other cultures, but Sal complicates this point by warping his travels with optimism and drastic decisions that result in erratic behavior. By focusing mainly on what attracts him, he creates his own version of reality. Sal, as Richardson claims, “follows the logic of his dreams about what the lives of hard laborers are really like. In this way, ideology gives us a dream of the world rather than a ‘direct’ or unmediated experience of it” (225). This quotation raises a good point, and one that I am building upon, but I would argue that Sal’s dreams are not based on ideology, because he is too young and naïve to be aware of the social and political implications of trying to become part of a culture that engenders racial and economic discrimination he clearly chooses to ignore, even if he conversely pretends to understand the predicaments of Mexican-American migrant workers. Instead, as I have argued, Sal concentrates on the idealistic aspects of this lifestyle that attract his youthful self, and thus he does not fully understand the precarious social and political predicament he has put himself in with Terry. His mediation of this type of labor and lifestyle remains affected by both his physical attraction to Terry and his idealistic attraction to what he views as a simple life of working the land.

The last community that captures Sal’s imagination enough for him to hit the road one last time is the Mexican people he encounters on his trip to Mexico City in the spring
of 1950. The difference between this trip and the others is that Sal does not try to adopt the identity of a Mexican, because it is physically and culturally impossible to do so when he is clearly a white man in Mexico. Sal does travel to Mexico, though, as a sort of test of his ideals beyond the confines of conformist and materialist America. Drawing again upon Pratt’s definition of a “contact zone,” Sal’s trip to Mexico fits her description better than the other communities he encounters:

A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and “travelees,” not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (7)

Sal has no grand imperialist designs and, indeed, in the course of the novel Kerouac largely portrays him as powerless, but, as a traveler, his attraction for the road, for the other, and for his experience of different cultures informs his continuing pursuit of the ideals of American manhood and writing. By the time he travels to Mexico, Sal has begun to create a stable life for himself back East as a man and artist by publishing his first book and achieving a small amount of success and recognition, developments that he briefly reports before undertaking the Mexican journey by mentioning, “I came into some money from selling my book” (Road 249). Since this is his last journey before retiring from the road, Sal shows that he has finally started to mature as a man and writer; yet his trip to Mexico demonstrates that his attraction to an individualistic masculinity at least partially remains intact. He remains attracted to the road, possibilities of masculinity, and experiences that will fuel his writing. Although it could appear as a repudiation of
America, this journey also once again demonstrates Sal’s ideals guiding him to a new land and the possibility of recreating himself.²² Hugh Ruppersburg views the trip as “an escape from a dissatisfying life and homeland. It is Sal and Dean’s rejection of the hope that America might possess the answers they seek. It is, in fact, their abandonment of the civilized white European tradition from which American civilization is descended” (35). This “abandonment” is not as absolute as this quotation makes it sound, since, as I have argued, Sal uses his journeys throughout the novel to shift his identity, so Mexico presents yet another opportunity where he can attempt a transformation. Also Sal and Dean give no indication that they will remain in Mexico but every indication that they are simply tourists. Additionally, Ruppersburg does not point out that, since Sal searches for alternatives to the “white European tradition” from which his values derive, his trip to Mexico actually reaffirms that he is incapable of being part of any other tradition. During his journey to Mexico City, Sal’s ideals interact with and recreate Mexico twice: first as a symbolic border clash between commercialized America and magical Mexico and, second, as an idealistic immersion into what is for Sal a completely alien culture that offers him the promise of novel experience.

Once Sal decides to travel to Mexico, he immediately creates a symbolic dichotomy between the two countries that puts in the foreground his attraction to Mexico clashing against his repulsion to America. This dichotomy, naturally, is represented by the geographical border—in Sal’s words “the magic border” (Road 273)—between the U.S. and Mexico. Like most of his experiences in the U.S., Sal constructs ideal differences between it and Mexico, as if he is trying to shed his American identity so that he can again attempt to reconstruct his personality, this time in a foreign environment. In this
imaginary dichotomy, the U.S. is depressing and commercial while Mexico is mysterious and full of promise. Sounding like the wide-eyed youth of previous travels, he says, “I couldn’t imagine this trip. It was the most fabulous of all. It was no longer east-west, but magic south” (Road 265). Mexico must be different for an idealist like Sal to want to travel there; for him, there has to be a created difference that attracts him, otherwise, as he has done before, he will lose interest or devolve into childish despair. In San Antonio, Texas, Sal and Dean view a stale corporate American landscape “where things looked more sleek and American, several semi-skyscrapers and many neons and chain drugstores” (Road 272), and they “wandered out and negotiated several dark, mysterious blocks” (Road 273). Laredo, Texas, is an ominous city where the unsavory elements of society go to escape: “It was the bottom and dregs of America where all the heavy villains sink, where disoriented people have to go to be near a specific elsewhere they can slip into unnoticed. Contraband brooded in the heavy syrupy air. Cops were red-faced and sullen and sweaty, no swagger” (Road 274). Whereas earlier Sal relished such immersion into the underside of America, here he rewrites it to appear sullen and ominous precisely so his attraction to Mexico will become that much more optimistic and romantic. As a border town, Laredo exists in Sal’s imagination on the margins of two civilizations, and, as such, it represents a literal and figurative crossroads between his past in the U.S. and what he thinks are new and unwritten experiences in Mexico.

Once he enters Mexico, though, his interaction with the country becomes even more idealized, reflecting, once again, Sal’s childish attraction to people and experiences that he thinks will be transformative. The Mexico of Sal’s dreams is a conflicted amalgamation of tropes that have attracted Sal throughout his travels: cowboy
stereotypes (most likely taken from movies and pulp fiction as Sal has done before), references to Eastern religion, and historical memories. Conjuring images of the Wild West, Sal says of their entry into Mexico, “‘This road . . . is also the route of old American outlaws who used to skip over the border and go down to old Monterrey’” (Road 276). Upon entering Mexico, the divide between Sal’s attraction and avoidance becomes clear as Nuevo Laredo mutates into “Holy Lhasa” (Road 274), and the entire country spread out before them is “the magic land at the end of the road” (Road 276). As he has done before, Sal construes what he see from what he knows from reading (the Old West) and what is exotic (the spiritual capital of Buddhism and a place he has never been) in an immature attempt to try to give meaning and significance to illusions. To Sal, only in Mexico, a strange and foreign place full of new sights and sounds, will he be able to transform into another identity and try to discover himself fully, having failed to achieve this transformation in other communities and subcultures. So he does what he has always done and creates the Mexicans into a literary ideal, which in this case is specifically connected to the Fellahin, a marginalized culture that somehow will facilitate the creation of self: “driving across the world and into the places where we would finally learn ourselves among the Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity” (Road 280).

This statement reveals a phrase—“where we would finally learn ourselves”—that might prove the essential key to understanding Sal’s journeys and preoccupation with diverse communities throughout the novel. Indeed his interaction with Mexican culture, which can graciously be described as that of an American tourist traveling outside the U.S. for the first time, is not a grand transformative event, as Sal would like it to be;
rather it becomes a clue to his frame of mind—what guides his attractions—as he travels the road. After he arrives in Mexico City, Sal thinks it is “one vast Bohemian camp. . . . This was the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city that we knew we would find at the end of the road” (Road 302). This description ties together Sal’s masculine and artistic ideals that have plagued him the entire novel. The reference to a “Bohemian camp” reflects his artistic beliefs in freedom and originality. The reference to the “uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city” reflects his attraction to free places where he can negotiate different male subjectivities. He has tried before to be a wage earner and a family man and at this point in the novel he still desires that lifestyle; yet the quotation indicates that Sal’s attraction is itself “childlike,” not fully formed, and in the early stages of development. In fact, though the novel ends in New York City, a reader could speculate (as some of the novels in Kerouac’s Dulouz Legend describe) that Sal might be ready for further, more mature adventures that do not exclusively focus on literary and masculine ideals.

IV.

Thus far, I have looked at various communities and how Sal attempts to transform himself when encountering them on the road. Overall, Sal demonstrates that while the road can be liberating at times, at other times it can be confusing because his ideals continually fail to live up to reality. Concurrent with Sal’s search for sympathetic communities, however, is his search for individuals who embody the nonconformist ideals of independence and originality. Throughout the novel, one side of Sal connects masculinity to the traditional American role of breadwinner and head of family. The
other side, however, thinks of masculinity in terms of extreme individuality and nonconformity. Just as he searches for communities, Sal also looks for like-minded individuals, specifically white men, who can guide him in the nonconformist lifestyle that fulfills his literary and artistic ideals. Sal’s interest in individuality derives from Emerson’s description in “The American Scholar” of a man who relies on himself and refuses to go with the grain: “The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. . . . In its essence, it is progressive (57). In keeping with this description, Sal looks for individuals who are dynamic, unsatisfied with the status quo, and, quite literally, on the move. Dean elaborates the connection between individuality and movement (which, in the case of the novel, involves being on the road) to Sal when he describes their friend Rollo Greb: “I want to be like him. He’s never hung-up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he’s the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you’ll finally get it” (Road 127). When Sal seeks out individuals like Dean and Old Bull Lee (William Burroughs), he moves away from the diversity of communities and attempts to fit into a version of white male culture that values men of the “active soul” or outsiders and rebels. Thus he also looks to individuals as guides into white American manhood. To analyze how Sal’s masculine ideals influence his search for individuals throughout the novel, I will first take a brief look at some of the other individuals he encounters (including American types and Bull Lee) before entering into a fuller discussion of Dean as an
Emersonian individual who embodies (for Sal) the ideals of self-determination and transcendental knowledge.

Some of the people Sal encounters are American types or characters who remain stereotypical representations of American masculinity but who are still attractive to him because of distinct traits such as ruggedness or uniqueness. The men he encounters also have Emersonian “active souls” and appear rugged and self-reliant. When Sal goes west the first time, these prevalent American ideals of masculinity attract him to cowboys and farmers that seem created out of a writer’s imagination and that rely on traits found more in his reading and in popular culture than in reality. Setting an optimistic tone, Sal selects the positive attributes of the men he meets and ignores the mundane and familiar. He becomes drawn to men who appear autonomous, though he does not know whether they are free. In Nebraska, he sees what, for him, is a true representative of the West: “Then Omaha, and, by God, the first cowboy I saw, walking along the bleak walls of the wholesale meat warehouses in a ten-gallon hat and Texas boots, looked like any beat character of the brickwall dawns of the East except for the getup” (Road 19). Then there is the Nebraska farmer in a diner. Watching the laughing and swaggering character, Sal thinks, “It was the spirit of the West sitting right next to me. I wished I knew his whole raw life and what the hell he’d been doing all these years besides laughing and yelling like that” (Road 21). As he moves west out into what Ian Frazier describes as “the still-empty land beyond newsstands and malls and velvet restaurant ropes” (3), he leaves the crowded East behind and his imagination gets the better of him. The wide open spaces of the plains forge larger-than-life personalities that could only exist in certain regions of the U.S., or so Sal thinks. These images of supposed independence are what Sal wants to see
in an individual, what he refers to as “the West of my future” (*Road* 17), and they become suggestive of archetypal white American male values.

Another person who fascinates Sal during his travels, and perhaps embodies more than Dean the countercultural ideals of nonconformity and originality, is Old Bull Lee. Bull Lee is the laconic Jack Burns to Dean’s frenzied Ahab, and he has a commanding presence to which the other male characters defer. Bull appears as a stronger male guide for Sal than Dean because he provides a countercultural authority that Dean lacks. While dashing across the southern edge of the U.S., Sal and Dean make a pilgrimage to see Bull Lee in New Orleans. Lee is the older and wiser mentor, and Sal describes him as “a teacher, and it may be said that he had every right to teach because he spent all his time learning; and the things he learned were what he considered to be and called ‘the facts of life’” (*Road* 143). As Sal confesses, “We’d all learned from him” (*Road* 145). Lee is an extreme Thoreau in Sal’s eyes, making his retreat not in rural Massachusetts but in “a dilapidated old heap with sagging porches” (*Road* 141) in poor, industrial Louisiana and literally on the wrong side of the tracks. As an iconoclast, Bull Lee chooses a marginal lifestyle that suits his caustic opinions and he sees it as a duty to lecture Sal and Dean on topics ranging from “the old days in America, especially 1910” (*Road* 144), drugs, “Washington bureaucracy” (*Road* 145), and the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. His rejection of everyday American mores includes anything not authentic, which he groups together as the faceless, anonymous “they,” or the embodiment of Roszak’s technocracy. During his attempt to build a “‘shelf that’ll last a thousand years,’” Bull explains to Sal, “‘They prefer making cheap goods so’s everybody’ll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around
while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow” (Road 149). Bull clearly lacks Sal’s optimism. He represents the radical fringe that is highly critical of the U.S., viewing the government as destructive and dangerous: “The bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world” (Road 154). Bull states his views and attempts to live them simply by not engaging with any aspect of contemporary American life, which is something Sal struggles with throughout the novel. So Sal looks to Bull to provide the information for living as a nonconformist, admitting about Dean and himself in Bull’s presence, “we didn’t know anything about ourselves” (Road 145).

Although Sal finds other attractive individuals in On the Road, Dean is the one to whom Sal most looks for guidance; and, fittingly, he is the impetus for Sal’s taking to the road. Dean is tempestuous, mercurial, erratic. He displays contradictory traits that both attract and repel Sal throughout the novel, particularly Dean’s individuality that clashes with Sal’s desire for stability, his transcendental knowledge, and his competence as a driver. Each trip that Sal and Dean take becomes a series of transformations for Dean, who vacillates between being (in Sal’s view) a holy saint and a “HOLY GOOF” (Road 194). Critics view Dean, like his real-life counterpart Cassady, as “a new icon of masculine western freedom and sexual power, an archetype for the Beat and hippie movements, one of the last authentic cultural heroes to emerge from the Wild West” (Leavitt 212). There is no doubt that an aura of masculinity attracts Sal to Dean in the first place, a perception informed by Western myth and America’s pioneer past of rugged individualism and movement. Dean (again like his real-life counterpart Cassady) is from Denver, has been in jail, steals cars for fun (a mid-twentieth-century outlaw), and avoids conformity by rushing across the country, abandoning jobs, women, and family only to
resume those responsibilities when they suit him. To Sal, Dean embodies juvenile American icons in literature and cinema: “My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry—trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent—a sideburned hero of the snowy West” (*Road 5*). Sal, as a writer, creates Dean as a character, a type, with traits based on the American myth of the frontier man. Dean’s personality consists of “a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming” (*Road 10*). Creating Dean in this way serves Sal’s purposes in traveling and creating a writing life. Writers often claim that Dean is the dominant personality in the novel because he is a complete individual. According to these writers, he serves two important functions: first, he frees Sal from his depression and lethargy; second, he hints at the possibility “to create a revolution in American life” (Hipkiss 133). Dean “becomes a symbol of a new value system” (Swartz 85) and shows Sal the possibilities of freedom in the U.S., the thrilling and transcendent experience of traveling the continent.23 While Dean does display masculine prowess with women and cars and treats law and order as relative, his other actions contradict these traits because he does not fully represent nonconformity or self-reliance but rather a striving for white, middle-class values. Many times Dean talks about working various jobs to get ahead and wanting to settle down with a wife. He also demonstrates wild shifts in his extreme views, swinging from idealized rebel to untrustworthy madman often within the same journey. Nevertheless, Sal gravitates to Dean’s masculinity and seemingly boundless outlaw knowledge of the road.

Each one of Dean’s attractive traits for Sal is part of a series that revolves around masculinity and individuality. Initially Sal views Dean as having transcendental
knowledge, and Dean’s connection to an experience beyond the physical is, perhaps, what Sal most wants to understand about him. It is this personification of Dean as guide to enlightenment and self-knowledge that Sal finds most attractive throughout the novel. He takes to the road, in fact, in an attempt to learn to be like Dean. Sal labels Dean an “arbiter, old man, judge, listener, approver, nodder” (Road 269) in an attempt to give him credibility as a transformative figure. Dean’s ecstatic energy is a “holy lighting” that Sal sees “flashing from his [Dean’s] excitement and his visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the ‘overexcited nut’” (Road 7). Sal appreciates what appears to be Dean’s optimism, his Whitmanesque “yea-saying” (Road 10), which Sal closely allies with Dean’s sense of transcendent joy. Dean’s behavior, however, can become pensive, moody, and dangerous in Sal’s view. When Dean arrives in New York, and the untamed West meets the urban East, Sal immediately latches on to Dean’s promise in the face of the anomie of the U.S. city dwellers, who struggle to negotiate the complex social networks of post-war America, and he contrasts Dean’s optimism with his New York friends’ “tedious intellectualness” (Road 10). Tim Hunt claims in Kerouac’s Crooked Road that “Dean embodies the conflict between the autonomous, visionary isolation of the adolescent and the constricting but sustaining social world of the adult” (51-52). But this view places Dean in a liminal space wherein he has complete freedom, and thus the view is too simple. Throughout the novel Dean is at the mercy of the rules of society, especially when it comes to jobs, women, and the police. He loses jobs, suffers the wrath of the many women he abandons, and serves time in jail, but Sal presents what amounts to ideal alternatives to Dean’s chaos that ignore the reality of Dean’s selfishness and cruelty and make his actions seem meaningful. When
Dean maniacally crashes Christmas at Sal’s brother’s house in Testament, Virginia, Sal thinks, “The madness of Dean had bloomed into a weird flower” (*Road* 113). This is not the madness associated with saints and artists; it borders on pathological behavior and provides an excuse (in Sal’s eyes) for Dean to act however he wants without thinking about the consequences.24

Consequently Sal, in another series of transformations, sees Dean at times as a type of spiritual guide who negotiates U.S. society on his own terms because he supposedly acts in accord with his ambiguous morality. Perceiving Dean as holy allows Sal to view him as a figure apart from contemporary society—one who does not have to conform to established rules. But this point of view is typical of Sal’s inexperience. Contrary to popular notions of holiness, implying piety or serenity, Sal thinks that “Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot” (*Road* 193) and, furthermore, that he has transformed into the aforementioned “HOLY GOOF” (*Road* 194). For Sal, this title suggests that all of Dean’s antics have a higher purpose though they appear foolish and cruel to others. According to the novel, this perceived sanctity appears in Dean’s increasing childishness and selfishness that clash with ideas of being a good citizen, husband, or father in the U.S. Dean does not possess knowledge that leads to self-possession but rather practical knowledge of how to avoid social entanglements. He avoids them by jumping in a car, taking to the road, and thereby avoiding responsibility. Defending Dean against a group of friends who are criticizing his lack of responsibility, Sal chooses the ideal Dean: “I’ll bet you want to know what he does next and that’s because he’s got the secret that we’re all busting to find and it’s splitting his head wide open and if he goes mad don’t worry, it won’t be
your fault but the fault of God”” (Road 195). A common opinion among Kerouac scholars is that what Sal “learns from his tutelage under Moriarty is that authenticity in life requires abandoning our need for personal ties. We must focus our energies on obtaining our own kicks, and mustn’t let any obligations to others get in our way” (Wilson 83). Dean’s gospel, however, is more complicated than that, since he does dump responsibilities whenever the whim occurs to him and yet continually becomes entangled with women, wives, jobs, and other men like Sal who are willing and able participants in his poorly-hatched schemes. Sal’s glossing over of Dean’s true personality is best symbolized by Dean’s broken thumb (an overt sign of Dean’s inward anarchic nature), which he breaks after hitting his ex-wife Marylou. For Sal, “That thumb became the symbol of Dean’s final development. He no longer cared about anything (as before) but now he also cared about everything in principle; that is to say, it was all the same to him and he belonged to the world and there was nothing he could do about it” (Road 188). Sal’s overdramatic interpretation here shows exactly how he ignores the reality of domestic abuse to keep his ideals intact. Sal says this, though, after he has come across the continent to San Francisco by himself precisely to see Dean and feels his initiative has been affirmed when Dean says, “You’ve finally come to me” (Road 182). Thus Sal thinks his growth as a man and individual are being acknowledged by his pseudo-spiritual mentor.

Consequently, for Sal, Dean becomes the avatar of “IT,” which is, in the vague definition provided by Dean, a semi-mystical, transcendent experience that will raise their consciousness above the mundane. The search for “IT” for Sal and Dean can be viewed as Emersonian, as an experience that will fully realize self. Both Sal and Dean
think that, in order to experience “IT,” they need to break away from homogenized U.S. society and live life on the margins. This is the main reason the characters travel the U.S., look for other communities, drink, take drugs, decline work, and listen to jazz. By participating in these activities, Sal and Dean think they understand the transcendental experience of “IT” and delve into the “cult of high experience” (Swartz 91). Sal’s search for “IT” has been defined as “a quest for enlightenment” (Wilson 82) and “a pilgrimage” (Feied 70). Throughout the novel, according to Gerald Nicosia, “Kerouac never lets us forget that his characters are on a religious quest” (347). Of course the idea of a quest attracts Sal’s yearning for the new and unknown, and he wants the reader to think that he is engaged in “high experience” and a “religious quest” as justifications for his naiveté. Even though on their trip into Mexico Dean thinks, “‘Man, this will finally take us to IT!’” (Road 266), the trip proves otherwise. Sal uses “IT” to give his trips more importance than they actually have and “IT” justifies immature behavior like avoiding responsibility and doing drugs. By creating Dean as the high priest of “IT,” Sal also can excuse Dean’s boorish behavior and continue to use his ideals as a hedge against reality.

While Dean has many skills that set him apart from others in the novel, his most important skill in the context of this study is his skill as a driver. During a trip from North Carolina to New York and back, Sal marvels at Dean’s competence at the wheel. Like a cowboy of the Old West adept with his horse, Dean expertly commands the cars he drives, even at high speeds. A common view of Dean as a driver is that “he exceeds his powers with everything except the automobile, which he usually manages to push to its peak performance and beyond” (Hipkiss 37). Sal’s view of Dean’s driving, though, is
more complicated than the recklessness this quotation implies. Often throughout their journeys, Sal equates Dean’s driving skill with strength and virility. Even when he first meets Dean, who works as a parking-lot attendant in New York City, Sal says he is

The most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world, he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race among fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into tight spot, hump, snap the car with the emergency so that you see it bounce as he flies out; then clear to the ticket shack, sprinting like a track star, hand a ticket, leap into a newly arrived car before the owner’s half out, leap literally under him as he steps out, start the car with the door flapping, and roar off to the next available spot, arc, pop in, brake, out, run; working like that without pause eight hours a night. . . . (Road 9)

Driving through Testament, Virginia, Sal observes Dean’s transformation behind the wheel, his new Hudson becoming an extension of his being: “Dean grabbed the wheel, shifted to second, mused a minute, rolling, suddenly seemed to decide something and shot the car full-jet down the road in a fury of decision” (Road 113). Later his stature grows as Sal watches him drive: “Dean hunched his muscular neck, T-shirted in the winter night, and blasted the car along” (Road 134). And, driving through Nevada on a trip back East, Dean “balled right across the desert in this manner, demonstrating various ways of how not to drive, how his father used to drive jalopies, how great drivers made curves, how bad drivers hove over too far in the beginning and had to scramble at the curve’s end, and so on” (Road 210). Sal’s respect for Dean’s driving is contrasted with his own fear of driving: “I hated to drive and drove carefully” (Road 120). Sal, given
this timidity behind the wheel, views Dean as more manly and, thus, someone to emulate. While automobiles are often written about as passports to freedom, allowing the characters in *On the Road* the possibility for high-speed adventure across the U.S., for Sal cars are expressions of manliness. In cars, skills are tested and proven; therefore the better driver a character is the more of a man he is. Miller, conversely, looks at automobiles as unreliable machines, full of intricate parts, products of industrialism and capitalism.

V.

In this section, I analyze several episodes in *On the Road* that demonstrate an implicit criticism of the U.S. based on my point that Sal avoids or leaves behind the reality he encounters in the novel. This criticism works on two levels: Sal’s negative critique of the U.S. and the novel’s complementary criticism of Sal’s disillusionment. For most of his journeys, Sal relies on a false “frame of orientation” and is not “in touch with reality by reason, to grasp the world objectively” (E. Fromm 65) but instead views the world idealistically. Sal becomes aware of this tendency usually when his ideals clash with reality, and he obsessively tries to avoid that reality. Sal’s behavior throughout the novel exemplifies Fromm’s notions of avoidance and rationalization:

But the necessity to develop his reason is not as immediate as that to develop some frame of orientation, since what is at stake for man in the latter case is his happiness and serenity, and not his sanity. This becomes very clear if we study the function of *rationalization*. However unreasonable or immoral an action may be, man has an insuperable urge to rationalize it, that is, to prove to himself and to
others that his action is determined by reason, common sense, or at least conventional morality. He has little difficulty in acting irrationally, but it is almost impossible for him not to give his action the appearance of reasonable motivation. (E. Fromm 65; italics in original)

While Sal can appear as a callous youth, specific encounters, events, and people interrupt and contradict his ideals throughout his travels. In many ways, Sal and the novel aim their criticism at a faceless and ambiguous power structure, represented by Bull Lee’s “they” or what Fromm calls “anonymous, invisible, alienated authority” (E. Fromm 152; italics in original). “They” are forces that limit Sal’s ability to be an effective American man and artist, including police officers, the threat of the atom bomb, racism, or, in Sal’s words, “the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair [sic] of New York” (Road 106), and “laundromats, cleaners, soda fountains, beauty parlors” (Road 187). When his efforts to avoid these realities fail, the pendulum swing to pessimism becomes severe, and Sal eventually abandons the road for a conformist American life rather than pursue the nonconformist lifestyle as he has for much of the novel.

Like Miller, who can vociferously attack America’s problems but still retain a measure of hope, Kerouac (through his characterization of Sal) seems a romantic, focusing on the local and nostalgic reminders of an outdated America. Ferlinghetti elaborates on the connection between the two writers when he claims that Miller “was the beginning of the vision which Kerouac really elaborated on, and it was much more potent in Henry Miller as far as I’m concerned. Miller was more focused on the reality of America whereas Kerouac was off in his Catholic consciousness more” (qtd. in Codrescu 186). In my view, Miller does not fully confront the reality of America, preferring his
memories, but he certainly is not shy of ridiculing what he does not like. Despite what Ferlinghetti thinks, Miller prefers his optimism to any American reality. In *On the Road*, Sal carries on a conflict between ideal and reality that is similar to what Miller does in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, but Sal’s ideals are neither fully rooted in past experience like Miller’s nor Catholic in the strictest sense. Like Miller’s, Sal’s conflict derives from an optimistic vision of American masculine ideals (self-sufficiency, individuality) combined with his hope for America’s future. These visions come in conflict with the reality of conformity and consumerism experienced by Sal and Dean in *On the Road*.

Sal’s literary ideals cause him to come into direct conflict with many facets of U.S. consumer society, and he searches for alternate ideals that undermine and rewrite this culture. Sal and Dean struggle with contrasting desires for the stability offered by a middle-class existence and the chaotic freedom of the road, which they take to whenever they are bored or, as Sal says, “Whenever spring comes to New York I can’t stand the suggestions of the land that come blowing over the river from New Jersey and I’ve got to go” (*Road* 249). In *Naked Angels*, John Tytell thinks that *On the Road* is “a record of a new kind of existence in postwar America, a novel whose atmosphere suggested the new cultural forces destined to further erode the loyalties to place and family that Kerouac had shown disintegrating in his earlier book [The Town and the City] (159). The novel, however, waives between optimism and skepticism, since it proves difficult for Sal to find that new existence in America. He demonstrates some resistance to change, to the alteration of established patterns and norms in *On the Road*, since he returns home once his negative encounters with work, Dean, and subcultures become too much for him to
ignore. He likes the idea of an unfettered existence, but he also appreciates the idea of a stable home (thus the pendulum effect of the travels). While critics often point to Kerouac’s (and, since he is considered the father of the Beats, the entire Beat Generation’s) rejection of the post-World War II consumer culture, Sal’s relationship with that culture is complicated by his home life and his attraction to stability. Sal wants to be a typical member of middle-class society. Indeed, he lives with his aunt, visits his sister and brother-in-law during the holidays, dreams of having a family himself one day, goes to college, and, as the novel progresses, becomes a published writer. As mentioned earlier, each journey that Sal takes begins and ends the same way. He first removes himself from a stable life and then, after each journey, returns to the comforts of home. In effect, Sal moves in and out of conformity, adopting the road culture not to discover self but to learn how to be an American man who is self-reliant and can take care of a family—part of the “effort to offset feelings of masculine inadequacy” (176) according to Kimmel. Although Sal does fit in to a certain degree with the road culture, he questions whether he can be both a productive member of society and an uninhibited traveler.

Literature becomes Sal’s way to escape, but not too far. He can read and try to live up to his literary ideals, but, when these dreams fail to live up to reality, he can return home, adopt a more comfortable lifestyle, and conform to the dominant American culture.

Another look at the communities Sal gravitates to in his travels reveals his (and the novel’s) negative reactions to social and political issues in the U.S. His attraction to hoboes is tempered by the economic reality of homelessness and destitution. While Sal idealizes a hobo like Mississippi Gene, he glosses over the fact that Gene is destitute, a victim of capitalism, with “no cigarettes” (Road 30), and “no place he could stay in
without getting tired of it” (Road 28). Sal ignores the hardship and poverty that hobos endure, despite being told earlier by a cowboy who gives him a ride, “‘During the depression . . . I used to hop freights at least once a month. In those days you’d see hundreds of men riding a flatcar or in a boxcar, and they weren’t just bums, they were all kinds of men out of work and going from one place to another and some of them just wandering. It was like that all over the West. Brakemen never bothered you in those days’” (Road 20). Compared to the outsized exploits of men like Jim Bridger and Johnny Appleseed, Sal’s experience pales because the hoboes he finds have little freedom and cannot escape even briefly from society’s laws. Arriving in Chicago, Sal and Dean encounter a moribund group, “hordes of hobos, some of them sprawled out on the street with their feet on the curb, hundreds of others milling in the doorways of saloons and alleys” (Road 237). In “The Vanishing American Hobo,” Kerouac seems to have in mind Sal’s experiences in the novel when he acknowledges that the modern world takes away the freedom to travel and simply exist. Kerouac clarifies his view by lamenting the restriction imposed upon this footloose wandering, comparing the modern U.S. to an authoritarian state reminiscent of the alternate-reality in Sinclair Lewis’s It Can’t Happen Here (1935) and deciding,

As far as I’m concerned the only thing to do is sit in a room and get drunk and give up your hoboing and your camping ambitions because there aint [sic] a sheriff or fire warden in any of the new fifty states who will let you cook a little meal over some burning sticks in the tule brake or the hidden valley or anyplace any more because he has nothing to do but pick on what he sees out there on the
landscape moving independently of the gasoline power army police station.

*(Lonesome Traveler 182)*

Miller similarly notes that those citizens who do not have something of monetary value to add to the capitalist machine are suspect, and consequently they are marginalized, oppressed, or hassled.27

In contrast, the Beat community toward which Sal gravitates in New York City offers the promise of “kicks” and an escape from his mundane middle-class life, but it is also a conflicted community of unfulfilled dreams and desires. The conflict between Sal’s attraction/repulsion results in his critical attitude toward his friends who pose as nonconformists. Notwithstanding the appeal of this nonconformist community, he recognizes the pose of pseudo-intellectualism inherent in the lifestyle: “all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons” *(Road 10)*. These friends live in what Sal describes as a nightmare out of Miller, full of people who work “just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City” *(Road 106)*. Sal’s critical view of his friends demonstrates his conflicting viewpoints with respect to the dominant message of conformity and the attraction of nonconformity: “I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion” *(Road 126)*. Ultimately, Sal’s New York friends demonstrate the ennui that comes with being a member of a prosperous and humming city like New York. His repudiation of this lifestyle at one point comes in the form of avoidance: “We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and
performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*” (*Road* 133; italics in original).

In this instance, the road serves as an escape from elements he does not want to face in the U.S.

Although the Beat characters Sal gravitates to in *On the Road* go to great pains to be individuals, they still struggle with being entangled in mainstream culture. Thus Sal’s experiences with the Beats inform the attraction/repulsion dichotomy of the novel. Robert A. Hipkiss in *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, echoes what many writers think of Kerouac’s characters by claiming that they “are separated from the community and have no interest in social reorganization, much to the disgust of many of the author’s critics. But to the Kerouac hero the world and its institutions are too absurd for personal involvement” (133-34). This outlook is not entirely correct. Kerouac’s characters want a nonconformist lifestyle, but they struggle with their own involvement in American society: they have jobs and ambitions, they want houses and security, just like the conformists they ridicule. Sal tells Dean during a journey west: “‘I want to marry a girl . . . so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can’t go on all the time—all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something’” (*Road* 116). In these moments, Sal casts doubt on the value of life on the road, which does not fully satisfy his desires. His views, therefore, demonstrate the puzzling contradiction of this novel. The characters seek an authentic existence and the freedom that comes with fleeing about in cars, yet they are happy to embrace the goods and services they find on the road when the mood hits them.

Sal’s experience with Remi and the working poor in California brings him into direct contact with the capitalist system’s exploitation of the dispossessed and demonstrates that
the freedom of the road can be contradictory. As he travels through different communities, his avoidance of the economic inequality of America proves problematic precisely because it is sophomoric and intertwined with cultural misconceptions. Despite his efforts to travel and attain freedom, Sal becomes embroiled in economic and social circumstances beyond his control, and he encounters men losing their individual identity when they try to play the game. Remi works as a security guard but, like Miller working tirelessly to make ends meet for the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company, he remains poor and his job means nothing to him other than as a way to make money. Sal watches Remi and his girlfriend Lee Ann struggle: “They spent all week saving pennies and went out on Saturdays to spend fifty bucks in three hours” (*Road* 61). As a cog in the system of earning and spending, Remi, perhaps as any disadvantaged person, attempts to undermine his overseers and make himself feel more powerful. He steals groceries, claiming, “The world owes me a few things, that’s all!” (*Road* 69). Sal resigns himself to this pessimism quite literally because he is broke, admitting, “I suddenly began to realize that everybody in America is a natural-born thief” (*Road* 71), and his job as a security guard, as a member of the American workforce, becomes emblematic of the menial nature of most low-paid work. This job poses a problem for Sal in that it puts him at the mercy of the capitalist juggernaut, forcing him to work a job he neither cares about nor wants. “This is the story of America,” Sal thinks, “Everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to do” (*Road* 68). Being in this position demonstrates how Sal can alter his frame of mind within different communities, but it also shows his willingness to do what is expected of him.
Sal discovers a similar conflicted and precarious economic situation in his working life with Terry. He discovers that Terry and other migrant fruit pickers, though seemingly living in an idyllic rural wonderland, are part of an exploitative economic system. The difference is that for Terry and the other workers it is not a choice, whereas for Sal it is. Sal’s original satisfaction with this life soon turns sour as the reality of a migrant existence proves too rigorous for him. The huge amount of cotton he thinks he will gather, “at least three hundred pounds a day” (Road 95), never materializes, and he earns only a dollar fifty per day, which is “just enough to buy groceries in the evening” (Road 97). The frustration of not making enough money weighs on Sal, and he asks, “What kind of old man was I that couldn’t support his own ass, let alone theirs [Terry and her son]?” (Road 96) Views of this episode vary, but Martinez summarizes the majority view that Sal’s escape into this itinerant lifestyle represents a “primal, simple way of life that no longer exists for the postwar American male and the confusing state of modernity that awaits in the city” (Martinez 89). Of course, this romanticized view does not take into account that this particular postwar American male dealing with modernity is mainly white and hardly marginalized. Sal’s inability to be an effective head-of-a-household is a sign of the immaturity of his ideals: he is clearly part of another world, an urban world that knows nothing of working in fields. Sal admits that his dream of being “a man of the earth” (Road 97) clashes with reality: “I was through with my chores in the cottonfield. I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back” (Road 98). The fact that he quits so quickly demonstrates his immaturity, but it also functions as a commentary on the aggravations and disappointments of migrant farm work. Sal’s quitting also shows, most poignantly, that when he has had enough he can leave; he can head to the safety of home.
Sal’s last journey to Mexico serves as the defining experience of the novel, the trip in which he attempts to shed fully American influences as a last-ditch effort to achieve his goals of masculinity and freedom, yet he ends up abandoning his search for self and returns to a stable life in New York. Unable to find an ideal community beyond the control of American social and economic forces, Sal turns to Mexico in the hope of finding an alternative to the dominant influences of materialism and conformity. Turning away from America becomes a repudiation of America. In America, “We [Sal and Dean] felt awful and sad. But everything changed when we crossed that mysterious bridge over the river and our wheels rolled on official Mexican soil” (Road 274). Once immersed into Mexican culture, however, Sal’s avoidance of the country’s economic and social problems cannot last. As with California, the reality of Mexico clashes with his ideal notions of the possibilities inherent in rugged frontiers. Although Sal wants to think that Mexico is a spiritual and artistic refuge, the country is comparable to the U.S. as it struggles with poverty, inequality, and the dangers of the atom bomb. The poverty of Sabinas Hidalgo surprises Sal and Dean: “The main street was muddy and full of holes. On each side were dirty broken-down abode fronts. Burros walked in the street with packs. Barefoot women watched us from dark doorways” (Road 277). Monterrey is an industrial town like any in America, full of economic castaways. Sounding like Miller, Sal says,

Entering Monterrey was like entering Detroit, among great long walls of factories, except for the burros that sunned in the grass before them and the sight of thick city adobe neighborhoods with thousands of shifty hipsters hanging around doorways and whores looking out of windows and strange shops that might have
sold anything and narrow sidewalks crowded with Hongkong-like humanity.

