John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*: In Search of What Kind of America?

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Abstract

The American road narrative as a genre has had little consideration in the academic context. Those narratives were most of the time studied in a fixed way, linked to spiritual and internal journeys rather than actually analyzing the relationship between humans and the space they were travelling on. Similarly, the environment had scant consideration in literary works as well as in the academic debate at least until the nineties. The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of an American road narrative through an ecocritical and space-oriented approach, trying thus to display what is the relationship between humans and the environment within this specific American genre. This will lead to new insights on aspects of mobility/movement and place/space, being the latter not only strongly linked to the American road trip, but also representing important features in American history and culture. The American road narrative chosen for this analysis is John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962), the result of the author's travels in his own country.

Keywords: American road narrative; Mobility/Movement; Space/Place; Ecocriticism

Resumo

A narrativa de estrada americana como género literário tem tido pouca relevância em contexto académico. Essas narrativas têm sido estudadas quase sempre de uma forma fixa, ligadas a viagens interiores e espirituais, ao invés de analisar a relação entre os humanos e o espaço onde a viagem era realizada. De forma semelhante, os estudos sobre o espaço e o ambiente têm tido poucas considerações em obras literárias assim como no debate académico, pelo menos até aos anos noventa. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar uma narrativa de estrada americana através de uma perspetiva ecocrítica e focada no espaço, tentando deste modo mostrar a relação entre o ser humano e o espaço/ambiente circundante dentro deste género literário especificamente americano. Isto levará a novas perspetivas sobre os aspetos de mobilidade/movimento e espaço/lugar, sendo estes elementos importantes, não só para a narrativa de estrada americana, mas também para a história e cultura americana. A narrativa

de estrada escolhida para este artigo é *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962) de John Steinbeck, obra resultante da viagem do autor no seu próprio país.

Palavras-chave: Narrativa de estrada americana; Mobilidade/Movimento; Lugar/Espaço; Ecocrítica

Introduction

Mobility/movement as well as place/space have always been pivotal and strongly interconnected features in American history and culture. In fact, as John Opie argues in *Virtual America: Sleepwalking through Paradise* (2008): "Space, more than time, roots the American experience; space is the central fact of American history" (45). To this statement, I would also add movement as a central fact to American history. From the "First West" (the settlements in the East coast) to the progressive conquest of successive "frontiers", America is based on movement and space. Movement meant the possibility of conquering new places, expanding and progressing both physically and socially in space. America was seen as a Garden of Eden, in which Man could start over again as well as a pastoral place where Man could be regenerated. There was (and to a certain extent still is) the idea that through the contact between Man and the landscape/wilderness a new character could arise: the American character. Thus, this connection between man and nature was and still is among the significant elements of the American psyche.

Nature has always played an important role for the American experience. Long is the tradition of accounts and writings concerning nature and the American landscape: from the early depictions of John Smith to what is known as "nature writing", strongly influenced by romanticism and transcendentalism. Just to mention some important writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau devoted some of their writings to the important role of nature, almost always represented in pastoral terms. However, American reality at that time was becoming more and more industrialized and urbanized; the American pastoral was vanishing and proving to be just an ideal, but one which still held a great power. In fact, the idea of America as a Garden of Eden, as a place in which Man can find regeneration through the contact with Nature, is still very much present. Moreover, the recurrent accounts about travels westward, the conquest of the frontiers, the trope of the errand into the wilderness, among others, do no more than reinforce the concept of movement, as it

is stressed in *The Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing* (2009) edited by Alfred Bendixen and Judith Hamera:

> Travel and the construction of American identity are intimately linked. This connection undergirds commonplace descriptions of America as a . . . restless populace on the move. It lies at the heart of the politics of Manifest Destiny, in complex relationships between the technology, commerce, and aesthetics of the car culture, and in migration narratives from those of the Hopis and Zunis to those of the Beats. . . . It creates American "selves" and American landscapes through affirmation, exclusion, and negation of others, and interpellates readers into these selves and landscapes through specific rhetorical and genre conventions. (I)

With the pressing and almost anarchic advance of technology and progress, especially with the appearance of the car and with the massive construction of road networks,[1] the concept of movement acquired even more appeal. The road gave to Americans the chance to move through the vast continent, but also gave them the belief that, through the road, a certain kind of reconnection with Nature and with the American landscape could be found. Travelling American roads by car gained different symbolic meanings, such as those of freedom, speed, independence, escape, and, as already mentioned, the possibility to be immersed into the American landscape, so much praised by Americans. Hence, the road turned into an American icon, and, consequently, road narratives became one of the most important expressions of that iconic symbol. Nevertheless, we should stress the contradiction and ambivalence of this significant icon: that very same road has contributed to significant changes and to the damage of the American landscape and environment.

