

Article

# Sad Paradise: Jack Kerouac's Nostalgic Buddhism

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**Abstract:** Jack Kerouac's study of Buddhism started in earnest in 1953 and is traditionally believed to have ended in 1958. This paper considers the relationship between Kerouac's Buddhist practice and his multi-layered nostalgia. Based on a close reading of his unpublished diaries from the mid-1950s through mid-1960s, I argue that Buddhism was a means of coping with his suffering and spiritual uncertainty. Kerouac's nostalgic Buddhism was a product of orientalist interpretations of the religion that allowed him to replace his idealized version of his past with an idealized form of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Kerouac; Buddhism in America; nostalgia

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Twentieth-century American writer Jack Kerouac spent his early adulthood enjoying an unfettered existence as he traveled around the United States in search of adventure, wisdom, and good times.<sup>2</sup> At the forefront of Kerouac's writing during the 1950s was the pursuit of experience. For Kerouac and fellow Beat Generation writers in post-World War II America, life was meant to be embodied. That is, lived, performed, and felt. Experienced. The Beat Generation was a movement that greatly valued the accumulation of sensory experiences, whether realized through drugs, jazz, literature, religion, or sex. In the late 1950s, Kerouac pulled away from his contemporaries, alienating his friends and fellow writers through his conservative politics, uncontrollable alcoholism, frequent moves, unhealthy attachment to his mother, and a likely undiagnosed depression.<sup>3</sup> Kerouac's mental state is of importance here as it is connected to his nostalgic sentiments and his turn to Buddhism in the 1950s.

This essay focuses on Kerouac's Buddhist Period in 1953–1958 through the mid-1960s, a time during which he withdrew from his fellow Beat writers. Of primary concern is the role of nostalgia in the development of Kerouac's Buddhist practice. The following explores the connection between Kerouac's Buddhist practice and his multilayered nostalgia. Though Kerouac's nostalgia can be categorized into three separate areas, their boundaries are blurry. In what follows, I consider Kerouac's nostalgia for his pre-World War II life, his pre-fame life, and his nostalgic Buddhism. Roughly, his nostalgia corresponds to pre-1945, 1945–1957, and 1953 onwards. I argue that nostalgia provided Kerouac with a means of coping with his internal and spiritual conflicts, but in the end resulted in the replacement of his idealized version of his past with an idealized form of Buddhism. On the one hand, his pre-WWII and pre-fame nostalgia are a by-product of modernity. On the other, his nostalgic Buddhism is more complex and a legacy of romantic, orientalist perspectives of Asia and its

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Marylou Murray for her insightful comments on early drafts and her excellent skills as an editor. Also, I extend my gratitude to Mary Catherine Kinniburgh and Lyndsi Barnes of the New York Public Library for their guidance and knowledge of the Kerouac collection.

<sup>2</sup> Though Kerouac's two most popular novels, *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, were published in 1957 and 1958, they are based on his travels and experiences from 1947–1950 and 1955–1957, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Though not a medical doctor or psychologist, I am basing this additional factor on a detailed reading of Kerouac's diaries from the early 1950s to his death in 1969. See Johnson for a discussion of Kerouac's depressive episodes, exacerbated by his use of alcohol and Benzedrine.

religions. Ultimately, his own nostalgic sentimentalities, as seen in his novels and poetry, resulted in the commodification of his image and cemented his status as a pop culture icon, a status he deeply despised, but which continues unabated to this day.

This paper is part of a larger project that examines Kerouac's impact on the development of Buddhism in America. It is based on approximately one hundred hours of archival research conducted during three separate trips to the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library (NYPL) between January 2017 and October 2018.<sup>4</sup> The NYPL houses the majority of Kerouac's diaries, notebooks, and other unpublished writing. The documents most relevant for the topic under discussion include Kerouac's published works, as well as his unpublished diaries and notebooks in which he obsessively recorded his day-to-day life, then meticulously catalogued. More specifically, the analysis considers his unpublished works for a nearly fifteen-year period from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.<sup>5</sup> All but ten of Kerouac's fifty-five diaries were consulted, in addition to miscellaneous documents in the Berg Collection's enormous Kerouac collection.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. On Nostalgia

The study of nostalgia remains a popular topic across a wide variety of academic disciplines—medicine, psychology, history, and sociology, to name a few.<sup>7</sup> Boym writes, "Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, "[a]t first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition."<sup>9</sup> Thus, nostalgia is a modern condition, a byproduct of technological advancements. For Kerouac, his nostalgia was mediated by postwar technological developments including movies and music, as well as air travel and infrastructure improvements such as the interstate system.

