ABSTRACT

While Jack Kerouac is most often associated with his novel, *On the Road*, and the subsequent allegations of hedonism and wanton rebellion that this text elicited from media outlets, I aim to complicate understandings of Jack Kerouac’s writings and ideas through a rare reading of his poems, which are often seen as secondary to his more popular prose. Specifically, I will discuss two poetic series, the urban *San Francisco Blues* and the mountainous *Desolation Blues*, written in two divergent geographical locations. On the surface, these poetic series reinforce traditional narratives that position Kerouac as a Romantic soul trapped in the modern city and yearning for escape. A close reading of the poems, however, will reveal a compassionate, complicated, and even contradictory Kerouac who is, above all, a writer.

INDEX WORDS: Kerouac, Beat Generation, Ginsberg, counter-culture, multiculturalism, 1950s, San Francisco, Joyce Johnson, Desolation Blues
TO A DIFFERENT BEAT: THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF JACK KEROUAC

by

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For Jack, in an exchange of honors.
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INTRODUCTION

In a speech sponsored by Brandeis University and given at Hunter College in November 1958 to answer the question, “Is there a Beat Generation?” Jack Kerouac swoons, “who knows but the Universe is one vast sea of compassion really” (Kerouac “Is there a Beat Generation?”). Or, in 1957, on an episode of the Steve Allen show, when asked to describe the Beat Generation in one word, Kerouac answers, “sympathetic” (What Happened to Kerouac?). Or, in the last article he ever wrote, published in the Los Angeles Times on October 29, 1969, fully one week after his death, he admits that he could, on account of having written “a matter-of-fact account of a true adventure on the road,” easily snake into the

‘top echelons’ of American society, all sleeked up, and try to forget the ships’ crews of World War II who grew beards and long haircuts till a mission was finished, or of GI Joe in the foxholes, the ‘slovenly appearance’ of men and women in 1930s breadlines. (“After Me” 1)

Or, on October 18, 1960, Kerouac walked into the garage of his Florida home to pray to God for “knowledge of why I’m on earth and what to write.” The answer: “sent down to preach kindness (like many others) but with my ART which is given to me liberally for great preaching!” (Kerouac, Box 57, Envelope 7).

Slightly on a different page, postmodern writer Thomas Pynchon (1984) writes of the 1950s shift in the literary hierarchy:

We were encouraged from many directions – Kerouac and the Beat writers, the diction of Saul Bellow in The Adventures of Augie March, emerging voices like those of Herbert Gold and Philip Roth – to see how at least two very distinct kinds of English could be allowed in fiction to coexist. Allowed! It was actually OK to write like this! Who knew? (6 – 7)
Or, in a journal entry dated December 12, 1957, Kerouac defines his passion for language: “Thinking: I’m not a romantic surrealist poet. I’m a linguistic poet. I’m interested in sounds, the “k” in keltic languages, the “A’s” and soft consonants of Latin languages, the “I”s and “U”s of Japanese, the TL’s” and Cs of Aztec, what do I care about surrealism?” (Kerouac, Box 55, Envelope 7).

Such central aspects of Kerouac’s person, including his philosophy of compassion and his lingual poetics as elucidated in the preceding passages, often ride backseat to the popular and rabblerousing image of Kerouac as the “James Dean of the typewriter” (Turner 13) and the predecessor for the “marijuana, amphetamines, hallucinogenics, homosexual experimentation, orgies, alcoholism, drug busts, charges of obscenity, meditation, religious engagement” that permeated the 1960s and 1970s (21). Having written a text, *On the Road* (1957), that highlighted many of those facets of life and experience that post-war American popular culture tried to hide in the space between Lucy and Ricky’s separated single beds, Kerouac was understandably and promptly labeled as a counter-cultural icon, part and parcel of the “drug-taking, auto-racing, poetry-chanting, bop-digging, zen-squatting crew” (Krim xxi). The Beat Generation that he helped name and found, along with writers like Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, William Burroughs, Diane di Prima, Hettie and Leroi Jones, and many more, nearly overnight became associated with the unconventional, the deviant, and sometimes even with the diseased (as demonstrated in the many personal testimonies of shock therapy or institutionalization that could be found in any Beat gathering). As critic James Jones writes, Kerouac “wanted simply to rise to a kind of romantic status as a gentleman writer, but […] found different conditions of fame set by the media” (3).

Jones’s insight is reinforced during an interview Kerouac gave to Radio Canada on March 7, 1967. Throughout the interview, Kerouac is confronted with questions and comments such as, “What is the Beat Generation for you,” and “You say the name is not important yet you refuse to be called a Beatnik. You are not a Beatnik.” In his responses, Kerouac attempts to emphasize his writing, pointing out that the central Beat movement was at its inception, “a
literary movement, a poetic movement,” but the conversation consistently reverts to the differences among bohemians, beatniks, and Beats. Though it can accurately be said that Kerouac was active in constructing the Beat Generation category – he was, after all, the one who founded the term and concept that first entered the common lexicon through John Clellon Holmes’s article, “This is the Beat Generation,” (Holmes 1952) – his vision was eventually usurped and distorted in the public realm, in the same way that rebellions such as rock-and-roll and James Dean were vacuumed into and antisepticised by the mainstream. But Kerouac continued to assert the nature of the Beat Generation as he imagined it, and in the last question of the Radio Canada interview, when asked, “What do you think of yourself,” Kerouac returns to his literary core. He initially replies, “I’m sick of myself,” and then continues, “Well, I know I’m a good writer. A great writer. I’m not a courageous man. But one thing I know how to do is to write stories. That’s all” (YouTube Radio Canada).

