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## World Beats

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Published by Dartmouth College Press

Fazzino, Jimmy.

World Beats.

Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2016.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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A WORLD, A SWEET ATTENTION: JACK KEROUAC'S  
SUBTERRANEAN ITINERARIES

*Kerouac and the Transnational Turn*

In the final journey of *On the Road*, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty drive down at last to Mexico, and not long after crossing the border, Dean cries, "It's the world. . . . My God! . . . It's the world! We can go right on to South America if the road goes. Think of it! Son-of-a-bitch! Gawd-damn!"<sup>1</sup> Dean's exclamation is characteristic of the wide-eyed exuberance celebrated in Kerouac's novel. His telescopic vision of space and motion, in which *somewhere* becomes *everywhere*, also provides a formula of sorts for understanding the meaning of Beat travel more generally. Beat travel writing comprises a large and significant subset of the Beat corpus. Rob Wilson speaks of a "world-horizon come near," and this is what Beat writers bring into view again and again in their travel writing; Dean's ecstatic "It's the world!" is but the pure form of the "world-horizon come near." This chapter gathers together the various world-making tactics in Kerouac's prose and poetry, which is the point of departure for a worlded analysis of a whole series of Beat writers in subsequent chapters.

It is only after Dean and Sal leave the United States behind that Dean can apprehend "the world" as such. Yet Kerouac's own travels abroad (primarily to Mexico, but also Tangier, London, and France) provide him with new perspectives on the United States as well. A few pages after Dean's "It's the world!" Sal offers to drive (a rare occurrence) while Dean sleeps (also a rare occurrence). Sal soon finds himself dreaming his own world-vision:

I was alone in my eternity at the wheel, and the road ran straight as an arrow. 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 Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches in a belt across the equatorial belly of the world from Malaya (the long fingernail of China) to India the great subcontinent to Arabia to Morocco to the selfsame deserts and jungles of Mexico and over the waves to Polynesia to mystic Siam of the Yellow Robe and on around, on around, so that you hear the same mournful wail by the rotted walls of Cádiz, Spain, that you hear 12,000 miles around in the depths of Benares the Capital of the World. (280)

These lines are the expression of a foundational moment in Kerouac's transnational imaginary, precipitated by and dependent on crossing the border into Mexico. Readers encounter various iterations of this "fella-hin" dream throughout Kerouac's corpus, especially his writings from and about Mexico. Kerouac's reference to "the Fellahin Indians of the world"—in the famous scroll version of the novel, it's the even more crazed "worldwide fellaheen people of the world"—is straight out of Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, whose influence on Kerouac (through Burroughs) cannot be overstated.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to oversimplify his influence, however. Kerouac knew his Spengler well, writing about his 1957 trip to Morocco in *Desolation Angels*, for example: "In fact [Tangier is] exactly like Mexico, the Fellaheen world, that is, the world that's not making History in the present: *making* History, manufacturing it, shooting it up in H bombs and Rockets, reaching for the grand conceptual finale of Highest Achievement (in our times the 'Faustian' West of America, Britain and Germany high and low)."<sup>3</sup> Spengler's conception of history, and specifically his concept of the fellahin who live *outside* of history, retains its critical function in Kerouac's rendering, which pits the "Fellaheen world" squarely against the grasping "Faustian" West with its imperialist and militarist aims. But the real force of this passage lies in Kerouac's characteristic word-play: the West's "H bombs" are "shot up" like the H of heroin (its "*Highest* Achievement"—Kerouac was staying with Burroughs at the time). In other words, he adapts Spengler to suit his purposes, which were aesthetic as well as philosophical. Discussing Kerouac's posthumous *Some of the Dharma* (composed in the mid-1950s, much of it in Mexico), Nancy Grace adds another twist, suggesting that "*Dharma* repudiates Spengler's mindset as . . . preoccupied with a falsely detailed view of history. Spengler, he concluded, failed to understand Eastern thought or the nature of the universe."<sup>4</sup>

Spengler's History with a capital H is strangely echoed in *Lonesome Traveler*, in the "Fellaheen Mexico" chapter, where Kerouac's "guide and

buddy,” Enrique, “couldnt say ‘H’ but had to say ‘K’—because his nativity was not buried in the Spanish name of Vera Cruz his hometown, in the Mixtecan Tongue instead.—On buses joggling in eternity he kept yelling at me ‘HK-o-t? HK-o-t? Is means *caliente*. Unnerstan?’”<sup>5</sup> Kerouac, a French Canadian who grew up speaking *joual* in working-class New England, is always attentive to the power dynamics inscribed within linguistic difference. Enrique the indigenous subaltern cannot even utter the word “History,” let alone possess one. In general, what makes Kerouac’s use of the fellahin concept irreducible to a mere orientalist othering is the redemptive freedom of language it enables, not at the expense of the Other but as a means of giving voice to the Other (however fraught that becoming-other of the self might be). Such linguistic experimentation is perhaps most evident in the poems of *Mexico City Blues*, but manifests itself wherever the fellahin appear in Kerouac’s work. Finally, it is not inconceivable that Burroughs and Kerouac were familiar with the German title of Spengler’s *Decline of the West*—which is *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. Alternatively rendered as *The Setting of the Eveninglands* (as of the sun in the west—*Abendland* the German equivalent of “occident”), Spengler’s title calls to mind the planetary dimensions of his grand historical drama.

Kerouac’s many references and allusions to a distinctly Spenglerian view of history, it must be said, do also point to the dangers lurking within Kerouac’s conception of a worldwide communion of beatific souls. Taking seriously the dangers of Brian Edwards’s “orientalist trap,” what I want to emphasize, however, is the fact that even with something like “the worldwide fellaheen” bearing all the hallmarks of orientalism—the East (which in Kerouac’s case becomes the Global South) as timeless, unchanging, essential, primitive, and all the rest—given the problematic choice between depicting total alterity or total identification (“going native”), Kerouac consistently tends to the latter. What Wilson has aptly called Kerouac’s “fellaheen orientalism” always involves an expression of felt solidarity and mutual understanding. Wilson sums up both the possibilities and the pitfalls of such a gesture: On one hand, he praises Kerouac, “whose language of maximal openness to sites such as Mexico City, San Francisco, and Tangier was invaded by cultural otherness, by what Gilles Deleuze would call the *third worlding* of his own language and tactics.” But on the other hand, Wilson concedes, “However multiple, impure, or compassionate, fellaheen orientalism is still an orientalism as such doing discursive work in and upon the world: its language works to circulate, cite, and reiterate typifying representations of binary other-

ness that can occlude, distort, convert into metaphor, and romanticize the peoples and places of the worlds Kerouac's open roads would embrace."<sup>6</sup>

Only through this double lens of a strategic orientalism—a double move caught between identification and otherness—does a scene like the one in *On the Road*, where Sal has spent the day picking cotton with Teri (his Mexican lover) and her family of migrant farmworkers, gain any critical purchase whatsoever. Sal, nervous about recent violence committed against a worker in their party, says, "They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am."<sup>7</sup> His boundless identificatory impulse leaves a bad taste in many readers' mouths. There are limits, after all. D. H. Lawrence lampoons the same impulse to "merge" in Whitman's poetry: "oozing into the universe," as Lawrence calls it.<sup>8</sup> (Doris Sommer calls it an imperialist gesture on Whitman's part.)<sup>9</sup> To many, the most outrageous instance of the always fraught relationship with otherness in Kerouac's fiction also appears in *On the Road*: "At lilac evening . . . in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life" (180). (Sal Paradise's Denver doldrums are reminiscent of Whitman's "I am the hounded slave" in "Song of Myself.") Unlike Teri and her family, Sal possesses the privilege of crossing borders, of wearing disguises. But at the very same time, this kind of *transgression*, or willful alienation from a hegemonic U.S. culture at home and dominance abroad, also makes visible and contests the underlying structures of dominance and hegemony that Beat writers are themselves able to profit from.

It is certainly ironic that the author of *On the Road* traveled much less extensively abroad than his Beat Generation peers. But Kerouac did spend a good deal of time in Mexico at several points throughout the 1950s. His first trip there was the one referred to in the passages from *On the Road* quoted earlier. He stayed with Burroughs in Mexico City in the spring of 1952 and composed *Dr. Sax* at that time; the fact that Kerouac's most intimate and idiosyncratic portrayal of his Lowell childhood should be written from Mexico is exemplary of the temporal and especially the geographic displacements and layering so characteristic of Kerouac's writing. Kerouac wrote *Mexico City Blues* in his rooftop abode at 210 calle Orizaba in the summer of 1955 and stayed there again in the fall of 1956. (Both stays are dramatized in the short novel *Tristessa*.) Apart from Mexico, Kerouac visited Burroughs in Tangier in 1957 while Burroughs was assembling what would become *Naked Lunch*. But as the story goes, he began to long for the comfort and routine of life with his Memère and left Morocco after only a few weeks. While Burroughs,

Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso were living it up in Paris at the famous "Beat Hotel," while Ginsberg searched India for a guru, and while Gary Snyder, Joanne Kyger, and later Philip Whalen studied Zen in Japan (and so on and so forth), Kerouac chose to remain stateside and dispatch letters of grim forbearance to his more worldly friends.

