

Devotion to Solipsism:  
Religious Thought and Practice in Jack Kerouac's *Tristessa*

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When he was four years old, Jack Kerouac – born Jean-Louis Lebris de K  rouac, to French Canadian parents in the Francophone, Catholic “Little Canada” section of Lowell, Massachusetts, and called by the childhood nickname Ti Jean – lost his brother, Gerard, to rheumatic fever. In the autobiographically inspired novel Kerouac later crafted about this tragedy, the narrator, also known as Ti Jean, cries at his brother Gerard’s funeral: “*Non non non.*” Witnesses in the church assume that, as a child, he simply doesn’t understand the irrevocable reality of death, yet the narrator wants “to express somehow, ‘*Here and Now I see the ecstasy,*’ the divine and perfect ecstasy, reward without end, it has come, has been always with us, the formalities of the tomb are ignorant irrelevancies...”<sup>1</sup>

“The little Christly drama” of his brother’s beatific suffering and death opened Ti Jean’s heart to the Love of God, just as Kerouac, speaking autobiographically, held that his brother’s example acted as a template for religious understanding.<sup>2</sup> But Kerouac’s religion was a unique blend of his inherited Catholicism and his own studies in Buddhist thought. As he writes in *Visions of Gerard*, he was “destined indeed to meet, learn, understand... the Blessed Lord Buddha (and my Sweet Christ too through all his Paulian tangles and bloody crosses of heathen violence)—To awaken to pure faith in this bright one truth: All is Well, practice Kindness, Heaven is Nigh.”<sup>3</sup>

This claim that “All is Well” and “Heaven is Nigh” becomes the central refrain of Kerouac’s religious thought, reiterated throughout his literary work, coupled frequently

with the notion that the world is illusory in its transient forms, for which Kerouac borrows the Buddhist term *maya*. Trapped in a world of *maya*, we are misled by false perceptions and ego and, thus, we imagine ourselves to be suffering when, in reality, “All is Well.” This emphasis on delusionary human perception and illusory earthly reality shifts the meaning of Kerouac’s stated emphasis on the “practice [of] Kindness.” Practical ethical action in this world (feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, etc.) makes little sense if the world is nothing more than “a mind movie,” as Kerouac repeatedly claims.<sup>4</sup> Individual humans shuffle through deluded lives surrounded by so much fake scenery, all of which will fade away at the moment of death, which “makes the end of illusion and delusion... The whole world has no reality, it’s only imaginary, and what are we to do?—Nothing—*nothing*—*nothing*. Pray to be kind, wait to be patient, try to be find. No use screaming.”<sup>5</sup>

The “practice [of] kindness,” thus, as I will show, becomes for Kerouac a specific task related to writing, one he associates with the role of a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened being, in Buddhist thought, devoted to helping to liberate other beings on earth. Kerouac sees his own task as that of a *bodhisattva*, specifically “to illuminate all” sentient beings to reality as he has come to understand it.<sup>6</sup> Yet in Kerouac’s system “individual humans” aren’t quite that, either. Following from Upanishadic Advaita Vedanta, the ancient Hindu philosophical doctrine of non-dualism (i.e., that the true self is one with the ultimate Reality, all deities and forms are manifestations of one true Brahman), Kerouac holds that seeming divisions between people and even between people and animals are all just the result of *maya*. ““Don’t you realize you are God?” is what you learn when you understand the meaning that’s here before you on this heavy earth: living but to die...

help me understand that I am God—that it's all God..."<sup>7</sup> To recognize this is to experience *nirvana*, to realize that we are all, as Kerouac also says, already in Heaven – paradise is not just “Nigh,” it’s “*Here and Now*,” if only humans can see through the distorting gauze of *maya* and recognize reality for what it is.

Such imported notions as *maya*, *bodhisattva*, and *nirvana* are, in Kerouac’s writings, imposed upon his pre-existing Catholicism. However much he studied and found truth in Buddhism, he remains devoted to his Catholic upbringing. While Kerouac turned away from the institutional church – first during the 1940s and early 50s, claiming that the Church lacked relevance in the world, then, later, in the 1960s, because the Church was “substituting liberalism for refuge, ‘mixing theological verities with today’s headlines,’” his devotion to Catholic imagery continued throughout his life.<sup>8</sup> He worked with a crucifix above his desk, and, in his later years, painted crucifixion scene after crucifixion scene. Indeed, his entire oeuvre can be read as an expression of his personal religious stance, a kind of “fusion” of Catholic theology with notions taken from Buddhist philosophy and practice. As he explained it, however, no “fusion” was necessary for “Buddhism and Christianity almost kiss... For to the Buddhist the world is a manifestation of Mind Essence, due to Ignorance, the ‘Fall’ implied there, but being a manifestation it requires a purified life to abide in the realization of manifestation and epiphany and not to grasp at false and delusive visions of phenomena as real, as abiding, as blissful source.”<sup>9</sup>

As Kerouac describes it, his interest in Buddhist began after the failed love affair described in his (again, autobiographically inspired) novel *The Subterraneans*. “I didn’t

know what to do. I went home and I just sat in my room hurting. I was suffering....

Well, I went to the library to read Thoreau. I said ‘I’m going to cut out from civilisation and go back and live in the woods like Thoreau’, and I started to read Thoreau and he talked about Hindu philosophy. So I put Thoreau down and I took out, accidentally, *The Life of Buddha* by Ashvaghosa.”<sup>10</sup> This was 1953 or 1954, according to biographers, in New York.<sup>11</sup> By “the spring of 1955, at his sister’s house in North Carolina, Kerouac produced two religious texts, *Buddha Tells Us*, his version of the Surangama Sutra, and *Wake Up*, a brief biography of the Buddha.”<sup>12</sup> As outlined in his journals of religious study – published posthumously as *Some of the Dharma* – Kerouac was working back and forth from Catholic texts and texts from the Harvard Oriental Series and the Pali Text Society.<sup>13</sup> His central text, however, – both as informative and, notably, as a devotional object, carried around with him for years – was Dwight Goddard’s popularizing anthology *A Buddhist Bible*, translating the Diamond Sutra, the Surangama Sutra, and the Lankavatara Sutra along with commentary glosses, particularly “designed,” in Goddard’s words “to show the unreality of all conceptions of a personal ego.”<sup>14</sup>