Twenty-first century scholarship no longer considers nostalgia a completely negative affliction. Rather, nostalgia is now viewed as part of a creative process, full of potential and enabling individuals to cope with major life changes.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Batcho notes that nostalgia is now viewed as a fundamental component of human experience which, though often bittersweet, can enhance one's mood and serve as a means to maintain self-identity.<sup>11</sup> However, as will be seen below, the nostalgia in Kerouac's writing reveals an individual struggling with attachments to an idealized past, much like the understanding of nostalgia depicted by Pierro, Pica, et al.: "People look to the past to provide a narrative structure for their lives, to make sense of regretted mistakes, and to forge a sense of belonging by recalling and affirming relationships with attachment figures."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, attachment to the past can be propel one forward into a more positive mode of being. For Kerouac, his nostalgic tendencies allowed him to fully actualize and mature his spiritual nature, resulting in his interpretation of Buddhism and incorporation of it into his life. As Boym notes, "[m]odern nostalgia is a mourning for the impossibility

<sup>4</sup> The New York Public Library Berg Collection houses the Kerouac Collection which it acquired in 2001, but did not open to the public for research until 2006. The collection that is comprised of ninety manuscript boxes worth of material.

<sup>5</sup> Kerouac gradually stopped writing in his daily diaries in the mid-1960s with very few entries in the two years leading up to his death in October 1969.

<sup>6</sup> The ten diaries not consulted were those that pre-dated the start of Kerouac's Buddhist Period in December 1953.

<sup>7</sup> For an examination of the history of nostalgia, see Boym.

<sup>8</sup> (Boym 2001, p. xiii).

<sup>9</sup> (Boym 2001, p. xv).

<sup>10</sup> (Atia and Davies 2010, p. 183).

<sup>11</sup> (Batcho 2013, p. 170).

<sup>12</sup> (Pierro et al. 2013, p. 653).

of mythical return, for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values; it could be a secular expression of a spiritual longing, a nostalgia for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the Edenic unity of time and space before entry into history. The nostalgic is looking for a spiritual addressee.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Kerouac’s nostalgic Buddhism is unsurprising considering his earlier nostalgia, romantic longings, and ongoing spiritual quest. In other words, it is a continuation of the spiritual longing found in his pre-Buddhist Period writing.

### 3. On Kerouac

In March 1922, American literary and pop culture icon, Jack Kerouac, was born into a working-class French-Canadian Catholic family in Lowell, Massachusetts. Kerouac’s early childhood experiences, particularly the death of his older brother Gerard and indeed the town of Lowell itself, greatly shaped his identity, religious beliefs, and nostalgic sensibilities. Kerouac’s autobiographical publications, known collectively as the Duluoz Legend,<sup>14</sup> revolve around his life as a young man in postwar America, but spend a significant amount of time reflecting on his childhood experiences. Regarding Kerouac’s religious practice, the Duluoz Legend is a coalescence of his childhood Catholicism and the Buddhism he turned to at the age of thirty-one.

In 1957, at the age of thirty-five, Kerouac garnered attention from mainstream America, and quickly gained a global audience, with the publication of his controversial novel *On the Road*.<sup>15</sup> The novel catapulted Kerouac to fame for a number of reasons. First, *On the Road* shattered the postwar dream of suburban America as it advocated for a lifestyle that was the complete antithesis of the materialism and conformity of postwar mainstream society. Second, as with his fellow Beat writers, salacious topics and antinomian behavior—drug use and homosexuality, for example—were in the forefront of his writing. And finally, Kerouac’s writing style was unique; his methodology was controversial and his spontaneous prose much criticized for its lack of traditional narrative structure. While *On the Road* remains his most famous work, Kerouac, in his short life of forty-seven years, was a prolific writer, both published and unpublished.<sup>16</sup> *On the Road* introduces readers to his early interest in Buddhism and what was for the 1950s an unconventional lifestyle, a life driven by wanderlust and the pursuit of Truth. Buddhism became the cornerstone of later novels and poetry, specifically *The Dharma Bums*, *Mexico City Blues*, and *Desolation Angels*.

Throughout his books, readers find Kerouac conflicted about his religious beliefs. As he had been raised Catholic by French-Canadian parents, Kerouac’s interest in Buddhism was a source of both internal and familial conflict, his mother, whom he called Mémère, and sister unable to understand his appreciation of Buddhism. This conflict is fully realized in a posthumous publication of Kerouac’s more personal writings, *Some of the Dharma* (1999), a scattered collection of poems, prose, and scribbles on Buddhism. In addition to his Duluoz Legend accounts and musings on Buddhism, Kerouac also wrote more “traditional” Buddhist texts, most notably *Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (1960) and the posthumously published *Wake Up: Life of the Buddha* (2008).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> (Boym 2001, p. 8).