Nonetheless, Kerouac's writing has proven to be fertile ground for a number of critics interested in literary transnationalism. Rachel Adams refers to Kerouac as a paradigmatically "continental" writer, and Hassan Melehy discusses the significance of the author's Quebecois roots, theorizing Kerouac as a diasporic and nomadic writer and creator of a "minor literature" à la Deleuze. Kerouac has also provided a model for the kind of worlded writing that I am most interested in. At first glance, Kerouac may seem out of place in Adams's study, with its strong emphasis on indigenous and women writers and artists, as well as the U.S. expatriates of the 1930s, who, as Adams points out, had traveled to Mexico to take part in revolutionary history. So how, exactly, does Kerouac fit into a project that "grants new centrality to people and places that have been marginalized by official histories of conquest and nation building," especially given the fact that Kerouac's writings on Mexico so often get read as blindly appropriative and orientaling?<sup>10</sup> Adams's study moves beyond such a reading, although she too poses the familiar critique of Beat writing, and Beat travel writing in particular, as narcissistic and apolitical. Ultimately, Kerouac figures in Adams's conception of continental literature not simply because he is someone who, with his Canuck background and formative experiences in Mexico, truly does span the continent but also, and more important, because he is able to translate (a key term for Adams as well as Susan Gillman and Kirsten Silva Gruesz in their formulation of a transnational or hemispheric "text-network") so many different kinds of continental flows and energies.

Adams asserts that Kerouac "is one of a very select group of authors who could be described as genuinely continental in scope," a transnationally minded writer "who crossed multiple borders of class, language, and nation." Yet Kerouac's work, according to Adams, has not been sufficiently well understood in its extranational contexts:

Whereas Kerouac has come to assume canonical status as a U.S. American author, I show the importance of his French Canadian background and his Mexican travels to his influential "visions of America." As much as we associate Kerouac with the Beat subcultures of New York and San Francisco, I argue that we must also recognize the profound impact of French

Canadian Lowell and Mexico City on the form and content of his writing . . . paying particular attention to his status as a theorist of language, an author concerned with the possibilities of translanguing communication as well as the problem of untranslatability.<sup>11</sup>

Kerouac's primary importance to Adams is precisely as a "theorist of language," and the texts she chooses to focus her attention on, those which most fully disclose the transnational poetics of Kerouac's writing, include *Lonesome Traveler* and *Desolation Angels*, with their transcontinental itineraries, and *Mexico City Blues*, where Kerouac's language is most experimental and discernibly rhizomic. Moving away from the usual emphasis on his so-called bop prosody and the rhetoric of "spontaneous prose," Adams underscores instead Kerouac's *minor* use of the English language.

For Adams, as for Hassan Melehy, a good deal of what makes Kerouac's writing distinctive and significant is linked to Kerouac's upbringing in the working-class French Canadian community of Lowell, Massachusetts. Kerouac would often point out that English was not his first language; Adams cites an early passage in *The Subterraneans*—where he writes "confession after confession, I am a Canuck, I could not speak English till I was 5 or 6, at 16 I spoke with a halting accent and was a big blue baby in school"—as one example among others in Kerouac's work of the link between language and otherness.<sup>12</sup> With moments like these in mind, Melehy argues that "Kerouac explicitly raises the question of identity through a thoroughgoing exploration of the relationships among *québécoisité* or Québec-ness, Frenchness, and provincial versus metropolitan identity in France, and indeed of the fleeting, nomadic nature of cultural identity itself."<sup>13</sup> But while his linguistic background, as he illustrates poignantly in *The Subterraneans*, certainly contributes to Kerouac's shy awkwardness, he also understood his "halting accent" to be a source of strength (as does Deleuze when he refers to *minor language* as language that productively "stammers"<sup>14</sup>) and something to be turned to his advantage as a writer. Kerouac composed an early sketch of *On the Road* in French—it turns out that what some consider the "great American novel" was originally penned in a language other than English—and snatches of French dialogue and description can be found in nearly all of his published works.

There is a crucial distinction to make between the standard French that, by all accounts, Kerouac could speak and write, and the French that most often appears in his oeuvre: a transcription of the French Canadian

dialect *joual*, a patois with no written form. Adams explains that, for Kerouac, *joual* is closely allied with not just the past (familial and cultural history) but also linguistic and cultural vitality in the present; he often equates the language of his youth with musicality, rhythm, breath, and performance. Within this fruitful yet admittedly logocentric paradigm, it becomes easy to see how the method and ideal of “spontaneous prose” arose in part from the linguistic milieu of Kerouac’s Lowell. Throughout his work, linguistic difference often stands in for cultural, ethnic, and racial difference, and linguistic *hybridity* is a marker of hybridity as such. Adams notes, “Often his protagonists describe themselves as hyphenated subjects who personify the mingling of French and indigenous America: a ‘Canuck Fellaheen Indian’ in *Maggie Cassidy* or ‘Jack Iroquois’ in *Book of Sketches* . . . works in which to be American is to embody racial mixture and to trace one’s tangled roots across multiple borders” (153). What remains somehow redemptive in Kerouac’s projections is that their weirdness (Jack Iroquois?) prevents the different sides of the equation from fusing into anything like a seamless whole, and difference as such is preserved. The strange juxtapositions of Kerouac’s aliases and epithets can be read as a recuperative strategy within a “culturally homogenous modernity” threatening to relegate Kerouac’s Lowell to an “unrecoverable past” (154).

While the French language is tied to home and childhood innocence, Spanish is tied to adventure, travel, and the allure of the exotic. What is most vital to Kerouac’s continental “visions of America,” however, are the ways in which the two overlap in a linguistic assemblage that opens onto a wide-ranging set of concerns and possibilities. As Adams says, “One invokes the other” (163). She laments the pitiful state of Kerouac’s Spanish but also sees the poetic potential of lines like “Do you know what I p l a b r a” in *Mexico City Blues*. A generous appraisal might reckon that Kerouac’s pidgin is an attempt to render a Spanish equivalent of *joual* or that his willful distortions are a nod to Whitman’s “camerado” and the like. Interestingly, what Adams takes exception to is not Kerouac’s misprision or verbal tourism but the fact that his “willingness to identify with the Other” (166) does not go far enough and is too often “subsumed” by a compulsion to *self*-knowledge through drugs, sex, religion, and so on, leading Adams to conclude that Kerouac, and the Beats in general, “were relatively uninterested in the specific details of Mexican politics or history; its primary attraction was the cheap and permissive climate it offered for writing and recreation” (157). In Adams’s account, however, a countervailing, continental situation does arise in *Desolation*



*Angels*, when Kerouac takes Memère with him to Mexico, narrating for her the long history of intermarriage between indigenous Americans and Spanish colonials. His mother asks, “Aw but these are good people the *Indians* you say?” Kerouac responding, “*Oui*—Indians just like the American Indians but here the Spaniards did not destroy them” (in French). “*Içi les espanols sont marié [sic] avec les Indiens*” (384). Here, the mestizo is a marker of the historicity of the Americas. Kerouac emphasizes singularity and contingency rather than the atemporal essentialism embedded in such a notion as his “worldwide fellaheen.” Reminded perhaps of her own *Unheimlichkeit* as a French Canadian in Protestant New England, even Kerouac’s mother, whose rabid anti-Semitism drove a wedge between her son and Allen Ginsberg, in these pages is at least open to an experience of recognition across cultures.<sup>15</sup>

The quest for longer histories and more capacious (though often submerged or occulted) networks of human interaction is a hallmark of Beat travel writing. It allows for Kerouac to disappear into the Mexican landscape while spinning a web of words that encompasses his native Catholicism, Maya ritual, Buddhist scripture, the American West, jazz, drugs, railroads, Spanish, French, and more. Such assemblages of influence and inspiration amount to a distinctive Beat syncretism. And in corresponding fashion, the recent studies of Kerouac by Adams and Melehy demonstrate that Beat Generation writing can be productively placed within wider trends in literary and cultural studies, that is to say, among the many critical rubrics designated by the umbrella term “transnational.” With Kerouac front and center, Adams’s continent stakes a claim on the middle ground between comparativism and globalism and shares with worlding a desire to think a nontotalizing totality. What may seem like a limitation, the continent paradigm—its ostensible concern with North America alone—becomes a strength in that it can be adapted to the specific contours of other places, times, and critical projects while retaining its status as a “third term” that points to something at once more and less than the nation. And given the Beats’ complex relationship with Latin America, which continue to be explored in the chapters to come, the hemispheric view has much to offer any reconsideration of Beat writing in its inter-American aspect.

