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Author[s]: Elsa Court

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Off the Beaten Track: Jack Kerouac on Robert Frank

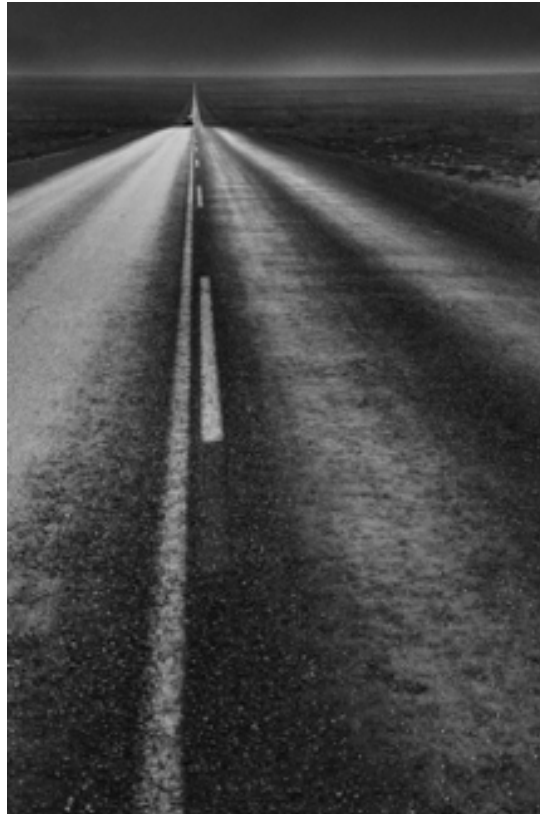
By Elsa Court

Robert Frank had just returned to New York from a Guggenheim-funded cross-country road trip of two years when he met Jack Kerouac in September 1957, at a party given by their mutual friend Lucien Carr. Frank had been seeking to get in touch with the writer on the advice of another friend, the independent filmmaker Emile de Antonio, who had anticipated that Kerouac's name, recently brought to fame by the publication of *On the Road* (1957), would bring attention to Frank's collection of road photographs, *The Americans* (1958). Frank showed Kerouac a dummy of his book, asking if he would write an introduction for it. Kerouac liked Frank's road-trip pictures and accepted his request.

Within a few days, Kerouac had produced a short ode to travel in America for Frank, praising the photographs which, according to him, captured no less than the spirit of the American road. Though Walker Evans, Frank's mentor, had already written an introduction for the book by that point, it was Kerouac's piece which was retained, so clear was it that it would be a selling point to future American editors. Joyce Johnson, whom Frank obliquely refers to as Kerouac's then-girlfriend, was instrumental in foreseeing the connection between their respective work. In her 1987 Beat generation memoir *Minor Characters*, she wrote about witnessing Frank and Kerouac's first encounter, seeing for herself, immediately, Kerouac's themes epitomised in Frank's pictures:

Robert Frank walked in with a couple of boxes of his work. For several years he'd been going around the country taking photos for a book he planned to call *The Americans*. He was hoping to convince Jack to write an introduction. The first one I saw was of a road somewhere out west – blacktop gleaming under headlights with a white stripe down the middle that went on and on toward an outlying darkness. Jack's road! I thought immediately (241-2).

The picture which Johnson describes presents a frontal confrontation with a portion of two-lane highway, which stretches vertically rather than horizontally to the viewer's eye. It is an inviting but equally daunting vision of the road through the motorist's perspective, evocative of the endless expanses of the travelled territory.



Robert Frank, U.S. 285 New Mexico, *The Americans* (1958)

The viewer, presumably at the command of the car whose headlights illuminate the road, confronts the unravelling of a vast territory which, though offered to exploration, seems to resist any kind of comprehensive representation in the stilled moment of the photograph. It was their mutual fascination with this difficult American landscape which initiated Frank and Kerouac's collaboration. Looking at the photographs alongside this and other examples of Kerouac's writings about Frank, we can highlight their echoing perceptions about post-war travel. Separately and then together, both authors travelled the American road to define the socio-economic revolutions happening in the periphery of the democratisation of car travel. This essay will look at Kerouac's reception of Frank's practice in such a context, and examine the way the photographs refined his attention to America's roadside landscape.

