

Beatness Meets Marginality: San Francisco in Jack Kerouac's Literature

Pedro A. GALÁN LOZANO
Departamento de Filología Inglesa II
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
pagalan@estumail.ucm.es

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Abstract

This article proposes an analysis of the interaction between a selection of Jack Kerouac's fiction and poetry, the city of San Francisco, and social marginality. The Beat author's texts studied here grant great prominence to the urban setting this city provides. The South of Market district—which constituted San Francisco's skid row through the 1960s—offers an extensive cohort of marginal characters that are shown by Kerouac as praiseworthy examples of resistance to the social homogeneity that the 1950s American society pursued. Among these characters, the hobo stands out in these texts, for his individualistic ways represent the epitome of the detachment from the mainstream that Kerouac advocates. Our aim, in short, is to shed light on how the presence of San Francisco and its marginality is articulated by the author so that it becomes the most suitable city for him to vindicate those outcasts excluded from the larger community.

Keywords: San Francisco, Jack Kerouac, Beat Generation, social marginality.

Título: La contracultura *beat* y su integración en la marginalidad: San Francisco en la literatura de Jack Kerouac

Resumen

Este artículo propone un análisis de la interacción entre una selección de prosa y poesía de Jack Kerouac, la ciudad de San Francisco y la marginalidad social. Los textos del autor *beat* aquí estudiados otorgan gran protagonismo al escenario urbano que constituye esta ciudad, la cual ofrece un extenso elenco de personajes marginales presentados como ejemplos loables de resistencia a la estandarización de los caracteres que la sociedad estadounidense de los cincuenta perseguía. Entre estos personajes destaca el *hobo* –o trabajador nómada–, cuyo individualismo se erige en epítome del distanciamiento de la sociedad normativa que el propio Kerouac defendía. Nuestro objetivo, en definitiva, consiste en arrojar luz sobre cómo el autor articula la presencia de San Francisco en sus textos de modo que dicha ciudad se convierte en un escenario más que apropiado en el que vindicar a aquellos que se hallan marginados del sector dominante de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: San Francisco, Jack Kerouac, generación *beat*, marginalidad social.

One of the most genuine hallmarks of the Beat counterculture is its admiration for—and even association with—the social characters placed on the fringes of normative culture. In his quest for the identification with marginality, the hipster pushes himself toward the latter willingly rather than because his social position compels him to it. In her essay "Born 1930: The Unlost Generation" (1957), Caroline Bird defines this characteristic figure of the 1950s counterculture:

The hipster is an *enfant terrible* turned inside out. In character with his time, he is trying to get back at the conformists by lying low [...]. He takes marijuana because it supplies him with experiences that can't be shared with "squares." [...] He may earn his living as a petty criminal, a hobo, a carnival roustabout or a free-lance moving man [...]. As the only extreme nonconformist of his generation, he exercises a powerful if underground appeal for conformists, through newspaper accounts of his delinquencies, his structureless jazz, and his emotive grunt words. (Mailer 1992: 582-583)

The aim of the hipster is therefore to get rid of every single trace of the "square" way of life—that is, that which is confined to the normative limits set by the American society of the time. Those limits are referenced by Japhy Ryder, protagonist of Jack Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958), as he dissociates himself from

the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume. (Kerouac 2006: 73)

This is how the contemporary American way of life is defined in Kerouac's works: a sort of "jail" where the individual is imprisoned in an endless cycle based on the notions of striving, producing, and consuming. This cycle, at the same time, is intended to seek what the Beat counterculture calls, in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's words in his poem "1" (1958), "imbecile illusions of happiness" (Ferlinghetti 1958: 9)—a distorted version of the concept of individual fulfillment and happiness that the United States Declaration of Independence highlights¹. It is those illusions which give sense to the American Dream the way it is conceived in Kerouac's contemporary American

¹ The Declaration of Independence of the United States (1776) points out the inalienable rights that, according to the Founding Fathers, were bestowed by God upon men: "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" ("Declaration of Independence: A Transcription").

society. According to the Beats, the above-mentioned refrigerators, televisions, vehicles, and the rest of material possessions constitute empty emblems that do not correspond with the essence of this national ethos². Whereas they are widely conceived as markers of success in achieving the American Dream, the Beat counterculture considers that they actually strip the individual of his uniqueness provided that the same markers are available to a great number of Americans.

