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Sean Deskin
University of New Orleans

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Entropy in Two American Road Narratives

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
concentration in American literature

by

Sean Deskin

B.A. Texas State University, 2004

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Dedication

For my mother and father, thanks.

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Abstract

Tony Tanner's book *City of Words* analyzes American literature from 1950-1970; in the chapter entitled "Everything Running Down" the theme of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, is explored and revealed to be a common motif within many works of American literature. Tanner's analysis does not specifically address the presence of entropy within the genre of the American road narrative; when considering his analysis presented in "Everything Running Down" with Kris Lackey's analysis of American road narratives presented in his book *RoadFrames*, the presence of entropy and how it is applied within the American road narrative becomes apparent. Although Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* were published over sixty years apart from one another and are seemingly disparate texts, these two texts reveal the thematic use of entropy which connects them in an ongoing dialogue within the genre of the American road narrative.

American literature, entropy, post-apocalyptic literature, Transcendentalism, road narrative, realism

Though Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) are two seemingly disparate road narratives, McCarthy creates a narrative driven, like Kerouac's, by entropy. Tony Tanner devotes a chapter in his book *City of Words* to the theme of entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, and relates it to literature: "Taken in its broadest sense . . . [entropy] mean[s] the increasing disorder of energy moving at random within a closed system, finally arriving at total inertia" (*City* 142). He cites entropy as a major thematic preoccupation of American novelists from 1950 to 1970. In the chapter entitled "Everything Running Down" Tanner claims that "the frequency with which 'entropy' occurs, as a word or as a tendency, is in itself a phenomenon pointing to a disposition of the American imagination which we should take notice of" (*City* 141). Tanner provides an analysis of the fiction of novelists such as William S. Burroughs, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, and Susan Sontag to demonstrate how these authors handled the concept in at least one novel or short story. Though Tanner formulated this thematic model nearly forty years ago, his analysis is still pertinent to American road narratives because the concept of entropy, as we shall see, is interwoven with many aspects of traveling: the motives for taking to the road, the disbursement of energy during the journey, and the survey of a society's disbursement of its own energies.

I will apply Tanner's interpretation of entropy to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Tanner's essay "Everything Running Down," when linked with Kris Lackey's analysis of American road narratives in *RoadFrames*, not only provides the contemporary reader with a framework for understanding the traditions from which the American road narrative emerged but also contextualizes some of its hitherto unrecognized thematic preoccupations. An examination of how each of these authors uses the concept of

entropy will help us trace some of the broader patterns of how it is used to shape post-WWII American fictional road narratives.

Tanner claims that the modern and contemporary American novelist's interest in entropy is due in part to Henry Adams' theory of history:

> In his "Letter to American Teachers of History" (1909) Adams starts by referring directly to the second law of thermodynamics and quotes from Clausius, "The Entropy of the Universe tends toward a maximum." This, says Adams, "to the vulgar and ignorant historian meant only that the ash-heap was constantly increasing in size." (*City* 149)

Tanner points out that Adams notes that the law of entropy affects human existence; it "applies to all vital processes even more rigidly than to mechanical" (*City* 149). For Tanner, Adams's theories on physics and history explain why American novelists share, for example, the "widespread fear of the tendency of all things towards eventual homogeneity" (*City* 142), the dread of arrest, suspicion of order, and the obsession "with the basic mystery of force and energy" (*City* 150). This "ubiquitous dread" of entropy found in American literature is especially pervasive in the road narrative because this genre requires that its protagonists be mobile. This mobility is also an isolating experience for these protagonists, who, during their journeys away from their societies, become isolated on the road, which can accelerate personal entropy. Tanner explains that much of American literature focuses on characters who, either willfully, or because of the world around them, are "turning themselves into 'isolated systems'" (*City* 146), initiating the entropic process: "they take in a decreasing amount of information, sensory data, even food, with the result that the sense of their own personal entropy is heightened and this sense is then projected over the world around them (*City* 146-7). The road experiences

in Kerouac's and McCarthy's novels feature protagonists whose sense of personal entropy emerges as they become isolated during their journeys. Eventually, the characters' personal entropy increases until either a catastrophe (which takes the form of mental debilitation or even death or suicide) or an intervention (which comes in the form of interpersonal communication) occurs, which can either increase or disrupt these characters' tendencies toward entropy. In both novels isolation proves to be a catastrophic element which initiates entropy within the characters, their social enclaves (I am using the term enclave to refer to any family, social peer group, sect, etc. that maintains its cohesion in the midst of entropic surroundings), and their societies. For example, the closing scene in *OTR* depicts Dean as socially isolated and in poor mental health as a result of entropy; in *TR* the mother grows reticent, then isolated, and shortly after commits suicide, alone (58).

A common posture of the protagonist at the outset of a road novel is one of alienation or marginalization framed in a space that seems to be decaying; in short the world around the protagonist is itself moving towards entropy. In fact, this environmental entropy and the protagonists' inner dread of entropy motivate road protagonists to take to the road. The road experience, by placing the main characters in the center of entropic forces (the dying myth of the West or a post-apocalyptic American landscape ravaged by marauders and cannibals), acts as a way of purging the characters of their alienation.