(*Road 279*)

The further south he travels, the more he becomes isolated and paranoid just as he does during his travels in the U.S. He and Dean want to connect with Mexicans so they can fully integrate into the culture, but they cannot bond with the people because they are white, they are the others in Mexico, and they have little real knowledge of what life is like in another country. Hanging out with a group of locals, Sal realizes, “It was hard to come around without a common language. And everybody grew quiet and cool and high again” (*Road 284*). While he searches for an ideal community in what he tries to view as a mythic land, Sal cannot ignore the fact that the threat of nuclear annihilation is as much a military threat to Mexico as it is to the U.S. Driving past villages in the Sierra Madre Oriental, Sal muses, “They didn’t know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way” (*Road 299*). The seeds of Sal’s disappointment planted throughout the novel emerge fully bloomed in Mexico as he acknowledges economic and military realities.

While Sal loses faith in each community he encounters to guide him as a man and artist, he simultaneously loses faith in the initially inspiring people he meets, especially Dean who consistently disappoints Sal throughout the novel. He comes to realize that these people struggle with their own entanglements in conformity and consumerism. Sal’s attraction to the unique characters of the West clashes with his experiences with the real West—a much more mundane post-war consumer culture—causing him to confront the efficacy of his ideals. The consumer and tourist driven West that Sal encounters is
devoid of Emerson’s progressive soul. The swaggering cowboys and farmers Sal rhapsodizes about get replaced by overweight businessmen and tourists—prosperous American types. Encountering uniformity in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Sal says, “All winter I’d been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of course now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn” (Road 19). His disillusionment with reality worsens in Cheyenne, Wyoming, when he comes across Wild West Week—a kitschy parody of the ruggedness of the old Wild West. Instead of lean gunfighters loping down the street, Sal watches as “Big crowds of businessmen, fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire, bustled and whooped [sic] on the wooden sidewalks of old Cheyenne” (Road 33). Sal’s surreal experiences make it difficult for him to reinterpret events optimistically: “I was amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (Road 33). What Sal sees could be a “replacement by shallow copies of the original” (Holton, American Journey 45), but it is truly a replacement by grotesque and critical parody, which is essentially tourism denigrating a version of the Western myth. Drifting aimlessly around Denver and Central City, Sal realizes that the Old West has been recreated by “Chamber of Commerce types of the new West” (Road 51) and reshaped by the warping influence of too much money.

As Sal criticizes the reality of the places he visits, he also criticizes the individuals he once admired. Old Bull Lee becomes less of a mentor for Sal and more of a strange, seedy character whom Sal leaves behind on his travels rather than follows. As an
individual, Bull displays contradictory attitudes to American mores just as Dean does. Mostly Sal and Dean avoid his contradictions, preferring instead to view Bull Lee as a sage and “teacher” (Road 143), but Sal’s narration indirectly shows that Bull’s behavior is erratic. Bull expresses a contradictory blend of liberal and conservative views out of keeping with his status as mentor and teacher: “His chief hate was Washington bureaucracy; second to that, liberals, then cops” (Road 145). This description suggests that Bull rejects all forms of authority, but what it truly shows is that he is cantankerous, unbearable, and indecisive, sounding more like someone who would rather complain than act. Since Bull Lee’s authority as an individual erodes, views like the one expressed by Omar Swartz inadequately explain the paradoxical nature of the characters. Swartz asserts that Bull demonstrates “Kerouac’s discontent with American capitalism and its destructive qualities” (Swartz 71). But Bull is the product of a corrupt America, verbally rejecting what he does not like but doing nothing more. In this sense, he demonstrates the difficulty of living an original life in the U.S. Bull’s extreme drug use, instead of being a form of rebellion, is a form of submission—he numbs himself to the realities of living in a consumer-driven society. Sal recognizes these contradictions in Bull’s behavior when he notices that “The confusion began right there” (Road 142) after visiting Bull in New Orleans.

Dean most disappoints Sal and nudges him back into a life of conformity with American economic and cultural mores. Sal eventually cannot ignore that the economic system intrudes on Dean’s life and forces him to interact with the values of the dominant, white culture. Dean, presented as the model individual Sal tries to emulate, offers both an ideal existence and a nightmare version of that existence. The reality of Dean is much
different from Sal’s misguided view of him. Like most uneducated Americans in post-war society, Dean has few options for economic mobility and is mostly relegated to working as a parking lot attendant in the East or for the railroads out West. The capitalistic system traps him just as it traps Remi, Terry, and other people Sal encounters. Dean’s individualism, of course, often comes into conflict with the system and he struggles to maintain a family and to keep jobs. His experience becomes a commentary on the real consequences of his rugged and fanatical way of life, which is unfulfilling for Dean and ultimately for Sal as well. Dean’s rebellion also rings false at times precisely because he becomes part of the system he rebels against. Indeed he is a swindler only out for himself, and his unstable personality reflects the true origins of his “holiness” or “beatness.” While an individual can be dispersed and have more than one side, I argue against most interpretations of Dean as a wild, optimistic western hero, the reckless criminal described by Sal: “his ‘criminality’ was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy . . . (he only stole cars for joy rides)” (Road 10).

Dean’s individuality and his attempts to live beyond the system, however, are facades that mask his implication in the system that he pretends to reject. Clearly he wants to be free to act, but, like Sal, he is preoccupied by conformist notions of American masculinity: get a job, settle down, buy a house, and raise a family. Sal’s commentary on Dean’s actions demonstrates how pervasive conformity is in the America of On the Road. Several times throughout the novel, Dean admits to Sal that he wants to be with one woman and raise a family. Dean spends much of the novel chasing after women—particularly his wife Camille, ex-wife Mary Lou, and lover Inez—not to flee
responsibility as he claims but to find peace and stability. With Inez, for instance, he plans to move to “a farm in Pennsylvania this summer—station wagon for me to cut back to New York for kicks, nice big house, and have a lot of kids in the next few years” (Road 250). Yet Dean laments the concept that hard work will bring its own rewards, including financial security: “You’ve seen me try and break my ass to make it and you know that it doesn’t matter” (Road 251-52). Dean complains about this paradox, but he continually thinks about the American Dream of family and financial stability, and he continually repeats the cycle of attaining and losing dead-end jobs. Dean’s behavior perfectly represents the struggle Miller challenges in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare: although the system is corrupt, Dean nevertheless cannot escape it because he must be part of it in order to survive. Sal recognizes Dean’s struggle, describing Dean’s life as “all troubles and ecstasy and speed as ever” (Road 247) and attempts “to understand the impossible complexity of his life” (Road 303). Yet the contradiction remains: Dean acts the rebel but also the roles of would-be family man and capitalist slave.

Moreover Dean, throughout the novel, turns into a destructive force that Sal has to face. A typical view of Dean, as expressed by Tytell, claims that Dean’s “energy, though admirable, is mindless and narcissistically devouring. Representing the momentum of energy for its own sake, Dean seems maddened by the urge to be everywhere at the same time, to love several women, to conduct various searches while fulfilling none” (“Jack Kerouac” 171). This view, however, does not account for Dean’s personality being warped by cultural forces. As a writer, Sal realizes Dean’s destructiveness imaginatively through two negative images, each becoming more harmful as the journeys progress. Shortly after arriving in New York City with Dean, Sal dreams of the “Shrouded
Traveler” who represents “only death: death will overtake us before heaven” (*Road* 124). Although associated with Dean, this apocalyptic vision of death and destruction also becomes associated with a U.S. military capable of destroying entire cities with atomic bombs. Later in the novel, as Dean and Sal drive East, Sal views Dean as a “mad Ahab at the wheel” and asserts that “Great horrors that we were going to crash this very morning took hold of me and I got down on the floor and closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep” (*Road* 234).³⁰ For Sal, the vaunted hero of the western night has transformed into a rival of the great megalomaniac of American literature, one who is bent on his own search for an elusive ideal, whether that be kicks, freedom, women, drugs, or a white whale.

Additionally, through his contact with Dean, Sal slowly realizes the limitations of transcendental notions such as “IT.” One major issue with “IT” as it relates to the critique of America and Dean is that it cannot be defined and remains unknowable. “IT” develops into a construct on which Dean can attach many meanings, and this plurality causes it to lose all meaning and, paradoxically, to become more important to both Sal and Dean.³¹ When Sal asks Dean what “IT” is, he cannot elaborate: “‘IT! IT! I’ll tell you—now no time, we have no time now’” (*Road* 127). In his alcoholic, drug-addled, and slightly sociopathic mind, Dean seems more like an idealistic adolescent than a “holy goof.” Later Dean says, “we know what IT is and we know TIME and we know that everything is really FINE” (*Road* 208) without ever clarifying what he means. He seems to be talking about a “mystical kind of knowing” (Hipkiss 35), a life-altering experience, but their encounters in New York, Denver, San Francisco, or Mexico leave no permanent mark on either character. Sal also comes to realize during his travels that nobody can attain “IT” in an American context. Unlike Thoreau’s travels in Concord and Whitman’s
wanderings around New York, both of which produced paeans to American individuality, Sal’s travels immerse him more into the very society he wishes to escape. Like Miller before him, Kerouac wants to join those American writers who have often used the road to represent freedom and possibility: “The road represents an avenue of escape from the limitations, restrictions, conformity, and claustrophobia of society, from the regimentation inherent in mass society and its organizations” (Malmgren 62). But the road also represents limitation: Sal cannot escape responsibility nor can he discover what “IT” fully entails. “IT,” therefore, remains amorphous and becomes a product of “the myth of the rainy night” (Road 128) and “the tea that we were smoking” (Road 129) and “the blank tranced end of all innumerable riotous angelic particulars that had been lurking in our souls all our lives” (Road 208). Contrasted with Miller’s ideals, the frantic search for “IT” shows Sal trying to avoid the inevitable: stability and conformity.

Traveling the road for Sal begins as an optimistic impulse rooted in attraction to the possibility of America, but it ends in capitulation as Sal, realizing the futility of his actions, leaves the road for home. Sal rejects Dean and the random search for “IT” and, instead, embraces a stable life, effectively abandoning the chaos of the road and accepting the reality of being a wage-earning American man. At the end of the novel, Sal has settled down with Laura (a woman with whom he thinks he can create stability) and meets up again with Remi (providing ironic symmetry to his travels). Together they head to a Duke Ellington concert, which shows Sal as a consumer, a member of the middle class, and he seems more comfortable with that life than with returning to the road with Dean. When Dean asks for a ride, Sal rejects him, and afterwards he expresses confusion
and embarrassment: “I was thinking of Dean and how he got back on the train and rode over three thousand miles over that awful land and never knew why he had come anyway, except to see me” (Road 309). Sal, reconnected to the life which he prefers, has come full circle—he leaves New York but returns to New York to stay. Although Hunt claims that Sal’s last thoughts of Dean and the road are an “American mixture of past and present, dream and nightmare, hope and nostalgia” (73), they are much better described as a literary meditation of loss and guilt and a Gatsby-esque recognition of what Sal has rejected (as any young person would perhaps think). Enclosed in the comfortable interior of yet another car, a Cadillac that in the end represents the embrace of his consumerist lifestyle, Sal reasserts his acceptance of the dominant value system as preferable to the alternatives he has encountered in his travels.

Rather than providing an account of the thrill of the road or becoming a guidebook to bohemianism, On the Road offers a conflicted chronicle of hope clashing with a stale, corporate America. Even though Sal begins each journey with optimistic motivations—looking for communities of like-minded people, searching for masculine role models, focusing on ideals and avoiding the reality of the post-war U.S.—the pendulum shifts between optimism and reality during his travels and eventually settles on reality. Sal’s travels always lead him home, as travelers are wont to do, yet this recurrent structure to his travels suggests that his thinking also has been at home all along. When his ideals fail him, and the fleeting effects of booze, drugs, and women fade, Sal embraces again a life that is familiar to him. Although he writes of his travels, of the meaninglessness of things, and advocates dropping out of society, he does not have the seriousness or courage to live out those ideas in the long haul. Taking to the road, for Sal, is nothing
more than a romantic attempt to be an American man. When his dreams fail, when he can no longer avoid reality, he does what is expected of him and settles down, rejecting Dean and the frenzied lifestyle of the road. While Miller retains a measure of optimism in his road narrative, Kerouac in his novel faces the pessimistic reality of America and decides in the end that philosophical notions of how best to live meaningfully in America cannot be achieved.
Chapter Three

Memory Myth and the Rediscovery of America: John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*

While Miller’s optimism is severely tested and Sal’s ideals wither away, John Steinbeck’s optimism seems disingenuous as memories of the past clash with present reality in *Travels with Charley* (1962). A narrative of his 1960 circuitous cross-country journey with his pet poodle Charley, the book details Steinbeck’s rediscovery of and conflict with the country he had once travelled extensively as a younger man. The impulse to take the trip derived from Steinbeck’s literal separation from the country and, in particular, California. Since 1941 he had mostly lived in and around New York City, and the long separation from his boyhood home in the Salinas Valley produced a desire for the old and once-familiar. He acknowledges as much at the beginning of *Travels with Charley*: “In America I live in New York, or dip into Chicago or San Francisco. But New York is no more America than Paris is France or London is England. Thus I discovered that I did not know my own country” (*Travels* 5). But he does not want to rediscover America so much as to rediscover his youthful memories of northern California. The entire route is centered novelistically on his return to his home state and his meditation upon what he calls memory myth, which is mainly defined by nostalgia and optimism in his younger self. The journey begins at Steinbeck’s home in Sag Harbor, New York, then moves to New England and proceeds counterclockwise around the country, across the Upper Midwest and the Northern Plains, down through Seattle and the Pacific Northwest into Northern California, then back toward the East through the Southwest, Texas, and New Orleans before quickly heading home to New York. In many
ways, the most important scenes in the book occur in northern California, and Steinbeck’s experiences there form the turning point of his travels. Like Miller and Sal before him, Steinbeck vacillates between praising the country as he remembers it and criticizing the reality he encounters. Thus the trip is dialectical in nature, highlighting the opposition of optimism, or the idealism based upon memory myth, and negative criticism.

In the context of this study, Steinbeck’s road narrative is much more traditional and formal than either Miller’s or Kerouac’s, but it differs in both tone and structure. Steinbeck balances his negative critique of America with optimism. While he is also optimistic, Miller is far more straightforward in his criticism and Sal leans more toward inadvertent criticism. Steinbeck’s book is also more of a traditional travel narrative that has a set plan with a beginning and end point; thus it contrasts with the more experimental structures of Miller’s essays and Kerouac’s novel, which covers Sal’s back-and-forth wanderings over a period of years. Steinbeck’s journey, though integrating picaresque qualities common to road narratives, relates his outward journey and return to New York. This circular structure from East to West and back again differs from Miller’s and Kerouac’s books, organized as they are around ideas and motifs. While Steinbeck’s book has novelistic qualities—it is a little too well organized to be taken for full reality—it also cannot function as fiction as On the Road claims.

Steinbeck’s project in his road narrative involves both social and personal motives. He takes to the road in order to rediscover his country and redefine himself and, in doing so, seek to recapture the idealism of his past that he defines as “memory myth” (Travels 157). Memory myth is Steinbeck’s idealized conception of the past, based mainly on his
recollections of his childhood in Salinas and his personal experiences as a young man and writer in Monterey and other places in Northern California. Similar in conception to the ideals of Miller and Kerouac, memory myth also functions for Steinbeck as a representation of the difference between perceived and experienced reality, affecting the present through recollected experiences. Yet his optimism exists as a lesser counterweight to the reality it would impossibly deny, and he becomes critical of the contemporary political and social scene in the U.S. He also realizes that his efforts to rediscover an authentic self fail because of his own entanglement in the culture he criticizes. Unlike Miller and somewhat unlike Kerouac, Steinbeck participates in many of the materialistic activities he finds wrong with the U.S. What makes his trip interesting is that Steinbeck is increasingly aware of and admits his participation. His participation becomes evident even before the trip begins, and he admits he has conceded to some of the very ills he finds deplorable beyond himself: “As the day approached [to begin the trip], my warm bed and comfortable house grew increasingly desirable” (Travels 17). But leave he does because one of the reasons he wants to make the trip is to discover if there are people unlike himself, people who are like he used to be, people who are like people he used to know, less urbanized, closer to the land, who represent a somewhat rural but fairly pastoral America of farms and small towns. His optimism in America’s potential, rooted in his conception of memory myth but also connected to his search for these folk or the good poor people he wrote about in previous works, is unable to withstand the clash with reality, and thus his road trip fails on two levels, the public and the personal, becoming a failed journey into America’s political and social culture and his own nostalgic past. This failure mainly appears in the circularity evident in
Steinbeck’s thinking both at the beginning and the end of the trip as he has not gained much intellectually or critically that he did not suspect from the outset. Thus his narrative differs from Miller’s and is more in line with Sal’s experiences in *On the Road*, indicating that the negative issues in America might be getting worse despite optimism in its potential.

In this chapter I argue that Steinbeck struggles with the conflict between the optimism inherent in memory myth, his critique of America, and his awareness of his own involvement in the culture he criticizes. Throughout his journey, Steinbeck ambivalently jockeys between past and present, sometimes resulting in disappointment with what he finds on the road and in himself. This dialectic is further muddled due to Steinbeck’s conflicted thoughts on the American people (or the folk) who he wants to discover are idealistic poor crusaders but who, in fact, desire material gain just as much as he does. In making this argument, I draw from and reinterpret critical commentary on the effect that Steinbeck’s view of the past has on his journey. In particular, Peter Lisca in *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth* claims Steinbeck searches “not for present reality but for an idealized past” (234), and, to expand upon this view, I argue that Steinbeck’s encounter with that past is much more confrontational than Lisca makes it sound. Similarly Robert S. Hughes Jr. notes, “Steinbeck often looks back nostalgically at a bygone America, comparing it unfavorably with the present one, which he cannot fully understand or accept” (87). This view, however, fails to contend with Steinbeck’s intricate interweaving of the past and present and with his realization that the past is past. It also does not take into account Steinbeck’s awareness of his participation in the culture he criticizes. Barbara B. Reitt highlights Steinbeck’s memories, admitting that “the warping
effects of his memory make it impossible to view anything objectively” (194) once he returns to California. While the core of this statement may be accurate, I believe that it is really his disingenuous optimism that influences his critique of the present. And, while John Ditsky claims that “Travels with Charley never reaches its intended goal of finding the self again” (56), he misreads Steinbeck’s purpose for taking the journey, which is not about finding self again in broad terms but about reinvigorating a version of the self that does not exist anymore: younger, more manly, and just as creative as his younger self.

The issue of nostalgia—in the form of memory myth—applies more fully to Steinbeck than it does to either Miller or Kerouac. Unlike Miller, Steinbeck has something to be nostalgic about concerning America, mainly his youth and young manhood in California and his successful career as an American writer. Steinbeck’s memory myth, however, is quite materialistic, altogether different from Miller’s idealism. Steinbeck is more involved with things than with ideas, and he is far less involved with an America of ideal politics for people at large and for self, for growth, for spiritual attainment. Miller suggests one who has sloughed off the weighty possessions of material culture, simplified his life in the manner of Thoreau, whereas Steinbeck has amassed possessions to excess, which becomes evident from his descriptions in the book. Indeed, for the trip across the U.S., he had built a camper truck that he named, appropriately enough for his quixotic adventure but antithetical to the actual materialist nature of the quest, Rocinante. Steinbeck, in short, is ingrained in the culture he criticizes and thus his criticism rings insincere. Yet, at times, Steinbeck demonstrates awareness that his criticism is partly aimed at himself: “In literary criticism the critic has no choice but to make over the victim of his attention into something the size and shape of himself”
(Travels 60). Unlike Sal, Steinbeck is past his youth at the time of his journey and can look back on life somewhat nostalgically. He is fifty-eight when he begins the trip—a decade older than Miller was during his travels and almost four decades older than the college-age Sal Paradise. The purpose of his journey is not to view the “country and leave it with a good taste in my mouth” (Nightmare 10) nor to search for kicks. Instead it is to regain his masculinity, or, more accurately, control over his life which is directly connected to his lost youth, waning creativity, and rampant materialism. At the beginning of his trip, in a macho boast, he justifies what many were telling him was a foolhardy endeavor: “I knew that ten or twelve thousand miles driving a truck, alone and unattended, over every kind of road, would be hard work, but to me it represented the antidote for the poison of the professional sick man. And in my own life I am not willing to trade quality for quantity. If this projected journey should prove too much then it was time to go anyway” (Travels 17-18). Yet his inability to reclaim fully his manhood or to revive his creativity results in refocusing his criticisms of American culture and politics and, partly, himself.

At the outset, however, memory myth functions as a subtle optimistic outlook for himself and for a future betterment of the folks (the good poor people) in the U.S. Yet it stands in opposition to Steinbeck’s realistic and detailed critique of political and economic conditions in America. Throughout the first part of Travels with Charley memory myth, though buried and not mentioned by name until late in the journey, and his criticism of the U.S. exist together as Steinbeck slowly acknowledges that maybe his thoughts are facile and contradictory. Part of this contradiction comes from Steinbeck, maybe from the start of his writing career, being faced with a larger-than-local America
that realistically, economically, is juxtaposed to a democratic idealism, an idealized admiration for the “folk” who only seem not to desire material comfort but who really do value getting and accumulating things. This conflict accounts for the discrepancy between those who have and those who do not, as Steinbeck adumbrated in *The Grapes of Wrath* and other works. Economic issues in the U.S. are therefore pertinent from the start of his journey, but Steinbeck, troublingly, seems to resent the people in the late fifties and early sixties who survived the Depression and World War II and have achieved a measure of economic comfort. Accordingly, Steinbeck’s critique of economic progress seems disingenuous primarily because he enjoyed U.S. economic progress much earlier than and, perhaps because of, the folk he seeks. The folks buying his books allowed him a livelihood in advance of theirs. His critique would seem hypocritical, too, because he could have found the truly poor people in the country if he had traveled off the main roads. Had he done so, he might have found the kind of people he remembered from his youth. Yet he mostly travels on the main highways and their arteries rather than the country byways. This tendency suggests Steinbeck was not as eager to find down-home people as he claims, and it also leads to the inauthenticity of his critique.

Steinbeck, as an observer and writer, becomes all too aware of these contradictions and even goes so far as to question the very purpose of the journey. Before the midpoint in *Travels*, he says, “I came out on this trip to try to learn something of America. Am I learning anything? If I am, I don’t know what it is” (*Travels* 107). He makes these disarming statements, however, while driving through North Dakota, almost entirely rural and scarcely populated. These statements beg the question, “Why hasn’t he learned?” His supposed ignorance at this point becomes a product of being part of the culture he
criticizes. By the midpoint in his journey, he seems to have recognized that what he finds admirable in the U.S. relates to a past that is passing away; and what he finds dispiriting or depressing or annoying largely relates to uncomfortable knowledge about himself. He makes similar statements throughout the trip, which highlights his awareness and attempted avoidance of his thoughts and feelings toward the past.

Before I engage in a dialectical analysis of the trip itself, I will briefly clarify the influence of memory myth on Steinbeck’s earlier works and how it functions as an obvious optimistic outlook for a future betterment of the folks in the U.S. I will also discuss how memory myth comes to stand in opposition to Steinbeck’s realistic, detailed critique of the political/economic conditions in America. A brief overview of Steinbeck’s work makes clear that his optimism is more vexed than Miller’s. Memory myth is rooted in the local, in Steinbeck’s childhood and some of his young manhood. So in his earlier work the memory myth (and, really, the optimism) served as a positive forecast, an overcoming of economic enemies; however, in Travels with Charley it serves only as a reminder of what once was. Here it is strictly nostalgic, confronted by Miller’s juggernaut of consumerism and materialism.

In comparing Steinbeck’s earlier work with his later work, a clear decline in his optimism becomes evident. In his works of the 1930s and 1940s, memory myth functions as a subtle optimistic hope for a betterment of folks in the U.S. Although he had already criticized the U.S. in his early fiction, particularly the treatment of the poor and dispossessed in In Dubious Battle (1936), Of Mice and Men (1937), and The Grapes of Wrath (1939), these works also express at times a muted hope that things could get better. Responding to the poverty and depravity of the Great Depression, Steinbeck, like
other leftist writers in the 1930s, increasingly turned to fiction that engaged with immediate social and economic problems. Jay Parini notes that Steinbeck in the 1930s “was alert to what was happening in the country, and he was looking around him . . . and growing increasingly upset by what he saw. That the very people to whose class he belonged were among those so visibly responsible for the damage to working people that was now becoming evident throughout the country only added to his anger, personalizing it” (90). His separation from the poor people becomes even more apparent as he becomes a successful novelist, and this economic separation lies at the heart of his contradictory opinions of these folks in *Travels with Charley*. That Steinbeck believed he could confront and change the status quo that favored the rich is a testament to his affirmative vision of individuals confronting the seemingly unlimited power of the U.S. government and big business.¹ As Tom Joad says in *The Grapes of Wrath*, “‘I been thinkin’ a hell of a lot, thinkin’ about our people livin’ like pigs, an’ the good rich lan’ layin’ fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hunderd thousan’ good farmers is starvin’. An’ I been wonderin’ if all our folks got together an’ yelled” (*Grapes* 571). His optimism is also rooted in his role as a socially active and politically engaged writer, or what James Woodress calls “the artist-social critic” (386), though I prefer the idea of the artist as social reformer, especially when looking at Steinbeck’s earlier works. Even an early, seemingly dark work like *To a God Unknown* (1933) expresses optimism in the characters’ relationship to the land, inasmuch as it ends on a hopeful note.² And many of his characters are hopeful and able to survive in a world that seems out to destroy them; significantly they retain optimism in the face of criticism. Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* and George Milton in *Of Mice and Men*, for example, endure and believe in a
better future. Even though his later work strays from this optimism, Steinbeck, curiously enough, returned to his idea of the writer’s role in his 1963 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement” (Selected Nonfiction 173). Implicit in this statement is Steinbeck’s belief that the writer, by calling attention to social problems in literature, can affect change in society.

In Steinbeck’s later works such as The Winter of Our Discontent (1961), but particularly in Travels with Charley and America and Americans (1966), this optimism wanes and memory myth serves strictly as nostalgia for what once was when confronted with rampant consumerism and materialism in the U.S. Published the year before Travels with Charley and his last novel, The Winter of Our Discontent is an incisive indictment of the lengths some people will go to achieve the American Dream. In Travels with Charley, however, he intensifies his critique of consumerism and its attendant waste, conformity, the paranoia of nuclear war, and political apathy. He laments “the great hives of production” (Travels 83) of Cleveland, Toledo, Flint and other towns and “the exploding production lines of the Middle West” (Travels 84). He mocks “The new American [who] finds his challenge and his love in traffic-choked streets, skies nested in smog, choking with the acids of industry, the screech of rubber and houses leashed in against one another while the townlets wither a time and die” (Travels 56). He wonders late in his journey about the uniformity he has encountered: “If the same song, the same joke, the same style sweeps through all parts of the country at once, it must be that all Americans are alike in something” (Travels 185). Ultimately,
though, Steinbeck appears disgruntled that his own success and material desires have been embraced by so many. Correspondingly, he rushes home as a curmudgeon, refusing to look at America: “The miles rolled under me unacknowledged. I know it was cold, but I didn’t feel it; I know the countryside must have been beautiful, but I didn’t see it” (Travels 208). Although he critiques America in Travels with Charley, Steinbeck’s critique lacks the passion of his earlier novels, and he sounds more like a tired wealthy man who is on an assignment than a social commentator.

Memory myth, then, though not specifically mentioned until he gets to California, is at the center of Steinbeck’s critique in Travels with Charley. As a novelist writing a work of nonfiction, Steinbeck structures his journey around the importance of his epiphany about memory myth and the idealized version of what actually happened in his life that it represents; it is the denouement to his various realizations about his personal life, family, and the social fabric of America.³ Before his realization, he remains somewhat optimistic, able to look for the positive elements in U.S. society, though he also tempers that optimism with critique. But as an analysis of his journey will show, the farther west he travels the more this optimism erodes. After his recognition that “my memory myth repaired itself” (Travels 157), he is mostly pessimistic, turning a critical eye on the most troubling issues facing the U.S. in the early 1960s but also luxuriating in what he critiques. This chapter, therefore, reflects Steinbeck’s jockeying as described in the course of his trip. Part I examines how nostalgia mainly informs his optimism of the U.S. during the first part of the trip. Part II analyzes Steinbeck’s harshest critiques which occur during his journey west and return to New York after contemporary reality overtakes his ideals and he recognizes his participation in and enjoyment of this reality.
Early in *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck justifies the optimism inherent in the trip and tries throughout the first part of the journey to retain it. Sounding earnest, he claims, “I determined to look again, to try to rediscover this monster land” (*Travels* 5). Feeling disconnected from his native country and seeking the experience he feels is essential for an American writer, he recognizes that “My memories were distorted by twenty-five intervening years” (*Travels* 5) during which he failed to travel and gain first-hand knowledge of the folk in the U.S., an early signal that his views of the people may be misguided. While he wants to reencounter America, he also wants to regain his masculinity and creativity. His stated purpose for the trip contrasts with his private views during the planning stages. In a letter written to his literary agent Elizabeth Otis, Steinbeck defends his decision to strike out across the country alone as a personal impulse to prove himself as a man and writer: “Between us—what I am proposing is not a little trip or reporting, but a frantic last attempt to save my life and the integrity of my creative pulse. An image of me is being created which is a humbling, dull, stupid, lazy oaf who must be protected, led, instructed and hospitalized” (*Life in Letters* 669-70). In a sense, this almost juvenile impulse to prove himself can be viewed as a type of optimism, but it is an optimism that contains the seeds of disappointment, reflected in the critique that follows. But, as becomes apparent through *Travels with Charley*, this impulse becomes a self-interested one which differs from Miller’s and Sal’s.

During the first part of his trip in the fall of 1960, Steinbeck drives through New England before turning west and his optimism leads him to seek the positive in the social and political issues confronting the U.S. Even though he has doubts as he sets out,
thinking in Connecticut, “And suddenly the United States became huge beyond belief and impossible ever to cross. I wondered how in hell I’d got myself mixed up in a project that couldn’t be carried out” (*Travels* 20)—he still believes he will recover the America of his memories by first-hand experience of people and places. This questioning early in the trip is significant, however, as it establishes the dialectic that becomes the controlling force of his perceptions and reflections. Yet, thinking like a novelist, he finds hope in the creative process, in the design of the project, reasoning that by organizing experience he will create sense out of that experience. Comparing his trip to the daunting process of a writing project, Steinbeck thinks:

> When I face the desolate impossibility of writing five hundred pages a sick sense of failure falls on me and I know I can never do it. This happens every time. Then gradually I write one page and then another. One day’s work is all I can permit myself to contemplate and I eliminate the possibility of ever finishing. So it was now, as I looked at the bright-colored projection of monster America. (*Travels* 20).

Recording the experience is analogous to living the experience since, by writing, the writer relives and orders what has come before and, in so doing, Steinbeck will do what he has previously done: report on the people. After passing through Maine, he heads west, admitting, “It seemed to give the journey a design, and everything in the world must have a design or the human mind rejects it. But in addition it must have purpose or the human conscience shies away from it” (*Travels* 50). His journey begins with the optimism implicit in Whitman’s statement in the “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass* (1855) that “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (*Poetry and Prose* 5).
Other writers have commented on the optimism with which Steinbeck approaches the journey without fully acknowledging his misgivings and misapprehensions or his narrative understanding of the journey. Richard Astro argues that “Steinbeck celebrates man’s ability to emerge ahead of his accomplishments and grow beyond his concepts, when those concepts are framed by a recognition of the unity of all life in a regulated, ordered cosmos” (2). My ideas extrapolate from Astro’s but also complicate his point that Steinbeck “celebrates” man’s ability to move ahead by analyzing Steinbeck’s self-awareness. As Lisca also suggests, Steinbeck is “motivated by a Whitmanesque compulsion to identify with and speak for the whole country” (232); however, he never finds such a voice, only one that comes from his narrowing observations and youthful memories. This voice clearly lacks the “yea-saying” of some of Sal Paradise’s effusions.

Nevertheless Steinbeck initially employs two methods to affirm the positive as he drives cross country. He talks to Charley, and he talks with what he wants to think are ordinary Americans in order to discover the pulse of the U.S. Both methods ultimately prove hypocritical, however, since he uses Charley mostly as comic relief, often jokingly commenting on events to the poodle and downplaying much of his critique as his optimism diminishes. His conversations with Charley become a resourceful dialectic that serves several purposes. Charley offers a good way to meet people and strike up a conversation without arousing suspicion. “A dog,” Steinbeck acknowledges, “particularly an exotic like Charley, is a bond between strangers” (Travels 8). He also serves as a listener, allowing Steinbeck to talk about and make sense of his encounters with America. Having been called a “companion, confidant, and displaced conversationalist” (Primeau 80), Charley serves as a counterbalance to Steinbeck’s
contradictory thinking. He is a calm and patient observer of the frantic and materialistic American scene, but obviously separate from it since he is a dog and not subject to the capriciousness of human beings. He “stands for common sense and humanity, characteristics that modern people so frequently abandon in inventing new interpretations of the world and its social rules” (Rutkowska 131), though this role for Charley is created by Steinbeck and so should be regarded carefully since a reader only sees what Steinbeck wants him to see in Charley. Steinbeck also absurdly interprets some of Charley’s expressions as criticism, clearly a misleading tactic. In fact, he allows Charley an unforgiving judgment on Americans. “I’ve seen a look in dogs’ eyes, a quickly vanishing look of amazed contempt,” Steinbeck says after encountering racism in New Orleans, “and I am convinced that basically dogs think humans are nuts” (Travels 203).