<sup>14</sup> The books that should be included in the Duluoz Legend are often debated by Kerouac scholars, regardless of the fact that Kerouac listed the novels in a 1960 diary. See the following link for a summary of the debate and a photo of the 1960 diary entry: <http://thedailybeatblog.blogspot.com/2018/02/jack-kerouac-duluoz-legend.html>.

<sup>15</sup> The commonly told story is that Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in a spontaneous burst of creativity fueled by Benzedrine over a roughly three-week period in 1951. While not entirely false, Kerouac had worked on earlier drafts and, while he did complete a draft in a three-week period, the novel is largely based on his very detailed daily diary entries taken during his travels.

<sup>16</sup> On 20 October 1969, Kerouac experienced an internal hemorrhage, complicated by cirrhosis, from which he was unable to recover due to the damage inflicted by decades of alcohol abuse. The number of published Kerouac books includes: fourteen novels, eight posthumously published novels, thirteen books of poetry, five works of non-fiction, and multiple collections of letters and interviews.

<sup>17</sup> Kerouac’s retelling of the Buddha’s life story is unsurprising considering the centrality of Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita* to his study of Buddhism. The *Buddhacarita* is a Sanskrit composition from the early second century C.E. and offers a retelling of the Buddha’s life story. Written in the style of an epic poem, the text is divided into twenty-eight sections that detail the

Kerouac's nostalgia was deeply connected to post-World War II America, reflecting a yearning for his childhood and the town of his youth, both of which were highly idealized and complemented the heavily romanticized lifestyle promoted in his writing. Looking beyond his printed works to his unpublished diaries and personal correspondence gives us a glimpse of a Kerouac overcome by a nostalgia not fully articulated in his published works. This paper considers more heavily the Buddhist elements of his spiritual writing and how he reconciled his religious practice with the nostalgia that, I argue, was complicit in his faithful return to the Catholicism of his youth. Towards the end of his life, Kerouac's nostalgic longing for his New England childhood surpassed his nostalgia for an idealized Buddhist practice. Kerouac's pre-fame nostalgia was rooted in his childhood and a product of postwar modernity. Whereas, his nostalgic Buddhism was the product colonial orientalist perspectives.

The aim of this paper is not to provide a detailed discussion of Kerouac's Buddhist practice. Furthermore, the following does not delve into the question, frequently raised in discussions of Kerouac's Buddhism, of the legitimacy or authenticity of said practice. In many ways, the question of authenticity is irrelevant. For the purposes here, it is important to note that regardless of how deeply Kerouac understood Buddhism, his interpretation of Buddhism continues to influence the development of Buddhism in America. As Borup notes in his discussion of Buddhism and popular culture, it is important " . . . to analyze such popularization, entertainmentization and mediatization of Buddhism not as deviant misunderstandings in a neo-liberal consumer market, but as cultural phenomena with their own rationale in a broader perspective. Rather than seeing 'content' (teaching, practice, institution) as the only prime mover, such developments are understood here as framing conditions and transmission technologies in the overall transformation and adaptation processes of the religion."<sup>18</sup> I will note that Kerouac's Buddhist practice is far more complex than typically portrayed. Most accounts limit his Buddhist practice to a very short period of time, 1953–1958, his so-called "Buddhist Period." A detailed reading of his unpublished materials presents a far different picture and a much longer engagement with Buddhism that in fact continued into the mid-1960s. It is true that he returned to Catholicism later in life, arguably having never left it entirely behind, but his diaries attest to a continuous interest in Buddhism that is often overlooked and not clearly presented in his published works.

Kerouac's diaries reveal an individual attached to an idealized past—his brother, his hometown, and his Catholicism, attachments he was aware of and attempted to work through with the help of Buddhism. Following the publication of *On the Road* in 1957, Kerouac's increasing fame was matched by his increasing alcohol intake. His diaries reveal his struggle with the subculture—Beat Generation—he had helped create, and his resultant feelings of alienation from his contemporaries in both New York and the Bay Area. The Beat lifestyle with its unattached, non-conforming wanderlust featured in his writing conflicted with his nostalgic remembrances, thus feeding his sense of alienation. Pierro, Pica, et al. note that, "one of the primary functions of nostalgia is to induce positive mood or a sense of belongingness."<sup>19</sup> Yet, Kerouac's fixation on his idealized past only served to further separate him from his friends and his Buddhist practice and propelled him into Mémère's Catholic embrace.

Kerouac's nostalgia can be placed into three overlapping categories:

- (1) **Pre-World War II nostalgia** for his hometown, his childhood, his French-Canadian, Catholic identity, and his brother and father;
- (2) **Nostalgic Buddhism** that ebbed and flowed from 1953–1969;
- (3) **Pre-fame nostalgia** for the period between 1945 and until 1957 characterized by travel, writing, and Beat friendships.