Kerouac's Introduction

The style of Kerouac's introduction to *The Americans* evokes his excitement on discovering, through the photographs, something of a kinship between Frank's vision and his own. From the opening line, he describes the overwhelming feeling of excitement which he identifies, broadly, with the American experience, and which, he argues, is palpable at the sight of Frank's photographs: 'That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and music comes out of

the jukebox or from a nearby funeral ... that's what Robert Frank has captured in [his] tremendous photographs' (1993, 19). Throughout the piece, Kerouac maintains his focus on this ambivalent 'crazy' feeling: a mixture of restless excitement and melancholy, here introduced in the unclear origin of the music, which could be 'the jukebox' or, just as plausibly, 'a nearby funeral'. Kerouac is sensitive to the melancholy undertones in Frank's representation of the era's longings. In some pictures, says Kerouac, the jukebox – a recurring motif – does in fact look as black and imposing as a coffin. Kerouac suggests, as he describes 'that crazy feeling in America', that the perspective of death lingers on the era's fetishisation of new commodities, which would distract post-war American citizens from the finitude of existence by denying the finitude of pleasure.

Through these introductory words, America appears as a combination of tangible, prosaic matter and illusory promises. Kerouac wonders at the way a roadside café table is illuminated by a halo of sunlight through the window, while in another shot, a cluster of 'monster' gasoline pumps on the side of a road is imbued with anthropomorphic qualities. He notices how election posters, overlooking a gaming table in a 'luncheonette' in Butte, Montana, give the scene a sense of sour 'editorial' truth, suggesting that public trust and power, in this country, are as good as games (1993, 19-23). Signs or crosses by the side of the road, in the eye of Frank's democratic camera, also appear as culturally resonant to Kerouac: seemingly incidental, they form a subtle portrait of a vast country that lives through and for the automobile. In his description of the collection as a whole, Kerouac keeps oscillating from the abstract feeling to the material detail and back. On the one hand he praises '[t]he humor, the sadness, the EVERYTHING-ness and American-ness of these pictures!' On the other he delights in Frank's attention to what he calls 'the low level of the world': telephone poles, tarpaulin shrouds in 'green unexpecteds', 'ditches by the side of the road' – an alternative space which he describes as the 'orangebutted westlands of Arcadia' (1993, 21). In Kerouac's legendary road-trip novel *On the Road* (1957), visual attention to the physical space of the road is often compromised by the narrator's forward vision, which is always projected ahead of the present moment, to a physical or spiritual destination. In Frank's photographic project, attention to the road as a physical place brings the roadside into focus, as it is the margin of the road that makes space for the vehicle to stop and for the photographer to take pictures of the surrounding landscape. The introduction to *The Americans* suggests that, through Frank's pictures, Kerouac begins to contemplate the roadside as a landscape where symbolic meaning may be found, derived for the most part from material culture: signs and found objects, as well as the structures of the road's vernacular architecture.

Kerouac's praise of America's 'orangebutted Arcadia' implies that legendary 'westlands' contain material 'wastelands'. Junk, in the works of many writers of the Beat generation, becomes an icon of the counter-culture: in Kerouac's

introduction to *The Americans*, traditional ideals of pastoral beauty are invaded by consumer culture, which also assimilates material refuse. The roadside Arcadia that is revealed through Frank's road pictures speaks to Kerouac's romantic sense of an alternative America, an America which only gives itself to the apprehension of the drifter: 'the crazed voyageur of the lone automobile,' writes Kerouac, who 'pressed his eager insignificance [...] into the vast promise of life' (1993, 21). One of the most vivid illustrations of Kerouac's Arcadian America is, however, one which captures the end of the 'voyage'. Half-way through the collection, *Backyard – Venice West, California* presents, in Kerouac's words, a 'madman resting under [an] American flag canopy in [an] old busted car seat', in a 'fantastic Venice California backyard' (1993, 20). The figure in the centre of the photograph, whom Kerouac describes as a 'madman', is transfixed in his evocation of interrupted mobility. Yet the photograph as a whole presents the outcome of the photographer's exploration, evoking an 'eager' though directionless progress, on and off the main road, which has led here to a pocket of hidden 'insignificance':



Robert Frank, *Backyard – Venice West, California*,
The Americans (1958)

