

Roaming Beyond Orthodoxy: Intellectual Nomadism in Jack Kerouac's *The Sea Is My Brother* (2011)

التجوال خارج نطاق التقاليد: الترحال الفكري في رواية "البحر أخي" لجاك كيرواك (2011)

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Abstract :

*Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) is an American novelist, poet, and the leader of the Beat movement. He captured the Beat spirit of the time through his writings that portray a series of movements and travels around and beyond America. This is reflected in his writings, wherein his characters are either artists, intellectuals, or simply beatniks, who seek self-actualization and attempt to overcome systematic dogmas and institutionalized beliefs. In his posthumously published novel, *The Sea Is My Brother* (2011), Kerouac delineates characters stifled by striated spaces while creating non-static rhetoric in deconstructing spaces and demarcations. This paper investigates how traveling and intellectual nomadism are portrayed in Kerouac's novel, mainly through the character Bill Everhart, a university professor, who initially undergoes an existential conundrum. The analysis hinges on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "private thinker," a concept that advocates nomad thought and gives rise to psychical nomadism through defying confining institutions. The paper, accordingly, proposes that Kerouac's intellectual character experiences ontological becoming through deconstructing capitalist institutions and spaces, for he chooses to travel to a smooth space and maintain a nomad thought.*

Keywords: nomad thought, intellectual, private thinker, traveling, space.

ملخص

جاك كيرواك (1922-1969) روائي وشاعر أمريكي وزعيم حركة البيتنيك. استحوذ الكاتب على روح الإيقاع في ذلك الوقت من خلال كتاباته التي تصور سلسلة أسفار حول أمريكا وخارجها. ينعكس هذا في كتاباته حيث تكون شخصياته إما فنانيين أو مثقفين أو ببساطة البيتنيك الذين يسعون إلى تصور الذات ومحاولة التغلب على العقائد المنهجية و / أو المعتقدات المؤسسية. في روايته المنشورة بعد وفاته، البحر أخي (٢٠١١)، يصف كيرواك الشخصيات التي تخنقها المساحات المخططة بينما تخلق خطابا غير تقليدي في تفكيك المساحات وترسيم الحدود. يهدف هذه البحث إلى التحقيق في كيفية تصوير السفر والرحل الفكري في رواية كيرواك، لا سيما من خلال شخصية بيل إيفرهارت، الأستاذ الجامعي الذي واجه في البداية معضلة وجودية. بالتالي، يعتمد التحليل على المصطلح الفلسفي "المفكر الخاص" لجيل دولوز وفيليكس جواتاري، وهو مفهوم يدافع عن الفكر البدوي ويؤدي إلى نشوء البدو النفسي من خلال تحدي المؤسسات المقيدة. وفقا لذلك، يقترح البحث أن شخصية كيرواك الفكرية تختبر التحول الوجودي من خلال تفكيك المؤسسات والمساحات الرأسمالية، لأنه اختار السفر إلى فضاء سلس والحفاظ على الفكر البدوي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: فكر بدوي، مثقف، مفكر خاص، سفر، مساحة.

1. Introduction:

Nomadism has always been viewed from an anthropological perspective since the advent of Ibn Khaldun's *The Introduction* (1377). Postmodern context, however, presented another view of nomadism through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), in which they established the notion of psychical and intellectual nomadism as an unconventional mode of thinking that challenges orthodoxy: they called it nomadology. Deleuze and Guattari associate their perception of nomadism with nonconformity and intellectual freedom, which can be correlated, for instance, with Beat writers and artists due to their proclivity for traveling and intellectual autonomy. In this respect, The current study provides an in-depth analysis of Kerouac's novel, entitled *The Sea is My Brother*, from a nomadic perspective by referring to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of psychical nomadism as a stratum for intellectual bearings in order to argue that traveling, through nomadism, enables an intellectual to rethink his identity and maintain an autonomous mindset away from institutionalized dogma. Notably, this paper hinges on Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of 'private thinker' and nomad thought to scrutinize the above-mentioned novel, posthumously published in 2011. This paper poses the following questions: How does space affect the characters? If nomadism is antithetical to a sedentary lifestyle, how does the intellectual nomad maintain such a nomadic spirit? What are the central credos of the intellectual nomad? The study proposes that a space can either restrict and institutionalize someone's thinking or permit his ontological becoming. It also suggests that an intellectual nomad preserves 'nomad thought' to liberate themselves from institutionalized thinking and contrive thoughts without images, in a space unbound by rules or dogmas.