Nevertheless, despite Kerouac’s insistence that he is first and foremost a writer, “No American author has received such intense interest from biographers in such a short period of time,” written about and analyzed in texts that “focus primarily on validating Kerouac’s fiction by demonstrating its basis in autobiography” (Jones 2). Such biographical readings inevitably reduce Kerouac’s artistry, bypassing important elements and complexities in his work for the sake of correlating his writings with what is construed as Beat ideology or with what is known of Kerouac’s personal life. Premiere Beat Generation scholar, John Tytell, emphasized to me that with the exception of the scholarship of Joyce Johnson and Ann Douglas, “most of the writing [on Kerouac] has not been very perceptive.” While there certainly do exist insightful criticisms, such as Douglas Malcolm’s (1999) critique of Kerouac’s appropriation of jazz idioms, or the even more recent collection of essays edited by Jennie Skerl, Reconstructing the Beats (2004), that move beyond conventional Beat scholarship, much of what is currently written about Kerouac remains biographical, pop cultural and imposes upon him a political orientation that is not grounded in his writing but in his association with a specific historical moment and way of life. Works of this nature include Stephen Turner’s engaging biography, Angelheaded Hipster
This Master’s Thesis, on the other hand, wishes to instigate a more “perceptive” discussion of Kerouac’s literary merits. Rather than enter his literature with preconceived notions regarding his counter-cultural position and beliefs, I will instead begin with the texts, specifically two different poetic series written in two divergent geographical locations in the western United States, *San Francisco Blues*, written in 1954 while Kerouac lived in a hotel in San Francisco’s Skid Row, and *Desolation Blues*, written in 1956 while he spent two months isolated atop Desolation Peak in Mount Baker National Forest as a fire lookout. I will then use these close readings to guide a discussion and interpretation of Kerouac’s cultural location as revealed (if at all) in or through the texts.

This project is unique not only in its privileging of Kerouac’s art over his legend, but also in its exploration of Kerouac’s poetry, a largely neglected portion of his oeuvre. Scholars are aware of the poetry, of course, and do turn to it to substantiate their thematic arguments, but overall, the various poetic series do not receive nearly as much critical scholarly attention as do certain of the prose novels, such as *On the Road* (1957) or *The Subterraneans* (1958). Examples of texts that make evidentiary use of Kerouac’s poetry include John Suiter’s helpful history of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Kerouac’s interests in and travels through Buddhist, *Poets on the Peak* (2002) and Ed Adler’s innovative and interesting collection of Kerouac’s artworks, *Departed Angels: The Lost Paintings* (2004). These works analyze certain verses from various poems to help elucidate Kerouac’s Buddhist education and his visual expressions, respectively, but do not explore any of the poems in their own right. Kerouac’s poems are written in and best read in series, each poem like a note of a song, a piece of a larger whole. Reading the poems out of this cohesive and collective context detracts from or at least influences attempts at an accurate interpretation of his poetic project. In reading the *San Francisco Blues* and *Desolation Blues* series as the author might have intended, each as a whole and collected unit imbued with literary merit and worthy of critical attention, I hope to demonstrate that Kerouac’s relationship to his immediate environment, his thoughts on modernity, on interpersonal relationships and on what it
means to be human in a post-World War II atomic, American society are more complicated and more fluid than conventional Beat Generation thematic narratives allow.
CHAPTER 1

“‘SKETCHING’ IN SAN FRANCISCO:
KEROUAC’S BOP PROSODY BREAKS ON THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE”

In Martin Scorcese’s recent exploration of the life and work of Bob Dylan, No Direction Home, Dylan states that one of his primary artistic influences was Jack Kerouac’s On the Road. Dylan quotes the following well-known passage: “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, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing” (Kerouac, On the Road 5). He says he “fit right into that bunch” (Dylan), aching to “burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles” that eventually “pop,” right before “everybody goes ‘Awww!’” (On the Road 6). The “pop and ‘Awww’” moment Kerouac and Dylan describe appeared quite frequently in mid-century American literature, including in Kerouac’s erratic and ecstatic prose. Postmodern scholar Paul Maltby (2002) labels this urge for epiphany a resurgence of the Romantic ideal of the “visionary moment,” a moment of “sudden enlightenment” that “dramatically raises spiritual awareness” to a “redemptive order of knowledge” (1). Kerouac and his contemporaries were, indeed, interested in moving towards a new order or knowledge, or what they called a “New Vision” and a “New Consciousness” in homage to Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West (Watson 38). While Allen Ginsberg worked to implement this New Consciousness in the political as well as the poetic sphere, participating, for example, in anti-war demonstrations throughout the 1960s, Kerouac limited his consciousness-raising activities to what he saw as the more productive and more ethical medium of poetics. The transformative potential of the written word, especially as expressed through the Kerouac mind and love of language, can be discerned

1 For more on Ginsberg’s role in the protest movements of the 1960s, please see David Farber, Chicago ’68 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988) or the documentary film, Berkeley in the Sixties (dir. Mark Kitchell, 1990).
in nearly every poetic series Kerouac produced, but it is the series he wrote in 1954 while living in a hotel in San Francisco’s Skid Row, *San Francisco Blues*, that best articulates the modern, urban *American* condition\(^2\) and the writer’s role and ability within it.