In this picture, material icons of American culture have turned to junk: a man sitting in an overgrown backyard is almost concealed from view by the abundance of vegetation, his face shaded by an American flag which he uses as parasol. Right between him and a white clapboard house in the background is an old rusty car which looks beyond repair, reinforcing the sense of immobility which the picture communicates. Describing the picture, Kerouac suggests that it is the car's 'busted seat' that the man is in fact sitting on, recycled into a canopy chair with an overhanging American flag. The silent oddity of the scene inspires Kerouac to write: 'I could sit in [this backyard] and sketch 30,000 words' (1993, 20). The angle from which the picture is taken presupposes a

physical closeness to the scene which, because it is set in a private backyard, feels somewhat intrusive. One wonders how the photographer could have stumbled upon this scene without attracting the attention of the man who, in the picture, looks pensive, undisturbed by the photographer's intrusion. His peaceful stance presumably leads to Kerouac's intuition that he must be 'mad', so suggestive of psychological remoteness is his oblivious attitude to his surroundings. Kerouac's response suggests that, in capturing this figure of aloofness among the uncontrolled backyard – overgrown, littered with junk and, on top of everything, intruded upon – Frank has ventured as close as he could to defining social inadequacy in post-war America's terms. The marginal, the picture suggests, is the man who makes no distinction between new and old, private and public, inside and outside. Physically and metaphorically, this man has been stranded, led off the road of social progress.

At the sight of Frank's backyard picture, Kerouac evokes personal journeys: not, as one might expect, on the road, but by train. In parentheses, he writes of his work experience as a railroad brakeman and recalls that, while riding trains between East and West coasts, he used to see similar backyards alongside the tracks. He would occasionally lean 'out of the old steam pot' in order to see these backyards, wondering at the sight of garbage in roadside ditches such as 'empty tokay bottles in the palm weeds' (1993, 19-23). It is significant that Kerouac remembered having seen those backyards from the window of a train instead of a car. Travelling by car on better and newly expanded roads in the 1950s, motorists would be spared a trip through the impoverished residential areas or settlements that frequently surrounded railways on their way into the city. While new highways would enter the city through the 'miracle mile', an expansion of the main street which provided larger shopping centres and drive-in services, the sight of the backyard became associated with older routes that were gradually being bypassed. In this case, the backyard stood for the social inequalities which persisted through the rise of the middle class, which road users were becoming better equipped to ignore. The backyard is, in fact, a recurring image for the Beats, who tend to use it as a symbol of alternative American culture. At the beginning of *On the Road*, for instance, as Sal Paradise sets off hitchhiking for the West, the whole of the American continent is imagined in anticipation, and compared to a vast backyard. The narrator and all his friends, then scattered all around the country, virtually share this vast continent by simultaneously dancing to the same bop tunes in their respective backyards (Kerouac, 2000, 13). Backyard images also echo, for instance, through Allen Ginsberg's poetry. In *Howl* (1956), Ginsberg evokes the sexual escapades of Neil Cassady, 'cocksman and Adonis of Denver', which he performs in a series of overlooked public places:

[...] joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings

& especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys
too [...]. (2007, 136)

These lines form a song of praise to human bodily functions that society conceals from public view. They anticipate the poem's footnote, in which the totality of the human body ('The skin [...] the nose [...] the tongue and cock and hand and asshole [...]'), the troubled human mind ('the madman [...] as you my soul [...]') as well as the residues of once desirable commodities ('junk') are all deemed to be 'holy' (Ginsberg, 2007, 142).

Diner and gas station, icons of mid-century mainstream culture, also invite chance sexual encounters through their backyards and public toilets, making room for desirable social values to coexist with the public expression of sexual impulses. Both kinds of public spaces maintain, within their structure, the separation between consumption and waste, which parallels a virtual cohabitation between the social and what it considers deviant behaviour. As Kristin Ross has argued, cars and public sanitary spaces are the dominant features of post-war modernisation in the Western world, whereby the consuming habits of post-war societies show an obsession with personal hygiene and the technological advances of independent mobility. In this context, Western societies (American and Western European) undermined the realities of accumulating waste, pollution and road casualties that would become prominent issues in the 1960s. Describing the assimilation of American culture in postcolonial France, Ross identifies increasing domestic control and subjectivity, linked with the privatisation of sectors of public life and the enclosure of the home as well as the private car (1996, 7-11). Things that may require fixing or adjusting are an unwanted source of embarrassment in the societies that Beat generation writers describe, where commodities are not built to last but to be periodically replaced with new and improved versions. The social isolation of the man in Frank's picture is evident from his making no apparent distinction between the comfort of the home and the open junkyard, wearing, as he does, a suit; but also from his strange lack of control over this space and his willingness to recycle broken utilities, suggestive of economic desperation. The car, which is a central feature of the post-war modernisation described by Ross, is doubly symbolic in the light of Kerouac's reading of the photograph: though he writes that the idea of sitting in the backyard inspires him, his own perspective remains that of a narrator on-the-run, entranced by the 'crazy feeling' of mobility in America. His praise of marginality romanticises what is presented in a slightly colder light through Frank's camera. The stranded car, for instance, an image that may evoke sexual exhaustion, does not catch his eye, and he does not linger on the fact that the man in question is, unlike him or Frank, socially and financially immobilised.