There have been scarce scholarly works on Kerouac's intellectual endowment or on his characters. Lisa N. Lujano's essay "Jack Kerouac: An Uncommon Public Intellectual" (2017) tackles, more or less, Kerouac's intellectualism, mainly his and the Beats' creative and artistic engrossment (p. 145). She refers to Kerouac's auto-didacticism, contending that he broadened his vocabulary and advanced his learning while living at the University of Columbia's dormitory (149). Lujano, however, relies heavily on Kerouac's biography rather than on literary scrutiny of his works. Further, there is no particular reference to Kerouac's nomadic intellectualism in academia or how

traveling is represented concerning intellectuals. The current paper ventures to implement a thorough analysis of Kerouac's literary work by explicitly studying the intellectual vocation of his characters and how they pursue traveling beyond borders and institutionalized paradigms.

2. *Intellectual Nomadism:*

Academia is laden with critical and philosophical works about intellectualism or nomadism, but only some theoretical frameworks coalesce between the two discourses. Ralph Waldo Emerson is among the predecessors, who pioneered the concept of 'intellectual nomadism' in his essay "History" (1841). He claims that it has a time limit that results in bankruptcy: 'intellectual nomadism, in its excess, bankrupts the mind through the dissipation of power on a miscellany of object' (2000, p. 123). He considers intellectual nomadism as the ultimate danger that bankrupts the mind, which hinders the course of fathoming history and leaves education without a defined structure. Emerson argues that nomadism in Asia and Africa originally started as a "terror" and a danger to a sedentary lifestyle, while in America and Europe, it became a mode of "curiosity" and a means of economic system (2000, p. 122). In his essay, Emerson (1841) discusses the importance of understanding history while education is the key to achieving the process (2000, pp. 115-117). The oppositional discourse between nomadism and history is further demonstrated by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), who state that nomadology is the opposite of history (p. 24). They, however, do not consider nomadism as a danger but rather as an intellectual and psychical process that maintains a nomad thinking, which defies orthodoxy.

In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari provide several postmodern concepts, which vary from political and psychological to social disciplines. The concept of 'nomad thought' is the axis of the work, notably in the essay entitled "Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine," wherein Deleuze and Guattari present the concept as divergent from orthodox or conventional thinking. Deleuze and Guattari, however, do not provide a clearly stated definition of the concept. Be that as it may, the general discernment of the concept is to think differently from and outside the static conventions. Brian Massumi, in the "Translator's Foreword" (1980) of the book, understands that "'Nomad thought' does not immure itself in the edifice of

ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not repose on identity; it rides difference. ...it replaces restrictive analogy with conductivity that knows no bounds" (p. x-xi). The nomad thought, as the central concept of Deleuze and Guattari's perception of psychical nomadism or nomadology, indicates a non-conformist mode of reflection that challenges presuppositions and doctrines. It mainly questions and confronts conceptual as well as representative demarcations of dogmatic thinking. The crux of the matter is that nomad thought is creative, transitional, and possesses no orthodox boundaries of dogmatic representations.