From the protagonists' motives for approaching the road, the means of transportation featured in these narratives (on foot or by automobile), to the dispersal of the respective societies' energies, one can detect entropy imposing itself on the energies that drive these narratives. I intend to examine the various postures of road protagonists and the entropic forces that drive them to the road. Paradoxically, on the road they travel into the chaos that has driven

them to the road, yet on the road they also discover their power to impose personal order on the world.

One striking similarity between *OTR* and *TR* is that in the opening scenes entropy characterizes the landscape and the protagonists' social surroundings. In general the protagonists' worlds are rotting or decaying, and the protagonists themselves seem alienated as a result; they are also in poor health. In the opening of *OTR* Sal Paradise reveals that he and his wife have recently split up and that he has also recently gotten over a serious illness; Sal also notes that he was irked by the "feeling that everything was dead" (1). In the opening scene in McCarthy's novel we are presented with a similar sense of death and decay, but the degree of entropy is much more pervasive, intense and hostile: "he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of night. . . . Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3). The climate featured in this novel can be said to be approaching a terminally entropic state; the imagery of sickness, a "cold glaucoma," is used to characterize the setting, which for Tanner denotes "a gradual collapsing towards inertia and death" (*City* 143), the end product of entropy. McCarthy presents us with a world where all natural systems are losing their energy. The world is being reduced to its final entropic stages, hastening towards its final repose, and the protagonists, the father and son, are immersed in these elements. Sal Paradise and McCarthy's protagonists take to the road because they are confronted and threatened by these forces of entropy.

The journey that the father and son take in McCarthy's novel directs them south to escape the onset of what can be assumed to be a nuclear winter. The setting in *The Road* is growing colder and darker day after day, and the refugees' sense of alienation increases because the post-apocalyptic landscape is visually uniform. They cannot distinguish for certain where they are

topographically, and despite their having a tattered map, it only offers them suggestions as to where they *might* be. Their inner alienation is projected as chaos in the external world. This environment is nearing its ultimate state of entropy, and if the father and son were to stay in this environment, they would freeze to death, starve or fall prey to the thieves and marauders who, both on the road and off, haunt the territory. The uniform landscape only sharpens the figure of the father and son, making them slow-moving targets for their enemies. Therefore, the ever-present threats of robbery, murder and cannibalism prompt them to hit the road.

The degeneration of society's values combined with the depletion of resources in McCarthy's novel divides the survivors into scavenging groups:

> People sitting on the sidewalk in the dawn half immolate and smoking in their clothes. Like failed sectarian suicides. Others would come to help them. Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered. By day the dead impaled on spikes along the road. What had they done? He thought that in the history of the world it might even be that there was more punishment than crime but he took small comfort from it. (28)

The entropy that is played out in this setting, the immolated people and "fires on the ridges," leaves ashes and charred remains the father and son must later trudge through as they head south. These are the remnants of the holocaust. "The screams of the murdered" and the "deranged chanting" suggest a rhetorical entropy, a deterioration of the ability to convey information. The resulting chaos also explains why McCarthy's post-holocaust America has degenerated morally and why it experiences sectarian violence. By the time the narrative's action begins, most survivors are divided into marauding groups whose members cannibalize one another, and even their own children.

Sal Paradise's trajectory is also motivated by entropy. He is first inspired to take to the road because he is alienated, though not by a dying landscape or the threat of murderers as in McCarthy's road narrative, but by bourgeois conformity and torpor, which stifles his writing. Tanner, citing R.P. Blackmur, would agree:

> Society takes on the aspect of uniform motion. The artist is the hero who struggles against uniform motion, a struggle in marmalade. For the artist regards uniform motion as the last torpor of life. Torpor is the spread of momentum, but we prefer to believe it is the running down of things. For three generations we have heroized the second law of thermodynamics, which is the law of the dissipation or gradual unavailability of energy within any system—which is the law of entropy or the incapacity for fresh idiom, time and perception going backwards. (*City* 143)

In a society which conforms, where clockwork people adhere to rigid rules and regulations, entropy necessarily increases. We have thus far associated entropy with a sense of disorder, running down and decay, but Tanner points out that too much order may induce entropy as well:

> "order," if it is dedicated to the procuring of "uniform motion," may in fact accelerate entropy and not counter it; the disorder (and destruction) produced by the "order" of the army and air in *Catch 22* and *Eustace Chisholm and the Works* are examples of the phenomenon. (*City* 144)

Sal's claim that his life "hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified" (7) has entropic overtones, and it explains his need for a brush with other modes of life which take him away from his "stultified" and torpid existence, to inspire his literary pursuits, as a possible avenue to resist entropy. Because of his ethos, a dime store brand of

nineteenth-century Transcendentalism, the remedy to his torpor naturally lies in a westward trajectory. Kris Lackey explains the symbolic geography: "West = the self alone in space = hardy self-reliance and authenticity; East = the self enclosed in capitalist hierarchy = servitude and conformity" (93). This equation also explains why Sal regards Dean as "A western kinsman of the sun" (8), imbuing him with a mythic aura, and why he regards Dean's speech as "a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming" (7-8). Dean's speech represents a "fresh idiom" for Sal and serves as an antidote to the conformity and listlessness that he associated with the East and his life there.