In his last paragraph, Kerouac concludes that Frank has taken rank 'among the tragic poets of the world' (1993, 23). Having in fact used the metaphor of

poetry to describe *The Americans*, Kerouac seeks to elevate Frank's work above distinctions of form on the grounds of the artist's epochal sensitivity: his perceptiveness in dealing with a fleeting cultural moment in the social history of the United States is, from Kerouac's point of view, what makes Frank an artist. Praising his photographs, Kerouac distinguishes between two kinds of images: he suggests that, as a viewer, you are either appreciative of Frank's work, which contains 'poetry' or, alternatively, someone who may as well go home and 'see Television shots of big hatted cowboys being tolerated by kind horses' (1993, 23). Kerouac's assumption here that the poetic form is, above all others, suited to define the essence of the artistic enterprise, regardless of medium, may seem hackneyed, at odds with the democratic ideals of the Beat generation. It is telling, perhaps, of Kerouac's intuition that Frank's photographs must acquire artistic legitimacy: that they must be praised for working against the codes of an image-crazed consumer culture. His choice of metaphor also anticipates his acknowledgement of the influence Frank's vision and practice has on his writing: by annihilating distinctions between Frank's work and his own, Kerouac eases the conception of written word and image as working in the same spirit. The introduction insists on the fact that Frank's photographs capture the essence of contemporary life in America better than contemporary photographers had done – a comment which the comparison to poetry extends beyond the visual arts. Kerouac writes, in fact, that Frank photographed scenes that he 'never thought [...] could be caught on film and 'much less described in [their] beautiful visual entirety in words' (1993, 19). As a writer, he expresses his envy of the ease with which Frank is able to record first-hand encounters with the world 'with that little camera that he raises and snaps with one hand' (1993, 23). Even his insinuation that he could write '30,000 words' about the man in the backyard suggests that he would have to produce at least as much in order to attempt to describe the same scene in sufficient detail.

On the Road to Florida

In 1958 Kerouac wrote another, slightly longer piece about Robert Frank and photography which, incidentally, was also a piece about the American road, as it detailed a trip to Florida he had taken with the photographer within the year that followed their first meeting in New York. Reading this text alongside the introduction to *The Americans*, Neil Campbell argues that 'Frank photographed what Kerouac wanted to write but could not' (2010, 114). This article-length feature, simply titled 'On the road to Florida', details the trip Frank and Kerouac took from New York to pick up Kerouac's mother in Long Island, and then with her to Orlando, Florida, and back. While Kerouac needed to pick up some manuscripts and take his mother with him to Florida where he would write for the next few months, the trip was also taken as a provisional *Life* magazine assignment which, Kerouac writes, gave them 'two hundred bucks for gas and oil and chow both ways' (1993, 24). Again, Kerouac's seemingly spontaneous prose produces praise for Frank, though this time he describes not so much

the photographer's pictures as his practice, which he witnesses as they travel together. He writes, for instance, how, having stepped out of the car, Frank would move about the side of the road taking pictures, 'prowling like a cat, or an angry bear, in the grass and roads, shooting whatever he wants to see,' as he, the writer, remained seated inside their parked car, bewildered, looking at him (1993, 26). Describing Frank as a predatory animal or, playing on the ambiguity of the verb 'shooting', a hunter, Kerouac wishes he himself had a camera of his own, 'a mad mental camera', so that he could take a photograph of his friend in the act of taking photographs. 'Prowling', constantly attentive to the trivia of his surrounding environment, Frank takes pictures the way Kerouac thinks writers of the American road should write: he is, in Kerouac's words, 'catching those things about the American road writers should write about' (1993, 24). Kerouac generally implies that writers fail to catch what they 'should' about the American road. He justifies this assumption by describing Frank who, from the start of their trip, takes pictures of things to which he himself would not have paid attention. It is Frank's activity as a photographer which reveals these details to him as they travel on the road: his eye falls on easily-consumed commodities, unremarkable roadside landscapes and structures of the American roadside, which inspires Kerouac to describe them in turn, as in the following passage:

