

Article

# The Dharma Bums: A (Fictional) Pseudo-Buddhist Hagiography, or a Pseudo-*ojoden*

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses Jack Kerouac's brief but intense conversion to American pseudo-Buddhism and the artistic effect of this biographical development, arguing that his conversion was total from a spiritual point of view and that its almost immediate effect was the production of a literary piece which should be read as a (fictional) pseudo-Buddhist hagiography, or a pseudo-*ojoden*. The article investigates Jack Kerouac's life as the life of a modern American Buddha, as a person engaged in a constant quest for spiritual enlightenment, who imbued his work with a spiritual feeling derived from his personal, direct, albeit limited experience with spirituality. His novel, *The Dharma Bums*, is a (fictional) pseudo-Buddhist hagiography because it is (auto)biographical, and the central characters are portrayed as enlightened, "holy" beings.

**Keywords:** hagiography; Buddhism; Jack Kerouac; Buddhist novel; *ojoden*

## 1. Introduction

Born in the *annus mirabilis* of literary modernism and baptized on the feast of St. Joseph (as Jean Louis Kirouac/Keroack), Jack Kerouac (whose full name was, allegedly, Jean-Louis Lebris de K rouac) started his journey in Lowell, Massachusetts, on 12 March 1922, as the son of the poor (but probably with noble ancestry) French-Canadians Leo and Gabrielle Keroack (n e Levesque). Almost seven decades after Jack Kerouac's birth, Colette Bachand Wood, one of his distant relatives, found the old family's castle in Brittany, France: Chateau de Kerouartz and the second half of the family motto, "Tout en l'honneur de Dieu"; the first half of the Kerouacs' motto was, "Aimer, Travailler, et Souffrir." According to some of Jack Kerouac's biographers, this combined motto not only perfectly described his family's fate but also outlined his own life, without, of course, being able to envision the influence his life was about to exert on the world: "taken together, the two inscriptions sum up Kerouac's brief but fascinating life, which was passionate, productive, painful, and pious. But neither begins to suggest the transformative effect that Kerouac had on modern society" (Amburn 1999, p. 7).

Jack Kerouac's life passed through three stages of development: his boyhood, his adulthood, and his later years. He spent his boyhood as the third child of a French-Canadian married couple. As an adult, he was a student at Columbia University (where he played football and met Ginsberg and Burroughs), a sailor, then a marine (diagnosed with schizoid personality and discharged from active duty), a writer (a member of the Beat Generation), a husband (he was married three times), and a traveler (he took long road trips across the US and he visited Burroughs in Mexico). During his later years, he was haunted by spiritual turmoil and dreams of returning to his (alleged) Native American origins and his Roman Catholicism. From a spiritual point of view, these three stages were dominated either by (a shadow of) his family's religious belief (his mother was a fervent Roman Catholic), by a temporary shift (his brief encounter with American pseudo-Buddhism), or marked by a "return" to his origins (both ethically and ethnically, none of these origins being straightforwardly acknowledged and documented).



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On a more personal level, the first stage, his childhood, was consumed under the sign of Roman Catholicism, with the blessings of Saint Joseph, St. Anthony of Padua, or Ste. Thérèse de Lisieux, and partly in the atmosphere of Christmas and that of the Good Friday (especially after the death of his brother, Gerard). His encounter with American pseudo-Buddhism, the second stage, following the penance of the first, was accepted at first as a breakthrough, as the ultimate salvation; though it had seemed profound and absolute, it ended abruptly (in brief, because of his inability to give up alcohol and sex) for reasons related to an ethical conflict between the “localized” version of Buddhism and the precepts of the “original” Pure Land. The last stage, the return to his origins, or the recovery of what was still intact after the two previous experiences in his life, materialized like an ending, like the conclusion of the life of a fighter for personal and creative freedom, free from all material and, especially, spiritual constraints and ready to continue the journey by entering the following and last stage, Nirvana and, hence, eternal life and happiness.

Seen through the blurred lens of some of his friends (such as Carolyn Cassady, for example), Jack Kerouac’s life might be interpreted as the life of an exceptional (“holy”) being, an all-American Buddha, promoter of a basic, Western version of Buddhism stripped from all its tradition and adapted to the modern world, a supporter of an unnatural, syncretic belief dominated by the principle of “*sola Dharma*”, a “protestant” Buddhism, who experienced different stages of development or suffering, who was not a prince, but “The Wizard of the Ozone Park”, as Allen Ginsberg dubbed him. As the perfect manifestation of American exceptionalism, he started his own quest for “awakening” when he thought he was ready, and he ended it when he realized that the purpose of his enlightenment was not to escape from the world but to become aware of his own humanity, in other words, to continue his journey on the path of the ordinary and access the extraordinary through deliberate (as opposed to forced) conversion. Kerouac’s conversions followed the natural progression of maturity, the result of which was the secular “Nirvana” to which the artist, the creator, aspires. This state applies only to the artist, but his work and legacy live on and “reincarnate” in other artifacts of the material and spiritual world. Nevertheless, Jack Kerouac’s influence on the decades to come was impossible to estimate during his short (according to the usual standards) life, but the impact of his life and work has expanded beyond the boundaries of his own earthly existence.