Sal oscillates between lifestyles: freewheeling in the Beat enclaves he meets in his travels, a lifestyle associated with the Transcendentalist's spatial formula of the West, and leading an academic life of daily routine, associated by the same spatial formula with the East and his associations there.. Deep immersion in the Beat lifestyle (like Sal's first stint in Denver or the trip into Mexico) gives way to disorder and chaos, and deep immersion in the bourgeois lifestyle gives way to torpor and homogeneity. These disparate social milieux are the polarities between which Sal shuttles when the forces of entropy impinge upon him. Sal's road experiences can be understood as counter-entropic gestures undertaken to resist the tendencies of either bourgeois conformity or Beat debauchery. After distinguishing between the two forms entropy takes in the modern world, Tanner remarks that

> The problem of differentiating between that sort of organization which procures and protects intelligible life, and that sort of mechanical "order" which induces anaesthesia and ultimately irreversible torpor, is one which may be said often to prove too difficult for the American hero. (*City* 144)

The two lifestyles that Sal leads, his Beat lifestyle on the road and the academic lifestyle at his aunt's home on the East Coast, indeed present difficulties for him. Tanner would consider Sal's motivation for approaching the road as a measure of his flexibility as he confronts the forces of entropy: can he lead a productive professional and artistic life on the road? The domestication and ambition-choking ennui that arise from academic endeavors as well as the chaos and disorder of Beat-living are the forces that keep Sal on the road for over three years as he works to resolve the conflicts between these two modes of life. Yet Tanner's focus on entropy helps to explain why these two walks of life complement his work as a writer: Sal is "a writer and needed new experiences" (7) to write about, and his life-on-the-road experiences provide this material. Because the material that Sal finds most suitable to write about and shape into art is his chaotic road experience, Kerouac, through the prose of Sal Paradise, seems to be putting forth the suggestion that art thrives on disorder. But one must also sit down and perform the work of recording these experiences to be a writer; the breaks from the road that Sal takes at his aunt's home enable him to make art from his road experience. Sal is able to complete one degree (though he hardly mentions it), take up work on another degree, and complete a novel during the course of this narrative, and let's not forget that this is a book about writers, and the main threat that a writer faces, besides debt and death, is unproductivity. Tanner, therefore, would appreciate Sal's narrative as a proof of his flexible resistance to the forces of entropy.

In McCarthy's road narrative we find the same notion of art thriving on disorder because for all the calamity which occurs in this novel, McCarthy seems at least to be creating a beautiful picture out of this chaos. The disorder and chaos depicted in *TR* is different from the disorder and chaos in *OTR* because in *The Road* it is mainly the outside world and its villainous inhabitants which produce conflict and motivate the protagonists' flight. In *OTR*, however, the

protagonists tend to project their internal chaos upon the world, and the resulting consequences are what, in many cases, motivate their journeys. Take for example Dean's joyriding spree in Denver, which is prompted by nothing more than a drinking binge:

> Dean went mad again with sweats and insanity, and to add still more to the unbearable confusion Dean rushed out the next moment and stole a car right from the driveway and took a dash to downtown Denver and came back with a newer, better one. . . . All the madness and bitterness of his entire Denver life was blasting out of his system like daggers. (221-23)

In this scene Dean is a dynamo of destruction, and the world around him is fair game for his depravities. Because of this incident both Sal and Dean are forced to the road again the next morning. In short, the outside world provides enemies for McCarthy's protagonists, while the Beats tend to be their own worst enemies.

Because *OTR*'s narrative thrives on its artistic portrayal of disorder we hear very little of Sal's orderly, academic lifestyle; the narrative picks up when he leaves it behind. When "everybody in [Sal's] scattered gang was getting ready to take one trip or another" (6), he begins to consider a trip West for himself, and because of his Transcendental, albeit naïve, perspective at this early point in the novel, in which he entertains the myth of the American West as a space for robust self-actualization, we understand why that is a natural direction to travel. He has other reasons to travel west than Transcendentalist yearning: he has a friend with a place for him to stay in San Francisco when he gets there; he also wants to reunite with the gang in Denver; and importantly, his writing goals require new experiences for material. These new experiences come in the form of road trips that take him away from the stultifying East where most of his

work as a writer is conducted and bring him into contact with other modes of life. Lackey claims that

> Kerouac and company, in their brushes with beatness, travel much closer to the edge. Their lyrical and mystical ramblings reveal a desperate expediency, and their struck-up friendships link them with the desperately poor. . . . Sal Paradise . . . [who] must survive on his vision, compensate for hunger and cold with poetry . . . goes on the road as a tramp and, sometimes, an outlaw . . . [standing] outside the mainstream. (57)

But Sal's notion of the West as being a place for self-actualization is as misguided as the first trajectory he takes, when he goes north instead of west, and ends up shelterless on the side of the road with "the rain [coming] down in buckets . . . . crying and swearing and socking [himself] on the head for being such a damn fool . . . stuck on [his] northernmost hangup" (10). His disillusion and alienation here are projected across the American landscape, and a sense of his alienation emerges.

