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Vibrant Matter, Mobile Assemblages: Reading Nonhuman Agency in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* through Jane Bennett's New Materialism

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Abstract

This article aims to explore Jack Kerouac's (1957) *On the Road* through the lens Jane Bennett's (2010) theory of vibrant materiality, arguing that the novel's myth of individual freedom is repeatedly interrupted and reorganized by the active force of nonhuman matter. Most humanist interpretations of the text, such as geographical and cultural studies of Beat mobility (Cresswell, 1993; Valente, 2024), view Sal Paradise's and Dean Moriarty's travel across the States as an expression of freedom of the will against a complacent American "landscape." Instead, this study proposes that mobility within the novel is to be regarded as a continuous and uneven production of assemblages of human bodies, automobiles, roads, weather, and strangers, each producing a force, or "thing-power" that helps shape the direction and nature of the journey. Drawing on Bennett's (2010) notions of thing-power, assemblage, and trajectory, and situating these within new materialist theory (Latour, 2005; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Gamble et al., 2019; Ejsing, 2024) and automobility/mobilities scholarship (Hellberg et al., 2024), the article traces four recurring patterns: the failure of human plans before the resistant materiality of road and weather; the car as co-driving actant rather than inert object; self-generating trajectories of assemblage in scenes of crash and rescue; and material entanglement of embodied selfhood. *On the Road* redistributes agency across a dynamic ecology of lively things, offering a materialist corrective to canonical readings of the Beat road narrative and a contribution to the growing dialogue between new materialism and literary studies (Musgrave, 2023; Vint, 2020).

Keywords: Assemblage, Automobility, Mobility Studies, New Materialism, Vibrant Matter.



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Introduction

On the Road, which was published in 1957, has had an ambiguous status in American literature since its first appearance: it is the most mythologized document of the post-World War II restlessness yet one of the most persistently misinterpreted. The novel's reception has persistently revolved around one, alluring image the free individual, liberated from convention, traversing an open continent by his own means. This is a picture that has lasted in popular and scholarly writings, and it has textual support: Sal Paradise is throughout figured as a project of "self-authorship," and Dean Moriarty is often represented as an "American vitalist hero," a man who apparently creates his own momentum. But Kerouac's prose itself throws this humanist mythology into great uncertainty at every moment. Roads become flooded and washed away, cars break down, skid and loane, weather interrupts journeys and subverts the entire process of travel before they have started, rivers assault the senses, changing their perception of the experience. In other words, the novel itself is filled with materiality that continually intervenes and remodels the plans of humanity, which it purports to serve.

This article does not treat the material intrusion as just the scenery, but as an object to be analysed. It draws on Jane Bennett's (2010) idea of vibrant materiality, which is best developed in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, to contend that "mobility" that Kerouac describes is never the result of "pure" human agency. Rather, it comes from assemblages, which are non-homogeneous, provisional, and contingent gatherings of human and nonhuman actants whose combined consequences are more than the sum of its parts, and even more than the human driver. This approach to Reading *On the Road* does not negate any of the extant scholarship concerning Kerouac's account of mobility as a means of resistance (Cresswell, 1993), *flânerie* (Valente, 2024), or the socio-economic entanglements of the postwar highway system; instead it builds upon this scholarship by posing the following question that sits largely outside the scope of existing scholarship: What happens to our understanding of the novel's central theme (mobility) when matter itself becomes an actor instead of an inert stage?

This question goes beyond the realm of Kerouac studies. In the last decade and a half new materialist theory has progressed from political theory and philosophy of science to wider literary and cultural studies, producing a body of work which engages with the question of how narrative form, character and plot change when the nonhuman matter is given a share of agency (Vint, 2020; Musgrave, 2023; Gamble et al., 2019). Meanwhile, proponents of the materialist turn have been forced to reply to critics who are concerned that too much attention to the vitality of things would risk depoliticizing structural critique, and who have been most recently and directly engaged in this debate by Ejsing (2024) who suggests that new materialism, properly understood, helps rather than hinders political and ecological responsibility. *On the Road* provides a particularly good test case for such debates because it is on the surface the very sort of humanist narrative that new materialist critique is intended to disrupt: a narrative that celebrates the individual will, mobility, and freedom as purely human products. Reading the novel against its own mythology, however, allows this article to make a modest but concrete contribution to an ongoing, theoretical dialogue, and a new interpretation of a novel whose critical history has been dominated by biographical, spatial and countercultural interpretations (Cresswell, 1993; Barbu, 2024; Belletto, 2024).

