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September 4, 2013

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Bea Kozera and the Beats

Posted: 09/04/2013 9:04 am

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In August, Bea Kozera (born Beatrice Renteria) -- Jack Kerouac's real-life inspiration for "Terry, the Mexican girl" in his novel *On the Road* (1957) -- died at the age of 92. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported, "Without their encounter, *On the Road* may not have been published. The book was rejected for six years until the *Paris Review* published the excerpt 'The Mexican Girl' in 1955."

Ofentimes, correcting the historical record does not have to do with adding missing content but rather with correcting a near-sighted focus on one group. The Beat Generation is often seen as upending the American status quo: the Beats versus the elites, as Manuel Luis Martinez notes in an essay written for *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. Martinez offers a different conclusion: "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."

Indeed, what are we to make of the fact that *On the Road*, the quintessentially "American" novel, bookends its upending of convention with two "Mexican" encounters: a Chicana fellow traveler in California and a road trip into Mexico? Perhaps we start by disidentifying with the novel's narrator. Go along for the ride -- enjoy it, in fact -- but just realize with whom you are traveling and how their trip began, and orient yourself to the mental map they are using to get to the "basic primitive" of their true selves.

In the novel, when Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty reach the U.S.-Mexico border, they find what they already know: "Just across the street Mexico began. We looked with wonder. To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico." To the narrator, Terry also represented his idea of Mexico -- not America, or even California. She does not belong in his world.

It is with such vision that Kerouac borrows from non-white culture in order to find himself, his generation, and America. Of course, the arts create by borrowing, and every national art form has the ironic pedigree of foreign sources. But even that is not the whole story. Borrowing is just one point in a larger cultural arena involving many voices and peoples, not all of whom are "foreign."

There is a dialogue waiting to happen here, and it behooves us to disidentify with a narrator committed to monologue. Otherwise, we only hear one side of the story, and assume it is all there is to know about the Beat Generation. If Kerouac thought "There was nowhere to go but everywhere," José Montoya captures the return to somewhere in his poem "El Louie" (1969). Listen to him read the poem, and hear the "beat" of a different voice in American art and letters.

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