## 2. Kerouac’s Conversion to Buddhism

Jack Kerouac’s conversion to American pseudo-Buddhism did never imply the rejection of his Christian background. Moreover, if we were to believe Tom Clark, one of his biographers, he had never left his Christian life behind, but, on the contrary, he kept it close to his soul in all his spiritual journeys through the philosophy of the East: “When, at the age of thirty-four, after much study of Eastern philosophy, he sat down like a Chinese monk in a Marin County hillside garden finally to compose his own Buddhist sutras—‘The Scripture of Golden Eternity’—he wound up writing about the Little Way” (Clark 1997, p. 8). Gabrielle Kerouac, his mother, a fervent Catholic, venerated St. Thérèse of Lisieux (a Carmelite nun, born Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin and canonized in 1925 by Pope Pius XI) and admired her “Little Way”, her simplicity, her vocation, namely her love of God and the world (St. Thérèse of Lisieux 1978, p. 312). Of course, her veneration of St. Thérèse was transferred to her children, and Jack found in the saint’s “Little Way” valuable material and inspiration for his own “scripture . . .” since his own vocation was love, as well: “‘Love is all in all’, said Saint Thérèse, choosing love for her vocation and pouring out her happiness, from her garden by the gate, with a gentle smile, pouring roses on the earth . . .” (qtd. in Clark 1997, p. 8).

Carolyn Cassady, Neal Cassady’s wife and Jack’s friend, saw Jack Kerouac’s Christian background in more definitive terms, as downright “indoctrination” combined with a sense of “unworthiness and guilt”, which he was never able to repudiate. Moreover, his feelings of inferiority, fed both by his relationship with his family and by his interactions with the outer world, augmented his desire to evade the mundane and find refuge in a more

welcoming world, one that was not totally different from the one he knew and experienced, but located in a liminal space that he could constantly negotiate and improve; he imagined this liminal space as being located—spatially—at the intersection between the West and the East, and—spiritually—between Roman Catholicism and Buddhism: “In both of his religions he chose to revere the bits that offered comfort, beauty, serenity, peace and love, and the acceptance of suffering. The instilled Catholic obsession with ‘death’ created a growing cancer of fear within him, and he looked at life often as just a shortcut to this horrible ending of all that he so warmly celebrated” (Cassady 1997, pp. xiv–xv).

Carolyn Cassady observed Kerouac’s intense struggle with the real world for decades and saw his “conversion” to American pseudo-Buddhism as an attempt to bring order in his life: “Chaos was the rule until Buddhism came along and supplied the answers he sought—or so he believed. The tenets of Buddhism became a balm to his emotional and spiritual aspirations and fit his own psyche, but they related very little to the demands of daily life nor did they provide practical help” (Cassady 1997, p. xvi). He found temporary, topical help in alcohol, marijuana, and Benzedrine, aware that they were incompatible even with his personal understanding of Christianity or Buddhism but were able to produce certain effects in what his writing was concerned (Cassady 1997, p. xviii).

Even though Carolyn Cassady noticed that “the tenets of Buddhism” acted like a cure for Kerouac’s spiritual distress, she also admitted to the fact that they were inefficient in adding the order he was craving to the chaos of his everyday life. It was just a textbook example of *malpraxis*: wrong medication combined with a totally inadequate and insufficiently researched treatment plan. The “medication” he used was based on alcohol and drugs (unacceptable in any of the religions he explored), while his pseudo-Buddhist belief (just as his Roman Catholicism was based on his childhood memories, on his nostalgia, rather than on personal choice and commitment) was derived from a shallow understanding of Pure Land Buddhism and was tributary to an all-American understanding of the Eastern religion.

This variant of Buddhism is, according to James Najarian, just one of the several “Western manifestations of Buddhism [which] manipulate, select, remake, and appropriate Buddhist beliefs and practices to accommodate and unconsciously incorporate Western thinking” (Najarian 2016, p. 310). The “Western thinking” which combined with Buddhist beliefs to give birth to this variant of this all-American, pseudo-Buddhism is identified by David McMahan with “the dominant discourses of Western modernity, specially those rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, Romanticism, and Protestant Christianity” (Najarian 2016, p. 310). In Jack Kerouac’s case, a few Roman Catholic ingredients are also added to the melting pot, such as the Christian virtue of *agape* (charity) he incorporates into the more complex concept of *karuna* (compassion) (see Kerouac 1995, p. 446). Eighteenth-century Protestant theologians, such as Thomas Astley, found the striking similarities between the “Romanish Religion” and “Fo’s Religion” guilty of the former’s failure in the East (see Lopez 2018, pp. 29–30); obviously, these similarities may be responsible for the latter’s success in the West.

This variant of Buddhism, successful in the West, is modernist, intertwined with Romanticism, not a religion, but a “spirituality”, focused on values that match the aspirations of Western modernist society (such as freedom of thought, democracy, creativity, etc.) and, ultimately, deprived of all Eastern traditions and practices which might have made it less consumer-oriented and thus less marketable. In brief, this pseudo-Buddhism was a basic, distilled form of Buddhism, “freed” from all the constraints of its tradition and practices and thus acceptable for the Western, modern society: “Probably in its most distasteful form, it involves Europeans or European-Americans ‘purifying’ Buddhism of its ‘Asian’ traditions, a movement that has its roots in the brief nineteenth-century vogue for emphasizing the Buddha’s ‘Aryan’ heritage. At its most extreme, of course, Buddhist modernism reduces Buddhism to a form of self-help or a mere style of life” (Najarian 2016, p. 311).