As Clark Coolidge, avid Kerouac reader and professional poet attests, Kerouac’s writings presented an alternative to the whitewashed, “absent-minded intellectual vacuum” that existed “immediately before the Beat onslaught” (15), “an unforeseen and endless option” (16). While Coolidge couches his praise in terms of his experience reading *On the Road* (1957) for the first time in 1957, Kerouac’s more revolutionary, more experimental, and more “unforeseen” writings are found in the less popular texts, such as *Visions of Cody* (1960), which in many ways is what *On the Road* was intended by its author to be: “Forced, either by his own lights or the pressuring of his book-mill editors, to rewrite [*On the Road*] so many times, he had to create *Visions of Cody* (using much of the same material) to get some of his own back” (70).

It is in the poems, however, rather than the extended prose pieces, that Kerouac’s “spontaneous bop prosody” most effectively shines and his teasings of language are most prominent. Kerouac is well known for vehemently rejecting the early and High Modernist valorization of writing as a disciplined craft. Instead, he advocates, in his infamous “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” “not ‘selectivity’ of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought” (Kerouac, “Essentials” 744), shunning revision in favor of “non stop ad libbing” (Kerouac, *Book of Blues* intro). In fact, as scholar and Beat contemporary John Suiter (2002) notes, after having completed his “Mexico City” series, Kerouac wrote his New York agent and “confidently predicted: ‘*Mexico City Blues*...will do for poetry what my prose has done, eventually change it into a medium for Lingual Spontaneity...’” (138). Kerouac believed that only in this spontaneous project could the mind let loose all those

\(^2\) Kerouac’s poetic series *Mexico City Blues* (1959, Grove Press) and *Orizaba Blues* (published in *Book of Blues*) also discuss aspects of the modern, urban condition, but are more telling of Kerouac’s relationship to international communities and his valorization of the fellaheen than *San Francisco Blues*, which speak to a particularly American identity.
“personal secret idea-words” (“Essentials” 743) that could transform an individual’s consciousness, and perhaps by extension, the collective social consciousness.

Such “Lingual Spontaneity” seems to be the genesis for the following lines from the “8th Chorus” of the San Francisco Blues series:

Oi yal!
She yawns to lall
La la –
Me Loom – (1 – 4)

These lines reveal Kerouac’s frequent partiality towards the sounds of words rather than their meanings, but equally as important, these lines uncover the rough-around-the-edges, transitional steps any writer must take in creating a work of art. Kerouac exposes and valorizes the actual work of authorship, including all of its ostensibly disposable lines and blocked moments lurking underneath the magic of the final performance, a final performance that is really an accumulation of lines and moments that eventually lead to a point where the effusions naturally stop, or “Whack” (Coolidge 47). Perhaps in unveiling the writer’s process, Kerouac is extending the Whitmanesque project of democratizing poetry, stripping the poetic discipline of its elitism and at least ostensible discipline, thereby expanding the artistic community to include anyone with courage enough to document his or her unedited, unadulterated momentary thoughts. Such a democratic project would certainly not be embraced warmly in a cultural climate of homogenization and standardization.

Nor was it warmly embraced. The poetic products of Kerouac’s “Lingual Spontaneity” were vehemently lambasted. Critics and artists alike, who subscribed to what poet Robert Creeley (1995) calls, in his introduction to Kerouac’s Book of Blues, an “intense orthodoxy” and “insistent critical watchguard” ruling the art world, “patrol[ed] the borders of legitimate literature [and, I would add, all artistic movements] to keep all in their necessary places” (ix). Creeley writes: “If one came from habits of ways of speaking or thinking that weren’t of the requisite pattern, then the response was abrupt and hostile” (ix). “Abrupt and hostile” may even seem
understatements in light of the critical responses to Kerouac’s prose and poetry, the majority of which appeared in the widely read and renowned *New York Times Book Review*. While Truman Capote’s denigration of Kerouac’s work are well-known, a great many critics jumped on the baleful bandwagon, describing Kerouac’s sentences as “slaver” (Adams) or “sludge dripping from a leaky drain pipe” (Dempsey). Writing of *Mexico City Blues*, San Francisco’s premiere poetic hub, Kenneth Rexroth, found it “a ‘naïve effrontery’ to have published [*Mexico City Blues*] as poetry, and […] ‘more pitiful than ridiculous’” (Creeley ix). Kerouac biographers, like Ellis Amburn (1998), sometimes argue, however, that Rexroth’s issues with Kerouac were more personal than professional (232). In fact, Suiter (2002) says that at their first meeting, Kerouac read pieces from his poem, “October in the Railroad Earth,” and Rexroth was “tremendously impressed” (147), and was, in fact, also in attendance at the first Six Gallery Reading in 1955.

