

“With Imperious Eye”: Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg on the Road in South America

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But invasion is the basis of fear: there's no fear like
invasion.

—William S. Burroughs

Barry Miles, biographer of both Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, gives a typical interpretation of the Beat phenomenon's political significance:

The group was more of a fraternity of spirit and attitude than a literary movement, and their writings have little in common with each other; what they did have in common was a reaction to the ongoing carnage of World War II, the dropping of the A-bomb and the puritan small-mindedness that still characterized American life. They shared an interest in widening the area of consciousness, by whatever means available. (1992, 5)

This quote is significant not only because of what Miles alleges about the Beat writers, but also because of what he describes as the Beat “reaction” to those postwar events commonly maintained as the most important. He suggests that a monolithic U.S. culture, in the throes of a puritanical conservatism, was challenged by a group of heroic writers who countered its hypocrisy and blindness by “widening the area of consciousness.” The version of history that this view implies is troublesome for many reasons. First, it posits an axis

of historical relations in which conservative arbiters of bourgeois culture are set against a subversive group that saves the decade by creating a liberating cultural movement, a movement that “widens” consciousness and presages the even more “liberating” countercultural movement of the 1960s. Second, it posits a small, primarily Anglo, elite class that controls the action of history and whose main source of contention is an equally small, Anglo, elite group, in this case, the Beats.¹ Third, it posits the military-industrial complex (“carnage” and “atom bomb”) as the central reality to which the Beats reacted. This view elides the possibility that the action of both these Anglo groups was a reaction to other historical events and trends, ones very much effected by women, African Americans, and Mexican Americans.

What has remained largely unexamined is that the Beats were not immune to the cultural fears that lay at the heart of the decade’s reactionary political atmosphere, but rather articulated social strategies that ultimately proposed a neo-individualism fueled by a neo-colonial imperative. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs talks about the “new imperialism”² that drew him to Mexico and now beckoned from Central America. Understanding this “newness” of imperialism after World War II means understanding the necessity of re-creating the mythos of the frontier in American culture, and more important, understanding the ways in which “movement” describes the relation between neo-individualism and communal mobilization.

Beat Historiography

The Beats were fascinated by Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1991), which posited a land of marginalized peoples, living on the edge of history and waiting for an apocalyptic moment. He called these people the “fellaheen,” and the Beats used this historiography to construct Mexico as the site of a new frontier. Although their reading of Spengler remained cursory, Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac appropriated the idea of the fellaheen as a teleological justification for their adventurism. In their interpretation, the people of Mexico lived in a primitive and declining society, existed on the periphery of a fallen civilization, and waited for its eventual re-creation. Spengler’s historical cycles underpinned a racialized vision of the southern lands in which expansion and an imperialist

exploration was warranted. The fellaheen lands thus provided the American "western hero" a land in need of conquest, while suggesting for the Beats a holy and noble purpose: a new mission in the wilderness.

Kerouac's biographers, such as Gerald Nicosia, have long discussed Spengler's central importance to Beat historiographical logic:³ "Spengler's analysis of European history as occurring in cycles of cultural entropy contributed to the early Beat writer's apocalyptic vision of their times" (1983, 65). Nicosia goes further saying that Kerouac "often talked of Goethe's Faust and the way Spengler had used Faust to typify Western Man's endless reaching into space. To Jack, Spengler had found the essence of the western soul in Faust's craving for infinity" (204). Thus Kerouac's early construction of western man's desire manifests itself in his movement narratives.

This expansionist (read colonialist) impulse is seen in other Beat texts. In Burroughs's original letters to Ginsberg, later collected and edited by Lawrence Ferlinghetti as the *Yage Letters*, Burroughs defines the "stasis horrors" that push him on in his expedition in South America in search of a telepathic drug:

At dinner got bad case of stasis horrors. The feel of location, of being just where you are and nowhere else is unendurable. This feeling has been with me all over South America. (Burroughs 1994, 174)

Notice the fear of immobilization: it makes up much of the subject matter of Burroughs's novels. This stasis horror has an imperialist element because the cure for stagnation and ennui is always to move on to a new southern location, in this case the new Southern frontier. Interestingly, imperialism and communalism are imbricated processes for Burroughs. In a sense, Burroughs's motivation to explore South America in search of the new product Yage, with its fabled power, was an indirect attempt to create a nonthreatening community, one that did not limit the individual or his ability to move. An alternate form of expansion, Yage signified the ideal communal form for the Beats: non-absorbing, portable, requiring no civic responsibility or membership to enjoy its privileges. Certainly, responsibility was never put before individual desire, as a look at Burroughs's letters reveals.