Fractures in his outmoded Transcendentalism, which he uses as a lens for interpreting the contemporary American landscape and its society, are revealed along his journey. Lackey argues that:

> bourgeois motorists . . . are fond of Thoreau's austerity because it has devolved into a stance. It has an intellectual cachet and the vague appeal of hearty individualism, self-sacrifice, and gentle rebellion. But as a romanticized stance—a packaged intellectual commodity—it no longer requires real sacrifice, as Robert Pirsig notes in *Zen* [*and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*]. Much like the historical pastoral, Thoreau's asceticism provides a politically attractive and

> attractively disposable riff for the motorist who can equate driving out West with walking at Walden. (106)

Sal's mid-twentieth-century Transcendentalism, "a packaged intellectual commodity" by this point in American history, can be understood as an ethos that is suffering from the effects of entropy: the national consciousness had already begun to turn its gaze from the expansive West to an inward, scrutinizing, and even hostile gaze typical of the McCarthy era. By the end of the narrative, Sal's "innocent road eyes" turn out to be the equivalent of out-of-fashion Claude glasses that lead to the disillusionment that causes the three-plus-years of careening across North America, shambling after Dean. In his book *The Reign of Wonder*, Tanner criticizes the Transcendentalists and explains why Sal is disillusioned by the end of the novel:

> the Transcendentalist, by relying so much for his poise and faith on fervent but vague feelings and generalizations, does expose himself to the risk of a shockingly abrupt disillusion, a very sudden sense of blighting deprivation, an impotent gloom which is the residue of an evaporated enthusiasm. (24)

Aside from his connections in the East, Sal becomes involved with a number of social enclaves struck-up during his travels in the West, the American South and even Mexico. Yet underlying his "lyrical and mystical ramblings," there always seems to be a sense of despair about their capriciousness. As he moves from one enclave to the next his departures are typically "shockingly abrupt," and his visits leave him disillusioned.

Sal's road experiences are cathartic gestures that temporarily purge him of his alienation and make possible his re-entry into society. This re-entry also leaves him disillusioned with Dean Moriarty as a beatific and Transcendental icon: ultimately, he leaves Dean in the cold for a

ride in a Cadillac to the New York Opera to watch Duke Ellington—which is a far cry from the wild bop musicians playing in dive-bars that they were accustomed to catch on their travels.

The southward trajectory that the father and son in *The Road* take is an anti-entropic gesture as well. The apocalyptic event that happened off-stage in this novel left North America decimated, suffering the effects of a nuclear winter. The father and son head south because they hope there will be an environment that can still sustain plant life, and, in turn, animal life, somewhere along the way to the equator.

There are various enclaves of survivors who inhabit this dying world. Most of these enclaves' members are "bad guys," in a Manichean sense, figures typical of post-apocalyptic literature, who commit atrocities, but there are enclaves of benevolent "good guys." The father and son approach the road in the first place because of their enclave's resistance to the prevailing forces of entropy: they could have been waylaid by the effects of entropy and succumbed to self-annihilation or cannibalism. Though the father dies at the end of this novel, the son encounters and is accepted into a group of "good guys." This bolsters the strength of the new enclave, and presumably the members will continue to impose their idea of order on the forces of entropy in the world.

In both novels, in fact, enclaves are the units that enable the protagonists to resist entropy as they move through the landscape. In Kerouac's novel Beats establish anti-entropic enclaves, for awhile at least, in response to the homogenization of post-WWII-McCarthy-era America. This resistance to homogenization, for Tanner, indicates for the Beats their "widespread fear of the tendency of all things towards eventual homogeneity…[,] another manifestation of the ubiquitous dread of 'entropy'" (*City* 142). Enclaves are able to resist the tendency towards entropy as long as they appear as distinct, organized social sects with their own ethos that set

them apart from mainstream or bourgeois society. However, enclaves dissolve on a number of occasions; the element that keeps these enclaves together in *OTR*—tentative order—is precarious, and it may actually impel the forces of destruction. The Beats' practice of "kick seeking," a group ritual and unifying practice, many times degenerates into outright debauchery, voluntary anesthesia, and disorder, which evolves into the entropy of the individuals and their enclaves—a prime example being the trip into Mexico: what starts out as just "kicks" becomes a near-death experience for Sal.