Rexroth’s questionable motives aside, Kerouac received enough derogation to suggest that his spontaneous project posed a great threat to the literary gate-keepers (e.g. critics) whose livelihoods depended then and still today upon differentiating insiders from outsiders, discipline from drivel. A writer who advocates for an untamed, idiosyncratic poetry in which almost anything goes as long as it remains true to “laws of time” (Coolidge 37) is threatening to do away with all those literary standards to which certain inveterate critics and academicians, such as Ginsberg’s professor and “New York Intellectual,” Lionel Trilling, cling (Genter 2004).³ It is perhaps for this reason that Kerouac’s poetry may have been shunned not only for its raw and in-process language, but also for its “personal” voice which signaled a dramatic break “from the modernist doctrine of impersonality” (Maio 6) in ways similar to the projects of the New York and Confessional poets. Whereas Modernist icon, T. S. Eliot, wanted, according to Maio’s quote of Ralph Mills, to “rid poetry of biographical excesses and the residue of the Romantics’ preoccupation with personality which had seduced attention from the true object of interest, the

³ To be sure, experimental writers, like Thomas Pynchon or Richard Fariña, were to be found in the academy, but such writers were influenced less by their teachers and more by the “alternative lowlife data that kept filtering insidiously through the ivy” (Pynchon 8).
poem itself” (7), Kerouac advocated a subjective poetry. He modeled his aesthetic upon a 23,000-word letter written by the Beat Generation muse, Neal Cassady, who described his own method as follows: “Rather, I think one should write, as nearly as possible, as if he were the first person on earth and was humbly and sincerely putting on paper that which he saw and experienced and loved and lost; what his passing thoughts were” (Watson 135). With such a so-called subversive project in mind, Kerouac’s first poem in the *San Francisco Blues* series, “1st Chorus,” begins:

I see the backs
Of old Men rolling
Slowly into black
Stores (1 – 4)

By beginning the entire body of poems with “I see,” Kerouac sheds the oppressive mantle of the “impersonal Modernist” aesthetic and asserts his personal, confessional, authorial voice. This rejection of his immediate artistic predecessors is further reinforced in what Kerouac’s “I” sees: “the backs/Of old Men,” possibly the Old Modernist Guard, “rolling” into the commercialized and standardized safety and immobility of “black/Stores,” “Slowly” fading from view and making way for a revolution in writing.

In fact, this writing style was so new (or at least re-visionary), that even Ginsberg, now considered an indispensable member of the Beat Triumvirate that also includes Kerouac and William Burroughs, had to be schooled in “Beatspeak” by Kerouac and, as it so happens, William Carlos Williams (Watson 127). Though Ginsberg’s “Howl,” became the rallying call of the new “Beat Generation” after its premiere at the San Francisco Gallery 6 Reading in 1955, Ginsberg’s earlier works, largely written during his tenure at Columbia University, were imitative, echoing the “academic verse that dominated the poetry journals after the war” (Tytell, *Naked Angels* 83). Ginsberg “realized that the false rhetoric of his symbolism only created artificial passions” (82) rather than the “100% personal honesty” redolent in the works of writers like Kerouac and Williams (Coolidge 54).
Kerouac first and consistently goaded Ginsberg to “create a mosaic of details, using the ‘sketching’ method that [Kerouac] began in 1951, recording straightforwardly what the eyes see and not attempting to forge something poetic,” or as he was fond of saying, “craft is craft” (Douglas Selected Letters 1957 – 1969 16). Williams, believing that Ginsberg’s work could be more new than what his “above-average grasp of rhymed verse” allowed, encouraged him to “write idiomatically and root his work in objects and details of quotidian life” (Watson 127-128), much as Kerouac had already done. Ginsberg (1993), in “The Visions of the Great Rememberer,” admits to the indoctrination he needed in the Beat aesthetic: “Jack always accused me of stealing from him, & rereading 20 years later I see now how much it was true, my Greyhound poem […] the very syntax & phrasing is similar, ‘cept his is half decade earlier” (407). He had more implicitly admitted to this even earlier, in his “Dedication” to Howl, which first and foremost acknowledges “Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose,” who contributed “[s]everal phrases and the title of Howl” (Ginsberg, Howl “Dedication”).