### *Mapping the Beat Subterranean*

That Kerouac continues to attract critical attention is a testament both to the persistent allure of his mystique and to the inexhaustibly protean

nature of his writing. Having looked thus far at some salient features of the transnational Kerouac postulated by Adams and Melehy, I want to begin formulating a theory of worlded Beat travel that turns out to be the external, or extensive, aspect of a subterranean world that lies at the core Kerouac's oeuvre. The subterranean, like the world, is an image of creation and connectivity, where vast underground networks of influence and inspiration proliferate in the manner of the Deleuzian rhizome. There is no contradiction in positing subterranean spaces that exist *en plein air*, for the subterranean in Beat writing—and in the rich tradition of underground thought in literature, philosophy, critical theory, and cultural studies—becomes a critical term containing within itself a dialectical force subsuming depth and surface, the internal and the external, immanence and transcendence. I want to suggest that Kerouac is a paradigmatically subterranean writer and that close attention to the language of the subterranean in Beat writing can help foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Beat transnationalism. To revise an earlier assertion: where Kerouac is concerned at least, it is not entirely necessarily to leave the United States behind to bring the world at large into view, and this is precisely why his work is of such value to theorists of the transnational. The subterranean spaces manifested throughout his work, whether set at home or abroad, give rise to a radically expansive geographic imaginary.

Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans* (written 1953; published 1958) is a conspicuous place to begin an investigation of the underground in Beat writing, not simply because of its title but also because it employs a set of formal and rhetorical tactics of critical importance to thinking about a worlded Beat Generation as well. Whereas an entire mythology has grown up around the composition of *On the Road*—the scroll, the three-week amphetamine blaze, no revision, years of rejection by every publisher in New York, the breakthrough of spontaneous prose, and so on—we know, thanks to a recent turn to textual studies among Beat scholars and the publication of the “original scroll edition” to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Kerouac's novel, that it was in fact heavily edited and underwent several major revisions and constant smaller ones throughout the 1950s. (This includes its translation from “Sur la route” by Jean Kerouac.)<sup>16</sup> What emerges from these rich textual histories is the fact that it is not *On the Road* but rather *Subterraneans* that lives up to the legend of the author's spontaneous prose. The much shorter novel was written in a mere three days, and unlike with *On the Road*, Kerouac refused to make concessions to his editor, Donald Allen, that he felt compromised his stylistic breakthroughs in *Subterraneans*.<sup>17</sup> Composed in a single burst

of creative energy, this novel is perhaps the purest expression of what Kerouac will put down as his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose.” In fact, explaining the genesis of Kerouac’s “Essentials,” Ann Charters notes, “He wrote it at the request of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in the fall of 1953, after he had shown them the manuscript of *Subterraneans*. His friends were so impressed that he’d written the entire book in three nights . . . that they asked him to describe how he’d done it.”<sup>18</sup> This novel in particular reveals a kernel of truth in the Kerouac myth and for that reason alone is worth a closer look.

Moreover, not just the name but the naming of *Subterraneans* is significant and offers further insight into the collaboration between Kerouac and his earliest literary associates. It is entirely fitting that Adam Moorad, Ginsberg’s avatar in *Subterraneans*, should be the one to name the group of North Beach (read Greenwich Village) bohemians on whom the novel centers. His characterization of them—“They are hip without being slick, they are intelligent without being corny, they are intellectual as hell and know all about Pound without being pretentious or talking about it, they are very quiet, they are very Christlike” (1)—remains a touchstone of Beat hipsterdom. By extension, Ginsberg names the novel itself, just as Kerouac had a few years earlier provided the title for Ginsberg’s *Howl* and inspired some of the poem’s most memorable lines. In his dedication of *Howl and Other Poems*, Ginsberg lionizes Kerouac for “creating a spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature,” but it is worth keeping in mind that of the eleven titles Ginsberg cites as proof of Kerouac’s genius, including *On the Road* and *Subterraneans*, none were as yet published.<sup>19</sup> As Kerouac himself will write in the “Passing through Mexico” section of *Desolation Angels*, “Nothing could stop me from writing big books of prose and poetry for nothing, that is, with no hope of ever having them published—I was simply writing them because I was an ‘Idealist’ and I believed in ‘Life’ and was going about justifying it with my earnest scribblings—Strangely enough, these scribblings were the first of their kind in the world” (256). At the time of *Howl*’s publication, Kerouac, along with Burroughs and Neal Cassady (*Howl* was dedicated to them as well), could still be said to compose a “subterranean” literary community in the most basic sense of subterranean as underground, out of sight, unknown. Finishing one book after another while facing what would only seem like diminishing prospects for publication after his largely failed first novel, *The Town and the City*, in 1950, who or what could Kerouac said to be writing for without some abiding sense of the subterranean as a space of radically projective, community forming potential?<sup>20</sup>

The Beat movement as a spatial phenomenon has long been a source of interest: over the years, books such as James Jones's *Map of Mexico City Blues*, James Campbell's *This Is the Beat Generation: New York–San Francisco–Paris*, along with Deborah Baker's *A Blue Hand* and Todd Tietchen's *Cubalogues*, have all dealt with significant locales along the Beat landscape and have documented some of the main lines of the Beats' world travels. There is much yet to be written, however, on the subject of Beat "space" per se. *Subterraneans* has a lot to say about Beat geography; Kerouac's novel maps a creative topography, and readers can follow the lines of interconnectivity from New York to San Francisco that open onto multiple spaces for writing and sex and family and spirituality—that is to say, the major obsessions of Kerouac's life and work. Through its highly compressed layers of concern, *Subterraneans*, like so much of Kerouac's work, traces an attempted line of flight (leading seemingly always back to lost youth and Lowell) but loses itself amid the dissipation and self-hatred that begin to poison Kerouac's life and relationships. The novel's very first sentence begins, "Once I was young and had so much more orientation." Its context disorients the reader as well, for although *Subterraneans* is set in the bohemia of San Francisco's North Beach, the events depicted took place on the other side of the continent in Greenwich Village. There remains a great deal of specificity of place names, but each one is marked by a shifting geography. These shifts are due in large part to the fact that the novel is very much autobiographical, and Kerouac felt compelled to protect or disguise the actors by changing their names and transplanting the entire scene.<sup>21</sup> But a more productive kind of transformation is also at work in *Subterraneans*. For Kerouac, the journey west always catalyzes the most intense kinds of becomings, and by rerouting the lines of a fairly banal tale of love, betrayal, and loss, it is as if he is able to redeem that loss by linking it to the creative energies and spiritual nourishment invariably associated with the West Coast in his writing.

Kerouac's decision to move the center of action from New York to San Francisco is not simply a matter of legal or editorial expediency. Seen another way, the fact that he can change the setting of the novel so convincingly and in such detail gets at the heart of the Beat subterranean as lived space. It speaks to a certain synchronicity that exists among bohemian enclaves across the country, a pulse that Kerouac finds again and again in his writing. Japhy Ryder's utopian vision in *The Dharma Bums* (1958) of a "rucksack revolution," a million young seekers taking to the road en masse, arises from similar intimations. When Bob Dylan describes his experiences in early-1960s bohemia in his memoir *Chronicles* and in Mar-

tin Scorsese's documentary *No Direction Home*, he likewise refers to an entire network of liberated zones stretching across the United States. He explains to Cameron Crowe in 1985:

I came out of the wilderness and just naturally fell in with the Beat scene, the Bohemian, Bebop crowd, it was all pretty much connected . . . St Louis, Kansas City, you usually went from town to town and found the same setup in all these places, people comin' and goin,' nobody with any special place to live. You always ran into people you knew from the last place. . . . Where I was at, people just passed through, really, carrying horns, guitars, suitcases, whatever, just like the stories you hear, free love, wine, poetry, nobody had any money anyway. There were a lot of poets and painters, drifters, scholarly types, experts at one thing or another who had dropped out of the regular nine-to-five life.<sup>22</sup>

Kerouac's work, too, moves along the circuits of this ever-expanding network, or rhizome, as it extends to Mexico City, to Paris, to Tangier, and beyond. Beat notions of the worlded world are so often based on exactly the kind of hidden synchronicity and syncretism described by Dylan.

The Beat subterranean comprises both a spatial and a temporal aspect: subterranean, rhizomic space is radically contiguous and densely layered, and subterranean *time* is necessarily "out of joint."<sup>23</sup> Throughout *Subterraneans* the narrator maintains an intense awareness of a temporal displacement or distance between himself and the subterranean hipsters of San Francisco. This distance is expressed most poignantly early on, at the first encounter between Leo and Mardou: "She was interested in thin ascetic strange intellectuals of San Francisco and Berkeley and not in big paranoiac bums of ships and railroads and novels and all that hatefulness . . . and because ten years younger than I seeing none of my virtues which anyway had long been drowned under years of drugtaking and desiring to die, to give up, to give it all up and forget it all, to die in the dark star . . . ah time" (6). Like the rhizomic circuitry of the spatial organization of Kerouac's novels, the painful awareness of such temporal gaps serves to deflate the whole Kerouac mythos of "railroads and novels." When *On the Road* was finally published in 1957, the events depicted therein had taken place over a decade earlier in many cases. Now thirty-five years old and already beginning to show signs of alcoholic wear and tear, the real-life Sal Paradise was not quite what readers were expecting. *Subterraneans*, published amid the tempest of Kerouac's first notoriety, painfully registers his age and "hatefulness" in relation not only to his new fans but also to a potential love interest like Mardou.