The nature of the entropy that affects the Beat social enclaves featured in *OTR* differs from the type of entropy that affects McCarthy's protagonists. Tanner, quoting Wiener, distinguishes between two types of entropy: "the negative evil which St Augustine characterizes as incompleteness . . . [and] the positive malicious evil of the Manichaeans" (*City* 144). The nature of the entropy found in *OTR* is representative of the "negative evil" that is associated with Freud's concept of "irrationality deep inside the self" (*City* 144) and St Augustine's idea of an "ineradicable element of chance in the texture of the universe." This negative-evil entropy is responsible for the unplanned and random feel that characterizes much of Sal's road experiences. However, the nature of the entropy that menaces McCarthy's protagonists is two-fold: the negative-evil entropy is present in the dying world with its nuclear winter and its effects, but also the positive, Manichean entropy at play, represented by the marauding gangs. These forces, as Wiener puts it, "like any other opponent, . . . [are] determined on victory and will use any trick of craftiness or dissimulation to obtain this victory" (quot. in Tanner, *City* 148).

The father and son in McCarthy's novel rely on their enclave's resistance to entropy as their only hope for survival. The threats posed by entropy come in two forms: the negative-evil entropy that confronts them on their journey south: starvation, freezing, falling trees, and other

random acts of nature; and the Manichean entropy that confronts them in the form of rape, murder or cannibalism at the hands of marauding gangs. If they had chosen not to flee, they would have had to assimilate into
a culture that would force them to adopt a new code of values that would justify savagery and cannibalism.

Sal and Dean become involved with Beat social enclaves in various settings across the nation: New York, Denver, San Francisco and New Orleans, to name the main ones. When these protagonists join up with other Beats to form an enclave, an initial sense of group solidarity emerges. The Beat social enclaves in *OTR* display a distinctly different ethos from that of the otherwise homogenized American society and exhibit an initial "limited and temporary tendency for organization to increase" (Tanner, *City* 145). It is during this brief organizational period that the enclave is able to prevail against the forces of entropy, but when the practice of kick-seeking reaches a fevered pitch a catastrophic isolation ensues, and the enclave begins to suffer the effects of entropy.

I have already pointed out that in the first two sentences in *OTR* Sal characterizes his domestic life in the terms of personal entropy (illness, fatigue and death), yet interestingly, in the following sentence Dean Moriarty is mentioned in relation to Sal's rebirth, so to speak. Sal puts it himself: "With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road" (1). Dean, especially upon Sal's first encounters with him, is a force of cohesion whose arrival marks a new life for him. Sal comes to regard Dean as a point of communion for many of the enclaves that Sal becomes involved with, but paradoxically, Dean is also a destructive force who both instigates and accelerates an enclave's tendency towards entropy.

When entropy causes a Beat enclave to dissolve its members tend to disperse and gravitate towards other social enclaves, either Beat or bourgeois. These dispersions take the shape of independent road trips (like some of Sal's and Dean's journeys), or road trips in small groups (as is the case when two or more Beats travel in one automobile or when a couple of the crew take trips to the south of France in high fashion). The enclave's integrity can resist the tendency towards entropy while its communal goals remain more important than the goals of the individual members. But the individual members tend to grow introverted and socially isolate themselves if they grow listless from inactivity, become exhausted from travels, exhausted from excessive debauchery, poverty, or from any mixture of these. Isolation is a catastrophic element for a social enclave. When isolation triggers an enclave's entropy, the enclave's communal goals are abandoned by its members, and they take to their individual paths and the enclave dissolves—for instance when, after having grown listless, Dean abandons his wife and baby daughter in Testament, Virginia, thousands of miles away from his family because "suddenly he blew his top while walking down the street one day. . . . saw a new 49' Hudson for sale . . . . bought it on the spot . . . . [and now was] broke" (110).

Tanner, quoting Henry Adams, claims that the novelist's job is the same as "the historian's business . . . [which is] to follow the track of the energy; to find where it came from and where it went to; its complex source and shifting channels; its value, equivalents, conversions" (*City* 148). And therein Sal's narrative can be understood as a sort of flow chart of energy and entropy. In part one, Sal is at once enthralled and humbled by the energy of the Beat social enclaves he joins and compares their energy to his: "I was a lout compared, I couldn't keep up with them. The whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then; it would mix up all my friends and all I had left of my family in a big dust cloud over the American

Night" (5). Dean Moriarty is an integral contributor to this initial enclave's strength. He is portrayed as a force of cohesion, a sort of vortex around which "the whole mad swirl of everything" orbits and towards which members gravitate. Emerging within the first few pages of this narrative is a sense of high-energy output levels, systems being pressed to their limits and resources being exchanged for dust and detritus, social happenings being constructed and then torn down within the passing of a few hours. The spectacle that this society creates in their gatherings is at once enticing, because of the allure that getting kicks with such a large group of peoples creates, and foreboding, because of the destructive elements that emerge as the narrative progresses. And Sal, knowing full well that the risk of such debauchery might be debilitating and counterproductive to his writing, admits that he must keep his hand in the flame, so to speak, so that he might have material to write about. In doing so he also admits to a sense of perverse voyeurism prompting him to be near, if not a part of, the mayhem. As he puts it,

> I shambled after [them] as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" (5-6)

Sal states here his distaste for the commonplace and his preference for the sense of movement, energy release and climax. His fascination with energy release and climax draws him into the "mad swirl or everything" where he is in a position to witness the factors leading up to the climax, and it also allows him to view the entropic process that follows as the energy from these points of climax peters out.