As Kerouac would write in his own attempt at an American sutra, *The Scripture of Golden Eternity*, “...there is no me and no you, only one golden eternity.”<sup>15</sup> Only heaven is real, and thus all suffering is a temporary delusion. Such thought leads to the claim that “Everything’s all right,” as Ray Smith thinks in Kerouac’s novel of Buddhist practice, *The Dharma Bums*.<sup>16</sup> Here, in a story based on the encounter between Kerouac and Zen student and nature poet Gary Snyder, the Kerouac-based character (Smith) upon first meeting the Snyder character (Japhy Ryder) is told “at once that I was a great ‘Bodhisattva,’ meaning ‘great wise being’ or ‘great wise angel,’ and that I was

ornamenting this world with my sincerity.... 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."<sup>17</sup> In the course of the novel, however, this third truth becomes more and more important, and, moreover, Smith goes to great length to draw connections between Buddhist philosophy and Catholic theology: "Didn't Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn't Heaven Buddha's Nirvana?... We're all in Heaven now, ain't we?... Words, words, what's in a word? Nirvana by any other name."<sup>18</sup> Except of course, names and forms (the *nama* and *rupa* of Hindu and Buddhist tradition) are how humans distinguish how and what they perceive and conceive – we don't all realize that "we're all in Heaven now," and, as I will show, Kerouac has a great deal of trouble keeping faith in that belief himself, or at least finding any comfort in it.

Such clumsy overlay of religious vocabularies erases distinctions (all that "mythology," "names," and historically contextualized "national flavor" Ray declared his lack of interest in) in favor of a general panacea. Tathagata or Buddha is just another "word" for God or Christ or Virgin Mary, though Kerouac expands beyond such traditional representations as well, as in *Golden Eternity*, where God is synonymous with such phrases as "All is Well."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this – that everything's ok – is the truth to which Kerouac comes in his religious study, and with this knowledge comes a responsibility to teach:

"... there came over me a wave of gladness to know that all this perturbation was just a dream already ended and I didn't have to worry because I wasn't 'I' and I prayed that God, or Tathagata, would give me enough time and enough sense and

strength to be able to tell people what I knew... so they'd know what I know and not despair so much."<sup>20</sup>

In *Some of the Dharma*, his notebooks of religious contemplation, Kerouac expresses the longing for communication that will dominate the novella *Tristessa*: "I wish I could do something to ease their fears, for now I'm convinced that there's absolutely nothing to fear – sadness yes, and no name to it..."<sup>21</sup> *The sadness comes from a recognition both of the Void* of this reality and the suffering that comes with people's non-realization of said Voidness. "EVERYTHING IS ALREADY DESTROYED," but people do not grasp this and, thus, mourn.<sup>22</sup> We are, in Kerouac's system, born into mourning, born to die, but recognition of the illusory nature of the impulses toward such mourning can, itself, offer, via Enlightenment, a foretaste of Heaven, which is assured not by state of mind but by the love and grace of God – testified to by Christ as well as Buddha and the Virgin Mary, among others. As heaven's inevitability is a predetermined fact, certain questions of theodicy arise which will haunt Kerouac for the rest of his life. Why, for instance, the Fall into maya in the first place? Why – as will be expressed, with dismay, repeatedly, in *Tristessa* – did God create humans to suffer so? Notably, as well, the central salvific drama of Christ's sacrifice of Himself becomes, in Kerouac's reading, a still-central and powerful symbol, but superfluous, really, as salvation is universal, not in dependent on any act of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus's role seems more like Kerouac's own adopted "ornamental" "Bodhissatva" task, testifying to the truth and, thus, alleviating a little suffering through his words.

"I know everything's alright but I want proof and the Buddhas and the Virgin Marys are there reminding me of the solemn pledge of faith in this harsh and

stupid earth where we rage our so-called lives in a sea of worry, meat for Chicagos of Graves.”<sup>23</sup>

Kerouac’s task (viewed explicitly as like that of Buddha or Christ before him) is to speak to the suffering of the world and show it as false. In *Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac holds, for instance, that “The suffering of workers all over the world” is “a chimera, instantly.”<sup>24</sup> As I will show via a close reading of the 1960 novella *Tristessa*, such a conception leads to solipsism, offering a religious justification for dismissal of the material reality of other people’s suffering. One’s own suffering – in the form of loneliness, say, or fear – is harder to shake, however, and Kerouac, while repeatedly and emphatically describing death as an escape from suffering and, moreover, a release into the recognition of the reality of heaven, nonetheless still characterized death by the horror and fear humans holds for it. Even in the above quote about “Chicagos of Graves,” the motivation of the statement is that delusory “worry” about death. Thus, “I’m writing this book because we’re all going to die,” as Kerouac repeatedly says – a line which at once speaks to a conception of writing as conveying a spiritual teaching but also reflects the existential dread compelling Kerouac to put words to paper.<sup>25</sup> While he insists that “The world is the movie of what everything is”<sup>26</sup> and that, transcending this world (simultaneous with it but also awaiting the souls that survive our mortal and therefore illusory, void bodies) is heaven, a real reality in which we will be reunited with our lost dead (including, for Kerouac, both his brother Gerard and Adolph Hitler), it is in the contemplation of death that Kerouac seems least able to escape those human emotions that he claims have an illusory root.<sup>27</sup>

I am hardly the first to consider Kerouac’s religious worldview as a motivating factor for his work. Indeed, his literary project is explicitly framed as a work of religious

interpretation and theologizing, and several critics have offered deep and convincing analysis of aspects thereof. This includes the work of Ben Giamo, who terms Kerouac “a lapsed pre-Vatican II figure with pagan impulses and a medieval load on his conscience, let loose amid the secular strife of the modernist era”<sup>28</sup> and makes a case for parallels between Kerouac’s thought and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholic heresy of Jansenism, with its emphasis on sin and the corollary necessity of divine grace, with individual and world history as predestined by God. Indeed, Kerouac’s priest and defender, Father Morissette of Lowell, liked to say that Lowell was a “Victorian, puritanical, Jansenistic city,” a quote that dominates treatment of Catholicism in many works on Kerouac.<sup>29</sup> Other important work has been done by Nancy Grace, who parses out the personal cosmology of Kerouac’s tale of “quiltish innocent book-devouring boyhood,” 1959’s *Doctor Sax*, arguing for the uniqueness of this bricolaged apocalyptic fantasy and by John Lardas Modern, who traces the influence of the Spenglerian view of history, with a world as sinful and Fallen and continuing to fall via the corruption of civilization.<sup>30</sup>

The works of Grace and Lardas Modern are particularly useful for my exploration of religion in *Tristessa* because they have both contributed important thoughts on Kerouac’s conceptions of race and sex as they relate to his wider philosophical claims. Grace argues that Kerouac’s own upbringing – as a child, bearing “the brunt of a prejudice that labeled [the local French Canadian community] *les blanc negres*.”<sup>31</sup> – led to a sense of “hybrid status,” which contributed to his monolithization of Caucasian heritage and his essentializing of other races.<sup>32</sup> Lardas Modern’s analysis of the influence of the Spenglerian worldview on Kerouac helps to make further sense out of the use of racial categorizing in Kerouac’s thought.