Christopher Miller (1993) ascertains that this work exhibits "an intellectual nomadism and a nomadism for intellectuals. We might call this case the 'free mode of nomadology'" (p. 10). In this work, Deleuze and Guattari propose the concept of a private thinker, who adopts nomad thought, which enables him to overcome dogmatic orthodoxy. Besides, Deleuze unilaterally tackles intellectual nomadism at first, suggesting the opposition of the private thinker to the 'public teacher' or 'professor' in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), and later with Guattari in *What is Philosophy?* (1991). Deleuze (1968) acknowledges that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were the first to establish such opposition between private thinkers and public professors (p. 7). Deleuze and Guattari (1980), moreover, consider the private thinker as a modern intellectual figure, typified in Søren Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, or even Lev Shetov, for "[w]henver they dwell, it is the steppe or the desert. They destroy images. ... as opposed to the public professor" (p. 439). To clarify, a private thinker can overcome borders and spaces because his mode of thinking is nomadic, advocating nomad thought rather than dogmatic counterpart. Movement is essential in nomad thought as it urges the private thinker to deconstruct spaces and images of thought. The private thinker, in effect, travels through what Deleuze and Guattari label smooth spaces, in which he can destroy dogmatic images and orthodoxy.

Concerning space, Deleuze and Guattari conscientiously juxtapose striated spaces with nomadic or smooth counterparts that include new possibilities. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1980), the striated space is restricted and restricting (p. 445) as it is a space of codes and norms that are institutionally foisted on individuals. What is freeing and liberating is the smooth space that is outside the state's circumferences. In this manner, the smooth space, or space as though it were smooth, is occupied by the nomad in the act of deterritorializing sites and geography of the state; it can be a desert or sea (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 559). It permits the private thinker to be an

intellectual nomad, who can destroy “the image of thought and its relation to the State” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 439). Ergo, the private thinker is the epitome of thought without “image,” in which the traditional “image of thought” is subverted and even destroyed, which leads to generating new possibilities and realities by going beyond closed spaces to the un-striated counterparts. In the DeleuzoGuattarian context, the traditional image of the intellectual is subverted and given a new conception (the private thinker). In order to understand such a concept, the current study demonstrates how Kerouac’s character, Bill Everhart, can be a private thinker who questions the “image” of authority and maintains his autonomous mindset.

3. The Conventional Image of the Intellectual Revisited:

The Sea Is My Brother is a posthumous novel on brotherhood, friendship, and the relationship between Man and sea. Wesley Martin, a sailor, meets Bill Everhart, a Colombia University professor. The latter leaves his old life and embarks on a sea voyage for spiritual and intellectual purposes. The novel has yet to receive critical scholarly attention since it was recently discovered and published in 2011, which is ironic considering it is one of Kerouac's first works. James Campbell (1999) argues that the sea essentially galvanized Kerouac's travel writings, adding that:

When [Kerouac] went to sea, the vastness and unexpected alienation that came off it, day after day—days of dreary expectation of more of the same—led to the conception of a novel of Melvillean scope (everything Kerouac attempted in writing, even then, was overseen by a giant literary guardian) called ‘The Sea Is My Brother.’ (p. 4)

As one notices, Kerouac's traveling escapades inspired him to write Melvillean and nomadic stories in nature, considering that such incentive for traveling started in a smooth space (the sea). In his *Book of Sketches*, Kerouac (2006) alludes to his vision of the book as “a figment of the gray sea & the gray America, of [his] childhood dreams—” (p. 110). It indicates Kerouac’s vision of America, which is analogous to the Melvillean gray sea. Melville’s impact on Kerouac is tellingly alluded to or mentioned in several of Kerouac’s works, mainly when he journeys to the sea and describes himself as a “Melvillean youth

dreaming in sea pants, at his clerical dockside work—with night to come” (Kerouac, 2006, p. 337). More specifically, Kerouac (2006) calls for the Melvillean spirit:

O Melville! thy Soul
Sustains me
More than all of the Buddhas That have passed
With the water
Under the Brooklyn Bridge (p. 399).

The passage demonstrates Kerouac's Melvillean inspiration for *The Sea Is My Brother*, in which nomadic figures are portrayed as pursuing spiritual and intellectual emancipation.

Dawn M. Ward (2011), the editor of *The Sea Is My Brother*, maintains that this narrative is the most prominent literary work that the Beat writer composed in his career (p. 3). The journey of Everhart and Wesley is inspired by Kerouac's tour as a merchant marine on the SS Dorchester in the late summer of October 1942 (Kerouac, 2011, p. 3). While the work tackles the friendship between Bill, the intellectual, and Wesley, the sailor, it is also a critical statement of Kerouac's conflicting emotions about staying or leaving. It further depicts Kerouac's dilemma between the intelligentsia and “his blue-collar friends,” which are personified in Bill Everhart and Wesley Martin (Ward, 2011, p. 9).