Burroughs

Burroughs writes many times to Ginsberg and Kerouac of the excellent opportunities in South America for buying cheap land on which to grow crops with almost no outside (“bureaucratic”) interference. Burroughs recognized this as valuable from his earlier exploitation of migrant workers in Texas as a cheap work force (as I will show below). In a letter to Kerouac written at the end of 1949, Burroughs sells Kerouac on the positive aspects of coming to Mexico:

Be mighty glad to see you down here. You won't make a mistake visiting Mexico. A fine country with plenty of everything cheap. One of the few places left where a man can really live like a Prince. (56)

While running a farm, he wrote Ginsberg that the farmers “are doing pretty good in Texas, but we are having labor problems. . . . Believe me socialism and communism are synonymous and both unmitigated evil, and the Welfare State is a Trojan Horse” (58). The “labor problems” consisted of Mexican attempts to regulate the flow of braceros (legal Mexican guest-workers) to the United States in order to force American labor contractors to produce better working conditions. Mexico was seeking to reverse the wage erosion that resulted from the influx of “illegal” workers allowed into the United States by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which simultaneously deported workers, both “legal” and “illegal,” in order to drive wages in the United States even lower.⁴ Thus, a poet described as part of a liberating and subversive social movement sees the “welfare” state as a “Trojan horse” that emits cancerous cells of unionism, socialism, and in the case of the Mexican workers, union-susceptible subjects. Like many anti-immigration activists such as Pete Wilson, however, Burroughs did not see the use of undocumented workers for cheap labor as a problem. Here's some of what Burroughs wrote Ginsberg as early as 1948:

Nov. 30—

The line between legitimate and criminal activity has broken down since the war. Most everyone in business violates the law every day. For example, we farmers in the Rio Grande Valley depend entirely on Mexican laborers who enter the Country illegally with our aid and connivance. The “civil liberties” of

these workers are violated repeatedly. They are often kept on the job by force of gun (at cotton picking time when delay may mean loss of the entire crop). Workers who try to leave the field are shot (I know of several instances). In short my ethical position, now that I am a respectable farmer, is probably shakier than when I was pushing junk. Now, as then, I violate the law, but my present violations are condoned by a corrupt government. (25)

...

I am disgusted with conditions I may leave the US altogether, and remove myself and family to South America or Africa. . . . It's almost impossible to get anyone to do anything. Unions! That's the trouble, Unions! (27)

Dec. 2—

Enclose article about the Texas labor situation. The Rio Grande Valley is one of the few remaining areas of cheap labor in the US. The only alternatives to cheap labor (2 dollars per twelve hour day) is mechanization, requiring a large initial outlay for expensive equipment. . . . If Valley farmers had to pay a living wage for farm labor they would be ruined. A farm worker Union is the farmer's nightmare. If anyone wants to live dangerously . . . let him organize farm labor in Texas. (27)

Burroughs's antiunion rhetoric and his willingness to exploit Mexican labor in the Southwest belie his image as a radical, progressive iconoclast who confronted "the paranoid Red-baiting anticommunism of McCarthy, and the cynical detachment of the creators of the atomic bomb" (Miles 1989, 100). Rather, Burroughs reveals himself as a practical, indifferent businessman willing to be pragmatic when dealing with financial affairs:

I do not mean to convey the impression that Kells and I sit under a palm leaf sun shelter, rifle in hand, "suppressing" the workers. The whole deal is handled by labor and vegetable brokers. For example, I will make a deal with a labor broker, paying him so much per lb. to get my tomatoes picked and delivered to the vegetable broker who buys them. . . . The broker backs a truck up to the Rio Grande and loads it with Mexican "wetbacks" as they

swim or wade across the border. He drives them to the field and gets the job done. Some brokers go in for rough stuff, some don't. I recall one broker mentioning casually that "his foreman had to shoot 2 wetbacks last night." But like I say, I don't have anything to do with it personally. (1994, 29)

While Burroughs distances himself from the brutality through which he and the coterie of his fellow Rio Grande farmers benefit, he does not distance himself from the necessary exploitation of cheap labor, nor from his invective against the unions and the "socialism" they represented. He pointedly suggests that the failure of his ethical code is justified by the breakdown in ethics in business, thus suggesting that such ethics are rightly overwritten by the rule of individualist economic survival.