In Jack Kerouac's literature, the marginal characters that the hipster seeks to resemble are called *fellaheen*. This term, according to Robert Holton, is used by Kerouac so as to encompass "all those peoples—in North America and throughout the world—who appeared to him to be culturally situated outside the structures and categories, the desires and frustrations, of modernity" (Holton 1995: 267-268). If we extrapolate Holton's explanation strictly to the culture of the United States, we may understand as *fellaheen* all the people who are excluded from the American way of life and, by extension, from the American Dream. This is the people that do not conform with the essential sameness that the dominant ideology imposes (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 117). The fascination for these individuals that we find in Kerouac's texts leads us to consider the worship of marginality as one of the defining elements of the Beat author's literature. This worship, at the same time, is linked to the heavy presence of the city of San Francisco in many of Kerouac's works. This city serves as the setting for the ups and downs of hipsters and *fellaheen*, disclosing its peculiar character stemmed from the different factors that have configured its identity since its foundation. San Francisco, with its peculiar idiosyncrasy, has always attracted a wide range of marginal individuals—whose presence is pervasive throughout Kerouac's works—that make up the most sordid areas in the City³. In the following pages, we will analyze the worship of marginality as an essential mainstay for Kerouac's literature. We will likewise shed light on how the aforementioned worship interacts with the urban setting supplied by the city of San Francisco. This analysis will rely on a selection of the Beat writer's texts set in San Francisco that have not

² The coinage of the term "American Dream" is attributed to historian James Truslow Adams, who provides one of the most authoritative definitions of the essence of this notion in *The Epic of America* (1931): "The *American Dream* is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement [...]. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by other for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (Adams 1954: 374).

³ When capitalized, the "City" here and elsewhere refers to the city of San Francisco.

yet enjoyed massive critical attention. These texts will help us study in depth the role that this city has as an articulating factor of their countercultural nature.

Allen Ginsberg's poetics, in which the long line intended to determine the reader's breathing prevails, or Michael McClure's organic poetry, which reflects the verbal impulses of the author's whole body thought (Brakhage 2002: 39), are significant examples of the tendency in Beat literature to rely heavily on individual subjectivity. Kerouac's literary style follows in the footsteps of the aforementioned authors—central figures of the San Francisco Beat scene themselves. In his brief essay "Essentials on Spontaneous Prose" (1958), the author of *On the Road* defines the tenets that outline his language and style. Among them, the following notions stand out:

METHOD No periods separating sentence-structure already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing [...]

TIMING Nothing is muddy that *runs in time* and to laws of time—Shakespearian stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue—*no revisions* [...]

MENTAL STATE If possible write "without consciousness" in semitrance (as Yeats' later "trance writing") allowing the subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so "modern" language what conscious art would censor. (Kerouac 1979: 531-532)

Here, Kerouac advocates the riddance of every formal constraint of the written language that hinders the most spontaneous form of expression. This frantic, organic language used without formal consciousness is intended to bring out the utmost authenticity, making every single utterance a celebration of the uniqueness of the individual. We therefore find it reasonable to understand this literary style as the result of unleashing the most elementary stratum of the self. This is the instrument used by the author to produce a text that reflects, both in form and content, a philosophy of prevalence of the individual and subjective over the normative. We can conclude that the fascination for marginality that we perceive in Kerouac's works stems from this radical individualism the 1950s counterculture championed as a means to confront social homogeneity. Obviously, this philosophy is not quite free of detractors: Norman Podhoretz, one of the most hostile critics of the Beat movement, attributes to this individualism a "primitivism [that] serves first of all as a cover for an anti-intellectualism so bitter that it makes the ordinary American's hatred of eggheads seem positively benign" (Podhoretz 1979: 350). Podhoretz, regardless the accusatory tone of his words, utters a

concept that lies at the core of the subjectivism that marks Kerouac's literature: primitivism.

