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Kerouac's instrumental use of jazz

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Kerouac's Instrumental Use of Jazz

(TITLE)

BY

Dawn Nehr Korn

THESIS

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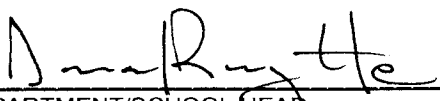
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Abstract

This essay uses Jarrett's *Drifting on a Reed* to connect Kerouac's writing and bebop jazz. The first chapter, discusses *On the Road* in terms of *satira*. Kerouac's novel playfully mixes such diverse categories as autobiography, *roman a clef*, social satire, the adventure story, the *bildungsroman*, and the (sexual and religious) manifesto. As bebop jazz pushed the limits of music in the 1940's and 50's, Kerouac strove to challenge the limits of literary invention. *Obbligato*, the subject of Chapter two, refers to obligatory improvisation. Bebop players such as Charlie Parker are noted for spontaneously reworking the chords of old standards and creating new sounds. Kerouac responded to this movement in jazz, crediting his use of "sketching" or spontaneous writing to the music's influence. Chapter three of my thesis, *Charivari* explores the notion "distorted and noisy performances" in Kerouac's writing, with attention to his use of beat argot. *Mexico City Blues* is the subject of Chapter 4. The poetic sequence incorporates all of the major influences on Kerouac's writing: jazz and blues, Buddhism, autobiography, and his delight in *melopoeia*.

I dedicate this work to

Luo Yi, Brandi Spelbring, and Luke Tschosik

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Introduction

Bebop jazz experimented with improvisational techniques in the search for new sounds, and its influence on the Beats, especially Jack Kerouac, has been much documented, though the scholarship here has often been anecdotal and impressionistic. Clearly Jack Kerouac thought of Bebop music as a model for his spontaneous “bop” composition. For example, it was after Kerouac began listening to jazz that he developed his spontaneous writing method. His “Bop Began With Jazz,” compares improvisational jazz musicians Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, and Miles Davis to “great poets of foreign languages singing in foreign countries with lyres, by seas.” (Charters, *Port. Jack* 555) Kerouac claims that “because the language isn’t alive in this land yet-Bop is the language from America’s inevitable Africa.” Kerouac’s *On the Road* is composed of infamously “wild typewritten pages,” and jazz-derived spontaneity informed Kerouac’s argument against revision. According to him, in an essay entitled “Jack Kerouac Takes a Fresh Look at Jack Kerouac,” “If you don’t stick to your first thought, and to the words the thought brought, what’s the sense of bothering with it anyway, what’s the sense of foisting your little lies on others, or, that is, hiding your little truths from others?” (Charters 486) Kerouac was almost religiously devoted to jazz, worshipping Charlie

Parker throughout his writing career, and in *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac portrayed Parker as “the king and founder of the bop generation.”

Given the importance of jazz to the Beat *mythos*, I would like to argue that an understanding of Jazz technique is crucial to understanding the *specifics* of Kerouac’s spontaneous method. Using Michael Jarrett’s typology from *Drifting from a Read*, I will explore Kerouac’s understanding of the relationship of Jazz composition to writing in *On the Road* and *Mexico City Blues*. Jarrett’s typology is particularly useful because it offers a critical, non-impressionistic approach to Kerouac. Central terms in that typology are *satura*, *obbligato*, and *charivari*.

As Jarrett writes, “*Satura*, the Latin term from which we derive the English word ‘satire,’ literally means ‘mixed dish,’ ‘farrago,’ ‘hodgepodge,’ or ‘medley’.” (24, emphasis mine) For my thesis, this term offers a useful way of understanding Kerouac’s sense of literary mode. Like Petronius’ *Satyricon*, a model *satura* and *satire*, *On the Road* is in itself a “hodgepodge,” incorporating autobiography, hagiography of Dean Moriarty, elements of the travelogue and quest, as well as and cultural criticism..

Jarrett notes that the musical term *obbligato* is problematic in meaning: “*Obbligato*, usually means with reference to an instrument [violino obbligato] a part that must not be omitted; the opposite is *ad libitum*. Unfortunately...the term has come to mean a mere accompanying *part that may be omitted if necessary*. As a result one must decide in each individual case whether *obbligato* means “obbligato” or “ad libitum.” (61) Ultimately, for Jarrett, the term comes to mean obligatory improvisation.

For my purposes, “obligato” refers to Kerouac’s inflections of inherited stories, myths, and motifs, all the elements that go into his *satura*. *On the Road*, for instance, is a quest, has elements of the Bildungsroman, and is about the “American Adam.” Jarrett would call the quest for identity in Kerouac’s novel its “ground-zero” anecdote, which evolves into a “grammatalogue (a trope or metaphor one can write with).” (56) Moriarty becomes an “icon” or “figure become mythical” which is the starting point for Kerouac’s portrayal of Moriarty as an American innocent and the original Beat. (56)

Note, though, that obligato involves *improvisation* upon these elements: they have to be taken over, appropriated. We find this, too, in *On the Road*; in fact, it’s a major element in the novel. Again and again, Kerouac suggests that theft can be a source of creativity. As a *roman a clef*, the novel steals from life, and its hero Dean Moriarty is a premier and artistic car thief. In fact, freedom to be oneself, the act of taking oneself back from the dominant culture is a kind of theft. *On the Road* plays out this notion of liberation through theft, not only in its appropriation of jazz as an “ethic” and model for writing, but also in the way it compulsively steals and “fences” everything from drugs, food, and sex, to Buddhist enlightenment.

In Jarrett’s “reading” of jazz, *charivari* “signifies a deliberately distorted and noisy performance.” (159) Jargon, Beat argot, the language of the street, and all varieties of “non-standard” English contribute to Kerouac’s *charivari*. Chapter three of my thesis focuses on how *charivari* contributes to Kerouac’s “hipster” style. Kerouac’s “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” gives us some of the details. He describes Bebop grammar in these terms: “No periods separating sentence-structure

already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas--but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases).” (Charters, *Port. Jack* 484)

Kerouac also imitates blues lyrics in his poem *Mexico City Blues*, which is divided into two hundred and forty-two choruses. I use the last chapter of my thesis to show how *Mexico City Blues* carries the method of spontaneous prose into the realm of poetry. Jazz exerts a pervasive influence on *Mexico City Blues*; as Ann Charters points out, “Kerouac was attracted to the blues form for many reasons, perhaps because he felt that its structure allowed him the most free and spontaneous approach to the merging of text and sound.” (*Port. Jack* 449) Kerouac refers to numerous jazz musicians and uses different media such as “scatting” in *Mexico City Blues*, which can be characterized as a type of charivari because it is “non-standard” English. Kerouac’s poem is a broadening of his experimental “Bebop prosody” because it incorporates the “repeating structure of the chorus,” scatting, and “writing from memory and in response to the stimulation of his senses.” (Jones 151)

Chapter One

Satura

Kerouac contributed to the myth that he composed *On the Road* in three consecutive weeks on a roll of paper. He described his writing process for the novel in "Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation 1959": "I wrote *On the Road* in three weeks in the beautiful month of April 1951 while living in the Chelsea district of lower West Side Manhattan, on a 100-foot roll." (Charters,570) The idea that Kerouac composed a novel within such a short period of time helped create an attractive image for him as a writer, but the reality is far more fascinating. This chapter will de-construct the myth of Kerouac's "furious" writing and show that its construction was derived from techniques carefully derived from jazz.