The rest of the article goes on like this. The following section puts the study in the critical and historical context of the development of a scholarship of Kerouac and new materialist thinking.

The literature review then examines three intersecting fields of scholarship: foundational and more recent articles focused on Bennett's rich materiality and new materialism; mobility, automobility, and road-narrative scholarship; and existing literary-critical studies on *On the Road*. The research framework sections outline three Bennettian concepts (thing-power, assemblage, and trajectory) to organize the analysis. The discussion and analysis part then takes this approach to four moments of the novel and finally to the implications of this study for reading mobility, materiality, and the Beat road novel.

Background of the Study

On the Road is the novel that Jack Kerouac wrote during his own road trips in the U.S. with Neal Cassady between 1947 and 1950 and that was published in 1957, which is often said to have defined the Beat Generation as a literary and cultural movement (Belletto, 2024). Soon after publication, both critics and the general reading public began to see this book as a celebration of the open road, freedom, and the rejection of postwar conformity that had defined American culture. This interpretation has been both persistent and significant, and has become a version of the book's central themes that have led to it being read in many ways other than its creator intended.

Over the years the popular image has been complicated but not replaced by scholarly treatment of the novel. In an influential geographical reading of the novel, Tim Cresswell (1993) argued that Kerouac's mobility should be understood as a politics and sociality of travel in direct opposition to the mid-century norms of family life, place, and work, and thus as a political statement rather than a pure individualist fantasy. In more recent scholarship, Sal Paradise has been examined through the lens of the flâneur, as in Valente's 2024 essay, which suggests that the times in which he travels restrict as well as liberate him from the freedom implied by the term, with money, class, and the postwar organization of automobility playing a significant role in how he moves around; and brought into the tradition of an archetype, as in Barbu's 2024 essay, in which Corin Braga explores how Sal's geography is not goal-oriented, but more directionless, with the meaning of that journey not dependent on how far he achieves.

Yet what brings these accounts together, despite the discontinuities, is the emphasis on the human aspects of Kerouac's mobility economic, social, subjective interior, cultural myth. Indeed, even geographically sensitive and materialist text-oriented readers like Cresswell (1993) finally represent the road, the car, the weather, as a backdrop for the construction of meanings among humans. It is not a fault; it is more of a testament to the theoretical stock at hand when wrote; Cresswell's essay is more than a decade old before the new materialist turn in the humanities has even come to a head.

The most influential expression of that turn comes in the work of Jane Bennett (2010), *Vibrant Matter*, in which she argues against an idea known as the "dull matter" assumption in most Western political and literary thinking: that entities such as objects, substances and environments are at best passive matter, available for human use, manipulation, and interpretation. Bennett's work builds on the broader tradition of new materialism theory, such as Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory and Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari's (1987) assemblage theory, on which he draws and extends. That body of theory has been refined and defended in recent years by other scholarship; Gamble et al. (2019) go some way towards clarifying exactly what brings the otherwise eclectic collection of thinkers who have been grouped under the label "the new materialism" together; and Ejsing (2024) directly counters post-Marxist critics claiming that such a move weakens political

critique by showing instead how it enhances “ecological and political responsibility” in the context of the Anthropocene. However, these thoughts have continued to mature in Bennett’s latest public debates (Simonini, 2025) and through widely read philosophical debates (Lee, 2025).

In the margins of this philosophical shift, mobilities and automobility scholarship has also come to similar, highly suggestive, conclusions regarding the entangled and distributed nature of movement. Alongside this philosophical trajectory, the branches of mobilities and automobility scholarship have provided strikingly similar conclusions concerning the entangled and distributed nature of movement. Hellberg et al. (2024) show how the sociotechnical regime of automobility is not only an infrastructure, but a politics and how the physical world of cars, roads, fuel systems actively resists and transforms policies designed to reduce car reliance. This body of work is an important addition to Bennett’s more philosophically driven model, filling the gap of the abstract notion that “things” have agency with concrete descriptions of how automobile systems act in more than infrastructure, thus grounding that claim.