When, in an early journal entry, Jack Kerouac focuses on the humble and therefore open, active sexuality of Negro women (not “prideful” and aloof like “our ‘respectable’ White girls”) he is articulating the germ of a much wider line of thought, a linkage of race and sexuality, human spiritual history and decline, to his personal theology and religious practice, and the privileged functionality, therein, of writing.<sup>33</sup> I agree with Grace that “it is simply too easy to label him racist and misogynist,” in that these terms are insufficient lenses for reading this literary work, too dismissive of the intellectual complexity – albeit repugnant – at play here.<sup>34</sup>

For one thing, Kerouac tends to collapse racial distinctions when it comes to non-white “others.” All cats, it seems, are Fellaheen in the dark; there is, in his work, a consistent conflation of “primitive” races. In *Lonesome Traveler* he describes “a perfect little Mexican (or that is to say Arab) beauty perfect and brown,” making a characteristic poetic move, mixing imagery for the exotic. Likewise, there is a marked obsession with women of those races. Again, in *Traveler*, Kerouac declares “the most beautiful women in the world are definitely English... unless like me you like em dark.”<sup>35</sup>

As Lardas Modern has shown, Kerouac’s vision of human history and race is deeply indebted to Oswald Spengler and his two-volume *The Decline of the West* (1922, 1928). The more “primitive” peoples are examples of an earlier humanity, more in tune with the cosmos, less subjected to the “Faustian” oppression of civilization. Such “Fellaheen” people offer a glimpse into the primal past and the possible, utopian future, with primitive purity approached as a practical societal cure.<sup>36</sup> For Kerouac, this schema leads to a privileging of “Indian” blood.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, “Indian” is such an important racial

category and spiritual quality for Kerouac that he frequently self-identifies as Iroquois via his family's French Canadian lineage<sup>38</sup> "The earth is an Indian thing," Kerouac writes in *On the Road*. "As essential as rocks in the desert are they [Indians] in the desert of 'history'" – a word bound in scare-quotes to indicate its dependence on the corrupt modern world of concepts.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Subterraneans*, Leo's love interest, Mardou, was given a half Cherokee ancestry, her blackness reduced to "half" in part to avoid libel, though Kerouac said "The Subterraneans is a true story about a love affair I had with a Negro girl."<sup>40</sup> In the novel, the narrator falls for the girl not only because she was mad, tiny, and a sex-pot but "maybe too because she was Negro,"<sup>41</sup> a category presented in that novel as synonymous with suffering and victimization and "the existential joy, wisdom, and nobility that comes from suffering and victimization."<sup>42</sup> However much Mardou's Negro characteristics may have attracted Leo, it is her Indian nature that he really sees, looking at but past her toward glimpses of Inca and Aztec civilization and the ancient, more innocent world.<sup>43</sup> Skeletally small, wracked by various worldly abuses, Mardou signifies a certain romantic race theory as well as a real threat.<sup>44</sup> Mardou's *blackness* leads to Leo's "last deepest final doubt," "that she was really a thief ... out to steal...my white man heart, a Negress sneaking in the world sneaking the holy white men for sacrificial rituals..."<sup>45</sup> Leo also worries about "the pull and force" of the Negress's vaginal muscles, which "being so powerful she unknowing often vice-like closes over and makes a dam-up and hurts... this contraction and greatstrength of womb." Theories are floated both that black female genitals are essentially male in structure and that the black vagina can cannibalize the white penis.<sup>46</sup> Such hyperbolic horror follows a slope from disgust and fear of the female

organ *in general* to an exaggerated terror at the likewise exaggerated sexuality of the ethnic Other. If the white vagina is “a fucking veritable GASH – a great slit between the legs / lookin more like murder than / anything else,” as Kerouac says in a letter,<sup>47</sup> then it makes sense that the black vagina might be a “mutant,” a monstrosity.

Any discussion of Kerouac and women must, of course, take his mother into account, both their close relationship and his repeated claims, in novels to playing the Oedipal role at home and in relationships. Kerouac’s oeuvre features a divide between the sexualized female and the maternal female, which finds echo in religious imagery and double resonance in the figure of Tristessa. Kerouac’s understanding of “the meaning and the truth of the Virgin Mary,” is rooted in a dualism inherent in women, whose wombs give life but also bear “the burden of earth and dirt and blood.” The Virgin Mary offers a solution, lifting this “burden” in a manner parallel to the crucifixion.<sup>48</sup> Kerouac draws a dichotomy between whores and virgins, explicit in his appreciation of those who renounce the abjection of their own physical nature through awareness and disciplined devotion parallel to his own practice in *Tristessa*.

As the ethnically *other* female is a hyperbole of the white, “*standard*” female, so too with geographic place, and that culmination of the American highway, across “the magic border,” Mexico, is given particular privilege in Kerouac’s writing not only because it is “one vast Bohemian camp” but also because here “the basic primitive, wailing humanity” exists in more pure form (two sorts of humans glimpsed in Sal’s first moments across the border are, of course, dark-skinned prostitutes and maternal old