Through Ginsberg’s experience, we can see how Kerouac’s spontaneous prose is not necessarily what fellow poet, friend, Buddhist mentor, and inspiration for the novel, Dharma Bums, Gary Snyder, called “hasty workmanship” (Suiter 240), but was also an avenue into an entirely new aesthetic, in the same manner that Ezra Pound defined Imagism and T.S. Eliot defined Modernism. According to Ginsberg, Kerouac revolutionized the literary world by introducing the notion that one can write as one speaks and as one is: in everyday, conversational language (Maio 12). Marco Abel (2002) affirms Kerouac’s creative position in the literary canon: “Kerouac is interested in inventing a new language, a new literature, rather than representing whatever is given” (231). For example, the titles for the poems in the San Francisco Blues series, as well as the poems in several other series such as Desolation Blues (1956) and Mexico City Blues (1959), are numerically ordered “Choruses,” (e.g. 1ST Chorus, 2ND Chorus, etc), mixing his medium with another to create a new hybrid. Before readers even enter into the poems, they are aware of a bridge being laid to connect writing and music, a “totally original […] spontaneous, jazzy, druggy, visionary, American, catholic fusion of
Mayaynist wisdom teachings and pop culture” (Suiter 167). Kerouac’s introduction to his collection of poems, *Book of Blues*, specifies this connection further, linking his style to “jazz blues”:

In my system, the form of blues choruses is limited by the small page of the breastpocket notebook in which they are written, like the form of a set number of bars in a jazz blues chorus, and so sometimes the word-meaning can carry from one chorus into another, or not, just like the phrase-meaning can carry harmonically from one chorus to the other, or not, in jazz, so that, in these blues, as in jazz, the form is determined by time, and by the musician’s spontaneous phrasing & harmonizing with the beat of the time as it waves & waves on by in measured choruses. (intro)

John Tytell writes in *Naked Angels* (1976), the first comprehensive and serious account of Beat literature, that throughout the 1940s, Kerouac listened “to the bebop of Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, and their music formed the basis of a new sense of rhythm which he adapted to his own prose line” (143 – 144). That is, the same discovery, “frequently misattributed to Charlie Parker” (Townsend 147), of “grabbing notes from the higher intervals of the chord and hearing a possible improvisation there” (Coolidge 43), surfaces in Kerouac’s writings where he improvises upon standard refrains and toys with the positions of poetic notes in the harmonic verse and sequence. The fact that improvisation plays such an important role in 1950s art forms – including painting, as evidenced in the spontaneous outpourings of abstract expressionism, a discussion of which is outside the scope of this paper – suggests an intersection between culture and art. For example, Peter Townsend (2001) reads the evolution from hard bop to free jazz in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and its fostering of a sense of cultural pride, thereby leading many musicians of the mid-Sixties to “align their own musical practices with values and procedures they identified as African” (152).

We might thus be justified in a culturally contextualized reading of Kerouac’s affiliation with jazz spontaneity in the 1950s, an era in the United States’ history characterized as:
a moment when notions of personal responsibility were being subsumed by the values caused by an unprecedentedly sophisticated technology and corporate largeness, when the future was being mortgaged to the Pentagon, when the industrial oligarchy that Eisenhower warned us of in his farewell address was perpetuating the power of the police State. (Tytell, *Paradise Outlaws* 50)

The 1950s saw the proliferation of the suburban paradise and a revivification of the cult of domesticity, creating a culture in which Mommy Dearest arranges the family’s affairs from home while Father who Knows Best drives into the city to work his nine-to-five at an increasingly bureaucratized corporate office. “Any discussion of sexual matters […] was taboo” (53) and “the Cold War hysteria was accelerated by Senator Joseph McCarthy’s allegations of traitors in the State Department” (47). Allen Ginsberg (1993), discussing Kerouac’s aesthetics and ideals in “The Visions of the Great Rememberer,” defines the perspective of the Beats with respect to mainstream society further. He writes:

Larimer Street’s [in Denver] torn down by mad businessmen beastly for money Progress, a bunch of selfish stupid bums who cut the heart out of the city ignorant of what they were doing to history for the sake of another horrible Fascist 1948 insurance building air-condition-windows sealed so you can’t open ‘em up to smell the vomit of the past or jump out into a sea of wine sloshing out of an old pawnshop where Cody’s father pissed in his pants. (408)

These machinations, categorizations, and tabulations lead Tytell to dub this mid-century decade “The Frozen Fifties” (*Paradise Outlaws* 44). In this strict and stringent climate, in this black-and-white, sanitized and televised world, in this world “too dry and too frightened, mercilessly pinned beneath the thumb of the Puritan God” (Baldwin 311), in this world in which “things are often not what they seem to be” (Tytell, *Paradise Outlaws* 55) the Beats explode upon the scene, attempting “to open the individual through the doors of feeling, to leave him vulnerable, sympathetic, and receptive” (55).