The new modernist forms of Buddhism, this “Neo-Buddhist modernism”, or “Neo-Buddhism”, to use Faure’s terminology, were also used by Asian Buddhist teachers as a political weapon against Western colonialism. James Najarian’s analysis shows how, for example, Zen Buddhism was prepared for export to America by authors such as Soen Shaku and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the latter even employing a strategy meant to transform it into a universal spirituality, which supported Japanese nationalism and Japanese cultural hegemony (see [Najarian 2016](#), p. 312). Twentieth-century Western Buddhism sold to the Americans was a paradoxical, both universal and unique, construct, a hybrid organism born of (“old”) Buddhist traditions and (“new”) Western ideas, namely an “idealized and purely ‘spiritual’ form of Buddhism”, a “Neo-Buddhism”, which “has tended to become a sort of impersonal flavorless and odorless spirituality, a kind of Buddhism à la carte” ([Faure 2009](#), p. 139).

In his essay on “The Roots of Buddhist Romanticism”, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (Geoffrey DeGraff, an American Buddhist monk of the Kammatthana Tradition) identifies the real source of the Westerners’ interest in Buddhism, which is their own tradition of German Romanticism, re-interpreted within the framework of the new, modern world. To a certain extent, this interest is legit, for “Romanticism and the Dharma view spiritual life in a similar light. Both regard religion as a product of human activity rather than divine intervention. Both regard the essence of religion as experiential and pragmatic; and its role as therapeutic, aimed at curing the diseases of the human mind” ([Ṭhānissaro 2006](#)).

However, a more focused examination of the two, on three coordinates: “the nature of religious experience”, “the basic spiritual illness”, and “the successful spiritual cure”, will expose Western “Buddhist Romanticism”, defined by Ṭhānissaro as “the Dharma seen through the Romantic gate”, as a blurred, confusing, image of true Buddhism, one which acts like a “door shut in their faces”, rather than a gate to the Dharma. Ṭhānissaro observes that since the very existence of “Buddhist Romanticism” in American society is not jeopardized, the next necessary step would be for researchers to shed more light on those aspects of “Buddhist Romanticism” that have not been yet sufficiently investigated. If finding all the answers at once seems rather impractical today, after so many years of silence on crucial topics, a good starting point in this respect would be, at least, to start asking relevant questions.

### 3. *The Dharma Bums*: A (Fictional) Pseudo-Buddhist Hagiography

Some of those relevant questions may be asked in relation to the literary productions of the Beat Generation, especially those of Jack Kerouac, usually interpreted as examples of Buddhist influence on twentieth-century American literature. As shown above, at its best, the Buddhism that was imported into the West, in North America, was nothing else but its re-interpreted, updated, and localized version, which focuses on the individual, leaving aside what it cannot adapt to the American society ([Najarian 2016](#), p. 313). This perspective integrates perfectly with the ideas of American exceptionalism, with the ambitions of American individualism, and with the quest for a recognizable, all-American spirituality. Unfortunately, what is lost in this process of adaptation, as James Najarian observes, is the right of Buddhism to remain “recognizable” even in its Western version.

Jack Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums* in 1957 (the year when his *On the Road* was eventually published after having been rejected several times) and published it in 1958 when his brief but intense encounter with the form of spirituality that can be safely labeled “pseudo-Buddhism” was almost over. The novel follows the path of a sacred text recounting significant, “inspired” events of the past, which prove influential in the present by bridging the gap between the mundane and the extramundane. *The Dharma Bums*, usually referred to as an autobiographical novel, reads like a pseudo-(Christian)-Buddhist hagiography itself or, in other words, an account of the lives of two heretic (both) Christian desert fathers and pseudo-Buddhist monks embarked on journeys of becoming in the wilderness bordering a North American metropolis, climbing peaks in their struggle to reach the heights of personal enlightenment. Soon after its publication, Jack Kerouac published *Visions of Gerard*

in 1963 (which he had written back in 1956) in loving memory of his “better” brother as an attempt to preserve the spiritual connection with his dead doppelgänger. Taken together, *The Dharma Bums* and *Visions of Gerard* are “free-form acts of modern hagiography and prayer” (Douglas 2018, pp. xv–xvi).

The term “hagiography” used with reference to a Buddhist context might sound inappropriate, but considering the etymology of the word (derived from the Ancient Greek ἅγιος, holy, and γραφία, writing) it describes, at least partly, the result of Jack Kerouac’s “inspired”, “spontaneous” writing. It even meets the two requirements set by Christoph Kleine for a work to be considered a “hagiography”; first, it must be “at least technically or superficially somehow biographical [in its] literary form”, and second, “regarding its contents, the protagonist of the life of the account is conceived as a saint or holy person” (Kleine 1998, pp. 325–26).

Nevertheless, as Jinhua Chen argues in his *Philosopher, Practitioner, Politician: The Many Lives of Fazang (643–712)*, discussing the life of Fazang, “one of the greatest Buddhist metaphysicians in medieval Asia”, and “a scholastic monk who composed a variety of technical and philosophical texts” (Chen 2007, p. 1), the biographical data in such a writing is not to be considered or used as historically accurate and reliable information, and that a clear-cut distinction must be made between biographical and hagiographical information in a “hagio-biography” (Chen 2007, p. 339).

This apparently simplistic model contains a set of variables which, in a strictly religious context, acquire a relevance that is not fully compatible with a fictional, literary model such as Jack Kerouac’s novel, even if it is read as a pseudo-Buddhist narrative or, to particularize Professor Chen’s term, a fictional “hagio-biography”. The first variable is the biographical feature, which requires reliable information related to the birth, life, and death of the protagonist. In the case of *The Dharma Bums*, such data are only partially relevant since the characters, though based on real persons, are essentially fictional, and thus, any resemblance between them is of secondary importance in the analysis.