We started off in New York at noon on a pretty Spring day and didn't take any pictures until we had navigated the dull but useful stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike and come on down into Highway 40 in Delaware where we stopped for a snack in a roadside diner. I didn't see anything in particular to photograph or to write about but suddenly Robert was taking his first snap. From the counter where we sat he had turned and taken a picture of a big car trailer with piled cars, two tiers pulling in the gravel driveway but through the window and right over a scene of leftovers and dishes where a family had just vacated a booth and got in their car and driven off and the waitress not had time yet to clear the dishes. The combination of that plus the movement outside and further parked cars and reflections everywhere in chrome glass and steel of cars cars road road. I suddenly realized I was taking a trip with a genuine artist and that he was expressing himself in an art form that was not unlike my own and yet fraught with a thousand difficulties quite unlike my own. (1993, 24)

Whether 'prowling' in the roadside weeds or neglecting his meal to take a picture of leftovers at a neighbouring table, Frank's receptiveness to the 'dull but useful' landscape of the highway appears as both surprising and inspiring to Kerouac. As they exit the diner, Frank continues taking pictures of vernacular architecture on the roadside. Walking alongside him, Kerouac continues to pay attention and to be surprised by what he sees:

Outside the diner, seeing nothing as usual, I walked on, but Robert suddenly stopped and took a picture of a solitary pole with a cluster of silver bulbs way up on top, and behind it a lorn American Landscape so unspeakably indescribable, to make a Marcel Proust shudder... how beautiful to be able to detail a scene like that, on a gray day, and show even the mud, abandoned tin cans and old building blocks laid at the foot of it, and in the distance the road, the old going road with its trucks, cars, poles, roadside houses, trees, signs, crossings [...] little details writers usually forget about. (1993, 25)

The capacity of photography to produce an image that exactly conforms to a vision showcases its superiority over visual memory, which cannot retain the same richness of detail. This indiscriminate precision, suggests Kerouac, exhibits photography's superiority over writing in documenting the trip. Kerouac's report also highlights Frank's especially open-minded attitude as a photographer: his sensitivity to structures and artefacts that are so engrained in the texture of everyday life that they would not be noticed by a more casual observer or a more traditional photographer. Travelling with Frank, Kerouac sees how photography may return the obvious to the common passerby, better than the writer could, even the kind of writer who distinguishes himself by showcasing a phenomenal memory: a Marcel Proust type of writer; someone, in fact, like Kerouac himself.¹

Conclusion

It is not often remembered that *On the Road* was not originally intended to stand alone as a novel, but to be part of a multi-volume project, which Kerouac had started devising in his early twenties as an autobiography as well as a 'contemporary history record' (qtd Barnett 2013). The idea of this long serial novel, *The Duluoz Legend*, was inspired, says Kerouac, by Proust's seven-volume autobiographical work, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927). In a letter to his editor Malcolm Cowley, Kerouac wrote that the finished project would be 'like Proust, but done on the run... like a Running Proust' (Kerouac, 1995, 515). Kerouac's proposal reads as if the project would reconcile two contradictory impulses: movement, on the one hand, and contemplation on the other. Describing the experience of speed, Kerouac's prose would often also display a restless rhythm, ever suggestive of a will to transcend the moment: speaking for the Beat generation and for Kerouac in particular, Jonathan Day calls this metaphysical quest the 'experimental transcendent': a form of trance which negates time and death and which, in Kerouac's work, is most famously captured by the image of the car in motion and the seemingly endless road (2014, 128). Yet his interest in Proust, on the one hand, and Frank, on the other, spring from Kerouac's desire to bring conscious attention to the small details, and to anchor his viewpoint in the subjective perception of the present, which seems at odds with

¹ Gerald Nicosia's influential biography of Jack Kerouac, *Memory Babe* (1994), derives its title from a nickname Kerouac was given, as a boy, due to his unusual capacity for observation and his memory.

the ‘experimental transcendent’. Though Dean Moriarty is himself a dedicated Proust reader in *On the Road*, his travelling companion, Kerouac’s narrator, muses, by the end of the novel, that while driving with ‘frantic Dean’ he had been ‘rushing through the world without a chance to see it’ (2000, 187). In ‘On the road to Florida’, on the other hand, Kerouac describes the way Frank travels with ever-open eyes: photographing the roadside, Frank displays a curiosity which excludes nothing, embracing even the ‘things writers usually forget about’: ‘roadside houses, trees, signs, crossings’, and ‘telephone poles’. Kerouac, who famously practiced free association in writing, would praise the kind of spontaneity that allowed the ‘free deviation (...) of mind’ (1993, 70). His recognition of Frank’s talent, therefore, acknowledges that the photographs are the record of the photographer’s ‘free deviation’: Frank’s attention to roadside trivia is as culturally marginal as the position of the roadside itself is physically marginal to the road. In search of the American road’s landscapes, Frank has in fact deviated, physically as well as ideologically, from the beaten path of the open road.

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