In such Kerouac's works as "October in the Railroad Earth" (1957), *The Dharma Bums* (1958), and *San Francisco Blues* (1991), the presence of San Francisco as a hub for marginality is pervasive. Throughout these texts, the City supplies a wide range of individuals on the margins of 1950s American mainstream: African-Americans, hoboes, bums, winos, prostitutes—that is, characters that, within the miscellaneous San Francisco scene, represent an alternative reality that normative society tends to ignore. This reality is well connected to the identity of a city that, according to Kenneth Rexroth's account, "had been settled mostly, in spite of all the romances of the overland migration, by gamblers, prostitutes, rascals, and fortune seekers who came across the Isthmus and around the Horn" (Brook, Carlsson and Peters 1998: viii). As a result, San Francisco serves as a suitable setting for the above-mentioned characters, who are associated to the most primitive stratum of the individual. Primitivism—which is a notion arguably associated to the *fellaheen* and the City itself—is revered by Kerouac in his texts as central to the authenticity of the self in opposition to the alienation imposed by social monotony. Thus, as Robert Holton notes, "Kerouac's fellahin appeared to exist in a more authentic, more real and vital space beyond the confines of [the] consumer culture" (Holton 1995: 268).

The epicenter of marginality in Kerouac's San Francisco is the South of Market district—also known as SoMa. One of its major thoroughfares, Third Street, is referred to by Leo Percepied, the narrator of *The Subterraneans* (1958), as "wild Third Street" as Mardou Fox—the African-American woman who is the object of his desire in the novel—is described wandering about it

among the lines of slugging winos and the bloody drunken Indians with bandages rolling out of alleys and the 10 cent movie house with three features and little children of skid row hotels running on the sidewalk and the pawnshops and the Negro chickenshack jukeboxes. (Kerouac 2001: 30)

We should not get confused by the gentrification this neighborhood has undergone in recent decades: in the early 1950s, South of Market still "had a substantial concentration of homeless, drug-addicted, or alcoholic street people" (Rubin 1998: 250). It is to be noted, moreover, that the district increased its black population nine times over that which it had before World War II (Averbach 1973: 215). As a consequence, this conjunction of characters situated, one way or another, on the margins of American society makes SoMa a recurrent urban setting for Kerouac's account of marginality in San Francisco.

The short story "October in the Railroad Earth" starts off with a first paragraph that reflects the contrast that takes place South of Market between its marginal individuals and those who stick to the normative American way of life:

THERE WAS A LITTLE ALLEY IN SAN FRANCISCO back of the Southern Pacific station at Third and Townsend in redbrick of drowsy lazy afternoons with everybody at work in offices in the air you feel the impending rush of their commuter frenzy as soon they'll be charging en masse from Market and Sansome buildings on foot and in buses and all well-dressed thru workingman Frisco of Walkup ?? truck drivers and even the poor grime-bemarked Third Street of lost bums even Negroes so hopeless and long left East and meanings of responsibility and try that now all they do is stand there spitting in the broken glass sometimes fifty in one afternoon against one wall at Third and Howard and here's all these Millbrae and San Carlos neat-necktied producers and commuters of America and Steel civilization rushing by [...] not even though time to be disdainful, they've got to catch 130, 132, 134, 136 all the way up to 146 till the time of evening supper in homes of the railroad earth. (Kerouac 1957: 119)

In this excerpt, Kerouac's narrator provides a thorough description of a typical scene in the district in the 1950s, opposing the obliterated Americans that inhabit it to the mainstream citizens that rush through it on their way to the train station, from where they will be returned to their suburban lives. This description, at the same time, shows the contrast between South of Market, represented by "the poor grime-bemarked Third Street," and San Francisco's Financial District, referenced by the narrator by alluding to the office buildings that crowd its heart around the intersection of Market and Sansome streets: the abrupt social gap between those excluded from the American way of life—lost bums and hopeless Negroes, according to Kerouac's words—and those who help sustain corporate America—represented in the text by the suburban "neat-necktied producers and commuters of America." Furthermore, the comparison of both concepts, at a larger scale, points at the fracture of the social homogeneity that was so heartily pursued in the mid-century United States. In this pursuit, according to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer,

individuals are tolerated only as far as their wholehearted identity with the universal is beyond question. [...] [P]seudoindividuality reigns. The individual trait is reduced to the ability of the universal so completely to mold the accidental that it can be recognized as accidental. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 124-125)