What I intend to do in this essay is to analyze an American road narrative through an ecocritical perspective, and, thus, to study the relationship between human beings and the environment in the American road narrative. Already many literary texts have been studied through an ecocritical approach, but this specific American genre appears not to have been investigated through that filter.

The idea of the road mainly as a getaway from "something" is well stressed and explained in Ronald Primeau's seminal work *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996). Previously to Primeau, there were no critique accounts of the road narrative as a genre; there had been a substantial amount of critical studies on Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), but not on the American road narrative as a genre. In this respect, Primeau's work reveals to be useful, considering that he provides a retrospective study on the long tradition of travels on the road. The

American road tradition encompasses several types of travels: just to give some examples, Henry David Thoreau's walking road trip (*Walking*) or Walt Whitman's "Song of the Open Road", and Mark Twain's river and stagecoach journeys. However, the road that I am considering in this essay is the modern Macadam road, thus a paved road, which allows traffic of motorized vehicles, and mainly the car. Paved roads, highways, back roads, and the car represent an intrusion in the so praised American landscape, but, at the same time, they are symbols of the American spirit of restlessness and movement.

American road narratives were most of the time associated with certain issues, such as a way to flee from a consumerist and conformist society, or as the possibility to reinvent one's identity. The hope was to find, at the end of the road, some kind of purpose or meaning. However, in *American Road Narratives* (2015), Ann Brigham argues:

> . . . the road represents not a flight from opposition but a meeting place of clashing or contradictory elements. . . . Mobility does not function as an exit from society/home/the familiar, but instead emerges as a dynamic process for engaging with social conflicts. This makes sense because road stories themselves are plotted around unsettling processes: the crossing of borders, the courting and conquering of distance, the reinvention of identity, and the access, negotiation, and disruption of spaces. The road introduces an otherness that is both spatial and social, and so mobility becomes a process for working out the fact of difference. (8)

This is the sense in which my analysis of the American road narrative will proceed, and, especially, the above-mentioned aspects of "courting and conquering of distance . . . the access, negotiation, and disruption of spaces" will be relevant for the ecocritical approach. It will be analyzed whether or not it is given prominence and voice to the role of environment and space, and to the destruction of certain landscapes (particularly the natural ones). Moreover, attention will be also given to urban spaces, thus considering the environment in its entirety.

Ann Brigham's approach to concepts of mobility and movement seems to be the most appropriate, given the fact that the road trip appears as a way to engage with social conflicts and not as a flight from them. Furthermore, Brigham underlines in her introduction the importance of the road trip to Americans still in contemporary times, emphasizing its connection to the "pleasures of seeing America" and to the natural environment (2). And here ecocriticism seems to properly blend with the American road narrative's definition previously provided. In *The Future of Environmental*

Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination (2005), Lawrence Buell argues that nature and environmental issues were for a long time excluded from literary and cultural studies, pointing also to the fact that race, gender, and postcolonial studies have already gained a noticeable status, whereas environmental and ecocritical studies are still in expansion (1). This is also very apt to American road narratives which apparently were never considered through an ecocritical approach. Using Cheryll Glotfelty's words:

> Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (xix)

Therefore, as it has become relevant to focus on gender, class, and race, ecocriticism emphasizes the significance of focusing on nature, environmental issues, and on the importance of place and landscape in literature. It is only since the nineties that ecocriticism has become a field of interest within the field of literary studies, and it is from then on that, slowly, there have been more and more attempts to give voice to those relationships.