ladies tending marijuana gardens). “The caves of Mexico,” as *Indian* places, are “where it all began and where Adam was suckled and taught to know.”<sup>49</sup> Again, the Spenglerian view of history and race finds echo – or evidence, in Kerouac’s view – here. At once “an ominous portent of America’s future,” as Lardas says, and “a land of Edenic innocence because it no longer could be characterized as a Civilization,” Mexico exemplified what America could be *again*.<sup>50</sup> Mexico, in *On the Road*, is a radically different place, its people physically and spiritually different from white Americans, its society more basically human and thus manifesting heightened abjection and sensuality.<sup>51</sup> In *Desolation Angels* this abjection makes the country “like a dirty old rag somebody finally used to wipe up spit in the men’s room,” a place characterized by venereal disease and boisterous celebrations raining flaming fireworks from the sky.<sup>52</sup> Even the cuisine is marked by cruelty and horror for Kerouac, as in one of *Tristessa*’s best passages, with Jack tearing down a road, on foot, famished, grabbing “stinking livers of sausages chopped all black white onions steaming hot in grease that crackles on the inverted fender of the grille... heats and hotsauce salsas... devouring whole mouthloads of fire... broken cow-meat hacked on the woodblock, head and all it seems, bits of grit and gristle, all mungied together on a mangy tortilla...”<sup>53</sup> While “delicious,” it is an acquired taste, like the “pictures of Mexican Pornography Girls,” hanging on the walls all “roiled and rain-stained and roll-spanned” such that they must be damply straightened in order to reveal “clouds of bosom and pelvic drapery.”<sup>54</sup> Such, again, is the human condition. In Mexico, the story is told straight – as with Negro sexuality, here the truths of human existence are displayed without the masks of white “respectability,” the deceptive, corrupt veneer of civilization. Thus, it is within the framework of Mexico, wallowing in

the Fellaheen (and thus *most* human) baseness – physical abjection, sexuality, desire, and suffering – that Kerouac can best frame his teachings, his claims to metaphysical truth. Wallowing in the hyperbolically human, Kerouac is able to best stake his claim that all this world is maya.

In the 1960 novella *Tristessa* the solipsism of Kerouac's religious system is made painfully explicit. The title character of this autobiographically-based story is a sick, Mexican, half Indian heroin addict, living with a menagerie of animals in poverty and beat squalor in a leaky shack decorated with an altar to and huge icon of the Virgin.<sup>55</sup> Dressed in “impoverished Indian Lady gloomclothes” Tristessa is nevertheless heir to that nobility and maternal quality Kerouac associates with “the Virgin Mary of Mexico.”<sup>56</sup> Her alluring physicality is, like a mirror of the abject world, also a kind of corporeal void: “she *has* no body at all,” Kerouac writes, “it is utterly lost in a little skimpy dress, then I realize she never eats, ‘her body’” – this *lack* of body – “...‘must be beautiful.’”<sup>57</sup>

“That little frail unobtainable not-there body” is central to the novella's plot, which is, in turn, a record of a spiritual trial, a dark night of the loins.<sup>58</sup> Jack, the narrator, visits Mexico and falls “in love with her,” but because of a recent devotional swing deeper into his own specific Catholic Buddhism, he's “sworn off lust for woman... sworn off sexuality”<sup>59</sup> in order to better remain aware of the reality of the universe. By refusing indulgence in the play of maya – the illusory of transient forms and desires, the world of the impermanent, egotistical, and fleshy – Jack hopes to stay focused on the *really real*, the divine promise of heavenly salvation present throughout and beyond this

mortal life. Celibacy here is a test for belief; it would be “all my own sin if I make a play for her,” Jack says, meaning a slip back into engaging in the false world of suffering as if it were real.<sup>60</sup> Yet, alas, temptation abounds. The narrator is “afraid to look and watch Tristessa remove her nylons for fear I will get a flash sight of her creamy coffee thighs and go mad.”<sup>61</sup> “I just can’t look at her for fear of the thoughts I’ll get.”<sup>62</sup>

Part One of the book runs from Saturday to Sunday, ending with Jack resisting the final thrusts of temptation as Tristessa pumps her groin in the air. Then Tristessa, “her Enlightenment... perfect” dispenses wisdom to her mendicant admirer. Yet the Sunday sermon of Tristessa is no revelatory teaching – not for Jack at least. She merely reiterates his earlier arguments: “We are nothing, you and me.” It’s no surprise that he agrees with her. Here the truth he has for some time known is voiced by a stand-in for racialized authenticity, an Indian, who is also seen by Jack to be an “angel” and a “saint” as well as a manifestation of the Virgin Mother, “her long damp expressive fingers dancing little India-Tinkle dances before my haunted eyes” assuring him that regardless of all the suffering and injustice in this world the Lord pays us back “*more*.”<sup>63</sup>

*Tristessa*, the book, is both a record of Jack’s struggle to remain “trembling and chaste” and his attempt to document his awareness of the cosmic truth around him; the entire text is an example of the composition practice Kerouac termed *sketching*: “I see the whole thing popping and parenthesizing in every direction,” he writes.<sup>64</sup>

In his appearance on the Steve Allen Show, Kerouac differentiated his “narrative prose” works (done by typewriter) with his “impressionistic prose” works (done in pencil). This is one of the later, and revolves, too, around Kerouac’s specific

understanding of the word he offers as, in answer to a question from Allen, a definition of the word “beat.” “Sympathetic,” Kerouac says.<sup>65</sup> But sympathetic to what, and in what way?

“I am sad because all la vida es dolorosa,” Jack tells Tristessa early on, explicitly, he says, “hoping to teach her Number One of the Four Great Truths... what could be truer?...All Life is Sad.”<sup>66</sup> Yet, later, in a bar surrounded by Mexican strangers, Jack asks “Que es la vida? What is life?” “to prove I’m philosophical and smart.”<sup>67</sup> The similarity of the two scenes points to the problematic tension between the desire for egolessness and plain old egotistical desire. At times it seems that Kerouac wants “Enlightenment” just as he wants to be a great and famous writer.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, there is a paradox to possessing the desire to move beyond desire, to the self identifying with the desire to move beyond self. And while religions offer a variety of ways of dealing with this paradox, for Kerouac the response is interior withdrawal. He doesn’t have sex with Tristessa, and he tries to teach her the salvific (but superfluous, because she’ll get saved anyway; not to mention that she KNOWS it already, by race) truth, but he also reduces her to just another illusory bit of décor in the “Golden Movie inside my own mind without substance” that is the world.<sup>69</sup> At one point he prays to God, who “lovedst all sentient life,” at once asking why he has “to sin and do the sign of the Cross” and answering himself by explaining, once again, how “life’s not real,” yet, at the same time, “you see a beautiful woman or something you can’t get away from wanting because it is there in front of you...”<sup>70</sup>