Steinbeck’s other method is to meet and talk with individuals who reinforce his optimism in self-reliance and hope in the face of harsh odds. Even though he already thinks he knows who these folks are, having written about them previously, he has the illusion that he will continue to discover the same America he encountered in the thirties and forties with people challenging their bosses or the government. Unlike Miller, who searches for artistic or unusual individuals, Steinbeck looks for people who are ordinary or represent what he considers American archetypes: workers, migrant farmers, soldiers, waitresses, hotel clerks, and small businessmen. Yet he rarely goes out of his way to drive on the back roads where he might find the very types he claims he wants to see. At times, he gains hope from the people he meets, those who are thoughtful, engaging, and, seemingly, apart from the culture of materialism and greed, those who, on the surface at
least, are comfortable with their life. Evidently, the individuals he most wants to find are best exemplified by his impressions of the Midwest, where he finds people who have an electric energy, a force, almost a fluid of energy so powerful as to be stunning in its impact. . . . Almost on crossing the Ohio line it seemed to me that people were more open and more outgoing. . . . Strangers talked freely to one another without caution. . . . It seemed to me that the earth was generous and outgoing here in the heartland, and perhaps the people took a cue from it. (Travels 81-82)

These are people who, despite living in a country dominated by the commercial, realize the importance of forging connections with others. He meets these types of people elsewhere in the country, however, even in the East. One of these folks is a dairy worker in Deerfield, Massachusetts, with a Ph.D. in mathematics. “He liked what he was doing,” Steinbeck remarks, “and he didn’t want to be somewhere else—one of the very few contented people I met in my whole journey” (Travels 22). When the people he meets adhere to Steinbeck’s conception of what an American individual should be, he retains hope that such people will reject consumerism, Cold War paranoia, and political apathy.

His idea of American types derives from individualism in association with others of a like mind and temperament. Steinbeck imagines a past when a man was not afraid to adventure into the unknown: “There was a time not too long ago when a man put out to sea and ceased to exist for two or three years or forever. And when the covered wagons set out to cross the continent, friends and relations remaining at home might never hear from the wanderers again” (Travels 88). Like other writers before him, he connects this communal growth to the westward expansion across the continent, a particularly male impulse in U.S. history exemplified for Steinbeck by the 1804 Lewis and Clark
Expedition. Standing on the continental divide, Steinbeck contrasts the heroics of the expedition with modern pusillanimous U.S. males, “And if we get to thinking we are men, we might remember that in the two and a half years of pushing through wild and unknown country to the Pacific Ocean and then back, only one man died and only one deserted. And we get sick if the milk delivery is late and nearly die of heart failure if there is an elevator strike” (Travels 127). The sentiments expressed here offer a good example of how Steinbeck contrasts hope with critique in the first part of his journey. He defines this like-minded individualism, overall, by what it means to be a certain type of American male—strong-minded and competent, what Michael Kimmel calls “the Heroic Artisan” (192-93). Curiously, he rarely, if ever, discusses women or minorities. The long-distance truckers he meets on Interstate 90 heading west match the masculine ideal: “They are a breed set apart from the life around them” (Travels 71), and they are helpful with Steinbeck’s own truck since he has little first-hand knowledge of its mechanics. He views the truckers as competent individuals, saying, “I always like specialists” (Travels 72) but idealizes them in a way that places them fully within the juggernaut of interstate commerce, realizing when talking to them that “I soon learned not to expect knowledge of the country they passed through” (Travels 73). For such knowledge Steinbeck proposes to make his trip and, by extension, Travels with Charley is intended to supply. But does the book deliver?

When he starts his trip through New England, Steinbeck romanticizes the back roads and marvels at the wonders of nature. He wants to appear as if he is looking for the real American people; so, at first, he scorns superhighways and he claims to drive when possible the back roads and country highways. The back roads give him the leisure to
observe and experience life in the U.S. as he thinks the people he wants to find live it in the 1960s, and this thinking fits nicely with his optimism. Since acquiring first-hand knowledge of the U.S. is one of the goals of his trip, Steinbeck is drawn to those places where he naively thinks the country is untouched by the evils of greed, materialism, and sprawl. He claims, “And this is why, on my journey which was designed for observation, I stayed as much as possible on secondary roads where there was much to see and hear and smell, and avoided the great wide traffic slashes which promote the self by fostering daydreams” (Travels 74). His intention or desire, though, does not conform to his actual travel routes as he indicates more often than not that he does drive the big highways, usually because he quickly tires of the back roads and takes to the interstates to travel more quickly. With a wry sort of amazement, he also discovers along the back roads (in New England especially, where he spends the most time on them) the pervasiveness of materialism: “I can never get used to the thousands of antique shops along the roads, all bulging with authentic and attested trash from an earlier time. . . . There are enough antiques for sale along the roads of New England alone to furnish the houses of a population of fifty million” (Travels 35). Although it may sound as if he resents rural shopkeepers trying to make a living, he actually identifies with them, saying, “If I seem to be over-interested in junk, it is because I am, and I have a lot of it, too—half a garage full of bits and broken pieces” (Travels 35). The “junk” mirrors the idyllic memories of the past that overwrite the present.

This “junk” also becomes a tangible reminder of the materialism surrounding the journey. Unlike Miller, who can get by on very little, Steinbeck packs Rocinante with everything he can imagine:
Tools for emergency, tow lines, a small block and tackle, a trenching tool and crowbar, tools for making and fixing and improvising. Then there were emergency foods. . . . I prepared for at least a week of emergency. Water was easy; Rocinante carried a thirty-gallon tank.

I thought I might do some writing along the way. . . . I took paper, carbon, typewriter, pencils, notebooks, and not only those but dictionaries, a compact encyclopedia, and a dozen other reference books, heavy ones. . . . Also I laid in a hundred and fifty pounds of those books one hasn’t got around to reading—and of course those are the books one isn’t ever going to get around to reading. Canned goods, shotgun shells, rifle cartridges, tool boxes, and far too many clothes, blankets and pillows, and many too many shoes and boots, padded nylon sub-zero underwear, plastic dishes and cups and a plastic dishpan, a spare tank of bottled gas. The overloaded springs sighed and settled lower and lower. (Travels 9-10)

Despite Steinbeck’s intentions to find the “folk,” his reliance on the abundant paraphernalia for the trip, including the brand new Rocinante, does not auger well for a way to get close to them.

In the first part of his journey, Steinbeck appreciates the transformative beauty of the natural world despite the rampant materialism, urbanization, and sprawl he also encounters. Steinbeck’s optimistic feeling about the people and places of the U.S. is mainly connected to his conception of American space but also to a misguided, freewheeling conception of pioneers and explorers. As he admits, “And another thing I had conveniently forgotten was how incredibly huge America is” (Travels 44). The vastness of the land often offered hope for a better life for pioneers looking for a
settlement, for farmers, trappers, hunters, and dreamers who searched the continent for a new beginning. Steinbeck’s conception of American space—like that of the earlier settlers—allows room for growth and expansion, both physically and mentally. The vastness connects with the beauty of the countryside and a longing for the pastoral. Driving through the Midwest, Steinbeck thinks that the wide-open landscape of Illinois is “a noble land of good fields and magnificent trees, a gentlemen’s countryside, neat and white-fenced” (Travels 97), and, in Wisconsin, he is “unprepared for the beauty of this region, for its variety of field and hill, forest, lake” (Travels 97). “I don’t know how it is in other seasons,” he continues rhapsodically about Wisconsin, “the summers may reek and rock with heat, the winters may groan with dismal cold, but when I saw it for the first and only time in early October, the air was rich with butter-colored sunlight, not fuzzy but crisp and clear so that every frost-gay tree was set off, the rising hills were not compounded, but alone and separate” (Travels 97). As the country opens up farther west and he encounters the Rocky Mountains, the “great splash of grandeur” (Travels 121) in Montana, Steinbeck has a vision of how the folk should live in America: “It seemed to me that the frantic bustle of America was not in Montana. Its people did not seem afraid of shadows in a John Birch Society sense. The calm of the mountains and the rolling grasslands had got into the inhabitants” (Travels 121). At this point, Steinbeck presents himself as something more than a writer rediscovering his country: he is a traveler seeking new vistas and, like Miller, proving himself and rejecting the limits imposed by age. He releases his preoccupations and ideals for a moment and declares, “I am in love with Montana” (Travels 121).
Interestingly the most rhapsodic descriptions of nature during his travels are in the redwood country of Southern Oregon and Northern California. Introducing Charley to the area, and sounding a bit like both Miller and Sal at their most dramatic, Steinbeck says, “The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. . . . The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It’s not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time” (Travels 143). Getting closer to his home, he delves deeper not just into natural history but personal history and thus begins his effort to uncover the sources of memory myth. He believes a natural sight, unencumbered by the trappings of modern civilization, will foster the personal growth necessary for the restructuring of modern life to better coexistence with natural beauty. During this section of his journey, just before he returns to Monterey, Steinbeck turns into an environmentalist, lamenting over Americans who too often look at the natural world as a commodity that should be exploited. The U.S. has almost always suffered from the excess of space and an abundance of natural wonders, and Americans, concurrently, have a privileged attitude when it comes to the natural world. Steinbeck admits, “Can it be that we do not love to be reminded that we are very young and callow in a world that was old when we came into it? And could there be a strong resistance to the certainty that a living world will continue its stately way when we no longer inhabit it?” (Travels 147) Materialism and, by extension, the deforestation that comes with greed and sprawl, are ways to control nature that, essentially, cannot be controlled. Americans acquire goods or destroy nature and replace it with something new. Steinbeck suggests that the perspective that
accompani\ntes an awe-inspiring encounter with nature, if translated into public life, can change destructive thinking. Yet these thoughts suggest that he can simultaneously critique and excuse modern developments. Nature in geologic time, in other words, will wipe out the ugliness the moderns have created.

Despite these environmental concerns, during most of the early journey, memory myth is muted, not mentioned by name, and only hinted at by Steinbeck’s concern with a vanished past. Once he enters Northern California, however, he becomes more vocal about how memories of his childhood form the greater part of his optimism and thus influence how he views some aspects of the U.S. During the first part of his journey, he vaguely thinks of the past as a permanent influence on the present. He recalls idyllic memories of small towns, general stores, streets lined with houses, and all of it somehow interwoven by unadulterated nature. As a child in Salinas, he took many trips with his family to Monterey, Carmel, Pacific Grove, and King City, home of his mother’s family’s ranch (Lisca 5). Driving into Northern California, he admits that he struggles with reconciling the changes of the present with his recollections: “What it is is warped with memory of what it was and that with what happened there to me, the whole bundle wracked until objectiveness is nigh impossible” (Travels 148). Much like Sal in On the Road thinks he can live the tranquil rural life of a migrant worker with his lover Terry, Steinbeck often privileges a rustic ideal. His thoughts here reek with contradiction however: “I have never resisted change, even when it has been called progress, and yet I felt resentment toward the strangers swamping what I thought of as my country with noise and clutter and the inevitable rings of junk” (Travels 148). He is part of change, claims to accept it and take advantage of the comforts brought on by progress, but he
wants to reject it too. As he travels west, he imagines what has been called a “nostalgic frontiersman’s vision” (French, *Steinbeck’s Nonfiction* 107), echoing a long history of pioneers, settlers, and missionaries who viewed the end of the continent as the promised garden but is more accurately revealed to be an Eden of memory, a child’s dream. What memory myth really is, then, is a vision reconstructed from his childhood, some young manhood, and, without question, his reading, which conflates memory’s experience with youthful dreams.

A major source for memory myth is Steinbeck’s idyllic idea of his childhood. His nostalgia for the past is best represented by his thoughts as he stands on Fremont Peak and looks out over the Salinas Valley, telling Charley about his childhood: “‘[I]n that little valley, I fished for trout with your namesake, my Uncle Charley. And over there—see where I’m pointing—my mother shot a wildcat. Straight down there, forty miles away, our family ranch was—old starvation ranch. . . . And on one of those oaks my father burned his name with a hot iron together with the name of the girl he loved’” (*Travels* 157). So, in some sense, he is also psychically travelling with his uncle, with a representative of the past. In the spirit of Proust and Faulkner, Steinbeck’s intense mental and physical connection to the landscape becomes a “permanent and changeless past where my mother is always shooting a wildcat and my father is always burning his name with his love” (*Travels* 158). At this point, the past is ever-present, what Ditsky calls “controlled nostalgia” (59), an interesting phrase indicative of Steinbeck’s role as writer but that also limits the amount of influence nostalgia exerts over Steinbeck.

The optimism inherent in memory myth is also influenced by his personal experiences as a young man and writer in Northern California. Contrary to the path taken
by many writers of his generation who lived as expatriates in Europe, and contrary to Miller’s fleeing of the U.S. for France, Steinbeck stayed in his native California, becoming inextricably associated with the land through his birth and works. Much of his fiction is set in California and, though he is not considered a local color writer (Lisca 1-2), his use of characters and landscape to frame his fiction demonstrates the influence that California exerts on his imagination. Remembering his youth in San Francisco, Steinbeck muses, “Once I knew the City very well, spent my attic days there, while others were being a lost generation in Paris. I fledged in San Francisco, climbed its hills, slept in its parks, worked on its docks, marched and shouted in its revolts. In a way I felt I owned the City as much as it owned me” (Travels 150). Sounding like a man defending choices he has made in life, Steinbeck remembers his youth as a time of freedom and possibility but also one tied to ideas of social change and progress. While remembering himself as social crusader, he also remembers himself—perhaps misleadingly—as part of the wild and unruly frontier spirit of the West. In a way, too, Steinbeck’s statements here show an awareness that the past is gone. Taking possession of the city is taking possession of the past that he knows is gone and unrecoverable except through memory myth, and this is the key to the trip, to his psyche, and to what troubles him. This past intrudes upon the present when he once again walks the streets of Monterey: “It was the Monterey where they used to put a wild bull and a grizzly bear in the ring together, a place of sweet and sentimental violence, and a wise innocence as yet unknown and therefore undirtied by undiapered minds” (Travels 152). Memory myth, then, can also be seen as a source for some of Steinbeck’s early works, and his confrontation with the past comes across as a reinvigoration of his lost youth.
Another influence on Steinbeck’s optimistic conception of the past is his reading throughout his life but especially in the years before he drove around the country. This reading was wide and varied and, as Robert J. DeMott records in *Steinbeck’s Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed*, included classical authors such as Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Rabelais paired with twentieth-century writers Thomas Wolfe, Sinclair Lewis, William Shirer, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, John O’Hara, and J. D. Salinger (xliv-xlv). DeMott characterizes Steinbeck’s reading in the last years of his life as a “movement toward resuscitating a personal brand of romanticism” (xliii), which is a view I build upon throughout this chapter as another way to express the effect that memory myth has on Steinbeck’s imagination during his travels.

Literary references abound in the book: the title, supplied by Steinbeck’s wife Elaine (*Life in Letters* 686), derives from Robert Louis Stevenson’s account of his hiking trip through the Cevennes Mountains, *Travels with a Donkey* (1879); the truck’s name comes from Don Quixote’s horse Rocinante; the conception of the past derives from *You Can’t Go Home Again*; and the evocation of Arthurian lore has roots in the references to Galahad. This last literary reference is an important one as Steinbeck was obsessed with the stories of King Arthur as recorded by Sir Thomas Malory in *Morte d’Arthur*. Prior to embarking on his journey across America in September 1960, Steinbeck spent part of 1958-59 in Somerset, England, working on a modern translation of King Arthur’s tales. Unable to finish the project (it was published posthumously in 1976), Steinbeck was influenced by the concept of a nonexistent idyllic past, similar to that associated with Camelot, as he traveled across the U.S., and these fictional memories contribute to his
frustration and confusion when encountering a dissonant reality. Concerning this unfinished project, Reitt notes that “The real world and Camelot are both miles and eons apart, and Steinbeck seemed to be crushed by his inability to bring them together, to make Camelot sensible to modern readers, to express anything about Camelot that made sense, to pull order and unity out of the chaos of his feelings and ideas” (189), and this could also be an accurate description of Steinbeck’s attitude in *Travels with Charley*. This reading thus highlights Steinbeck’s preoccupation with what once was, and the reminders increase as the traveler gets nearer to and eventually reencounters the land of his birth.

After Steinbeck leaves California, however, memory myth functions as a persistent reminder of the past left behind and serves less effectively as a counterweight to the reality he encounters. Memory myth becomes a reminder of what has been lost not only in his past but in America. When he leaves California he says, “But what I carried in my head and deeper in my perceptions was a barrel of worms” (*Travels* 159). That image evokes the hives of activity and swarms of people he has described up to this point. He also admits, “But these are my people and this my country. If I found matters to criticize and to deplore, they were tendencies equally present in myself” (*Travels* 159), and these statements demonstrate where he clearly contradicts himself since he does not look for “my people,” which is what he wants to find. He is not the proletarian writer of the thirties anymore, and he has to travel the rest of the country to fully realize it. In Texas, he questions the way the mind makes sense of reality, much the way he has tried to use memory myth in his travels: “What I am trying to say is that there is no physical or geographical unity in Texas. Its unity lies in the mind. . . . There’s no question that this
Texas-of-the-mind fable is often synthetic, sometimes untruthful, and frequently romantic, but that in no way diminishes its strength as a symbol” (*Travels* 177). On his return east, Steinbeck sounds like the tired old man he was at the outset—justifying himself—and still finds it difficult to let go of much of the nostalgic thinking that has gone into his trip. As he drives through the racist South, his thinking becomes less sure and more fragmented, as if memory myth itself were breaking apart. Confronting the conformity required of white citizens in the South, he sounds less sure of his ideals and opinions: “But the more I inspected this American image, the less sure I became of what it is. It appeared to me increasingly paradoxical” (*Travels* 186). The South then marks the end of his optimism, his exploration of the self, and, largely, his study of America.

II.

Even though Steinbeck focuses more on observable reality and less on memory after his experiences in Monterey, he vacillates throughout the first part of his trip between optimism and criticism. This section examines how Steinbeck’s criticism plays out as he heads west and analyzes the change in his attitude after he leaves California and heads east. The difference between these two critiques lies in the dialectical nature of Steinbeck’s thinking, particularly in how much he clings to optimism and ignores reality. His attack of materialism as he heads west negates his optimism because, when he views reality, he is more honest and harsher in his opinions of America. He attacks people for their conformity and the lack of community; condemns consumerism and its attendant waste, sprawl, and change; bemoans the fear and paranoia of the political climate; and mocks the commodification of natural resources. These issues not only detract from the
supposed uniqueness of America but also corrupt masculinity and creativity, both of which he is trying to recapture. As he heads east and home, he no longer holds onto any optimism but, instead, views America’s problems, particularly racism, in the harsh light of the quotidian world.

Most people that Steinbeck encounters on his trip west clash with his ideal of individuality because they are caught in a conformist mindset, limited by their social-economic circumstances, and paralyzed by political events beyond their control. Most of these people ignore Thoreau’s counsel in *Walden*: “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away” (217). Steinbeck finds citizens trapped by circumstances that control their lives: government regulations, community expectations, family obligations, business demands, or material needs. In addition, the people he meets often reflect his own fears of being trapped by age. Stopping by a lake in Indiana, Steinbeck is confronted by a guard whose sole job is to prevent camping, hunting, or fishing on the boss’s property. Steinbeck convinces the man to let him stay by bribing him with coffee and whiskey and, while talking to him, realizes that the man’s life is molded by the outside forces of consumerism and industry. To take care of his wife, Steinbeck realizes, the man “would get a job in some great clanging organism of progress, and they would live happily ever after. . . . She knew exactly what she wanted and he didn’t, but his want would ache in him all his life. . . . He wanted his pretty little wife and he wanted something else and he couldn’t have both” (*Travels* 87). The last sentence, in particular, sums up a fair amount of the conflict residing in Steinbeck. He
has pretty much had success but he still seems unsatisfied or pretends he is not. Perhaps, though, this conflict has more to do with his declining power as a writer than with anything else. In a hotel room in Chicago, where Steinbeck takes a break from his trip in order to meet his wife Elaine, he imagines its previous inhabitant, Lonesome Harry, a typical businessman who is sad and lonely. Steinbeck imaginatively reconstructs Harry’s life from the detritus left in the room: a letter to his wife, an empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s, and lip-stick stained cigarettes and a hair pin found on the floor, signifying his liaison with an unknown woman. Steinbeck feels sorry for this man whom he imagines unhappy and burdened by his obligations: “[H]e didn’t do a single thing that couldn’t be predicted—didn’t break a glass or a mirror, committed no outrages, left no physical evidence of joy” (Travels 91-92). Even though he is only part way through his trip in Chicago, Steinbeck’s criticism springs from the reality he has already encountered in his travels. Later, in Idaho, Steinbeck meets a young man who wants nothing more than to escape his mundane life and live in New York City because “‘There’s nothing here. You can just rot here’” (Travels 131). This young man troubles Steinbeck because he lacks initiative, preferring instead to complain and resign himself to working at his father’s motel with little hope of leaving. Men like these stand in sharp contrast to his rhapsodic descriptions of Lewis and Clark and other voyagers with whom Steinbeck imaginatively engages before he meets this young man.

What Steinbeck finds is that these forlorn people remain alienated from community or any stabilizing sense of permanence, the result of rapid industrial and social changes in the U.S. after World War II. Community, or a group of like-minded citizens joined for the public good, is integral to Steinbeck’s idealism as it is for Miller’s. In this sentiment,
he echoes Tocqueville: “I am persuaded that . . . the collective force of the citizens will always be better able to achieve social prosperity than the authority of the government” (91). Community is rooted in a historical conception of the American people joined together based on commonalities, which Steinbeck’s friend, an unnamed political reporter, describes: “I don’t mean the square-eyed toothpaste-and-hair-dye people or the new-car-or-bust people, or the success-and-coronary people. Maybe they never existed, but if there ever were the People, that’s the commodity the Declaration was talking about, and Mr. Lincoln” (Travels 129). The average American of the early 1960s, however, is more concerned about material gain than a shared history. But this homogenizing of the U.S. is precisely what Steinbeck is a part of and actually counts on, even as he criticizes it through the reporter. This separation from people and place is exemplified by the French-Canadian migrant farm workers that Steinbeck meets in Maine. While he shares drinks and stories with them, he notes that migrant workers like these “have been driven to movement and seasonal work by poverty and terrible need” (Travels 53). While they come to America for economic opportunity as many immigrants have before them, they are at the mercy of an unfair economic system that exploits them for cheap labor, which Sal also experiences during his migrant farm worker episode. Steinbeck further encounters this disconnection in the ultimate symbol of wandering the highway: the mobile home. Having dinner with a couple in Maine, his host notes, “Who’s got permanence? Factory closes down, you move on. Good times and things opening up, you move on where it’s better. You got roots you sit and starve” (Travels 79). Lack of a stable community, then, is closely tied to economic issues and, particularly, the open market fluctuations of capitalism. Steinbeck continually notes throughout his journey the
paradox between those with opportunities and wealth and those with limited options even though he does not find truly poor people. While those workers at the mercy of a larger social and/or cultural force seem to exert the greatest influence on his view of the U.S, it is almost as if he does not want them to succeed but rather to suffer.

Steinbeck’s optimism erodes further in his encounters with consumerism, waste, urban sprawl, and the vicissitudes of progress. In a 1959 letter to Adlai Stevenson, Steinbeck, sounding much the way he sounds in *Travels with Charley*, complains about the negative effects of consumerism on Americans: “Having too many THINGS they [Americans] spend their hours and money on the couch searching for a soul. A strange species we are. We can stand anything God and nature can throw at us save only plenty. . . If I wanted to destroy a nation, I would give it too much and I would have it on its knees, miserable, greedy and sick” (*Selected Nonfiction* 108-09; ellipsis in orig.). His own rampant reliance on material comforts, however, renders these statements fairly hypocritical: he sounds like a man who resents others for success like his own. One instance of this conflict within himself emerges during his journey when he visits a mobile home park and shows a familiarity with buying and selling goods: “If you are doing well you turn yours [mobile home] in on a new model just as you do with an automobile if you can possibly afford to. There’s status to that” (*Travels* 76). Despite having seen the destitution of the Great Depression first hand, he emphasizes that the country has moved in the opposite direction and now relies on the excess of goods and services. He travels through what has been memorably called “a synthetic land” (Astro 9) that indulges every whim and tries to make life uncomplicated through mechanization and homogenization. He complains at length about how this complacency and desire for
goods extends to highway travel, where the ease of modern life is translated to the uniformity of the roadside experience. In a hotel in Bangor, Maine, Steinbeck echoes Miller’s thoughts of his hotel room in Pittsburgh: “It was immaculate; everything was done in plastics—the floors, the curtain, table tops of stainless burnless plastic, lamp shades of plastic” (Travels 36). This uniformity leads to American travelers accepting these conveniences without question and, because they seemingly have all they need at their fingertips, they become disconnected from each other. As he travels down the Pacific coast, Steinbeck realizes the paradoxical solitude that accompanies staying in auto courts with other guests, managers, and maids with whom he has little contact:

“Everything was convenient, centrally located, and lonesome. I lived in the utmost luxury. Other guests came and went silently. If one confronted them with ‘Good evening,’ they looked a little confused and then responded, ‘Good evening.’ It seemed to me that they looked at me for a place to insert a coin” (Travels 139).

The consumerism Steinbeck finds rampant throughout the U.S. leads to waste and a resulting destructive attitude when Americans dismiss their effect on the environment. He discovers that Americans rely on the easy solution of throwing away used and unwanted articles instead of thinking of other solutions. A culture of waste corrodes the heart of what Steinbeck thinks of as America: resourceful, inventive, and practical. Experiencing the congestion of Hartford and Providence, he realizes,

American cities are like badger holes, ringed with trash—all of them—surrounded by piles of wrecked and rusting automobiles, and almost smothered with rubbish. Everything we use comes in boxes, cartons, bins, the so-called packaging we love so much. The mountains of things we throw away are much greater than the
things we use. In this, if in no other way, we can see the wild and reckless
exuberance of our production, and waste seems to be the index. (Travels 22)
Throughout his travels, he claims to avoid cities if he can, so that he can escape the
ubiquitous trash piles or junk yards and instead view natural beauty or small-town charm.
But this avoidance has an insincere counterpart since Steinbeck tends to stay in the large
cities he criticizes and contributes to the culture of waste he critiques. While Miller and
Kerouac are outsiders, viewing the U.S. from the stance of expatriate and countercultural
figures, Steinbeck is immersed in the comfort that accompanies modern consumer living.
Indulging in a nostalgic reminiscence of the conveniences at roadside rest areas, he
marvels at goods that will soon be tossed aside in accordance with the growing
wastefulness of Americans:

I remember when a coin in a slot would get you a stick of gum or a candy bar, but
in these dining palaces were vending machines where various coins could deliver
handkerchiefs, comb-and-nail-file sets, hair conditioners and cosmetics, first-aid
kits, minor drugs such as aspirin, mild physics, pills to keep you awake. I found
myself entranced with these gadgets. (Travels 70-71)

Entranced, yes, but also eager to consume such objects. Waste can be the problem that
comes with “the destructive powers of abundance” (Strecker 223), but it can also be the
byproduct of coveting material products that attract Steinbeck’s attention.

From early on in his trip, Steinbeck telegraphs his participation in consumer culture.
As he travels in this truck teeming with goods, he also encounters and embraces many of
the modern conveniences associated with highway travel. Steinbeck critiques the culture
of waste, but he openly admits to being part of that culture. Cooking in his camper, he
denigrates the importance of his pots and utensils by calling them “things” (Travels 24) and, hence, easily disposable, using them for what they have become in the modern U.S., throwaway objects:

There are so many modern designs for easy living. On my boat I had discovered the aluminum, disposable cooking utensils, frying pans and deep dishes. You fry a fish and throw the pan overboard. I was well equipped with these things. I opened a can of corned-beef hash and patted it into a disposable dish and set it on an asbestos pad over a low flame, to heat very slowly. (Travels 24)

The paradox here is that he can complain but he still takes advantage of the bounty.

Another change in the U.S. that receives Steinbeck’s attention, one closely related to waste as more Americans consume the resources in one area and move to another, is urban sprawl. Driving from city to city, Steinbeck marvels at the growth that suffocates the landscape. In the Midwest, he notices “the enormous increase in population. Villages had become towns and towns had grown to cities. The roads squirmed with traffic; the cities were so dense with people that all attention had to be devoted to not hitting anyone or not being hit” (Travels 81). And, in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Steinbeck becomes overwhelmed: “As I approached, a great surf of traffic engulfed me, waves of station wagons, rip tides of roaring trucks” (Travels 99). He notices in these episodes a paradox that accompanies growth in people who seem unaffected by the development surrounding them, but he also senses an uneasy optimism that accompanies change. People in the Midwest “were more open and more outgoing” (Travels 82), but later he realizes that the growth of towns, cities, and roads merely counters the dread of destruction and annihilation. After being buffeted by the traffic in St. Paul and
Minneapolis, Steinbeck suddenly becomes aware that he has been driving along an Evacuation Route: “Of course, it is the planned escape route from the bomb that hasn’t been dropped. Here in the middle of the Middle West an escape route, a road designed by fear” (Travels 100). As Sal Paradise also realizes when he travels to Mexico in On the Road, the threat of nuclear war lies uneasily yet scarcely acknowledged in the collective consciousness. Facing the threat of nuclear destruction, why not seek material pleasures before it is too late?

The sprawl Steinbeck encounters is aided by the expansion of the interstate highway system, which becomes both an advantage and a hindrance during his travels. By the time of Steinbeck’s journey in 1960, President Eisenhower’s Federal Highway Act of 1956 had begun to transform the size and scope of highways across the U.S. Warren French recognizes the impact this change had on Steinbeck’s journey:

> It is equally important to bear in mind that the traveler’s United States in 1960 was very different logistically from the one that greets wanderers today. The vast interstate highway system, which President Eisenhower had campaigned for successfully on the basis of its usefulness to the national defense, was just beginning to get Americans on the road for longer journeys in the Midwest and West. Few stretches yet existed in the South or in the crowded East, where building costs were higher. (Steinbeck’s Nonfiction 101)

John B. Rae in The Road and the Car in American Life analyzes the motives and benefits of the construction of the highways, concluding that along with the benefits to national defense, businesses, and the travel industry, “The ease and greater celerity of both long-distance and local travel must of necessity have a major social impact” (193). Along the
highways, Steinbeck encounters “places of rest and recreation, food, fuel and oil, postcards, steam-table food, picnic tables, garbage cans all fresh and newly painted, rest rooms and lavatories” (Travels 70). He seems to bemoan the lack of true connection with the country when riding the highways and even discusses the detriments of such homogenized conveniences. The speed and ease of highway travel also comes at the expense of experiencing the unique in the country and its landscape. Traveling Interstate 90 west through New York and Pennsylvania, Steinbeck recognizes, “These great roads are wonderful for moving goods but not for inspection of a countryside. . . . When we get these thruways across the whole country, as we will and must, it will be possible to drive from New York to California without seeing a single thing” (Travels 70). The monotony of traveling the interstates detracts from the essential experience that Steinbeck wants to find in small U.S. towns and regional people. Yet his actual use of the highways qualifies his critique, for he resorts to the interstate highways just as the travelers he scorns do. They allow speed and convenience. Thus his stance as critic loses luster as he continually takes advantage of the amenities he mocks.

All the same, Steinbeck’s pessimistic views of the U.S. grow as he encounters unavoidable complications that accompany industrialization and change. While Steinbeck views change as inevitable, he also questions what the cost will be to American society:

It is the nature of a man as he grows older, a small bridge in time, to protest against change, particularly change for the better. But it is true that we have exchanged corpulence for starvation, and either one will kill us. The lines of change are down. We, or at least I, can have no conception of human life and
human thought in a hundred years or fifty years. . . . The sad ones are those who waste their energy in trying to hold it back, for they can only feel bitterness in loss and no joy in gain. (*Travels* 83)

His conflicted feelings about change reach their nadir during and after a visit to Seattle, just before he returns to his boyhood home in Northern California. The reality of Seattle as a growing city humming with manufacturing fails to live up to the place he remembers from his youth, and he unexpectedly gets lost: “The traffic rushed with murderous intensity. On the outskirts of this place I once knew well I could not find my way. Along what had been country lanes rich with berries, high wire fences and mile-long factories stretched, and the yellow smoke of progress hung over all, fighting the sea winds’ efforts to drive them off” (*Travels* 138). This change conflicts not only with Steinbeck’s memories but also with his thoughts of the values a city should have—such as diversity and dynamism. As cities grow and change, they abandon their centers of living for the new and seemingly better housing and shopping that often take the guise of improvement.11 When populations flee to the suburbs, they leave the past behind. For Steinbeck, whose entire journey is structured around rediscovering his childhood and the value of the past, this is a wasteful change. Walking through Seattle, he thinks,

> When a city begins to grow and spread outward, from the edges, the center which was once its glory is in a sense abandoned to time. . . . The district is still too good to tear down and too outmoded to be desirable. Besides, all the energy has flowed out to the new developments, to the semi-rural supermarkets, the outdoor movies, new houses with wide lawns and stucco schools where children are confirmed in their illiteracy. (*Travels* 138-39)
This “energy” could be equated with change, but it is a change misdirected—Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption” on a grand scale. Although these transformations are representative of what Steinbeck does not like, it is curious that he takes advantage of these changes as well by living in New York.

While becoming disgusted with consumerism and waste, Steinbeck, politically engaged writer that he is, also turns his criticism to political issues. He finds less optimism in the political issues facing the U.S. during the first half of his journey, particularly in the Cold War culture of fear and paranoia. Throughout the country, he encounters people paralyzed by “this frightened time” (Travels 117), which leads to a populace afraid to act and increasingly concentrated on the self. Most of the fear he encounters derives from the U.S. government’s massive build-up of conventional weapons and the stockpiling of nuclear weapons. On Long Island Sound, Steinbeck, influenced by memories of crossing the U-boat-infested waters of the Atlantic during World War II, watches submarines based in New London slicing through the water and thinks, “I wish I could like submarines, for then I might find them beautiful, but they are designed for destruction, and while they may explore and chart the sea bottom, and draw new trade lines under the Arctic ice, their main purpose is threat. . . . And now submarines are armed with mass murder, our silly, only way of deterring mass murder” (Travels 18-19). As the Cold War consumes society, the preoccupation with death—rather than the usefulness of objects—becomes paramount. Later, on the same ferry, Steinbeck meets a young man who serves on submarines. The sailor’s view of the future embodied by the submarine—stable and peaceful—causes Steinbeck to reflect on youth versus age, “And could be he’s right and I’m wrong. It’s his world, not mine any more.”
. . I must not put my memories and my fear on him. Maybe it won’t be true again, but that’s his lookout. It’s his world now. Perhaps he understands things I will never learn” (Travels 19-20). But Steinbeck’s thoughts of nuclear annihilation cause him to be anxious about the future. Thinking of man’s progress through the centuries, from the discovery of fire to the manufacturing capacity of Detroit, leads Steinbeck inevitably to the problem of nuclear weapons, and he is concerned that it will not take long before humans create even more powerful weapons. The pace of humans’ ability to grasp the significance of their creations lags behind their capacity for invention, and therein lies the danger: “And now a force was in hand how much more strong, and we hadn’t had time to develop the means to think, for man has to have feelings and then words before he can come close to thought and, in the past at least, that has taken a long time” (Travels 27).

Faced with outside threats, the people Steinbeck meets would rather put their faith in the stability offered by the military-industrial complex. His criticism of political paranoia stems from a paradox: he wants to find people who will shout for change, yet he does not seek out those people, preferring instead to concentrate increasingly on the negative. In this sense, he lacks the optimism Miller extols of marginal individuals in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare.