Charters notes that Kerouac struggled over a ten-year period to write the novel which eventually became *On the Road*. (Kerouac 102) His desire to conceal the extended period of composition reflected his attempt to turn decisively away from the "the traditional 'novelistic'" model of Thomas Wolfe, which he had followed in his first published novel, *The Town and the City*. (103) He had clearly taken Wolfe's model as far as he could. In January of 1951, "Jack wasn't satisfied with how [his new work] was going. Holmes remembered Kerouac still fighting to find new form, caught in the traditional mould of his first novel." (127)

Exhausted by his struggle with Wolfe's influence, Kerouac found a new model in the letters of Neil Cassady. Kerouac incorporated the benzedrine-driven frenzy in which Neil Cassady composed letters with the "directness and straight narrative technique" of William Burroughs. (132) It was on benzedrine that Kerouac wrote in a wild continuous period of three weeks, and finally discovered "Sketching," a technique that was to evolve into spontaneous composition. As Charters writes: "For Jack the appeal of sketching was his excitement letting himself go on paper, just as a jazz musician blew riff after riff of a solo following whatever direction his own mind and immediate emotions led him. As he told Allen, when he sketched, he wrote 'with 100% honesty,' and sometimes was so inspired that he lost consciousness. " (*Kerouac*, 147)

Kerouac's eventual incorporation of the sketching method in *On the Road* reflected his desire to experiment with "new" art forms, but he was hardly alone. Earlier in the century, Surrealism had used spontaneous means and "automatic writing" to expose the artist's inner life and bring the unconscious mind to the fore. Freudian psychology, a great influence on the Surrealist artists, was in its heyday in the 1950's. The search for truth in depth-psychology involved the use of narrative in terms similar to those of fiction-writing. Kerouac's technique of spontaneous composition and "first thought best thought" are Beat counterparts of psychoanalytic free association. In this context, it may be more useful to see Kerouac, as a paradoxically traditional rebel, as someone out to revitalize the core-story of the American Adam in an age of anomie and the "organization" man's sterile conformism

Another way that Kerouac sought refuge from the world was by turning to Eastern religious thought and practice, especially Zen Buddhism. Eastern philosophy allowed Kerouac detachment from the world and the ability “to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.” (Mailer 9) Vipassana, the quiet observation of mental phenomena, offered another mode of access to the world (form), feelings, thoughts, and consciousness. Kerouac did not totally reject his Catholic background, but rather, incorporated and worked out a personal synthesis of Zen and Catholicism in his writing.

Arguably, however, the most important influence on Kerouac’s *On the Road*, is jazz. Bebop jazz musicians experimented with improvisational techniques in their search for new sounds, and Kerouac was hardly alone in finding a precedent in jazz for spontaneous verbal art. The spontaneity of jazz, and especially Bebop music influenced many writers during the 1950’s (as it had influenced myriad African American writers, such as Sterling A. Brown, Melvin Tolson, and Langston Hughes during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920’s), and it gave birth to a revitalized oral tradition through “jazz poets” like Jack Micheline and Bob Kaufmann.

Kerouac’s interest in jazz can be dated to 1955, before the publication of *On the Road*, when he published a section of the novel in *New World Writing* 7 under the title “Jazz and the Beat Generation.” Kerouac described his spontaneous technique when he wrote “Belief & Technique For Modern Prose” and “Essential of Spontaneous Prose.” Kerouac specifically compares his use of dashes to a “jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases.” Kerouac, as an aficionado of

jazz, went on to write and publish two articles about jazz, “The Beginning of Bop” and “The Last Word” (both in *Escapade* magazine) after he finished *On the Road*. Kerouac made recordings of himself reading prose and poetry alongside live jazz after the publication of *On the Road*. Specifically, a jazz –influenced verbal sketching became the method to the madness of Kerouac’s “wild typewritten pages” that make up *On the Road*. Kerouac got the method from his study of jazz. Kerouac’s method and its origins are thus important to an understanding of his novel.

Just as the Beat style of *On the Road* had a mystique attached to it, musicians described Bebop jazz as unexplainable. It was Louis Armstrong who stated: “Lady, if you gotta ask what it is, you’ll never know,” in response to the task of defining jazz. In comparing jazz to *On the Road*, right away there is a similarity in how the two have been perceived. The anecdotal and impressionistic manner in which *On the Road* (as well as the influence of jazz on other Beat writers) and jazz have been recognized produces a motive for exploring their relationship. Jarrett describes the way music and myth appeal to the senses, “Music, like myth, appeals to mental structures that we all have in common.” (26) He tells us that:

Both music and mythology, Levi-Strauss maintains, are natural systems, automatically intelligible, because they are expressions of the *a priori* conditions that make communication possible. They are ordinary languages. Everyone understands them (for they constitute the conditions for understanding); no one can translate them.

(9)

Michael Jarrett’s *Drifting on a Road* offers a useful approach to *On the Road*. Jarrett finds a new poetics in jazz that is applicable to texts like Kerouac’s. Jazz, he

argues, is a music based on tropes, on “signifyin(g).” “[J]azz is [...] devoted to the Law of Trope.” (Jarrett 50) Historically, jazz has “modeled generalizable strategies for invention, strategies we might characterize as tropes.”(3). Tropes, Jarrett argues, have been used in language traditionally for the use of biblical interpretation. Tropological reading extended the Bible’s range of meanings. In the same way that tropes have “opened up the possibility of aberrant readings” (Jarrett 4) for “liturgy and scriptures,” tropes also make “untranscribable” jazz available for discussion and invention. (4) Mystery can be put aside and an inventive “model of textual production that imagines language and music as the play of several tropes (grammatology)” can occur. (15)

The jazz tropes that will be useful for my discussion of Kerouac’s *On the Road* are: *satura*, *obbligato*, and *Charivari*. *Satura* is my initial interest because it has to do with the global features of the novel. Jarrett writes:

A *satura* is a “hodgepodge” of elements: The Latin term from which we derive the English word “satire,” literally means “mixed dish,” “farrago,” “hodgepodge,” or “medley.” Originally employed as an adjective meaning “full”...It was associated with copiousness (having *more*), with the worship of Saturn, and the celebration of Saturnalia. (24)