The study’s contribution lies at the nexus of both of these developments: the new materialist theory of the humanities, which is maturing, and an independently maturing mobilities scholarship that is focussed on the nonhuman aspect of vehicle travel. Nevertheless, Bennett’s (2010) framework has not yet been used in a sustained chapter-length study in any kind of way in a work as well-suited to analysis of the novel as *On the Road* is, in which virtually all the action takes place in the car, the road, and the weather, and the work of the machines is thrilling (or lacking) throughout.

Literature Review

This section deals with the preview of existing scholarship available on the new materialism, mobility studies, and Kerouac scholarship, in order to understand how nonhuman material forces, affect mobility and agency in *On the Road*. To being with *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* by Jane Bennett (2010) emerges as the most significant articulation of what has become known as vital or new materialism in political theory and, by extension, literary studies.

The core argument of Bennett is that matter, broadly defined as objects, substances, technologies, and ecological systems, has a kind of active force that can be more than background or tool, and one that she calls “thing-power.” Bennett’s account of agency does not stem from any single willing human subject, but rather from assemblages, temporary and uneven collections of human and non-human elements whose “agent” is reater than the sum of its parts. In this collection Bennett takes the word actant from Bruno Latour (2005), to refer to anything, animate or inanimate, that alters a situation, without necessarily being intentional or conscious.

Bennett’s notion of assemblage is explicitly grounded in the theorization of assemblage by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), as an emergent, provisional, and non-dominant mode of organizing, and in the broader project of “reassembling the social” by Latour (2005), which extends sociological analysis to nonhuman actants. Since then, attempts have been made in the commentaries to define the exact nature of the difference between this set of ideas and previous materialist traditions. In one of the field’s most frequently cited definitional efforts, Gamble et al. (2019) define new materialism as a sensibility, rather than a doctrine, and it is one that is similarly informed by a variety of sources, such as process philosophy, feminist science studies, and posthumanist theory. Going further, Basile’s (2019) close reading of *Vibrant Matter* questions the theoretical “novelty” that underlies the “new” in new materialism and warns that Bennett’s rhetorical effort to counter vibrant, living matter with an “old” conception of inert matter is likely

to repeat the same dogmatic historical divisions it tries to surpass. This is a good reminder for this present study, because the whole argument that follows does not treat vibrant materiality as a metaphysical fact but as an interpretive lens that points toward what might be noticed when reading *On the Road*.

Recent scholarship has focused particularly on theorizing the political utility of new materialism in response to critique. Ejsing (2024) rebuts the post-Marxist theorists who object to considering nonhuman vitality, arguing that new materialist theory, including Bennett's, refines the analysis of responsibility and causality in the face of ecological crisis by compelling analysts to look at the larger, distributed network of actants humans, nonhumans, corporations, infrastructures that brings an outcome into being instead of focusing only on a single culpable human subject. This defence is directly relevant to the method of this study: reading the crashes, breakdowns, and near-misses of *On the Road* as assemblage effects is not a license to condone the reckless driving of Dean Moriarty, but rather a means of pinpointing more specifically how danger and mobility are co-produced by driver and machine, in conjunction with the road.

The transfer of theory from the realm of the material into the realm of literary/cultural studies is well-documented. In the context of post-humanist literary theory, Vint (2020) follows the trajectory of the core tenets of new materialism as the theories applicability to texts that feature interactions between human characters and technological and ecological systems gets picked up by works that focus on speculative fiction and environmental writing, to which Kerouac's auto-driving story very much belongs. Similarly, in children's literature studies, García-González (2020) and Deszcz-Tryhubczak (2023) both show how new approaches from the materialist and posthumanist fields raise questions about material entanglement that are not usually considered by character- and theme-based studies; in this article's discussion section, methodological precedents for the kind of close reading of matter and of objects and assemblages are provided. Popular and semi-academic commentary has also kept up the flow of discussing and defining the key terms for a wider audience (Lee, 2025), and Bennett, in a recent interview, has called vibrant materialism a "filter for perception" that "looks at what happens and looks at what happens to things" that a purely humanist approach would miss (Simonini, 2025).

Another, more distinct group of scholarship directly relates to this study's object of analysis: research on mobility, automobility and the American road narrative. In his early and important interpretation of *On the Road*, Cresswell (1993) makes mobility a particular and feminist reading of how "the car" and "the road" themselves have social and political significance, given the dominant midcentury expectations of family, work, and settlement.