Most of this Cold War anxiety and its subsequent pessimism results from an increased governmental presence in regular lives. Steinbeck’s encounters with the pervasiveness of the U.S. government make him uneasy. As Steinbeck travels across the U.S. in 1960, he encounters the aftermath of the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s. In that divisive decade, Senator McCarthy hunted for communists at all levels of government and American life, the Rosenbergs were executed, the Truman Doctrine went
into effect in Korea and Vietnam, and the government used the Smith Act to prosecute
anyone suspected of having communist or socialist sympathies. Anti-Communist
thinking entered all areas of life in the U.S., from fiction and comic books to air raid
drills in schools (Zinn 436). The Communist scare also gave the government full power
to increase military spending and create a war machine: “It was an atmosphere in which
the government could get mass support for a policy of rearmament. The system, so
shaken in the thirties, had learned that war production could bring stability and high
profits,” so that “In 1960, the military budget was $45.8 billion—49.7 percent of the
budget” (Zinn 436-37). No wonder that Steinbeck’s optimism about the U.S. becomes
eroded by this culture of fear and suspicion embodied in the people he meets across the
country.

The fear accompanying this paranoia causes irrational thinking and anti-government
sentiments in the people Steinbeck encounters. The dichotomous thinking associated
with the Cold War lets people blame an amorphous other, in this case the U.S.S.R., for
problems in society. Steinbeck finds people who use the Soviets as scapegoats in order to
ignore real problems in the U.S. or to justify how they conduct their lives. A store owner
in Minnesota tells Steinbeck, “‘Hardly a day goes by somebody doesn’t take a belt at the
Russians’” (Travels 110), and Steinbeck mocks him when he asks whether anybody has
met a Russian: “‘Course not. That’s why they’re valuable. Nobody can find fault with
you if you take out after the Russians’” (Travels 110). Here Steinbeck highlights how
government controls people by creating either real or imagined threats. He also
questions whether the government can protect the people. Attempting to enter Canada
and save time on his trip, Steinbeck is turned away by the border guards’ bureaucratic
insistence that he produce proof of Charley’s rabies vaccination. Looking again for that physical outlet he associates with courageous explorers like Lewis and Clark and sharing Miller’s vituperative tone, Steinbeck admits, “I guess this is why I hate governments, all governments. It is always the rule, the fine print, carried out by fine-print men. There’s nothing to fight, no wall to hammer with frustrated fists” (Travels 67). Thoreau had already argued against such obsessive government control in “Resistance to Civil Government,” saying, “Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient” (Walden and Resistance 226). Steinbeck seems to agree with Thoreau’s point, concluding that “government can make you feel so small and mean that it takes some doing to build back a sense of self-importance” (Travels 69). Yet this would seem to be spurious logic as Steinbeck’s thinking in Travels with Charley is a far cry from Thoreau’s.

Since Steinbeck as a writer emphasizes political and social issues, one of his preoccupations during his journey is the general reaction to the presidential election of 1960. What he finds is that Cold War paranoia permeates the political campaign leading to what could be taken mistakenly for apathy. The election between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy was one of the closest and most contested races in the nation’s history; yet wherever Steinbeck travels, he finds people who do not want to talk about politics. Despite the passionate argument he will have with his sisters upon arrival in California, most people he finds care little about the government or the state of the union because they think that the government is responsible for the problems, and it fosters secrecy and silence. Sounding as if he is traveling through an authoritarian state, Steinbeck says, “I had been keen to hear what people thought politically. Those whom I had met did not
talk about the subject, didn’t seem to want to talk about it. It seemed to me partly caution and partly a lack of interest, but strong opinions were just not stated” (Travels 109). A farmer he meets in New Hampshire exemplifies this culture of distrust and is unable to give Steinbeck an answer to why nobody wants to discuss the election, saying, “‘People aren’t talking. I think this might be the secretest election we ever had. People just won’t put out an opinion’” (Travels 26). This seeming indifference troubles Steinbeck as no better than the control enforced by authoritarian states where silence is a virtue.

Traveling through the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, Steinbeck experienced oppressive government control firsthand, “which led him to think of that kind of totalitarianism as the worst fate that any society might have to endure—the complete lack of freedom, the thought control, and the gray conformity enforced by ever-present fear was a complete hell on earth” (Benson 967). When Steinbeck encounters citizens who prefer easy lives rather than political engagement, he could be remembering this authoritarianism and the dangers of inaction.16

Steinbeck also finds peoples’ indifference to politics extending to their relationship with the natural world, which, according to some of his fiction, should be a source of renewal and hope. In John Steinbeck: The Voice of the Land, Keith Ferrell notes that in California and elsewhere “Steinbeck saw signs of the depletion of the soil and of an overdependence upon chemical fertilizers. Even in remote spots during his travels he found trash left by people unaware that the earth’s natural beauty was their charge and responsibility” (163). While this is not a unique observation, it does highlight the growing culture of waste that extends to the natural landscape. Americans’ relation to their natural resources has been a concern of writers since Thoreau’s Walden (1854) and
George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* (1864). Marsh, in fact, was one of the first writers who warned of man’s detrimental effect on the environment, claiming, “[M]an, who even now finds scarce breathing room on this vast globe, cannot retire from the Old World to some yet undiscovered continent, and wait for the slow action of such causes to replace, by a new creation, the Eden he has wasted” (228). What most distresses Steinbeck, however, is how the natural world has become subsumed by the consumer culture. He confesses to having visited few national parks, mainly because he sees them as the commodification of the environment. In Yellowstone, Steinbeck explains:

> Perhaps this is because they enclose the unique, the spectacular, the astounding—the greatest waterfall, the deepest canyon, the highest cliff, the most stupendous works of man or nature. . . . For it is my opinion that we enclose and celebrate the freaks of our nation and of our civilization. Yellowstone National Park is no more representative of America than is Disneyland. (*Travels* 123)

Steinbeck’s attitude again seems contradictory, because he follows the same touristic impulse in visiting Yellowstone that he mocks. He is drawn in by the culture of consumption that devours observed experience instead of seeking a transcendental one. He does not seek the transcendental in the sense that Miller and Kerouac attempt to; he merely reports his impressions. Since he has already highly praised the natural beauty of Wisconsin and Montana, these statements also demonstrate Steinbeck’s recognition that the natural wonders of the U.S. that appeal to him within a nostalgic and pastoral vision belong almost strictly to the past even as they continue to be present (thanks in large part to the U.S. government). For Steinbeck, parks are created spaces and natural wonders become an extension of the artificial, tinsel life of the modern U.S. Not wanting to
explain to others why he does not appreciate Yellowstone, he admits, “Again it might have been the American tendency in travel. One goes, not so much to see but to tell afterward” (*Travels* 123), which he does in his book. Just as Steinbeck meets Americans who do not take an active part in national affairs, he also discovers they do not appreciate experience in itself but rather as commodity.

All of these previous points—sprawl and waste, fear and anxiety, political indifference, and the commodification of nature—overshadow his homecoming in California, precipitating Steinbeck’s disgust during his journey east. The climax of his personal journey in California and the defining moment that shapes his outlook on the U.S. is his realization and acceptance of the divergence of his nostalgia (as embodied in memory myth) and reality/acceptance (the critique and capitulation). His realization is triggered by two confrontations in Monterey: one with family and another with an old friend. Despite the negative overtone of these clashes, they allow Steinbeck to present himself as liberal and positive about both the direction of the country and in his personal life. The undertone, however, signals a shift in his orientation. He begins to focus more on reality and less on memories; after these episodes he largely ignores memory myth. “I arrived in Monterey and the fight began” (*Travels* 151), he explains as he argues with his sisters over the presidential election of 1960. This confrontation represents the culmination of his muted frustrations and the beginning of his reconciliation of the ideal past with the pragmatic present. He can hold fast to his somewhat compromised liberal views, but other people will be just as tenacious when defending their views. His argument with his sisters over the political direction of the country represents the larger social and political tension of American life largely obscured in Eisenhower-era 1950s
America. When his sisters challenge him (curiously calling up the past), “‘Father would turn in his grave if he heard you’” (Travels 151), Steinbeck counters, “‘No, don’t bring him in, because he would be a Democrat today’” (Travels 151). This argument over Democratic versus Republican values serves as a microcosm for the larger debate in the fall of 1960 over Kennedy and Nixon. Steinbeck admits, “It was awful. A stranger hearing us would have called the police to prevent bloodshed” (Travels 152). This scene foreshadows the harsher critique that will dominate the rest of Steinbeck’s journey and stands in stark contrast to the few people he finds who are happy and content with their lives.

The next confrontation with his old friend Johnny Garcia leads to a change in the way that memory myth functions for Steinbeck during the rest of the trip. After fighting with his sisters, Steinbeck decides to visit old haunts and reunite with old friends. He does so as a way to face his past and to test the nature of his memory myth. Criticism of this section of the book focuses on “Commercialism, ‘the complicated systems of American business,’ [that] have finally routed the embattled paisanos and annihilated Tortilla Flat” (Fontenrose 138). But this view is not entirely accurate, as most of Steinbeck’s feelings about Monterey revolve around his memories of the people and his feel of the place in the distant past, and both are faulty. For example, due to its infamous canning industry, Monterey was commercialized long before Steinbeck returns in Travels with Charley. During her travels in the early 1930s, Zephine Humphrey laments, “That Monterey caters to tourists is such a regrettable fact that I think an incendiary would perform a pious act in destroying the shops full of curios” (166). Given what he has seen during his journey thus far, Steinbeck seems already aware of the change, is ready for it, but chooses to
ponder personal memories that often represent the past as an innocent realm. Yet, clearly, he knows better. Sounding tired, he retreats to an old Monterey hangout, Johnny Garcia’s bar, where he confronts his friend on the vagaries of the past. When Johnny Garcia claims the past lives inside the bar, Steinbeck acknowledges change: “‘Let us not fool ourselves. What we knew is dead, and maybe the greatest part of what we were is dead. What’s out there is new and perhaps good, but it’s nothing we know’” (Travels 154). More than the mere ramblings of a maudlin old man, these statements demonstrate that Steinbeck is becoming fully aware of how the outside change reflects the inside change in the man and writer. Some commentators claim that “Monterey disappoints Steinbeck because it does not match his expectation. Here, he wants to see filth” (Strecker 220), but this outlook misreads one of Steinbeck’s last optimistic reveries when he declares, “In my flurry of nostalgic spite, I have done the Monterey Peninsula a disservice. It is a beautiful place, clean, well run, and progressive” (Travels 156). There is also more going on in this episode: Steinbeck is cognizant of his age, his unrecoverable youth, and his decline in creativity, all of which are clarified in his visit with Johnny Garcia and his visceral past. He is all too conscious of his conflicted and contradictory desires. He cannot go home again, yet he wants to all the same.

After visiting his sisters and Garcia and during the rest of the trip, memory myth destabilizes his optimism, turning Steinbeck’s attention fully to negative aspects of American society and to his enjoyment of the culture he criticizes. Before leaving California, he retreats to Fremont Peak, casting the Salinas Valley presented before him as a symbolic representation of his past, and he confronts the past for the final time. Echoing Thomas Wolfe’s dictum that “you can’t go home again,” Steinbeck recognizes,
“The place of my origin had changed, and having gone away I had not changed with it. In my memory it stood as it once did and its outward appearance confused and angered me” (Travels 156). While maybe his memories of the land of his birth and young manhood have not changed, he has changed as a man and writer: the present Steinbeck loses the idealism associated with youth when it clashes with reality. This realization compels him to leave behind his optimism and assess the social and political issues in the U.S. Although it can be argued that Steinbeck recognizes that he is “caught between two Americas, one dead and the other a stranger” (Lisca 234), it is more accurate to say that for Steinbeck the past is ever present, not so much as an influence on the present as it is a monument, a stable image unaffected by the vicissitudes of time. Nevertheless and paradoxically, there is no denying change leading to the present. For he additionally is not really a stranger to the present since he attempts to engage with it in the last part of the book wherein he comes face to face with America’s contemporary realities. As Tetsumaro Hayashi reasonably argues, after Monterey Steinbeck views the U.S. “not as a stranger, but as a new challenge to him first because he learned to separate reality from nostalgia and illusion and then because he found happiness and acceptance as an adopted New Yorker. Having lost a home in the West, he has found a new home in the East after all” (92). Yet one might more accurately suggest that, after his confrontations in California, Steinbeck does not appear to be happy anywhere in America, including his adopted New York. Indeed, it is precisely from within this perspective that Steinbeck writes and structures Travels with Charley—leading up to a greater discontent at the end of the trip than the one with which he began. Indeed, criticism of the U.S. outweighs praise, almost from the start but especially in the concluding episodes in the book.
Accordingly, after his experiences in Monterey and his recognition of the influence that memory myth exerts on his thinking, Steinbeck’s optimism fades and he more critically eyes himself and the U.S. and its problems. Before he leaves Monterey, he takes a last look at the Salinas Valley and says, “I printed it once more on my eyes, south, west, and north, and then we hurried away from the permanent and changeless past” (Travels 158), indicating quite well that he sees but prefers not to see the present reality lying before him that has changed. He does not mention the east, which at this point in his journey represents his present and future. He would never again live in California, dying in New York City in 1968. The past, though “permanent and changeless,” has ceased to be a living and active influence on him, and he can now view it as the historical artifact that it has become. This realization, however, comes with what Astro calls a “feeling of displacement” (10), and Steinbeck’s mood and view of the trip are altered. This phrase is not fully accurate, however, since he has been displaced during the entire trip. The displacement Steinbeck experiences after California suggests that he is more bitterly resigned to the way things are in America and that he will live out the rest of his life in New York. The eastward journey picks up speed and covers less space than the westward journey, consisting of less than a third of the book. He now thinks he knows what he needs to know, and he wants to rush home to jot down his impressions and thoughts as he speeds through the Southwest, Texas, and the South. His capacity for observation and experience has obviously diminished and he no longer has the creative energies to engage fully with the reality he encounters. He says, “I was driving myself, pounding out the miles because I was no longer hearing or seeing. I had passed my limit of taking in or, like a man who goes on stuffing in food after he is filled, I felt helpless to
assimilate what was fed in through my eyes” (*Travels* 167). Stopping for the night along
the Continental Divide in New Mexico, Steinbeck questions the entire point of his trip:
“Why had I thought I could learn anything about the land? For the last hundreds of miles
I had avoided people. . . . My eye and brain had welshed on me. I was fooling myself
that this was important or even instructive” (*Travels* 168). Repeating questions he asks
earlier in the trip emphasizes the circularity of the journey and of Steinbeck’s thinking
and the fact that he does not learn anything he did not already know. He has absorbed
much information and many impressions on his journey, but he has not found the hope
and confidence that he thinks essential to the American character. At this point, he deals
with the consequences of the present not being heir to the past.

Steinbeck also realizes as he quickly travels east that the U.S. he encounters has been
indelibly created by his own preoccupations and perceptions: “This monster of a land,
this mightiest of nations, this spawn of the future, turns out to be the macrocosm of
microcosm me” (*Travels* 159). He has written the road just as much as the road has
written him, and he notes that everybody essentially sees his own America: “External
reality has a way of being not so external after all” (*Travels* 159). This statement
becomes a rumination on the paradoxical nature of identity in the country, and Steinbeck
thinks that “The American identity is an exact and provable thing” (*Travels* 160) but also
difficult to define as befits a country as large and varied as the U.S. At this stage of his
journey, Steinbeck has yet to reconcile the essential dilemma of American identity: the
collective versus the individual. This contradiction concerning the U.S. reflects
Steinbeck’s ambivalence about the past and his own relationship to the present. These
statements further reflect Steinbeck’s consciousness of his act of creating the very
persona who impossibly wants the past but knows he cannot have it. He wants a past that he knows never existed; he created it as he wanted it out of special moments remembered, moments that he chose to privilege over the many mundane or ugly moments. He recognizes, furthermore, that there is a “difference between an American and the Americans” (Travels 185), but he also is unable to define clearly what the difference is. Instead he relies on ambiguity and, as a result, demonstrates that exact meaning is impossible because the individual’s nostalgia—what he calls “wishful thinking” (Travels 185)—shapes reality. He concludes, “But the more I inspected this American image, the less sure I became of what it is. It appeared to me increasingly paradoxical, and it has been my experience that when paradox crops up too often for comfort, it means that certain factors are missing in the equation” (186).

As he heads east, Steinbeck becomes less of a traveler and more of a citizen again in order to resume his identity as author and a respected member of mainstream society. He hints at this desire earlier in the book: “Chicago was a break in my journey, a resumption of my name, identity, and happy marital status. My wife flew in from the East for her brief visit. I was delighted at the change, back to my known and trusted life” (Travels 95). A significant post-Monterey episode occurs when he meets his wife once again, this time in Texas for an extended holiday over the Thanksgiving weekend. Texas becomes a symbol for the modern capitalist state, a state that Steinbeck knows he is as much a part of as anybody. He describes its energy: “It seems to me like that thrust of dynamism which caused and permitted whole peoples to migrate and to conquer in earlier ages” (Travels 176). Yet he also recognizes (as he does throughout his trip) that Texas is part of the consumerist nightmare, and, in the American way, it is a devouring culture created
“by purchase rather than by warfare” (Travels 176). Texas is also connected to the overall well-being of the nation. Bursting with wealth and civic, cultural, and educational achievements, it is the successful embodiment of capitalist ideals. Steinbeck engages fully with this society, what he calls a “Texas orgy” (Travels 179), by eating, drinking, hunting, and generally consuming rather than observing U.S. culture. While Hayashi writes that “It is the positive, open, hopeful qualities found in Texas that Steinbeck wanted us to discover in America and Americans” (91), the opposite is true. Since this episode occurs after the confrontation with memory myth in Monterey, the Texas episode signifies the culture that Steinbeck must confront and, inevitably, become a part of once more since, in the 1960s, that type of consumerism and waste has become the norm. He both reviles and relishes it—more paradox, more ambivalence.

As the chapters on Monterey form the personal turning point of Steinbeck’s journey, so the chapters on New Orleans and the South form the social turning point. He observes the racial anxieties in the South that reinforce his negative attitude toward the U.S. Unlike John Howard Griffin, who details his journey through the South masquerading as an African American in Black Like Me (1961), Steinbeck does not take an active role but instead observes and reports. He finds a politically-engaged populace for the first time on his trip, but it is a populace on the wrong side of the issue, according to his perceived democratic ideals. As John A. Williams observes during his travels through the South, “I thought then of how all travel into the South must dull the hearts of all Americans. . . . We do not have to go there to know that, on the whole, it is not a good place to visit. It is not altogether a sense of fear, but a greater one of shame and of helplessness” (42). After spending Thanksgiving in Texas, Steinbeck drives to New Orleans and confronts the
particularly American issue of race. He goes there for a first-hand look at the
“Cheerleaders,” a group of elderly ladies who gather each day to taunt black students
attending a white school. The Cheerleaders and the crowd that gathers to support them
do not uphold the American ideals of equality and liberty but the counter ideals of
inequity and repression. The Cheerleaders attack not only a little black girl whose “eyes
showed like those of a frightened fawn” (*Travels* 194) but also a “white man who dared
to bring his white child to school” (*Travels* 195). The ferocity of the women and crowd
shows Steinbeck the complicated depth of racial hatred in the South and reinforces his
experiences of people toeing the line. He becomes “sick with weary nausea” (*Travels*
195) watching the Cheerleaders and decides,

> Here was no principle good or bad, no direction. These blowzy women with their
little hats and their clippings hungered for attention. They wanted to be admired.
> They simpered in happy, almost innocent triumph when they were applauded.
> Their[s] was the demented cruelty of egocentric children, and somehow this made
> their insensate beastliness much more heartbreaking. These were not mothers, not
even women. They were crazy actors playing to a crazy audience. (*Travels* 195)

The Cheerleaders demonstrate the dangers of conformity and how many in the U.S. are
content to define themselves based on the habits (misguided or not) associated with their
class, race, or community. Steinbeck quickly leaves New Orleans, “ill with a kind of
sorrow” (*Travels* 197), feeling that there is no easy way to change such ingrained
thinking and behavior.

Steinbeck’s thoughts on American identity during his return trip become more
problematic when he thinks of how conformity relates to the destructiveness of racism.
During his travels, this was an issue he could hardly escape. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the race issue rose to prominence in the U.S.: 1956 marked the Montgomery Bus Boycott; in 1957 Eisenhower sent troops to ensure the desegregation of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas; in both 1957 and 1960, Congress passed crucial civil rights legislation; and, also in 1960, sit-ins as a form of protest originated in Greensboro, North Carolina (Brogan 628-30). Howard Zinn labels this period as a time when “the idea of taking the initiative against segregation took hold” (453), but because of the deeply-rooted problem of race in America change could not occur without opposition. Based on his experiences in New Orleans, Steinbeck casts his views both in historical and biblical terms: “I knew, as everyone knows, the true but incomplete statement of the problem—that an original sin of the fathers was being visited on the children of succeeding generations” (Travels 186). Unlike Miller, Steinbeck does not cast a romantic aura over the South and its history. Instead, as a writer concerned about social issues, he recognizes the seriousness of a problem that he thinks has little hope of being corrected in his lifetime or, indeed, the foreseeable future.

To illustrate the alteration of his optimism in the face of reality, Steinbeck details his engagement with the prevailing attitudes on race, both positive and negative. After the New Orleans episode, he meets four hitchhikers who each represent a different point of view on the contemporary race issue: an open-minded white man, a scared black man, a racist white man, and a black student-activist. These hitchhikers represent two groups: the status quo, represented by the scared man and the racist; and the coming change, represented by the open-minded white man and the student-activist. Each of these men reinforces Steinbeck’s negative view of the U.S. and the inability of its citizens to change
dominant systems of power and control. The liberal white man Steinbeck meets
describes himself as an “‘enlightened Southerner’” (Travels 199) even though he is
descended from “‘More generations than I can prove beyond doubt’” (Travels 198) in the
South. This man puts racial anxiety into a different perspective for Steinbeck by
supporting a moderate view that considers both black and white positions. He tells
Steinbeck how difficult it is to change ingrained patterns of thought for both sides: “‘I’m
only telling you how hard it is to change a feeling about things. And will you believe that
it will be just as hard for Negroes to change their feeling about us as it is for us to change
about them? This isn’t new. It’s been going on a long time’” (Travels 199). Despite the
“us versus them” rhetoric of the man’s speech, which reflects his own history and social
background as a privileged white man, he is able to remove himself from the current
anxiety in the South and to view the possibility of a more hopeful future. When
discussing his relationship with an old black couple who work for him, he says that they
are able to exist together and, at times, forget how they are supposed to act: “‘and we are
just three pleasant . . . things living together and smelling the flowers’” (Travels 200;
ellipsis in original). Despite the man’s liberal rhetoric, however, he seems unable to get
beyond the racist associations of his upbringing. He sounds like a positive force, and his
ideas create an alternate reality where the typical labels of “white” and “black” do not
matter. Yet Steinbeck thinks, ominously, “When he went away I felt a sweetness like
music, if music could pleasure the skin with a little chill” (Travels 201).

The rest of the hitchhikers he meets continue to destroy any lingering optimism and
reinforce Steinbeck’s negative views of the U.S. The older black man he picks up shows
the effects of oppression. He is a physical example of how the white power structure
erodes individual identity by control: “He clasped his hands in his lap, knotted and
lumpy as cherry twigs, and all of him seemed to shrink in the seat as though he sucked in
his outline to make it smaller” (Travels 201). When Steinbeck asks the man what he
thinks of desegregation, the man avoids the question and asks to be let out on the side of
the road. Steinbeck may not fully understand the extent that racism engenders anxiety
and suspicion, but he fears where it all may lead: “I had not felt one moment free from
the tension, a weight of savage fear. No doubt I felt it more being new-come, but it was
there; I hadn’t brought it. Everyone, white and black, lived in it and breathed it—all
ages, all trades, all classes. To them it was a fact of existence. And it was building
pressure like a boil. Could there be no relief until it burst?” (Travels 203) The next
person he meets along the road confirms this realization, a white racist who represents the
dominant ideology of inequality and violence. When the young man expresses his
support for the Cheerleaders, Steinbeck challenges him, causing the man to direct his
hatred at Steinbeck. “‘You sound to me like a nigger-lover,’” he says, “‘Trouble-
makers—come down here and tell us how to live. Well, you won’t get away with it,
mister. We got an eye on you Commie nigger-lovers’” (Travels 205). Steinbeck leaves
him on the side of the road and replaces him with another radical viewpoint, this time
from a black student-activist who is impatient with the nonviolent teachings of Martin
Luther King, Jr. He wants “‘action—action now’” (Travels 206). When Steinbeck asks
why, he replies, “‘I might be an old man before I’m a man at all. I might be dead
before’” (Travels 206). The student’s statements reflect dissatisfaction with the slow
process of change in both white and black people, a dissatisfaction that, for other blacks,
would find its expression in the Black Panther Party and other militant groups of the mid-
to late 1960s. Each of these four men represents a viewpoint that Steinbeck tries to understand but, in the face of intense reality, ultimately does not analyze much. He ends his stay in the South by rejecting them all, feeling “that the end is not in question. It’s the means—the dreadful uncertainty of the means” (Travels 207). The social crusader of the thirties has disappeared.

After these encounters, he quickly drives to New York to complete his travels, suggesting something disingenuous in Steinbeck’s analysis of America all along. For Steinbeck, who started on a transcendental impulse to prove himself, to rise above his personal limitations, and to rediscover his past, the journey fails because he cannot give up the materialistic life he enjoys and, thus, he participates in what he criticizes and he knows it. Driving through Abingdon, Virginia, he recognizes that his travels are finished: “My own journey started long before I left, and was over before I returned. . . . I tried to call it back, to catch it up—a foolish and hopeless matter, because it was definitely and permanently over and finished. The road became an endless stone ribbon, the hills obstructions, the trees green blurs, the people simply moving figures with heads but no faces” (Travels 208). He goes home suggesting he has learned nothing he did not already know, and these thoughts hint at the circularity in his thinking. The road no longer embodies hope in the people but something to be conquered and endured. As often happens in road narratives, the exterior journey leads to an interior journey, and Steinbeck’s personal odyssey ends in disenchantment with the U.S. and its citizens. Roy S. Simmonds argues that Steinbeck’s “personal quest to find his own identity and roots in the vastness of his homeland” is a failure because “he underestimated the extent of his own personal involvement in the project” (170). His failure could more accurately be
attributed to his inability to recapture his past and his own enjoyment with the culture he
criticizes. His failure, Furthermore, can be attributed to his lack of mental engagement
with the country during his journey: hence the “I wound up right where I started”
thinking that dominates the last part of the book. At the end of Travels with Charley,
Steinbeck apparently ceases attempting to look into himself, his past, and how they relate
to the present U.S. Yet he would launch a much more vociferous critique of the U.S. in
his next book, America and Americans, which is often viewed as a sequel to Travels with
Charley but which also displays a wry acknowledgement of his capitulation to
contemporary American culture.

The final result of his journey is not that he redeems his youth or recaptures his
creativity or finds the folks but rather that he remains the man and writer he is, embroiled
in the very culture he wants to reject but cannot. The circularity of his thinking, the fact
that he has been out in the country but has not learned becomes evident upon his arrival
home. Perhaps the most revealing episode in the book, underlining Steinbeck’s overall
view of his trip, is this return to New York, where he gets lost in familiar territory. This
ending represents Steinbeck’s returning to a reality that he does not want to escape, but it
also represents his returning to his real home, the hive of consumerism that is New York.
He describes getting caught in “the daily panic rush of commuters leaping and running
and dodging in front, obeying no signals. Every evening is Pamplona in lower New
York. I made a turn and then another, entered a one-way street the wrong way and had to
back out, got boxed in the middle of a crossing by a swirling rapids of turning people”
(Travels 209-10). Getting lost in the work-a-day whirlwind of downtown Manhattan
demonstrates Steinbeck’s failures on his journey, his consequent return to a bewildering
dominant culture, and his resignation to that culture and his life. The ending shows Steinbeck accepting the status-quo in America and his life, while also highlighting the apathy and resistance to social and political change he has encountered throughout his journey. Geralyn Strecker sums up typical views of the journey by saying, “Steinbeck sets out on a quest to find America, but he does not succeed. Is he lost, or is America lost?” (226) This view, though, is too simplistic concerning the other issues that Steinbeck confronts, including his youth and his waning creativity, which ultimately are not resolved in the book. Unlike Miller, who ends his book on a note of optimism, and Kerouac, who ends his on a note of resignation tinged by melancholy, Steinbeck ends his journey where he literally and figuratively begins. His entanglement in the culture he accepts but tries to criticize, ultimately, suggests that his entire journey from the beginning is undermined by the conflict of his misguided optimism for the people and his desire for his comfortable life.
Chapter Four
Democratic Ideals and Cautious Optimism: William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*

William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways* (1982) is the most optimistic road narrative in this study, though—like *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, *On the Road*, and *Travels with Charley* before it—the book remains highly critical of economic and cultural trends in the U.S. It waxes optimistic about people in small towns holding on to traditional values and the quality of life along the back roads of America. But, in terms of the U.S. generally, it attacks, like the other books, materialistic values, conformity, economic changes in the guise of progress, and, especially, the destruction of the environment. Like Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon takes to the road to escape personal problems. After losing his job as an English instructor at the University of Missouri and having already been separated from his wife for nine months, Least Heat-Moon travels the country on the back roads—the blue highways as drawn in old atlases. Thinking one night between “sleep or explosion,” he says, “I got the idea instead. A man who couldn’t make things go right could at least go. He could quit trying to get out of the way of life. Chuck routine. Live the real jeopardy of circumstance. It was a question of dignity” (*Blue Highways* 3).¹ The book follows Least Heat-Moon’s 1978 clockwise journey around the country, beginning in Columbia, Missouri, and moving through the South, Texas and the Southwest, continuing to the Pacific Northwest, and on through the High Plains, the Midwest, New England, the Atlantic Coast down to New Jersey, and back west to Missouri. Set later than the other road narratives in this study, Least Heat-Moon’s travels reflect the continuing struggles and turmoil in
American society, such as the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, the vanishing of small-town America, rising consumerism, and an erosion of democratic ideals such as egalitarianism and self-determination, because the country he travels through in 1978 is an integral part of the flux of global economic and military competition. This America has become wasteful, gobbling up fast food, paving farmland for malls, and destroying relics of the past for housing developments. His plan to travel the blue highways comes from his desire to escape the pervasive mass culture (fast food chains, crowded cities, congested freeways and interstate highways), yet he finds that, often enough, mass culture dominates even the back roads like an ominous shadow.

As are the other books in this study but perhaps more so, *Blue Highways* is also concerned with self-discovery. So the book has two overriding concerns: first, the exploration of the country—its good and bad features; second, the exploration of the self in relation to the observations of the country and the experiences Least Heat-Moon has with people he meets. In contrast to Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon already knows much about what he learns first hand along the way from his reading, television, movies, and other media. One of his unstated purposes for the trip is to confirm or deny what he already suspects from what other writers have written. As an academic, he has read a great deal and he refers throughout the book to Thoreau, Emerson, Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck among many other writers who have insightful and scathing views of the U.S. What Least Heat-Moon wants to discover is whether the country is better than he imagines, has read about, or has seen on national television. Or whether it is worse. The answers he forms during his journey parallel his own processes
of self-realization, renewal, and discovery of the country that has produced the visions of Black Elk, the “yea-saying” of Whitman, and the optimism of Miller.

As part Native American, Least Heat-Moon’s ethnicity necessarily shapes the way he views himself and the past, and his heritage helps to differentiate his narrative from others. Although his given name is William Trogdon, he chooses to write under the name William Least Heat-Moon to reflect his English, Irish, and Osage heritage. So being part Native American complicates his relation to the U.S. Being dispossessed of his job at the beginning of Blue Highways almost echoes his American Indian ancestors’ dispossession of their land. His trip around the country becomes in part a close look at what whites have done to the land that once belonged to native peoples who did not despoil the landscape and environment. Thus there develops something of a running tension in the book between past and present, between the natural world largely unspoiled by natives before white incursion and the artificial, mechanized world of nonnatives ever since.

One and two generations removed from Miller’s, Kerouac’s, and Steinbeck’s road narratives, Least Heat-Moon’s account engages with its predecessors. He mostly critiques the same American issues as the others, and, in some instances, he records little improvement on issues raised by other writers. But he also confronts the survival of American individuals and types, pockets of nonconformity, and self-reliance, all of which Miller would appreciate. Least Heat-Moon notices what the others either fail to see or only partly see: environmental matters and the struggles and joys of Steinbeck’s good poor folk or Ray Raphael’s “old folks” on “the Edges—the nooks and crannies of a countryside rich with human experience that is all but forgotten today” (4). In many
ways, Least Heat-Moon’s journey plays off of and mocks Steinbeck’s journey in Travels with Charley. Instead of a counterclockwise journey, Blue Highways details a clockwise journey. Early in his trip he tells a waitress in Gainesboro, Tennessee, “It isn’t traveling to cross the country and talk to your pug instead of people along the way” (Blue Highways 28). Unlike Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon does what he sets out to do: travel the back roads and discover the folk, out-of-the-way towns, and local American culture different from the increasingly homogenized culture of national television syndicates. Like Kerouac, Least Heat-Moon seems nostalgic for an image of American manhood that revolves around the responsible and well-adjusted male, capable of keeping a job and starting a family. Yet he becomes more individualized than Kerouac’s Sal, and his journey of self-discovery is therefore more successful because he truly reevaluates his life on the road and returns a man ready to start life anew. His book also differs from the others in this study because of the occasional ironic tone that Least Heat-Moon adopts when he comments on people and events. And he is often at his best when he is polemical, directly and harshly commenting on the current state of American culture. His road narrative also differs from the others because it remains more optimistic about discovering self, and his ideals—which parallel the literary models and books that Least Heat-Moon extols—remain intact and, in fact, become more fully developed.

Furthermore Least Heat-Moon’s decision to travel solely on the back roads, the blue highways, connects to his desire to discover an authentic America but also to his desire to avoid the pervasive mass culture of fast-food restaurants, chain hotels, and tourist traps. Early in his trip, he announces his intention: “I was going to stay on the three million miles of bent and narrow rural American two-lane, the roads to Podunk and Toonerville.
Into the sticks, the boondocks, the burgs, backwaters, jerkwaters, the wide-spots-in-the-road, the don’t-blink-or-you’ll-miss-it towns. Into those places where you say, ‘My god! What if you lived here!’ The Middle of Nowhere” (Blue Highways 6). Ian Frazier in Great Plains calls these roads “unworthy of notice” (15). In a 2010 interview, Least Heat-Moon describes the choice as “seeking meaning in the wildings” (Banga 99), but traveling the back roads carries more meaning than that. He also wants to avoid “travel experience reduced to formula” (Jakle 304). One implication of taking to the blue highways is that he already knows what he will find along the interstates—exactly what Miller and Kerouac decried, but in the 1970s conditions have become even worse. Steinbeck, of course, knows they are bad, but he does not seem to mind traveling the interstates as much as the other three. Least Heat-Moon emphatically makes this point throughout. “Life doesn’t happen on interstates. It’s against the law” (Blue Highways 9), he says, driving through Indiana. Passing by Winston-Salem and Greensboro, North Carolina, he gets stuck on Interstate 85 and “For a few miles I suffered the tyranny of the freeway and watched rear bumpers and truck mudflaps” (Blue Highways 43). Later in North Carolina, he gets sucked onto Interstate 95 and sounds like Steinbeck in St. Paul and Minneapolis: “Truck diesel spouts blowing black, the throttle-guts slammed past me as if I were powered by caged gerbils; campers hauling speedboats rushed into Saturday, and so did stationwagons with windows piled full of beachballs, cardboard boxes, and babies” (Blue Highways 67). Much later in the trip, sounding a bit like Miller but citing one of the great critics of America, he pronounces sentence on interstate travel once and for all: “The highway was still a nightmare vision of the twentieth century, a four-lane...
representing (as Mencken has it) “the American lust for the hideous, the delight in ugliness for its own sake” (Blue Highways 357-58).