Nature has most of the time been considered just through an anthropocentric perspective, in which human beings are always at the center, whereas Nature is placed at the periphery, mostly in a submissive position. Nature seems to have no agency at all and to exist just to serve humans' purposes. This is, in fact, what is known as the Anthropocene: "The name emphasizes "the central role of mankind in geology and ecology" and the impact of human activities on the planet" (Crutzen and Stoermer qtd. in Mertens and Craps 134). In *Ecocriticism: The New Critical Idiom* (2004), Greg Garrard sheds light on different aspects ecocriticism deals with, such as the pastoral, the concept of wilderness, and of deep ecology, among others. The latter seems to be especially relevant:

> . . . deep ecology demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. It identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere. The shift from a human-centred to a nature-centred system of values is the core of the radicalism attributed to deep ecology, bringing it into opposition with almost the entirety of Western philosophy and religion. (21)

As it was already pinpointed previously, the American road narrative is strongly linked to the idea of an immersion and a reconnection with the American environment. The road and the car allowed this reconnection, but at what cost?

John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*

The American road narrative that I have decided to analyze through an ecocritical lens is John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962), the result of the author's travels in his own country.[2] He departed from Sag Harbor, Long Island (New York), with his camper, named Rocinante, after Don Quixote's horse, and his American poodle Charley. He traveled 10.000 miles across America, passing through thirty-four states. To my knowledge, Steinbeck's road trip is not recognized as an environmental or ecocritical work; he did not make the journey to raise awareness of environmental issues or damages, or to show the consequences of human actions upon the landscape. He made the road trip in 1960, a year in which environmental concerns and earth-centered perspectives were not yet taken into account, at least in literary works. The term "ecocriticism" was only used for the first time with the publication of William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), turning into a trend in literary criticism in the 1990s. This is the reason why I think that John Steinbeck's road trip's aim was not about creating environmental consciousness. Notwithstanding this, there is a kind of implicit and latent ecocritical approach clearly visible through Steinbeck's comments during his trip. Therefore, this essay will attempt to find if there is a certain kind of awareness toward environmental changes and damages, and to see how the environment is dealt with in this specific American genre.

First of all, it has to be clarified why John Steinbeck decided to undertake the trip:

> My plan was clear, concise, and reasonable, I think. For many years I have traveled in many parts of the world. In America I live in New York, or dip into Chicago or San Francisco. But New York is no more America than Paris is France or London is England. Thus I discovered that I did not know my own country. I, an American writer, writing about America, was working from memory, and memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir. I had not heard the speech of America, *smelled the grass and trees and sewage, seen its hills and water, its color and quality of light*. I knew the changes only from books and newspapers. But more than this, I had not felt the country for twenty-five years. In short, I was writing of something I did not know about, and it

> seems to me that in a so-called writer this is criminal. My memories were distorted by twenty-five intervening years. (5, my italics)[3]

His road trip is, thus, a way to discover and to reconnect with his own country, twenty-five years having passed since he had last done that. Nostalgia and a profound desire of reconnection are what lead Steinbeck to road tripping America. Steinbeck is in "search of America" and probably still attached to a certain idea of his native country, since the term "America" makes reference to a set of mythical features, typical of the United States of America. Likely, Steinbeck is thinking of America as the idealized space. He had an idea of America, but, through the road trip, he wants to see how America really is. And it appears quite clear that the reconnection with America means also to reconnect with Nature: there is this explicit need to smell and see the American landscape, and to learn about the changes. Thus, it seems Steinbeck was also aware that something had changed in his country, and he was not wrong.

Twenty-five years before Steinbeck's travels, nearly at the end of the 1930s, the massive construction of road networks, the Interstate Highway System, was yet to start. In *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy since 1939* (2012), it is explained that already with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, there was the idea of creating a national freeway system. However, it was only in June 1956 with the Federal Aid Highway Act, during Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency, that the construction of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was approved. Clearly, this project of roads' construction represented an advance for the country, enabling an easier and faster movement throughout the vast territory. However, as it is argued in the preface to *Interstate*'s third edition: ". . . authors of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 made no provision for cities, the environment, housing for those displaced by construction, or for any consideration other than traffic flow" (x). The Interstate Highway System brought irreversible changes and consequences: destruction of natural and open spaces, progressive constructions of motels, gas stations, diners, malls, a high amount of traffic, of pollution, and the gallop, almost scary, advancement of urban centers, among other aspects. Steinbeck mentions some of these when he talks about cities such as Hartford and Providence (26). Manufacturing and traffic seem to be dominant in Hartford and Providence, and, specifically, traffic prevents people from enjoying the cityscape. Furthermore, Steinbeck's judgement about those two cities is extended to all American cities. In fact, he adds: "American cities are like badger holes, ringed with trash – all of them – surrounded by piles of wrecked and rusting automobiles, and almost smothered with rubbish" (26). American cities appear as cramped places, adorned with a great deal of trash, waste and automobiles. There