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Buddha's life from beginning to end. There are several English translations of the text. Kerouac read Samuel Beal's 1883 translation from the 5th-century C.E. Chinese text by Dharmakṣema and E.B. Cowell's 1894 translation from the extant Sanskrit, both of which are included in F. Max Müller's collection *Sacred Books of the East*.

<sup>18</sup> (Borup 2016, p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> (Pierro et al. 2013, p. 654).

Like many in postwar America, Kerouac longed for a simpler past in the wake of the suburbanization of the country, as the burgeoning middle class pursued the American Dream. However, his postwar nostalgia was more than a yearning for simpler times; for Kerouac, his nostalgic focus on the prewar years was a focus on his childhood, and more specifically on his family's heritage and home, on his deceased father, and, most importantly, on the divine nature of his brother.

Kerouac's personal identity was greatly defined by the suffering he experienced as child in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, and was memorialized in the Duluoz Legend. In the early twentieth century, Lowell was a small but thriving mill town with a "Little Canada" neighborhood with a significant francophone population. It is the francophone community in Quebec to which Kerouac's family traced their roots, and which Kerouac idealized in his published and unpublished writing.

Kerouac's Duluoz Legend reveals a significant amount about his childhood in New England, romanticizing the very few years during which his family was intact. For example, *Visions of Gerard* paints a picture of a happy, loving family despite Gerard's debilitating illness. Kerouac affectionally recalls Christmas morning in 1925 and the gifts each child received.<sup>20</sup> He ends the scene, "I basked in all this just like you would expect someone who deserved it, to bask in eternal bliss . . ." <sup>21</sup> A few pages later, Kerouac tenderly reminisces about a seemingly perfect family breakfast. "But comes morning and a temporary cessation of his pain and Ma's up making oatmeal in the kitchen, the steam from the stove is fragrant and comes and steams Gerard's bedroom window and gives everything a wonderful new quality of gladness, of simple attempt—he earth and the flesh be harsh, but there's comradeship below—I'm making you some nice oatmeal, Gerard, and some nice toasts—wait another five minutes, I'll put you that on a tray and we'll have a nice breakfast together."<sup>22</sup> When Kerouac was four, nine-year-old Gerard died of rheumatic fever. Kerouac's father turned to alcohol to assuage his grief, while Mémère, a frequent drinker herself, turned towards her Catholic faith. Throughout his diaries and *Visions of Gerard*, Kerouac prays to his older brother, refers to him as a saint, and in many instances as an angel. For the Catholic Kerouac, the turning of his older brother into a guardian angel makes sense. The yearning for help with confronting his own suffering, and that of his dying brother's, was a recurring theme in Kerouac's writing. It was these experiences of suffering that made Buddhism so attractive to Kerouac. Ultimately, changing the angelic Gerard to a bodhisattva.

For instance, several diary entries attribute great compassion to Gerard despite the immense suffering he experienced as a boy, and in an entry as recent as May 1961, Kerouac prays to Gerard, alongside Jesus, Mary, and Avalokiteśvara. A clearer expression of Gerard's bodhisattva status is found in *Visions of Gerard*, Kerouac writes in poetic form:

"O Lord, Ethereal Flower,  
 Messenger from Perfectness,  
 Hearer and Answerer of Prayer,  
 Raise thy diamond hand,  
 Bring to naught,  
 Destroy,  
 Exterminate—  
 O thou Sustainer,  
 Sustain all who are in extremity—  
 Bless all living and dying things in  
     the endless past of the ethereal flower,  
 Bless all living and dying things in

<sup>20</sup> *Visions of Gerard* was written during Kerouac's Buddhist Period in 1956 but was not published until 1963. It serves as the first entry in the Duluoz Legend even though it was written later than some of his other autobiographical works.

<sup>21</sup> *Visions of Gerard*, (Kerouac 1987, p. 67)

<sup>22</sup> *Visions of Gerard*, (Kerouac 1987, pp. 70–71).

the endless present of the ethereal flower,  
Bless all living and dying things in  
the endless future of the ethereal flower,  
amen.

Unceasing compassion flows from Gerard to the world even while he groans in the very middle of his extremity.<sup>23</sup> For Kerouac, Gerard's bodhisattva-like abilities extended beyond that of a guardian angel to include caring for all the suffering beings in the face of his own hardships.