This insight is further developed in later mobilities scholarship, which has been predominantly outside of literature, to a more comprehensive theorization of automobility as a self-perpetuating sociotechnical system. Hellberg et al. (2024) show how contemporary urban interventions to curb car dependence in Gothenburg, Sweden, are hindered by the material systems of automobility and how they invisibly define what may be politically viable. While set in a more modern planning context, far from 1950s America, this scholarship is nonetheless useful in providing a structural parallel: It demonstrates empirically that automobile systems are not merely passive instruments of human movement, but provide concrete, contemporary support for the more speculative assertions that new materialist literary criticism makes about vehicles as actants.

In the past, however, the myth of frictionless freedom has been complicated, in the context of

Kerouac scholarship in particular. In Valente (2024), Sal Paradise's mobility in the novel is repeatedly halted and redirected as he fails to have enough money to travel, bringing him closer to a modern flâneur whose travel is limited by economic considerations than to a purely self-authorizing traveler; in Valente's reading, money is a condition of mobility in itself, either enabling or limiting Sal's ability to move. Barbu (2024) heads elsewhere in her pursuit of a similar conclusion, drawing on Corin Braga's theory of the anachetype to assert that the novel's geography is utterly antithetical to the idea of a conventional narrative teleology, resulting in a journey that has no ending but whose meaning remains paramount throughout. In his edited scholarly companion, Belletto (2024) places *On the Road* in the context of Kerouac's multi-volume Duluoz Legend, which as a whole is an autobiographical and literary work. This recent study, along with a wide range of other critical studies, establishes a general consensus: This mobility is not only limited and redirected by forces beyond the travelling subject's control, but is also created by them. What is not well studied is how much of those forces are the nonhuman materiality of the vehicles, roads, and weather in which that mobility is realized the focus of this article.

Synthesis and Gap

Together, these two areas of scholarship point toward a fruitful (but thus far unfulfilled) synthesis. While it has been applied to a variety of literary texts in children's literature, environmental writing, and speculative fiction, (Vint, 2020; Musgrave, 2023; García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020) it has not received much attention in the context of mid-century American road narratives. In contrast, mobility and automobility scholarship has generated a materially-informed description of the operation of auto systems as something more than passive infrastructure (Hellberg et al., 2024), which is often not complemented by sustained close reading of literary texts. And Kerouac scholarship itself, even in its latest forms (Valente, 2024; Barbu, 2024; Belletto, 2024), remains preoccupied with human social, economic and psychological categories, viewing the novel's cars and roads primarily as symbols and settings for human meaning, rather than as co-producers of meaning. The aim of this article is to connect these three conversations by offering a reading of *On the Road*, understood as a powerful documentation of the assemblage of humans and nonhumans, not a history of individual will.

Research Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of *vibrant materiality*, developed in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Bennett challenges the idea that agency is the exclusive domain of human agents, suggesting that things objects, substances, technologies, and environments can have a certain "thing-power" the capacity to be more than merely the "dull matter" of backdrop or tool. Agency for Bennett does not arise in a single willing subject, but rather in "assemblages" temporary, uneven combinations of humans and non-humans, the totality of which is greater than the sum of its parts. In an assemblage, each and every one of the participants, whether human or not, is an actant, a concept borrowed from Bruno Latour (2005) to describe something that changes the course of things, whether it has intention or consciousness.

This model is particularly applicable to *On the Road*, as Kerouac's story gives the impression that it unfolds as if the cars are driving themselves, the roads are either impassable or inviting, the weather is more powerful than the characters, and mechanical breakdowns cause the characters to

reinterpret their journeys. To analyse these moments through vibrant materiality instead of what does Sal or Dean decide? asks what does the assemblage of driver, car, road, weather, companions produce?

The analysis that follows is organized by three of Bennett's concepts:

1. Moments such as thing-power, when an object (the car, the road, the river) also has a force or life that surpasses its role as a passive tool, becoming a factor and creating what can happen.
2. Assemblage situations in which an event or outcome (a crash, a rescue, a crossing of a border) is generated when multiple human and nonhuman actants work together in an uneven manner, each of which is not enough on its own to explain the event.
3. Trajectory Bennett's (2010) example of how an assemblage, once created, falls out of the control of any individual, such as a human.

These three ideas enable the analysis to follow how Kerouac's travelogue is a reflection of mobility, but not the individual will, rather the continuous production of powerful, alive material, produced by human bodies in concert, and in conflict.