Everhart, a moderate professor, encounters a social and intellectual dilemma when he meets Wesley for the first time. Kerouac depicts their different and paradoxical countenances: “Wesley glanced at Everhart and found him ogling from behind the fantastic spectacles, their eyes locked in combat, Wesley's cool and non-committal, Everhart's a searching challenge, the look of the brazen skeptic” (2011, p. 23). Their glances entail their attitudes in life: while Wesley is spiritually free and nonchalant, Everhart suffers from an existential conundrum, aware of his conformist and dull life. Everhart sees himself “at thirty-two, a queer-looking assistant professor, known amiably around the whole place as ‘Shortypants.’ The price of trying to be unpretentious! Like the others, radiate professorial dignity, and they will call you William or Professor Everhart” (Kerouac, 2011, p. 41). Despite his compliance with

corporate thinking and acquiescence to the general mainstream conventions, Everhart experiences a sense of alienation, and this, however, backfires in his paradoxically conspicuous eccentricity and lack of communication. Everhart, however, is aware of his passive life as a professor at Columbia University, stating, “I am at Columbia, teaching—what of it? I accomplish nothing; my theories are accepted and that's all there is to it. I have seen how ideas are accepted and set aside for reference...that is why I gave up writing a long time ago” (Kerouac, 2011, pp. 35–6). He demonstrates nonsensical academic writing that seems to be accepted rather than questioned, indicating a lack of creativity and the critical dimension in the then-current academic writing.

Everhart, at the beginning of the novel, exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's public professor/ teacher (the schoolman), who advocates perennial and established beliefs (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991, p. 62) and “submits to the demands of reason and the State” (Baugh, 2015, p. 315) while being in a striated and stifling space. Everhart tries to belong to the mainstream culture to feel less of an outsider and more at spiritual and intellectual ease. Conversely, as much as he attempts to attain social and intellectual credibility, his conformity becomes rather a sickening habit, being a part of an abrasive reality:

I ate up literature like a hog—especially Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Chaucer, Keats, and the rest—and left a brilliant enough record to win me an assistant professorship in the university. Whatever social protest I came across in my lectures I treated from a purely objective point of view; in the reading and discussion of Dos Passos a few summers ago, I drew from his works simply from a literary standpoint. By George, where I started by deliberately avoiding Socialism, I believe I wound up not particularly interested anyway. Insofar as I was in the university, living a gay enough though fruitless life, I didn't find the need to bother. (Kerouac, 2011, p. 85)

Everhart scrutinizes literary works, which may have political subjects and a revolutionary bearing, such as Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* (1937), from an objective and traditional point of view without even attempting to form personal opinions or presenting a nuanced reading, and this entails the gradual narcotization of his critical sense. Billy undergoes an intellectual bafflement as a professor

following institutionalized education. It bespeaks the state's repression of creative/critical thinking while maintaining a corporate counterpart. In retaining his status as a professional intellectual and public teacher/ professor, Everhart is slowly deflecting his subjectivity and following what society demands of him as an inconsequential member of the herd. To use Emerson's words, Everhart, in a decadent state, "tends to be a mere thinker, or [...] the parrot of other men's thinking" (2000, p. 44). Kerouac implicitly provides an early statement against social and intellectual conformity through Everhart's inner struggle to maintain his livelihood or live like the nomad Wesley.