For Kerouac, his childhood experiences and family's French-Canadian heritage had lasting impacts. Both of Kerouac's parents were born in Quebec and moved south to Massachusetts via New Hampshire in search of jobs in the booming mill towns of New England.<sup>24</sup> Kerouac's nostalgia extended to ancestors whom he had never met. He longed for the homeland of his ancestors, so attached to this familial identity that he traveled to France in the hopes of tracing his ancestry through Canada back to France. His family had settled in a community of French-Canadians in Massachusetts prior to his birth, yet, he wrote nostalgically about Quebec.<sup>25</sup> Though born in America, Kerouac's attachment to Canada is found in his writing. Skinazi writes in reference to Kerouac in *On the Road* "... employing a language and heritage that harken back to French Canada to create artful pictures of the American road ..."<sup>26</sup> His French-Canadian heritage was intrinsic to his being, as Beaulieu notes, "Because Jack always identified with French Canada it never occurred to him to say he was Franco-American."<sup>27</sup>

It has been argued elsewhere that Kerouac's books are by their very nature spiritual, his quest while on the road a spiritual journey.<sup>28</sup> His unpublished diaries are largely focused on religious matters, allowing the reader to trace the ebb and flow of his religious practice.

In December 1953, Kerouac was introduced to Buddhism by fellow *On the Road* traveler Neal Cassady.<sup>29</sup> Kerouac's earlier diaries, prior to 1953, reflect his prior knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism, most certainly influenced by his appreciation of nineteenth-century Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman. While staying at the Cassady's house, Kerouac began his study of Buddhism, having gone to the San Jose public library to check out books on Buddhism. Kerouac's diaries and personal correspondence from late 1953 into 1954 reveal that he committed himself quite quickly to the teachings of the Buddha.

Kerouac and the Beat Generation rose to fame through the postwar alienation that crept across America. The key players of the Beat Generation thrived on the margins of American society, both in their lives and in their writing.<sup>30</sup> Kerouac's novels championed a life on the fringes, instead of a life spent chasing the American Dream as portrayed in the 1950s and 1960s on *The Adventures of Ozzy and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver*. The other irony that the nostalgia he felt for the prewar freedom of the road, a breaking away from the American Dream through travel and Buddhism, ultimately resulted in his pop icon status.

#### 4. On Kerouac's Buddhism

Despite being credited with popularizing Buddhism in America and the prevalence of Buddhism in several of his novels and poetry collections, as well as the publication of three Buddhist focused

<sup>23</sup> *Visions of Gerard* (Kerouac 1987, p. 70).

<sup>24</sup> See Maher Jr. for details about both sides of Kerouac's family.

<sup>25</sup> Kerouac's family spoke a French-Canadian dialect. In 2014, a book containing Kerouac's previously unpublished French writings was published called *La vie est d'hommage*. (Skinazi 2010, p. 52).

<sup>27</sup> (Beaulieu 1979, p. 122).

<sup>28</sup> See Gewirtz, (Gewirtz 2007, chp. 5) "The Buddhist Christian."

<sup>29</sup> Neal Cassady was never influenced by Buddhism to the same extent as Kerouac and later Allen Ginsberg. However, in the early to mid-1950s, the period during which Kerouac turned to Buddhism, Cassady and his wife Carolyn were reading the teaching of clairvoyant Edgar Cayce.

<sup>30</sup> See Panish for a discussion of the idealized and essentialized perspective Kerouac adopts towards racial minorities in his writing, particularly, *The Subterraneans* (Kerouac 1994).

works, his Buddhist practice has yet to receive a book-length consideration.<sup>31</sup> His published works present Buddhism as the answer to his suffering and in line with the spontaneity and freedom he expounds in rejection of postwar America. This is evident early in *The Dharma Bums* when Ray Smith (Kerouac's character) describes Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder's character). Regarding Japhy's vast knowledge of Buddhism, Ray says, "[h]e knew all the details of Tibetan, Chinese, Mahayana, Hinayana, Japanese and even Burmese Buddhism but 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* . . ." <sup>32</sup> For Kerouac, and his character Ray, Buddhism could be reduced to a salve for the human condition.<sup>33</sup> In accordance with his source material and western conceptions of Buddhism, Kerouac was less concerned with the mythology and ritual of the religion than the manner in which it alleviated his suffering. In chapter five, Japhy says, "[y]ou know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values but and when I discovered Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived in a previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins in that lifetime I was being degraded to a more grievous domain of existence and my karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom."<sup>34</sup> And later in his *sutra*, titled *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, published in 1960, when recalling a religious experience, he writes, "[i]t was perfect, the golden solitude, the golden emptiness, Something-Or-Other, something surely humble. There was a rapturous ring of silence abiding perfectly. There was no question of being alive or not being alive, of likes and dislikes, of near or far, no question of giving or gratitude, no question of mercy or judgment, or of suffering or its opposite or anything."<sup>35</sup> Kerouac's suffering, whether brought on by his addictions or as a result of his postwar pessimism, made sense when he discovered Buddhism. His nostalgia for his youth, brother, and idealized family were replaced by a romanticized Buddhism. Through an analysis of his unpublished diaries, Kerouac's Buddhism comes into focus as more complex than previously depicted/believed, serving as influential force and constant in his life from 1953 to the mid-1960s. When the above quote from *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* is read alongside Kerouac's unpublished works from the time the *sūtra* was written in 1956, we get a clear picture of his involvement with Buddhism. For instance, at the time Kerouac wrote his published *sutra*, he was also working on an extensive rewrite and reinterpretation of the *Diamond Sūtra* that remains unpublished but will be discussed below.