*Subterraneans* is hardly unique among Kerouac's novels in being organized by a circuit of motion at times productive and liberating, at times treacherous and entrapping. The nodal points of *Subterraneans* are Mardou's apartment in Heavenly Lane, the East Bay apartment of Leo's mother, and the bars and jazz clubs of North Beach. Leo maps the geography of the novel as he rushes from one node to the next in an increasingly desperate search for both escape and disciplined creativity (major themes in Kerouac's life and oeuvre). *On the Road* is structured by several cross-continent trips, *Dharma Bums* by the movement between mountaintop and city, and *Big Sur* by at least three different durations of movement. (Kerouac's desperate refrain in the novel is "One fast move or I'm gone.")<sup>24</sup> In *Big Sur* the first, a long-distance, or macro, movement from the East Coast to California—Kerouac's attempt to escape the crush of fame and notoriety that followed *On the Road* in hopes of solitude and recovery at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's cabin near Big Sur—is what precipitates the action of the novel as a whole. The second, a mid-level movement from San Francisco to Big Sur and back, structures much of the novel narratively and thematically. In general, the city is presented as the place of dissolution and entrapment, while the cabin and coast at Big Sur offer physical and spiritual regeneration. But Kerouac cannot hold these two worlds apart, and Ferlinghetti's cabin becomes the site of Kerouac's final (in the novel) delirium and breakdown. The third duration, the most interesting in the context of this discussion, involves a series of short or micro movements that he makes from the cabin to the coast, most often at night and to write down what would become "Sea: The Sounds of the Pacific at Big Sur," the long sound poem that forms a coda to the novel.

Once at Big Sur, Kerouac's world comprises three major elements, each with its own important and often unexpected movements and dynamics: the Raton (Bixby) Canyon bridge, the creek that flows underneath it, and the Pacific Ocean.<sup>25</sup> These last ocean flows from Hawaii, Asia, and beyond are fearful and violent but also vital and dynamic. They are contrasted with the circular or closed tourist flows moving up and down Highway 1 and across the canyon bridge. Together, the various movements, circuits, and flows that permeate and shape the novel converge to produce a warp zone at Big Sur, which in turn adds and is added to by Kerouac's own dissipation and paranoia. He continually emphasizes the disorienting nature of the landscape, which is registered immediately upon his arrival by taxicab: "And sure enough when he lets me off at the Raton Canyon bridge and counts the money I sense something wrong somehow, there's an awful roar of surf but it isn't coming from the right place, like you'd

expect it to come from ‘over there’ but it’s coming from ‘under there.’ . . . The sea roar is bad enough except it keeps bashing and barking at me like a dog in the fog down there, sometimes it booms the earth but my God where is the earth and how can the sea be underground!”<sup>26</sup> Kerouac’s crossing under the bridge and toward the sea is most significant in its expression of the subterranean spaces and energies of Beat writing. In the novel the highway does not *even* represent commerce or the commodity, only a kind of hollow, passive spectatorship. “There they are,” writes Kerouac, “thousands and thousands of tourists driving by slowly on the high curves” (43). As he attempts to move beyond the tourist flows, farther out on the coast than the coastal highway itself, Kerouac is blocked, thrown back, and rejected by the worlded flows of the ocean. Trapped here as in the city, he inevitably cracks up.

Kerouac’s creative geographies often have less to do with the pure freedom of the mythic open road and more to do with Deleuzian lines of flight and escape. Here Deleuze draws heavily from D. H. Lawrence’s essay “The Spirit of Place” and uses Kerouac, Burroughs, and Dylan as examples. For Deleuze, the line of flight marks the most salient, vital feature and tendency of English and American writers, whose greatest aim is “to leave, to escape,” or in Lawrence’s words, “to cross the horizon, to enter into another life.”<sup>27</sup> Creating a line of flight would therefore seem to be an internal, or intensive, process, yet, according to Deleuze, “it is the opposite of the imaginary.”<sup>28</sup> Lawrence, who figures largely in Deleuze’s conception of English and American literature, describes America itself as being founded on the desire, not for “freedom” but for an “escape.” He asks, “All right then, what did they [the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’] come for? . . . They came largely to get *away*—that most simple of motives. To get away. Away from what? In the long run, away from themselves. Away from everything. That’s why most people have come to America, and still do come. To get away from everything they are and have been.” Lawrence’s immensely ironic characterization of American history—setting “escape” in opposition to “freedom”—problematizes both notions. In the same way that Deleuze’s lines of flight can quickly become reterritorialized and destructive, Lawrence’s freedom leads more often than not to a “hopeless sort of constraint.”<sup>29</sup> Deleuze transforms Lawrence’s pessimistic, almost cynical viewpoint, however, by deemphasizing the idea that flight or escape must necessarily involve physical or spatial movement. Immediately following a quotation from Lawrence, Deleuze writes, “To fly is to trace a line, lines, a whole cartography. One only discovers worlds through a long, broken flight.” The British and American writers he praises “create

a new Earth; but perhaps the movement of the Earth is deterritorialization itself."<sup>30</sup> This kind of thinking seems to me to be absolutely central to the work that worlding must undertake: creating nothing less than a "new earth"—not one of territories, fixities, homogenous spaces, and immutable borders but rather a worlded world utterly deterritorialized, open, and unpredictable.

Kerouac's work is vital to Deleuze's conception of literary lines of flight, which are in turn central to understanding the subterranean in Beat writing more generally. Cultural historian David Pike has argued at some length that over the course of the past two centuries the subterranean itself has become inextricably linked to the city. And insofar as the Beat movement began as a primarily urban phenomenon—although the notion of the subterranean actually serves to displace the city as primary cultural locus—the Beat subterranean necessarily has a complex and intimate connection with *the street*. To be underground is to be under the pavement. Amiri Baraka's first collection of poems, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, written during his early "Beat period," opens with a quotidian image of the urban underground:

Lately, I've become accustomed to the way  
The ground opens up and envelopes me  
Each time I go out to walk the dog.<sup>31</sup>

One of several valences of "beat" is, of course, the notion of being beaten down, a dead beat, and so on: a valorization of what Ginsberg has called the "bottom-up vision of society."<sup>32</sup> In Baraka's poem one can detect an exaggerated quality characteristic of this kind of street talk. The speaker is, in a sense, "beater than beat"—not just down on the ground but wholly underground, swallowed up by pavement. The speaker's resignation ("I've become accustomed") is also typical of the subterranean trope in Beat writing, as, for instance, in Kaufman's "West Coast Sounds—1956":

San Fran, hipster land,  
.....  
Too many cats,  
Monterey scene cooler,  
San Franers, falling down.  
Canneries closing.  
Sardines splitting  
For Mexico.  
Me too.<sup>33</sup>



Kaufman's poem transforms the vertical movement implied by the spatial mode of the subterranean into an explicitly geographic vision of escape and exile. The resigned enclosure evoked by Baraka is carried over into Kaufman's poem through the image of the sardines, but Kaufman also manages to create a line of flight as the sardines "split" from Cannery Row, and the conditions of decay and despair generate the very means by which one may ultimately transcend those conditions.

Given the constant and easy slippage from street level to subterranean that characterizes this particular line of figuration, I do not want to be too schematic about it, but a working thesis could be put forward with the street a site of contestation and the subterranean a site of continuity. One example of this can be seen in the opening lines of Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (1965):

Johnny's in the basement  
 Mixing up the medicine  
 I'm on the pavement  
 Thinking about the government.<sup>34</sup>

The subterranean means connectivity: the basement "medicine" provides the means Ginsberg calls the "ancient heavenly connection"; while above ground, the Whitmanian vision of the interconnectedness of all things has become a hallucinated paranoia, at once vital and destructive.<sup>35</sup> Dylan's own Beat period provides numerous illustrations of this dynamic, perhaps most notably in "Desolation Row" (1965) with its unmistakably Kerouacian title.

The subterranean is both a spatialized trope and troped space: the active creation of a figurative zone of encounters and energies that Beat writing employs in an attempt to conceptualize the labyrinthine processes of aesthetic and cultural production and social transformation. But the Beat subterranean is just one iteration of underground thinking to sprout up within the broad zone of literature, philosophy, critical theory, and cultural studies over the course of the twentieth century. Several times I have used the word "rhizomic" to describe Kerouac's work; my particular understanding of the subterranean in Beat writing flows from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and their theorization of the *rhizome* in *A Thousand Plateaus* and elsewhere. Developing the principles of rhizomic multiplicity and heterogeneity, they posit the immanence of the rhizome against all forms of transcendence. "A rhizome as subterranean stem," they write in *Plateaus*, "is absolutely different from roots," which is to say nonhierarchical, asymmetrical, and without a clearly defined beginning or end. They go on to say, "A rhizome ceaselessly establishes con-

nections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances related to the arts, sciences, and social struggles." The rhizome will always be opposed to the tree-root system, which for Deleuze signifies unity, transcendence, and a fixed nature. "There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root," he and Guattari write. "There are only lines."<sup>36</sup> These lines allow the subterranean rhizomic to link up with the most diverse elements (social, political, psychic, aesthetic, etc.). And the rhizome, as opposed to the tree-root system, is centerless—a point Deleuze drives home by quoting Henry Miller's adage that grass (another image of the rhizome) always "grows between."<sup>37</sup>

If a rhizome has no center and no edge, then ideas of margins, marginality, and marginalization, always crucial when thinking about the Beats, begin to take on a new significance.<sup>38</sup> Notions of borders and transgression must also be rethought in terms of subterranean space and motion along rhizomic lines of flight. The subterranean is a figurative space where high and low, inside and outside, are but different and constantly shifting aspects of the same processes. In Sam Green and Bill Siegel's 2002 documentary on the Weather Underground—a group whose name derives, after all, from a line in Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" ("You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows": the group was also known as The Weathermen)—one former member explains that the "underground" was not so much a hiding place as it was a state of mind: a new set of behaviors and patterns of activity that allowed him and his comrades to hide in plain sight. This one member marveled at the fact that he would constantly run into people he once knew "on the outside" yet would never be noticed, as if he had simply ceased to exist.