Jack’s solution to the sin of engaging in the illusory desires of the world is rooted in his understanding of Buddhist renunciation and mediation, as in the parable he relates

of a man who, trying to level ground for the feet of the Buddha is told “First level your own mind.”<sup>71</sup> But Jack’s response isn’t so much to level his mind as to dig deeper into it, and the “sympathy” he expresses is ultimately not for those around him who he sees suffering but for himself, because he is unable to reach them. Such sympathy is expressed, in particular, in relation to the animals in Tristessa’s shack. The cat, the dog, the dove, the rooster: “All the little animals in the room know me and love me and I love them though they may not know them,” he writes.<sup>72</sup> Yet Jack can’t know anyone because he’s so deeply insulated in his *self*, projecting his own fantasies apocalyptic and beatific onto the world as it is, reading his own unfurling scrolls of “golden thoughts” from out of the skull of a dove or kitty that, like everyone and everything in this book, is purely a representation of the illusory veil... only the writer is a real presence, with his cosmic awareness and its documentation in text the only really real action.<sup>73</sup>

The little cat is a perfect example. This Mexican cat differs from American cats much as Mexicans differ from (white) Americans. “Everything is so poor in Mexico, people are poor, and yet everything is happy and carefree.” Likewise, the cat, “dirty as rags,” infested with fleas, “he doesn’t mind,” doesn’t scratch, “just endures,” “Cat Buddha style.” In America “automatons sitting at wheels automatically [kill] cats every day,” but “this cat will die the normal Mexican death – by old age or disease...”<sup>74</sup> Contemplating this creature, Jack knows “all of a sudden all of us will go to heaven straight up from where we are,” so he says to Tristessa’s companion “Your cat is having golden thoughts... but she doesn’t understand.”<sup>75</sup>

The “wish to communicate” is a recurring and ardent desire in this text, one perpetually frustrated in the events it chronicles but hopefully redeemed by the eventual reception of the book-as-book. The bittersweet “Teaching” that we’re all “born to die” but that heaven makes this ok is linked to an explicit call for compassion, but this is most often structured such that, collapsing all categories and boundaries, it becomes practically meaningless: “When the hell will people realize that all living beings whether human or animals, whether earthly or from other planets, are representatives of God, and that they should be treated as such, that all things whether living or inanimates and whether alive, dead, or unborn, and whether in the form of matter or empty space, are simply the body of God?”<sup>76</sup> There’s an embarrassment of clauses here. It’s not about treating your fellow or the stranger a certain way but, as Kerouac sees it through his cosmic lens, about inanimate objects and animals and everything, “whether in the form of matter or empty space.”

Compare, for instance, Kerouac’s rage, in *Some of the Dharma*, against “MARTIN BOOBER,” who “with all his fancy veins sticking out of his forehead... still wont face the final truth---of *Nil Substantum*.” Some of the vitriol here is plain old Jew hatred, deeply engrained in Kerouac, but he frames his hatred in terms of his understanding of cosmic truth, attacking Buber for his ethics of engagement – of recognizing the otherness of the other and remaining open to the risky, always unique, immediate, and exclusive *encounter* of one person with another. For Kerouac, such focus on recognition of the otherness of other humans – and concern for the ethics of interaction with them – is pure fallacy. “The Jews,” Kerouac writes, “are proud of being a ‘person’---as tho it was some great achievement---The old Hasidic saying ‘For *my* sake

the world was created' reflects the Jew's profound inability to detach himself from ego-self-belief---The final depersonalized Aryan Indian blank truth and highest perfect final fact of Everything-is-Emptiness is beyond their best scribes---Yet, in truth, one must know, there are no Jews no Indians, nothing to discuss, only everything's alright forever and forever a n d f o r e v e r .....<sup>77</sup>

Allen Ginsberg – who likewise engaged in an interpretation of non-dualism, insisting that All was One – often cited how, on one of his last visits to Kerouac's home, Kerouac and his mother commented on what a shame it was that Hitler didn't finish off the Jews. Yet Hitler's frequent appearance in Kerouac's references to a roster of who'll be in Heaven seems less a reward for a job well done and more a logical extension of his religious thought. The Void, as illusory, is not worth weeping over – and thus the Holocaust, for instance, wasn't the big deal deluded Jews try to make it into. The only sad thing about it is that others take its illusory nature for truth. I trust the terror of such a system is obvious.

But Kerouac can go further, culling ethical prescriptions from his Buddhist readings -- "Practice kindness and you will soon attain highest perfect wisdom," for instance – and exegetically defusing them. As he reads it, "kindness is only a word... Kindness is as imaginary as unkindness, as empty---Empty concepts all." He goes on to list examples of such "empty concepts," from his mother's affection to "the cruelty of Hitler," which he identifies as "imprintations of false imagination of sentience in the void"<sup>78</sup>

When he seems to catch the potential problematic of this system – wherein there are no Jews and no Indians, ultimately – he passes the metaphysical buck, so to speak,

writing that “Noxzema and Peanut Butter are of the same intrinsic nature, but for the purposes of life on earth dont go tasting them to compare.”<sup>79</sup> The rub here is that he is all too ready to leave it for others to taste them, or, more specifically, to leave it to others to deal with the “false imagination” of starvation, oppression, exploitation, and abuse. He’s safe, insulated except for the occasional contemplation of that which, anyway, is ultimately false. Jack *thinks* about cow brains and the cruelty of slaughter as he munches those tasty grease-hot tacos, but he feels no call to act in response to the situation – except to testify, in his writings, to his cosmic gloss on it. At one point in *Tristessa* we are presented with the rhetorical question, “...supposing everybody in the world devoted himself to helping others all day long, because of a dream or a vision of the freedom of eternity, then wouldnt the world be a garden? A Garden of Arden,” is the answer, meaning – in the Shakespearean code Kerouac and Ginsberg used with each other, referencing the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* – a garden full of illusions and lies, maya and desire.<sup>80</sup> Thus, in *Tristessa*, Jack doesn’t waste his energy helping others; rather, he devotes it to writing, to sketching scenes he lives through, testifying to his vision of the world.

It’s no great stretch, of course, to see celibacy here as likewise motivated by solipsism. Avoiding sex not only addresses Kerouac’s fears of disease but also of rejection. The risks of communication are illustrated by *Tristessa* and Jack being able to speak each other’s languages only in butchered paraphrase, exemplifying the core loneliness of all Kerouac protagonists, the worry that the guy just can’t express himself, has, literally, “no language,” which is, of course, an aspect of the larger worry: “Worst of all, would it be, to have her push me aside and say ‘No, no, no.’”<sup>81</sup> Convinced that we are

all, in our emptiness, One – all God, all Void, etc. – Kerouac nonetheless can't seem to handle reminders from other humans that, in this so-called illusory world, they still believe themselves to be separate from him, and act with their own distinct wills.