Everhart's other predicament is his aspiration for intellectual and spiritual freedom: "I shall be free: if the process denies me freedom, I will not search on. I shall be free at all times, at all costs: the spirit flourishes only in the free" (Kerouac, 2011, p. 27). Such freedom is typified by breaking filiative ties with academic and familial institutions. Indeed, his pursuit of freedom is articulated, but the issue is how he initiates this search. He cannot, however much he wants, abandon his orthodox life in order to experience freedom:

[H]e had rushed around for the past six years clad in his cloak of genius, an enthusiastic young pedant with loud theories, shabby clothing, and a barefaced conviction in the art of criticism. He'd never paused to appraise anything but the world. He had never really paid any attention to his own life except to use his own freedom as a means to discuss the subject of freedom. Yes, he was Everhart who had told his classes, one triumphant morning when the snow lashed against the windows, that art was the revolt of the free. . . . (Kerouac, 2011, p. 40)

The unique quality about Everhart is that he is cognizant of art as a means of revolution and freedom; his nomadic spirit is confined because Everhart aims to belong since he is afraid of singularity. Further, Everhart, suppressed by his party affiliation, national background, and primeval loyalties, needs help to achieve his credo of freedom. He mainly preaches about it until he meets Wesley, a catalyst that inspires Bill to consider traveling and roaming around seriously. At some point, Everhart wants "to get away from all this for awhile" (Kerouac, 2011, p. 44). His readiness to abandon his work and his stable life is the modern intellectual's *raison d'être* to reshape thought without the static

image because "the less people take thought seriously, the more they think in conformity with what the State wants" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 438), seeing that the state essentially wants to disseminate corporate thinking and acquiescence. Emerson, in this respect, argues that "Who leaves all, receives more" (2000, p. 271), which portends that when an individual leaves behind these filial adherences, freedom will be his reward to accomplish self-individualization.

Such obsession with freedom is realized when Everhart furthers his discussions with Wesley and realizes that it is within him to pursue this nomadic life and intellectual freedom: "I think I realize now why the pioneer spirit always guided me in my thinking—it's because he's free, Wes, free! He is like the skylark when contrasted to the settler, the man who plants his roots and leans back. The pioneer is free because he moves on and forgets to leave a trace" (Kerouac, 2011, p. 63). One can fathom that "the pioneer spirit" symbolizes the early America or the transcendental spirit of Melville, Emerson, and Thoreau. Here, Everhart discerns that such freedom should be restored and normalized through mobility and traveling. He is eager to go beyond what Deleuze and Guattari call the striated space of capitalist society and achieve intellectual freedom in an open space, the sea. Not only is Wesley the catalyst for Everhart's brave decision to travel, but Everhart's dissatisfaction with the status quo of postwar America is another impetus that urges him to leave.

Further, Everhart looks within the façade of the state's pseudo-intellectuals (Kerouac, 2011, pp. 41, 43). He fears becoming one of them: conformist, unoriginal, and acquiescent; hence, he attempts to break the filial and primeval ties. Additionally, his position as a professor does not deflect him from deconstructing regimes and political structures through his heated discussions with his new friends regarding fascism, socialism, and capitalism (Kerouac, 2011, pp. 86-8). It entails Everhart's early deconstructive thinking of political dogma and plunging into thought without "image." As for Wesley, he is the epitome of a becoming-nomad who finds the sea as home (p. 32) and repeatedly longs for it (p. 48). Wesley is nomadic, considering that he roams around more often than not and consequently views each place as home to him, yet without eternally settling down in one: "All depends where your home is...lose one, make another" (Kerouac, 2011, p. 61). Conversely, Everhart, in the

beginning, is convinced that the sea or the ship is "no place for an academician. It [is] Wesley's medium ... and not his own" (ibid, p. 116); but afterward, the sea is integrated into his world; it is the quintessential space where he can achieve his individual beliefs: "Would to God Everhart could find freedom in so simple a process as that, could be relieved of vexation by so graceful an expedient, could draw comfort and love from the sea the way Wesley seemed to do" (p. 129). Freedom, in this novel, is closely associated with the smooth space (the sea or the ocean) (pp. 113, 115, 135), for "the sea [is] enough, [is] everything" (p. 91).