The other variable is the “sanctity” of the protagonist, which in both Christianity and Buddhism is a rather “subjective” feature related more to how a person is perceived by one religious group or the other than to the “objective” dimension of that person’s life. If in Christianity, saints are canonized following the recognition of their extraordinary lives and deeds (which include miracles, martyrdom, virtue, etc.), the

original prototype of the Mahayana Buddhist saint is the Bodhisattva, a being that was, however, from an early stage on elevated to a level far beyond ordinary human beings. [...] The existence of the Bodhisattvas and their cults makes a cult of lower, more human saints unnecessary. [...] Christianity did away with all the former deities or divine beings thus leaving a gap which had to be filled by the saints who had to be human enough not to question the monotheistic nature of the Christian religion. (Kleine 1998, p. 331)

Kleine’s argument that the existence of the Bodhisattvas renders that of “more humane” saints irrelevant and that Christian saints occupy the void left by the disappearance of other deities is based on his analysis of Buddhist hagiographic literature as a genre and its subgenre, *ojoden*, or “accounts of those born in the Pure Land” (Stone 2007, p. 135). Kleine starts from the *jataka* (tales of the good deeds of the Buddha in his previous lives) and the *apadana* or the *avadana* (tales in verse about the deeds of Buddhist monks and nuns) and describes the evolution of the genre in the East Asian tradition, emphasizing that, in China, Korea, or Japan, this type of narrative would “deal with only one incarnation of the protagonist”, and that the “working of moral causality manifests itself in the present life or immediately after death” (Kleine 1998, pp. 327–28). Most such accounts subscribe to a certain stylistic and formal pattern (they contain information about the background, the birthplace, and death of the protagonist, about his/her character, about his/her miracles, prophecies, visions, etc.), which makes it easier for them to be classified as “hagiographies”, than to define their protagonists as saints (Kleine 1998, p. 330).

Therefore, Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* can be read like an American pseudo-Buddhist *ojoden*, a "hagio-biography", a pseudo-Buddhist hagiography, or in more simple, non-technical terms, a hagiography of a few (aspiring, or pseudo-) Buddhist "monks" struggling to preserve their "sanctity" in and around the metropolis. If one of the "monks", Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder), looks more like an Eastern sage practicing his variant of Buddhism in America, Ray Smith (the narrator and Kerouac's alter ego) is an American Bodhisattva, a Buddha, or "St. Raymond of the Dogs". Jack Kerouac started his work of non-fiction titled *Some of the Dharma*, which contains a vast array of pieces ranging from reading notes, meditations, prayers, letters, and stories to poems and haikus in December 1953. He finished it in the spring of 1956 (on 15 March, to be more precise), the year before he wrote *The Dharma Bums* (published in 1958), but it was published only posthumously in 1997.

*Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac's reading notes on Buddhism, contains a list of sources that he consulted over time and which somehow seem to explain his definition of "religions": "Religions appear to be schismatic technical haranguish corruptions of some original pure Vision. . ." (Theado 2009, pp. 152–53). In search of this capitalized "pure Vision", according to his own notes, he had read nine books, such as *Texts from the Buddhist Canon Known as Dhammapada* (1878), *Life of Buddha, or Buddha Charita* by Asvaghosha (translated by Samuel Beal), *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894) by Paul Carus, *Buddhism in Translations* (1896) by Henry Clarke Warren, or *The Buddhist Bible* (1938) by Dwight Goddard. He also listed the sources in his 1954 letter to Allen Ginsberg, whom he instructed to start with *Life of Buddha* by Asvaghosha and continue with Surangama Sutra in *The Buddhist Bible* (Kerouac 1995, pp. 415–16). The texts in his bibliography are neither exclusively Buddhist (as James Najarian observes) nor an exhaustive list of sources for research into Buddhism, but they are obviously the starting point of the spread of Buddhism in American literature via the agency of the Beats. Of all the members of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac played the most prominent role in the promotion of American Buddhism.

*The Dharma Bums*, an American pseudo-*ojoden*, was written in less than a month by a reincarnation of Buddha in America, aware of his role in the world: "I am Buddha come back in the form of Shakespeare for the sake of poor Jesus Christ and Nietzsche. . . I'll become an Intuitionist farmer. . ." (Kerouac 1997, p. 41). The American bard wrote *The Dharma Bums* "with the swiftness of *On the Road*, *Tristessa* and *The Subterraneans*" and "in the way that *On the Road* itself was composed, with a specific reader in mind. [. . .] *The Dharma Bums* is written with an air of patient explanation, as though addressed to a book editor" (Gifford and Lee 2012, pp. 240–41). If we were to believe Gifford and Lee, *The Dharma Bums* is indeed addressed to someone who might be interested in reading it, such as, for example, a book editor, for it emerged from Kerouac's superficial study of Buddhism, it was derived from his notes gathered in *Some of the Dharma* and in line with his own, sometimes obviously biased, interpretation of ancient Buddhism. Its first and most devoted reader was the American writer, literary critic, social historian, and Kerouac's editor, Malcolm Cowley, who, according to Kerouac's own testimony in the interview he granted to Ted Berrigan, "made endless revisions and inserted thousands of needless commas" (Berrigan 1968). This book, according to John Clellon Holmes, the author of the first Beat novel, *Go* (1952), and Kerouac's friend, "wasn't impelled by the stuff that made the good books good. It was impelled by an understanding that he had, a perception that he had and experiences that he'd had, and it's valuable and it's fine. But the prose is lax" (qtd. in Gifford and Lee 2012, p. 241).