Discussion and Analysis

The discussion and analysis is carried out using a close reading of selected episodes from *On the Road* organised around Bennett's theories of thing-power, actants, assemblage, trajectory and material entanglement.

Thing-Power and the Failure of the Plan

Sal Paradise's journey starts out as a human design; he tells us that he had been "poring over maps of the United States for months" and had settled on "one long red line called Route 6" as the form his freedom would take (Kerouac, 1957, p. 9). It's the purest humanist dream of travel the road is a blank slate upon which the mind aspires to spread out. The question posed in Bennett (2010) is to be aware of the speed at which the story undermines this fantasy. At Bear Mountain a rain interrupts, a highway empties, and inexplicably, bad shoes. And Sal now has to concede that "it was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America" (Kerouac, 1957, p. 10). Here the weather and the roadway are not just barriers to a human plan for the trip, but they are also thing-power, a force they have that alters the traveller's plans before he's really started. The scene sets up in miniature the novel's argument, which will be continually repeated thereafter: mobility isn't an act of the human only, since the matter through which it moves is not passive.

The narrative opening error in this case is one that echoes Valente's (2024) comment about Sal being forced to move in the novel by external factors, with the implication that the constraint in this case is not economic, but weather and geography. Money and mud are not rivals, they are complementary: both are actants that can redirect a human plan imagining itself as sovereign, as Bennett (2010) says.

The Car as Actant: From Tool to Co-Driver

Where Bear Mountain reveals matter that is in opposition to the human plan, the novel reveals more disturbing activity of matter: as an actant in the plan. Sal compares the engine of the Cadillac to "the big motor thrumming with immense birdlike power" (Kerouac, 1957, p. 136), giving the car an almost animal quality of life that is more akin to a body than a tool. This is the most vivid

thing-power: the car isn't just carrying Dean's intentions down the highway, it is carrying a power, speed, momentum, danger, all of which are in concert with Dean's driving, but not necessarily subservient to it.

The point is made even more clear when the speedometer cracks: "Well, no speedometer, I won't know how fast I'm going, I'll just ball that jack to Chicago and tell by time" (Kerouac, 1957, p. 136). From a humanistic perspective, Dean replaces his own perspective with the malfunctioning instrument and restores the control of humans. More likely, however, Bennett's (2010) model points to the reverse: it is not some neutral instrument, but rather one of a set of nodes or links that make up the possibility of "knowing" one's speed, namely driver, car, and instrument. When the speedometer stops working, the assemblage of things that it is made of rearranges itself around a second set of actants (Dean's sense of time, the noise of the engine, the resistance of the road). The human does not escape the technological system and assert control over it, but is rather repositioned in a differently configured technological system, which is also a deeply integrated, sociotechnical system of the automobile, where the driver constitutes an operator and the vehicle is a hybrid instrument (Hellberg et al. 2024).

This is most clearly depicted when Dean remembers when he was driving in Houston and he could "close his eyes and this old car would take care of itself" (Kerouac, 1957, p. 130). Hyperbolic as it is, hyperbolic it names what Bennett's theory says, and that is just what an embedded driver in the car-and-road is: a car that seems to have some of the agency for the journey. The human subject is not the driver of a dead object, but rather one of various actors, and, in his own words, sometimes the one least active.

Assemblage and Trajectory: The Ranch, the Bridge

The assemblage is most visible in Bennett's (2010) scenes where an event is seen to be made up of several actants who are all necessary but none is responsible for it. Dean drives the car too fast, even in the rain and mud, and "really going much too fast," says Sal, but the car "skidded in the grease and wobbled hugely" before coming to rest in a ditch (Kerouac, 1957, p. 136). The farmer and a tractor are needed to extract the car. This is a story about an individual, the recklessness of Dean, when he reads it alone. As an assemblage, it tells a story of mud, rain, tires, ditch, tractor and farmer working together to create something greater than the sum of its parts, an outcome that is not Dean's alone. The rescue does not restore human control but rather it continues to add the elements that were absent in the previous human tractor combination in order to solve the problem. This reading was consistent with Ejsing's (2024) defence of new materialist causal analysis, which was that focusing on the whole distributed network of actants is not so much an evasion of responsibility as an indication of it, more precisely than a strictly individualist causal account would.