Kerouac's entry point into the study of Buddhism was, for the most part, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century translations, including F. Max Müller's fifty-volume collection titled *Sacred Books of the East*, and Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, which contains many translations of Buddhist sutras, and includes: *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra*, *Diamond Sūtra (Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra)*, and *Heart Sūtra (Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya)*.<sup>36</sup> Kerouac's diaries clearly indicate that the *Diamond Sūtra* most resonated

<sup>31</sup> Also, (Giamo 2000; Haynes 2005; Lardas 2000; Tomkinson 1995).

<sup>32</sup> (Kerouac 1986, p. 12).

<sup>33</sup> Kerouac's archival documents, not limited to his diaries, often refer to the miracle of the Dharma and its ability to alleviate suffering. In a diary entry from early 1961, he refers to the Buddha as nothing more than realistic about suffering and the way out of it.

<sup>34</sup> (Kerouac 1986, p. 31).

<sup>35</sup> (Kerouac 2001, p. 59).

<sup>36</sup> When one examines the source material in Kerouac's diaries, both Goddard and Müller are the most commonly cited, but Kerouac's interaction with Goddard's text makes it the overwhelming favorite. It can be argued that the favoritism Kerouac showed for Goddard's text is likely due to its ease of transport, as it is known that he stole a copy from a library that he said he'd eventually return (See his September 8, 1958 letter to Allen Ginsberg). Whereas, the size of Müller's collection would have been prohibitive for Kerouac's ongoing study of Buddhism. Though a fifty-volume collection of translations, *Sacred Books of the East* contains nine volumes of Buddhist texts, and at least seven were consulted by Kerouac. To a lesser extent, Kerouac also consulted Paul Carus' *The Gospel of Buddha* for translations of Buddhist texts. All three collections can be found online at [www.sacred-texts.com](http://www.sacred-texts.com).

with him. Initially, his interest in Buddhism was not limited to a particular school, as he read whatever he had access to, which in postwar America was not a lot. However, the majority of the material he read was Mahāyāna in origin and, more often than not, Zen in orientation. One can well argue that the prevalence of Zen in Kerouac's writing and Buddhist practice was reflective of his friendship with Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen and of the fact that Zen was popular amongst his peer group and, more broadly, white American males than other types of Buddhism in 1950s America.<sup>37</sup> Kerouac was inconsistent in his adherence to a particular school of Buddhism. He was critical of different schools at different points in his life, as reflected in both his published and unpublished writing. For instance, he told Snyder, "I'm not a Zen Buddhist, I'm a serious Buddhist, I'm an old-fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism."<sup>38</sup> Here, Kerouac's vision of his Buddhist practice parallels his idealized vision of the religion. However, in his diaries and in a 1958 letter to Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac was often dismissive of the "Hinayana earlier crude moral stratagems."<sup>39</sup> Regardless of his inconsistency, Kerouac's diaries are overwhelmingly focused on Mahāyāna texts and teachings.

As noted above, the overwhelming concern for Buddhist Kerouac was the religion's focus on suffering (*duḥkha*). The premature death of his brother, his desire to be respected as a writer, and his struggles with alcoholism were, for Buddhist Kerouac, hurdles he was unable to overcome. His diaries reflect the near constant turmoil he experienced. It makes sense that he turned to Buddhism with its focus on attachment and desire it resonated with him and his yearning for the past and ongoing drinking problem. A close reading of his diaries reveals that Buddhism offered him a modicum of, though temporary, relief. While not drinking any less, he was cognizant of and accepted his problems and Buddhism seemed to provide him with a means to understand and deal with his addictions and past experiences. In many ways, Kerouac replaced his nostalgia for his past with a romanticized, nostalgia Buddhism.

Kerouac had limited access to Buddhism when compared to the average twenty-first century American. With *A Buddhist Bible* as his guide, Kerouac immersed himself in the study of sūtras, including the "transliteration" of sūtras, and his attempts to translate them into French.<sup>40</sup> He engaged with Buddhism in any form available to him, eventually finding Buddhist friends in Gary Snyder and Whalen.<sup>41</sup> A few years into his Buddhist practice, at the urging of Snyder, Kerouac composed his own sūtra titled *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* in 1956 although it remained unpublished until 1960. In addition to producing the above sūtra, Kerouac spent countless hours writing about Buddhism in his diaries. Eventually, he collected the material into the posthumously published *Some of the Dharma*.