The "lax", "spontaneous" prose flows like a *vitae sanctorum*, springing from a special, personal understanding of an adaptation of ancient Buddhism to the realities of Kerouac's contemporary world, a direct perception of its effects on humanity and a first-hand experience of its teachings in the real-life interaction with or separation from the world, which, just like a hagiography, has inspired generations of "Dharma bums". The "spontaneity" of Kerouac's prose is based on his epiphanies and visions, constantly recurring and generating new transcendental experiences, which keep the author alive and his text going. According to Erik Mortenson, "[f]or Beat Generation writers the visionary state reveals the truth of

the world—it is a peek behind the curtain of reality that provides an authentic glimpse of the universe”, but this moment is transient and almost impossible to materialize in useful experience. Thus, writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg “both turn to the Buddhist conception of a ‘stillpoint’ lying beyond rigid ego consciousness for an answer. Although not always successful, Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s deployment of the Buddhist stillpoint allows them to turn seemingly isolated visionary experiences into a means of connecting past, present, and future into a meaningful whole”. Mortenson, who coined the term “stillpoint”, admits that he derived it from Robert Aitken’s and Shunryu Suzuki’s “breath moment”, or “moment of attention”, cf. the Sino-Japanese term *sesshin*, and the Japanese term *soshin* (Mortenson 2009, p. 123).

Mortenson interprets the “breath moment” as a “stillpoint” and places it in opposition to “the eruptive visionary state” in an attempt to provide a useful tool for a better understanding of the work of Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg while admitting that this does not imply they manifest the same tendencies throughout their artistic careers: “they evidence two opposite tendencies—Kerouac continually seeks new visions while Ginsberg refers back to his original visionary experience. While both writers discovered Buddhism, their development in this area followed separate paths as well. Kerouac typically employs Buddhism as a means of avoidance, while Ginsberg, through an increasing focus on his body, utilizes the Buddhist stillpoint to harness his visionary experience” (Mortenson 2009, pp. 124–25). Simply put, they follow two different career paths, which also implies two different approaches to life: writing and spirituality or spiritual experience.

At least in Kerouac’s case, and as a tool he uses in his constant search for new spiritual, visionary experiences, this type of breath moment is similar to the freeze-frame technique used extensively as a cliffhanger in 1960s cinema and 20th-century television (mainly in soap operas) as a generator of suspense, as a link to the future scene or episode. Peter Coates describes it as follows: “As a variety of ‘false ending’, freeze-frames proliferated in the 1960s, when social changes and the collapse of the studios’ hegemony, among other things, shook traditional narrative schemata and their resolutions” (Coates 2021, p. 44). The main functionality of this “stillpoint” is to connect or to fuse the past, present, and future, to facilitate “a closer connection between the self and the world” (Mortenson 2009, p. 128) and thus ensure the flow.

Even though his (pseudo-)Buddhist practice was far from that of a great Zen Buddhist master, Kerouac used a similar—both, surprisingly, Buddhist and cinematic—technique in 1951 when he wrote his *On the Road* (published in 1957): instead of typing his novel on separate sheets of paper, he used a continuous scroll which helped him maintain the flow unbroken during the writing process (which, allegedly, took only three weeks). In such a process, every “break” would be just a “stillpoint” after which his recurrent epiphanies would continue to produce his “spontaneous prose” and build his text as a continuum.

This continuum, supported by his interest in the world combined with the struggle to separate himself (and his self) from the material mundane, reached a moment of balance, the stillpoint in his career due to his interest and total, albeit temporary and superficial, immersion into Buddhism. According to Jones, “Kerouac [...] passed through Buddhism in 1955 and 1956, and during these years, the movement of his writing, like a satellite in orbit, achieved equilibrium” (Jones 1992, p. 106). This stellar, imponderable moment in his career was the one that produced *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac’s most significant pseudo-Buddhist narrative. He found in Mahayana Buddhism “a fatalism that corresponded to his own Celtic nostalgia, with the important difference that the inevitable extinction of the ego, instead of an event to be feared, became the object and goal of his study and meditation—and of his writing” (Jones 1992, p. 107). The deficiency in Kerouac’s Buddhist practice was attributable to the absence of a teacher of Zen, classical Buddhism, one able to teach him (the importance of) meditation, namely “how to actually take in his body the notion of emptiness or examine it as a process of mind, through the practice of classical meditation as handed down in immemorial ‘ear-whispered’ tradition” (Allen Ginsberg qtd. in Kerouac et al. 2017, p. 54).

However, if his spiritual (Buddhist or Christian) practice was always less than perfect, to say the least, and never final, though, paradoxically, total, Kerouac's spiritual literary practice was always one that tended to perfection or to perfecting the human being. In Christian terms, this struggle to achieve perfection is a path to deification, with its practical, formal counterpart, sanctification, while in Buddhism, it is generally known as enlightenment. In other words, the (albeit pseudo) hagiographical approach to his characters is due to his belief that the ultimate goal of existence is the cancellation of the self and that there is little or no perceptible difference between writing and real life. This is probably why his characters are all "deified", "sanctified", "enlightened", and heightened versions of real-life characters of a certain condition in the world, namely people who are capable of such spiritual development (writers, for example). Following Erik Mortenson's (mild) call for a more critical approach to the Beats and extending the area of research beyond their actual work (Mortenson 2009, p. 125), reading *The Dharma Bums* as a *roman à clef*, as a pseudo-bio-hagiography, in which the key is not necessarily the connection between fact and fiction but rather the tool which helps triangulate the spirituality of a whole generation, effects a process that would facilitate interdisciplinary research, thus expanding Beat studies beyond the immediate realm of the Beats themselves.