is no trace of beauty or of human existence, but just the result of what might be seen as human progress and consumerism, "the wild and reckless exuberance of our production" (26). Steinbeck seems to be aware of the consequences of progress and of the danger of the much praised American icon - the car - which seems to be invading American cities. A little bit further, he claims: ". . . I do wonder whether there will come a time when we can no longer afford our wastefulness – chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in sea. When an Indian village became too deep in its own filth, the inhabitants moved. And we have no place to which to move" (27). All that wastefulness is having (and will have even more) harmful consequences; it is affecting two important aspects of the American experience: nature and movement. Wastefulness is not merely subjugating the urban parts of America, but also adulterating American nature. Moreover, as it was clarified at the beginning of the essay, movement is one of the central aspects of American history and culture. The so praised possibility to move was, already at that time, being ruined by Americans themselves. Not only were cities becoming increasingly gloomy and industrialized, but natural spaces were also turning into places full of filth and waste, hindering the chance to move over there or even the idea of merely enjoying those spaces.

Further ahead, Steinbeck addresses not only the waste and filth, but also what consumerism has done to most rural parts of America:

> The big towns are getting bigger and the villages smaller. The hamlet store, whether grocery, general, hardware, clothing, cannot compete with the supermarket and the chain organization. Our treasured and nostalgic picture of the village store, the cracker-barrel store where an informed yeomanry gather to express opinion and formulate the national character, is very rapidly disappearing. People who once held fortresses against wind and weather, against scourges of frost and drought and insect enemies, now cluster against the busy breast of the big town. (71-2)

The big towns and the increasing consumerism are killing American small villages because they are not able to sustain themselves anymore, especially due to the fact that big malls and chain organizations are taking over. The global/national is suppressing the local, the place where national character actually lies. In the introduction to *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), Ursula K. Heise argues that:

> The marked emphasis in American environmentalist thought on the local as the ground for individual and communal identity and as the site of connections to nature

> that modern society is perceived to have undone certainly fits broadly into a pattern of critique of modernity that has repeatedly articulated in Western Europe and North America for at least two centuries. But many of the specifics of this critique draw their strength from cultural and rhetorical traditions particular to the United States, where rootedness in place has long been valued as an ideal counterweight to the mobility, restlessness, rootlessness, and nomadism that Americans themselves as well as observers from outside have often construed as paradigmatic of American national character. (9)

These concepts of rootedness and mobility appear to be in an ambiguous and continuous clash between them. On the one hand, there is still a longing for rurality and small-sized communities, to go back to the husbandmen state so praised at the end of the eighteenth century by President Thomas Jefferson. On the other hand, there is the unstoppable thirst for progress, which has contributed to crush small rural communities. America is based on this enigmatic conflict between ideal and reality. For Steinbeck, the ideal is linked to localness, to a national character which is disappearing, as in fact he claims in the following instance:

> The idioms, the figures of speech that make language rich and full of the poetry of place and time must go. And in their place will be a national speech, wrapped and packaged, standard and tasteless. Localness is not gone but it is going. In the many years since I have listened to the land the change is very great. Traveling west along the northern routes I did not hear a truly local speech until I reached Montana. That is one of the reasons I fell in love again with Montana. The West Coast went back to packaged English. The Southwest kept a grasp but a slipping grasp on localness. Of course the deep south holds on by main strength to its regional expressions, just as it holds and treasures some other anachronisms, but no region can hold out for long against the highway, the high-tension line, and the national television. What I am mourning is perhaps not worth saving, but I regret its loss nevertheless. (106, 107)

Steinbeck is traveling not only to reconnect to a certain idea of America, in terms of place, but he also travels in time. At certain moments and in some places, there was localness marked by the presence of local accents, but these aspects are fading away. Everything, even the language, seems standardized; the American individuality is vanishing and is being replaced by globalization and standardization. Steinbeck stresses the fact that even the most resistant rural regions will cease under the construction of the highway, the intrusion of progress.