When Sal arrives in Denver he encounters two Beat enclaves, one represented by Dean and Carlo Marx and the other by Tim Gray and Roland Major. These enclaves differ from the bourgeois society because they are bohemian. Though some members (Sal for instance) become involved with both groups, Tim Gray and his friends prefer not to mix with Dean and Carlo, and we hear the first criticisms of Dean Moriarty, who Roland Major insists is "a moron and a fool" (46). Independently, each enclave increases its energy output until it initiates its entropic tendencies: Dean and Carlo stay up at all hours and converse on Benzedrine doses, Dean rushes off several times a day to fornicate with a number of sexual partners, and Carlo writes apocalyptic poetry and works a day job at a department store on the side; Tim Gray, Roland Major and company orchestrate massive, booze-fueled parties—all of this enormous venting of energy leads to the entropy of the enclaves when the members can no longer resist the tendency to grow isolated.

The effects of entropy on the Dean/Carlo enclave in Denver is first captured by Sal's description of Carlo Marx's poem "Denver Doldrums:" "A gray shroud fell over the city. The mountains, the magnificent Rockies that you can see to the west from any part of town, were 'papier-mâché.'" The whole universe was crazy and cock-eyed and extremely strange" (47). Carlo envisions Denver and the surrounding landscape as growing dim and oppressive: the mountains have lost their distinction, solidity and permanence; the universe is presented as "crazy and cock-eyed and extremely strange," and exudes a sense of apocalyptic chaos. The whole poem is preoccupied with entropy, and his excessive lifestyle has given way to his alienation from reality. Immediately after the reading of Carlo's poetry Dean re-enters the narrative again and announces that he is going to dismantle the Denver enclave, "divorce Marylou and marry Camille and go live with her in San Francisco" (47). Dean and Marylou's

marriage can be understood as a domestic enclave, and Dean had been destructively isolating himself from his wife since before Sal's arrival in Denver, allowing, if not inviting, the forces of entropy to prevail. The Tim Gray/Roland Major enclave is another of the novel's enclaves that initially display anti-entropic tendencies but which finally prove untenable. At the end of chapter nine, Sal claims that "Everything seemed to be collapsing." Though Kerouac never uses the word "entropy" directly, such comments as Sal's occur *every* time a Beat social enclave that Sal is involved with loses its integrity. The Tim Gray/Roland Major enclave begins this process the day after the party that they, along with the opera stars, chorus members and local students, throw in the abandoned house in Central City, and it is also the scene where Sal ends his association with them during this road episode. Babe, the "enterprising blonde" (52) who was elemental in organizing the event— arranging the use of her employer's car, locating a place for Sal and company to stay, and even cooking for them—is unable to carry herself away under her own power the morning after. Past the initial phase of organization, the social enclave falls apart in the wake of the chaotic party; the kick-seeking gives way to introversion as the enclave's members nurse their hangovers on their "sad ride back to Denver" (56). Disillusioned, Sal declares at the end of this scene that he is "itching to get on to San Francisco" (56), to continue his search for the West.

Sal heads west to experience the myth of the West, but what he finds when he gets to Denver is another more or less bourgeois society, not totally unlike those he was familiar with in the East. This episode is the first instance of many that dissolve Sal's illusion of the mythic West. Instead of Central City's being anything like an old mining town, where the "old buzzards" had found a "veritable shelf of silver," Central City is now saturated with "chichi tourists," opera singers and chorus members (51). Instead of stereotypical characters of Wild

West movies and literature, it is Sal and his company who instigate the shenanigans. The notion of achieving the hardy self-realization associated with the West is challenged by reality, and the Denver social enclaves collapse: the Tim Gray/Roland Major enclave falls apart after the Central City debacle and the Dean/Carlo enclave collapses at the end of chapter ten when Carlo Marx reads "his apocalyptic, mad poetry" (59).

From Denver Sal moves westward again, this time to San Francisco to visit his pal Remi Boncœur, who wants to enjoy Sal's company while waiting for jobs that he has arranged for the two of them on an around-the-world liner. Remi gives Sal a place to live, and to write. He even lands him a temporary job and brings together a new enclave which could temporarily withstand the ubiquitous presence of entropy. However, this enclave falls apart, and Sal doesn't stay in San Francisco much longer than his stint in Denver. After Boncœur and Sal get fired from their patrol job and subsequently lose all their money at the horse track, Sal declares, "everything began to collapse with Remi and Lee Ann and me" (73), conjuring yet again a sense of entropy. Sal returns to the road.