As a consequence, as Kerouac highlights, those on the normative side of society tend to reject and even vilify the individuals who break uniformity. The Beat author's narrator, as the other hipsters depicted in his texts, proves sympathetic to the marginality that pervades the South of Market neighborhood, thus making it a symbol of the reassertion of his own stance—and lifestyle—against the larger community.

Marginality notwithstanding was not new to SoMa in post-war San Francisco. After the 1906 earthquake, the district emerged as a predominantly homeless single men's quarter. During the following sixty years, until the neighborhood's redevelopment project, life in San Francisco's skid row revolved around two main epicenters of activity. One ran up Third Street, where men gathered from all over the city to gamble at poker or rummy. The other one was located at what can be regarded as the core of the City's skid row—Howard Street's stretch between Third and Fourth streets. Here, men spent their time out on the street, looking at the blackboards advertising work, drinking, and pitching pennies on the sidewalk (Averbach 1973: 205-206).

At the time Kerouac's texts were written, the term "skid row" already had a derogatory usage intended to describe an area of the City where hoboemia⁴ was forced into decline by economic developments (Averbach 1973: 206). As a result of the establishment of hoboemia South of Market, a wide range of marginal, non-normative individuals settled the neighborhood: bums, winos, prostitutes, and so forth. This has already been referenced in the above-quoted Kerouac's excerpt, as it is again later on in "October in the Railroad Earth":

one time finally on my way up Third near Market across the street from Breens, when in early 1952 I lived on Russian Hill and didn't quite dig the complete horror and humor of railroad's Third Street, a bum a thin sickly littlebum like Anton Abraham lay face down on the pavement with crutch aside and some old remnant newspaper sticking out and it seemed to me he was dead. I looked closely to see if he was breathing and he was not, another man with me was looking down and we agreed he was dead, and soon a cop came over and took and agreed and called the wagon, the little wretch weighed about 50 pounds in his bleeding count and was stone mackerel snotnose cold dead as a bleeding doornail—ah I tell you—and who could notice but other half dead deadbums bums bums bums dead

⁴ "Hoboemia" is the term used to describe that area of American cities where hoboes—who gathered in the neighborhood out of necessity in search for shelter and food—were joined by bohemians that voluntarily sought an unconventional lifestyle as a means to detach themselves from the larger community.

dead times X times X times all dead bums forever dead with nothing
and all finished. (Kerouac 1957: 123)

This is the reality of San Francisco's skid row as witnessed by Kerouac's narrator and alter ego⁵. As we can see in this excerpt, the everyday life South of Market is scrutinized by him with sympathy for—and identification with—the marginalized, the dispossessed of America, who are excluded from society and eventually even, left to death. This passage helps us understand the parallelism between social exclusion and physical death suggested by the narrator, as both notions are put on an equal footing in this text. For those who did not partake in the quest for social homogeneity in 1950s America tended to be buried by the larger community in a metaphorical way—that is, they were ostracized so as the self-idealization of Kerouac's contemporary society was not spoiled.

In *San Francisco Blues*, the poetic voice, a resident of SoMa himself, provides the reader with a privileged insight into the daily life in a district taken over by squalor and marginality. As it is disclosed at the very end, the reader enjoys a trip through the depths of the district—which are, in the same way, synonymous with those of American society at large—throughout the 79 previous choruses led by an attentive observer of the reality of San Francisco's obliterated skid rowers:

San Francisco Blues
Written in a rocking chair
In the Cameo Hotel
San Francisco Skid row
Nineteen Fifty Four. (Kerouac 1995: 81)

Thus, from his residential hotel room, the poetic voice describes the bustle that takes place around him. Special attention is paid to the activity of prostitutes and the unleashing of the lowest human passions:

Sex is an automaton
Sounding like a machine
Thru the stopped up keyhole
—Young men go fastern
Old men
Old men are passionately
breathless

⁵ It is worth noting that, in the texts that we analyze in this article, Kerouac's narrative and poetic voices may always be regarded as alter egos of the Beat author himself—that is, they are the literary counterpart of real-life Jack Kerouac in the experiences that they relate.