Since it is not at all easy to be "a saint in the city", the characters in *The Dharma Bums* flee urban life with the explicit intent to climb a mountain, imitating and/or perfecting the aspirations of their real-life counterparts, doppelgangers, i.e., the Beats, who "taken together have produced one of the most profound bodies of spirituality oriented literature since the American Renaissance—with Kerouac playing 'Emerson' to Ginsberg's 'Whitman' and Snyder's 'Thoreau'" (Inchausti 2017, p. 2). The literature they wrote was never just literature but more like an exalted form of spiritual experience, created as an alternative to life in postwar America and a spirituality outside the artificial form of organized Western religion: "[. . .]for the Beats, Buddhism became the new realism, poetry a tool for enhanced perception, science a critique of ideology, and Spengler's meta history their founding metaphysic. Literature was always to be something *more than literature*, something more akin to scripture. Kerouac once even described it as the Vedic yoga of the West, having more in common with the sacrament of confession than the rhetoric of Aristotle" (Inchausti 2017, pp. 4–5).

Therefore, *The Dharma Bums* is itself more than just a fictional autobiography, but rather a fictional *ojoden* of the Beats, in which the characters (just like their real-life doppelgangers) are born in an imagined Pure Land and inhabit the earth for just a limited period of time until they reach the final stage of enlightenment and enter Nirvana. Kerouac's entire work should be read as one single book, comprising one single set of characters, engaged in one single memory flow recorded "on the run"; the characters are always the same, and the volumes they populate are all chapters of one single piece, *The Duluoz Legend*. It is only for publishing purposes that Kerouac (and his early publishers) decided to give these chapters distinct titles and these characters different names in each of the works, as he declares in an explanatory note introducing his *Big Sur* (written in 1961 and published in 1962):

*My work comprises one vast book like Proust's except that my remembrances are written on the run instead of afterwards in a sick bed. Because of the objections of my early publishers I was not allowed to use the same personae names in each work. On the Road, The Subterraneans, The Dharma Bums, Doctor Sax, Maggie Cassidy, Tristessa, Desolation Angels, Visions of Cody and the others including this book Big Sur are just chapters in the whole work which I call The Duluoz Legend. In my old age I intend to collect all my work and re-insert my pantheon of uniform names, leave the long shelf full of books there, and die happy. The whole thing forms one enormous comedy, seen through the eyes of poor Ti Jean (me), otherwise known as Jack Duluoz, the world of raging action and folly and also of gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye. (Kerouac 1992, p. iii)*

Ti Jean, also known as Jack Duluoz, a member of the pantheon of characters imagined by one Jack Kerouac, acts like Ray Smith in *The Dharma Bums*, a book he wrote using the

same technique he used when he wrote *On the Road*, typing it on a paper roll like a sequel to *On the Road* and using the same reincarnated central characters. *The Dharma Bums* is

a book about Gary Snyder and ‘the rucksack revolution’; the events it describes occurred six years after the events at the end of *On the Road*. It is a ‘sequel’ because the central characters from *On the Road* (those based on Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Allen Ginsberg) reappear along with Kerouac’s new hero, Gary Snyder named Japhy Ryder in this book. Biographically, the book is a sequel because it recounts Kerouac’s own adventures; the author maintains the first-person point of view, this time as Ray Smith, a name left over from an early, unfinished version of *On the Road*. (Theado 2009, pp. 151–52)

The other characters are inspired by Beats Jack Kerouac knew well, such as Alvah Goldbook (based on Allen Ginsberg), Cody Pomeray (based on Neal Cassady), or George (based on Peter Orlovsky), and all of them appear to be engaged in their own story of becoming. However, only two of them seem to fit the profile of spiritual beings whose lives are worthy of being included in Kerouac’s pseudo-*ojoden*. These characters are Japhy Ryder and his disciple Ray Smith. Another element that would also help qualify *The Dharma Bums* as a pseudo-*ojoden* is the style and the events which compose the plot. Matt Theado is very explicit in this respect when he refers to the novel as a worthy sequel to *On the Road*: “It contained no experimental prose, and the story unfolded in linear time with identifiable characters and set situations. [...] Like *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums* was written rapidly, yet in a conventional style. [...] One big difference between the books is Kerouac’s incorporation of Buddhism. As in his other Buddhist works, Christianity combines with Buddhism to produce the distinctive Kerouac religious flavor” (Theado 2009, pp. 152–53).

This “combination” could be interpreted as either religious syncretism or as heresy if the context would be something else but a fictional world imbued with a religious feeling, indeed in a very particular Kerouac style. The result is indeed a fictional *vitae sanctorum* or *ojoden* portraying several “saints”, “bodhisattvas”, “desert fathers”, “itinerant (beggar) monks”, or “bhikkhus”, who are all citizens of the modern world, irrespective of where they were born or where they live. In *The Dharma Bums*, “[w]hat matters are latitudes and landmasses, not the countries that claim and dispute them. Citizenship here is potentially global; Dean Moriarty could only be American but Japhy appears in Ray’s visions as a mischievous Chinese sage” (Douglas 2018, p. xv).