Later in the book, Steinbeck travels to Seattle. He had been there before, but the Seattle he is now seeing is completely different:

> I remembered Seattle as a town sitting on hills beside a matchless harborage – a little city of space and trees and gardens, its houses matched to such a background. It is no longer so. . . . The highways eight lanes wide cut like glaciers through the uneasy land. This Seattle had no relation to the one I remembered. The traffic rushed with murderous intensity. On the outskirts of this place I once knew well I could not find my way. Along what had been country lanes rich with berries, high wire fences and mile-long factories stretched, and the yellow smoke of progress hung over all, fighting the sea winds' efforts to drive them off. (181)

This is a good example of the rapid transformation of cities. Seattle was once a pleasant town; in the sixties, the change for the worse is explicit: Seattle is dominated and overwhelmed by traffic, depicted as murderous, by the highways and by the dirty smoke of progress, in stark contrast and continuous fight with the natural sea winds. Steinbeck appears to be aware of the consequences of progress on the environment, as in fact he stresses a little bit further: "Everywhere frantic growth, a carcinomatous growth. . . . I wonder why progress looks so much like destruction" (181). Steinbeck also witnesses this carcinomatous growth and change in his native town, Salinas (California). First, he claims that maybe the changes we witness are led by our own personal change. However, he has to debunk his claim. Salinas really appears to be totally different:

> I remember Salinas, the town of my birth, when it proudly announced four thousand citizens. Now it is eighty thousand and leaping pell mell on in a mathematical progression – a hundred thousand in three years and perhaps two hundred thousand in ten, with no end in sight. Even those people who joy in numbers and are impressed with bigness are beginning to worry, gradually becoming aware that there must be a saturation point and the progress may be a progression toward strangulation. (195-6)

This rapid and rampant growth does not look very promising: here progress and increasing expansion will lead to a point of no return. The area and city of Salinas underwent several environmental changes and massive industrial intrusions. As it is reported in the webpage "Salinas Public Library,"[4] between 1960 and 1969 Salinas was overwhelmed by many industrial companies and by changes in its cityscape.

Progress is a process which appears unavoidable, and Steinbeck feels already the loss of a place and of a time which are almost gone forever; in a certain way, he foresees what will happen to America. He is aware of the great changes and of the fact that the past is irretrievable. Furthermore, Steinbeck observes that out of this America in progress, a new American, with new challenges, is born (72). Once, the

American challenge was in taming the wilderness; as previously mentioned, from the contact with nature and wilderness the American character was believed to be born. In the sixties, there is a new American character who loves progress and consumerism, in all their aspects. This American romance with progress and technology can be found in the most varied parts of America; it almost seems that there are no differences anymore from one region to another, the polluted air and rivers of Texas are more or less the same of Maine. Therefore, the rural, local, and natural appear to be just an ideal, but not the reality. Steinbeck himself is dominated by this clash between ideal and reality, as it can be seen from the idea he has about the city of Fargo, North Dakota:

> Curious how a place unvisited can take such hold on the mind so that the very name sets up a ringing. To me such a place was Fargo. . . . Fargo to me is brother to the fabulous places of the earth, kin to those magically remote spots mentioned by Herodotus and Marco Polo and Mandeville. . . . As a sop to hurt feelings, I must admit that when I passed through Moorhead, Minnesota, and rattled across the Red River into Fargo on the other side, it was a golden autumn day, the town as traffic-troubled, as neon-plastered, as cluttered and milling with activity as any other up-and-coming town of forty-six thousand souls. (135)