In a final diatribe against the meddling bureaucrats that have transformed America into a paralyzed, immobile entity, Burroughs harkens to the America of the past, an America of frontiers, which he attempts to recreate: "Whatever happened to our glorious Frontier heritage of minding one's own business? The Frontiersman has shrunk to a wretched, interfering, Liberal bureaucrat" (61). At this writing, Burroughs was about to undertake his journey south in order to find the "pioneer" spirit that was missing in modern America: a foray in which he would be joined, at various times, by Ginsberg and Kerouac.

Ginsberg

Turning to Allen Ginsberg, the motivation for his trip to Mexico in 1954 is not so easily gauged. Surely he was tempted by Burroughs's descriptions of his adventures in South America. He also indicates in letters to Neal Cassady that he needed a diversion after ending a trying romance with Burroughs, who had recently left for Tangiers. But the journal entries from his trip indicate his compelling reasons for traveling. In them, we see an explorer's narrative in which Ginsberg revels in the role of the great white explorer. In the entries, he endorses Spengler's historiography and gives credence to Kerouac's belief that Mexico and her people are fellaheen. Focusing on Mayan ruins, Ginsberg portrays the people as living in antiquity, views their existence as foreshadowing the eventual des-

ication of all Western civilization, and describes the sights as a “Spenglerian movie.” The rejuvenation Ginsberg believed such exploration offered parallels Burroughs’s motivation in South America and Tangiers. Like Burroughs, who evinced a belief that the American spirit could be recreated in the new frontier, Ginsberg set out to use fellaheen Mexico as a site for a renewed creativity through a symbolic conquest. The Beat poet could there achieve a liberating liminality while retaining a personal space of power.

At the beginning of his journey, he writes, “Had thought yesterday despairing on bus, realized I was in Mexico in flight, no future, no past” (Ginsberg 1995, 33). Movement engenders in him a feeling of anxiety, but also of temporary freedom and a sense of possibility. His Western fantasies of freedom are predicated on the ability to move:

I want to escape to some great future with Bill Jack
Neal Lucien, cannot do and in loneliness forming an
imaginary movie-world without a plot—must make
a great phantasy and carry it to Europe and
throughout the world, traveling ever toward it. (34)

In essence, Mexico provides a blank screen on to which Ginsberg can project his movie-world. Such fantasy can only be imagined in a space that has no future or presence of its own, but only a past, dead and gone, and thus colonizable, even if only in fantasy.

Ginsberg spent a month at Chichen Itza, where the famed Mayan ruins were at that time being excavated. In the poem that describes this period in Mexico, “Siesta in Xbalba,” Ginsberg sets off the purpose of his visit by contrasting the “timeless” nature of the contemplation afforded to him by his surroundings at Chichen Itza with the profane time all too evident in New York City. The poem describes the ruins at Uxmal, a city that has seen the end of time, according to Ginsberg’s Spenglerian reading. Its existence and meaning are comprehensible only in the past:

Late sun opening the book,
blank page like light,
invisible words unscrawled,
impossible syntax
of apocalypse—Uxmal: Noble Ruins
(Ginsberg 1984, 97)

Ginsberg vivifies his title by settling into the pensive mood provided by his surroundings; the pace and activity of New York cannot reach him in a country that is motionless. He “succumb[s] to this temptation” (97) to write his own history anew on the “blank page” that fellaheen Uxmal provides.

By juxtaposing his serenity with the frenetic lives of his friends in New York, he dichotomizes the living and dead civilization. (The privilege that Ginsberg retains, however, is that he is “alive” within the dead culture.) He imagines his friends in a photograph, all at their different activities, and through his position in a dead thus transcendent Mexico, pulls them from their profane time so as to mythologize them,

all posturing in one frame,
superficially gay
or tragic as may be,
illumined with the fatal
character and intelligent
actions of their lives. (98)

This mythologizing is only possible within the museum that Mexico represents. For Ginsberg, the ruins of Chichen Itza act as an exotic archive in which temporality, both human and social, can be arrested by the adventuring curator. Existing as it does at the end of time, Mexico functions simultaneously as a warning, a scrapbook, and a blank sheet waiting to be inscribed by the American poet-prophet.