The Illinois model of the bridge crossing is similar, but incorporates Bennett's (2010) idea of trajectory, or the momentum an assemblage accumulates after it has left the hands of its individual operators. After Dean "passed the slow cars and swerved and almost hit the left rail of the bridge," he narrowly avoided colliding with the oncoming truck "(Kerouac, 1957, p. 137). The danger of the scene is created by the combination of the narrow space of the bridge, the weight of the truck, the curvature of the road, and the speed of the car combined, and Dean's steering is just one part of a trajectory that the whole assemblage is following. The human decision to swerve does occur, but it happens within a momentum which was never solely in his hands to initiate or to halt, much

like the private car theorists' account of the private car as a system that generates "the preconditions for its own self-expansion" once it is in motion, which he then attempts to redirect, whether as a driver or a policymaker (Hellberg et al., 2024).

Embodiment as Material Entanglement

The novel's treatment of the body is another facet illuminated by Bennett's (2010) framework that is never removed from its material context. On the way after a long journey, Sal remembers a night in a "cheap hotel" that is so disorientating that he "didn't know who I was anymore" (Kerouac, 1957, p. 12) and tells the story of this collapse in identity entirely in terms of material sensations: the "hiss of steam outside," the creaking of the building, footsteps on the stairs (Kerouac, 1957, p. 12). Selfhood is not an enclosed inside space that is disturbed by outside space, but it is a process of production, a moment-by-moment creation of the self, from the lively matter around the body, steam, sound, structure. At this intimate level, the idea that matter is not "dull" but active is readable in Sal's own sense of self: new materialist literary criticism's views on the material environment as a constituent of embodied selfhood in narrative are echoed here by his sensitivity to the noise and movement of non-human entities (Vint, 2020).

Similarly, Sal's experience with Mississippi is one of "big rank smell" (1957, p. 11), like "the raw body of America itself." The river is not just seen, it is smelled, and through its materiality, it generates the meaning Sal gives to the country that he is traversing. Perception is a collection in Bennett's sense, a collection of Sal's mind, a collection of the matter of the river, and a collection of the smell.

Conclusion

On the Road isn't just a story of individual freedom, it's a long, convoluted account of assemblages: combinations of bodies, cars, roads, weather and strangers, each adding a force, a thing-power, that propels and inflects the path of the trip. Rain and geography derail Sal's plans before they have even gotten a chance to start, and a single skid on a muddy ranch road draws mud, tractor and farmer into the causality of the story, as much as it does the driver steering through it. Even the travellers' sense of self is rendered material created under the steam and sound of the hotel room, by the smell and flow of the river.

None of this is meant to suggest that the human is abandoned from the novel, nor that Bennett's framework requires human presence to be subtracted from it; rather, the human is moved from the novel, and is only one actant among many and always in flux. This move is also a response, in microcosm, to the larger theoretical one addressed in the literature review: that new materialism is leading to a radical dissolution of human responsibility into a seamless "space of materiality" (Ejsing, 2024). Taking care of the thing-power of the car, the resistance of the road, and the redirection of the weather does not excuse the recklessness of Dean Moriarty, it makes it more precise than any purely individualist account can, because of this, the nature of danger, freedom, and mobility is produced all together. The novel in this sense anticipates a recent claim from the other, empirical corner of mobilities scholarship that automobile systems are not just inert infrastructure, but can be sources of momentum, risk, and possibility that cannot be entirely mastered by any single, even if charismatic, human actor (Hellberg et al., 2024).

Finally, this novel is not a myth of the free individual moving across a passive terrain, but a description of mobility as a process that is always being made, and always requires the participation of the material world, of cars and roads, of rivers and the weather. This conclusion

has implications that extend beyond the confines of Kerouac studies. It proposes, for one, that the canonical mid-century American road narrative continues to be a promising and largely under-explored site for new materialist literary analysis, being an almost exclusively text-focused grouping around the vitality, and the failure, of technological and environmental actants (Vint, 2020; Musgrave, 2023). It proposes, second, that literary criticism and mobilities scholarship have much to learn from each other, and that both disciplines have independently arrived at remarkably similar accounts of the system of automobility as a form of distributed, self-perpetuating technology that is beyond the control of individual humans (Hellberg et al., 2024; Bennett, 2010). Future research could be expanded to the rest of Duluz Legend (Belletto, 2024) and/or to other major American road narratives, to see if the distribution of agency described here in *On the Road* is a genre-level phenomenon in American automobile fiction, or whether it is a trait more closely tied to Kerouac's own restless, improvisatory style.

Conflict of Interest

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