Young men breathe inwardly
Young women & old women
Wait

There was a sound of slapping
When the angel stole come
And the angel that had lost
Lay back satisfied. (Kerouac 1995: 16)

We can notice that even the poetic voice's passions are, inadvertently or not, unleashed in the excerpt above; his role as observer and narrator itself therefore turns into a sort of blind voyeurism.

Prostitution is joined by alcoholism in Kerouac's chronicle as the marginal nature of the SoMa district intensifies in his texts. In "October in the Railroad Earth," the narrator grants prominence to characters such as:

winos with no money, who found 21 cents left over from wine panhandlings and so stumbled in for their third or fourth touch of food in a week, as sometimes they didn't eat at all and so you'd see them in the corner puking white liquid which was a couple quarts of rancid sauterne rotgut or sweet white sherry and they had nothing on their stomachs, most of them had one leg or were on crutches and had bandages around their feet, from nicotine and alcohol poisoning together. (Kerouac 1957: 122-123)

The lifestyle of these characters is something Kerouac's narrative and poetic voices arguably seem to sympathize with. Winos and prostitutes represent individuals that defy the values that Kerouac's contemporary larger community imposes in terms of achievement and decorum. The narrator, as a hipster seeking detachment from the mainstream, sounds enthusiastic about this way of life and even about willingly submerging in it. In *The Dharma Bums*, the narrator, Ray Smith, relates:

A few days after his big farewell party Japhy and I had an argument. We went into San Francisco [...] and then went up to Skid Row in a drizzling rain [...]. As we were walking in the drizzly exciting streets [...] I got the overwhelming urge to get drunk and feel good. I bought a poorboy of ruby port and uncapped it and dragged Japhy into an alley and we drank. "You better not drink too much," he said, "you know we gotta go to Berkeley after this and attend a lecture and discussion at the Buddhist Center."
"Aw I don't wanta go to no such thing, I just wanta drink in alleys. [...] Look at that fog flyin over the alley and look at this warm ruby red port, don't it make ya feel like singing in the wind? [...] I drink for joy! [...] There's wisdom in wine, goddam it!" [...] I drained the

bottle and we went back on Sixth Street where I immediately jumped back into the same store and bought another poorboy. I was feeling fine now. (Kerouac 2006: 144)

With this rebellious yet self-destructive attitude, not only does Ray express his fascination for the atmosphere of San Francisco's skid row but he also shows how he lets himself go and be assimilated by its predominantly deviant lifestyle. "The neons of stores and bars were glowing in the gray gloom of rainy afternoon, I felt great" (Kerouac 2006: 145), Ray carries on explaining. The enthusiasm Kerouac's narrator displays thus resembles that of the hipster who mingles with the marginality of San Francisco's skid row in order to dissociate himself from mainstream society.

After this analysis of the interaction between the least normative section of the City in the 1950s and Kerouac's texts, we will focus on the main outcast figure that fascinates Kerouac: the hobo. This figure will be studied more specifically as the central marginal character that determines the relationship between the Beat author's literature and South of Market as a skid row setting.