This is certainly applicable to *On the Road* with its blending of autobiography, *roman a clef*, adventure story, social satire, and *bildungsroman*, not to mention its polymorphous sexual and religious experimentalism. Kerouac’s characters can be described as saturnalian as they search “kicks” as along American highways. As Jarrett notes:

Everything was topsy-turvy. Kids ditched school, soldiers stopped all “peacekeeping” missions, and traffic cops wrote no speeding tickets; social hierarchies were exchanged. ... Saturnalia was the Garden of Eden without snakes, the New Jerusalem without apocalypse, communism without bureaucracy. ... It was Utopia. (25)

Dean Moriarty’s car provided a Utopia for Sal Paradise. This Utopia in Dean’s car offers Sal an escape from the “quiet Christmas in the country,” which he longed for as he looked around at the “Christmas tree, the presents, and smelled the roasting turkey.” (*OTR* 115) Sal submitted to what he refers to as “the bug” who’s “name was Dean Moriarty” and with that confession, Sal “was off on another spurt around the road.” (115) It is the same madness of a Saturnalian celebration that occurred “on the road” in Dean’s car for Sal.

The “hodgepodge” of elements that Kerouac used to write *On the Road* and the adventure Sal and Dean took across America, make a kind of collage: “one name given for writing (composting) with the trope of *satura*.” (Jarrett 26) Troping with *satura* offers a “means to invention (heuretics), not interpretation (hermeneutics),” and also “suggests that representation is always a collage effect.” (26)

Jazz is a collage of previous influences and beautifully shows how invention is produced from a “mixed dish.” It would be impossible to talk about jazz without giving attention to its ability to thrive as a “mixed dish” of musical forms. Music critic Andre Hodier, who recognized “that there is no point in its [jazz] history at which jazz can be considered a “pure” music as historians might regard kinds of exotic music” is one of many musical critics who addressed the combination of

elements found in jazz. (Jarrett 46) The combination of multiple influences in jazz is for sure:

The music we recognize today as jazz is a synthesis drawn originally from six principal sources: rhythms from West Africa; harmonic structure from European classical music; melodic and harmonic qualities from nineteenth-century American folk music; religious music; work songs; and minstrel shows. (Jarrett 31)

Searching for the origins of jazz is a more challenging task as Leroi Jones notes: “The general liberating effect of the Emancipation make it extremely difficult to say just exactly where and when jazz, or purely instrumental blues (with European instruments), originated.” (Jarrett72) The root form both of jazz and of Kerouac’s *On the Road* is probably best termed an amalgam. Jarrett comments: “Thus, the amalgam solves a problem for jazz. It forges an identity for the music, casts it as a body, ostensibly diverse but essentially unified.” (33)

One thing that jazz or *On the Road* are clearly *not* is “homogeny.” (Jarrett 33) Kerouac defined what *On the Road* was *not* when he “wrote” away from the rigid cultural constraints of the late 1940’s. Kerouac used his sketching method, derived from jazz, to go beyond traditional literary concepts. Kerouac described his spontaneous method in the beginning of *On the Road* as a way to “get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears...” (*OTR* 7) As previously mentioned, *On the Road* would provide a new form for Kerouac to write. New literary forms are similar to new musical forms found in jazz because both contain a “hodgepodge” of elements. Like jazz, Kerouac’s spontaneous method was a combination of experimental writing. Sketching was an

inventive way for Kerouac to compose *On the Road* and is simultaneous to the trope *satura*, which emphasizes invention over depiction.

In *On the Road*, the characters “drove” away from societal constraints. Dean Moriarty is the model for Sal Paradise’s quest to uncover truth despite their rootlessness. Kerouac constantly addresses the late 1940’s culture in *On the Road*. Kerouac’s technique of sketching places a great value on spontaneity such as is found in Bebop jazz.

Chapter Two

Obbligato

The elements of a story told remain inside the global environment. The “mixed-dish,” or *satura*, of *On the Road* is only one layer of Kerouac’s story. To understand the deeper layers of any story, in particular *On the Road*, one must also be able to relate what is required for the story. Obbligato determines what is needed “usually with reference to an instrument (*violino obbligato*) or *part that must not be omitted.*” (Jarrett 61) In the case for *On the Road*, the requirements are melody, harmony, and rhythm.

On the Road “functions...much as melody and harmony function within the polyphonic jazz of old New Orleans; it regulates the unfolding of a text.” (Jarrett 51) The projection of sound onto story is playful, but a type of obbligato play. The character Dean Moriarty projected Bebop throughout the novel because he was constantly “blabbering and frantically rocking.” (*OTR* 132) Dean is required listening for *On the Road*. Dean functioned as the tenorman about to “blow his top” while he recognized the “old tenorman” as someone to “listen to” because the musician would “tell the story and put down true relaxation and knowledge.” (*OTR* 134) Dean’s madness is always at its peak when Dean and Sal are in the presence of live jazz music:

“Go!” Dean was sweating; the sweat poured down his collar. “There he is! That’s him! Old God! Old God Shearing! Yes! Yes! Yes!” And Shearing was conscious of

the madman behind him, he could hear everyone of Dean's gasps and imprecations, he could sense though he couldn't see. "That's right!" Dean said. "Yes!" Shearing smiles; he rocked. ...It was the myth of the rainy night. Dean was popeyed with awe.

(128)

Kerouac could not play jazz so he had to write "bop prosody." Just as the "jazzman always uses melody, harmony, or rhythm as a place to start improvising," Kerouac used *On the Road* to improvise. (Jarrett 52) The novel was the medium Kerouac "jazzed up" with the character Dean Moriarty, Kerouac's great model for the original beat. Jazz as a part of Kerouac's writing style was often a part of the background throughout the novel. Kerouac inserted jazz into the setting of the novel early as he introduced the historical significance of jazz in 1947. Notice that this introduction to jazz marked Sal's departure across America. Sall tells us:

At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. The fellows at the Loop blew, but with a tired air, because bop was somewhere between its Charlie Parker Ornithology period and another period that began with Miles Davis. And I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about. And for the first time in my life, the following afternoon, I went into the West.