The poem reveals a notion that Ginsberg inherited from Burroughs: that the fellaheen land lies outside of time and history. Spengler’s historical cycles suggest that temporality is illusory since the cycle is ultimately repeated *ad infinitum*. The Mayans are prologue to the future of the West, and Western profane time will eventually become sacred time in myth and legend. While Mexico provides a vision of the end, Ginsberg also suggests that a dead, fellaheen civilization can renew the deadened spirit of the West:

blind face of animal transcendency
over the sacred ruin of the world
dissolving into the sunless wall of a blackened room
on a time-rude pyramid rebuilt
in the bleak flat night of Yucatan
where I come with my own mad mind to study
alien hieroglyphs of Eternity. (101)

In Ginsberg's spiritual version of Burroughs's more material regeneration, the fellaheen south lies outside of time, at least outside of profane, historical time, and is now a sacred playground for the renewal of the northern civilized man. The scrapheaps of the past, the fallen and decrepit civilization, serve now to provide, to borrow a title from Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1958), "a Coney Island of the mind." Interestingly, Ginsberg suggests in his journal that reconstructing the city Uxmal, "they'd have a tourist attraction so vast and magical it would put their economy on a working basis" (1995, 41). The fellaheen culture becomes pure "past," no present and no future: the perfect ground for a spiritual imperialism.

Pale Uxmal,
 unhistoric, like a dream
Tulum shimmering on the coast in ruins;
Chichen Itza naked
 construction on a plain. . . .
I alone know the great crystal door
 to the House of Night
a legend of centuries
 —I and a few Indians. (102)

The decay that is now Mexico, its past now its present and its future, serves as the site of a spiritual renewal for the souls living in "the motionless buildings/ of New York rotting" (105). Chichen Itza serves as the fellaheen site of renewal, assuring redeeming movement:

there is an inner
anterior image
of divinity
beckoning me out
to pilgrimage (106)

This holds out hope for Ginsberg that past is not necessarily prologue. The west need not fall into decay; there is indeed a future: "O future, unimaginable God" (106). The future is recycled in the place of dead civilizations via Burroughs's "new imperialism."

It is only then that he can return to the United States, jumping "in time/ to the immediate future" where he comes to the border "tanned and bearded/ satisfying Whitman, concerned/ with a few Traditions" (106/110). Fellaheen Mexico has given Ginsberg a vision of the future and the past, prov-

ing itself as a space in which American regeneration can take place. Invoking Whitman as his progenitor, Ginsberg is armed himself, now a prophet to:

The nation over the border
[that] grinds its arms and dreams
 of war; I see
the fiery blue clash
 of metal wheels
clanking in the industries
 of night, and
detonation of infernal bombs (110)

While this poem is not a celebration of industrial America, I am suggesting that Mexico becomes a sacred colony, a sort of Club Med of Historical Lessons and Spiritual Renewal for the Dispirited Western Man. Sight is cleared, conscience restored, ancient Indian secrets revealed, cultures renewed. Mexico is killed so that the United States might live. As Barry Miles puts it: "He washed away ten years of NY soot in a tropical paradise" (1989, 160).

Ginsberg's romanticization of Mexico and the historiographical logic of such a vision was articulated via an imperial metaphysics. As in Burroughs's case, it was not long before this vision produced imperial manifestations. Ginsberg quickly took on the persona of the great white explorer. On his arrival in Chiapas, ill-tempered because of the natives' failure to understand his faulty Spanish, Ginsberg met Karen Shields, whom he took to calling the "White Goddess." She owned a local cocoa *finca* (plantation) after starring in several Tarzan movies as "Jane." At first he was interested in working with the Indians in the fields, but he soon "found" himself leading an expedition to explore a nearby volcano. (Ginsberg implies that his leadership role was not self-imposed, but a natural selection.) The switch provides insight into the dynamic of the Beat poet in the fellaheen country. Because of his whiteness, Ginsberg is selected as a leader and "most of the Indians followed him" (Miles 1989, 163). Ginsberg's recounting of this period to Neal Cassady sounds much like Burroughs's own adventures in South America:

It was a real great *Life Magazine* intrepid American
adventure situation. I really was a great hero. . . .
In Yajolon . . . I lived in the Presidente's house and

strode the streets in my beard and all the Indians saluted me respectfully and asked me for volcano advice and all the merchants invited me in back of their shops for coffee and the priest and I had many long afternoons over beer and theology and geology and I ate in the restaurant every evening and dined with the pilots of the crazy air service, heroes of the mountains. . . . and my restaurant bills went to City Hall, and everybody in town loaned me mules and guides for further exploration, other caves came to me, I went to Petalcingo, Chillon, all the little villages and town in central Chiapas. (Miles 1989, 163)

Clearly, Ginsberg was seduced by Burroughs's vision of the southern climes as open and useable. Ginsberg, however, softened Burroughs's more material approach. He spiritualized Mexico, gave it an aura of cosmic renewal, and also showed how, as in the nineteenth century, imperial mysticism is soon followed by imperial action. Ginsberg declared himself the leader of the Indians, the discoverer, explorer, the celebrated archetypal Western man admired and desired by the fellaheen.