While *Some of the Dharma* contains a significant amount of Kerouac's thoughts on Buddhism, it only touches the surface of his Buddhist poetry, diaries, and personal correspondence, included in his unpublished works. For instance, during his time in Northport, New York with Mémère, Kerouac wrote another short unpublished sūtra called *The Northport Sūtra*.<sup>42</sup> *The Northport Sūtra* is a dialogue between Kerouac and a nameless individual on the ignorance of existence where he uses a tree as an example. After a discussion of the existence and non-existence of the tree, Kerouac concludes by asserting the emptiness of all things and that compassion is what characterizes people and the Golden Eternity.<sup>43</sup> Kerouac wrote hundreds of Buddhist-themed haikus, drunken scribbles, and even the start

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<sup>37</sup> Gary Snyder, the character Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*, greatly informed Kerouac's Buddhist practice. Snyder later received Zen training in Japan from where he continued to offer Kerouac advice via mail. Additionally, in postwar America, Zen was continuing to gain in popularity. For instance, D. T. Suzuki was active during Kerouac's Buddhist Period. Kerouac and Ginsberg met Suzuki in New York City in the summer of 1957. See Nicosia for additional details, p. 579.

<sup>38</sup> (Charters 1994, p. 248).

<sup>39</sup> (Charters 1999, p. 171).

<sup>40</sup> Kerouac incorrectly referred to copying and typing of sutras as his "transliterations."

<sup>41</sup> Snyder and Whalen were Kerouac's closest friends with an interest in Buddhism. Allen Ginsberg turned to Buddhism long after Kerouac grew disillusioned with it. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, William S. Burroughs had little tolerance for Kerouac's Buddhist practice.

<sup>42</sup> NYPL 19.47—*The Northport Sūtra* is signed by Kerouac and dated 12 September 1958, Northport, NY.

<sup>43</sup> Kerouac often referred to *nirvāṇa* as the golden eternity.

of a movie script called *Being a Tathāgata*. Most of this material remains unpublished; however, in 1956, Kerouac did publish some of his Buddhist poetry in the *Berkeley Bussei*, a Bay Area publication of the Berkeley Young Buddhist Association put out by the Berkeley Jōdo shinshū community. In yet another example of the intensity of Kerouac's Buddhist studies, just as he famously wrote and typed *On the Road* in the form of a scroll, he wrote a new version of the *Diamond Sūtra* onto a scroll nearly ten feet in length.<sup>44</sup> His scroll version was *The Diamond Vow of God's Wisdom*. However, his diaries refer to the *Diamond Sūtra* more often as *The Diamondcutter of Perfect Knowing* or simply *The Diamondcutter*. Kerouac's rewriting of the text was done to facilitate his actual practice of Buddhism. The scroll is divided by days of the week which correspond to one of the six perfections (*pāramitā*) and ending with *samādhi* on Saturday. Kerouac's division of the text by day reflects the meticulousness with which he dated and catalogued his writing, but arguably, was also meant to offer discipline for his practice and an easy entry point in to the canonical literature for the Americans he hoped to convert to Buddhism.

Kerouac has been referred to as a literary Buddhist and is often criticized for his lack of sustained meditation practice. Though in an account of the time Kerouac spent with his friends Whalen, Snyder, and Ginsberg, Fields writes, "[e]xcept for Snyder, who sat regularly on his rolled-up sleeping bag for half an hour or so every morning, and Whalen who sat occasionally, the Buddhism was mostly literary. Kerouac's sitting remained idiosyncratic." Fields then quotes Whalen, "he [Kerouac] was incapable of sitting for more than a few minutes at a time . . . His knees were ruined by playing football . . . They wouldn't bend without great pain, I guess. He never learned to sit in that proper sort of meditation position. Even had he been able to, his head wouldn't have stopped long enough for him to endure it. He was too nervous. But he thought it was a good idea."<sup>45</sup> To discount Kerouac because of his physical inability to "sit in that proper sort of meditation position" reflects the western Buddhist focus on meditation as an essential element of practicing Buddhism, when in fact millions of Buddhists then and now spend very little, if any, time practicing meditation. Regardless, Kerouac's diaries from spring and summer 1959 and into 1960 reveal he continued to engage in meditation and yoga practice well beyond the end of his so-called "Buddhist Period" (1953–1958). Kerouac's Spring 1960 diary reveals his interest in Buddhism remained high. In mid-April, he meditated, followed by weeks of work on his version of the *Diamond Sūtra* throughout May, ending with yoga postures and breath work.<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, Kerouac did not distinguish between his Buddhist meditation practice and Hindu Yoga. A conflation that remains common amongst modern western Buddhists.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, Kerouac's picking and combining of elements from different religious traditions and types of Buddhism was standard in his attempts to find relief from his suffering.