(14)

Jazz as a primary influence to Kerouac's *On the Road*, and credited with his source for spontaneous writing or "sketching," is one of several art forms that lent to the development of spontaneous composition. Kerouac's spontaneous method was

important because it showed how the playful became necessary. The origins of Kerouac's interest to "invent a method that would allow him to write his next book with a more consistently sustained intensity" has been described by George Dardess as a suggestion Kerouac was given from a friend:

"Why don't you just sketch in the streets like a painter but with words?" the friend (Ed White) had urged, and Kerouac later told Allen Ginsberg that, if the metaphor is realized, then "everything activates in front of you in myriad profusion." "Sketching" was no mere casual exercise but an active engagement with the object, person, or place sketched. (Dardess 733)

Dardess' claim that "sketching" was more than a "mere casual exercise" suggests that a method informs Kerouac's spontaneity. "Sketching" as a playful writing technique becomes necessary. Kerouac has every intention of creating a place for his spontaneous method and carefully brings it to the attention of the reader when, as a part of the story-line, Sal (the autobiographical Jack Kerouac) is training Dean to be a writer in *On the Road*. Here is his description of the sketching technique:

As far as my [Sal's] work was concerned he [Dean] said, "Go ahead, everything You do is great. He watched over my shoulder as I wrote stories, yelling. "Yes! That's right! Wow! Man!" and "Phew!" and wiped his face with my handkerchief. "Man wow, there's so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even *begin* to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears." (7)

On the Road is also a starting place for what Jarrett calls the "Mystory." "Mystory functions as both story and critique" which is evident in *On the Road*

through Dean Moriarty's actions and Sal Paradise's standoffish manner and point-of-view. (Jarrett 48) Jarrett offers a "recipe" for mystory, for which *On the Road* has the right ingredients: An "icon" or "figure becomes mythical" is the main ingredient of Jarrett's recipe, and here it is Dean Moriarty. Dean Moriarty, is the archetypal American innocent and the original Beat: "My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry--trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent--a sideburned hero of the snowy West." (Kerouac 5)

Dean's innocence is part of a literary tradition portraying a hero figure as "willing, with marvelously inadequate equipment, to take on as much of the world as is available to him, without ever submitting to any of the world's determining categories." (Lewis 199) When Sal and Dean embark on their travels, Sal has to get accustomed to Dean's unpredictable behavior. What makes Dean Moriarty fit into Jarrett's model is the fact that he is an unconventional hero. "Retelling" the adventure story containing a mythical hero constructs "the Story as a means to invention." (Jarrett 52)

Dean as an eccentric hero attracted Sal to Dean's "criminality" because through Sal's eyes, Dean's criminality "was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides)." (*OTR* 10) Dean's role of mythic hero had nothing to do with self-righteousness or moralizing the country. Dean's role as hero was that of liberator from the restrictions of society. Kerouac's hero may have alarmed many readers of the fifties, such as Norman Podhoretz, who in 1958 criticized *On the Road* for

“fighting the notion that sordid acts of violence are justifiable so long as they are committed in the name of “instinct.” (356) Podhoretz didn’t only attack Kerouac’s morals for writing *On the Road*, but also Kerouac’s intelligence when he claimed, “juvenile crime can be explained partly in terms of the same resentment against normal feeling and the attempt to cope with the world through intelligence that lies behind Kerouac.” (355) The reaction against Kerouac’s novel demonstrates a collective attitude in which Kerouac responded against with *On the Road*.

Kerouac familiarized readers with the life of individuals who were considered Beats, like Dean. Sal announced in *On the Road* that “the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time,” as a signal to readers that he was not concerned with writing a novel that advocated post-war ethics. (*OTR* 8) Although the attention of critics such as Podhoretz has focused on the “loose morality” of characters in *On the Road*, John Clellon Holmes asserts: “Only the most myopic, it seems to me, can view this need for mobility (and it is the distinguishing characteristics of the Beat Generation) as a flight rather than a search.” (Holmes 373)

It is clear why the drive for “kicks” would satisfy Sal paradise. American society seemed to suggest the most detached solutions to solving problems. The desire for money produced mass production while the desire for security produced mass destruction, and Kerouac’s generation was the first “that has grown up since the possibility of the nuclear destructions of the world became the final answer to all questions.” (Holmes 371)

Kerouac's reaction to society with *On the Road* is essential as well as the use of Dean Moriarty. Kerouac's Dean Moriarty directs the reader to the exploration of extremes. An interest in extremes by Kerouac and other Beats seem appropriate when considering the culture of the late forties and early fifties. Holmes best explained the insatiable curiosity of the Beats when he wrote:

Nothing seems to satisfy or interest it [the Beat Generation] but extremes, which, if they have included the criminality of narcotics, have also included the sanctity of monasteries. Everywhere the Beat Generation seems occupied with the feverish production of answers-some of them frightening, some of them foolish-to a single question: how are we to live? (371)

When Sal Paradise desired "new experiences" because "my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified," Dean Moriarty became the answer. Dean is symbolic of Kerouac's own drive for "literary kicks" and rejection of traditional literary styles. (*OTR* 11) Kerouac's representation of the hipster is purely an obbligator for *On the Road* and becomes an anecdote.

The actions of Dean are "required reading" and form a "ground-zero" anecdote, which evolve into a "grammologue [a trope or metaphor one can write with]." (Jarrett 56) For example, in *On the Road*, Dean stole cars and that action is the ground-zero anecdote. What develops from the anecdote of Dean stealing cars is the grammologue that the beats stole what they needed to find freedom or "he [Dean] only stole cars for joy rides." (*OTR* 10) At first the stealing of cars was fun for Dean in *On the Road*, and seemed to entice Sal since he made light of Dean's behavior because it was only "for joy rides." Later in the novel, the sporadic car stealing reaches a peak

performance following a disappointing event. In his search for family, Dean encounters his uncle, Sam Brady, in Denver and is met with rejection; thus, exposing Dean's vulnerability:

Sam Brady was suspicious of his young cousin. He took one us out for a spin in his Old ratty coupe and immediately he made his position clear in regard to Dean.

"Now look, Dean, I don't believe you any more or anything you're going to try to tell me. I came to see you tonight because there's a paper I want you to sign for the family. Your father is no longer mentioned among us and we want absolutely nothing to do with him, and, I'm sorry to say, with you either, any more." I looked at Dean. His face dropped and darkened. (216)

Dean anticipates his car-stealing career by shoplifting a softball. Dean is described as "calmly" stealing the ball then casually walking out of the store where he is "popping it up and down in his palm." (118) Clearly the anecdote of Dean stealing is not only for "joy rides" but a reaction in search of freedom as suggested by the grammalogue. Dean's stealing at its height reveals how the obligatory play in *On the Road* becomes satirical:

From the window I saw Dean jump into the nearest car and roar off, and not a soul noticed him. A few minutes later he was back in an entirely different car, a brand-new convertible. "This one is a beaut!" he whispered in my ear. "The other one coughed too much-I left it at the crossroads, saw that lovely parked in front of a farmhouse. Took a spin in Denver. Come on, man, let's *all* go riding." All the bitterness and madness of his entire Denver life was blasting out of his system like daggers. His face was red and sweaty and mean.(221)

The grammalogue (in this case, stealing to find freedom) suggests “a specific method for arranging materials the mystorian has either gathered or invented.” (Jarrett 57) Kerouac unknowingly followed Jarrett’s recipe for a mystory when he described how “the mystorian [Sal or Kerouac himself] first learned about and became interested in the icon.” (Jarrett 56) Kerouac introduced Dean in the first sentence when *On the Road* began: “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up...With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road.” (3) Kerouac also introduces Dean’s criminality within the first two pages of the novel. The recipe that Jarrett has created also makes clear that a ground-zero anecdote must “describe how, for all intents and purposes, this icon [Dean] called or solicited the mystorian’s attention and affections.” (56) Dean invites Sal’s attention easily because Dean signifies Sal’s own drive for “kicks.”