Another implication in traveling the blue highways for Least Heat-Moon is that the country has continued further down the path of conformity and homogenization that Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck attack. Soon into his journey, Least Heat-Moon comes across the intrusion of mass advertising on the back roads of Kentucky, and he finds it appalling: “I . . . found the Gospel According to Acme Outdoor Advertising an abomination” (Blue Highways 18). This slur carries especial weight, because he previously enjoys the lack of traffic on the back roads, declaring, “[T]he interstate system has opened a lot of roadway to the dawdler” (Blue Highways 14). Everywhere he goes in the country he critiques change and commercialization along the back roads. In Heber, Arizona, he laments the loss of the soul of this small town due to the spread of chain motels:

Nothing has done more to take a sense of civic identity, a feeling of community, from small-town America than the loss of old hotels to the motel business. The hotel was once where things coalesced, where you could meet both townspeople and travelers. Not so in a motel. No matter how you build it, the motel remains a haunt of the quick and dirty, where the only locals are Chamber of Commerce boys every fourth Thursday. . . . Motels can be big, but never grand. (Blue Highways 173)

Holbrook, Arizona, fares no better as “a tourist stop for women with Instamatics and men with metal detectors; no longer was the big business cattle, but rather rocks and gems” (Blue Highways 173). Like Kerouac and Steinbeck before him, Least Heat-Moon sees
how the West’s violent and troubled past has transformed into a plastic, conformist money-making present. After picking up a hitchhiker in Wisconsin, Least Heat-Moon further comments on the vapid commercialization that he continually confronts: “East of Hayward we drove into resort country where billboards and small, tacky motels lined the highway” (Blue Highways 286). Even along the back roads, Least Heat-Moon runs into the pervasiveness of mass culture. The farther he drives, the more these encounters erode his optimism—or Least Heat-Moon’s hope for finding authenticity, uniqueness, and democratic discourse throughout the country—and fuel the vehemence of his criticism.

The argument I make in this chapter, therefore, is that Least Heat-Moon’s attempt to reconcile his idealistic impulse (embedded in literature, local history, and his exploration of self) with reality is more successful than Miller’s, Kerouac’s, or Steinbeck’s attempts. His process is more subtle since he thinks he knows the worst that he will see but wants to confirm that skepticism and, he hopes, discover surprising exceptions which will bolster his idealism. He acts as the roving journalist, interviewing scores of people, taking pictures of them, and delving into local history and culture.7 These people develop into colorful local types, not stock characters as they often appear in Miller, Kerouac, and, especially, Steinbeck. Unlike Kerouac and Steinbeck but a bit like Miller, Least Heat-Moon deals most directly with local people and places while the other writers are off in an American Shangri-La looking for a past that no longer exists. Being part-Native American, he has a perspective not completely skewed by nostalgia, so he does not ignore the negative aspects of America’s history such as wars and the treatment of American Indians and minorities. Least Heat-Moon’s ethnicity produces differences between his book and the other narratives because he offers a critical perspective the
others cannot. But his optimism is at times offhanded and ironic throughout the journey. His interest in seeing if a democratic impulse—individual, self-determining—is alive and well in America connects to his investigation into small-town life. He can be more optimistic than the others in this study because he occasionally finds that democratic impulse.

In advancing these arguments I draw from and argue against past criticism of Least Heat-Moon’s work. Although sparse, the commentary tends to agree on several points such as his decision to drive on the blue highways and the journey as self-discovery. In my conception, the blue highways become essential for Least Heat-Moon’s dual critique and optimism of America and these both coincide with his self-discovery, an essential part of his overall project. Renee Bryzik in “Repaving America: Ecocentric Travel in William Least Heat-Moon’s Blue Highways,” compares Blue Highways to On the Road by claiming that “Kerouac’s novel is decidedly people-centered, while Least Heat-Moon’s travelogue seems deliberately to refuse human privilege over non-humans and landscape” (667). This view does not take into account the wide range of people Least Heat-Moon talks to and who, at times, dominate the book as they relate the history of their towns or areas. My analysis of Least Heat-Moon’s interactions with certain individuals forms an important part of my argument that he, like Miller, derives optimism from these people. Comparing Blue Highways to Travels with Charley, Thom Tammaro mistakenly argues, “Whereas other books in the documentary genre are compelled more by social analysis, Blue Highways . . . [is] compelled by self-analysis” (Tammaro 269). This view does not account for both Least Heat-Moon’s attack of America and his search for self, which I make clear occur together throughout Blue Highways. And the
mislabeled “ambiguity of American [sic] itself” (Anderson 30) does not bear out during Least Heat-Moon’s travels as he continually finds and comments upon distinct regional differences, which I believe becomes an important part of his critique. James Stull, additionally, in *Literary Selves: Autobiography and Contemporary American Nonfiction*, claims that Least Heat-Moon’s journey is a failed search for self (122-23), yet I argue that the narrative clearly shows otherwise as it ends on a note of regeneration. Finally, Pamela Walker asserts that Least Heat-Moon’s “egotism” dominates the book: “In the course of his travels, he comes to recognize that egotism poses the main obstacle to his own ability, in whatever place, to affirm time, the inevitability of change, and the necessity of engaging himself with his physical environment and others who share that environment” (289). While I agree that much of the narrative does focus on Least Heat-Moon and his problems, he repeatedly engages with others and allows them to inform the narrative and thus become a part of Least Heat-Moon’s voice. In a sense, Least Heat-Moon absorbs these voices, along with the people and places they represent in the way that Whitman absorbs the multiplicity of America. The accumulation becomes a measure of Least Heat-Moon’s growth, and enlargement, whether for good or ill. Thus his engagement with others, in my thinking, becomes part of a major preoccupation of Least Heat-Moon’s: his focus on self in relation to community.

Unlike the other writers in this study, who mostly separate their optimism and criticism, Least-Heat Moon integrates his critical perspective with cautious optimism in the people and intellectual climate of America. His quest to recreate his sense of self parallels his delving into America’s history and small towns. As he seeks to confirm his optimism and belief in the democratic spirit, he looks for people and places that can
affirm it, while being aware that he may fail. His method is to discuss the name and history of a place, then to meet locals and talk to them, and finally to examine the intrusion of modernity into the simplicity of small-town life. In order to analyze how Least Heat-Moon’s optimism informs his criticism, I first explore Least Heat-Moon’s preconceptions and ideals of the U.S. based on literature, history, and his perception of back roads. Next I examine how Least Heat-Moon’s critical observations match with those of Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck. Then, in the final section, I consider how his observations and experiences differ from theirs.

I.

Before looking at the relationship between Blue Highways and the other books in this study, examining the major literary and historical ideals that Least Heat-Moon possesses before setting out on his journey demonstrates how they infuse his optimism and criticism. As a former English instructor, Least Heat-Moon is the most obviously literary of the writers in this study, having a wide knowledge and a deep understanding of literature. He peppers his account with quotations from and references to Whitman, Black Elk, Thomas Harriot, Thomas Merton, William Carlos Williams, Herman Hesse, Walter de la Mare, Homer, Washington Irving, the journals of Lewis and Clark, the Bible, Gertrude Stein, John Bunyan, John Greenleaf Whittier, H. L. Mencken, Henry Miller, Mathew Arnold, John McPhee, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and so on. While he uses Steinbeck as a model, playing off of his motifs (traveling alone instead of with a dog, listing equipment taken on the journey, reversing the direction of Steinbeck’s travels) and referring to him at times, he only briefly mentions Miller and Kerouac, though their
influence—particularly their ideas on individuality and the self—permeate the book. At a monastery near Conyers, Georgia, Least Heat-Moon interviews a monk who wandered around America in the late 1950s. Demonstrating the ironic method he employs throughout, Least Heat-Moon says, “‘Jack Kerouac? On the Road?’” (Blue Highways 84). “‘Something like that,’” the monk replies and the matter of Kerouac disappears (Blue Highways 84). Miller, however, lingers. Leaving Holliston, Massachusetts, after traveling the interstate (one of the rare times he drives one), and slightly misquoting Miller’s Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch, Least Heat-Moon claims, “‘Our destination,’ Henry Miller says, ‘is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things’” (Blue Highways 359). Earlier, in Arizona, Least Heat-Moon waxes poetic about the Southwest as does Miller in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, yet he appreciates the landscape while not exhibiting Miller’s fascination: “I was in one of the strangest pieces of topography I’d ever seen, a place, until now, completely beyond my imaginings. What is it in man that for a long while lies unknown and unseen only one day to emerge and push him into a new land of the eye, a new region of the mind, a place he has never dreamed of?” (Blue Highways 162). And later in Maryland, he comes across “An exact scale model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in Cairo, Egypt” (Blue Highways 387) that calls to mind Miller’s attraction to William Hope “Coin” Harvey and the pyramid he wanted to build in Monte Ne, Arkansas, which Miller devotes considerable time to discussing in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare. Although he does not directly engage with Miller and Kerouac, Least Heat-Moon seems aware of the influence their work has on the road genre and thus on his journey, which he seems intent on memorializing in a book, as evidenced by the extensive notes he takes along the way.
These various literary models influence how he positively and negatively views people and places, but they also underscore his lack of surprise at what he finds. For instance, he meets a woman in Texas who tells him “that she often threatened to write a book about her family vacations. Her title: *Zoom!* The drama of their trips, she said, occurred on the inside of the windshield with one family crisis after another. . . . She said, ‘Our vacations take us’” (*Blue Highways* 188). He counters this anecdote with idealized references to literary travelers: “She longed for the true journey of an Odysseus or Ishmael or Gulliver or even a Dorothy of Kansas, wherein passage through space and time becomes only a metaphor of a movement through the interior of being” (*Blue Highways* 188). Unwittingly he invokes his own trip in this musing, drawing from literature and projecting his own desire for self-renewal upon the woman. He also often uses literary references to highlight his examination of some event or personage in America’s past or present. For example, outside of Fort Stockton, Texas, he muses romantically on lines by Stephen Vincent Benet:

> When Daniel Boone goes by, at night,  
> The phantom deer arise  
> And all lost, wild America  
> Is burning in their eyes. (qtd. in *Blue Highways* 151)

These musings, however, parallel those on the city: “[T]he reality of Fort Stockton was plywood and concrete block and the plastic signs of Holiday Inn and Mobil Oil” (*Blue Highways* 151). Such reaction to the drab reality of Fort Stockton sounds like Kerouac’s descriptions of Sal and Dean’s responses to San Antonio and Laredo. For Least Heat-Moon, the literary serves as an analogical hedge against a man-made reality impossible to
deny. This analogy is important because he lets Benet speak for him with a poetic expression of a lost America equivalent to Fitzgerald’s poetic evocation of loss at the end of The Great Gatsby.

The literary models that are most important to the journey are Least Heat-Moon’s “vade mecums” (Blue Highways 8): Whitman’s Leaves of Grass and John G. Neihardt’s Black Elk Speaks (1932). Instead of a dog, Least Heat-Moon takes along intellectual and emotional (or poetic and ethnic) companions, and he lets them speak throughout the trip. His use of Whitman and Black Elk, furthermore, differs from how the other writers use Whitman and various literary ideals because they shape the tenor of the trip. Whitman informs the optimism in the self that Least Heat-Moon summons throughout the trip, and Black Elk informs the overall significance of the trip, underlying the importance of various turning points in Least Heat-Moon’s development of self. They are also literary and historical guides to both a democratic and spiritual view of America’s past. For Least Heat-Moon, Whitman, along with strains of Thoreau and Emerson, offers a somewhat optimistic outlook on America through the open road that resembles the workings of that metaphor in Whitman’s poetry. Yet he also accepts the bad as much as the good, the way Whitman claims about himself. Echoing Whitman in “Song of the Open Road,” Least Heat-Moon says, “I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected” (Blue Highways 5). In fact, most of the Whitman quotations in Blue Highways come from “Song of the Open Road,” and the poem informs Least Heat-Moon’s method: “Maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens an inner one. STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, the old railroad crossing signs
warned. Whitman calls it “the profound lesson of reception” (Blue Highways 17). As most road travelers look out as well as within during their journeys, Least Heat-Moon devotes much time to self-reflection while using Whitman as a literary companion, someone he can turn to for support and advice. Whitman also serves as a romantic rallying cry for Least Heat-Moon both as a man and traveler. From “Song of the Answerer” Least Heat-Moon quotes, “‘A man is a summons and a challenge’” (qtd. in Blue Highways 216), which speaks to Least Heat-Moon’s explorations of identity throughout. Furthermore, “Song of the Open Road” gives meaning and shape to the journey by providing a way for Least Heat-Moon to negotiate both the self and the larger world. In Oregon, he thinks, “What I needed was to continue, to have another go at reading the hieroglyphics, to examine (as Whitman says) the ‘objects that call from diffusion my meanings and give them shape’” (Blue Highways 221). By adopting Whitman so readily throughout the book, Least Heat-Moon makes of Blue Highways another “Democratic Vistas,” highlighting the individual’s relation to the promise of America but also clearly aware of the threats to that promise, which also differs from how the others use Whitman. Whitman thus connects Least Heat-Moon to Miller particularly when discussing optimism of the self, despite the country’s going to hell.

As he does for Miller and Kerouac, Whitman also highlights the transcendental impulse—“a moving beyond the narrow and parochial limitations of self” (Banga 95-96)—behind Least Heat-Moon’s trip and how that impulse clashes with reality. Least Heat-Moon journeys to get away from the shambles of his life but also to rediscover who he is as a man. At times, though, unlike Whitman, he allows people he meets to interfere with this impulse. Therefore he struggles with dark thoughts and negativity at
several points in his journey and uses Whitman to highlight those points. One of these occurs in Arizona after he talks to a conformist-minded and selfish fellow traveler—nicknamed “The Boss of the Plains” (*Blue Highways* 168) for the Stetson he wears with the “absurd seven-inch crown” (*Blue Highways* 163)—who “regretted not becoming a history professor—his true calling” (*Blue Highways* 164) and who “never quit thinking of himself long enough to listen” (*Blue Highways* 165). The encounter sticks with Least Heat-Moon as he drives to Tucson. Although he is disgusted with the man’s self-centeredness, he seems to see a bit of himself in “The Boss of the Plains,” preoccupied as he has been with his personal problems. At this point, Least Heat-Moon abandons the blue highways, significantly indicating that he wants to get away from self-analysis: “I weakened and took the well-beaten and undenied public road northwest toward Phoenix” (*Blue Highways* 168). He despairs and invokes Whitman’s, “‘Hell under the skull bones’” (qtd. in *Blue Highways* 168). “Encounters such as these,” as Kris Lackey claims, “trivialize the Whitmanesque theme of spiritual unity in *Blue Highways* by confusing poetic vision and human nature. As a result, Whitman’s idealism becomes nothing more than a personal longing for ‘harmony’ (Heat-Moon’s term)” (88). But Least Heat-Moon does not use Whitman in this way; instead he criticizes people like “The Boss of the Plains” for their conformity or lack of initiative, and not for any lack of spirituality. So Whitman serves also to highlight Least Heat-Moon’s attempts to get beyond the negative in American culture, even though the invocation of this literary ideal does not mean a denial of present social conditions.

As for Black Elk, he serves as Least Heat-Moon’s spiritual father whom he quotes at significant turning points in the journey. As such, Black Elk embodies for him spiritual
and ethnic ideals, what Least Heat-Moon refers to as “the red way of thinking” (Blue Highways 4). As a spiritual guide, Black Elk connects to Whitman’s optimism, and he serves also to embolden Least Heat-Moon’s sense of self.\textsuperscript{15} But Black Elk does not represent spiritual in a religious sense so much as he serves as a connection to traditions that help Least Heat-Moon make sense of experiences in his life (losing wife and job) and during the journey (justifying his travels). As for the turning points, most of them involve some crisis for which Black Elk’s guidance and wisdom help Least Heat-Moon make sense of events and lend them significance. For instance, after getting caught in a snow storm on the Markagunt Plateau in Utah, Least Heat-Moon evokes Black Elk as a life-saving measure to reaffirm his decision to travel alone and reassert his manhood: “Black Elk prays for the Grandfather Spirit to help him face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet” (Blue Highways 180).\textsuperscript{16} Later he battles loneliness, the psychological pain of memories from his past, and he calls for help: “Black Elk says it is in the dark world among the many changing shadows that men get lost” (Blue Highways 240). As he often does throughout the journey, Least Heat-Moon takes strength in these words and focuses on continuing the journey instead of giving in to despair. Thus Least Heat-Moon’s use of Black Elk during these moments also serves as a reminder of his different perspective on American history due to his ethnicity. Still later Black Elk becomes a way for Least Heat-Moon to deal with the failures of his past. Awakening from dreams of his wife, with whom at the midpoint of the journey he still has not become reconciled, he writes, “as Black Elk says, certain things among the shadows of a man’s life do not have to be remembered—they remember themselves” (Blue Highways 327). While this statement sounds almost tautological and suggests that the past will be
ever present, Least Heat-Moon sets himself up to accept not only the choices he has made in life but also the America through which he has traveled: “Black Elk on seeing his people on the blue road: ‘I did not know then how much was ended’” (Blue Highways 327). Least Heat-Moon may no longer fulfill the role of spouse and breadwinner, but the knowledge he gains of himself on the road through Black Elk and Whitman is greater than that gained following an ordinary routine.

Even though Black Elk Speaks exerts a crucial influence on Blue Highways, another Black Elk text, The Sacred Pipe, also becomes important, influencing the concept of “racial memory” (Blue Highways 219). “Racial memory,” borrowed from Jung yet similar to Steinbeck’s memory myth, functions as a connection to the past, but a past that Least Heat-Moon seems only to know from his reading and maybe some family history. Although he only mentions this phrase once, it strongly indicates how he views his Native American identity. Reading The Sacred Pipe while waiting out a rainstorm in Oregon, Least Heat-Moon, in another pivotal moment on the journey, says,

I started reading a book I’d bought in Phoenix, The Sacred Pipe, Black Elk’s account of the ancient rites of the Oglala Sioux. In contrast to the good and straight red road of life, Black Elk says, the blue road is the route of ‘one who is distracted, who is ruled by his senses, and who lives for himself rather than for his people.’ I was stunned. Was it racial memory that had urged me to drive seven thousand miles of blue highway, a term I thought I had coined?” (Blue Highways 219)17

Despite the constructed nature of this scene with its motif of rebirth or renewal (buying the book in Phoenix and calling attention to Least Heat-Moon’s own state of mind), this
passage suggests that his Native American heritage is more complicated than at first it appears. “Racial memory” connects to the communal/individual dichotomy he has discovered throughout his trip. He is consumed with his own problems but he also inserts himself into different communities throughout the country to comment on and analyze their particular attractions or quirks. He is also Native American, part of a large and diverse community of tribes. So his racial memory informs his views of America’s past and present, particularly the past complicated as it is by the U.S. government’s horrible treatment of Native Americans. He embodies racial otherness unlike the other writers in this study even though they encounter racial issues, as Miller does in the South Side of Chicago, Kerouac’s Sal does in California with Terry, and Steinbeck does in New Orleans.

Least Heat-Moon’s Native American heritage informs one of his literary ideals, constructed as it is from his frequent consulting and borrowing from Black Elk throughout the trip. His evocation of Black Elk differs from Miller’s and Kerouac’s romanticized views of native peoples in that he actually is part American Indian and so, at times, negotiates ideas of otherness with which the previous writers in this study would not be able to identify. But he vacillates between white and Native American cultures and appears to adopt a Native American identity mostly in racist contexts, as when “The Boss of the Plains” says to him: “‘Sorry to scare you. Figured an old chief like you would hear me coming’” (Blue Highways 162). Not to be overlooked in this context of dual ethnicity—white/American Indian—is the problematic authenticity of Black Elk Speaks. Black Elk’s words, as translated by his son, were then shaped into English by John G. Neihardt. Thus the text has a compromised narrative authenticity, shaped by the
dominant white discourse, which in turn reflects the fractured identity of Native American culture in the U.S. This white shaping of native narratives is what Arnold Krupat in *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* calls  “dialogic models of the self” (133)\(^{19}\) and leads to “difficulties of one self being mediated by another individual from another culture in another language” (Wong 9). Like most of the ideals that this study explores, Least Heat-Moon’s have been constructed by someone else, yet he remains aware of that construction as evidenced by his many literary and historical digressions throughout the journey. As part Native American, he can complain about the treatment of Native Americans throughout history—and at times he notices and comments on their dispossession—but he mainly uses his role as racial other in America to view and understand all facets of American history more fully.

Along with literary ideals, both national and local history shape Least Heat-Moon’s critical perspective. Typically his method is to begin with an anecdote about local history when he enters a town for the first time.\(^{20}\) These anecdotes usually highlight democratic ideals (such as the aforementioned egalitarianism and self-determination) from America’s past that have variously been corrupted or upheld, so that history serves as both a positive and negative influence on the present. Least Heat-Moon thus differs greatly from Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck who either romanticize local history or ignore it altogether. For him, history is record and testament: “History has a way of taking the merely curious and turning it into significance” (*Blue Highways* 143), he evokes when discussing the Nimitz Hotel in Fredericksburg, Texas. He makes this comment so he can avoid any knee-jerk romanticizing of the past. History in America has often been subject to nostalgia, the
glossing over of the bad and focusing solely on the good, the legendary. In *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America*, John A. Jakle says of roadside attractions:

> [O]ldness and historical significance could be romanticized. Meanings could be attached that the modern contemporary scene did not warrant. Romance was always in the past tense. Things and places acquired romantic value after they had all but vanished. Only after an era was gone, and relics relegated to isolation, did feelings of longing for the past emerge. Romance did not attach while things were coming to pass. (288)

Aware of this American tendency and, though at times he may wax poetic, Least Heat-Moon most often would rather understand the history of a place and comment on it rather than romanticize it. His combining of the road narrative with history is no accident. Janis P. Stout in *The Journey Narrative in American Literature* points out the connection between “history and literary tradition” when looking at how American writers approach road narratives (17). She says that “there is an overwhelming tendency for American writers who utilize journey narratives to perceive them after the patterns of history. American history, one might say, provides a kind of filter through which writers perceive literary traditions” (17). While Least Heat-Moon grounds some of his ideals in history, he does not fully approach the matter this way. Instead, his use of history encompasses both literary tradition and a unique sense of American place.

The historical digressions, like the literary ones, take many forms but they all serve to demonstrate Least Heat-Moon’s critical commentary on the negative changes that have occurred from the past to the present. By doing this he focuses on changes in America but also the changes that have occurred since the other books in this study appeared.
Everywhere he goes, and sounding like Steinbeck, he discusses “a continuous and evident past” (*Blue Highways* 325). When visiting Woodstock, Vermont, he marvels at the lack of change before wryly observing that it would come in time: “A chamber of commerce flier claimed that the citizens had ‘zealously guided Woodstock’s development and growth past the hazards of change that overtook much of the country’; perhaps, at least for now, that was true” (*Blue Highways* 325). He appreciates Woodstock’s nonconformity but mockingly acknowledges that any semblance of the past can easily fall to the tide of progress, something that he has seen elsewhere in the country. So his use of history also becomes a stereotypical warning, akin to George Santayana’s admonition, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (172).

Citing the English scientist and explorer Thomas Harriot’s *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, Least Heat-Moon proclaims that Harriot was “Ahead of his time, [he] saw the Manitowocs as admirable people who lacked advanced civilization but not intelligence or decency” (*Blue Highways* 64). Yet any modern reader with even skimpy knowledge of American history is familiar with the horrific treatment of native peoples and can expect that statement to be qualified. Least Heat-Moon follows this praise with a description of what truly happened and how future actions would create a deep wound in America’s past: “Harriot’s work would help the Jamestown colony succeed a generation later. Nonetheless, the failure of the new people to give comparable respect to the Indians—not just on Roanoke, but over the whole continent for four centuries—would, more than any other cause, open a gulf between red men and white, a division not yet closed” (*Blue Highways* 65). He makes these comments early in his journey, while traveling through Virginia and North Carolina, but they reverberate
throughout the remainder of his travels, especially as he observes reservation life in the West and Southwest.

The literary and historical ideals he notes inform the basis and structure of the trip as various literary and personal ideals do for the other writers in this study. The structure of the journey and mode of transportation derive directly from Least Heat-Moon’s literary and Native American ideals.\(^{21}\) Before he even sets forth, he states his plan to travel in a circle: “Following a circle would give a purpose—to come around again—where taking a straight line would not” (Blue Highways 3). The idea of the circle helps Least Heat-Moon to set out from a transcendental impulse as most road travelers do: to reevaluate and start life anew and, through the journey, return home a changed person with increased self-knowledge. But the circle also has deeper significance: a representation of the trials and resolution of them during a man’s life, represented by the Hopi symbol of emergence about which he learns in a conversation with a student in Cedar City, Utah. Depicted as a circle within circles, “Its lines represent the course a person follows on his ‘road of life’ as he passes through birth, death, rebirth. Human existence is essentially a series of journeys, and the emergence symbol is a kind of map of the wandering soul, an image of a process” (Blue Highways 185).

The origin of the circular nature of the journey, however, comes from both Whitman and Black Elk. Whitman in “Eidolons,” which coincidentally can mean “ideal,” says, “Ever the growth, the rounding of the circle, / Ever the summit and the merge at last, (to surely start again)” (168). This poem also echoes Emerson’s essay “Circles,” which examines the phenomena of circles throughout nature. Black Elk’s vision in Black Elk Speaks revolves around the concept of the “sacred hoop”: “And I saw that the sacred
hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father” (Neihardt 43). In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk discusses the symbolism of the circle as it relates to the Sun Dance: “[T]he circle helps us to remember *Wakan-Tanka* [the Great Spirit], who, like the circle, has no end. There is much power in the circle” (Joseph Brown 92). The circle, then, embodies the literary and spiritual ideals that make-up Least Heat-Moon’s idea of self and reflect an idealized view of Least Heat-Moon’s own ups and downs during the journey, his attractions and explorations, and his ever-expanding knowledge of himself and America. In the context of my argument, Least Heat-Moon’s self-discovery and travels become more successful than the others because he roots both in a personal and spiritual exploration.

Least Heat-Moon’s vehicle highlights his heritage but also the misguided optimistic impulse that fuels all the works in this study. Just as Steinbeck names his camper-truck *Rocinante* to reflect the foolish romantic nature with which he views his travels, Least Heat-Moon names his Ford Econoline van *Ghost Dancing*. He explains,

I named my truck *Ghost Dancing*, a heavy-handed symbol alluding to ceremonies of the 1890s in which the Plains Indians, wearing cloth shirts they believed rendered them indestructible, danced for the return of warriors, bison, and the fervor of the old life that would sweep away the new. Ghost dances, desperate resurrection rituals, were the dying rattles of a people whose last defense was delusion—about all that remained to them in their futility. (*Blue Highways* 5)

As he says, the truck represents an ideal of rebirth but one opposite to the state of his life at the beginning of his journey. On another level, though, naming the truck *Ghost*
Dancing represents Least Heat-Moon’s recognition of the ill-fated hope inherent in the Ghost Dance movement. Despite describing it as a “delusion,” the reference to this particular Native American ritual emerges as a first indication of his own reserved optimism since the Ghost Dance could also be viewed as hope for change.

Also like Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon begins his journey with a thorough description of Ghost Dancing and a list of equipment he takes with him. Unlike Steinbeck, though, who packs his camper-truck with everything he can imagine, Least Heat-Moon packs practical gear that reinforces the themes of self-reliance and rejection of the consumer culture. Ghost Dancing “rode self-contained but not self-containing. . . . I had converted the van from a clangy tin box into a place at once a six-by-ten bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, parlor. Everything simple and lightweight” (Blue Highways 9). A far cry from Steinbeck’s loaded-down and custom-made camper-truck, this simplicity bears affinity with Thoreau. In an unusual move for most road narratives but in keeping with the journalistic tone of the book, Least Heat-Moon includes a cutaway diagram of Ghost Dancing so that a reader can see hard evidence of the Spartan-like life he leads on the road. In additional contrast to Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon’s list of gear is short and practical and includes a sleeping bag, blanket, cooler, portable toilet, small stove, utensils, clothes, tools, notebooks and pens, camera, and Leaves of Grass and Black Elk Speaks (Blue Highways 8). His sparseness has more in common with Miller’s and Kerouac’s minimalism than Steinbeck’s conspicuous consumption.
II.

Based on Least Heat-Moon’s literary models and historical ideals and his indebtedness to Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck, I examine his journey in two ways: first, how his critical observations match those of the other writers in this study; and second, how his observations and experiences differ from theirs. In doing so, I reveal how, throughout his journey, Least Heat-Moon holds on to a tenuous optimism that infuses the way he can positively view America and Americans, which is similar to but also different from the other writers in this study. I also analyze how similar topics of road narratives (homogenization and the environment to name just two) get appropriated by later writers like Least Heat-Moon and how the country and criticism of it has changed or remained the same throughout the books in this study. Unlike Kerouac or Steinbeck, he never fully relinquishes his hope, and like Miller he ends on an optimistic note. Yet Least Heat-Moon appears not as optimistic as he might think inasmuch as he remains guarded. His journey has an almost scripted quality about it: he drives the country using a map to find places with unusual names like Dime Box, Texas; Lookingglass, Oregon; or Nameless, Tennessee—places where he thinks he will find a resistance to change and modernization. He then relates anecdotes of the history of a place before he follows with offhanded remarks or serious comments on changes brought about by homogenization, economic influences, the interstate, or the destruction of the environment. Two brief examples will elucidate this tendency. First, in Arizona, he says, “Settlers once ran into Payson for protection from marauding Apaches; after the Apache let things calm down, citizens tried to liven them up again by holding rodeos in the main street. Now, streets paved, Payson lay quiet but for the whine of sawmills releasing the sweet scent of cut
timber” (Blue Highways 171-72). And second, while driving on Long Island, he notes, “in the past, an American traveler depended on the local grease pit boys to tell him (a) the best route to wherever; (b) the best place to eat . . .; and (c) what the townsfolk thought about whatsoever. Now, it already may be too late for a doctoral candidate to study the ways that Americans’ views of each other have been shaped while waiting for the tank to fill” (Blue Highways 368). Like the other three writers, Least Heat-Moon’s optimism and negative critique coexist, particularly with respect to individuals, communities of like-minded people, homogeny, and racism.

While all the writers in this study are particularly attracted to American individuality, Miller and Least Heat-Moon find the most distinctive individuals in their travels. Least Heat-Moon especially finds original American types precisely because he travels on the back roads and is more broadminded when looking for individuals, whereas Miller searches for people who are like him. Least Heat-Moon bases his views of individuality on ideals from the past, on historical models of self-sufficient individuals like Pony Express riders and trappers and fur traders, traits also noted by Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck. Least Heat-Moon realizes, however, that these images are mostly a creation, as in the case of Pony Express riders: “[T]his last of the old-world means of communication before mechanical contraptions took over left a deep mark on the American imagination. The riders, going far on little, became touchstones of courage and strength” (Blue Highways 197). He appreciates the feat of endurance and skill required of these riders and admires a tenacity that he does not always see in people during his travels. In Minnesota he marvels at eighteenth and nineteenth century trappers and fur traders “since it was their presence that helped hold the Near West against British
expansion from the north; and it was their explorations that opened the heart of the nation to white settlement. These men, by making pelts the currency of the wilds, laid the base for a new economy that quickly overwhelmed the old” (*Blue Highways* 281). Yet Least Heat-Moon quickly denigrates the bravery and ingenuity shown by the fur traders: “And all because European men of mode simply had to wear a beaver hat” (*Blue Highways* 281). These men also made possible the settling of the West and the resulting removal and genocide of many Native American tribes, a fact left unsaid, though implied. Like Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon looks to Lewis and Clark as models of frontier individualism, but he also invokes them as models of decency and fairness. He notes, “For three-quarters of a century after the two visits by the Corps of Discovery, the Nez Perce did not fight white men because the captains had conducted the first encounters so well” (*Blue Highways* 245)—a paean to the power of individuals to shape events.

The people Least Heat-Moon meets and talks to, for the most part, are nonconformists, living life the way they think they should and not as the prevailing culture dictates. Least Heat-Moon’s concept of self and individuality derives very much from Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson, discrete and at the same time identifiable with others. This concept originates in a grass roots view of individualism that comes from the self and not from government or other outside forces. Steinbeck would struggle with this idea as he saw firsthand during the Depression that government can help people during times of economic hardship. But Least Heat-Moon travels in a post-Watergate world and finds himself more attracted to individuals who go their own way and do not seek institutional help. Most of the people he meets are truly the folk that Steinbeck wanted to meet but did not. Some hold on to the ways of their parents but others forge
unique existences for themselves. So while he seeks out individuals as do Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon has interactions with real people who have real problems and who offer astute comments on America. This interaction contrasts with the almost stock characters in Miller and Steinbeck. Least Heat-Moon allows his characters to speak and either uphold or challenge his ideals of nonconformity and originality in America.

One of these individuals, Patrick Duffy, Least Heat-Moon places squarely in the tradition of nonconformity as espoused by Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson. Duffy is an ex-policeman whom Least Heat-Moon meets at a Trappist monastery near Conyers, Georgia. He lived a peripatetic life before deciding to become a monk: he attended college, worked as an Army medic, traveled Central America, dug subway tunnels (Blue Highways 83-84). Least Heat-Moon learns from him that real change occurs when looking within the self precisely when one becomes separated from the intrusions of the modern world, a view that seems somewhat akin to Thoreau’s experiment at Walden Pond. Responding to another would-be monk who left the monastery “‘because he couldn’t find so-called stability,’” Duffy tells Least Heat-Moon, “‘I told him this place was alive. People grow here. The brothers are likely to start sprouting leaves and blossoms. This is no place to escape from what you are because you’re still yourself’” (Blue Highways 85). While his may be an extreme view of individualism, Duffy demonstrates that there remains no outside answer to personal questions, no goods or services that can make a person whole. Again sounding like Thoreau, Duffy says, “‘Simplicity reveals the universals we all live under. Material goods can blunt your perception of greater things. Here, the effort is to free yourself from blindness,
arrogance, selfishness” (Blue Highways 87). Duffy mirrors what Least Heat-Moon does by traveling around the country: stripping life down to the bones and looking within to make sense of life’s imposed problems. Least Heat-Moon seems genuinely affected by his time in the monastery and, especially, his conversation with Duffy. “When I stepped into my rig,” he says, “I thought for a moment I was in the wrong truck. It seemed small and enclosed like a cell—not a monk’s cell, but a prisoner’s” (Blue Highways 91). Least Heat-Moon’s conversation with Duffy demonstrates the different paths an individual can travel to avoid conformity and materialism. But it also demonstrates one of Least Heat-Moon’s conflicts throughout his journey. By meeting and talking to individuals, he gets a welcome respite from his problems, yet these interludes always precede his re-entanglement with the realities of his life: no wife, no job, and no prospects. These real problems differ from Miller’s care-free attitude, Sal’s continual immersions into his life in the East, and Steinbeck’s celebrity, thus giving Least Heat-Moon’s narrative an immediacy and authenticity the others lack.