Kerouac

Like Burroughs and Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac also held fantasies located in the fellaheen lands, yet his more forcefully focused on the creation of a male-centered domestic space. His first novel, *The Town and the City*, later to be rewritten as *Vanity of Dulouz*, brought him an advance of \$1,000, which he used to buy some land outside Denver. His plan was to build a ranch for himself and his family: his mother Gabrielle, his sister "Nin," and her husband and young son. His ambition, as Carolyn Cassady writes in her memoir *Off the Road*, was to "buy a ranch for all of us to share, and," she continues, "Neal [Cassady] answered with enthusiasm" (70). The correspondence regarding this ranch is interesting not only for what it suggests about Kerouac's desire to become a "westerner," but for what it portrays as their ideal domestic arrangement. Neal Cassady describes the home he and Kerouac would build with the book advance:

for us to build a ranch, a great spread, together, would be better than renting rooms. . . . we had better start right now. . . . bring your buddies, we'll have

a 7–8 bedrooms—your mother . . . and Carolyn are exactly alike—Carolyn’s a great worker, and interior decorator. . . . And I’ll get the money. A home—to go and come to—to grow old in—to make into a great place. (Cassady 1993, 70)

As early as May 1948, Kerouac rhapsodized to Cassady about his fantasy of living in the west. He wrote:

By Christ, I’m going to be a rancher, nothing else. I’ve made up my mind to become a rancher. I’ve learned about it in books. . . . All I want is about 300 head, a spread that cuts enough alfalfa for them, a winter pasture, two houses for me and whoever joins me in partnership, etc. etc. . . . And proceed to live a good life in the canyon countries, lots of forage, trees, high sharp mountain air . . . and marry a Western girl and have six kids. (Kerouac 1995, 149)

Cassady’s reply gave specific shape to the growing fantasy:

I envision Holmes, Bill Tomson, and . . . one Allen G[insberg], grubbing, scrubbing to aid, for they come in as they wish. No hard and fast, naturally, rules or obligations or expectancies or any such bourgoise [sic] strains in our veins toward them. The nucleus of our family then . . . you, your mother, Paul, his wife and child, me, Carolyn and our offspring (*and your wife?*). That totals to 8 or 9, all living, striving. . . . Allen, Holmes, Tomson, and dear beautiful brother Herbert Huncke. This may seem to be becoming overdone, but, to continue, I don’t really mean to include Burroughs. . . . but I do love him and Joan so much you know . . . pure speculation, but maybe visits at any rate. So, that’s another 10 counting Julie and Bill junior. That makes a house that, at one time or another, ought to hold 18 people. How many rooms is that? Anywhere from 10 to 13. Kitchen, living room . . . , dining room, figure about 7–8 bedrooms. . . . Huge garden. . . . Well, I’ll stop. (Cassady 1993, 71)

Their descriptions give shape to a deferred, idealized domestic space that would continue to fascinate Kerouac and Cassady. The ranch would represent a refuge for the beleaguered male, as Kerouac’s letters make clear. The ideal ar-

rangement would provide a complex in which the men could philosophize as the women took care of the domestic chores. Cassady might have gotten the idea for such a ranch from Burroughs's Texas spread, which he had visited the year before with Ginsberg. There, Burroughs had a farm and ranch house complete with hired hand, Herbert Huncke, imported from New York City, and "wetbacks" to pick the crops.