Chapter Three

Charivari

At term from jazz criticism, *charivari*, refers to “a deliberately distorted and noisy performance.” (Jarrett 159) The term offers a way to describe the difference between Bebop and earlier forms, such as Ted Gioia describes:

To the old-timers of jazz, these frantic and frenetic performances could be quite unnerving. Even an intelligent and adventurous swing era musician such as drummer Dave Tough found his first experience with modern jazz to be a frightening one. Tough recalled: As we walked in, see, these cats snatched up their horns and blew crazy stuff. One would stop all of a sudden and another would start for no reason at all. We could never tell when a solo was supposed to begin or end. Then they all quit at once and walked off the stand. It scared us. (Gioia 60)

The “noise” or “distorted” performance produced by Bebop musicians was an integral part of a music that was recognized for expanding the boundaries of accepted musical norms. The musician used a “noisy” or distortion to his or her advantage. Thematically, noise is a figurative eruption of disorder, which destroys any preconceived notion of an “ideal continuity.” (Jarrett 162) Noise opens a new space for the performer, a way of achieving distance from the continuous hum of social order. Performers, whether they be musicians or writers, become, “noisemakers: interrupters that transfer one message (system or order) into another.” (162)

This noisy performance of jazz musicians finds a counterpart in Kerouac’s performance on the typewriter. In Bebop, Kerouac found precedent for a “noisy”

literary style that included the syntactic disruptions and “non-standard” flow of street language. “Blow” or breath becomes as important a term for the writer as it had been for the musician. Kerouac described his Bebop influences during the Paris Review interview with Ted Berrigan:

Jazz and bop, in the sense of a, say, tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement’s been made....That’s how I therefore separate my sentences, and breathe sentences of the mind.... I formulated the theory of breath of measure, in prose and verse, and never mind what Olson, Charles Olson says, I formulated that theory in 1953 at the request of Burroughs and Ginsberg. Then there’s the raciness and freedom and humor in jazz instead of all that dreary analysis and things like “James entered the room, and lit a cigarette. He thought Jane might have thought this too vague a gestures....” You know the stuff. (116)

Kerouac had an ability really to *hear* Bebop; he was an “*inside*” listener who possessed “improvisational competence.” (Greenblatt and Perlman 180) Kerouac displays this insider perspective in *On the Road* :

Charlie Parker leaving home and coming to Harlem, and meeting mad Thelonius Monk and madder Gillespie-Charlie Parker in his early days when he was flipped and walked around in a circle while playing. Somewhat younger than Lester Young, also from KC, that gloomy, saintly goof in whom the history of jazz was wrapped; for when he held his horn high and horizontal from his mouth he blew the greatest. And as his hair grew longer and he got lazier and stretched-out, his horn came down halfway: till it finally fell all the way and today as he wears his thick-soled shoes so

that he can't feel the sidewalks of life his horn is held weakly against his chest, and he blows cool and easy getout phrases. Here were the children of the American bop night. (239-40)

Kerouac described many jazz artists above with language that is rich in poetic metaphor and “signifying(g)” elements. For example, Kerouac describes Lester Young as wearing “his thick-soled shoes so that he can't feel the sidewalks of life.” (240) This lyricism is an important ingredient of *On the Road*, as a verbal enactment of jazz. Jazz, again, offers a literary model for Kerouac's poetic prose.

Like the work of bop musicians or “strong improvisers,” *On the Road* is made of “startling new phrases which are not immediately comprehensible.” (Greenblatt and Perlman 182) We have to read Kerouac's work in a quasi-allegorical manner, which Jarrett calls “allegoresis.” (Jarrett 204) When we do so, what begins to surface from Kerouac's work is what Jarrett would call the “lettoral” truth. (204) The approach allows us to appreciate the musicality of Kerouac's words as an important dimension of their meaning. Warren Tallman, literary critic, described the musical symbolism of *On the Road* :

The jazz is in the continuity in which each episode tells a separate story... And it is in the remarkable flexible style as Kerouac improvises within each episode seeking to adjust his sound to the resonance of the given moment. Some moments come through tinged with the earlier *Town and City* sentimentality. Others rock and sock with Moriarty's frenzy, the sentences jerking about like muscles on an overwrought face. Still others are curiously quiescent, calm. And the melody, which unifies the whole and lifts the cockeyed star up into the jazz sky is the holiness of life

because this for Kerouac is the meaning of words, the inside of his sound. Dean Moriarty is sweet prince to this proposition. To read *On the Road* with attention to the variations Kerouac achieves is to realize something of his remarkable talent for meshing his sound with the strongly felt rhythms of many and various moments. It is not possible to compare him very closely with other stylists of note because his fiction is the first in which jazz is a dominant influence. (*Charters, Port. Jack* 524)

The Town and the City was not as experimental as *On the Road*, but starting with *The Town and the City*, (and ending with *The Subterraneans*), Kerouac used jazz as his muse and model for writing. The prolongation of Kerouac's sketching method continued in later less popular essays and books such as: "In the Ring," "On the Road to Florida," *Visions of Cody*, "The Three Stooges," "Well, Cody is always interested in himself..." "Joan Rawshanks in the Fog," *Book of Dreams* and *Old Angel Midnight*.

Kerouac's creative use of dissonance in *On the Road* is apparent at a number of levels. The novel uses dialogue on two levels, interior and exterior. There is tension on each of those levels and between them. He uses the comma or dash to set thoughts in tension that would otherwise be safely set apart by periods. Kerouac outlined his use of the dash in "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" in his description of METHOD: No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas-but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)-"measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech"- "divisions of the *sounds* we hear" "time and how to note it down" (William Carlos Williams). (484)

Here, Sal imagines to himself (and the reader) how Mary Lou perceived her beau Dean. Notice that the reader must read nine lines before coming to a period.