Part One of the novella ends with Tristessa parroting Jack's earlier words: "We are nothing. / You and Me."<sup>82</sup> "I pivot in my feelings and brood," Jack says in Part Two, which is an apt description of Kerouac's mood swings. The novella's second part is a full reversal of the tone of the first, starting with "that vomity feeling of Mexico," "this ugh raggedy crap scene full of puke and thieves and dying."<sup>83</sup> Here Jack is not happy that he resisted Tristessa's physical charms a year earlier, calling himself "too pious," saying, "I had some silly ascetic or celibacious notion that I must not touch a woman – My touch might have saved her." Things have changed south of the border, however; specifically, Tristessa has changed, is on goofballs now, was paralyzed for the month before "down one whole leg and her arms were covered with cysts," plus, on top of all this, another character has declared that he is in love with her and wants to marry her.<sup>84</sup>

"Art thou Masochist, Lord, art thou Indian Giver, art thou Hater?" Jack prays.<sup>85</sup> It is a not-so-subtle sign of his system's unsatisfying nature that Jack keeps raising some complaints directly to the divine. "Ah Above, what you doin with you children?—You with your sad compassionate and nay-would-I-ever-say unbeautiful face, what you doin with your stolen children you stole from your mind to think a thought because you were bored or you were Mind—shouldna done it, Lord, Awakenerhood, shouldna played the suffering-and-dying game with the children in your mind..."<sup>86</sup> Earlier he heads from Tristessa's house because he's "become depressed" at the truth that "Everyone of us [is]

*born to die.*<sup>87</sup> Yet this – the phrase he “could write... on the wall and on Walls all over America” – is a central notion and oft-worded refrain to the book,<sup>88</sup> one that is resolved, supposedly, by the concurrent belief in heaven. “Living but to die, here we wait on this shelf, and up in heaven is all that gold open caramel...”<sup>89</sup> Yet, as *Tristessa* unfolds, the efficacy of such a belief to actually *help* – to alleviate suffering or offer assurance – is profoundly doubted.

So *Tristessa* is now sicker than before, more obsessed about drugs. She lies to and insults Jack, humiliates him, claims to hate him. He, then, ends up drunk and senseless in a dangerous dive. Soon his poems and notebook are stolen; his wallet is taken, he throws his remaining money on the floor, and all this is presented in the novella as exemplification of our human ontological condition.<sup>90</sup> When his “sad mutilated blue Madonna”<sup>91</sup> shows up he wonders if she’s come to save him, though, of course, she’s just there to score a shot, but saves him nevertheless<sup>92</sup> Like “Angels in hell,” they stumble down the street.<sup>93</sup> She buys him the drinks he needs in order to maintain, but the earth’s chill is so strong he shivers uncontrollably and, making fun of this, *Tristessa* falls, the first of three times. In a scene re-envisioning Christ’s passion, *Tristessa*, bloody and bleeding, stumbles up only to “lead the Way” – capital W – and all Jack can do “is stumble behind her.”<sup>94</sup> He wants to sleep with her, but circumstances – and hostile landladies – intervene; *Tristessa* catches a bus and is gone into the night, with Jack left inconsolable, even by his own system, which he blames for her hating him. “Why does she hate me? Because I’m so smart,”<sup>95</sup> he thinks, just as, earlier, stumbling down the street with the barely functioning *Tristessa* and Cruz, Jack sees straight past the illusory sufferings of the moment, pondering how “from the Golden Eternal Heaven bends God

blessing us with his face which I can only describe as being infinitely sorry (compassionate), that is, infinite with understanding of suffering, the sight of that Face would make you cry – I’ve seen it, in a vision...”.<sup>96</sup> Yet alone in his bed, watching the door as if Tristessa might miraculously appear, Jack is left with little comfort from all his metaphysical smarts. All his knowledge of the truths of the universe offers no comfort from his (supposedly illusory) pain. In his loneliness, he becomes speechless. That “night little Mexican cop whistles blow that all is well, and all is all wrong, all is tragic, – I dont know what to say.”<sup>97</sup>

I’m interested in *Tristessa* both because it is an example of Kerouac’s literary skill at its absolute best – conveying a striking, naked vulnerability coupled with oftentimes genius wordplay and a mining of childhood memories, a raw and poignant book – but also because here Kerouac’s religious construction, and its consequent ethical ramifications, are given center stage, exposing a solipsism that I take to speak volumes toward that other famous aspect of Kerouac, outside of the texts, the abandoner of old friends, the anti-Semite and political reactionary, paranoid racist, anti-anti-Vietnam protestor, bitter, greedy, figure of the late letters and too many drunken, pathetic interviews.<sup>98</sup>

There is much to learn, I feel, from both. “I wanted some of that,” Jack says, contemplating Tristessa’s ass as the text of *Tristessa* closes, “But no, that’s enough, hear no more,” which feels, to me, like the right way to end it, this story.<sup>99</sup> Yet the book foreshadows its author’s future, as in his sloppy, sprawling *Paris Review* interview with a baffled and obviously uncomfortable Ted Berrigan, where Kerouac, hardly apropos of

anything, returns to Tristessa: “I didn’t write in the book how I finally nailed her. You know? I did. I finally nailed her.... I got my little nogood piece.”<sup>100</sup>

No golden thoughts, these, but useful to consider, nonetheless. *Tristessa*’s most useful teaching may be as cautionary tale. The rather tacked-on, redemptive “happy” ending of the novella is merely a restatement of the earlier claims of truth – a cosmic status quo – described as a “Golden Movie inside my own mind without substance”<sup>101</sup> in which everyone and everything else is just so much illusory décor – a movie of maya which the self watches, aware that it’s all false and from God, and that, indeed, the division between beings and God is false “for how can there be two, not-one?” Though Jack slumps away, at the bottom of the novella’s last page, to “go light candles to the Madonna... paint the Madonna, and eat ice cream, benny and bread.” All empty actions in an empty world, of course, but tasty and exhilarating in their own cheap, temporal way – on the way to the grave, alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1963), 147.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>6</sup> See Allen Ginsberg, “Negative Capability: Kerouac’s Buddhist Ethics,” *Tricycle Magazine*, accessed online <http://www.tricycle.com/ancestors/negative-capability-kerouacs-buddhist-ethic>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Sorrell. “Novelists and Ethnicity: Jack Kerouac and Grace Metalious as French-Americans,” *MELUS*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Varieties of Ethnic Criticism. (Spring, 1982, pp. 37-52), 40-41.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, (New York: Viking, 1997), 275.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Kerouac interviewed by Alfred Aronowitz for “The Year for Zen,” *Escapade*, October 1960, quoted in Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats, A Portrait*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 194.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, (New York: Harcourt, 1984), 131.