Also revealing is Weather Underground leader Bernardine Dohrn's assertion that there were "multiple undergrounds."<sup>39</sup> Where the subterranean is concerned, the multiple always trumps the singular, and a particular movement—literary, social, or otherwise—can be meaningful and effective only insofar as it can recognize and link up with an outside-of-itself. Iterations of a subterranean Beat genealogy often circle around the notion of an alternative or submerged tradition, as often seen in Ginsberg's relentless name dropping, in Greil Marcus's "secret history" and "invisible republic" (the latter in reference to Dylan's *Basement Tapes*), or in Anne Waldman's "outrider" tradition, which, according to Waldman, comprises "a second generation away from the New American Poetry with its branches of Beat, Black Mountain, New York School and San Francisco Renaissance [and] Umbra in the mix." She describes it variously as a "hybrid," a "curious amalgamation," and an "open system,"

and Waldman's *Outrider* collection even includes a long interview on the subject of a "Rhizomic Poetics."<sup>40</sup>

In the world of cultural studies, David Pike has been especially committed to thinking about the subterranean. In a series of books on the subject, Pike explores the rise and development of the underground as a dominant topos—like the worlded word, the subterranean is both space *and* trope—in modernity. He begins with Dante, whose *descensus ad inferos* in *The Divine Comedy* transforms older traditions of "descent" (Odysseus in Hades, Christ's Harrowing) and lays the groundwork for the next seven centuries of thinking and writing about the underworld. For Pike, the subterranean really comes into its own at the turn of the nineteenth century, when new technologies turn underground space into a new frontier:

True enough, man-made spaces such as tunnels, sewers, catacombs, and mines were being excavated beneath the earth by convicts or slaves as far back as the twenty-sixth century BCE. The Western city has long been associated with the underworld in moral terms as the center of iniquity and dissolution. But it was only with the development of the nineteenth-century city, with its complex drainage systems, underground railways, utility tunnels, and storage vaults, that the urban landscape superseded the countryside of caverns and mines as the primary location of actual subterranean spaces.<sup>41</sup>

By 1800 the globe had been mapped, and the sea was waning as an engine of imagination and a sign of the radically unknown. This is precisely when the subterranean began to take over those roles, making its history intimately linked with the rise of industrial capitalism and capitalist exploitation of the earth. Pike's work maps a certain tradition of subterranean thinking, which involves on one hand a familiar privileging of the modern, the urban, in a word: the West. But, on the other hand, the subterranean also works to undermine all kinds of binaries and false dichotomies. It thus shares much in common with worlded thinking as a critical practice. Put another way, as a historical fact Pike's subterranean may be a (by)product of Western modernity, but as a critical practice subterranean thought has the potential to decenter the modern and exceed Western hegemony. The Beat Generation is usually thought of as a primarily urban phenomenon—in contrast to, say, Mother Nature's children, the hippies—but if one emphasizes instead the rhizomic, subterranean geography of the Beats' world crossings, the city (like the West) becomes just one node among many others within the transnational circuitry of Beat writing. (And the Beats' many East-West crossings are even more complex.)

For me, Pike's most suggestive and highly resonant statement about his

overall project appears in a preface, where he “argue[s] that what we need now are strategies of reading that establish unforeseen connections and associations.”<sup>42</sup> New work on the Beats should be about nothing if not establishing “unforeseen connections and associations,” and I am immediately put in mind of Wai Chee Dimock and her strong emphasis on reading practices able to conjure planetary “deep time.” The subterranean is a site of artistic production, and Beat writing consistently seeks to manifest its transformative, antihegemonic potential. But the subterranean also names a critical practice, and specifically one in which modes of apprehending the world around us (“strategies of looking”) inform what Pike calls “strategies of reading.” (The authors of *The Worlding Project*, borrowing from Michel de Certeau, prefer to speak of worlded “tactics.”) Pike distinguishes between the “view from above” and the “view from below.”<sup>43</sup> The “view from above” he characterizes as hierarchical, abstract, and homogenous, whereas the view from below—the subterranean view, Ginsberg’s “bottom-up vision of society”—is marked by messiness, materiality, and heterogeneity: all the hallmarks, in other words, of the worlded world.

The rhizomic modalities of subterranean thought often blur the boundaries between artistic production and its reception and between writing and reading, art and life. Beat writing can nonetheless be located with a very distinct literary tradition that attempts, in a sense, to write the subterranean. Within this literary assemblage the underground or subterranean is a space not of dormancy and escape but of vitality and intense creative activity. This point is well illustrated by Deleuze and Guattari in their discussion of Kafka’s unfinished story “The Burrow,” which centers on a mole-like creature whose compulsion to build an ever more elaborate underground lair far exceeds the demands of shelter and protection. Deleuze and Guattari register this activity as a kind of man-becoming-animal, explaining, “To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone. . . . Kafka’s animals . . . are distinguished only by this or that threshold, this or that vibration, by the particular underground tunnel in the rhizome or the burrow. Because these tunnels are underground intensities.”<sup>44</sup> The subterranean figures in their reading of Kafka’s story as a site of infinite possibilities, where one may be receptive to the most disparate energies and influences. The active solitude of the burrow is also a stand-in for the act of writing itself, and seen in this light Kafka’s story becomes an allegory of the creative process. But what kind of process is being de-

scribed here? The burrow, with its proliferation of tunnels running in every direction, is an image of the centerless rhizome. It is true that there are main tunnels and auxiliary ones, but the burrow-creature's behavior suggests a nonhierarchical conception of its underground lair. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the tunnels that lead nowhere are actually the most interesting and potentially the most instructive. Also important is the suggestion throughout the story that there are other burrows made by other creatures (to say nowhere of the innumerable "small fry" that share the protagonist's burrow). The subterranean always holds the promise of connectivity and community, and in Deleuze and Guattari's vision the burrow-rhizome is itself multiple and can potentially link up with other burrows, other multiplicities.

Looking to "The Burrow" to characterize the rhizomic assemblages of subterranean space, one could make the claim that, rather than thematizing actual space, Kafka's story *actualizes* a purely conceptual space. The burrow, like the rhizome, like the subterranean, like worlding, exists only in its active creation. This is why the burrow-maker must continually and obsessively build new passageways; he ties his own survival to the necessity to keep building at all costs. Similarly, the subterranean will always imply an active process of assemblage (a praxis, a reading practice, artistic creation, and so on). In *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's Underground Man describes a similar undertaking as that of the burrow-maker. At one point, in a fit of benevolence, he declares, "I agree—man is primarily a creative animal, condemned . . . to be continually and eternally building roads for himself, leading *somewhere, no matter where*. . . . The main thing isn't where it leads, but just that it lead."<sup>45</sup> This will to create through self-effacement is also reminiscent of the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who, at the beginning of the novel, has escaped a riot by falling down a manhole and seeks lasting refuge below the streets of Harlem. The subterranean sites of Ellison's novel, like those of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, can be read as major precursors to the Beat subterranean. The Invisible Man, moreover, does not merely live underground but, as Ellison writes, "in a border area," a liminal space aligned with receptivity and productive transgression.<sup>46</sup>

Early champions of Ellison's work may have lauded the author for developing an American counterpart to the European existentialist tradition (the Invisible Man as isolated modern subject), but we can instead read the novel's opening scene as recognizing the potential of the subterranean as a space of affirmation and, above all, connectivity. I would argue that photographer Jeff Wall's large-format piece *After "Invisible Man"* by

*Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, in which the artist stages the protagonist's underground abode, offers just such a reading. The Invisible Man sits in his undershirt off to the side with his back turned to the camera; it is evident that subterranean space itself is the subject of Wall's photograph. In this way, *Invisible Man* is written in, of, and by the underground. The most striking aspect of Wall's photograph, however, are the "1,369 lights" that line the ceiling.<sup>47</sup> The viewer's gaze is drawn to the circuitry of the subterranean, and one is reminded of Ginsberg and his "bottom-up vision of society," which, in all its decrepitude, offers the best vantage on potential connections and possibilities. The obsessive wiring of these lights is analogous to the manic building of Kafka's burrow-maker or the ferocious scribblings of Dostoevsky's Underground Man.