The swift rebuilding of the City that followed the 1906 earthquake led to a great influx of both skilled and unskilled workers from all over the country. This meant the restoration of South of Market as a single men's district, where residential hotels pervaded the streets anew as a result of the great lodging demand that this influx prompted. As Averbach notes, "fifty-eight hotels and eighty lodging houses had been built by 1907 alone, the largest numbers being found along Third, Howard, and Folsom streets. Their greatest overall concentration was between First and Sixth, Market and Bryant streets" (Averbach 1973: 204). SoMa kept this trend of attraction of homeless migratory workers during the following decades. The district thus became home to San Francisco's hoboemia, where what Averbach calls hoboies' institutions flourished:

the hotels and lodging houses whose proprietors acted as bankers so that men spending their regular off-seasons⁶ in San Francisco had safekeeping for their money and would not spend it on a single spree; saloons which fed their patrons smorgasbord "free lunches" for ten or fifteen cents and sometimes doubled as informal employment agencies; and pawnshops on Third, lower Market, and the Embarcadero where a hobo might put up a tool or some clothing to pay for food, drink, or shelter when he could not stretch his winter's "stake" far enough. (Averbach 1973: 204-205)

⁶ Many of the hoboies that inhabited San Francisco's skid row were seasonal rather than full-time workers. Once their working season came to an end, they would strive to subsist during their off-season on their earnings.

Howard Street's stretch between Third and Fourth, however, was not so flourishing for the hobo community, which called the core of San Francisco skid row the "slave market." The nickname stems from the abusive practices of the employment agencies located along this block, which took advantage of hoboes' underprivileged position by charging substantial fees in exchange for precarious employment. As Averbach notes, "the semi-transient community South of Market was founded on blatant exploitation, and it understood its position as such" (Averbach 1973: 206, 209). Hoboes nevertheless failed to organize themselves in unions. Instead, they would deal with this situation by re-asserting their individualistic philosophy. Samuel E. Wallace remarks:

If employers were going to exploit [the hobo], he would do as little work as possible. If a decent wage was to be denied the homeless man, he would seek other satisfactions. Pride or skill in one's work counted for little. Instead, one proved himself in drink, travel, and experience. (Wallace 1965: 80-81)

This individualism based on the aforementioned concepts is arguably what Kerouac identified himself with. We can see this quest for the authenticity of the self continuously in the examples of Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*, his poetic voice in *San Francisco Blues*—who mingles with the San Francisco *fellaheen* by living South of Market in a skid row flophouse—, or in his narrative voice in "October in the Railroad Earth"—being himself a migratory worker based South of Market seeking movement and experience.

Of all the hoboes' informal institutions mentioned above by Averbach, dining saloons play a major role in "October in the Railroad Earth" as a means for the assimilation of Kerouac's narrator in the South of Market marginal community. During the first half of the twentieth century, affordable eateries crowded San Francisco's skid row in response to the predominance of low-income migratory workers in the district. Kerouac's narrative voice recalls:

DESPITE THE FACT I WAS A BRAKE MAN making 600 a month I kept going to the Public restaurant on Howard Street which was three eggs for 26 cents 2 eggs for 21 with this toast (hardly no butter) coffee (hardly no coffee and sugar rationed) oatmeal with dash of milk and sugar [...]. Public Hair restaurant where I ate many's the morn a 3-egg breakfast with almost dry toast and oatmeal a little saucer of, and thin sickly dishwater coffee, all to save 14 cents so in my little book proudly I could make a notation and of the day and prove that I could live comfortably in America while working seven days a week and earning 600 a month I could live on less than 17 a week which with my rent of 4.20 was okay. (Kerouac 1957: 122-123)

Here, he admits that, in spite of the fact that he earned a more than decent salary⁷, he enjoyed mingling with the hobo community in public restaurants. That is, even though he could afford a more average place to eat, he opted for public eateries where the South of Market hoboes got their inexpensive meals in much more precarious conditions.

Another symbol of Kerouac's association with the San Francisco skid row hoboes' institutions are the residential hotels—also known as single room occupancy hotels—that pervaded the neighborhood. This sort of lodging houses offered affordable rent housing—to the detriment of roominess and amenities—specifically aimed to low-wage workers, seasonal transient laborers, and recent immigrants (Groth 1989: 133-137). Kerouac's narrator in "October in the Railroad Earth" also displays his delight with his experience at the Cameo Hotel:

And there's my room, small, gray in the Sunday morning, now all the franticness of the street and night before is done with, bums sleep, maybe one or two sprawled on sidewalk with empty poorboy on a sill—my mind whirls with life. [...] There I am in my little room [...]. It's so thrilling to feel the coldness of the morning wrap around my thickquilt blankets as I lay there, watch facing and ticking me, legs spread in comfy skidrow soft sheets with soft tears or sew lines in 'em, huddled in my own skin and rich and not spending a cent on. (Kerouac 1957: 126-127)