Fargo is a disappointment for Steinbeck. It might be that he was looking for an idyllic and still rural Fargo, but the image he has in mind belongs to the past. Fargo has become a town full of traffic and of increasing industrialization. In the official webpage of the city of Fargo,[5] there is a part devoted to Fargo's history where it is explained how progress was already present in Fargo, since nearly its inception. Fargo as a frontier and rural town lasted for a short time. In 1905, the *Pence Automobile Company* was founded in Fargo, thus initiating its automobile industry flourishment. The town grew progressively and, in the late fifties, witnessed the construction of two Interstates: I-29 and I-94. Nevertheless, Steinbeck has an idea of Fargo as a fabulous and enchanting place, perhaps because he still links that place to certain myths. To a certain extent, Fargo still clings to ideals which have to do with rurality and nature. Its motto is "Gateway to the West" and its welcome sign is "City of Parks". Regarding the motto, Fargo is seen as an access road to the West, to what was considered the second Garden of Eden, a bucolic, regenerative and natural place, where rural values were still alive. The welcome sign, "City of Parks", points to the fact that Fargo is a city, but still has natural areas. The Fargo Park District counts about 2100 acres of land, in which recreation facilities, trails, camping, and other activities can be found. This represents an attempt to maintain the natural parts, and to provide Americans with

the chance to experience Nature. However, this is a (re)construction of nature, with the purpose to satisfy humans' desires. This digression about Fargo was, in my opinion, useful to underline that even if reality proves to be totally different from the idea, still the latter keeps on holding a great power, as in fact Steinbeck claims a little bit further, when he stops on the Maple River:

> Anyway, on the Maple River I . . . paused to lick my mythological wounds. And I found with joy that the fact of Fargo had in no way disturbed my mind's picture of it. I could still think of Fargo as I always had . . . . I am happy to report that in the war between reality and romance, reality is not the stronger. (136)

Bucolic and natural places seem to be vanishing, but the ideal of an imagined natural space still remains.

As mentioned above, after Fargo, Steinbeck stops on the Maple River, in a delightful place close to a little town called Alice. He quickly gives information about Alice's population, reporting that in 1950 there were 162 inhabitants, whereas the last census showed a decrease in population, counting 124 inhabitants. This stresses what was said before about big cities and small villages. Villages are disappearing, while towns, like Fargo, are progressively growing. Likely, people are more and more frequently attracted to progress and technology: it is the new American character. Nevertheless, this beautiful spot on the Maple River seems to be regenerative for Steinbeck, although the intrusion of the machine/progress is always there:

> . . . there on the Maple River, not far from Alice, the gift of it was coming back. . . . The pull-out place beside the water was pleasant. I brought out my garbage can washing machine and rinsed clothes that had been jiggling in detergent for two days. And then, because a pleasant breeze was blowing, I spread my sheets to dry on some low bushes. I don't know what kind of bushes they were, but the leaves had a rich smell like sandalwood, and there's nothing I like better than scented sheets. (136, 137)

The regenerative power through the contact with nature seems to be at work. In Maple River, Steinbeck finds peace and reconciliation with himself. However, as suggested before, the machine and progress are present. Steinbeck is enjoying the beauty of being in nature, but he is also using the resources of technology in nature, like, for instance, the garbage can he uses as a washing machine or the detergent. It is a semi-immersion into nature, taking benefit of technology. It is as if there were a

blend between nature and technology, perceived, for instance, from the natural smell on the sheets washed by Steinbeck's "washing machine".[6]

This blend between nature and technology can also be seen in the presence of the mobile homes in different parts of America. Steinbeck mentions them for the first time after driving U.S. 90 and U.S. 20: "Early in my travels I had become aware of these new things under the sun, of their great numbers, and since they occur in increasing numbers all over the nation, observation of them and perhaps some speculation is in order" (95). The automobile has evolved into a more industrial vehicle. It seems to me that these mobile homes comprise two clashing ideas: mobility and rootedness/place. As previously mentioned, the car provides Americans with the possibility to crisscross their vast country more rapidly and autonomously. However, these mobile homes own even more qualities, "they are wonderfully built homes" (96), they have every kind of facility and comfort, such as bedrooms, air-conditioners, toilets and televisions. Americans can have their homes wherever they wish and they can try to put down roots wherever they want. Movement and place are once more enhanced with this new technological advance. In addition, Steinbeck adds that sometimes the parks in which these mobile homes stop are landscaped, so probably closer to natural areas. Thus, it might be that these mobile homes offer not just the chance to move to different places (or to choose to stay in one) with every kind of comfort, but also to have a contact with nature, or at least to reenact the ideal of living in nature. However, this is merely a reenactment. These mobile homes are the result of progress and technology, and with no doubt they contributed to changing and destroying the landscape, as Steinbeck points out: "I had thought there were many of them in the East and in the Middle West, but California spawns them like herrings. The trailer courts are everywhere, lapping up the sides of hills, spilling into river beds" (196). This shows that the experience of the mobile home is becoming a problem, increasingly flooding into nature. Mobility is in the garden.