Just like Dean Moriarty, Ray Smith can only be an American “bhikku” on his way to enlightenment, to a heroic existence in Paradise. He quotes from the Diamond Sutra, and he is determined to practice charity without attachment and his “religious devotions almost to perfection.” Just like his creator, Jack Kerouac, Ray admits that this was just a transient stage in his development and that he would strip his faith of all “lip service” and remain “neutral” (Kerouac 2018, p. 4). In other words, his pseudo-Buddhism depends exclusively on its foundational values and gradually transforms into a lifestyle bound to produce the same effects as its original version.

Ray’s vision is based on Japhy Ryder’s own interpretation of his identity, as a soul reincarnated in an Oregon kid as a result of his faults in a previous life and with a clear purpose to improve his karma through constant effort, meditation, and fasting:

You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn’t feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values but and when I discovered Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived in a previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins in that lifetime I was being degraded to a more grievous domain of existence and my karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom. That’s why I was always sympathetic to freedom movements, too, like anarchism in the Northwest, the old-time heroes of Everett Massacre and all... (Kerouac 2018, p. 26)

When Japhy leaves, his presence still lingers “in the dim red light”, and Alvah describes him as an extraordinary, exceptional American hero and bhikkhu: “he’s the big hero of the West Coast, do you realize I’ve been out here for two years now and hadn’t met anybody worth knowing really or anybody with any truly illuminated intelligence and was giving up hope for the West Coast? Besides all the background he has, in Oriental scholarship, Pound, taking peyote and seeing visions, his mountain climbing and bhikkuing, wow, Japhy Ryder is a great new hero of American culture” (Kerouac 2018, p. 26). This adds to the mythical, saintlike aura of Japhy Ryder and turns him into Ray Smith’s model and Zen master, into one of the great figures of “the Zen lunatics of ancient Japan and China *and* contemporary California, where Japhy pursues free love, scholarship, poetry, and mountaineering as if they were one and the same thing” (Sørensen 2015, p. 116). Japhy, the protagonist of Kerouac’s novel, is eventually revealed as the enlightened being who is able to teach his disciple how to achieve absolute knowledge. Ray, his disciple, witnesses the revelation of the being of his visions, the subject of a magic epiphany: “I saw the unimaginable little Chinese bum standing there, in the fog, with that expressionless humor on his steamed face. It wasn’t the real-life Japhy of rucksacks and Buddhism studies and big mad parties at Corte Madera, it was the realer-than-life Japhy of my dreams” (Kerouac 2018, pp. 204–5).

This Japhy of Ray’s dreams is the “number one” Dharma bum, the Buddha who acknowledges the existence of and holiness of other enlightened beings. If Japhy is a Buddha, then Ray is a Bodhisattva: “‘Oh I always meet my Bodhisattvas in the street!’ he yelled, and ordered beers” (Kerouac 2018, p. 9). Both belong to the Western order and are confined to an American Diamond Triangle between New York, Mexico City, and San Francisco. They are both urban figures: Bodhisattva walks in the street, and Buddha orders beers in a bar.

Even though Ray agrees that Japhy is an authority in matters of Buddhism (just like Gary Snyder himself), who was not interested in traditional Buddhism, but in “the Zen intellectual artistic Buddhism he loved”, who knew everything about most traditions, and who was thus entitled to become the leader of the group of Dharma bums, he rejects his belief: “I warned him at once I didn’t give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism, but was just interested in the first of Sakyamuni’s four noble truths, *All life is suffering*. And to an extent interested in the third, *The suppression of suffering can be achieved*, which I didn’t quite believe was possible then” (Kerouac 2018, pp. 10, 97). Ray, the great virtuous “Bodhisattva”, the “great wise being”, the “great wise angel” prefers a blended faith, one in which all local flavors vanish to make room for the Western variant of Buddhism, which is supposed to coexist in his life—without the influence of any mythology (allusion to Gary Snyder’s interest in Native American mythology)—with the Roman Catholic background.

East meets West in Ray’s belief, but since his Roman Catholicism was not too profound either, he is determined to accept only the basic ideas of ancient Buddhism, namely two of the four noble truths (*All life is suffering* and, partly, *The suppression of suffering can be achieved*). Nevertheless, even though he has not read much (just like Kerouac himself), he describes his belief in very simple, straightforward terms: “‘I’m not a Zen Buddhist, I’m a serious Buddhist, I’m an old-fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism’, and so forth into the night, my contention being that Zen Buddhism didn’t concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect to make it perceive the illusion of all sources of things” (Kerouac 2018, p. 11). If Ray is a “serious Buddhist”, Kerouac himself declares himself as a promoter of his own variant of “Pure Essence Buddhism”, which, according to Najarian is nothing else “but a loose Buddhist modernism” (Najarian 2016, p. 315).

When Ray confronts Japhy on matters of Buddhist belief or practice, he uses references to Pure Land Buddhism as protection to justify his inability to understand certain theoretical principles or to learn and practice meditation, for example. Some of Ray’s false claims spring from his limited knowledge of Buddhist texts and from his hope that his pseudo-Buddhism might, eventually, become a legitimate, local variant of Buddhism, promoted by a Western holy Bodhisattva: “I went over to an old cook in the doorway of the kitchen and

asked him ‘Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?’” (Kerouac 2018, p. 13). The only “perfect” and possible (Zen) answer that Jack Kerouac’s bibliography listed in his *Some of the Dharma* would be able to provide to such a question is similar to the one provided by the cook in the second chapter of *Dharma Bums*: “I don’t care.” Transposing the difficult Zen koan (that Kerouac asked D.T. Suzuki when they met without getting any reaction) and the cook’s answer into twentieth-century America, we understand that the East does not care about any new, perverted pseudo-Buddhist ideas coming from the West, for, the Dharma is already there (just like in the case of the Patriarch’s journey from India to China).