Perhaps then Kerouac’s lingual spontaneity is an attempt to melt this frozen decade.
Perhaps we can say improvisation is one of the last vestiges of control left to individual persons in an age ruled by red tape and red baiting, a break from contemporary literary and social mores that attempted to quell, calm, and categorize the various effusions of the human, bodily self. As Kerouac writes in a letter to poet Philip Whalen in 1956:

In Shakespeare’s time, they didn’t know what autobiographical naturalism was, and well for us, we don’t know what spontaneous writing is…How else can you spit forth yr. intelligence? In meats, in parcels of meats? In wrappings? In hesitation, in bean-pots, in hooks and hams and ahems and holes of thought? in hems and haws? (Coolidge 70)

In other words, conventional and contrived packaging of words and ideas will hinder the expression of one’s “intelligence” and the world will consequently be littered with even more “deceit, pervasive counterfeit…[and] layers and layers of artifice” (Karl 21). The goal, instead, is to “write w/ 100% personal honesty both psychic & so on etc. and slap it all down shameless, willy-nilly, rapidly” (Coolidge 54). Norman Mailer states that such honest writing is “revealed to a good writer by the cutting edge of his style (he could thus hope his style was in each case the most appropriate tool for the material of the experience)” (Mailer Armies 87), so it is in Kerouac’s style, in addition to his content, that truths are revealed about the modern city and its inhabitants. Kerouac calls his method of observation and documentation “sketching,” (Coolidge 54), evoking the connotation of “sketch[ing] in the streets like a painter but with words” (54). It is “sketching” that he employs in San Francisco Blues, standing in city streets, watching the passers-by, and attempting to document in raw, unedited, real-time every aspect of the scene and people that his eyes can imbibe

And what does he gather from these observations? Energy. Much like the “lunch poems” of his New York School peer, Frank O’Hara, Kerouac catches the life force of the city, the action, the inhabitants in movement, in transition, in the throes of the processes of everyday existence, processes that continue from one “Chorus” into the next. Instances of movement can
be found in virtually every “Chorus” of *San Francisco Blues*. For example, “3RD Chorus” depicts:

Tile entrance once white

Now caked with gum

Of a thousand hundred feet

Feet of passers who

Did not go straight on

Bending to flap the time (3 – 8)

Similarly, “6TH Chorus” describes “Harried Mexican Laborers”:

Carrying newspapers

Of culture burden

And packages of need

Walk sadly reluctant

To work in dawn (11 – 15)

And, “42ND Chorus” finds “Little boys” who:

Carry bust out tubes

Around their necks

And roam the railyards

Of the great cities

Looking for locomotives (7 – 11)

Even the spatial layouts in these examples, with lines moving into and out of the side margins such as, for example, in the movement in “42ND Chorus” from the line “Carry bust out tubes,” to the indented line “Around their necks” to the less-indentend “Of the great cities,” reflect and reinforce the movement of the characters described. The lines appear almost as feet taking steps across the page, and sometimes back into the crease of the book. Honoring movement, rapidity, and the un-posed in these poetic snapshots of city scenes seems a productive and enlivening
opposition to the calendars, organizational tables, and procedural guidelines of the bureaucratic corporate and political worlds where everything has a place and a rhythm-less rhythm.

Furthermore, the fact that each poem’s title is part of a procession of chronological “Chorus”es demonstrates that a continuing thread unites all the poems, underlining the idea that every poem is one strand woven into an ongoing writerly process, not atomized like rungs upon a corporate ladder. The “individual choruses, which sustain interest independently” (Jones 19), also work together as a larger, cohesive body of work, wherein many poems’ endings smoothly feed into, or at least speak to, the beginnings of the poems immediately following. Unlike the bureaucratic world, the poems here are colorfully decorated with loose ends and frayed strings. For example, “13TH Chorus,” reads:

There’ll be an answer.
Forthcoming
When the morning wind
Ceases shaking
[…]
When
Dearie
The pennies in the palm multiply
as you watch (6 – 19)

Then, “14TH Chorus” begins: “When whistlers stop scowling/Smokers stop sighing/Watchers stop looking […]” (1 – 3). That is, “14TH Chorus” extends the conditions that must exist in order for the “answer” predicted in “13TH Chorus” to emerge. In sum, “There’ll be an answer. Forthcoming. When the morning wind ceases shaking […] When Dearie the pennies in the palm multiply as you watch [,] When whistlers stop scowling [,] Smokers stop sighing [etc].” “14TH Chorus” then adds to the necessary conditions for the “answer”:

When gray beards
Grow no more
And pain don’t
Take you by surprise
And bedposts creak
In rhythm not at morn
And dry men’s bones
Are not pushed
By angry meaning pelvic
Propelled legs of reason
To a place you hate (5 – 15)

Certain images in “13TH” and “14TH Chorus” are tinged with work or labor implications. For example, the “man’s collar” that no longer has any “starch in’t” in “13TH Chorus” may be an oblique reference to the corporate collar, a connection not completely untenable as two of the most popular books of the 1950s were metonymically-titled attacks on corporate conformity: Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), which became an instant best-seller and a successful film for its portrayal of suburban “discontent” and restlessness (Halberstam 522) and C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar* (1951/56). Following the starched collar with “Acme Beer” “flowing into/gray dry hats” (perhaps after the 5 o’clock hour?) further validates the corporate significance, as does the discussion of money in “13TH Chorus”: “When/Dearie/The pennies in the/palm multiply/as you watch.”