Marylou was watching Dean as she had watched him clear across the country and back, out of the corner of her eye-with a sullen, sad air, as though she wanted to cut off his head and hide it in her closet, an envious and rueful love of him so amazingly himself, all raging and sniffy and crazy-wayed, a smile of tender dotage but also sinister envy that frightened me about her, a love she knew would never bear fruit because when she looked at hangjawed bony face with its male self-containment and absentmindedness she knew he was too mad. (163-4)

The dash allowed Kerouac to sketch language “from the mind of personal secret idea-words,” and deliberately displayed an internal dialogue. Dashes also related to the elongation of standard jazz tunes from the incorporation of additional “licks” by Bebop musicians and were synonymous with the length of Kerouac’s sentences. (484)

In order for spontaneous prose to deliver external dialogue, Kerouac attempted to capture the spoken word in action. Kerouac did this in two ways; one was through the use of an informal narrator, such as Sal, who would use slang, and also in his attempt to avoid revision. By trying to capture the energy that a great storyteller has during

the event of telling a story poses a special challenge for a writer. As a jazz musician utilized his ability because of countless hours of having played his horn, a “linguistic competence,” was required of Kerouac to use words and refer to that “noise” as improvisation. (Greenblatt and Perlman 169) Kerouac understood the challenge for a storyteller to use improvisation with the written word. In the Paris Review interview Kerouac described this dilemma and how he attempted to solve it:

By not revising what you've already written you simply give the reader the actual workings of your mind during the writing itself: you confess your thoughts about events in your own changeable way... Well, look, did you ever hear a guy telling a long wild tale to a bunch of men in a bar and all are listening and smiling, did you ever hear that guy stop to revise himself, go back to a previous sentence to improve it, to defray its rhythmic thought impact... If he pauses to blow his nose, isn't he planning his next sentence? And when he lets that next sentence loose, isn't it once and for all the way he wanted to say it? Doesn't he depart from the thought of that sentence and, as Shakespeare says, “forever holds his tongue” on the subject, since he's passed over it like a part of a river that flows over a rock once and for all and never returns and can never flow any other way in time? (103)

In Kerouac's “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” he described that in order to express the essence of a story the writer must “Not [use] “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of the mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation.”(484) Kerouac's emphasis on the telling of a story rather than

the content or theme of a story supports the idea that *On the Road* cannot fully be understood with only hermeneutics in mind.

Kerouac tried to avoid revision as much as possible. The total absence of revision would be impossible and Kerouac acknowledged this fact in “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” when he wrote: “*no revisions* (except obvious rational mistakes such as names or *calculated* insertions in act of not writing but *inserting*).”(485)

As a storyteller, Kerouac didn't rely on “typing” alone, but rather, as his instrument of creation. Kerouac used familiar images of America, including American sounds. The language of the street fills television sets of the twenty-first century on channels like MTV and BET. “Hip hop” jargon can be heard on prime time television commercials advertising slogans such as anti-drug propaganda to teenagers. Jargon has remained popular and is often associated with being used primarily by young people. The fact is that Kerouac was beyond the age of adolescence, as many others who spoke argot language of the street during his time. The use of jargon was relatively new in Kerouac's period and with the widespread use of it today, jargon may not appear to the modern reader as a language denoting avant-garde or alternative ideas. Stemming from “jazz musicians, carnival and circus workers, homosexuals, hipsters, and African Americans,” Beat slang is another component the unconventional use of language by Kerouac. (Watson 8)

Kerouac used very expressive and colorful language. Sometimes the dialogue Kerouac used in *On the Road* reflected the way a saxophonist could accent a song. Dean was a great demonstration of dialogue reflecting jazz because he periodically exclaimed “noise” such as: “Whoeee!” and “Ech!” (133) Dean also used body

language. Sal described Dean as “bobbing his head, always looking down, nodding, like a young boxer to instructions,” at Sal’s first encounter with Dean. (4) The excited talk from Dean also reminds the reader of a jazz vocalist scatting along to an ensemble. The storyteller of *On the Road* told a “long wild tale” to the reader that included an external dialogue focused on mimicking language from a lower-working-class background.

Without pretending to ignore class-consciousness, Kerouac made use of scenery found in everyday America such as greasy-spoon restaurants, hobos, and railroad yards. Kerouac was adamant about recording the world exactly as it appeared and sounded. In *On the Road*, Dean used exclamations such as: “Yes...Yes...yes...” or IT! IT!” (127) Dean as a typified hipster used street lingo because he was from the streets, “actually was born on the road” (3) Dean’s use of jargon, the narrator’s voice at times, and jazz musicians or associations with jazz, speak the language of the street throughout *On the Road*. The narrator used hipster lingo, especially when he described jazz musicians:

Secret Chinamen went by. Noises of hootchy-kootchy interfered. They went right on. Out on the sidewalk came an apparition—a sixteen-year-old kid with a goatee and a trombone case. Thin as rickets, mad-faced, he wanted to join this group and blow with them. They knew him and didn’t want to bother with him...He wanted to jump, skinny Chicago kid. He slapped on his dark glasses, raised the trombone to his lips alone in the bar and went “Baugh!” (240)

The language used by Sal and Dean fused together at times in conversation as if Kerouac was recording himself and Neil Cassady. In the following conversation between Sal and Dean the narrator interestingly referred to it as English:

So the Indian brothers began talking about us in low voices and commenting; you saw them look, and size, and compare mutualities of impression, or correct and modify, “Yeh, yeh” while Dean and Stan and I commented on them in English.

“Will you d-i-g that weird brother in the back that hasn’t moved from that post and hasn’t by one cut hair diminished the intensity of the glad *funny* bashfulness of his smile? And the one to my left here, older, more sure of himself but sad, like hung-up, like a bum even maybe, in town, while Victor is respectfully married-he’s like a gawddamn Egyptian king, that you see. These guys are real *cats*. Ain’t never seen anything like it. And they’re talking and wondering about us, like see? (283-4)

In an earlier section of *On the Road*, Sal interprets Dean’s language to suggest that they were “leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of time, *move*.” (133) The noise, or *charivari* of beat slang as it appeared in *On the Road*, can never be disassociated from jazz. At the same time that Dean announced the “*move*” away from “confusion,” Sal and Dean were driving to Old Bull Lee’s house in New Orleans. The radio played Bebop by a tenorman who Dean described as a true storyteller, and told Sal: “listen to him tell the story and put down true relaxation and knowledge.” (134) The musician as storyteller began for Kerouac his own journey in writing, which he continued.

The impression Kerouac left on language has persisted in fascinating or frustrating readers. Kerouac set out to revolutionize language in *On the Road* by

capturing the essence of the storyteller in action. He chose several literary devices for developing a unique style, which Kerouac only described in a couple of essays and interviews. Kerouac's devices such as sketching, the use of street jargon, and avoidance of traditional grammatical rules, have formed in combination, an interesting signature of Kerouac's individual style. Although *On the Road* has been criticized for its subject matter, *On the Road* succeeds as an attempt to create a piece of fiction replicating Bebop jazz. By understanding why Bebop musicians use "noise", the reader can assimilate Kerouac's writing style. Whether looking at external or interior *chiarvari* elements in *On the Road*, Bebop jazz was Kerouac's classic source of inspiration.