Another individual in the same vein as Duffy is Arthur O. Bakke who represents an extreme strain of nonconformity like that found in Walden or various nineteenth-century utopian movements. Least Heat-Moon picks him up near Potlatch, Idaho, and he is a sort of lay preacher spreading the Word to anyone who will listen: “He was fifty-eight years old and a Seventh-Day Adventist. Some years ago he lost in a divorce most of what he owned and had never bothered to gather more. After recuperating from the car wreck, he went on the road to serve Jesus” (Blue Highways 254), and he plans to travel to El Salvador via Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, Missoula, Montana, and Virginia (Blue Highways 254). Bakke seems unreal, like a character out of folklore: committed to his cause,
zealous, but essentially kind. Bakke has been called “sanely crazy” (Perrin 22), an apt description to be sure as he represents the type of man whom Least Heat-Moon alternately eyes warily and enjoys talking to: a man with strong convictions but also a man way too far on the edge. Even more so than Duffy or Miller’s Desert Rat, Bakke lives a self-contained and simple life. He carries only one suitcase, and “He had a bank account in southern California and one in Virginia; otherwise, all his material goods were at his feet or wrapped around him” (Blue Highways 254). Least Heat-Moon, despite being almost entirely self-contained in Ghost Dancing, tells Bakke, “I envy your simplicity” and “I like your self-sufficiency” (Blue Highways 260). Overall, though, Least Heat-Moon takes Bakke with a grain of salt. While discussing the nature of belief, Least Heat-Moon toys with Bakke as if he does not fully take him seriously, countering Bakke’s Bible quotations with quotations from Whitman and Black Elk in a running dialogue that undermines Bakke’s position. These passages, though, reinforce Least Heat-Moon’s ideas about individuality and community. Toward the end of the discussion, countering Bakke’s contention (from First Corinthians 3.18-19) that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God,” Least Heat-Moon responds: “Why should I wish to see God better than this day?” Whitman, ‘Song of Myself.’ Here’s another one from a Sioux medicine man called Black Elk: ‘Whatever you have seen, maybe it is for the good of the people you have seen it’” (Blue Highways 261). Here Least Heat-Moon argues for an individuality grounded in experience, in the world, but also for individuality that fosters community. He seems to ask the question, “What is the point of individuals if not to help others?”
One more individual bears examination, because Least Heat-Moon views her as a paragon of self-sufficiency, and she arrives at a pivotal moment in the book. She is Alice Venable Middleton of Smith Island, Maryland, a former school teacher and resident of the island for sixty-three years at the time of Least-Heat Moon’s travels; she “was one of those octogenarians who make age look like something you don’t want to miss” (*Blue Highways* 388). Self-reliant and opinionated, she styles herself unofficial historian of the island. She also reiterates the motif of isolation, of getting away from mass culture to become oneself that Least Heat-Moon suggests as an important pursuit throughout his journey. She also possesses strong views on individuality and education that reinforce Least Heat-Moon’s own beliefs. When he asks Middleton what is the most difficult part of living on an isolated island, she responds, “‘Having the gumption to live different and the sense to let everybody else live different. That’s the hardest thing, hands down’” (*Blue Highways* 397). Because he ends the chapter with that particular quotation, it serves to reinforce the authenticity he has searched for and, on a structural level, allows Middleton to speak for him.23 She explains what Least Heat-Moon has been doing on his journey when she presents her views on education, which involve self-motivation and critical thought: “‘I wanted to show them [her students] there’s only one place they can get an education—in the school of thought. Learning rules is useful but it isn’t education. Education is thinking, and thinking is looking for yourself and seeing what’s there, not what you got told was there. Then you put what you see together’” (*Blue Highways* 389-90).

Throughout his journey, Least Heat-Moon does not hide his academic background and so he gravitates to places of free inquiry (often staying for the night on college
campuses) and to people engaged in it. These places and people speak to Least Heat-Moon because he bemoans the fact that the education needed for real democratic inquiry has disappeared from the culture at large.24 In his view, the troubling aspect of his conversation with Middleton is that individuals like her need to become part of the larger social and political conversation so they can push America back towards a democratic discourse involving egalitarian ideals.25 Instead these individuals remain isolated, on the fringes, and outside the larger political, cultural, and social relations. Middleton’s voice and views essentially remain silent despite their inclusion in Blue Highways. Instead America remains on the track of interstates, sprawl, materialism, and all the rest of what each writer in this study mostly wants to avoid. Speaking with Middleton only highlights these problems for Least Heat-Moon.

Along with self-reliant individuals, Least Heat-Moon finds communities of like-minded people who both affirm and challenge his ideals of the vitality of small-town life.26 Much more than Miller and Kerouac, and definitely more than Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon seeks small communities that share a common sense of place, history, and civic duty. But he conceives of an analogous relation between individuality and community. Most of these communities he finds by accident because of the random nature of the trip. Some communities he finds get smaller and smaller and fewer and far between. Others are viable communities but fading into obscurity; some have even disappeared, such as Liberty Bond and Moonax, both in Washington. Still other towns seem completely unknown, like Nameless, Tennessee, about which an ambulance driver tells Least Heat-Moon, “I don’t know if I got directions for where you’re goin’” (Blue Highways 28). Despite lack of directions, he finds that “Nameless, Tennessee, was a
town of maybe ninety people if you pushed it, a dozen houses along the road, a couple of barns, same number of churches, a general merchandise store selling Fire Chief gasoline, and a community center with a lighted volleyball court” (Blue Highways 31). There he meets J. T. Watts and his family, who own the general store but close it for lack of business. Least Heat-Moon hears about “‘them days’” (Blue Highways 32) and peruses Watts’s wife’s *Deathbook*, a record of a vanished community: “Chronologically, the names had piled up: wives, grandparents, a stillborn infant, relatives, friends close and distant. Names, names” (Blue Highways 35). Although the town seems suspended in the past, the *Deathbook* remains a record of bonds forged in the smithy of small-town life. Still, though, the encounter with the Watts family enlivens Least Heat-Moon and he thinks, a tad dramatically, “It is for this I have come” (Blue Highways 33).

One small community on the brink of dying still shows at least a spark of vitality. Dime Box, Texas, is “essentially a three-street town. . . . Disregarding a jarring new bank, Dime Box could have been an M-G-M backlot set for a Western” (Blue Highways 134-35). Except for the intrusion of corporate America represented by the bank, Dime Box is a place where time seems to have stopped, and in the case of the barbershop, where Least Heat-Moon goes for a trim, it literally has: “I hadn’t paid $1.50 for a haircut in a decade. The old clock in Claud Tyler’s barbershop had stopped at two-ten, and in the center of the room stood an iron woodstove, now assisted by a small gas one. Above the sink were bottles of Lucky Tiger hair tonic. I’d forgotten about tonics” (Blue Highways 137). When the barber expresses dismay that there “‘Ain’t much need of a barbershop in Dime Box now. People get out to the bigger towns anymore,’” Least Heat-Moon, asserting what he wants to believe, shoots back, “‘A lot of small towns are coming
back’’ (Blue Highways 139). This time, the barber expresses skepticism. In the post office, a postal worker poignantly reaffirms the importance of life in small-town America: “‘City people don’t think anything important happens in a place like Dime Box. And usually it doesn’t, unless you call conflict important. Or love or babies or dying’’ (Blue Highways 136). Perhaps Frenchman, Nevada, best expresses the attraction Least Heat-Moon has for small towns. There he meets Margaret and Laurie Chealander who run a café, which contains “a café-bar-filling station, four-unit motel, trailer, and water tower all huddled on an expanse of dry lakebed mudflats cracked into a crazed jigsaw puzzle of alkali hardpan” (Blue Highways 198). Despite their isolation, they preserve friendship and neighborliness: “‘But you get to know yourself out here—you have to. And you get to know the others around because we all have to look after each other. Out here, sooner or later, all of us need help. Look out for yourself, look out for each other. The law of the land’’ (Blue Highways 202).

Yet behind all of his positive outlooks on small-town people and communities lies the cold, hard economic truth in America: the costs and benefits that accompany corporate progress. In a radio interview with Don Swaim in 1983, Least Heat-Moon said, “One of the common elements I saw in back road America was a sense of community among the people and also something that might come as a surprise and that is the health of small-town America.’’ This hope applies to towns closer to big cities, but it does not fully apply to most of the isolated towns Least Heat-Moon visits. They are dead or dying unless big corporations come in to exploit the land and natural resources or the government takes over to practice bombing runs, as they do in Frenchman. In Dime Store the barber Claud Tyler admits as much: “‘Could happen to us [revitalization]. They located a big pool of
oil here—deep oil. Way down. . . . Now people believe oil’s gonna bring things back like they used to be. I say hoping’s swell, but better be ready for it to go as fast as it comes” (Blue Highways 139). This comment comes from a man who lives in a town that has already experienced a railroad boom and bust in its history. In Frenchman Laurie Chealander, despite her previously-quoted statement extolling the virtues of community, admits, “‘The only thing I worry about is the diesel generator going out. But I hope we can tie into that new powerline’” (Blue Highways 201). So while people in small towns trumpet the virtues of isolation and ability to bond together, they still realize the benefits and risks of economic progress. So the natural question follows: at what price to small-town America? As Least Heat-Moon immerses himself in these small communities, he increasingly sees how much small towns have changed, which differs greatly from what Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck encounter.

Yet, at times during his trip, Least Heat-Moon’s criticism sounds like an updated version of Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck. Some major aspects of American culture that Least Heat-Moon particularly despises are the pervasive homogeneity and conformity that he finds even on the back roads, aspects that he fears he might find but hopes he does not. Even though he discovers and appreciates regional differences, he is no different from Miller, Kerouac, or Steinbeck, yet what makes his criticism different is the cautious way he approaches the hope expressed in his literary models, particularly Whitman and Black Elk, as if he expects something to dash them. In Mississippi, he sees not originality or a sense of history but rather sameness: “The farmhouses weren’t the kind with large, encircling porches and steeply pitched roofs and long windows you used to see, but rather new houses indistinguishable from wet-bar, walk-out basement, Turfbuilder-Plus
suburban models” (*Blue Highways* 103). Elsewhere in the U.S. fares no better. Heber, Arizona, “was box houses and a dingy sawmill, a couple of motels and filling stations, a glass-and-Formica café. Heber had no center, no focus for the eye and soul: neither a courthouse, nor high church steeple, nor hotel” (*Blue Highways* 172-73). In his analysis, he returns time and again to ideas of community and democracy that he finds lacking: a town center for sharing disparate views, a coming together of distinct individuals. Sameness stifles and might as well be death. Even in a place as remote as Browning, Montana, a Blackfeet Indian Reservation town, he meets with not the authentic but more sameness, “pure U.S.A.: an old hamburger stand of poured concrete in the shape of a tepee but now replaced by the Whoopie Burger drive-in, the War-bonnet Lodge motel, a Radio Shack, a Tastee-Freez” (*Blue Highways* 264). Visiting old Navy haunts in Newport, Rhode Island, he discovers that a favorite restaurant has vanished, replaced by “condominiums and tennis courts” (*Blue Highways* 364). He concludes after seeing homogeny across the country: “Plastic scrimshaw, carnival rides, condos. That was what history had come to” (*Blue Highways* 364). All of these comments echo similar statements made by Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck and they show how Least Heat-Moon remains unsurprised by what he finds.

Throughout his journey, Least Heat-Moon blames the increase in tourism for much of this sameness and unoriginality. John B. Rae in *The Road and the Car in American Life* shows that the rise in tourism is a historical phenomenon related to the increase in car travel: as more people travelled by car, more goods and services became available. Rae explains, “the stimulus has been most pronounced in service enterprises—storage, maintenance, and repair of motor vehicles, gasoline stations, the provision of food and
lodging for travelers” (107). All over the U.S. but especially in the East, Least Heat-Moon cannot escape “resort homes and summer camps that advertise in the back pages of the New York Times Magazine” (Blue Highways 322) or “motel congestion” (Blue Highways 329). In New Mexico, he recites a litany of tourist abuses worthy of Miller or Steinbeck: “The highway, straight and level, went into a land of tourist trading posts where yellow and black billboards repeated like a stutter: cactus jelly, Mexican black-velvet paintings, Indian dolls, copper bracelets, cherry cider, carved onyx, bullwhips, cactus candy, steer horns, petrified wood, Zuñi silver, Navajo rugs, desert blossom honey” (Blue Highways 153). Driving through Michigan he finds it difficult even to locate a place to spend the night untouched by the hand of tourism: “Looking for a town whose primary business was not tourism, I drove on through stands of birch girdled for souvenirs by sightseers, through a countryside of motels and sewer-hook-up campgrounds. Nothing satisfactory” (Blue Highways 292). But his historical awareness paints tourism as hardly a new phenomenon; it has just become more pervasive. In Oregon, he observes, “Newport has been a tourist town for more than a century and it showed: a four-lane runway of beef-and-bun joints and seashell shops; city blocks where beach bungalows jammed in salty shingle to shiplap” (Blue Highways 222). Coast-to-coast, Least Heat-Moon sees variations of the same that erodes the regional differences he appreciates.

The conformity he sees has become possibly worse than what the other writers in this study also confront. Even though Miller rails against it in the late 1930s and early 1940s and Kerouac mocks it in the late 1940s (and despite what Howard Zinn says about youthful alienation and revolt), Least Heat-Moon witnesses the pervasiveness of
conformity in all walks of American life. In a scene that echoes Steinbeck’s encounter with the young man in Idaho who feels powerless to change his life, Least Heat-Moon meets a family at a gas station in Monroe, Louisiana. The young boy shows interest in Ghost Dancing, but only in an economic sense. Least Heat-Moon laments: “That short man of a boy depressed me. Ten years old and figuring the rate of interest and depreciation instead of the cost of adventure” (*Blue Highways* 108). This incident shows Least Heat-Moon how the young get inculcated into materialist culture by example, but, while he expresses disappointment, he does not seem surprised. Children are not the only ones being trained by the materialist society on how to consume goods and services.

Austin, Nevada, “was a living ghost town: forty percent living, fifty percent ghost, ten percent not yet decided” (*Blue Highways* 193). This haunting image of mindless automatons inhabiting a dystopian society resembles something that Miller might have conjured. However, Least Heat-Moon saves his most vicious rancor for fellow travelers who are not as self-sufficient as he. At a café in Klamath Falls, Oregon, he marvels as a family piles into “an Argosy landcruiser (the kind you see in motel parking lots) with an Airstream trailer attached; on top of the Argosy was a motorboat and on the front and back matched mopeds” (*Blue Highways* 217). As they lumber away, he quips, “Just above the legal maximum, off they went, those people who took no chances on anything—including their ideas—getting away from them” (*Blue Highways* 217). The land of plenty remains also the land of the status quo: material culture warps expectations and Americans, out of a feeling of necessity, become conformists. They not only have to acquire stuff but they also have to display that stuff, as Veblen would say.
Perhaps the most distressing aspect of American culture that Least Heat-Moon attacks, which echoes the other writers in this study, is racism, whether related to blacks or Native Americans. Despite the strides the Civil Rights Movement made in the fifties and sixties, Least Heat-Moon runs up against bigotry all over the county but especially in the South. Events in the Civil Rights struggle before Least Heat-Moon’s travels shed light on some aspects of this lingering problem. As Howard Zinn notes, “Civil rights laws were passed in 1957, 1960, and 1964. They promised much, on voting equality, on employment equality, but were enforced poorly or ignored. In 1965, President Johnson sponsored and Congress passed an even stronger Voting Rights Law, this time ensuring on-the-spot federal protection of the right to register and vote” (456). Yet these gains did not erase the presence of racism, and tensions mounted. Zinn describes that “In 1967 . . . came the greatest urban riots of American history,” the worst being in Newark and Detroit (460), and Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, igniting another series of riots across the country (Zinn 462). Even the Civil Rights Act of 1968 failed to help, and it was evident “that even with all of the civil rights laws now on the books, the courts would not protect blacks against violence and injustice” (Zinn 462). Over the next decade, blacks made little strides (Brogan 644) and Least Heat-Moon notices this lack of improvement in civil rights for blacks.

The racism against African-Americans that Least Heat-Moon observes shocks him, particularly because he has a unique perspective on this issue compared with Miller, Kerouac, or Steinbeck. Unlike them, Least Heat-Moon sometimes experiences being considered a racial outsider and thus he has to endure treatment that the other writers never do. He occasionally experiences racist comments such as being called an “‘old
chief” (Blue Highways 162) as mentioned earlier and also being derisively called “‘Tonto’” (Blue Highways 294) in one of the more disturbing scenes in the book. The point, though, is not that he is oppressed (he hardly is) but that he can observe racism from a personal point-of-view. In contrast to Miller, who romanticizes the Old South, Least Heat-Moon drives into the thick of the reality of the New South in Selma, Alabama. He quickly realizes that not much has changed since the Civil Rights struggle. In a 1991 interview he remembers the hatred: “I was shocked to go into places on the road and see so much racial bigotry” (Bourne 106). When he asks James Walker, a man born and raised in Selma, if anything has changed since Martin Luther King, Jr., Walker responds, “‘Say what? Last week I went to get my driver’s license. Twelve-thirty. Lunchtime. Sign on the door says they open again at one. I wanted to wait inside, so I pulled on the door. Trooper comes out and says, ‘What’s wrong, fool? Cain’t read? Get off that door less you want me next time comin’ out shootin’.’ There’s your change’” (Blue Highways 98). When Least Heat-Moon expresses confusion, Walker clarifies, “‘Ten years ago he woulda come out shootin’ the first time’” (Blue Highways 98). Another man, Charles Davis, tells Least Heat-Moon a story about a little kid threatening him and some friends with racial slurs and a baseball bat—all for sitting on the fender of his dad’s car. Davis ends by saying, “‘We never blamed the kid. We know where it’s comin’ from’” (Blue Highways 101). These encounters show Least Heat-Moon that the legacy of racism acts as a subtle form of control for both whites and blacks, which makes positive change difficult to achieve.

Most disturbing of all, though, is his conversation with Barbara Pierre, a secretary and student in St. Martinville, Louisiana, who, in a scene reminiscent of Steinbeck’s chance
meetings with black Southerners, confirms that change proceeds glacially.  

As she says, “‘What we want is slow coming—if it’s coming at all. Older blacks here are scared of whites and won’t do much for change if it means risk. Others don’t care as long as everything gets smothered over with politeness by whites’” (Blue Highways 119). While Least Heat-Moon does not always comment on these conversations, he allows the speaker’s words directly to affect his reader. What he leaves unsaid is the paranoia and degradation that still exist in parts of America that strip blacks of agency and identity. He does not have to mention these points outright, because they are obvious.

Yet whereas Steinbeck gives up and heads home after confronting the hatred and bigotry in New Orleans, Least Heat-Moon keeps investigating, especially when it comes to Native Americans and his own identity. While he comments on instances of racism as the other writers in this study at times also do, he uses his trip as a way to explore the treatment of Native Americans in America’s past and present. As part Native American, he can complain about the treatment of American Indians throughout history—and at times he notices and comments on their dispossession—but he downplays his role as racial other in America. He understands that, like racism towards blacks, the brutal treatment of Native Americans has troubling roots in American history, and he especially deplores the poor conditions and disappearing traditions on reservations. On the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, he notices waste as deplorable as the worst of other places in America: “Liquor bottles, beercans, an occasional stripped car littered the unfenced roadside. Far off the highway, against the mesa bottoms, stood small concrete-block or frame houses, each with a television antenna, pickup, privy and ceremonial hogan of stone, adobe, and cedar” (Blue Highways 174). In this scene, he deplores the
juxtaposition of the traditional Hogan with the symbols of American culture that coopt it: trash and automobiles. On the Hopi reservation, he sees firsthand the blending of tradition with popular culture and becomes disgusted: “In the gallery were drawings of mythic figures by Hopi children who fused centuries and cultures with grotesque Mudhead Kachinas wearing large terra-cotta masks and jackolantern [sic] smiles, dancing atop spaceships with Darth Vader and Artoo Deetoo” (Blue Highways 175). While some scholars argue “that Least Heat-Moon idealizes reservation life and ignores the social injustice inherent of the reservation system as a whole” (Bryzik 674), he clearly does not. He even goes as far as to comment sarcastically on the commodification of Native American culture by tourists: “In another era, white men came in wagons to trade beads to Indians; now they came in stationwagons and bought beads. History may repeat, but sometimes things get turned around in the process” (Blue Highways 177). Although tempered, the criticism in these statements cuts to the core of the capitalist and imperialist impulses that forced Native Americans onto reservations in the first place.

Least Heat-Moon also experiences slight hope when dealing with Native Americans despite their historical treatment by whites. This positivity derives from his analysis of the insincerity behind the Native American ideal, the stereotypical “noble savage” of literature and cinema. Even though he “failed to stir a conversation” on the Navajo reservation (something he is otherwise incredibly good at as the book shows) because of his “fear of the contempt that full-bloods often show lesser bloods” (Blue Highways 177), he has an extended conversation with Kendrick Fritz, a Hopi studying chemistry at Southern Utah State College. Typical of his method, Least Heat-Moon allows Fritz to speak and criticize for him, but Fritz also offers hope for change. Surely echoing Least
Heat-Moon’s own thoughts, Fritz shows displeasure at Native-American stereotypes:

“Half [of whites] show contempt because they saw a drunk squaw at the Circle K. Another half think we’re noble savages—they may be worse because if an Indian makes a mistake they hate him for being human. Who wants to be somebody’s ideal myth?” (Blue Highways 182). Attacking the theme of ideals that clash with reality, Kendrick gets at the heart of the misguided romanticized view of Native Americans that has been part of American culture for centuries. Fritz also decries the concept of the “‘apple Indian—red outside and white underneath’” (Blue Highways 182), which, though not identified specifically by Least Heat-Moon, appears to be an acknowledged struggle throughout his trip as he adopts and abandons the mantle of Native American. Fritz’s most important point, though, may be his concern about American Indians’ conflicts over their native identities while living in and taking advantage of the white world. “I hear Indians talk about being red all the way through,” he says, “‘criticizing others for acting like Anglos, and all the time they’re sitting in a pickup at a drive-in. But don’t tell them to trade the truck for a horse’” (Blue Highways 182). Fritz experiences how the dominant white culture has warped the Native American view of tradition, yet he recognizes that resolving the issue proves difficult. Contrasting these critical statements, however, he also embraces Hopi tradition and talks about land as the “Sacred Circle” (Blue Highways 182), as “medicine,” “the idea of harmony,” (Blue Highways 183), and the “Hopi Way” (Blue Highways 184), as portrayed in the “emergence symbol” (Blue Highways 185), which depicts life as a circular journey much like Least Heat-Moon’s own travels. While Fritz embodies Least Heat-Moon’s assessment of the treatment of Native Americans throughout American history, the young Hopi also offers hope that the problems caused
by assimilation into white culture can be overcome by a combination of embracing tradition and accepting the new. Although Least Heat-Moon attacks America’s problems, he also searches for hope that they can be solved one day.

Fritz may be indicative of a historical tide in the 1960s and 1970s: the Indian Movement. He offers cautious hope that things might change but also allows Least Heat-Moon to critique the contemporary oppression of Native Americans. While calling attention to injustices, the Indian Movement of the 1960s and 1970s exacted intense reaction from the U.S. government. Zinn writes, “As the civil rights and antiwar movements developed in the 1960s, Indians were already gathering their energy for resistance, thinking about how to change their situation, beginning to organize” in groups such as the National Indian Youth Council (525). Native Americans objected to old treaties never honored, staged elaborate protests such as occupying Alcatraz Island, and disputed the destruction of the environment (Zinn 527-30). The most dramatic protest came in 1973 when “several hundred Oglala Sioux and friends returned to the village of Wounded Knee to occupy it as a symbol of the demand for Indian land, Indian rights” (Zinn 534). Even though Indians banded together in protest, the federal government continued to suppress the Indians by arrests and sometimes shootings (Zinn 534-35). As often happens when change rears its head, the government, desperate to maintain the status quo, will do what it takes to achieve it. While Fritz offers faint hope for Least Heat-Moon when it comes to Native Americans, he still recognizes that the cultural and historical tide does not move in favor of men like Fritz.
III.

Even when Least Heat-Moon indulges in reveries about the past or literature, he does not shy away from reality; and this very engagement with reality makes his criticism notably different from the other writers in this study. Unlike Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck, Least Heat-Moon sees the good and bad almost simultaneously. A major difference with Least Heat-Moon’s narrative compared to the others remains his guarded optimism about America even as he exposes conditions that have not changed or have become worse. This optimism gets complicated by the fact that the back roads should shield him from the negative but do not. He looks for a democratic impulse, one mainly based on autonomy, yet he suspects it has diminished. When he discovers its absence, he examines the present, sometimes quite harshly. A major problem emerges that Americans have become more self-centered, consumed with looking inward, taking care of their own needs, not fostering a self-determining spirit. However Least Heat-Moon recognizes the deep-rooted history of this reaction: “After traveling nineteenth-century America, de Tocqueville came to believe one result of democracy was a concentration of each man’s attention upon himself” (*Blue Highways* 168). This egotism complicates his appreciation of regional differences and unfettered nature, yet it also causes other issues that Least Heat-Moon explores but that the other writers in this study do not, namely the destruction of the environment and economic change.

Another major difference between the criticisms of America in the previous three books and Least Heat-Moon’s is time period. His travels occur in 1978—a post-Vietnam and -Watergate America, an America on the whole that had grown distrustful of government and business interests, both of which clearly took care of their own needs.
As Zinn writes, “Undoubtedly, much of this national mood of hostility to government and business came out of the Vietnam war, its 55,000 casualties, its moral shame, its exposure of government lies and atrocities. On top of this came the political disgrace of the Nixon administration in the scandals that came to be known by the one-word label ‘Watergate’” (542). Add to these calamities an even earlier tragedy, John F. Kennedy’s assassination, of which Hugh Brogan writes, “Even before that event a deep skepticism had been growing; now it had free rein. Alienation from conventional society and its pieties was reinforced by the effects of prosperity. Children, teenagers and college students were now a major consuming group and called a new world into being by their expenditure” (657-68). So the America Least Heat-Moon confronts appears similar to, though also vastly different from, the America that the other writers confront. America has not changed in the sense that it remains far from the Constitution’s idea of “a more perfect union.” Changes have taken place, however, as Zinn notes: “In the sixties and seventies, it was not just a women’s movement, a prisoner’s movement, an Indian movement. There was general revolt against oppressive, artificial, previously unquestioned ways of living. It touched every aspect of personal life: childbirth, childhood, love, sex, marriage, dress, music, art, sports, language, food, housing, religion, literature, death, schools” (536). In response to these changes, Least Heat-Moon’s narrative differs from the others in that it is a more in-depth examination of America and its problems instead of being solely a personal journey or a series of diatribes against the U.S. Least Heat-Moon’s critical perspective mainly differs from Miller’s, Kerouac’s, and Steinbeck’s in that his voice does not cry in the wilderness. His criticism had become the norm as found in books that savagely attack the American scene and that preceded Blue Highways: Joan
Didion’s *Play it as it Lays* (1970), Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), Jim Harrison’s *A Good Day to Die* (1973), Robert M. Pirig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), and Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). Thus Least Heat-Moon’s road narrative plays into a common critical discourse about America more fully than the other narratives in this study.

In addition to participating in the growing dissent and protest, Least Heat-Moon’s visits to small-town communities also allow him to develop his appreciation for regional differences in America, especially when it comes to the beauty of the landscape and food. In the circular structure of the book, Least Heat-Moon focuses on regions and their similarities and differences much more than Miller, Kerouac, or Steinbeck. Each section of the book focuses on a particular region: Eastward, East by Southeast, South by Southeast, South by Southwest, West by Southwest, West by Northwest, North by Northwest, North by Northeast, East by Northeast, and Westward. This structure also highlights the symmetry of the journey and the symbol of the circle emphasizing renewal. The variation he finds affirms his attraction to back roads towns. The passages where he discusses them are some of the most folksy and ingratiating in the book, although at times they ring insincere. He also comes upon mass culture and big business, which intrude upon the back roads as well as the highways. Jakle says that, for American tourists, “The search for regional differences was primarily a search for cultural identity” (302), and this observation bears out in Least Heat-Moon’s investigations of people and places. In North Carolina, he sees sharecropper cabins along the roadside and says,

Many, like the ones in North Carolina, had been deserted for a subdivision green prefab next door, but not all. On one slanting porch, a woman worked at her
wring washer and on another a man sat at the ready with a flyswatter. The Old South disappears. Yet, the [sharecropper] cabins, once an emblem of a land and a way of life, were something you couldn’t see in Provo or Fort Wayne. Only on humanitarian grounds can a traveler approve the nationally standardized boxes replacing them. *(Blue Highways 70)*

While he almost sounds like Miller on the South’s troubled history, Least Heat-Moon appreciates regional differences while acknowledging creeping homogeneity. Driving through the South, he muses on the Army Corps of Engineers’ negative affect on the vibrant life along the Atchafalaya Basin: “Cajuns who traditionally make a living from the wetlands by fishing, frogging, mudbugging, trapping, and mosspicking are having to leave their fastness and take work in industry” *(Blue Highways 123).* Driving into the West, he marvels at the changing terrain and the overwhelming space that Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck all mention during their travels. Least Heat-Moon says, “The true West differs from the East in one great, pervasive, influential, and awesome way: space. The vast openness changes the roads, towns, houses, farms, crops, machinery, politics, economics, and, naturally, ways of thinking” *(Blue Highways 132).* He learns that, in this vast landscape, “Oregonians, also known as ‘Webfeet,’ learn to live with rain as Texans do wind” *(Blue Highways 221).* As he returns east, space contracts and in New Hampshire he notices that “The villages seemed to seep down the slopes to settle in the valleys along streams where people of another time built multiwindowed stone and brick factories and mills. Most of the old buildings and mill dams had been done in by cheap electric power and centralized industry” *(Blue Highways 329).* Along the Atlantic seaboard, region and history merge as Least Heat-Moon delves into America’s past.
Greate Street in Greenwich, New Jersey, is “a road of clapboard or Flemish-bond brick structures” and “Through colonial windows . . . [Least Heat-Moon] could see Windsor chairs and ancestral portraits. Some of the paintings were of men who, three days before the Christmas of 1774, dressed like Indians and savaged a shipment of tea bound for Philadelphia but temporarily hidden by the East India Company in a Greenwich cellar” \textit{(Blue Highways 374)}. Least Heat-Moon appreciates first-hand the variety and beauty of America’s regions, and this understanding is one of the stronger impulses behind his optimism.

Of the many regional differences upon which Least Heat-Moon muses, food emerges as the most pervasive. When he discusses food he adopts a folksy tone, and he almost always eats in out-of-the way places like diners, bars, and cafeterias, clearly reflecting his desire to remain on the back roads. Like the communities he seeks, the restaurants he most values have an individual identity. Least Heat-Moon also connects the distinctive cuisine of regions with their vitality. The more exotic and delicious the food is, the more likely Least Heat-Moon is to be optimistic about a certain town. In a 2010 interview, he talks about the importance of food to both the identity of a region and to travel in general: “It’s another expression of the nature of a region. A traveler can gain a feel for a territory by eating its signature dishes. . . . Food is one expression of the character of a people and a landscape. Take away good, local eating along the road, and, for me, half the reason for traveling vanishes” (Banga 101). Although he sounds extreme, \textit{Blue Highways} fully supports these views. From the very beginning of the trip, he avoids chains and fast-food restaurants as inauthentic to the back-roads experience:
But franchisers don’t sell many of their thirty-three billion hamburgers per year in blue highway towns where chophouses must draw customers through continuing quality rather than national advertising. I had nothing to lose but the chains, and I hoped to find down the country roads Ma in her beanery and Pap over his barbecue pit, both still serving slow food from the same place they did thirty years ago. Where-you-from-buddy restaurants. *(Blue Highways 16)*

One of the more famous passages in the book involves Least Heat-Moon’s means of telling a good café from a bad one: “There is one almost infallible way to find honest food at just prices in blue-highway America: count the wall calendars in a café” *(Blue Highways 26)*. According to this system, the more calendars the better the food. The ratings range from “No calendar: Same as an interstate pit stop” to “Five calendars: Keep it under your hat, or they’ll franchise” and even to “golden legends of seven-calendar cafes” *(Blue Highways 26)*. Again, this sounds like down-home wisdom, yet, by establishing this hierarchical system, Least-Heat Moon can legitimize a blue highways establishment, but he can also delegitimize it too which enables him to critique homogeny. He also lends himself credibility by eating where the folks eat and experiencing local culture first-hand.

Least Heat-Moon samples the diversity of American cuisine, influenced still by many cultures. He wants to demonstrate the point, as he says himself in a 1991 interview in *Artful Dodge, “E Pluribus Unum. It’s not ‘one among many,’ or ‘one with many.’ It’s ‘one out of many’*” *(Bourne 108)*, and this reasoning expresses an important democratic ideal for Least Heat-Moon—it just happens to be expressed through food. Descriptions of food are part of most road narratives, though Least Heat-Moon takes it to an extreme.
Thus he can look with fondness on Swamp Guinea’s in Georgia and the great feast he
eats there that includes “ham and eggs, fried catfish, fried perch fingerlings, fried shrimp,
chunks of barbecued beef, fried chicken, French fries, hush puppies, a broad bowl of cole
slaw, another of lemon, a quart of ice tea, a quart of ice, and an entire loaf of factory-
wrapped white bread” (*Blue Highways* 77). The feeding frenzy continues as he travels.
He samples gumbo at Eric’s in Lafayette, Louisiana, pausing to note in a professorial
tone that “The roots of Cajun cookery come from Brittany and bear no resemblance to
Parisian cuisine and not even much to the Creole cooking of New Orleans” (*Blue
Highways* 114). At Louie’s Oyster Bar in Portland, Oregon, he has “oysters panfried”
but the setting subtly hints at divisions in America: “The communal tables were, of
course, more fun, more companionable, but not many customers wanted community with
strangers” (*Blue Highways* 228). The Oil City Bar in Shelby, Montana, reminds him of
the “cultural narcissism” (Walker 290) of much of America. Unlike English bars, “the
traditional design of the American bar . . . [is] a straight counter facing a mirrored wall,
which forces the customer to stare at himself or put a crick in his neck looking at
someone else” (*Blue Highways* 266).

Without directly stating it, Least Heat-Moon makes clear that the structure of
American bars creates an environment for consumption, not companionship. Bars
reinforce the self and the gratification of desires, much as consumerism operates in the
culture at large. The Oil City Bar could arise straight out of the “new West” (51) in *On
the Road*, and, in fact, Least Heat-Moon echoes Kerouac’s phrase upon leaving the bar
and “walking out into the streets of the new Wild West” (*Blue Highways* 268). But he
never takes the gustatory experience lightly, regardless of his location in the country. In
Bentley’s in Woodstock, Vermont, he delves once again into the local cuisine. “Because I’d never eaten a shad Roe omelet before,” he says, “I ordered one, figuring I could write it off to experience, but I almost ordered a second” (*Blue Highways* 326). He has this positive eating experience despite the presence of tourist types: “The diners wore heels and Von Furstenberg signature dresses or plaid shirts and L. L. Bean hiking boots” (*Blue Highways* 326), another sign that, despite the abundance of local color, the mainstream culture hovers closely, which remains an inherent paradox in the U.S.

Despite his love of food, Least Heat-Moon remains awed by his other great attraction—the untouched nature he still finds in the U.S. More than the other writers in this study—with the exception of Steinbeck—Least Heat-Moon revels in America’s natural beauty in much the way as Whitman and Black Elk. Nature for him expresses the transcendental and implies a transformation of self, the getting beyond a facile understanding of self. *Blue Highways* resides in the tradition of “‘literary naturism’” (431, endnote 28) that Lawrence Buell analyzes in *The Environmental Imagination*. The term indicates works with “an interest in representation of literal nature as a substantial if not exclusive part of one’s literary project” (Buell 431, endnote 28). Along with analyzing Least Heat-Moon’s engagement with nature as “naturism,” I also consider it as a kind of humanism in that the natural world refreshes the spirit, as it often does for Least Heat-Moon and other writers like Edward Abbey. According to Jonathan Levin, Abbey and Least Heat-Moon “see their work as literary naturists as a very human undertaking” (249). Least Heat-Moon uses his journey—and, by extension, nature—to understand himself and other people, but he does so because he thinks he should change along the journey. Nature also serves to bolster his tenuous optimism, especially when he faces the
negative in America. He finds that, though natural beauty still exists in the America of 1978, that beauty will disappear unless rampant greed and commercialization are checked. This realization shows how different America has become for Least Heat-Moon when compared to the other writers.