The idea of a reenactment of life in nature can also be found in the creation of National Parks, and I believe a short discussion of this topic is important. Steinbeck claims the following in relation to National Parks:

> I must confess to a laxness in the matter of National Parks. I haven't visited many of them. Perhaps this is because they enclose the unique, the spectacular, the astounding – the greatest waterfall, the deepest canyon, the highest cliff, *the most stupendous works of man or nature*. . . . For it is my opinion that we enclose and celebrate the freaks of our nation and of our civilization. Yellowstone National Park is no more representative of America than is Disneyland. (161, my italics)

Yellowstone and Disneyland are both symbols of America. Even if they are different, they have complementary aspects, such as the fact that, in the end, they were built in order to satisfy humans' pleasures. However, Yellowstone was constructed with the aim of preserving nature (or attempting to do that), whereas Disneyland was built on 160 acres of orange groves in Anheim, California.[7] Therefore, Disneyland was built by sacrificing nature. The rarities of America imply that, on the one hand nature must be preserved, on the other hand it can be destroyed to, in the end, make profits and, therefore, to enhance progress. Yet, I would suggest that National Parks are a reenactment of the American wilderness, more than Nature's safeguarding. Steinbeck classifies National Parks as "the most stupendous works of man or nature". However, I would call them as "the most stupendous works of man *on* nature". Nature is remodeled and reshaped in order to serve human beings. The idea of National Parks as wilderness areas are thus quite paradoxical as Byerly argues in "The Uses of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System":

> . . . national parks can approximate the wilderness experience for a larger audience by presenting a landscape that reproduces a scenic *facsimile* of wilderness, a mythologized image of what we would like the wilderness to be. Evidence of human activity is carefully erased, but humans themselves are not excluded. On the contrary, their spectatorial presence is essential to the idea of wilderness. (58)

What seems to be important is framing beauty and comfort, considering that these look to be what humans seek. Therefore, what is provided is a beautiful image of the idea/myth of the American wilderness. Preservation is important but humans' safety and enjoyment come first. As a consequence, national parks' policies had to reflect what tourists longed for in the wilderness, and, at times, to attain that, wild animals were killed, as the case of elks, bears and bison in Yellowstone. Furthermore, it seems that National Parks are dominated by business interests, as it is suggested in Michael Lewis' *American Wilderness: A New History* (2007), in which he mentions, for instance, the operation of drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska (4). Besides, Lewis also remarks on the intrusive and destructive presence of the car around National Parks: "We show our love for our national parks by driving hundreds of miles to see them in RVs and SUVs that, at their best, travel fifteen miles per gallon of gas" (4).

Here we go back to the main aspects stressed previously, particularly the unsolvable and clashing relationship between mobility/movement/progress and

space/place/nature. The possibility of going into the wilderness is still important for the American framework of mind, given the fact that, as Frederick Jackson Turner argued in his pivotal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), it was from the contact with the frontier, with the untamed space that apparently Man underwent a process of "perennial rebirth" which led to the creation of an idealized American character. That is the reason why the American wilderness but also movement are representative of the American national character even if this has never corresponded to reality.

Conclusion

After driving 10.000 miles throughout America, Steinbeck returns to New York: "'Officer, I've driven this thing all over the country – mountains, plains, deserts. And now I'm back in my own town, where I live – and I'm lost'" (277). Steinbeck wanted "to look again, to try to rediscover this monster land" (6). After twenty-five years without looking at his country, what does he expect from it? He calls his country "monster land": besides providing the feeling of something enormous, it also holds a kind of negative connotation.