The nostalgic nature of Kerouac's Buddhism is evident in how he engaged with the Buddha and his teachings in an idealized, romanticized manner. In *Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac writes, "[t]he great mystery and astonishing discovery of Indian Philosophy or Buddha is, that in reality there is only perfect emptiness and silence and all this rigamarole we see, hear, feel, taste, smell, touch and think about is originating from that first defilement of individuation . . ." <sup>48</sup> In his posthumously published life of the Buddha, *Wake Up!*, Kerouac writes:

"People didn't know that the actual Buddha was a handsome young prince who suddenly began brooding in his father's palace, staring through the dancing girls as though they weren't there, at the age of 29, till finally and emphatically he threw up his hands and rode out to the forest on his war horse and cut off his long golden hair with his sword and sat

<sup>44</sup> The scroll is located in the NYPL archive. In May 2017, I requested to view the scroll but was unable to due to its fragile state. I requested that the NYPL Conservation Department repair the scroll and, in October 2018, I was able to open, read, and photograph the scroll. The scroll is dated as November 11, 1957, Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.

<sup>45</sup> (Fields 1992, p. 214).

<sup>46</sup> NYPL 57.4 Diary 21 Spring 1960.

<sup>47</sup> See Andrea R. Jain (Jain 2014) *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* for additional discussion of the conflation of Hindu yoga and Buddhist meditation.

<sup>48</sup> *Some of the Dharma*, (Kerouac 1999, p. 11).

down with the holy men of the India of his day and died at the age of 80 a lean venerable wanderer of the ancient roads and elephant woods. This man was no slob-like figure of mirth, but a serious and tragic prophet, the Jesus Christ of India and almost all of Asia."<sup>49</sup>

The image of the Buddha portrayed in the above passage is representative of Kerouac's nostalgic Buddhism, idealized and romanticized, and very much a product of the orientalist translations that served as his source material. In both his published and unpublished writing, Kerouac romanticized and idealized places, people, music, and religion. Five years later, in his diary from the Summer of 1960, Kerouac reminisces about the past, common in his diaries from the 1960s, and noted the nostalgia he experienced while serving as a fire lookout. And earlier in the diary, in what appears to be a lengthy drunken entry, he writes about the benefits of Zen practice and returning to the dharma in order to teach others.<sup>50</sup> These entries reveal a suffering Kerouac, determined to return to a time, a place, and the Buddhism that alleviated his pain, albeit a short-lived respite. The very thing that made it possible for Kerouac to capture the popular imagination was his ability to present himself as an unhappy, suffering individual, ensnared by his nostalgia, who presents a romanticized lifestyle as the salve to ease society's pains. When looking at Kerouac's Buddhism and considering his romantic longing for the wisdom of the Buddha, the issue of orientalism needs to be addressed. The majority of Kerouac's Buddhist reading materials were nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English translations of Buddhist texts, including the work of D. T. Suzuki. Thus, the texts were translated by individuals rooted in colonial and orientalist perspectives, and often biased and filtered through a Christian lens. Undoubtedly, Kerouac perpetuated the essentialism and orientalism that characterized his source material.

## 5. Conclusions

The nostalgia Kerouac felt for his youth and pre-fame life were supplanted when he encountered postwar American Buddhism. His study of the religion provided him with the means to understand his suffering and attachment to the past and, through its colonial orientalist lens, he was able to formulate a version of Buddhism built on his romantic tendencies. Ironically, Kerouac's nostalgia for prewar life espoused in his two most famous novels resulted in one of the anxieties that caused him the most suffering—fame. Kerouac's non-religious nostalgia and his pursuit of direct experience led to his solidification as an American pop culture icon.<sup>51</sup> His novels, in their rejection of modern 1950s–1960s America, laid the groundwork for his enshrinement in the pop culture hall of fame, representative of the process of commodified nostalgia. The lifestyle that Kerouac nostalgically wrote about in a quasi-religious, mystical manner is what made him popular, and resulted in the commodification of all things Kerouac related, which was exactly the consumerism of postwar America that he condemned. In its commodification of Buddhism and Kerouac, American popular culture has perpetuated the idealized images prevalent in Kerouac's nostalgia, including his orientalist-mediated Buddhism.

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<sup>49</sup> *Wake Up!*, (Kerouac 2009, p. 7).

<sup>50</sup> NYPL 57.5 Diary 22 Summer 1960.

<sup>51</sup> Kerouac's image, writing, and Buddhism have been used for many years. Some examples of this commodification include: t-shirts, bookmarks, word art, four Hollywood movies in fifteen years (which he tried to do during his life), a promotional campaign for The Gap, excerpts from *On the Road* read aloud during a Volvo commercial, and the online travel company Orbitz ran a series of *On the Road* retro promotional posters to commemorate its sixtieth anniversary.

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