Least Heat-Moon connects his love of nature, then, to two dominant themes of the trip: renewal and transformation. He mainly prais es nature in flux, which reflects the symbolic elements of the journey. For instance, he begins the journey in spring, signifying the stereotypical rebirth inherent in that season. At a dead end in his life, he seeks a new beginning and uses nature as an impetus. Waking up in the night, he sees a flock of blue geese “honking north, an undulating W-shaped configuration across the deep sky, white bellies glowing eerily with the reflected light from town, necks stretched northward. Then another flock pulled by who knows what out of the south to breed and remake itself. A new season. Answer: begin by following spring as they did—darkly, with neck stuck out” (Blue Highways 3). So nature for Least Heat-Moon functions as restorative, as transformative rather than just a backdrop as it functions in Miller, Kerouac, and Steinbeck, which is not new for the genre of road narratives. Least Heat-Moon develops it more fully than other road writers and connects nature to his project of self-discovery. He looks to “particularities” as he calls them, images of nature indicative of rebirth: “Item: a green and grainy and corrupted ice over the ponds. Item: blackbirds, passing like storm-borne leaves, sweeping just above the treetops, moving as if invisibly tethered to one will” (Blue Highways 5). The ice melting and the blackbirds compared to leaves both represent what Least Heat-Moon finds hopeful at the beginning of his journey: hope in the journey itself and in America. And this theme waxes and
wanes as he travels around the country. In Tougaloo, Mississippi, he meditates on life in a swamp: “It was spring here, and juices were getting up in the stalks; leaves, terribly folded in husks, had begun to let loose and open to the light; stuff was stirring in the rot, water bubbled with the froth of sperm and ova, and the whole bog lay rank and eggy, vaporous and thick with the scent of procreation” (*Blue Highways* 105). He later, literally, immerses himself in nature by bathing in Spencer’s Hot Springs in Texas, a restorative respite in the first leg of the trip: “I stripped and dished up the hot water, let it cool slightly, then poured buckets of it over me. I even slapped on hot, gritty, blue-gray mud to loosen the sinews. Then I rinsed clean as men before must have done, dumping over me water warmed by the molten heart of the earth” (*Blue Highways* 193). Even though this scene comes dangerously close to a parody of a Native American ritual, the sincerity Least Heat-Moon expresses appears genuine, and the immersion becomes analogous to the trip as a whole. This sincerity reiterates his understanding of nature as transformative. On Mount Mazama in Oregon, he gazes down upon Crater Lake and imagines its Native American past:

There, far below in the moonlight and edged with ice, lay a two-thousand-foot deep lake. Klamath braves used to test their courage by climbing down the treacherous scree inside the caldera; if they survived, they bathed in the cold water of the volcano and renewed themselves. Also to this nearly perfect circle of water came medicine men looking for secrets of the Grandfathers. Once a holy place, now Crater Lake is only a famous Oregon tourist attraction. (*Blue Highways* 218)
But his rhapsodic descriptions of the natural world must be seen in relation to what threatens to ruin it since his concerns for environmental degradation also inform much of the book. As Robert M. Pirsig views Crater Lake in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), he sees a double image: “This is how it was before the white man came—beautiful lava flows, and scrawny trees, and not a beer can anywhere—but now that the white man is here, it looks fake” (Pirsig 350). Least Heat-Moon’s and Pirsig’s narratives are separated by only a few years, yet both express the same sentiment: nature restores when it remains untouched by human hands and especially white peoples’ hands. This is a point alluded to by Steinbeck in Montana, yet it remains a point that Miller and Kerouac raise but do not explore.

Other aspects of nature that Least Heat-Moon notices are similar to what the other writers in this study also comment on (particularly in the Southwest and on the Great Plains), but he also deviates from them inasmuch as he views nature as a redemptive force. Unlike Miller, Least Heat-Moon at first views the Southwest landscape cautiously. In New Mexico, he says, “There’s something about the desert that doesn’t like man, something that mocks his nesting instinct and makes his constructions look feeble and temporary. Yet it’s just that inhospitableness that endears the arid rockiness, the places pointy and poisonous, to men looking for its discipline” (*Blue Highways* 160). Nevertheless, the desert also intrigues Least Heat-Moon as it does Miller. He says of Texas Canyon, Arizona, that “Nature in a zany mood had stacked up the rounded rocks in whimsical and impossible ways, trying out new principles of design, experimenting with old laws of gravity, putting theorems of the physicists to the test” (*Blue Highways* 168).32
The desert represents originality—an important American trait for Least Heat-Moon—but also unpredictability, which almost becomes a metaphor for the trip itself.

The Great Plains also figure prominently in Least Heat-Moon’s imagination. Like other writers, Least Heat-Moon finds the vast plains fascinating and mostly untouched by consumerism. For instance, upon first seeing them, Frazier in Great Plains says, “I didn’t pass a single place that looked as if it was in any way expecting me: no landscaped residential communities, no specialty sporting-goods stores, no gourmet delis offering many kinds of imported beers. Just grain silos, and flat brown fields with one cow on them, and wheat fields, and telephone poles, and towns with four or six buildings” (10). Driving across Montana, Least Heat-Moon muses on the pioneers’ use of nautical language to make sense of the enormous landscape. “Yet the language of the plains harks to the ocean,” Least Heat-Moon says:

pioneers came in “prairie schooners” (some even rigged with sails) and spoke of the “sea of grass” and the “prairie ocean,” and they cured hangovers with calf ballocks they called “prairie oysters.” Maybe the sodbusters saw seascapes in the undulations of the grasses or in the immensity of sky or in the lack of refuge from wind and storm. . . . And maybe also, their words expressed a prescient awareness of the tug between coming and going. (Blue Highways 269-70)

His preoccupation with “the language of the plains,” with ebb and flow, signifies the possibility of change inherent in himself. It also represents Least Heat-Moon’s own thinking during the trip as he vacillates between praise and negative critique. This vacillation ultimately makes his road narrative more successful than the others precisely because it sounds more genuine. In addition, he uses the pioneers as an example of
Americans making sense of the landscape just as he can increasingly make sense of himself, his personal problems, and the contradictions in America.

Yet the destruction of the environment remains the issue that Least Heat-Moon most notices that the other writers do not, and this point becomes his most persistent and dramatic criticism throughout his travels. In some ways, his attention to the environment connects to his Native American ethos, to Black Elk and a love of the land, but in other ways his love of nature derives from his academic background, in his familiarity with Whitman, Emerson, and especially Thoreau. One view concerning Blue Highways and the natural world states that “Nature . . . is not a central area of dispute. . . . Rather it simply is the setting for the human drama which cannot be ignored and which is integrally a part of the human story” (Ross-Bryant 98). But this view misses the conflict of much of the book, which is exactly Least Heat-Moon’s quarrel with those who abuse the environment. Most of the destruction he observes comes from man and man’s egotistical view of the land and history. Most people he meets do not think about their effect on the environment: people who carelessly throw “the [Pepsi-Cola] tab in the lake” (Blue Highways 285) or toss a Coke can into the Atlantic Ocean (Blue Highways 353). In South Carolina, farming techniques have changed the very landscape: “In the last generation alone, erosion control, crop rotation, fertilizer, and pesticide have changed the face of the South, and the people’s lives showed it” (Blue Highways 70); and, in North Dakota, “As daylight went, the men, racing rain and the short growing season, switched on headlights to keep the International Harvesters moving over cropland that the miracles of land-grant colleges (cross-pollinated hybrids resistant to everything but growth and petrochemicals) had changed forever” (Blue Highways 274). In outrage,
he continues to criticize the ways, throughout American history, humans have altered the ecological health of flora and fauna, rarely learning from past mistakes.\textsuperscript{35} In Wolf Point, Montana, “in another century . . . the citizens complained of wolves. They got together and set out poison, and the varmints died all over the prairie, and townsmen stacked a thousand frozen carcasses into high mounds that stood all winter” (\textit{Blue Highways} 272). Least Heat-Moon (rightly so) connects this massacre to the nineteenth-century decimation of the buffalo and identifies a pattern of violence designed against the land.

What he calls “so-called progress” (\textit{Blue Highways} 372) continues unabated in the East. In Othello, New Jersey, Least Heat-Moon speaks to a local historian and allows him to have the final say on man’s impact on the environment. Reacting to the possible building of a new plant by the Atlantic City Electric Company, the historian asserts: “This is about the limited capacity of men to understand because they measure time in terms of themselves. This is about men who won’t see causes and therefore can’t predict effects. This is about men who fail to realize that geographical refuge is central to our history. It’s about men who exterminate the species of the earth at the rate of one every day” (\textit{Blue Highways} 378). In the tone of the most ardent environmentalist, this man concludes by saying that the environment will nevertheless persevere: “the force of nature demands it” (\textit{Blue Highways} 378). While the scene seems a bit dramatic, Least Heat-Moon fully agrees with the historian. Americans have historically been shortsighted and selfish when it comes to the use of natural resources. Why worry about an issue that will not have an impact until generations have passed?\textsuperscript{36}

The worst environmental degradation Least Heat-Moon finds results from dams. Wherever he roams in the country, he almost always comments on them. While they
may control flooding and produce hydro-electric power, dams disconnect men from a bountiful and restorative natural world. The Atchafalaya Swamp gets ruined by levees that “altered not just the Atchafalaya and a great swamp but also one of the distinctive ethnic peoples in America” (Blue Highways 123). In Least Heat-Moon’s mind, dams become associated with a bastardization of man’s once idealized connection with nature. The dams along the Columbia River have created waterways for mere sport, the Army Corps of Engineers “turning one of the greatest rivers of the hemisphere into staircase lakes buzzing with outboards” (Blue Highways 231). He continues: “Unlike the lower river, Lewis and Clark would not recognize the Columbia above Bonneville. Rapids and falls where Indians once speared fish lay under sedimented muck; sandbars and chutes, whirlpools, eddies, and sucks were gone, and the turmoil of waters—current against stone—that ancient voice of the river, silenced” (Blue Highways 231). Least Heat-Moon also deplores dams because they take away the distinctive landscape of an area, and they destroy archeological history and Native culture. Flying above the Snake River Canyon with Fred Tomlins, a Vietnam veteran, Least Heat-Moon learns that the “ Corps of engineers has plans for hydroelectric dams all the way from the Columbia through Hells Canyon and on up. They’ve already built a couple dozen. Half the river’s drowned and so are a lot of Indian pictographs” (Blue Highways 252). Dams finally represent man’s shortsightedness—deal with problems now and worry about the future later. For Least Heat-Moon, that seems to be the motto of 1970s America when it comes to the environment.

Along with the environment, Least Heat-Moon criticizes economic change in the form of national and multinational corporations and fast food restaurants throughout his
trip. For Least Heat-Moon, the country has become worse off than he or the other writers thought. Change for the worse has devastated back-roads’ economies as corporations force local establishments to close. The spread of large chains leads to more consumerism and homogeny, and, with this recognition, Least Heat-Moon mostly agrees with Miller but without Miller’s Marxist leanings. Least Heat-Moon looks squarely at the effects these forces have on small towns, ridiculing them not from any ideological standpoint but from personal preference for the local, the unique. Shortly into his journey, he learns how big companies push out small businesses when he talks to Madison Wheeler, a former owner of a local general store, who tells him, “‘Then them supermarkets down in Cookeville opened, and I was buyin’ higher than they was sellin’. With these hard roads now, everybody gets out of the hollers to shop or work’” (Blue Highways 29). Even though supermarkets can offer more goods at cheaper prices, Least Heat-Moon regrets the loss of a community that tends to form around local businesses in small towns.

Fast food restaurants, particularly McDonald’s, also receive Least Heat-Moon’s ire for destroying his beloved small-town eateries. The destructiveness of McDonald’s restaurants comes to his mind when Least Heat-Moon watches cows graze in Montana and realizes that cattle grazing contributed to the decimation of the buffalo. Sarcastically echoing “Home on the Range,” he thinks, “I remembered reading that one out of nine beef cows ends up in a McDonald’s hamburger. The sky had been cloudy all day, and now I’d just heard a discouraging word” (Blue Highways 271). Despite the folksiness of the reference to a song associated with a romanticized West, the sentiment remains: big industries have been destructive forces in America, a sentiment he shares particularly
with Miller. In keeping with his journalistic method, he allows others to speak for his attitudes on fast food as well; for instance, when he records the reaction of the Italian-American wife of a farmer in upstate New York after she ate at McDonald’s: “‘Meat was thin like cheesecloth. ‘This is no hamburg sangwich,’ I say.’” (Blue Highways 311). All the same, Least Heat-Moon does not hold himself above indulging in fast food, though he declines to immerse in consumer culture to the extent that Steinbeck does. To his credit, he acknowledges the paradox of his participating in the very culture he abhors: “I’d got uppity about multilane America and was paying the price. Secretly, I hungered for a texturized patty of genetically engineered cow” (Blue Highways 105). This admission also shows how brainwashed by or vulnerable to the invidious advertising campaigns and ubiquitous chains Least Heat-Moon has become, a consequence of being a member of American society.

Overall, Least Heat-Moon holds capitalism responsible for destructive influences throughout the U.S. Specifically he explores how national and multinational corporations invade an area, consume the natural resources for profit, and then leave a ghost town behind. Least Heat-Moon describes this process by using the Pony Express as an example and then examines the current reincarnation of the same process: “1862, a Pony Express rider looking for a lost horse finds a rock loaded with silver ore; 1865, six thousand people and as many mining and milling companies, hundreds of them fraudulent; 1878, the mines virtually played out; a century later, three hundred people” (Blue Highways 194). This story proves all too common across his journey. Corporations become a shadowy “they” in stories he hears from interviewees, a pervasive presence ruining the American landscape. At Depoe Bay on the coast of Oregon, he
meets a man who “operated a charterboat company that catered to tourists” and who tells him, “‘Depoe Bay used to be a good commercial fishing town, but they overfished this corner of the Pacific. Then they polluted the spawning streams’” (*Blue Highways* 223). In Midland, Michigan, he drives “past the great industrial pile of Dow Chemical” (*Blue Highways* 295) that poisons the landscape. And the destruction extends beyond the U.S. Least Heat-Moon learns of corporations’ global reach, given that the U.S. is part of an international system of consumption and waste. In Kennebunkport, Maine, he joins a crew of commercial fisherman as they navigate the day’s catch and have to compete with “‘Russians and Germans and Japanese [who] were coming in with armadas of trawlers and factory ships that process and freeze the catch. Once they found a good coordinate, they’d sit on it until they cleaned it out’” (*Blue Highways* 354). Least Heat-Moon understands all too well that small local businesses become powerless against prodigious national and multinational forces.

Least Heat-Moon ends his trip where he began: home, in Missouri, with the possibility of starting a new life. Kerouac and Steinbeck also end up at home, end up a part of the very consumerist society they have criticized. Miller ends up in Big Sur, ready to start life anew in America but separated by geography and mindset from the rest of American culture. Least Heat-Moon ends more nearly akin to Miller than to Kerouac and Steinbeck: he returns home changed due to his exploration of the self in relation to his observations of the country and people. He has experienced doubt and joy in his journey, and he has experienced the good and the bad in the country. Accordingly, the ending, like most of the book, seems not entirely optimistic and finishes on an ironic
First he traverses a Harmonist maze in New Harmony, Indiana, “‘symbolic’ (a sign said) ‘of the Harmonist concept of the devious and difficult approach to a state of true harmony,’” which also reminds Least Heat-Moon of the “Hopi map of emergence” (Blue Highways 411). Thus he connects the historical and literary viewpoints he engages with throughout the trip into one neat package and can arrive home a different person aware of the complications brought about by clashing viewpoints: small town versus city, materialism versus simplicity. Least Heat-Moon does not become “too wise to say that his journey has come full circle” (Tammaro 272), but rather he remains aware of the implications of the maze, the symbol, and his entire journey. A man’s life is a series of journeys, full of mistakes, false starts, and misdirection, and, though this particular one in Blue Highways ends, a new one begins. And that beginning, inherent in the symbol of the circle, embodies hope in the search for self. The ending appears convenient because it reiterates the purpose of the entire trip. He sets out in the spring with the idealistic notion of making sense of self and discovering America, or a democratic voice in America. And he returns home in the spring, the circular journey synchronizing with the seasons. He does exactly what Thoreau does in Walden, except that Thoreau created the circular return aesthetically, reducing two plus years into one, while for Least Heat-Moon the circle of life suggests some promise of growth as a result of the trip. He also returns home appropriately westward, symbolically representing the opportunity inherent in the Old West, but to which he hearkens all along: the possibility of a new start. But he tempers his optimism even at the end, continuing the irony that has marked the trip throughout Blue Highways. Thinking about the circle that has guided his journey throughout, he obfuscates the importance of the structure of the journey: “If the circle
had come full turn, I hadn’t. I can’t say, over the miles, that I had learned what I had wanted to know because I hadn’t known what I wanted to know. But I did learn what I didn’t know I wanted to know” (*Blue Highways* 411). Thus at the end his critique remains authentic because he sees America more fully than Miller, Kerouac, or Steinbeck. In completing his circle, he withdraws into a self that has been enlarged. He has learned that things are getting worse but that there remain folks who do their work and who respect the land and one another. Learning this, he seems more at peace with himself at the end of the journey much as Miller seems by ending *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* on an optimistic note. His realization also stands in stark contrast to the melancholy with which Kerouac ends *On the Road* and the speed and confusion with which Steinbeck ends *Travels with Charley*. He also learns (and points out only in an off-hand manner throughout), as Miller does but Sal and Steinbeck seem to ignore, that America is an enormous and complicated place and any simple way to approach its enigmas results in confusion and doubt. He learns that America remains a land of promise and a land of regret. America as it always has been is a paradox.
Conclusion

When Dinah Shore sang “See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet” accompanied by beautiful vistas and happy people, the image of a trouble-free America was an attractive one. Yet it remains exactly these images that the writers in this study both hope for and deconstruct in their travels. Their narratives show that the American road narrative mostly remains the product of idealistic impulses involving the promise of America as set out in liberal readings in literature and history. These narratives have their roots in individual and collective optimism, adventure, discovery, and renewal but end up being thwarted when these writers encounter the quotidian realities of everyday America. Excepting Miller, these writers in their separate ways subscribe to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s elegiac climax in *The Great Gatsby*. The awe-inspiring possibilities that once met Dutch sailor’s eyes upon seeing the new world, America, have largely been corrupted by greed, carelessness, and complaisance.

In this study, I have developed an analysis of the American road narrative as an examination of American society based on ideals as a critical influence. While other writers and critics such as Kris Lackey, Ronald Primeau, Rowland A. Sherril, Janis P. Stout, and Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach recognize that ideals and nostalgia play a part in road narratives, this study looks more fully into the critical function of those ideals. These elements form the fulcrum of pointed attacks upon what America is contrasted with the promise of America derived from literature and the past. Of course, this disappointment varies for each writer but, disconcertingly, that disappointment remains all too consistent throughout these works. Thus, the writers in this study, in conflict with
an imagined past and the exigencies of the present, all revert to disappointment in what they encounter in America during their travels. Yet they also, for the most part, retain or transform their hope for America—whether for good or ill—and their attacks remain against what seems inevitable: progress and the concomitant degradation of ideals.

Miller, along with Least Heat-Moon, remains optimistic about America despite his most pointed revulsion over rampant materialism mainly because he removes himself from the hustle and bustle of the consumer culture and enacts, as he had in Paris, his ideas of living a life of art, which at the end of his trip occurs in Big Sur, California. By looking more fully at how Miller’s expatriate experience, his previous experience in the U.S., and his reading influence how he views the country, I have analyzed how his optimism infuses his attacks on the materialism and conformity he has already experienced in America and how his re-experience with them in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare confirms that they have become worse. Also, by ending The Air-Conditioned Nightmare on a positive note, Miller demonstrates that, despite the lack of individuality and expression he encounters, there remain places that do not stifle the impulses of individuals and artists (like Dr. Marion Souchon, Weeks Hall, and Hilaire Hiler) willing to live as they feel they must despite society’s pressures to conform. He remains confident that those who live on the margins, outside of the rampant consumer culture, can reclaim America’s lost ideals of originality and freedom. Perhaps his picture of America gets best represented through the structure of the book: the end of the trip in a neon-lighted vapid Los Angeles that perfectly represents the nightmare followed by wistful depictions of the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the water colorist John Marin, the muralist Hiler, and the South. What this structure suggests is that Miller’s hope in artists
and individuals will continue to clash with the banality of corporate America. Yet the struggle for life as art will endure for some while the majority of the country sleeps in nightmare.

Kerouac’s Sal remains the sad figure of this lot. Sal becomes subsumed into the very consumerist culture he ridicules mainly because he cannot reconcile the basic conflict within himself: his idealistic yearning for outsiders and male role models clashing with his desire for stability and conformity. His oblique critique attacks an America that remains inundated with paranoia and conformity. So On the Road does not hold up as a paean to the counterculture or as a celebration of freedom. Rather it relates Sal’s pendulum shift between optimism and reality and his failed searches for communities of like-minded people and role models. These shifts, as shown by the ending, eventually settle on reality for Sal or, rather, a reality that he thinks he should choose based on dominant mores. Although he wants to be a ragged American individualist like Dean or Bull Lee, Sal does not have the maturity or constitution to live that kind of life. When his optimism fades and reality coldly stares him down, Sal does what he thinks he should do and rejects the chaos of the road for the stability he sees offered by the consumer culture. While Miller thinks an authentic life remains possible in America, Kerouac, though Sal, demonstrates that lives lead against the grain in America become hopeless.

Steinbeck drives along a similar road to Sal. He fails to achieve the goals for his trip because he cannot reconcile his nostalgia (as embodied in memory myth) with reality, but, ultimately, the trip also fails because, from the very beginning, he is implicated in the very culture he criticizes. He has the means to spend time traveling and not working, a luxury most Americans he meets do not have. He acknowledges this paradox throughout
the trip, starting with the outfitted Rocinante, the camper/truck he drives. Naming the truck after Don Quixote’s horse emphasizes the idealistic impulse of the enterprise, and, in fact, in letters he wrote during the planning of the trip, Steinbeck referred to the project as “Operation Windmills” (Life in Letters 671). Despite being critical of the consumer culture of the U.S. and unlike Miller who can get by on very little, Steinbeck packs the truck with everything he can imagine. The paradox here is that what he hates about the U.S. Steinbeck finds mirrored in himself: he can critique but he still takes advantage of the bounty. The trappings of American culture in the early 1960s are difficult to escape and they serve to keep Steinbeck separated from the folk he wants to seek but does not.

Least Heat-Moon and Miller form appropriate bookends to this study since each retains a level of optimism despite what they dislike about America. Although Least Heat-Moon remains guarded about that optimism, he finds solace in the fact that there are still good folk doing good work around the country despite industrialization and conformity continuing to get worse. He also retains hope in change and renewal signified by the symbol of his circular journey. Least Heat-Moon’s critique also remains more authentic than the others in this study since he has read and studied and so expects most of what he sees. Thus he looks at America more clearly than the other writers in this study. His critique also remains authentic because, even though he returns home a changed man, he retains the realistic perspective that America cannot be solely revived by the nostalgia associated with small towns and back roads. Additionally, his search for self seems more successful than the other writers in this study. He may have realized something about himself thanks to his examinations of self in relation to his commentary on the country and people. So even though Least Heat-Moon confirms the worst of what
the other writers in this study think, namely that the country continues to get worse, his guarded optimism offers hope, at least, for change in the self.

As cultural critique, the road narratives in this study grapple with American issues in similar ways to other texts that are critical of the U.S. These narratives continue the critical outlooks on America of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and other writers while also building on the examinations of road narratives from the first part of the twentieth century. They, therefore, lay the groundwork for road narratives that come after them and that continue to develop—sometimes quite harshly—the project of critique. A brief look at some of these later narratives demonstrates how the issues that Miller, Kerouac, Steinbeck, and Least Heat-Moon tackle have become even worse in the ensuing years. Ian Frazier’s *Great Plains* (1989) for instance combines clear-eyed reporting with an examination of the past while he travels around the Great Plains. For Frazier, as for Steinbeck particularly, the past remains ever present: “But, for many places on the Great Plains, the past is much more colorful and exciting and populous than the present. Historical markers are everywhere” (81). He also retains optimism in the promise of America despite his critique of disappearing towns, vapid tourists, and the materialism that he sees becoming worse in the U.S. One of his conclusions concerning America remains somewhat hopeful while still recognizing the reality: “This democracy, this land of freedom and equality and the pursuit of happiness—it could have worked! There was something to it, after all! It didn’t have to turn into a greedy free-for-all! We didn’t have to make a mess of it and the continent and ourselves! It could have worked!” (173-74).

As the twentieth century came to a close, however, road narratives became increasingly more hostile to America. For example, Stephen Wright’s *Going Native*
reconstructs the road narrative into an impressionistic landscape that follows Wylie Jones, a suburban Chicago husband and dad, as he steals his neighbor’s Ford Galaxie and travels across the country to California. In a series of linked stories, the novel attacks the excesses of late twentieth-century America and suggests that the nightmare presented by Miller has become hellishly worse in the 1990s. Wylie seems to take to the road for freedom but soon discovers a violent world of drugs, advertising, and characters who emerge right out of obnoxious talk shows. In this world of hitchhikers, hotel managers, exotic dancers, and starlets, Wylie’s journey becomes a rejection of the American Dream but also a struggle to find identity in a materialist mass culture dominated by images on television. To Wylie, identity and search for self become useless: “There was no self, there was no identity” (Wright 305).

Interestingly some road narratives after Least Heat-Moon include those written by non-native writers who come to America seeking the same ideals that American writers do, particularly the desire to come to a new land to abandon the old self and create a new one. Jonathan Raban’s *Hunting Mister Heartbreak* (1991) focuses on an Englishman’s refashioning of his self by living in and traveling around America. Inspired mainly by his reading, particularly of J. Hector St. John de Crévecœur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*, Raban also examines the influence of history and myth on the perception of the U.S. He travels from New York to the South to Seattle and back east to the Florida Keys, commenting on aspects of American life that, compared with the views of the books in this study, seem to be getting worse such as people who “Every year, they have more money to spend” (101) and “corporate tourists” (234) who fail to see America when they travel because they limit themselves to “the pale speedway that linked them to their
Andrei Codrescu’s *Road Scholar: Coast to Coast Late in the Century* (1993) covers his trip across the country as he visits his past in Detroit and New York and encounters bizarre individuals such as Miller would appreciate, including a crystal healer from Santa Fe, a group from a retirement community who form a punk band in Sun City, Arizona, and a topless shooting instructor in Las Vegas. Although born in Romania, Codrescu emigrated to the U.S. in 1966, so his narrative, like Steinbeck’s and Least Heat-Moon’s, explores a personal past in relation to the changes in America from the tumultuous sixties to the nineties. He does so by adopting ideals based on his immigrant experience: “I think that for us foreigners America is a collection of fantasy images. . . . Immigrants don’t want to live in the real America: they want to live in the fantasy America of their youth” (Codrescu 11). Yet, having lived in America for close to thirty years, Codrescu attacks what he feels is a wasteful and ignorant culture. He bemoans television as “a death trap for the American mind” (xv) and attacks “the environmental horror that is the car” (6), while also sounding like Steinbeck by proclaiming, “Most of the American electorate votes like the dead these days” (22).

Perhaps the most damning condemnation of America that comes from a road narrative in this century is Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), which reimagines the road narrative as a post-apocalyptic story of despair and love. The book follows a man and his son as they walk toward the coast through an America burnt and ravaged by an unknown event. The land remains empty and covered in ash: “On the far side of the river valley the road passed through a stark black burn. Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened lightpoles whining thinly in the wind” (McCarthy
8). This blackened landscape emerges as the fictional culmination of years of waste—a country that has been destroyed most likely, though never stated, due to the excesses of the people who inhabited it. McCarthy takes the road narrative past its nonfiction and fictional roots into speculative fiction, though based on an idea of America’s projected decline in the last half of the twentieth century. In doing so, he almost makes the traditional road narrative obsolete by rewriting the tropes of the journey of self-discovery: finding self and country and, thereby, enriching one’s experience. The novel’s characters, though, retain hope in the face of despair. The man fights to save his son and the son sees the essential goodness in people. Despite the hellish landscape, the father and the son retain optimism for a new life in this harsh environment. When the man responds to his son’s worries about a lost little boy, he says, “Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again” (McCarthy 281). Despite the extreme critique associated with McCarthy’s descriptions of a post-apocalyptic America, the man and the boy demonstrate, as Least Heat-Moon would have it, that there remain good people who hold on to the possibility that one day things may be different.

These later road narratives thus continue the project set forth by the writers in this study and use the genre to respond to America’s promise and problems. As such the American road narrative as Miller, Kerouac, Steinbeck, and Least Heat-Moon conceive it remains a clash between ideals and reality. Later road writers, though, often dispense with the ideals as Wright does in Going Native and McCarthy does in The Road. For Frazier, Raban, and Codrescu, America remains a land of dreams and possibility, but it also has become a land further warped by the media and the insidious influence of money. So for all these writers, America continues to be a land of conflict because there
remain individuals and pockets of nonconformity that clash with economic and political forces. As long as writers retain an optimism in America as it can and should be, so long will writers travel the country in search of authenticity.
Chapter One
Self-Discovery, Idealism, and Critique:

Henry Miller’s The Air-Conditioned Nightmare

1 Miller declares in Black Spring (New York: Grove Press, 1963), “I am a patriot—of the Fourteenth Ward, Brooklyn, where I was raised. The rest of the United States doesn’t exist for me, except as idea, or history, or literature” (3). In “Place, Self, and Writing,” The Southern Review 26.3 (1990), J. Gerald Kennedy suggests that Miller’s conception of place “resides not in the material configuration of streets, buildings, trees, or rivers but in an idea of place already embedded in consciousness and shaped by cultural forces (art, literature, advertising, journalism) as well as personal fantasy” (498).

2 Miller had attacked the U.S. directly and indirectly in works prior to The Air-Conditioned Nightmare. Alan Trachtenberg’s “‘History on the Side’: Henry Miller’s American Dream” in American Dreams, American Nightmares (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1970) claims that “In his major work, the trilogy Tropic of Cancer (1934), Black Spring (1936), Tropic of Capricorn (1939), Miller had written of his contempt for modern America and of his attempts to purge its sickness from his system” (136-37). Annette Kar Baxter in Henry Miller, Expatriate (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1961) elaborates on this point: “Henry Miller, far more denunciatory than any expatriate who preceded him, continuously and unrelentingly outraged by his native land, showering epithets and obscenities at the land that betrayed him, cannot quite forget the America that might have been” (152). For further reading on the issue of critique in Miller’s work

3 The American expatriate experience, especially as it relates to Miller’s strained relationship with the U.S., includes several preoccupations. According to Donald Pizer’s *American Expatriate Writing and the Paris Moment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1996), “Reduced to its most fundamental level, the expatriate or self-exile state of mind is compounded out of the interrelated conditions of the rejection of a homeland and the desire for and acceptance of an alternative place” (1). Marjorie Smelstor’s “Expatriation and Exploration: The Exiled Artists of the 1920s” in *America: Exploration and Travel* (Bowling Green, OH: Popular, 1979) clarifies the impulses of expatriate artists and their relation to the U.S.: “Expatriation was more complex than mere escape because it was, for the most part, withdrawal for the sake of clearer vision, better articulation, freer expression. The expatriates did not sever themselves from their origins, but rather altered their relationship with that source” (136). Writing specifically of Miller’s situation, Baxter says, “To declare for Europe was to declare for life lived on a profounder level of experience; but the declaration implicit in the act of exile meant more than the specific quality of the life lived abroad. For that life was different from what the exiles had known in America chiefly in the sense it gave of a new psychological freedom” (4).
In the summer of 1961, both the Post Office and the U.S. Customs Service ended their bans on Miller’s work, allowing Grove Press to publish *Tropic of Cancer* in June, according to Mary V. Dearborn’s *The Happiest Man Alive: A Biography of Henry Miller* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 277. The other books followed: *Tropic of Capricorn* in 1961 and *Black Spring* in 1963. Yet it was not until 1964 that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled “that *Tropic of Cancer* was not obscene . . . thus putting an end to litigation in state and local courts” (Dearborn 285).

James Fenimore Cooper noticed this tendency over a century earlier in *The American Democrat* (1838. New York: Knopf, 1931) in which he attempts to defend the individual against society, popular culture, and (what he perceived as) the dangers of Jacksonian democracy. Cooper claims, “The people . . . which blindly yields its interests to the designs of those who would rule through the instrumentality of newspapers, has only exchanged one form of despotism for another” (125). Cooper identifies Miller’s critique: that Americans cannot think for themselves or pursue authentic lives.


7 Miller’s biographers focus on his internal struggle and its relation to his vision of America. Jay Martin in *Always Merry and Bright: The Life of Henry Miller, an Unauthorized Biography* (Santa Barbara: Capra, 1978) says that Miller, in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, never “intended to give an exact guide to America. Rather, he was improvising on the theme of America and of his relation to it, and thus was writing a purely subjective book, an account of his debate with himself about his native land” (383). J. D. Brown claims that Miller’s work tries to get at ideas central to the autobiographical American literary tradition: “a loose organic form, an exposition of ideas, the location of an autonomous self at the center of our culture, and the cultivation of a contemporary voice of authority for the archetype of the free individual in America” (116).

8 Whitman’s warning quoted in *Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1996) also includes a prediction for the U.S. should it continue along its current path:
I say of all this tremendous and dominant play of solely materialistic bearings upon current life in the United States, with the results as already seen, accumulating, and reaching far into the future, that they must either be confronted and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force-infusion for purposes of spiritualization, for the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics, and for absolute and primal manliness and womanliness—or else our modern civilization, with all its improvements, is in vain, and we are on the road to a destiny, a status, equivalent, in its real world, to that of the fabled damned. (1016)

9 In *The Books in My Life* (1952. New York: New Directions, 1969), Miller lists Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman (and many others) as “authors who influenced me as a man and as a writer, the two becoming more and more inseparable as time went on” (124). Miller specifically states that what attracts him to these writers is their shared view of the individual, their emphasis on self-reliance and freedom, and their understanding of the liberating power of art.

10 Miller’s “against the grain” comment echoes the same sentiment of William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* (1925). Both celebrate Emerson and other original American thinkers and individuals like Benjamin Franklin, Daniel Boone, Edgar Allan Poe, and Abraham Lincoln. Additionally Shapiro claims that Miller’s “hatred of righteousness is also American, with the Americanism of Thoreau, Whitman, and Emma Goldman” (80).

11 Thoreau expresses a similar sentiment in “Life Without Principle” (1863): “The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have
done anything by which you earned money merely is to have been truly idle or worse” (Collected Essays 350).


13 He is an itinerant outcast, or, as Alwyn Lee says in “Henry Miller—The Pathology of Isolation,” Henry Miller: Three Decades of Criticism (New York: New York UP, 1971), “In the United States, Miller remains rootless—an internal exile—able, in The Air-Conditioned Nightmare, to see his country with a tourist’s eye” (70). Leon Lewis feels that The Air-Conditioned Nightmare “is a book written by someone who is distinctly separate from his environment. His mind may still be in Greece, because Miller seems like a kind of European visitor, often looking with disdain at the various vulgarities of popular culture and other facets of America” (149). Widmer describes Miller’s process: “As he traveled, in memory and in fact, back and forth between Europe and America, he did not so much describe his experiences as turn out rhetorical markers indicating partly submerged fears, longings, and fancies” (76).