“14TH Chorus” introduces labors of all sorts, such as whistling, smoking, watching and walking, but this “Chorus” also adumbrates a paid and/or exploited labor connotation, specifically in the passage reproduced above, beginning “When gray beards/Grow no more.” Here, groups of reluctant, early-morning risers, (“And bedposts creak/In rhythm not at morn”), aching in tired bodies with “dry men’s bones,” are compelled, “pushed,” by a masculinist, “angry meaning pelvic” technocratic system that runs on “Propelled legs of reason,” “To a place [they] hate,” a place that might look a lot like the corporate world of work. Reading the “Chorus” in
this way suggests that perhaps the “answer” that “13TH Chorus” assures us is forthcoming will only actualize when the “legs of reason” – that exploit human labor and force modern persons out of bed “at morn” to trek to alienating and loathsome jobs – break. At this point, there will be an “answer.”

The San Francisco poems, however, never seem to locate this “answer” in the external world. Instead, every one of the 80 “Choruses” is a walk through the cityscape, guided by Kerouac’s observations of his persistent social and economic context, dead-ending, in “80TH Chorus,” in this “pretty white city” (6), San Francisco, that Kerouac writes, “Will no longer be/Available to me” (8-9). He explains:

I saw heaven move
Said “This is the End”
Because I was tired
of all that portend (10 – 13)

Not finding a “visionary,” uplifting, enlightening moment at the end of this road, Kerouac seems to simply tire of the search, of the anticipation, or “portend,” of the coveted “visionary moment.” But, rather than renounce belief in the search all together, the final stanza of “80TH Chorus,” also the final stanza of the entire San Francisco Blues series, resounds diunitally with continuance as well as finality:

And any time you need
me
Call
I’ll be at the other
end
Waiting
at the final hall (14 – 20)

Equipped with autobiographical knowledge, we know that Kerouac was leaving San Francisco for the “other end,” New York, but is “the other/end” also the beginning, meaning “the
other/end” or beginning of this poetic organism? Or, more metaphysically, is “the other/end” the beginning of yet another search?

“Waiting/at the final hall” suggests that perhaps the “end” is simply another beginning. While the “final hall” is easily associated with the final chambers of the spirit, the hall of death we could say, in the context of the preceding “Choruses,” “the final hall” takes on an entirely novel and unexpected meaning. The final ten “Choruses,” beginning with “70TH Chorus,” are lined and littered with “l”’s embedded in words like “Lowell” (70TH, 71ST, 72ND Choruses), or in the trio of “filled,” “sullen,” and “hollow” that appear within 13 lines of “73RD Chorus,” or the unsubtle lines from “75TH Chorus”: “Her eyes are living dangers/ ‘ll leap you” (1 – 2). This “Chorus” ends weighted with “l”’s as well:

Shows a pale green

Friscan hill

The last green hill

Of America

With a cut a band (14 – 18)

Already having primed his readers’ tongues to tap against the tops of teeth in sounding the plethora of “l”’s spilled across these “Choruses,” the appearance of “hil,” twice, in this “Chorus,” is particularly striking. To emphasize the strategic use of this term, Kerouac drops it into every subsequent “Chorus” but “79TH Chorus.” Thus, by the time “the final hall” is reached in the final “Chorus,” “80TH Chorus,” it is inevitably going to trigger memories of the still lingering sounds of “hill.”

In addition to serving as auditory cues and highlighting Kerouac’s dexterity with sound, the “hills” and the “final hall” also speak thematically. The first “hill”’s we encounter are in “75TH Chorus,” as we’ve already seen, and are preceded by the following:

The sweet unconcernedly

Italian humility

Glaring from black eyebrows
To ask
Of Renaissance:
“What have you done now
After 3 hundred years
But create the glary witness
Which out this window
Shows a pale green
Friscan hill
The last green hill
Of America (5 – 17)

The Renaissance, also associated with the Enlightenment ideals of science, technology, cultivation of human mind, dissection and control of Nature, is here asked to justify its existence, to prove its worth. But all that it will have to show for its glorification of Reason at the expense of Nature, is “a pale green/Friscan hill/The last green hill/Of America.” Not only has the Renaissance (and the ideals associated with it, including Manifest Destiny) razed all the land and brought Kerouac to the “last green hill” in San Francisco, but even this hill is fading quickly, a “pale green” as opposed to a healthy and full green. Read in this way, the “hill” embodies both exploration and exhaustion, so that the “final hall” in which Kerouac will be “Waiting” is at once a place from which movement will spring and in which the possibility of further movement will terminate.

Given Kerouac’s intense and immense literary background, the “hill” may also be an almost blatant allusion to John Winthrop’s (1630) auspicious prophecy for the New World, that it “shall be as a city upon a hill,” a beacon of light and hope for generations to come. Perhaps Kerouac is himself declaring a new and final hill in San Francisco, the last beacon and last place of yet undiscovered possibility and unfulfilled potential, which raises the question, what to do next? What to do, in a nation founded upon searching, upon the acquisition and taming of more and more land, upon expansion and continuous discovery, when one has reached the last hill and
the end of land? Which way to turn? These questions might help explain Kerouac’s fascination with the “fellaheen,” a term he borrowed from Oswald Spengler to symbolize the indigenous peoples of the world who are, according to Spengler, “remnants of a great culture that has already fallen” and whose mere existence shows modern, technological societies “the transitoriness of civilization and the persistence of fundamental values” (Jones 64). Kerouac “clearly identified with the fellaheen” and believed that “sophisticated societies should learn humility from the dignity, beauty, and simplicity of these survivors of a culture that has fallen – as ours inevitably will also fall” (64). The fellaheen serve thus as a contrast to the capitalist greed for more land and to modernity’s incessant searches for ultimate answers, highest plateaus, and final halls.