The subterranean and the world are two aspects of the very same modes and processes, a paradoxical doubling where *going out* is *going in* and vice versa. These centripetal-centrifugal forces make it so that Kerouac's Mexico, for instance, leads both to Dean's telescopic "It's the world!" and to Kerouac's intensely introspective period of writing and dharma study there. The latter also entailed the hyperlocal Joycean wanderings through Mexico City recorded in *Tristessa*. Kerouac is a disciple of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who exhorts his would-be followers to "*remain true to the earth*," telling them, "To blaspheme the earth is now the dreadfulest sin, and to rate the heart of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth!"<sup>48</sup> The subterranean is what grounds worlded thought and keeps its telescopic impulse to transcend firmly rooted in the "meaning of the earth." The earthbound immanence of Gary Snyder's planetary *ecos/oikos*, like Philip Lamantia's "house in the cracks of the pavement," like Kerouac's subterranean topographies, are characteristically Beat appeals to a worlded world.<sup>49</sup> They situate Beat writing within a definable tradition of subterranean writing through Ellison, Kafka, and Dostoevsky, as well as the looser cultural or ideological nexus described by Pike. The Beat subterranean compels a materialist reading practice that privileges the rootedness of the near-at-hand.

### *Kerouac's Worlded Itineraries*

As an image of worlded multiplicity and Pike's "unforeseen connections," the Beat subterranean is a major key to understanding Beat transnationalism, and no one makes this more apparent than Kerouac. His "domestic" novels such as *Big Sur* and *The Subterraneans* are shaped by their subterranean spaces, and so too are the string of books including

*Mexico City Blues* and *Tristessa*—whose immediate geographic reference is Mexico—and *Lonesome Traveler* and *Desolation Angels*, two volumes of travel writing, in a sense, which also deal with Kerouac's experiences abroad (most notably in Mexico and Morocco). For the French and French Canadian Kerouac, the places to look are *Dr. Sax* and the late *Satori in Paris*. In these works, Kerouac consistently presents his experiences abroad in the mode of the subterranean. While living in Mexico City, for example, in the fall of 1956, Kerouac received a visit from Ginsberg, Corso, and Ginsberg's lover Peter Orlovsky. As he describes it in *Desolation Angels*, they visit the pyramids at Teotihuacán but take a greater interest in the large ant mounds scattered around the site. Kerouac sets up a clear analogy between the anthills and the pyramids, musing, "While the Teo[tihuacán] priests goofed up there these ants were just beginning to dig a real underground super market" (272). With this seemingly offhand statement, Kerouac neatly locates the subterranean as an alternative, antihegemonic space. The power dynamic between the "Teo priests" on high and the ants down below resonates with Burroughs's own fascination with the priestly caste (of the Maya, in Burroughs's case) as insidious control agents.<sup>50</sup> Neither Burroughs nor Kerouac presents pre-Columbian Mesoamerican society as idyllic or romanticized; they are both attuned to the power differentials—made visible by their soaring temples but also suggesting their hidden obverse: the underground pathways of the ants—that shaped those cultures and still provide insight into the workings of control and authority in the present day.

Given the intense connectivity, simultaneity, and geographic syncretism of the subterranean, Kerouac's many depictions of the "fellaheen world" are incredibly overdetermined, to be sure. In *Tristessa*—Kerouac's account of his tormented love for Esperanza Villanueva, a Mexico City morphine addict and acquaintance of Burroughs's friend Bill Garver, the legendary junky familiar to readers of Burroughs as Bill Gains—the title character is made to carry an awful lot of symbolic and ideological weight. A devout Catholic, she at times represents the Virgin Mary (and therefore conjures memories of the author's Catholic upbringing in Lowell). But during this mid-1950s period of Kerouac's intense spiritual questing, Catholicism is never far from Buddhism.<sup>51</sup> At one point in *Tristessa*, he writes of "the sweep of the Mexican plateau away from the Moon—living but to die, the sad song of it I hear sometimes on my roof in the Tejado district, rooftop cell, with candles, waiting for my Nirvana or my *Tristessa*—neither come."<sup>52</sup> Kerouac envisions himself a Buddhist monk in his "rooftop cell," a place of introspection but also of vast pano-

ramas that he synesthetically *hears* in his cloistered solitude. This sensory assemblage parallels the spiritual, geographic, and linguistic assemblages that are often the fruit of Kerouac's subterranean reveries.

At other moments in *Tristessa*, Kerouac's muse is made to stand in for the whole of his now-gendered worldwide fellaheen, as when he calls her "Fellaheena" (24). These over-the-top moments are also where Kerouac maximally sets language on an expressive line of flight through characteristic wordplay that traces a worlded itinerary. A few pages after the "Fellaheena" remark, he writes, "The wild way Tristessa stands legs spread in the middle of the room to explain something, like a junkey on a corner in Harlem or anyplace, Cairo, Bang Bombayo and the whole Fella Ollah Lot from Tip of Bermudy to wings of albatross ledge befeathering the Arctic Coastline, only the poison they serve out of Eskimo Gloopgloo seals and eagles of Greenland, ain't as bad as that German Civilization morphine she (an Indian) is forced to subdue and die to, in her native earth" (28). If *Mexico City Blues* had been written as prose poems, this could be a fine example. "Cairo, Bang Bombayo and the whole Fella Ollah Lot" evokes the language of Kerouac's Mexico poems, which he was actively composing during the 1955–56 *Tristessa* period. His muse has now become an image of transnational hipsterdom and placed within an even larger spatiotemporal network stretching from the tropics to the arctic with echoes of a Spenglerian world history that pits Western civilization against indigenous cultures. And Tristessa's "native earth" is echoed in *Lonesome Traveler* by Kerouac's refrain: "The earth is an Indian thing" (22–23).

Like in the poems of *Mexico City Blues*, the linguistic assemblages of Kerouac's prose in *Tristessa* give rise to other kinds of combinations. Lighting a cigarette with a votive candle in Tristessa's squalid kitchen, he says in his nonstandard *joual*, "I make a little French prayer: 'Excuse *mué ma* 'Dame'—making emphasis on *Dame* because of Damema the Mother of Buddhas" (30). Kerouac's own Memère is a felt presence throughout the novella. High on morphine one night, he "see[s] the brown corners of the dream house and remember[s] my mother's dark kitchen long ago on cold streets in the other part of the same dream as this cold present kitchen with its drip-pots and horrors of Indian Mexico City" (35), and before that he thinks, "I wish my relatives from Lowell were here to see how people and animals live in Mexico" (29). In these lines there is the assumption of solidarity grounded in a shared Catholic faith and a shared positionality between the Indians of Mexico and the French Canadians of New England. After he says good-bye to Tristessa and her roommate, Cruz, following a long night of booze and drugs, he watches "the two



ladies go down the sidewalk slowly, the way Mexican women aye French Canadian women go to church in the morning” (83).

The knotted relationship between faith, language, identity, and affiliation is poignantly expressed in the final chapter of *Desolation Angels*, which describes that unlikely trip Kerouac made with his mother to Mexico. Not long after crossing the border, they visit a local church and witness a penitent kneeling with arms outstretched, inspiring this exchange between Ti Jean (Kerouac) and Memère:

“O Ti Jean, what’s he done that he’s so sad for? I cant believe that old man has ever done anything really bad!”

“He’s a *penitente*,” I tell her in French. “He’s a sinner and he doesnt want God to forget him.”

“*Pauvre bonhomme!*” and I see a woman turn and look at Ma thinking she said “*Pobrecito*” which is exactly what she said anyway.” (383)

After his mother’s epiphany in the church, a recognition of her fellow Catholics, the author feels confident saying, “Now she understood Mexico and why I had come there so often even tho I’d get sick of dysentery or lose weight or get pale. ‘*C’est du monde qu’il on du coeur,*’ she whispered, ‘these are people who have *heart!*’” (384). (He responds, “*Oui.*”) This deep sense of shared identities and values across languages and cultures lies at the heart of Kerouac’s subterranean world-visions. Granted, these identifications are often made all too easily—as when he baldly states in *Visions of Cody*, “I love the Indian, I am an Indian”—but are never made in bad faith.<sup>53</sup>

That is to say, what could be an essentializing move on Kerouac’s part, one that elides cultural and historical differences in the name of a world brother- and sisterhood of the fellahin, has more to do with a shared position relative to a sociopolitical dominant. This is how Kerouac the French Canadian growing up in Lowell (who claimed Iroquois ancestry on his mother’s side) can manage to feel a connection with the indigenous and marginalized from Mexico to Morocco. Not surprisingly, the core of this felt connection for Kerouac is always about linguistic difference. Still in Mexico with Memère, the conversation continues:

Ma said to me: “They’re afraid to talk?”

“They dont know what to do. They never meet anybody. They come from the desert. They dont even speak Spanish just Indian.”<sup>54</sup>

The variegated linguistic milieux he seems to find everywhere in his travels are precisely what bind Kerouac to the places he visits. For the very same

reason, when Ginsberg and company visit him in Mexico, he expresses a particularly strong fellow feeling for Gregory Corso. Kerouac describes Corso in the act of writing: "You can actually *hear* the poem for the first and last time in the world. The scratchings sound just like Raphael [Corso]'s yellings, with the same rhythm of expostulation and the bombast booms of complaint. But in the scratchety scratch you also hear the somehow miraculous making of words into English from the head of an Italian who never spoke English in the Lower East Side till he was seven." Kerouac clearly sympathizes with Corso on account of their analogous linguistic histories as outsiders in the English language, which is perhaps why he says a few pages earlier, "Raphael Urso I liked quite well, too, in spite or perhaps because of a previous New York hassle over a subterranean girl, as I say"—referring to their completing affections for Alene Lee, or Mardou Fox, when Kerouac dramatizes the conflict in *The Subterraneans*.<sup>55</sup> Corso's "miraculous making of words into English" is what Deleuze and Guattari would call the "becoming-minor" of English, and the description of Corso could apply equally to Kerouac himself. Kerouac's linguistic exile proved to be immensely productive, and Melehy and Adams both name it as a major source of his strength and originality as a writer.