Although the location of this ranch would change throughout the years, Kerouac and Cassady continued to plan an eventual ranch-commune. When Kerouac's dream of a ranch in Colorado failed—because of his mother's displeasure with Colorado and his sister's complaints—Kerouac sold the land at a loss and returned to the East Coast. Three years later, he wrote Cassady again, this time discussing the possibility of forming a communal homestead in Mexico. Influenced by Burroughs's suggestions that Mexico represented cheap land and easy living, Kerouac wrote Cassady, now settled in San Jose, California. Kerouac's vision of Mexico as fellaheen begins to take shape in this letter:

We'd hang on to every cent, give the Mexicans no quarter, let em get sullen at the cheap Americans and stand side by side in defense, and make friends in the end when they saw we was poor too. Comes another Mexican revolution, we stands them off with our Burroughsian arsenal bought cheap on Madros St. and dash to big city in car for safety shooting and pissing as we go; whole Mex army follows hi on weed; now no worries any more. Just sit on roof hi enjoying hot dry sun and sound of kids yelling and have us wives and American talk of our own as well as exotic kicks and regular old honest Indian kicks. Become Indians. . . . I personally play mambo in local catband, because of this we get close to them and go to town. Wow. How's about it? Hurry to N.Y. so we can plan and all take off in big flying boat . . . across crazy land. (Charters 1992, 211)

Kerouac's domestic fantasy shifts from the United States to Mexico as the realization that a male-dominated commune must find its fulfillment in the fellaheen south, the new frontier. Mexico provides a space in which Kerouac and cohorts simultaneously enjoy the liberating effect of ethnic appropriation while retaining their status as Americans.

Kerouac and Cassady, although never realizing their plans, eventually did share a household. Carolyn Cassady describes the zeal with which Neal enticed Kerouac to come and live with them in 1951. He wrote:

but listen now, you'd have perfect freedom, great place in which to write, car to cut around in . . . a spot with absolutely everything you could need already set up for you. . . . and Al Hinkle and maybe Bill Tomson and whore houses . . . and freedom, man, freedom, no bull, Carolyn loves you, be like your mama without you having any need to cater like to her. . . . Carolyn wants to try and make it up to you. We could try by way of a few group orgies or whatever, although this might be sensibly postponed until after Oct. [Carolyn's due date] because she's as big as our house. . . . Incidentally when all is lost you and I will go to Morocco and build railroad for a thousand a month. All we do is ride while African coolies dump ballast over roadbed. (Cassady 1993, 147)

Kerouac shared in Cassady's domestic fantasy, having already suggested a similar arrangement in earlier letters. In 1951, Kerouac was attempting to finish *On the Road*. Taken together, his domestic desires and his vision of a fellaheen south ready for exploration and settlement, suggest the need for a significantly new reading of *On the Road*, written during his most "optimistic" period. The novel reveals a misogynistic and neo-imperialist framework that undermines much of its acclaimed subversiveness.

In *On the Road*, the climax occurs during Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty's trip to Mexico. There, Paradise finds that the search for the father must culminate in the reconstruction of the spirit of the father. Mexico, for Paradise and Moriarty, is not only a land of liminal play, but also the space for the serious business of visual imperialism. It is through this practice that the men find the power of the father within. Shortly before Paradise leaves for Mexico, he recounts a dream in which appears a "Shrouded Traveler":

It haunted and flabbergasted me, made me sad. It had to do somewhat with the Shrouded Traveler. Carlo Marx and I once sat down together, knee to knee, in two chairs, facing, and I told him a dream I had about a strange Arabian figure that was

pursuing me across the desert; that I tried to avoid;
that finally overtook me just before I reached the Protective City. (Kerouac 1991, 124)

The dark figure pursues the lone traveler, which poses danger to Paradise not due to encroaching conformity, but due to forces of the marginal, signified as black and male. White man is threatened by black man. The pursued Paradise must return to the isolated Protective City. The Beat appropriation of ethnic identity is thus shown to be only a temporary, "liberalizing" moment, from which the white Beat retreats into the structure of white patriarchy, a position that provides stability and a safety from marginal forces.

The trip is western man's archetypal journey: the men leave behind castrating, maternal women and search for more worlds to conquer. For instance, Paradise finds Moriarty in San Francisco and "rescues" him from the "sewing circle" of women who steal his joy. The Mexican trip serves other purposes, too. The "two broken-down heroes of the Western night" make a pact that the ultimate goal of their wandering is to find the father: "I think he's in Denver—this time we must absolutely find him, he may be in County Jail, he may be around Larimer Street again, but he's to be found. Agreed?" (191). The trip provides the occasion to continue the mythic journey after Paradise has reached the West Coast and he finds that he must keep moving, since "our one and noble function of the time" is to "*move*" (133). The supposed nobility of their actions has to do with finding that which eludes the grasp of the modern American male: a sense of mission, patriarchal power, and primal freedom.