Despite the fact that Dean abandons his family in San Francisco and heads East, Sal depicts his behavior in somewhat positive terms, saying that it had "bloomed into a weird flower" (112). Perhaps he is thinking of Dean here as a force of cohesion for the newly emerging enclave in Testament, Virginia and as an antidote to the stultification of his academic pursuits. Whatever the case may be, Sal's appreciation of Dean's behavior reflects his paradoxical nature as both a force of destruction and a force of cohesion. For all of Dean's positive qualities however, his destructiveness prevails as the narrative progresses, and in his most maddened states he develops a sort of Midas touch of entropy: nearly every car that he drives for any length of time ends up a junk heap. The stolen cars that he joyrides in are pressed

to their limits and usually damaged too. Every social enclave he becomes involved with ultimately rejects him. Even the closing image of Dean, "ragged, in moth-eaten overcoat" (305), depicts him as physically and mentally spent.

When Sal and company are in their most chaotic and fevered states one can also detect an abstract, apocalyptic backdrop that arouses a sense of dread in them. There are two instances in the novel where Sal actually alludes to the apocalypse: once in Denver, he refers to Carlo's poetry as "apocalyptic, mad," (59) and again in Mexico on their way to the site of their most intense debauchery. In Mexico, Sal uses the idea of the apocalypse in a more reifying sense as they pass beneath the gazes of indigenous Mexicans:

> And they knew this when we passed, ostensibly self-important moneybag Americans on a lark in their land; they knew who was the father and who was the son of antique life on earth, and made no comment. For when destruction comes to the world of "history" and the Apocalypse of the Fellahin returns once more as so many times before, people will still stare with the same eyes from the caves of Mexico as well as from the caves of Bali, where it all began and where Adam was suckled and taught to know. These were my growing thoughts as I drove the car into the hot, sunbaked town of Gregoria. (280)

This monologue reveals that Sal feels alienated and isolated, and in this frenzied lyrical monologue he figuratively descends into chaos, entropy's field, and ultimately arrives at this apocalyptic vision.

The presence of the apocalypse is a curious link between Kerouac's and McCarthy's road narratives. Although in *OTR* the apocalypse is mostly an abstract presence, it is nevertheless a looming presence which in part motivates characters to take to the road. Once there, they don't

always have a destination in mind, as if they are riding for the sake of riding. For Tanner, this points to a phenomenon that occurs in many American novels whose hero has to decide "which way to move, where to aim his personal energy" (*City* 150). In McCarthy's novel the apocalypse happens before the action of the novel begins; it is the hostile presence which motivates the protagonists to be on the road. But unlike Kerouac's characters, these protagonists always know which direction they want to head, south.

The apocalyptic trip south to Mexico for Sal and Dean is the pinnacle of their kick-seeking. It is also their lowest descent into the pit of their desires, and the site of Sal's ultimate confrontation with entropy. Sal joins up with Dean in his trip to get a "Mexican divorce" from Camille because it is "cheaper and quicker than any kind" (*OTR* 262). The sole purpose of this trip is to officially dismantle an enclave, seemingly an ill star under which to guide a voyage. During this journey they consume massive amounts of alcohol and drugs, visit a brothel, and display gluttonous appetites and piggish behavior. This debauchery, as in many other instances in the novel, allows entropy to work through and dismantle the enclave, this time so effectively that Sal falls deathly ill. Upon recovering from this illness Sal is abandoned by Dean and has the revelation of "what a rat he was" (302). At this moment Sal decides to step off the road and re-enter society.

Whereas Kerouac's protagonists suffer the effects of entropy because of over-indulging, McCarthy's suffer entropy because they are starving. The Father and son's ultimate confrontation with entropy happens moments before they find the underground bunker. In the moments leading up to this discovery the father is asking himself, "How many days to death? Ten? Not so many more than that" (133). With this doubt in mind the father stumbles upon an entrance to an underground bunker containing a stockpile of food, water, clothes, and general

supplies. The father and son bathe for the first time in years, they rest healthily, their spirits are bolstered, their faith is restored, and they once again reaffirm their reason to head south—to escape entropy.

While Kerouac's road narrative seems to head into an apocalypse, McCarthy's narrative heads out of one. The apocalypse in *TR* has caused entropy to work through the world. Few life-sustaining resources remain. The father and son resist entropy by continually heading south. In this novel they are one of the two enclaves of "good guys" that resist entropy, which has reduced this world to a nearly terminal paralysis. McCarthy emphasizes this minimalism, even in his prose. There is very little dialogue even. In fact, hardly anything other than charred remains marks the landscape. Therefore, no Whitmanesque cataloging of America's resources and no Kerouacian speed chatter is present either, because McCarthy's road narrative is much slower paced than Kerouac's; literally its characters move at walking pace.