Ray is an avid reader of Buddhist texts which he reads on a daily basis (he mentions the Lankavatara Sutra, or the “Sutra of the Appearance of the Good Doctrine in Lanka” and the Diamond Sutra), while Japhy impersonates one of the promoters of Buddhist ideas into the West, whose works he collects along with works of poetry he translates into English: “He had a slew of orange crates all filled with beautiful scholarly books, some of them in Oriental languages, all the great sutras, comments on sutras, the complete works of D. T. Suzuki and a fine quadruple-volume edition of Japanese haikus. He also had an immense collection of valuable general poetry” (Kerouac 2018, p. 15).

Kerouac met Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, “Zen’s ‘missionary’ to the West” and “a general figurehead for the Zen Buddhist movement in the United States and Europe”, and helped build his image in America, based on “reader’s imagination” and, obviously of that of the authors of fiction who referred to him in their work. People were not fascinated by his “lucid introduction to Buddhism and Japanese culture”, but by Suzuki as a representative of the “enigmatic” East, “as a symbol of stylized religion” (Iwamura 2011, pp. 26–27, 38), as a Buddhist sage traveling to America to teach Zen. Kerouac’s fascination for D.T. Suzuki matches Ray’s fascination for Japhy, whom he sees as a promoter of Eastern wisdom in the West. The scene in the third chapter in which Ray and Japhy discuss the latter’s translation from Han Shan’s “Cold Mountain” is particularly interesting from this point of view. Japhy’s free translation of the poems sounds strange and complicated: “‘Course that’s my own translation into English, you see there are five signs for each line and I have to put in Western prepositions and articles and such’” (Kerouac 2018, p. 17). Japhy does not simply translate poetry from Chinese into English but also (Eastern) Buddhism into the American culture, throwing in all the small but significant ingredients that make its syntax acceptable in the West. The Western world is too complex and cannot understand and appropriate the simple values of Buddhism as such.

Ray rejects not only Japhy’s ideas about his translation of Chinese poetry into English but also his ideas about American society, his “vision of a great rucksack revolution.” His attitude is that of a Bodhisattva determined to “go off somewhere and find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas. I intended to pray, too, as my only activity, pray for all living creatures; I saw it was the only decent activity left in the world. To be in some river bottom somewhere, or in a desert, or in mountains, or in some hut in Mexico or shack in Adirondack, and rest and be kind, and do nothing else, practice what the Chinese call ‘do-nothing’” (Kerouac 2018, p. 88). Ray neither sees any problem with living like a Christian desert father practicing compassion for all beings like a true Buddhist, nor does he care too much about the differences between Christianity and Buddhism (Kerouac 2018, pp. 96–97). To him, Heaven and Nirvana, Jesus and Buddha, even West and East are one and the same thing: “‘I [. . .] pray under the stars for the Lord to bring me to Buddhahood after my Buddhawork is done, amen.’ And as it was Christmas, I added ‘Lord bless you all and merry tender Christmas on all your rooftops and I hope angels squat there the night of the big rich real Star, amen.’ [. . .] ‘Everything is possible. I am God, I am Buddha, I am imperfect Ray Smith, all at the same time, I am empty space, I am all things’” (Kerouac 2018, p. 104).

Saint Raymond of the Dogs is unable to keep the religion he was born into, as his mother and sister complain in chapter 21, but, outside his alcohol abuse episodes, practices meditation, miraculously heals himself twice of thrombophlebitis and his mother’s coughing after a vision he had in a trance, proving that everything is possible “in magic

America”, has a revelation on the mountaintop and then returns to the mundane world (Kerouac 2018, pp. 100, 125, 205). Ray knows he is an exceptional being: “It means I’ve become a Buddha”, “I really thought myself a kind of crazy saint” (Kerouac 2018, pp. 123, 157), and he is consecrated by the congregation of Dharma bums at a party through the voice of Rheinhold Cacoethes (Kenneth Rexroth), whose ironical statement supports his claims to sainthood: Cacoethes “‘Well I guess he’s a Bodhisattva in its frightful aspect, ‘ts about all I can say.’ (Aside, sneering: ‘He’s too drrronk all the time.’)” (Kerouac 2018, p. 163).

Moreover, this “crazy saint”, always intoxicated just like all the “crazy Japanese saints” at a Buddhist lecture (i.e., the Japanese scholars promoting Buddhism in Americans), enjoys nature’s protection while practicing meditation: “One night I was meditating in such perfect stillness that two mosquitoes came and sat on each of my cheekbones and stayed there a long time without biting and then went away without biting” (Kerouac 2018, p. 158). His prayer is listened to and produces cosmic effects: “One night in a meditation vision Avalokitesvara the Hearer and Answerer of Prayer said to me ‘You are empowered to remind people that they are utterly free’ so I laid my hand on myself to remind myself first and then felt gay, yelled ‘Ta’, opened my eyes, and a shooting star shot” (Kerouac 2018, p. 200), making him a member of the community of saints in Heaven/Nirvana.

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