Chapter Four

Mexico City Blues

Kerouac's poetic series *Mexico City Blues* may be his profoundest experiment in spontaneous method. This work of 242 choruses is Kerouac's linguistic playground, and it is his poetic heaven. Although *Mexico City Blues* is poetry and not prose fiction, Kerouac makes use of his characteristic voice in the sequence, and his "blues chorus" threads together diverse stylistic elements. Kerouac uses techniques and elements derived from autobiographical writing, music, religious scripture, and his deep awareness of the sound of words. Despite the work's complexity, in contrast to some of his popular works of fiction, such as *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, *Mexico City Blues* has received little scholarly attention. Hopefully less familiar works by Kerouac, such as *Mexico City Blues*, can also be recognized for their value.

Kerouac wrote *Mexico City Blues* in mid-career. If, as Kerouac's case suggests, a well-known writer receives little attention outside his recognized "field," does that mean he has failed in that genre? I would have to agree with James T. Jones, the only critic unafraid to write a whole book devoted to Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*, when he writes that: "Among the mysteries of literary prejudice remains the theorem that an author cannot make major contributions to more than one genre, with its corollary that a novelist cannot be a good poet. Nevertheless, *Mexico City Blues* is a good poem, perhaps even a great one." (Jones 2)

On a more personal note, I am hesitant to bring up Kerouac's name in any discussion of poetry. The often mixed responses people have to Kerouac's poetry always astounds me. Readers either hate or adore Kerouac's novels, but they rarely have strong responses, if any to his poems. Perhaps this is understandable, in light of the fact that Kerouac wrote relatively little poetry. Kerouac wrote fiction like a madman; poetry was a different story. Nevertheless, the length and complexity of *Mexico City Blues*' 242 choruses argue for the work's importance and place among other "long poems" of the era, including those of W.C. Williams and Allen Ginsberg.

Kerouac wrote other blues poems before *Mexico City Blues*, such as "MacDougal Street Blues" and "San Francisco Blues," but *Mexico City Blues* stands out as Kerouac's most accomplished form of poetry, one that countered "Pound's Modernism," and enabled him "to solidify, in the space of a mere few weeks, the notion of the improvisational structure of the repeating choruses." (Jones 16)

Mexico was a safe haven if not paradise for bohemians and other American expatriates of Kerouac's generation. Its appeal to Kerouac lay in its being a refuge from American conformism. (Coincidentally, as Kerouac's ex-wife Joan Haverty was filing a paternity suit for their daughter Jan, it also allowed him to escape paying child support.) Mexico was also a haven for Burroughs, Ginsberg, and other beat writers because it offered access to drugs and sex with little danger from the police. Mexico was a cheap place to live, so a poor writer could devote more of his attentions to writing than to "getting by." For American expatriates, finally, Mexico's culture provided inspiration as the romanticized "Other."

Immersion in a foreign tongue deepened Kerouac's awareness of the sound of

his own language. Melopoeia is an important element of *Mexico City Blues*. Like jazz, Spanish suggested to Kerouac ways of playing with language and exploring its possibilities. For instance, in the 5th chorus of *Mexico City Blues* Kerouac takes words from Spanish: “If you know what I / palabra.” (Kerouac 5) Using “palabra” instead of the English word “mean” makes for a certain *frisson*. The Spanish word for “word” isn’t equivalent to “what I’m saying” or “what I mean,” but we “get” Kerouac’s meaning nonetheless.

Elsewhere, Kerouac uses the phonemes *o* and *oo* to call our attention to the sound of language. The *o* and *oo* sounds are signs for the reader the same way that Kerouac uses *palabra* to signify Spanish influences. The vowel *o* can be used to signify “the Latin world” (or even the Italian world, in the instance which follows.) For example, in the 5th chorus Kerouac accents Gregory Corso’s name with “Subioso Gregorio Corso.” (Kerouac 5) In the same chorus Kerouac also exaggerates English with the Spanish use of *o* when he composed: “Of Peppers/ Is Numbro/ Elabro.” Instead of writing the English word “number,” Kerouac uses *numbro*, which, according to Jones, is a type of “pidgin” Spanish that “has undertones of a nursery rhyme”(63) The “babbling” that we sometimes hear in *Mexico City Blues* recalls children first learning to speak, by imitating the language, which they hear. Kerouac’s desire to *be reborn* in a “Fallaheen Mexico” reflects his dissatisfaction with a dead modern culture. Kerouac’s literal word journey to Mexico relies on the sound of language, moving the reader beyond the everyday meaning of words.

There are many other uses of the *o* and *oo* sounds, or what can be called Kerouac’s “breath sound” in *Mexico City Blues*. In Chorus 45 Kerouac begins with

“Euphonism, a softening of sounds/ Euphemism, a softened word,” noticeably using both sounds in the words “Euphonism” and “Euphemism.” What is interesting about Kerouac’s choice of words here is that Euphemism directs the reader to language’s power as an analytical instrument, while Euphonism is an instrument of synthesis, summoning up what could be called “deep rhyme” of things. Euphonism offers pleasures to the ear, one might argue, because it puts us in harmony with things at every level.

Choruses 87 through 104 can be understood as, to use Jones’ term, the “Lowell Cantos.” Just as *On the Road* depicts much of Kerouac’s personal experience, the Lowell Cantos also describe Kerouac’s life, beginning with conception and birth in Lowell, Massachusetts:

Remembering my birth in infancy, the coughs,
 The swallows, the tear-trees growing
 From your eyeballs of shame; the grey
 Immense morning I was conceived in the womb,
 And the red glory afternoon delivered
 therefrom...

(Kerouac 89)

Kerouac refers to the Lowell Cantos as a “big structure of confession.” (Kerouac 87) Kerouac’s use of autobiography in both fiction and poetry coincides with the prominence of “confessional” poets such as Snodgrass and Robert Lowell, and the confessional theme in *Mexico City Blues* raises a question central to all such work: given the illusory presence of the past, how is one to live in the here-and-now?

Kerouac answers by focusing on the *act* of confession as creative *realization*. When introducing the reader to his younger years in Lowell, MA in Chorus 87, Kerouac writes: “Make it a great story and confession.” (Like his contemporaries, however, Kerouac is selective about what he confesses. He studiously avoids any mention of the paternity suit, his daughter, or Neil Cassady.)