To summarize, Kerouac's mission is much more conservative than has been claimed by his more sympathetic critics. His tendency to desire personal liberty while ceding power to a stabilizing, regulating structure is manifest in the division between his "Lowell" and "Road" novels, and between his experience of the United States and Mexico. As in the westerns popular during the period, most notably *Shane*, Kerouac confronts the tension between the desire to settle and create a homestead and the impulse to move on and avoid the stasis that domesticity threatens the masculine figure with. Thus, the homesteading impulse is transformed by making it imperialistic in order to resist feminization. The impulse toward personal liberty is stripped of its revolutionary power by the

need to create a hierarchical relation between the races as protection against the potential loss of full identification with white male agency.

In *On the Road*, this delicate balance is achieved by being “Mexican” in the United States, but becoming “white” in Mexico. This biracialization results in some astonishing shifts. When in California picking crops with his “Mexican girl,” Kerouac claims that he is Mexican, but in Mexico such identification is not useful. That Kerouac intends his most famous novel as a sort of western is made clear when Paradise and Moriarty sleep in an all-night movie house:

The picture was Singing Cowboy Eddie Dean and his gallant white horse Bloop, that was number one; number two . . . was a picture about Istanbul. We saw both of these things six times during the night. We saw them waking, we heard them dreaming, we sensed them dreaming, we were permeated completely with the strange Gray Myth of the West and weird dark Myth of the East when morning came. All my actions since then have been dictated automatically to my subconscious by this horrible osmotic experience. (244)

The scene is an extraordinary representation of the way imperialist imperatives is instilled in the subconscious. Yet Kerouac does not reject the colonialist mind set even while recognizing its “horrible” effect on his behavior and the critique it suggests of U.S. history. Rather, he sees the films as metanarrative, inescapable and pure; as founding myth; and as cultural necessity. It is this project of restoring America to pureness, in some sense akin to the restoration of the father, to which the road of the title leads.

The foray south of the border begins with an enthusiasm reminiscent not simply of tourists or travelers, but of a more ambitious project:

“Do you know there’s a road that goes down Mexico and all the way to Panama? . . . Yes! You and I, Sal, we’d dig the whole world with a car like because, man, the road must eventually lead to the whole world.” (231)

In Mexico it is no longer necessary to be “Mexican,” for in Mexico marginality has no use. In Mexico, the Beat becomes “American.”

For instance, in Laredo, "the end of America" (273), Paradise begins sensing that structure and authority are falling away. Paradise assesses the border guards: "The Mexicans looked at our baggage in a desultory way. They weren't like officials at all" (274). It becomes apparent that, for Kerouac, liminality is not a matter of subverting a perceived authoritarian structure, but instead finding a space free of all authority where every individual can become his own sovereign. Mexico liberates, while "calling" for the strength of the colonizer. Mexico is here feminized: inviting and seductive, as soft and weak. It does not take long for the conversation between the men to turn toward conquest:

"Now, Sal, we're leaving everything behind us and entering a new and unknown phase of things. All the years and troubles and kicks—and now this! so that we can safely think of nothing else and just go on ahead with our faces stuck out like this . . . and understand the world as, really and genuinely speaking, other Americans haven't done before us—they were here, weren't they? The Mexican war. Cutting across with cannon.

"This road," I told him, "is also the route of old American outlaws who used to skip over the border and go down to old Monterrey, so if you'll look out on that graying desert and picture the ghost of an old Tombstone hellcat making his lonely exile gallop into the unknown, you'll see further." (277)

This exchange between Paradise and Moriarty reflects complex associations and transformations. The journey turns adventure (kicks) into exploration. This exploration is safe, however, because Paradise and Moriarty no longer need marginalized personas. In Mexico, appropriating a marginalized identity does not equal a defensive resistance to systemic forces (as it does in the United States). In a fellaheen nation, the resilient individual must demonstrate strength. In Mexico, the true American is a conqueror, in the United States, the true American is an outlaw; in both cases, the masculine subject is on the move.