In this sense, furthermore, Ray Smith repeats in *The Dharma Bums* this pattern of association with hobo-oriented institutions. In the passage of this novel quoted before, Smith recounted: "We went into San Francisco [...] and then went up to Skid Row in a drizzling rain to get cheap haircuts at the barber college and pook around Salvation Army⁸ and Goodwill⁹ stores in search of long underwear and stuff" (Kerouac 2006: 144). We can notice that these excerpts from Kerouac's texts show an endeavor by their respective narrators to let themselves be assimilated by the City's skid row and live on as little money as possible. This effort, as a result, suggests the rejection of the normative consume-ridden suburban life that the 1950s mainstream society in the United States championed.

⁷ According to the census data from the San Francisco Bay Area, the median income of a family in San Francisco in 1949 was \$3,923, whereas in 1959 it increased up to \$6,717 ("San Francisco City and County. Decennial Census Data 1950-1960").

⁸ The Salvation Army is a London-based Christian organization that carries out charity work and runs thrift stores.

⁹ Goodwill Industries International is another not-for-profit organization that uses its network of thrift stores to fund its community-based programs.

A consequence of the detachment from normative America was the inability of hoboes to command respect from the larger community. As Averbach puts it:

The face they presented to other segments of the urban population was not that of a roving, exploited proletariat following seasonal work at sea or in the California and western hinterlands and constantly forced to move in search of new, poorly-paid work. Rather, when the community at large encountered the single, unattached workers who made up the "homeless," hotel-residing population, they saw them between jobs as they tried to live on whatever money they had been able to make the previous season. (Averbach 1973: 206-207)

Therefore, hoboes South of Market were rejected by mainstream society and vilified as winos, semi-underworld elements, misfits, and failures (Walker 1998: 6; Averbach 1973: 211). Wallace points out that "whether the skid rower was truly vagrant, or simply an unemployed migratory or casual laborer made little or no difference to the community at large; neither worked much while living on skid row, neither had family or resources" (Wallace 1965: 18-19). This rejection does nothing but confirm the marginalization of those who do not comply with the patterns imposed by society. The establishment of these patterns entails, in Adorno and Horkheimer's words, that "anyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner. Disconnected from the mainstream, he is easily convicted of inadequacy" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 106). This is precisely the case of hoboes in San Francisco, who were heavily forced into decline by economic and social developments. Kerouac's texts reflect this reality and show sympathy for these *fellaheen* who are forced out of society, ignored, and even neglected to death due to their failure to share the values and anxieties of mainstream America.

In order to understand the complex three-way interaction between Kerouac's texts, social marginality, and the city of San Francisco, we have seen that the cohort of marginal characters provided by the South of Market district—in which the hobo stands out—represent examples of individuals who resist the social homogeneity that the 1950s American society pursued. Given Kerouac's fascination and sympathy for the dispossessed of America, we may affirm that a worship of marginality underlies his works. This cult can be read as his identification with the individualistic values that those *fellaheen* represent, which, in the eyes of the Beat counterculture, are synonymous with the most primitive, authentic stratum of the self.

San Francisco serves as host to these individuals mainly due to its liberal identity, which has attracted every sort of characters placed on the margins of normative society. Furthermore, the City, located at the westernmost end of the continent, has always served as a reception point for those who run out of land in their quest for their individual fulfillment. As Ann Garrison notes, San Francisco

is the end point of the country's westward movement [...]. There's no place left to go once you've chased your dream all the way to the Pacific, so if you're still depressed or anxious, or if you feel like you've failed, it may seem like the time and place to give up. (Garrison 1998: 118)

Therefore, its condition as a city at the very end of America's westward movement—which remains a seminal concept in the identity of the United States—, along with its liberality, makes San Francisco an ideal setting for Kerouac to grant voice to all of those excluded and ignored by mainstream society.

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