14 In a letter to Anais Nin, dated 24 April 1941 and written during the course of his journey, Miller admits as much:

What I am getting out of the trip is not anything from America, but soliloquies with myself. Confirmations and affirmations. And then too you must remember that the book was intended to be purely subjective and personal. I am not trying
to give a picture of America as it is—that has been done by others. I am just
giving my own personal reaction to the scene. The average American knows
more about America than I ever will. (Henry Miller: Letters 254)

Trachtenberg also says, “In a way the jaunty excursion recapitulates the westward
routes of pioneers in the last century. But civilization does not recede; it pursues Miller,
and although he settled a few years later at Big Sur, the California of the book (in ‘Soirée
in Hollywood’) epitomizes the nightmare of the title” (137).

Janis P. Stout in The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and
Departures (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983) analyzes the popularity of the theme of
escape throughout American literature:

As critics have often remarked, it [escape] is the most fully characteristic form
adopted by the American imagination and comprises a part of the mythology of
the American experience from its origins. Within that mythology, the journeys of
the Pilgrims and the founding Puritans, however mixed their purposes were in
actuality, are viewed as visionary escapes from religious oppression. It is also
firmly established in popular myth that motives of escape rather than expansionist
ambitions impelled frontiersmen of the Daniel Boone variety. They were men,
the story goes, who loaded up and moved on when they could hear a neighbor’s
axe, complaining that the country was getting crowded. (31)

Also, as has been borne out with time, the automobile is partly responsible for the
consumer mentality in America. As John B. Rae makes clear in The Road and the
Car in American Life (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1971), by October 1940, when
Miller travels the U.S., the automobile had created a revolution in patterns of
consumption and travel. In 1940 more than 27 million Americans had registered automobiles (Rae 49). The political situation of the 1930s also helped to solidify the automobile’s importance in daily U.S. life. Thanks to Roosevelt’s initiatives, James J. Flink notes in *The Car Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1975) that highway building and enhancement continued to increase (187), making feasible leisure travel and thus the urge to buy an automobile and see the country.


18 Contrast Miller’s viewpoint with John T. Faris’s vision of Southern California in *Roaming American Highways* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1931). After traveling through Death Valley, Faris exclaims, “What better preparation could there be than is given by this region of glory, this valley of splendor, for the experience to come so soon when, desert and mountains left behind, the orange groves, olive trees, and vineyards of Southern California burst on the sight!” (283). Faris’s view also contrasts with the arrival of the Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939. New York: Penguin, 1992), who suffer at the hands of exploitative farmers

Williams’s *This is My Country Too* (1964. New York: Signet, 1966) portray the dehumanizing effects of racism in the South.

20 He derives these memories of Mobile from his reading as a child, admitting in *The Books in My Life* that he read aloud to his grandfather a book about Admiral Farragut and the Battle of Mobile Bay. “Regarding this book,” Miller says, “I recall now that, in writing the chapter called ‘My Dream of Mobile’ in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, I was actively aware of this tale of Farragut’s heroic exploits. Without a doubt, my whole conception of Mobile was colored by this book I had read fifty years ago” (*Books* 42).

21 Previous road narratives have commented on the relation between the strange landscape of the Southwest and the overall road experience. See Lewis Gannett’s *Sweet Land* (New York: Doubleday, 1934), 80-81; and Humphrey 90-91.

22 For a writer who advocates Thoreau and who begged on the streets of Paris, progress is anathema. Starck elaborates on this point:

Within Miller’s critique of modernity there lurks what is at least an ambivalence toward the concept of progress: progress as real, as unquestionably good—as implicitly and essentially beneficial to humanity—especially when linked with technology. If, as seems likely, cities have become less humane, our daily needs are more and more constructed by advertising, work has steadily become more dehumanizing, war has not been eliminated but become more brutal, and riches continue to offer the ultimate sign of success yet remain in the possession of only a privileged few, the question whether the West has progressed at all, or progressed in a desirable direction, becomes one of serious importance for Miller. (231-32)
23 Both Leon Lewis and Mary Allen claim that Miller’s optimism lies behind his critique of the U.S. Lewis says, “Although he reviled the United States throughout his writing, his attacks stem from a conviction that the real ‘America’ can still be reclaimed” (34). Allen elaborates, “But what becomes fascinating about this book [The Air-Conditioned Nightmare] is the way his natural urge to rejoice prevails, as what begins as a diatribe on America’s ugliness and sterility turns into a paean to unusual people and places. In spite of all he finds to attack, and the desire to make that attack, Miller naturally goes from a haughty antagonism to a song of wonder for America’s loveliness” (“Yea-Sayer” 103). These views emphasize Miller’s essential hope but fail to note that his critique is rooted in the pessimistic idea that the status quo of materialism and conformity will almost certainly remain in the U.S.

24 In Democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006) says, “In the United States the people have no hatred toward the higher classes of society; but they have little goodwill toward them and are careful to keep them from power; they are not afraid of great talents but have little taste for them” (198).

25 Shapiro elaborates on Miller’s views of individuals:

Combating the ‘system’ is nonsense. There is only one aim in life and that is to live it. In America it has become impossible, except for a few lucky or wise people, to live one’s own life; consequently the poets and artists tend to move to the fringes of society. Wherever there are individuals, says Miller (like Thoreau) there are new frontiers. The American way of life has become illusory; we lead the lives of prisoners while we boast about free speech, free press, and free religion, none of which we actually do enjoy in full. The price for security has
become too great; abundance has become a travesty. The only thing for nonenslaved man to do is to move to the edge, lose contact with the machines of organization which are ubiquitous in this country as in Russia. (83)

See also Gordon 221 and Wickes 35.

26 See also Baxter 24, Gordon 188, Lee 73, Trachtenberg 139-41 for Miller’s views on art and artists.

27 In an interview with George Wickes in 1962, Miller reiterates America’s rejection of the artist: “I feel that America is essentially against the artist, that the enemy of America is the artist, because he stands for individuality and creativeness, and that’s un-American somehow. I think that of all countries—we have to overlook the communist countries of course—America is the most mechanized, robotized, of all” (“Art of Fiction” 142).

28 Widmer claims that Miller “follows out the American logic (though not the mixed American realities) that hates human communion even more than communism, suspects rich responsiveness even more than regal simplicity, and, in creating the world center of conspicuous garbage and hygienic nihilism, makes us superaesthetes who let our machines and organizations live for us” (86). Baxter remarks, “For Henry Miller the essential threat of materialism in America was its restriction of freedom” (23). See also Gordon 220, 222 for further discussion of Miller’s critique of U.S. mechanized society.

29 Goldman’s anarchism is also directly in line with Thoreau’s ideas spelled out in “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849). Thoreau seeks a better government, one not based on any kind of tyranny, even the rule of the majority: “After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted,
and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the
right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the
strongest” (Walden and Resistance 227).

30 In a letter dated 6 February 1940, Miller wrote Anais Nin:

I’m afraid of the monotony everywhere, the uniformity, the lackluster life or
lifelessness. I begin to wonder if it’s any use knocking about the land—though it
may be unfair to judge the whole by the little I’ve seen. The land is all right—it’s
the people—the bleak absence of anything vital or meaningful. That eats into one
quickly. One would have to be a Colossus to withstand it. It’s like a tree trying to
live in a sandy soil without heat or light. (Henry Miller: Letters 200)

31 Kris Lackey in RoadFrames: The American Highway Narrative (Lincoln: U of
Nebraska P, 1997) views Miller’s reaction to his car as negative: “Miller takes a
grudging interest in his car . . . as a rule he finds it a kind of necessary evil, something to
help him rediscover the bayous and desertscape he relishes but otherwise a drag on his
imagination” (45). I would argue that the automobile, in Miller’s view, is more
complicated. It is indeed a mechanical problem, but it also enables him to escape his
stultifying life in New York City and write about the trip.

32 Baxter elaborates on the meaningless goods and services that Miller criticizes
Americans for embracing:

Miller saw ugliness not only in the architectural and human reflections of big city
life, but also in the multitudinous inanities of the broader American scene: the
smothering presence of the superfluous (chewing gum, furniture polish); the
multiplication of panaceas (corn plasters, liver pills); the cacophonies of the radio
(the xylophone, the rooster crow); the debasement of public education (cross-word puzzles, “Information Please”); and the absence of edible food (synthetic bread, foul restaurants). All these corruptions were aesthetic opportunities lost.

(38)

33 Traveling across the country in the early thirties, Gannett in Sweet Land (1934) had a similar opinion of Pennsylvania: “The really curious motorist, not in too much of a hurry, might plan a route which would take him through less green Pennsylvania, through the coal and steel towns that are the slums of the nation” (8-9).

34 Previous road narratives have noted the damage caused and homogeny created by various industries in Western and Eastern Pennsylvania, particularly the coal industry around Scranton and Wilkes-Barre. See Dreiser 64-69, Gannett 6, and Humphrey 29.

35 Starck elaborates on Miller’s opposition to the war and connects it to his overall critique of U.S. society: “Miller’s rejection of many aspects of the modern world, his disgust with cities and the advertising spectacle, his refusal to acknowledge the sanctity of money or work, converge in his unwillingness to support the Allies in the Second World War, an act of defiance not passivity” (228). Wickes concludes, “Underlying many of his attitudes is the war, the final proof that the modern world is dehumanized and death-driven” (35).

Chapter Two

“Joyous alleys full of promise”:

Literary Memory, Artistic Ideals, and American Manliness in On the Road

268

2 What makes him different from American picaresque characters like Huck Finn, Augie March, the “Henry Miller” of *Tropic of Cancer*, or the Raoul Duke of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is Sal’s strange ability to conform to American mores despite his many experiences with marginal cultures. Sal fits the broad definition of a picaro as put forth by Richard Bjornson in *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1977): “Variously described as a social conformist in avid pursuit of material possessions and a rebel who rejects society and its rewards, an optimist and a pessimist, a good-for-nothing without scruples and a wanderer with potentialities of sainthood, he has been called immoral, amoral, and highly moral” (5). Sherrill in *Road-Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque* holds that Kerouac’s characters do not deserve to be included in a picaresque discussion because “Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarity et al. zoom across America without much interest in it beyond getting
‘there’” (275, endnote 1). I disagree with this view because Sal and Dean continually try to seek out authentic American experiences in their travels. One example of this searching is their love of jazz, which, along with the blues, is a distinctly American art form. See also Robert Alter who in Rogue’s Progress: Studies in the Picaresque Novel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1965) claims, “The picaresque novel affirms the primacy of individual experience—to begin with, the most basic aspects of individual experience—in a kind of existence where any larger order must be very much in question. It is a literary form characteristic of a period of disintegration, both social disintegration and the disintegration of belief” (84). This statement could describe the upheaval caused by the social and political changes taking place in the postwar U.S.

3 See also Hipkiss 132, Swartz 100, and Weinreich 48 for Sal’s conflict between ideal and reality.

4 For views of Kerouac’s idealism rooted in the conflict between childhood and adulthood, see Hipkiss 2 and Hunt 10. For the opinion that this idealism is based in the counterculture see Rachel Adams, “Hipsters and jipitecas: Literary Countercultures on Both Sides of the Border,” American Literary History 16.1 (2004): 60. For nostalgia deriving from the past and memory see Swartz 83 and Steve Wilson’s “The Author as Spiritual Pilgrim: The Search for Authenticity in Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and The Subterraneans” in The Beat Generation: Critical Essays (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 84. For additional insight into Kerouac’s immigrant roots see Ann Charters’s “Editor’s Introduction” in The Portable Jack Kerouac (New York: Penguin, 1995), 12-13, and her Kerouac: A Biography (San Francisco: Straight Arrow, 1973) 22-28, and Jaap van der

5 John Tytell in *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1976) claims that the road itself echoes the dreams of immigrants: “For Kerouac, the free open road represented the promise of America as once envisioned by European immigrants” (169). In my analysis, however, Kerouac’s immigrant experience is more provincial.


7 For more on the Beat Generation and their rejection of the U. S. see Holton, *American Journey* 8; Dan Fyfe’s “The American Frontier in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*” in *La Frontera: mito y realidad del nuevo mundo* (Leon, Spain: Universidad de Leon, 1994), 201; and Wilson 78.

Although *Huckleberry Finn* is the touchstone narrative for traveling down the Mississippi, other books recount and update the experience such as Jonathan Raban’s *Old Glory: A Voyage Down the Mississippi* (1981. New York: Vintage, 1998) and Eddy L Harris’s *Mississippi Solo: A Memoir* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988).

See Richardson where he claims Kerouac’s novel is “an optimistic work in the tradition of Whitman. It says ‘yes’ to America in the way Mark Twain’s ‘road’ novel, *Huckleberry Finn*, says ‘no’—and this despite the fact that *On the Road* invokes dystopian possibilities” (219).


See Weinreich 4 for Wolfe’s influence on *The Town and the City* and Kerouac’s effort to break that influence in *On the Road*. Also see Hipkiss 134 for information about Kerouac’s use of autobiography in his writing as influenced by both Wolfe and Miller.

See Stephenson 7 for Kerouac’s and the Beats’ transcendental literary lineage. See also Huntley 166-67 and Weinreich 11 for Emerson’s conception of the self as it relates to Kerouac. For additional connections between Whitman and Kerouac see Ruppersburg 32; Swartz 19; and Tytell, *Angels* 169.


See also Holton, *American Journey* 3-5.
For an extended analysis of the growth of the relation between the end of World War II, the highway system, and the growth of the suburbs, see Tom Lewis’s *Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life* (72-83).

See also Charters’s “What Was the Beat Generation?” in *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin, 2001), xix-xx; Richardson 220; and Swartz 63 for additional information about the historical climate of fear and doubt.


See also Adams 63; Holton’s “Kerouac Among the Fellahin: On the Road to the Postmodern,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.2 (1995): 267-68; and Richardson 223 for interpretations of Kerouac’s use of the term “fellahin.”

For more on the topic of Sal’s attraction to marginal cultures see Adams 62; Hipkiss 6-9; Holton’s “Kerouac Among the Fellahin” 265-70; Gordon Reynolds, “Argument and Fidelity in Kerouac’s *On the Road,*” *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 27.2 (1997): 9-10; Stephenson 23; and Wilson 80.

See also Hunt who claims that the trip to Mexico “is an attempt to get beyond the American patterns that have controlled the first three trips” (61). Carole G. Vopat in “Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road: A Re-evaluation,*” *Midwest Quarterly* 14 (1973) argues, “In Mexico Sal hopes to escape from the self, civilization, and their discontents” (402).

For other discussions of Dean’s (and Neal’s) personality, his freedom, and his effect on Sal see Fyfe 203; Hipkiss 42-43; Leavitt 221; Martinez on “the American
individualist” 11; Stephenson 157; Swartz 10-11; Tytell, Angels 160; and Weinreich 51-52.

24 Hunt thinks that Dean’s supposed autonomy and incorruptibility embodies “Whitman’s (and R. W. B. Lewis’s) ‘American Adam’” and that “Sal admires Dean’s freedom from social constraint, his success with women, and his ability to ignore social patterns” (22). While Sal does admire certain aspects of Dean’s personality, he also realizes, albeit slowly and painfully throughout their journeys, that Dean cannot shirk responsibility under the guise of a pretend Buddha.


26 For more on this topic see also Marco Abel, “Speeding Across the Rhizome: Deleuze Meets Kerouac on the Road,” Modern Fiction Studies 48.2 (2002): 230-31; Stephenson 175-77; and Swartz 29-32 and 85.

27 While the hobo has romantic connotations in literature, he, in reality, is a victim of economic forces. The hobo in American history has typically been a man who is down on his luck and at the mercy of outside forces, drifting along the rails or roads of the U.S. looking for a break. “Many hoboes,” explains Feied, “are merely men out of work who
were forced on the road by circumstances which they could not control” (16). The amount of hoboes increased during the Great Depression where writers have estimated that over one million men and thousands of women roamed the U.S. (qtd. in Feied 14). The existence of hobos is a telling commentary, then, on the economic health of a nation.

28 See also Hunt 66 and Vopat 403.

29 Holton in “Kerouac Among the Fellahin” says, “In On the Road, the road of modern western history leads inevitably to its own destruction—‘bridges and roads’ reduced to jumbles—and thence to ultimate union with the fellahin who, in the end, remain nonetheless misrecognized: a signifier of depth remaining unsounded, a unitary term masking a cultural multiplicity, a fantasy of freedom extrapolated from lives of marginalization” (278).

30 While Hunt says that, “like Ahab almost admitting his doubts to Starbuck and himself, Dean stands for the ultimate conflict between the will and all else even at the expense of its own destruction” (70), I think that Dean really does not fully comprehend what he does and thinks. In other words, he is not the towering and ferocious Ahab, clear-minded and focused. Scattered and elusive, Dean hangs on to vague concepts like “IT” that he cannot fully define and then acts on whims.

31 See also Hipkiss where he claims that “‘It’ is . . . really quite inexpressible in words” (35). My views differ from his, though, because I claim that the characters use “IT” as an excuse to create their own reality based on ideals. They do not define the concept because they want to call “IT” whatever they want when the episode calls for it.
For a similar view of the road as an avenue of escape see Swartz 66. French, however, thinks that Kerouac’s “road is less often the concrete ribbon of escape than the rutted dirt path that must be perilously followed with a faint lamp” (Jack Kerouac 127).

For other views of Sal’s failure see French’s Jack Kerouac 42; Huntley 172; Tytell, Angels 169; Weinreich 35, and Vopat 404.

See also Vopat 407 for similar views of the ending.

See French 42 for similar views in regards to Sal’s acceptance of the consumer culture at the end of the novel.

Chapter Three

Memory Myth and the Rediscovery of America:

John Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley

1 Louis Owens in John Steinbeck’s Re-Vision of America (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1985) claims that Steinbeck’s work was a direct challenge to popular notions of the American Dream:

Steinbeck’s California fiction—all of his finest work—represents a lifelong attempt . . . to awaken America to the failure at the heart of the American Dream and provide an alternative to that dream. . . . In nearly every story or novel he wrote, Steinbeck strove to hold the failed myth up to the light of everyday reality and to stress the necessity for commitment to place and to man as a way out of the wasteland defined by writers of the twenties. (3-4)

2 The protagonist of To a God Unknown (1933. New York: Penguin, 1995), Joseph Wayne, has an almost mystical union with the land, feeling before his father’s death that
“his father and this new land were one” (5). Joseph also feels the supernatural power of the land as he rides through the forest: “He was half-drugged and overwhelmed by the forest of Our Lady. . . . The endless green halls and aisles and alcoves seemed to have meanings as obscure and promising as the symbols of an ancient religion” (God Unknown 5). This feeling of untouched beauty and power is a typical view of the West as “promised land.”


4 Simmonds sums up Charley’s various roles succinctly: “He is more than simply a traveling companion, for he acts as a sounding board for Steinbeck’s philosophical musings along the way, as ‘ambassador’ in making contacts with strangers, as conscience, as occasional deus ex machina, and as a frequent provider of solace” (176).

5 Robert S. Hughes, Jr. in “Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley and America and Americans,” Steinbeck Quarterly 20.3-4 (1987) claims that “Charley functions finally as an example of a living creature who is both reasonable and sane” (79).

6 Indeed, this vision persists into the twentieth century and influences how travelers view the west. In The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1985), John A. Jakle notes,

Although the West changed throughout the early twentieth century, the prevailing touristic images remained remarkably consistent. The West was vast. Its scenery was superlative. Its cities were progressive. Its people were unhurried, friendly, happy. The West was a place both of opportunity and of contentment. The West
was not as refined as the East, since frontier conditions lingered there, but the
future belonged to the West. The West was North America’s promised land.

(244)

This quotation also explains Miller’s and Kerouac’s fascination with the West: both
writers were born and raised in the Northeast.

7 A similar rough-and-tumble, though perhaps satirical, depiction of another
California past (that of the Gold Rush) can be found in Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* (1872.
New York: Penguin, 1985): “It was a driving, vigorous, restless population in those
days. It was a *curious* population. It was the *only* population of the kind that the world
has ever seen gathered together, and it is not likely that the world will ever see its like
again” (414).

8 See also Jackson J. Benson’s *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer* (New
York: Viking, 1984), 20-21; Peter Lisca’s *John Steinbeck: Nature and Myth* (New York:
Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978), 4; Louis Owens’s “Patterns of Reality and Barrels of Worms:
From Western Flyer to Rocinante in Steinbeck’s Nonfiction” in *The Steinbeck Question:*
*New Essays in Criticism* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1993), 175-76; and Jay Parini’s
*Steinbeck: Biography* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 14 for the effect of Malory’s tales
on Steinbeck’s childhood and subsequent work.

9 In *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck, Writer*, Benson notes, “But his most
important reservation was that, in his view, the problem of the sixties, unlike the thirties,
was not deprivation, although certainly some still existed in this country, but the
affluence of the middle class. Overall, it was not that Americans had too little, but that
they had too much” (880).
Jakle claims that corporations, seeing an opportunity for profit, aided this homogenization:

With the corporation came a sameness in layout, architectural design, and signage of roadside businesses. Thus, not only were highways standardized, but their margins were standardized also. It was a world new and shiny and modern, without a sense of past. It was a place intended to make travelers feel at home, and yet it was a place unlike any home previously known. It was a standardized world thousands of miles long, which constantly intersected itself. At every point travelers found the same cigarettes, the same breakfast foods, the same radio and television programs, the same topics of conversation. (192)

Or as Lewis Mumford explains in *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961): “In the United States, with the eager connivance of municipal authorities, an ever-larger part of the population is spreading over the countryside, seeking, as we have seen, the conditions for homelife [sic], the space, the freedom of movement, that have become impossible within the central core” (550-51).

This fear of atomic warfare is carried to the extreme in Douglas Woolf’s *Wall to Wall* (1962. Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1984). The protagonist, Claude Squires, travels from the west coast to Boston and takes an unsentimental look at the country along the way. In Southern Arizona, he encounters Saint Jones, a proponent of “‘Cavism’” (143) who lives underground with his family to escape nuclear destruction. As Saint Jones explains to Claude, “‘We spend virtually all our afternoons down here. Whenever the bombs are falling we stay down here around the clock, with rotating two-hour shifts topside to look out for the Yellow Trucks’” (146).
13 For a fuller treatment of the paranoia and oppression associated with this period of American history, see Brogan 592-94 and Zinn 425-35.

14 Zinn claims the Truman Administration, after World War II, “In a series of moves abroad and at home . . . established a climate of fear—a hysteria about Communism—which would steeply escalate the military budget and stimulate the economy with war-related orders. This combination of policies would permit more aggressive actions abroad, more repressive actions at home” (425).

15 See also Benson 885 and Parini 425 for more on the disengaged populace Steinbeck encounters throughout his travels.

16 Sharing similar observations of the U.S. political landscape is Clancy Sigal’s Going Away (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1961). As a former union organizer, Sigal visits old colleagues to discover and understand the breakdown of leftist politics. What he finds along the road is that most have abandoned a life of political action that tackles tough issues for the ease of modern living, but “there are also a few small things such as the Cold War, bureaucracy and uprootedness within a compulsively competitive ethos, and in fact how the majority can live a sane and decent life in today’s America which the liberal and left intellectuals have a tendency to scamp in favor of questions more easily put and easily answered” (54).

17 See also John Ditsky, “Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley: The Quest that Failed” in Steinbeck’s Travel Literature: Essays in Criticism (Muncie, IN: Ball State U, 1980), 60; Tetsumaro Hayashi, “Steinbeck’s America in Travels with Charley,” Steinbeck Quarterly 23.3-4 (1990): 89; and Hughes 82.

Griffin’s direct involvement with the issue of race and the culture of racism in *Black Like Me* (1961. New York: New American Library, 2003) brings with it a consequent loss of identity. He realizes how reality can be twisted to create a culture of fear for one race and not another: “I concluded that, as in everything else, the atmosphere of a place is entirely different for Negro and white. The Negro sees and reacts differently not because he is Negro, but because he is suppressed. Fear dims even the sunlight” (101).

Chapter Four
Democratic Ideals and Cautious Optimism:
William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*

Thom Tammaro judges in “Lost in America: Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* and William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*” in *Rediscovering Steinbeck: Revisionist Views of his Art, Politics, and Intellect* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989) that Least Heat-Moon travels to fix the “metaphorical dislocation” (265) of self and “to set his life in order” and “use the journey as therapy” (269). While on one level he accomplishes these tasks, he uses the journey more as personal transformation than therapy. Tammaro claims further that “*Blue Highways* and *Travels with Charley* are compelled by self-
analysis” (269), which does not take into account the evident cultural critique in both works.

2 Although Least Heat-Moon claimed in a 1983 radio interview with Don Swaim not to have read Ray Raphael’s *Edges: Human Ecology of the Backcountry* (1976, Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986), the similarities in the two works are interesting to note. Like Least Heat-Moon, Raphael investigates people who live in small towns and attempt to make a living from the land. Raphael also records their stories in a journalistic fashion similar to Least Heat-Moon’s.

3 Indeed in a 1991 interview with Daniel Bourne, “*Artful Dodge Interviews William Least Heat-Moon,*” *Artful Dodge* 20.21 (1991), Least Heat-Moon confirms that *Travels with Charley* was an inspiration for his journey: “[I]n 1962, when I was 23 and in the Navy, I read Steinbeck’s *Travels With Charley*. There I was, locked up in an aircraft carrier, in a little steel box, and one of my escapes was to read *Travels With Charley* and think ‘That’s a hell of an idea. Why don’t I take off in a truck someday and circle the country?’” (Bourne 93). Later in the same interview, Least Heat-Moon cannot resist taking a jab at Steinbeck, much as he does throughout his journey in *Blue Highways*: “I think it’s [*Blue Highways*] a better travel book than *Travels With Charley*, a book I like very much, but it’s not really Steinbeck’s great travel work. His great travel work is *Grapes of Wrath*” (Bourne 94). In a 2010 interview with Shellie Banga, “‘More is More’: An Interview with William Least Heat-Moon, *Writing on the Edge* 21.1 (2010), he reiterates Steinbeck’s influence on his trip and cites *Travels with Charley* as “a book with some influence on the topographical aspect of the Blue Highways trip” (94). This
influence is evident in Least Heat-Moon’s many veiled and unveiled references to Steinbeck throughout *Blue Highways*.

4 This is a point that Noel Perrin makes in his review of *Blue Highways*, “By Back Roads to America,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 6 Feb. 1983, and is one that I agree with, though many other commentators fail to note it. Perrin writes, “Sometimes the college professor in him gets too strong, and he can’t resist little pedantic lectures on what he sees” (22). Quite right.

5 These ideals are also another way to view nostalgia—a preference and respect for the past. For more on Least Heat-Moon’s relation to nostalgia see Bourne 105-06 and Tammaro 267-68.

6 See also Tammaro 266-67 for similar views on why Least Heat-Moon sticks to the blue highways.

7 The idea of Least Heat-Moon as journalist has been echoed by his friend Scott Chisholm, who Least Heat-Moon visits in upstate New York in *Blue Highways*. In “The Essential Hyphenated Heat-Moon,” *Creative Nonfiction* 6 (1996), Chisholm says, “‘Blue Highways’ is a classic travel book; he reports what he sees in the order in which he sees it with a naturally occurring structure and style to match” (64). Least Heat-Moon has also commented elsewhere that “I became more of a reporter” (Bourne 97) as the journey progressed even though his journalistic tendency is evident from the outset.

8 In “Repaving America: Ecocentric Travel in William Least-Heat Moon’s *Blue Highways*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17.4 (2010), Renee Bryzik’s misunderstanding about *Blue Highways* extends to Kris Lackey, whom she
m isidentifies as a woman (670). Lackey’s work RoadFrames is an insightful look into the transcendental impulse behind many road narratives and is a source for this study.

While these thoughts about the ego can be historically and sociologically rooted, most of these ego-centered ideas come from Least Heat-Moon himself. Although he disagrees with the view, Peter Clecak in America’s Quest for the Ideal Self (New York: Oxford UP, 1983) describes the popular conception of the decade during which Least Heat-Moon travels: “The seventies . . . are an apolitical, devitalized decade of intense, morally debilitating preoccupation with the self” (4). Picking up on similar ideas in the 1992 essay “Journeys into Kansas,” Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1992), Least Heat-Moon says, “In Blue Highways, the narrator descends into the topography of self for half the journey before he realizes the futility of that course” (21). Yet Least Heat-Moon’s other statements about the people he meets contradicts this thinking. In a Hank Nuwer interview, “William Least Heat-Moon: The Road to Serendipity,” Rendezvous 21.1 (1985), Least Heat-Moon remarks, “I perceive now that Blue Highways is a book about other Americans, rather than a book about myself and my troubles. The travels are important only in so far as they develop the lives of other people” (80). And, in a 2010 interview, he admits, “I realized later, in writing the book, it was not about me—it was about others, and my primary role was to create a forum for their stories that draw lines of connections” (Banga 98).

Acknowledging this method of speaking to locals in a 1985 interview, Least Heat-Moon says, “I didn’t talk much about my trip, primarily because the people I was speaking to were not much interested in me . . . . That was fine with me. I was there to
listen to what other people had to say, and the people were more interested in talking about their lives” (Nuwer 87).

11 See Banga 98-99 for Least Heat-Moon’s views of the Beats as literary influences and, specifically, his thoughts about On the Road. Least Heat-Moon claims: “[T]he quest in On the Road is the opposite of that in Blue Highways. Subconsciously, I turned Kerouac’s notion upside down” (Banga 99). However he never clarifies what he means by that statement.

12 For other views on how Whitman functions in the book see Lackey 86-87 and Bryzik, who claims, “Whitman’s Song of Myself represents the canonical American literature of his former academic life” (680). While this statement is true on one level, the invocation of Whitman serves much broader purposes for Least Heat-Moon. See also Bourne 117 for Least Heat-Moon’s views on Whitman.

13 See Banga 95-96 for more of Least Heat-Moon’s ideas about Transcendentalism in his work.

14 Least Heat-Moon’s efforts to regain some kind of manhood stem first from losing his wife and job, but they might also be the cultural byproduct of what Michael Kimmel (citing Charles Reich’s The Greening of America) in Manhood in America (New York: Oxford UP, 2012) describes as a new consciousness that emerged in the late 1960s, “which replaced liberal marketplace individualism with a globally aware, environmentally sensitive, freely flowing androgynous cultural identity” (193). See Kimmel 192-93 for more about this matter.

16 This is not manhood in a traditional rugged, individual sense, but could be part of what Kimmel calls “‘men’s liberation,’” a movement he describes as beginning in the 1970s (Kimmel 202). It was a rejection of traditional views of masculinity, of men being “powerful and oppressive” (Kimmel 202) yet “still living lives of quiet desperation—working in boring and unfulfilling jobs, trapped in unhappy marriages” (Kimmel 202). Kimmel further claims that “the psychological costs of trying to live up to the image would lead men into lives of isolation and despair, of repressed emotion and deferred dreams” (203) all of which is expressly at odds with Least Heat-Moon’s project of self-discovery. So Black Elk helps Least Heat-Moon to reassert that hitting the road and getting out of routine was the right thing to do for him personally. See Kimmel 202-06 for an in-depth discussion of men’s liberation in the 1970s.

17 See Joseph Epes Brown’s *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk’s Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1953), 7, footnote 10, for the full passage.

18 See Nuwer 88 for Least Heat-Moon’s ideas about the passage.

of recording Black Elk’s narrative and “Appendix III” (291-92) for a discussion of Neihardt’s method of interpreting the transcript of Black Elk’s account.

20 In his *Artful Dodge* interview, Least Heat-Moon makes the distinction between “horizontal” and “vertical” travel: “*Blue Highways* is a horizontal journey. The goal was to keep moving—lots of places fairly quickly. That was the rootlessness aspect of travel” (Bourne 95). On the other hand, with vertical travel “The idea is to take a limited place and travel extensively through time in that single place” (Bourne 95). Astutely, Bourne points out that Least Heat-Moon does both in *Blue Highways*—a point I agree with. Least Heat-Moon only slightly agrees but then discusses the amount of historical research he did for the book, which is part of the nature of vertical travel (Bourne 96). Lynn Ross-Bryant, “The Self in Nature: Four American Autobiographies” *Soundings* 80.1 (1997), also makes a similar point: “The journey through space is, at the same time, a journey through time, through the events, the history that have created the culture” (97).

21 See Ross-Bryant 96 for more on the significance of this pattern.

22 In a 1991 interview Least Heat-Moon elaborates on this episode:

I admired Arthur, as you see from the book, because he had compressed his living down to that little aluminum suitcase and a briefcase—I mean that was everything. I was taking pride that I was living out of a truck, and he had taken it down to something he could carry in two hands. But afterwards, not long after I met him and he had married this woman, he bought a motor home—not a trailer—a motor home, and was living in it; he’d become fairly worldly. His attraction to me faded somewhat. (Bourne 100)
Despite these thoughts, it is clear in the book that Least Heat-Moon’s attraction fades from the start because of Bakke’s proselytizing.

23 See also Nuwer for Least Heat-Moon’s thoughts on how Middleton’s views are “a good definition of what democracy requires of us” (91).

24 See Bourne 119-20 for Least Heat-Moon’s views on anti-intellectualism in American education.

25 Another troubling aspect of his visit to Middleton, however, is that it seems too perfect coming as it does towards the end of the trip. It almost appears to be a set-piece like something out of Travels with Charley where the character summarizes the entire philosophy of the trip in colloquial and pithy language. Least Heat-Moon seems to have this idea in the back of his mind in a 1985 interview when he says, “In many ways she [Middleton] incisively put together connections for me in whatever we talked about. She felt that to miss the connections was simply to be blind, and all you had to do was open your eyes and see how the past prevailed in so many ways” (Nuwer 91).

26 See Bourne 107-08 for Least Heat-Moon’s further thoughts about community.


28 See also Newquist 19-20 for a brief overview of Least Heat-Moon’s trip to Selma.

29 See Bourne 100-01 for Least Heat-Moon’s further views on Pierre.

30 See Jakle 235-36 for more information about reservations as tourist destinations.

31 William Cronon in “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” from Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature (New York:
Norton, 1996) describes this idealized view: “Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity” (80).

32 Fascination with the strange landscapes of the Southwest is a common trope in road narratives and extends from Miller to Least Heat-Moon to Don DeLillo’s David Bell in *Americana* (1971). Delillo’s novel has a project similar to the works in this study: it both critiques corporate America and incorporates aspects of the road narrative. Driving across the Southwest, Bell marvels at “the desert shawled in Navaho paints, images of surreal cinema, of ventricles tied to pumps, Chaco masonry and the slung guitar, of church organ lungs and the slate of empires, of coral in this strange place, suggesting a reliquary sea, and of the blessed semblance of God on the faces of superstitious mountains” (DeLillo 349).

33 Bryzik calls Least Heat-Moon’s preoccupation with the environment “ecosensitivity” (670), but it could be better described as a diatribe against environmental destruction.

34 See Paula Gunn Allen’s “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective” in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1996), 241-63, for a fuller discussion of how Native American views of nature contrast with Western views. Specifically her ideas that Native Americans view “all of life is living—that is, dynamic and aware” (243) may be behind Least Heat-Moon’s views of nature as transformative.

35 By extolling the virtues of untouched nature, Least Heat-Moon sets up a man-versus-nature confrontation that necessarily critiques man for ruining nature. Many
ecocritics have challenged this view as simplistic. Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2012) says, “The choice between monolithic, ecocidal modernism and referential awe is a false dichotomy” (79). See Garrard 73-79 for a further discussion of this topic.

36 Harold Fromm in “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map” in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1996) examines man’s relation to his environment and, in particular, notices “The continual appearance of the concept of ‘trade-offs,’ in which one sacrifices the ‘luxury’ of an uncontaminated environment in order to permit economic ‘progress’” (36), which is exactly what Least Heat-Moon encounters.

37 See Bourne 106 for Least Heat-Moon’s views of the ending.
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