<sup>12</sup> James T. Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 56.

<sup>13</sup> See Kerouac’s reading list to Allen Ginsberg in Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters 1957-1969*, edited with an Introduction and Commentary by Ann Charters, (New York: Viking, 1999), 415.

<sup>14</sup> Dwight Goddard, ed. *A Buddhist Bible*, (Boston: Beacon, 1970), vi. See also Sarah Haynes, “An Exploration of Jack Kerouac’s Buddhism: Life and Text,” in *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol.6, No. 2, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1980), 25.

<sup>16</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 147.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Kerouac, *Scripture*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* 35. In “Biographical Resume, Fall 1957,” Kerouac writes “My chief activity (seriously) is praying that all living things and all things may go to Heaven. It is said in ancient sutras, that if this prayer and wish is sincere, the deed is already accomplished.” Jack Kerouac, *Heaven and Other Poems*, Grey Fox Press, San Francisco, 1959, 39.

<sup>21</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>23</sup> “I realize all the uncountable manifestations the thinking-mind invents to place wall of horror before its pure perfect realization that there is no wall and no horror just Transcendental Empty Kissable Milk Light of Everlasting Eternity’s true and perfectly empty nature. -- I know everything’s alright but I want proof and the Buddhas and the Virgin Marys are there reminding me of the solemn pledge of faith in this harsh and stupid earth where we rage our so-called lives in a sea of worry, meat for Chicagos of Graves...” Jack Kerouac, *Tristessa*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 16.

<sup>24</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 368.

<sup>26</sup> Kerouac, *Scripture*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Kerouac, “Heaven and Other Poems.”

<sup>28</sup> Ben Giomo, *Jack Kerouac, The Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2000), 79.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Miles, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Nancy M. Grace. *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Palgrave, 2007), particularly Chapter 4, pp. 126-9. John Lardas Modern, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> “Complicating matters, Kerouac claimed Irish and Native-American descent, an ancestral mix that, whether actual or a product of family lore, aligned him with peoples long denied personhood. Kerouac then grew up an ambivalent amalgamation, the maligned and homeless ‘Canuck,’ a hybrid of hybrids.” Nancy McCampbell Grace, “A White Man in Love: A Study of Race, Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Jack Kerouac’s *Maggie Cassidy*, *The Subterraneans*, and *Tristessa*,” *College Literature*, Vol. 27., No. 1, Teaching Beat Literature (Winter, 2000, pp. 39-62), 41. As Grace explains in footnote #2, page 61, she corresponded with Kerouac biographer Gerald Nicosia in 1998 for background information on the phrase *les blanc negres*. Nicosia replied: “When I did my interviews in Lowell in 1977-1978, many of the French Canadians and others told me of the pejorative use of the term ‘les blanc negres’ to refer to French Canadians, though I gathered the term was more in use early in the century, when the French Canadian ghettos were more clearly defined.... Part of that came from the fact that the French did not generally push their kids academically, toward college, etc., as the Greeks and Irish did, but took the lowest-paying, back-breaking jobs, like blacks in other big cities. Also, some of the French neighborhoods really were run-down, trashy tenements, which could easily suggest an inner-city ghetto. On top of that, many of the French had language problems, ... and I was told that French people would often be teased about their inability to pronounce the word ‘three,’ (t’ree).”

<sup>32</sup> Grace, “White Man,” 40.

<sup>33</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*, edited with an introduction by Douglas Brinkley, (New York: Viking, 2004), 136. The journal entry begins with a reference to a Nellie Lutcher song: “I met a guy while walking down the street... he took my hand, and held my hand... and I love him ‘deed I do.” Kerouac glosses these lyrics by writing “Just like that! *This* is the greatness of the Negro, right there, yet I can see how many of our ‘respectable’ White girls would laugh at the words of that song. *Their loving is more prideful*. But still – a great humanity is coming, I can feel it in my bones, I’m not worried, and I’m glad.”

<sup>34</sup> Grace, “White Man,” 97.

<sup>35</sup> Jack Kerouac. *Lonesome Traveler*, (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 144.

<sup>36</sup> Lardas Modern, 180 and 124.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. “The American seamen were throwing oranges at the Eskimos, trying to hit them, laughing coarsely – but the little Mongolians merely smiled their idiot tender welcomes. My fellow countrymen embarrassed me no end and considerably for I know that these Eskimos are a great and hardy Indian people, that they have their gods and mythology, that they know all the secrets of this weird land, and that they have morals and an honor that far surpasses ours.” Jack Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education, 1935-1946*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 136.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Miklos Zsedely, Northport Public Library Oral History Project April 14, 1964, in *Empty Phantoms: Interviews and Encounters with Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Paul Maher, Jr. (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2005), 228.

<sup>39</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On The Road*, (Penguin Books, New York: 1991), 282.

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Miles, 190.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans*, (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 2. The setting of the novel was also changed from New York to San Francisco to avoid a libel suit.

<sup>42</sup> Such romance of race is, as Panish has notes, “an indication of how deeply racism is embedded in American discourse that the African American characters and art forms that are depicted in Kerouac’s novels are not substantially different from ‘Negro symbols’ used by the romantic racialists over a century earlier to help eradicate slavery.” Jon Panish. “Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*: A Study of ‘Romantic Primitivism,’” pp. 107-123 in *MELUS*, Vol 19, No 3, Intertextualities (Autumn, 1994), 107.

<sup>43</sup> Parish, 118. “—the song of the Asia hunting gang clanking down the final Alaskan rib of earth to New World Howls (in their eyes and Mardou’s eyes now the eventual Kingdom of Inca Maya and vast Azteca shining of gold snake and temples as novel as Greek, Egypt, the long sleek crack jaws and flattened noses of Mongolian geniuses creating arts in temple rooms and the leap of their jaws to speak, till the Cortez Spaniards, the Pizarro weary old-world sissified pantalooned Dutch bums came smashing, canebrake savannahs to find shining cities of Indian Eyes high, landscaped, boulevarded, ritualled, heralded, beflagged in that selfsame New World Sun the beating heart held up to it) – her heart beating in the Frisco rain, on the fence, facing last facts, ready to go run down the land now and go back and fold in again where she was and were was all –” Kerouac, *Subterraneans*, 25-26. Compare the collapse of categories into “Indian” “...that stretches in a belt around the equatorial belly of the world from Malaya (the long fingernail of China) to India the great subcontinent to Arabia to Morocco to the selfsame deserts and jungles of Mexico and over the waves to Polynesia to mystic Siam of the Yellow Robe and on around, on around, so that you can hear the same mournful wail by the rotted walls of Cadiz, Spain, that you hear 12,000 miles around in the depths of Benares the Capital of the World. These people were unmistakably Indians and were not at all like the Pedros and Panchoes of silly civilized American lore – they had high cheekbones, and slanted eyes, and soft ways; they were not fools, they were not clowns; they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it.” Kerouac, *Road*, 280-1.