In the end, what remains is a sense of loss. What is also curious is that, before affirming that he is (literally) lost after his road trip, he says that with Rocinante he has traveled throughout America, but he just mentions the natural parts (mountains, plains, and deserts); he does not mention the cities which, as it was shown, were also part of his narrative. This seems to underline that what was more important for Steinbeck in his road trip was the reconnection with nature. However, this attempt to reconnect led him to feeling lost. Maybe because he did not recognize his country, or maybe because, as in the case of Fargo, his idealization did not correspond to reality.

In fact, as it was previously stated, Steinbeck himself recognizes that in the conflict between romance and reality, romance is always the stronger, and here romance stands for ideals. As William Barillas points out: "Americans, in other words, have not yet modified myth to meet changing realities. [W]e have not reconciled the machine and the garden, but have maintained a certain falsehood in our pastoralism, a sentimentality that belies social and environmental complexities" (23). And here it must be added mobility/movement and the garden, as this essay dealt with the American road narrative and ecocriticism. The American road trip is dichotomous: it stands for speed, fastness, independence, representing also a way to reconnect with Nature. It allows reconnection with Nature through a massive use of mobility, which proves to be destructive for the environment.

Furthermore, it seems that in *Travels with Charley*, even if there is a longing for rurality and localness, progress is shown to be unstoppable and invading everything and every part of America, even the so praised Middle West, considered as the heart of the American character. The Middle West is described as full of traffic roads and as a region with a boom in population density. Moreover, Steinbeck observes the presence of a force, of an electric energy: "No matter what the direction, whether for good or for bad, the vitality was everywhere" (105). Vitality meaning progress, and Steinbeck seems to be aware of its persistent existence, to which he is not totally adverse. In fact, Steinbeck claims: "I have never resisted change, even when it has been called progress, and yet I felt resentment toward the strangers swamping what I thought of as my country with noise and clutter and the inevitable rings of junk" (203). Strangers, but also Americans themselves are destroying the environment. Steinbeck seems to be partially aware of what is happening. The noun "environment" or the adjective "environmental" do not appear even once in his road narrative, and, what is more, he himself is driving with his camper throughout America. He is polluting, he is causing traffic as well. He was searching for a certain idealized America, and in the end, he did not find it, since the America he was looking for is an imagined one, localized in an imagined past and that is irretrievable except in the imagination. He reminds Gatsby and his belief in repeating the past, which shows that looking back is in itself a way of avoiding the present and particularly the problems of that same present. In other words, while in fact looking back even when facing the actual situation, Steinbeck is unable to really address the implications of the machine in the garden.

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[1] Specifically, with the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, commonly known as the Interstate Highway System (1956 – 1992).

[2] *Travels with Charley* is a non-fiction book. There have been varied debates about the nature of the book, being, at times, considered by some to be fiction, mainly for the fact that some critics supported the idea that Steinbeck's dialogues/encounters with people were fictionalized. Others focused on the veracity of the travel itself through the thirty-four American states. Steinbeck's Travels have been retraced by other writers and critics; for instance, Bill Barich's *Long Way Home: On the Trail of Steinbeck's America* (2010), John R. Olson's *Down John's Road: Recreating John Steinbeck's 1960 American Road Trip* (2011), Bill Steigerwald's *Dogging Steinbeck: Discovering America and Exposing the Truth about 'Travels with* Charley' (2012), and Geert Mak's *In America: Travels with John Steinbeck* (2012).

[3] I am using the 1980 edition.

[4] https://salinaspubliclibrary.org/learn-explore/local-history/city-salinas-history. Accessed 15 January 2020.

[5] https://fargond.gov/explore/about-fargo/city-history. Accessed 16January 2020.

[6] Steinbeck's washing machine is an ingenious process he came up with. It is simply made of a large plastic bucket with cover and bail, in which he would put hot water (heated in a tea kettle), the clothes and some detergent. The bucket was tethered "with a length of strong elastic rope of cotton-covered rubber to the clothes pole in [his] little closet" (45), where it would jiggle without spilling, thus reproducing a washing machine cycle.

[7] See https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/disneyland-opens. Accessed on 16January 2020.