In *Lonesome Traveler*, a collection of travel essays published in 1960 and clearly attempting to capitalize on the fame and notoriety of *On the Road*, which was published three years earlier, Kerouac includes a brief "Author's Introduction" (presumably at his publisher's request). It fleshes out categories like "EDUCATION," "PRINCIPAL OCCUPATIONS AND/OR JOBS," and "INTERESTS," and it reads like the liner notes to an early Dylan album, ending with what could also be a précis for his entire career. In response to "PLEASE GIVE A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE BOOK, ITS SCOPE AND PURPOSE AS YOU SEE THEM," Kerouac writes,

*Lonesome Traveler* is a collection of published and unpublished pieces connected together because they have a common theme: Traveling.

The travels cover the United States from the south to the east coast to the west coast to the far northwest, cover Mexico, Morocco Africa, Paris, London, both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans at sea in ships, and various interesting people and cities therein included.

Railroad work, sea work, mysticism, mountain work, lasciviousness, solipsism, self-indulgence, bullfights, drugs, churches, art museums, cities of streets, a mishmash of life as lived by an independent educated penniless rake going anywhere.

Its scope and purpose is simply poetry, or, natural description. (vi)

Kerouac's "SHORT DESCRIPTION" is a thoroughly Beat assemblage. It begins with a single theme, "traveling," but the fully wrought sentences elucidating it quickly succumb to the familiar parataxis and explode into a classic Beat litany, including "Railroad work, sea work, mysticism." With the inclusion of a few more themes, namely history (personal and otherwise), literature, and *language*, one would have, complete, Kerouac's thematic canon, the central and persistent preoccupations of his oeuvre.

His canny, self-conscious introduction to *Lonesome Traveler* is a reminder that Kerouac's prose always entails an act of condensation, a process a distillation, whereas his poetry—and especially in *Mexico City Blues*, the one volume of poems to be published during the author's lifetime—is all expansive: a world-dreaming. Taken as a whole, the "242 choruses" of *Mexico City Blues* spotlight Kerouac's spatial practices and world-making tactics (with *Tristessa* and the relevant sections of *Lonesome Traveler* and *Desolation Angels* serving as a useful prose counterpoints). James Jones counts the Mexico City poems among Kerouac's most significant accomplishments as a writer. Jones's *Map of Mexico City Blues* points to the topographic nature of the poems, although his map is chiefly a figurative one, not concerned with geography per se.<sup>56</sup> His study is important because critics and fans alike have tended to overlook Kerouac's poetry or regard his poetic works as mere ephemera that do not quite stack up against the novels. But Kerouac wrote a great deal of poetry and prepared several manuscripts that were published posthumously. Those detailing his travels domestically and abroad include *Scattered Poems* (1971), *Pomes All Sizes* (1992), and *Book of Sketches* (2006); these and other volumes amount to a substantial body of poetic output. In fact, Kerouac's peers, notably Ginsberg and Michael McClure, have spoken of him as a poet first and foremost. (His famous "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" is really a *poetics*.) McClure has said that he considers Kerouac's long poem "Sea: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur" one of the most profound and instructive pieces Kerouac ever wrote. Robert Duncan was impressed by Kerouac's "Belief and Technique in Spontaneous Prose," which he found tacked to the wall of Ginsberg's San Francisco apartment. (Duncan's "open field poetics" is a rhizomic compositional approach par excellence.) Kerouac's "manifesto" urges the poet to be "Submissive to everything, open, listening" and "In tranced fixation." Michael Davidson has even argued that Kerouac's poetics "has some affinities" with Jack Spicer's conception of poetry as "dictation." Both Spicer and Kerouac will refer to William Butler Yeats's "trance writing" as an important precedent.<sup>57</sup> The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, founded in 1974

at the Naropa Institute, is further testament to the enduring status of Kerouac's poetry among his peers.

Of the several volumes of Kerouac's poetry now in print, *Mexico City Blues* still possesses the most clarity of purpose and vision. He wrote its choruses in 1955 while living in his "rooftop cell" on calle Orizaba, and the collection was put out by Grove Press four years later, among the welter of novels published in the wake of *On the Road*. The most basic connotation of the Beat subterranean has to do with the sheer invisibility and out-of-sightness of Kerouac and his comrades during the long incubation of the Beat movement. Thinking about Ginsberg's charming dedication to his friends in *Howl*: his nod to Kerouac and the "eleven books written in half the number of years (1951-1956) . . . published in heaven," alas, I still wonder what could have sustained these efforts if not some deep intuition of the subterranean's obscure potentiality. The Mexico City poems were written from the depths of Kerouac's despair following his largely failed first novel and his inability to get *On the Road* published. At the time, Kerouac was writing mostly for his friends; in particular, he was preparing his elaborate notes for Ginsberg on Buddhism that would later be published as *Some of the Dharma*. Kerouac's Buddhist period (which is also to say his Catholic period), then, forms the immediate context of *Mexico City Blues*. What often gets read as Kerouac's pervasive nihilism or existentialism must be understood in terms of Kerouac's particular devotion to the Diamond Sutra, which holds that "all that has a form is illusive and unreal."

What makes *Mexico City Blues* so exemplary of worlded Beat writing is that the poems are firmly rooted in their place and time yet can expand to include the most wide-ranging influences and energies. Buddha and Christ, morphine and marijuana, "ships and railroads and novels" all exist on what Deleuze would call a single, and singular, plane of immanence.<sup>58</sup> Geography and thematics constantly overlap one another, making the kind of worlded mapping Kerouac undertakes in the poems far more complex as a result. Even the relatively straightforward image of Charlie Parker—the subject of a run of choruses late in the book—requires us to consider more than one location (Harlem) or one theme (narcotic self-negation) for the work to become legible. Parker, reincarnated as a Buddhist saint, is also the figure of the Beat poet: in this case, Kerouac himself. In his "NOTE" to *Mexico City Blues*, the author writes, "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday. I take 242 choruses; my ideas vary and sometimes roll from chorus to chorus or from halfway through a chorus to halfway

into the next.”<sup>59</sup> The poems spin a web that takes in a vast geography, as they alternately “Commen[t] on the Great Cities / of the World” (9), describe “Mysterious Red Rivers of the North— / Obi Ubang African Montanas” of “red earth” (8), and imagine “Arabies of hot / meaning” (113). And in the stillness of their nomadic wanderings, the poems, with their multivalent language games, remain deeply informed by the author’s ethnolinguistic background.

*Mexico City Blues*—its vast canvas coterminous with the world itself—is unthinkable in the absence of Kerouac’s pocket-sized notebook; the form of the poems is therefore well worth noting. By this time, Kerouac had begun carrying around pocket-sized notebooks to fill with thoughts and observations that would inevitably become the seeds of longer compositions. But with the Mexico City poems, the notebook becomes a sort of liberating constraint in that he must confine each poem to a single small page.<sup>60</sup> The question, then, is *how to fit the world onto the page*. The “3rd Chorus,” to take one salient example, suggests its own tactics:

Describe fires in riverbottom  
 sand, and the cooking;  
 the cooking of hot dogs  
 spitted in whittled sticks  
 over flames of woodfire  
 with grease dropping in smoke  
 to brown and blacken  
     the salty hotdogs,  
     and the wine,  
     and the work on the railroad.

\$275,000,000,000.00 in debt  
     says the Government  
 Two hundred and seventy five billion  
     dollars in debt  
 Like Unending  
     Heaven  
 And Unnumbered Sentient Beings  
     Who will be admitted—  
     Not-Numerable—  
 To the new Pair of Shoes  
 Of White Guru Fleece  
     O j o !  
 The Purple Paradise. (3)

The opening line, “Describe fires in riverbottom,” is curious, as if Kerouac must gear himself up to write the poem. It sets out a goal for the poem, but, more pointedly, it reminds the poet to be as specific as possible, at least at the outset. The poem moves outward from the specificity of the first stanza, which describes a fairly typical Beat scene—with its transient campfire, its “wine” and “work on the railroad”—to the infinities of the second stanza, as it somewhat jarringly compares the immensity of the national debt to a Buddhist infinity of “Unnumbered Sentient Beings.” The Buddhism that might seem out of place here will in fact become a major thread of the Mexico City poems, for it was in Catholic Mexico that Kerouac embarked on his most intensive and sustained study of Buddhist scripture. The “O j o !” of the penultimate line is similarly curious. The Spanish used by Kerouac throughout is hardly correct, colored as it is by English and by Kerouac’s native French, but in this poem, “O j o !” is not a substantive so much as an interjection or exclamation (as in “Aha!”), and the strange typography of the word, which corresponds to its meaning in Spanish, makes it look rather like a face with two o’s for eyes and a hooked j nose. Moreover, it sets up the final line in the “5th Chorus”: “If you know what I / p a l a b r a” (5), and, together with its “Purple Paradise,” it will be echoed in the much later “155th Chorus,” when it becomes the more narcotic “Rosy / of Purple O Gate / O J O” (155). In all the ways just described, the language of the poems remains quite playful and is one of the best examples of place as transformative of language. Just as Dean was free to apprehend “the world” in Mexico, Kerouac’s time in Mexico liberated his prosody to a remarkable degree. The language of the Mexico City poems is *deterritorialized* to a greater extent than in any of Kerouac’s novels, and the generative potential of their linguistic *deformations* is matched only by the vastness and complexity of their thematic and geographic imaginings.