<sup>44</sup> Marked as physically other – weak, vulnerable, victimized – in ways other than their racial otherness, as well: “Mardou’s is black and small, wracked by drug and alcohol use, psychic breakdown, male violence, and sexual excess. Tristessa’s... Aztec ancestry is the brown veneer for a sarcophagus of rotting flesh housing the bones of a woman so addicted to morphine she can barely walk or talk..” Grace, “White,” 107.

<sup>45</sup> Kerouac, *Subterraneans*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>47</sup> Kerouac, *Letters*, 499, to Allen Ginsberg, July 14, 1955.

<sup>48</sup> If, argues Kerouac, sin “could be lifted from one woman, then it may be lifted from another, or to be more precise, the burden is already lifted because the Virgin Mary *was*; just as our sins are expiated by the sacrifice of the great Lord Jesus, without any of us having to be crucified on a cross.” This is from one of his long letters to Neal Cassady, from 1950-51, when he was writing “the confession of my entire life to you... in installments.” Kerouac, *Letters*, 246, Dec 28, 1950. Note also the scene in *Subterraneans* where

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Leo's (Perceped, an Oedipus reference) mother appears to him in a vision, hovering above the railroad tracks, saying, in French, "Poor Little Leo... men suffer so, you're alone in the world, I'll take care of you," 104.

<sup>49</sup> Kerouac, *Road*, 280-1.

<sup>50</sup> Lardas Modern, 180. More specifically, the solution to society's spiritual and social problems could be found by studying Mexico. See *Ibid.*, 248 and Kerouac, *Letters*, 447 and Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 114.

<sup>51</sup> "It's not the kind of sweat we have, it's oily and it's *always there* because it's *always* hot the year round," explains Dean, regarding Mexican bodies. He then goes on to say "What that must do to their souls! How different they must be in their private concerns and evaluations and wishes!" Kerouac, *Road*, 298.

<sup>52</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 277. Simon catches gonorrhea as he didn't "bothered to clean up with the special salve medicine," as the narrator had. *Ibid.*, 275. See 254 and 256 for passages explaining why the narrator writes, out of reverence for life, life itself as the Holy Ghost.

<sup>53</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 39-40.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>55</sup> From which Jack at first lights his cigarette, a ritual faux pas, one he corrects later with "a little French prayer... making emphasis on Dame because of Damema the Mother of Buddhas." *Ibid.*, 30. "There is no difference" between Jesus and Buddha, Kerouac tells Ted Berrigan in an interview. "But there is a difference between the original Buddhist of India and the Buddha of Vietnam, who just shaves his hair and puts on a yellow robe and is a communist agitating agent." *Empty Phantoms: Interviews and Encounters with Jack Kerouac*. Edited by Paul Maher, Jr. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005), 303.

<sup>56</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-1.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>59</sup> "I'm trying to remember my place and my position in eternity. I have sworn off lust with woman, -- sworn off lust for lust's sake, -- sworn off sexuality and the inhibiting impulse -- I want to enter the Holy Stream and be safe on my way to the other shore..." *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>63</sup> "My friends ees seek, I geev them shot,' beautiful Tristessa of Dolours is telling me with her long damp expressive fingers dancing little India-Tinkle dances before my haunted eyes. '--Ees when, *cuando*, my friend does not pays me back, don I dont care. Because' pointing up with a straight expression into my eyes, finger aloft, 'My Lord pay me -- and he pay me *more*...' *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

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<sup>65</sup> Jack Kerouac on The Steve Allen Show, 1959.

<sup>66</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>68</sup> Also, of course, as Jones points out, the desire for abolition of ego clashes with Kerouac's approach to writing based on personal memory. Jones, 28.

<sup>69</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Note that the animals are also incorporated into Kerouac's racial conception: the dove's eyes are "perfect, dark, pools, mysterious, almost Oriental... so much like Tristessa's eyes...." Moreover, the dove – or, as Kerouac puts it, "Dove," capitalizing the term for this symbolic bird – "instead of flying through the bleak air... waits in her golden corner of the world waiting for perfect purity of death.... Poor Dove, poor eyes." His meditation on the bird becomes a meditation on the girl, Tristessa, who lacks the religious sensibility of the bird, to patiently wait for death and release and eternity. *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 29, 31.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> *Kerouac and Friends: A Beat Generation Album*, edited by Fred W. McDarrah, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 270-1.

<sup>77</sup> Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma*, 382.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>80</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 89.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 88, 63.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>98</sup> Kerouac to Sterling Lord: “Sterling, I feel that Route 66 and Al Zugsmith and all that represents the fact that my ideas are being lifted left and right, depriving me of maybe a million, and just between you and me being lifted by Jews, I should really subtitle *Big Sur: Another Idea for Jews to Steal...*” In *Letters*, 301. Cf. “The real enemy is the Communist, the Jew,” quoted in Jack McClintock, “This is How the Ride Ends,” *Esquire* (March 1970), 188. “Then here comes my Pa, father Emil A. Duluoz, fat, puffing on cigar, pushing admirals aside, comes up to my bedside and yells ‘Good boy, tell that goddamn Roosevelt and his ugly wife where to get off! All a bunch of Communists. The Germans should not be our enemies but out Allies. This is a war for the Marxist Communist Jews and you are a victim of the whole plot.’” Kerouac, *Vanity*, 163. Also see the bizarre (drunken?) link of Negroes with the spread of cancer in Kerouac’s Interview with Miklos Zsedely, Northport Public Library Oral History Project April 14, 1964, in *Empty Phantoms*, 234-5 or the way Kerouac baffles Ben Hecht on The Ben Hecht Show, WABC-TV Oct 17, 1958, also in *Empty Phantoms*, 74. Kerouac’s drunken performance on William F Buckley’s “Firing Line,” 1968, should also be noted; he dies less than a year after.

<sup>99</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 96.

<sup>100</sup> *Empty*, 308-9.

<sup>101</sup> Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 20.