The recurrent “breath sound” appears in *Mexico City Blues* at first as linguistic playfulness, but when Kerouac sounds the *oo* in “BLUES” in Chorus 137, it becomes associated with spiritual transformation. Kerouac’s connection to jazz and blue artists had to do with a shared attitude that somehow his place on earth was “down-and-out.” For the blues musician this feeling of being “down-and-out” often came from experiences of race prejudice in Jim Crow America. Kerouac connects to the world of the blues through his working class background and the isolation he experienced as an outsider with regard to mainstream, middle-class, and increasingly suburban. His aesthetic clearly has much in common with Blues culture. Jones compares Kerouac’s attitude to that of blues when he wrote: “his preference for skid row hotels and cheap, sweet wine in the 1950’s, enabled him to simulate the blues with great sincerity.” (81)

The eclectic groupings of images in *Mexico City Blues* is comparable to the way in which blues and jazz could have appealed to broad audiences containing African Americans of different backgrounds, as well as “white musicians and bohemians.” (Jones 82)

With its roots in the African *griot*, Blues is a talking music in which the instrumental accompaniment is often only the bluemans’s guitar. It is little wonder that Kerouac was so drawn to the sound of blues. As the storyteller evokes the past in

a blues chorus, Kerouac also attempts to capture a repetitive vocal quality in *Mexico City Blues*. In Chorus 146 Kerouac repeated the word Night and created a rhythm:

The Big Engines

In the night-

The Diesel on the Pass,

The Airplane in the Pan

American night-

Night-

The Blazing Silence in the Night,

the Pan Canadian Night-

The Eagle on the Pass,

the Wire on the Rail,

the High Hot Iron

of my heart. (146)

While emphasizing the word night for rhythm, Kerouac also refers to big-rig trucks or “Diesel[s],” “Airplanes,” and trains or “Wire on the Rail.” All of these forms of travel indicate Kerouac’s awareness of movement in the physical sense of traveling, along with the mental traveling of a poet composing poetry with the use of rhythm.

Mexico City Blues melds two major influences upon Kerouac’s writing, the blues and Buddhism. The period of *Mexico City Blues* also marks the beginning of Kerouac’s Zen Buddhist studies, which figure prominently in the work. Zen

Buddhism continued to influence Kerouac's writing for the rest of his literary career. As unlikely as the connection might seem at first glance ("blues people" are hardly chaste and solitary meditants), Kerouac intuitively perceives a deeper affinity. Like the itinerant *bhikkhu* or "left-home" person of Buddhist tradition, the bluesman is a homeless wanderer, whose survival is a matter of hand-to-mouth subsistence. In each case, homeless wandering comes in response to suffering (of the samsaric wheel of misfortune or of Jim Crow persecution). Both the Buddhist mendicant and Blues player have given up attachments, and both realize that this is a world of suffering in which nothing lasts and in which the "self" is ephemeral. Each wanderer, also, has something to teach. Wandering mendicancy takes different forms in different parts of the Buddhist world, but in Japan there is a long tradition of itinerant poets. Basho was not a blues man, but for Kerouac (who was also a writer of haiku) he might have offered a link between the Buddhist way and life in America.

Numerous references to Eastern religious texts identify Kerouac's spiritual interests in the poems. At the time he was reading such works as Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, and *the Diamond Sutra*. For example, Kerouac writes of Buddha in the 150th Chorus:

If Buddha appeased
the Likhavi Tribesmen
It means he must have hypnotized
with talk
Of Grand Nirvana's
Holy Paradise

Although the posthumously published *Some of the Dharma and Scripture of the Golden Eternity* show that Kerouac was a serious student of the Dharma, his approach is never scholarly, and he is always struggling to place Buddhism in the modern world. Like a fusion musician, Kerouac draws on Eastern ideology and Catholicism, biographies jazz musicians and hagiography. Most striking in this respect is the “Bird” Chorus, where Kerouac presents Bird as an image of Buddha:

Charley Parker Looked like Buddha
 Charley Parker, who recently died
 Laughing at a juggler on the TV
 after weeks of strain and sickness
 was called the Perfect Musician.
 And his expression on his face
 was as calm, beautiful, and profound
 As the image of the Buddha. (241)

At the same time in the Bird Chorus that Kerouac created a holy image of Parker, he sees Parker’s death as a form of martyrdom, aligning him with the image of Christ’s crucifixion. *Mexico City Blues* is an extension of Kerouac’s intellectual struggle with Buddhism and Catholicism.

It is a notion of art-as-religion that ultimately enables Kerouac to resolve his struggle between East and West. Jazz served as a model *art* form that reached *spiritual* heights, and offered a form of worship. In some of his other Choruses Kerouac struggles with Buddhist notions of craving and the samsaric wheel of

suffering. In Chorus 211, for example, he writes: “*Poor!* I wish I was free/ of that slaving meat wheel/ and safe in heaven dead,” and Chorus 209: “I got the woozes/ Said the wrong thing/ Want gold want gold/ Gold of eternity.” (209) Kerouac’s idea of the Blues offers him a way of letting go, of attaining the freedom he sought. Thus, he tells us in Chorus 197:

Inside, Inside Me,
I’se free
Free as the bee
Inside he.

Lord have a mercy
on a Hallelujah Town
I got to stomp my foot
And say, whee

The freedom that Kerouac refers to here is to be found in the mind or imagination of the writer. According to Kerouac’s biographer Nicosia, “Imprisoned by Buddhism, feeling still escapes, and emerges beautiful because it is human. Likewise poetry is a vital explosion no philosophy can smother.” (485) Kerouac’s 197th Chorus affords the writer/poet the status of seer. Besides the Bird Chorus that imposed Parker as a holy figure, Chorus 195 also combined blues and jazz with spiritual elements: “And rip me a blues/ Son, blow me a bop, / Let me hear ‘bout heaven/ In Brass Fluglemop.” (195) For the artist, whether musician or writer, art holds the key to attaining nirvana.

Mexico City Blues provides an example of Kerouac's experimentation with his spontaneous method in the context of poetry. Using autobiography, a musical sense of how sound can suggest meaning, and explicit references to jazz and blues, and religion, Kerouac solved for himself the puzzle of how enlightenment could be attained in art. Given the work's organic form, even mis/takes play a role. Kerouac's use of writing in *Mexico City Blues* shows how the writing process itself can be the subject of the work. Although *Mexico City Blues* has been largely ignored as an important example of how Kerouac used blues and jazz to further explore the use of the spontaneous method, it remains Kerouac's master-work of poetry.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the influence of Bebop jazz on Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody." Jarrett's *Drifting on a Reed* provided challenging but useful categories for this task, enabling me to discuss Kerouac's work in terms of jazz tropes such as *Satura*, *Obbligato*, and *Charivari*. The character of Dean provides a ground-zero anecdote, another important concept from Jarrett. *Drifting on a Reed* presents the jazz musician's techniques as a kind of *poesis* and gives me a way of connecting Kerouac's syntax at every level to that of the musicians he admired.

Although *On the Road* has achieved more attention than Kerouac's poetry I felt it important to discuss *Mexico City Blues*. My thesis ends with a discussion of Kerouac's poem as his grand synthesis. The 242 blues Choruses accommodate jazz and blues influences more readily than does the prose narrative of *On the Road*. The encounter with Mexico and the Spanish language shows that Kerouac's restless art would test every border and leave none uncrossed. It is for this reason, among others, that his work remains important for us today.

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