The notebook form implies a set of tactics in the sense of Michel de Certeau’s “strategies–tactics” distinction. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau opposes strategies—hierarchical, top-down, totalizing—and tactics, which involve fleeting alliances, unexpected juxtapositions, and what he calls “making do.” Certeau makes a corresponding distinction between “place” (*lieu*) and “space” (*espace*). Place (as in “everything in its proper place”) is static, organized from above and fixed by the powers that be, while space, according to Certeau, “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space

occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function as a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.”<sup>61</sup> Certeau’s formulations contain clear echoes of the immanence of the Deleuzian rhizome and also point the way forward to transnationalism as worlding, where worlding is always *to world, to make a world*: to make “the world-horizon come near and become local and informed, situated, instantiated.”<sup>62</sup> Kerouac’s poetry in *Mexico City Blues* operates squarely within the realm of tactics and seeks always to “actuate” space, to create a world through its disparate juxtapositions, “vectors,” “velocities,” and “variables.” And considering that, for Certeau, “Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice,” he offers yet another way to theorize worlded Beat writing.<sup>63</sup>

Kerouac’s language (his own “miracle of making words into English”) catalyzes new linguistic, spiritual, and geographic assemblages and creates composite landscapes that bring the worlded world into view. Adams’s continent is one such assemblage: Kerouac uses the term “North America” twice in the “Fellaheen Mexico” section of *Lonesome Traveler*—both times to suggest a kind of pre-Columbian unity shattered by colonialism—and twice more in *Tristessa*. The latter perhaps contains his most surprising use of the concept of North America. In a poignant moment near the end of Kerouac’s novella, the narrator describes himself and two companions as “three men, from three different nations, in the yellow morning of black shawls” (84). Bull Gaines (Garver) and “el Indio” are from the United States and Mexico, respectively, which means by process of elimination that Kerouac implicitly identifies himself here not as American but as Canadian. Throughout *Tristessa*, he has already aligned himself with Catholic Mexico and its indigenous “fellaheen.” Now, he seems to invoke the continent as a potentially transgressive space that exceeds or evades Western or U.S. hegemony, going so far as to disavow his U.S. origins in the name of a more heterogeneous, nomadic, and diasporic becoming-other (Canadian, Quebecois, Mexican, Indian).

The continent—like the hemisphere, the Pacific Rim, and other paradigms of the transnational—is thus a useful unit of analysis, but when it comes to Beat writing, and maybe literary production in general, once one moves beyond national borders, nothing less than the world itself will do. This is certainly the case with Kerouac, and his travels in Mexico need to be viewed alongside his travels elsewhere in the world, even if these latter were considerably less extensive. Kerouac’s brief stay in Tangier with Burroughs in the spring of 1957 is generally regarded as a missed opportunity, his only real accomplishment that he began typing a clean

copy of the *Naked Lunch* manuscript. (No small feat. He also played a role in naming the book; when Ginsberg misread the words “naked lust” as “naked lunch,” Kerouac suggested it should be the title.)<sup>64</sup> Tangier will continue to be a major location in subsequent chapters; Ted Joans and Philip Lamantia, in addition to Burroughs and Brion Gysin, all spent time in Morocco. But Kerouac’s apparent disinterest in Tangier, and his acute homesickness, are lamented and taken as signs of a more general lack of interest in the world at large—by which I mean the world of politics and social change, most pressingly in Morocco: decolonization and legacies of colonialism. Kerouac, who visited Tangier just following Moroccan independence, needed quite a bit of reassurance from Burroughs that it was in fact safe to travel there. He may have stayed only six weeks or so, but Kerouac’s overall response to Tangier, at least as depicted in his two major statements about Morocco in *Lonesome Traveler* and *Desolation Angels*, is complex and curious and worth a closer look.

One of the first things he notices, even before disembarking from the ocean liner that brought him to Tangier, is a group of Moroccan fishermen plying Tangier Bay: “some with red fezzes but red fezzes like you never thought they’d be real fezzes with wow grease and creases and dust on them, real red fezzes of real life in real Africa.”<sup>65</sup> Kerouac clearly relishes poetizing with the repeated word “fezzes,” which evokes the buzzing activity of the port, but, above all, in my reading, those fezzes call to the narrator’s attention the everyday, lived, material existence of the Moroccans. He takes what could be a hollow, stereotyped image of Morocco, the “exotic” red fez, and instead makes it real and tangible and near at hand. It thus bears a more hopeful metonymic relationship to the Moroccan people and to “real Africa.” Granted, this passage does keep Morocco and Moroccans at a certain remove—safely, one might say imperially, viewed from the deck of the oceanliner—but given Kerouac’s tendency to indulge in the other extreme of intimacy and identification, I find the distancing to be salutary, and the materiality of Kerouac’s first vision of Tangier sets the stage for a more nuanced appreciation of Morocco than most critics have allowed.

In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, Kerouac describes his stay with Burroughs as downright idyllic: “Together we take long walks over the green hills in back of the Casbah and watch the fantastic sunsets over Moroccan fields.”<sup>66</sup> Kerouac reads quietly while Burroughs types away at his “endless novel” (as Ginsberg memorably called it in the *Howl* dedication), the sound of clacking keys punctuated with occasional howls of laughter from Burroughs at one of his routines. It is only after an “opium



overdose” sends him horrors and “snarling dreary thoughts about all Africa, all Europe, the world” that he begins to pine for “Wheaties by a pine breeze kitchen window in America, that is, I guess a vision of my childhood in America.”<sup>67</sup> His sudden desire to leave Tangier fits into a grand narrative within Kerouac’s work (in the passage just quoted he specifically links it to a literary, expatriate tradition), which he has been developing since *The Town and the City* and is given major treatment in *Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur* and *The Subterraneans*, and now in *Desolation Angels*, of constantly feeling torn between the quiet life (with his mother, his writing, his past) and the high life. Kerouac’s crisis, it turns out, has less to do with disliking Tangier and more to do with an *idée fixe* that trails him like a ghost.

Even so, when Kerouac leaves Tangier it is with some regret. He remarks in *Lonesome Traveler*: “I suddenly felt sorry that I had already bought my boat ticket to Marseille and was leaving Tangier” (150). He recognizes that his time in Morocco was not without revelations—often having to do with his “worldwide fellaheen,” yes, but also of a more political kind. (Morocco’s politics and the larger story of decolonization in Africa and around the world will come to the fore in later chapters.) Burroughs’s attitudes, for example, toward Moroccan independence were equivocal to say the least, although more legible than generally reckoned. Kerouac’s writing generally disregards overtly political questions altogether, but Burroughs must have rubbed off on Kerouac in Tangier. In *Desolation Angels* he describes a volatile situation only exacerbated by the persistence of European authorities in the former International Zone:

We saw a riot in the Zoco Grande that flared up over an argument between Spanish cops and Moroccan soldiers. Bull [Burroughs] was there with us. All of a sudden a seething yelling mass of cops and soldiers and robed oldsters and bluejeaned hoodlums came piling up the alley from wall to wall, we all turned and ran. I myself ran alone down one particular alley accompanied by two Arab boys of ten who laughed with me as we ran. . . . “Riots every day,” said Bull proudly. (357)

This experience leads him to make the following observation:

One look at the officials in the American Consulate where we went for dreary paper routines was enough to make you realize what was wrong with American “diplomacy” throughout the Fellaheen world. . . . Why didnt the American consul ever walk into the urchin hall where Mohammed Mayé sat smoking? or squat in behind empty buildings with old Arabs

who talked with their hands? or *any* thing? Instead it's all private limousines, hotel restaurants, parties in the suburbs, an endless phoney rejection in the name of "democracy" of all that's pith and moment of every land. (357-58)

The "dreary paper *routines*" would have indicated Burroughs's presence in these lines, even if the author hadn't named him. Kerouac perceives the tension in Tangier as a struggle between hip and square. The diplomats in their "neckties" would never deign to visit such "beat" spaces as "urchin halls" or "empty buildings." Though he may couch the situation in these coded terms, what Kerouac describes here are postcolonial legacies of deprivation and alienation enforced by a neoimperial power structure ("the American Consulate," "the Spanish cops"). The worlded perspective on display in this last passage offers the barest glimpse of a postcolonial consciousness in Kerouac's oeuvre; it hints, finally, at the fruitfulness of a subterranean approach to Beat Generation writing that begins to unearth its hidden connections and concerns.