There is only one running automobile in McCarthy's narrative, which is unconventional for an American road narrative because so many works in this genre rely on the automobile as their protagonists' primary mode of transportation. The automobile in the earliest road narratives, an innocent apparatus for transcendental revelations, has been reduced by McCarthy to a Manichean evil; it can be understood to have suffered from its own representational entropy in the genre of the American road narrative: "Thoreau's cabin on wheels at 29 cents a gallon" (quot. in Lackey 16) is in *TR* a machine that conveys cannibals and marauders who wield tyrannical control over American exiles. And the one running automobile that does appear in this narrative is in poor condition: "They could hear the diesel engine out on the road, running on God knows what. . . . The motor sounded ropy. Missing and puttering. Then it quit" (61-2). All this adds to the sinister portrayal of the automobile in this road narrative and seems to put forth the

suggestion that the automobile and the infrastructure which sustains it is in part responsible for the current state that the world is in.

In *TR*, because there is so little dialogue, what does get said and what doesn't has a significant psychological bearing upon the protagonists and affects whether or not the characters will continue to resist entropy. The father's insistence throughout the narrative that they are the "good guys" sends conflicting messages to the son after the son witnesses him shooting a "bad guy" point-blank in the head (*TR* 66). Under most circumstances, a civilized person murdering someone would cause them some degree of psychological trauma, even if the person you kill is presenting a threat to you or your family, but the father's sensibilities are unaffected by this, coolly reasoning with his son that they should make a hasty departure and hide for a bit. You wonder if the father is becoming desensitized like the rest of the mad world. The son, nevertheless, is traumatized from having witnessed the murder and is silent for several days. During this period of non-communication between the father and son, the father grows angry with the boy and tells him that he is "close to losing his temper with [him]" (74). The silence between them has an isolating effect on them. The father is left to mull the thought that he had just killed "the first human being other than the boy that he had spoken to in over a year" (75), and the boy is left to ponder whether they are still the "good guys. In fact, this question breaks the silence between him and his father: "Are we still the good guys?" (77). The silent treatment in this world is brutal, and communication between these two becomes a crucial factor in keeping a psychological perspective that can thwart the effects of entropy.

Interestingly, one of the recurring phrases between the father and son is "carrying the fire," which is a metaphor for their holding onto their values of societal preservation as well as their search for the good guys, but the phrase also implicates the mythological story of

Prometheus, who was punished by the gods for stealing fire from Mt. Olympus and giving it to mortals. The protagonists' figurative position as torchbearers, or carriers of the flame of life, in the midst of a post-holocaust America leads them to understand the threat of "the fire" going out as the threat of succumbing to entropy. The father resists this threat by communicating the basic values of the "good guys" and passing on basic knowledge to his son. He also teaches his son more refined types of knowledge like the alphabet. In the education scene, we see the son drawing a small village in the sand, pairing the idea of education with city-building, all of which points to the preservation of society and resisting entropy in their entropic world:

> He fixed dinner while the boy played in the sand. He had built a small village. He dredged a grid of streets. . . .
>
> Can you write the alphabet?
>
> I can write it. . . . Maybe we can write a letter to the good guys. So if they came along they'd know we were here. (244-45)

The enclave of anti-entropy that the father and the son maintain until the end of the narrative, despite the threats to their existence from external forces—both the malicious forces of evil and the indifferent forces of chaos and chance—prevails in the midst of an exodus because they foster a spirit of family-building, nation-building and ethical indoctrination which motivates their flight, all of which can be passed on to others.

As we have seen, the theme of entropy in *On the Road* and *The Road* has manifold incarnations-- bourgeois order, chaos, Manichean, and Augustinian, for instance-- and that these incarnations are oddly enough—because the concept of entropy is occupied with the unavailability of energy—the engines which drive these narratives. Kerouac's *On the Road* uses the theme to motivate characters to approach the road and to explore various subcultures and

countercultures along their path amid the homogenized society of twentieth-century America; McCarthy uses this theme to hint at how contemporary American standards, perhaps Americans' fondness of the automobile and its culture of consumerism and consumption, is depleting America of her stores of natural resources and could possibly make exiles out of any one of us. *The Road* is clearly a departure from a Transcendental ethos in favor of stark post-apocalyptic realism; the travelers, rather than kick-seeking Beats, are a father and son in self-imposed exile. And the American highway system no longer provides an avenue for passive reflection on the American landscape. Rather it is a playing field for murderers, rapists and cannibals. Kerouac's narrative uses entropy to express the end of an ethos once seen through "innocent road eyes," while McCarthy's narrative uses entropy in its near-terminal state to explore how, as Lackey says, "America has already been intellectually consumed, settled, its potential as raw material for the imagination exhausted" (30). Yet, oddly, McCarthy's narrative seems to task its readers, in the context of an approaching environmental apocalypse, with discovering radical and preemptive means of thwarting entropy.

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VITA

Sean Deskin was born in Baytown, Texas. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in English from Texas State University in 2004. He joined the University of New Orleans English graduate program to pursue an MA in English, with an emphasis in American literature, and was awarded the Graduate Dean's Scholarship II which enabled him to participate in a TA position for the 2008/09 academic year at the University of Salamanca, Spain.