Obviously, Kerouac's notion of conquest has no direct manifestation. The intent of the tour is restorative, its logic ethnographic, its purpose the recovery of a fully armored individualism. The U.S. ideology of exceptionalism, behind the

westward expansion, includes a superior national identity that justifies exploitative colonization. The Beats' form of imperialism also sees itself as justified in pursuing an individualist identity through the appropriation of fellaheen inferiors. This fellaheen western serves several purposes: it dismisses the need for "society" in its communal connotations, attempts to restore masculine strength, and seeks to protect the individuality of the hero. Significantly, the western accomplishes these things through an imperial relation to the local fellaheen, expressed through visual techniques of observation and evaluation. The traveler "sees" all that he can, freely observing and searching for the "truth," which is evident in the lives of the primal subjects of his gaze. As Paradise observes, their movement through Mexico is:

Not like driving across Carolina, or Texas, or Arizona, or Illinois; but like driving across the world and into the places where we would finally learn ourselves among the Fellaheen Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches in a belt around the equatorial belly of the world. (281)

The essence of the fellaheen retains his primacy, his connection to the earth; his existence is *of* the earth. The observation by Paradise that the "Indians . . . were not fools, they were not clowns; they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it" (281) is not a declaration of some direct lineage. It is Paradise's "empirical" statement of the unchanged relation of the indigenous peoples of Mexico to the "land" in its broadest archetypal connotation. When Paradise claims that "they knew who was the father and who was the son of antiquity of life on earth, and made 'history' and the Apocalypse" (281), he does not claim the Indian as a true primogenitor: Indian "father" to Beat "son." Rather, he posits that the true individual may absorb the primacy of the fellaheen father, and thus become the father. For Kerouac, the search for the father is complete when the masculinized individual recognizes the unassailable father within himself. Ultimately, this outcome is the result of their neocolonial instinct.

This recognition has the potential to restore the power of the conqueror in a foreign land to the "outlaw" when he returns to his own country. The empowered conqueror brings

back, to the “embattled” white male subject in America, a re-worked patriarchal strategy based on a neo-imperial logic. Of course, as Kerouac seems to understand, this strategy cannot function fully in the United States because the reconciliation between the Father and the male “self” is achieved only in the gaze of the fellaheen, in their “earnest, big brown eyes” (297).

The fellaheen wait on the margins of history, waiting for a messianic moment, for the coming of the last man, and the advent of the Superman father. A Nietzschean historiographical logic prevails in *On the Road*. And seen in this light, Kerouac’s later reaction against the 1960s counterculture as weak, feminine, and dangerously egalitarian is perfectly logical, although misplaced. The Beat invective to “just go,” with its neo-individualist imperial desire, resonates more deeply within the 1960s counterculture than many critics might care to admit. The Beats gave voice to a postwar urge to revitalize an American identity based on an individualism that would prove antithetical to communalist efforts and susceptible to American wanderlust. This may go a ways in beginning to explain some of the forces that served to erode countercultural coalitions as the decade of the 1960s ended.

Notes

1. As David Farber writes in *The Age of Great Dreams*:

The sharpest and, in many ways, most prescient attack on the net worth of Peoples’ Capitalism came from a small pack of self-proclaimed “Dharma bums,” a.k.a. Beats . . . who’d fled corporate suburbia for a life of hard kicks and still minds. Allen Ginsberg rammed home the Beats’ outrage at an America grown old at midcentury. . . .The last had not been heard of Allen Ginsberg and his vision of a blasted America lost in its lust for money and power. (23)

2. In attempting to entice Allen Ginsberg to visit him in Mexico, Burroughs wrote the following in a 1951 letter:

Old style imperialism is done. It doesn’t pay. . . . If you want to give yourself a chance to get rich and live in a style that the U.S. has not seen since 1914, “Go South of the Rio

Grande, young man." Almost any business is good down here, since markets are unlimited." (Burroughs 1994, 78).

3. See Nicosia (1963) and the introduction to Kerouac 1995 by Ann Charters.

4. In 1948, control of the Bracero Program was given to the U.S. secretary of labor. Critics charge that collusion between the growers and the secretary resulted in further lowering of wages by importing large numbers of "illegals" during harvest time. A common practice of deporting the workers shortly after the harvest kept wages in the grower's pockets. Public Law 78 gave the secretary of labor the right to recruit Mexican workers and "illegals" who had lived in the United States for at least five years and to set their wage levels unilaterally. This resulted in an increase in the migratory flow from Mexico thus enlarging the labor pool, eroding wages even further, and giving growers even more power to hire workers on their own terms, while stripping Mexico of its remaining power to regulate the flow of labor from its own workforce. For further reading, see Anderson 1976; Cockcroft 1986; Craig 1971, and Galarza 1964.

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