Everhart is the befuddled intellectual who often attempts to realize self-conceptualization, but his surroundings stifle him with their structural and dogmatic realities:

A confused intellectual, Everhart, the oldest weed in society; beyond that, an intelligent modern minus the social conscience of that class. Further, a son without a conscience—a lover without a wife! A prophet without confidence, a teacher of men without wisdom, a sorry mess of man thereat! (Kerouac, 2011, p. 76)

His development as a nomadic intellectual/private thinker, albeit fast, manifests a journey of self-emancipation. In this sense, Everhart, depicted as an anti-hero mainly, aspires for an individual change, whereby he wishes "things would be different from now on... a change of life might give him the proper perspective" (Kerouac, 2011, p. 76). The ontological transformation begins when he embraces the "pioneer spirit" that calls him to liberate himself from being a public scholar and morph into a nomadic private thinker.

Everhart's intellectual metamorphosis is apparent at the end of the novel, when he is on the ship, in the engine room with Nick:

Nick waved his hand; he had apparently long given up conversation in an engine room, for he pushed a book toward Bill. Bill propped himself up on the table and ran through the leaves. 'Words, words, words,' he droned, but the din of the engine drowned out his words and Nick went on reading. (Kerouac, 2011, p. 143)

What begins as a portrayal of a pseudo-intellectual, a professor, evolves into a renewal and rebirth of an intellectual nomad in the smooth space (the sea). He becomes the nomadic private thinker "who forsakes reason's consolation that things cannot be otherwise than they are for freedom of contingency and becoming and replaces knowing [...] with being-able" (Baugh, 2015, p. 323). Everhart frees himself from the "image of thought," exemplified in the state's public professor, and becomes singular in his pursuit. Indeed, he, as a private thinker, is able "to think for himself and is a persona, who can change and take on another meaning." (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991, p. 70), and this new meaning is engendered when he becomes nomadic. Similar to Dedalus, Everhart searches for an experience that connects him to rhizomatic space, while books, in this passage, symbolize conformity and lack of experience, which painstakingly reminds him of his old life. He is morphing into an individual not engrossed in half-truths; thereby, he denounces the taught dogmas and traditional paradigms he once was asked to lecture.

Everhart turns his back to the institutionalized education and his old life when he browses through the book nonchalantly, and his repetition of 'words' entails his deconstructive thinking that challenges spoken words, which typify conformity and traditional thinking. It is tantamount to Emerson's argument: "Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times" (2000, p. 48). Be that as it may, such an act does not mean Everhart refuses to read any longer, for he takes with him several volumes of Everyman edition (p. 49), and he constantly reads based on his personal choices (p. 137); Everhart, here, mainly exerts free will in choosing his intellectual 'instruments.' It is worth noting here that when Everhart changes space, from sedentary to smooth space, his thinking is no longer restricted by dogma, which is analogous to how his view of books changes dramatically. In this respect, Everhart transforms into the DeleuzoGuattarian private thinker/intellectual nomad who succeeds in breaking the thought/image duality of the conventional intellectual and structural loyalties, and this allows him to concoct his nomadic possibility by pursuing the freeing nomad thought and rejecting orthodoxy.

4. Conclusion:

In general, Deleuze and Guattari oppose thought to reason and the private thinker to the state; thus, the private thinker is deemed to be unreasonable because reason is a source of the herd's commonly-held ideas. The private thinker can go beyond the paradigms of space and mode of thinking by destroying the image of thought and roaming in smooth or open spaces. That said, Everhart is the epitome of a DeleuzoGuattarian private thinker as he resigns from his job at university and chooses to go on a sea voyage in order to overcome the mere existence in systematized spaces or the tumultuous emotions of imprisonment that the government embargoes. Ergo, space affects the characters by restricting Everhart's intellectual pursuits through the confining nature of striated space, which even serves to institutionalize his thoughts. Smooth space, however, smooth space allows Everhart to feel a sense of freedom, which, while expanding his potential as a private thinker, also fosters a sense of continuous becoming. By roaming the sea, Everhart sustains his nomadic disposition and preserves his fluid process of becoming as a private thinker, one who is primarily inclined toward credos, such as nomad thought or thought without image, unbounded spaces, and an ongoing sense of transformation. Everhart is the nomadic intellectual, who achieves intellectual freedom by roaming around the un-striated space (the sea) and breaking the institutionalized image of the traditional intellectual in postwar America.

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