The tension or diunity between possibility and finality that completes this poetic series indicates that it may not matter whether there is more land in the United States to excavate because a new direction has been forged in the poems that lead up to the “final hall.” Though we may be tempted to leave San Francisco dejected, mired in the fatality of the “final hall,” thoroughly disheartened by the destruction of space and disillusionment of spirit engendered by Western progress, a true understanding of the intentions and breakthroughs of San Francisco Blues argues against such a crestfallen reading. The innovations Kerouac artfully steers throughout the 80 “Choruses” proclaim that though we may be at the end of the line in terms of land, we are only beginning to embark upon discovering the possibilities of our mental landscapes, possibilities that can be revealed through the fresh lines of poetry that Kerouac says the literary world is “waiting and bleeding for,” poetry that says all those things that “a man most wishes to hide, revise, and un-say” (Coolidge 75).

Thus, land is no longer the playing field upon which the transformation of person and his/her society will take place. Such activities are now turned inside, into the mind’s eye where the state cannot interfere (though it often would try in the 1950s through shock therapies or propaganda campaigns). And it is this mind’s eye that Kerouac intensely confronts during his isolated month-long stay atop Desolation Lookout Mountain in Washington during the summer
of 1956, the poetry of which time will be the focus of the next chapter. A reading of the *Desolation Blues* (1956) poetic series asks us to consider whether new poetic styles can indeed bring about “a general upheaval which destroys the old accumulations of intellectuality and lays down the foundations for a new faith” (Suiter 20) or whether, in the end, as Kerouac says, “Writing settles nothing” (Coolidge 20).
CHAPTER 2

“SELF AND SOCIETY MEET ON THE MOUNTAIN:
KEROUAC’S DESOLATION BLUES AND CONTEMPLATIONS”

Upon his introduction to Buddhism in 1953, Kerouac found that “waiting” for enlightenment in the city might be a fruitless endeavor. The Zen Buddhist master and Kerouac influence, D. T. Suzuki, teaches that “In Zen, there must be a general upheaval which destroys the old accumulations of intellectuality and lays down the foundations for a new faith” (Suiter 20), also known as satori. Kerouac and his fellow Buddhist-poet, Gary Snyder, believed that this “upheaval,” this Blakean vision, could only come about from time spent in solitude, in a Thoreau-inspired hermitage. In 1955, Kerouac wrote to Ginsberg that “his favorite writers – Emily Dickinson, Blake, and Thoreau – had all ended their lives as recluses” (Tytell, Naked Angels 75). Thus, at the encouragement of Snyder, Kerouac set off, in the summer of 1956, to work as a fire look-out for two months atop Desolation Lookout in Washington State. While there, he studied only David Goddard’s Buddhist Bible (Suiter 160), and wrote the 12 poems that compose Desolation Blues (1956/1995), as well as the journalistic prose of the first half of Desolation Angels (1965) which details “the events of his life during the summer and fall of 1956” (Charters, Selected Letters, 1957 – 1969 10), both atop Desolation Mountain and in Mexico later that same year. Before ascending the mountain, Kerouac wrote to an old friend from Columbia University, Lucien Carr, to state his mission atop the Peak: “If I don’t get a vision on Desolation Peak, my name ain’t William Blake!” (Suiter 179). Kerouac also writes in Desolation Angels, echoing Thoreau’s own search for self-reliance, divinity, and the stuff of life (NPR.org):

I’d thought, in June, hitch hiking up there to the Skagit Valley in northwest Washington for my fire lookout job. ‘When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules and I’m alone, I will come face to face with God
or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain.’ (4)

Guided by these existential goals, the Desolation Blues Choruses are markedly different from his San Francisco poems, as much in content as in language, style, and energy. Whereas his city poems are passing, flaneur-esque observations of the world about him, the Desolation poems tend to be observations of his inner world. While in San Francisco Blues, we walk with him through concrete descriptions of external events, on the mountaintop we walk with him through the landscape of his psyche as he searches the silence for understanding, for wisdom, and perhaps, for the “empty head” that rounds out the last line of the last Desolation Chorus.

As all great paradoxes go, the achievement of this ultimately “empty head” must begin inside the head, a less politically-minded variation on dismantling the master’s house with the master’s tools.4 Thus, the first poem of the Desolation series, “1STChorus,” begins:

I stand on my head on Desolation Peak
And see that the world is hanging
Into an ocean of endless space
The mountains dripping rock by rock
Like bubbles in the void
And tending where they want – (1 – 6)

The first line, “I stand on my head on Desolation Peak,” can be read literally, as Kerouac was known to do headstands every morning in order to prevent the phlebitis in his legs from aggravating him, but it may also be read metaphorically. First of all, the very present-tense description positions readers immediately and intimately with Kerouac, upside down, atop a mountain, right now. As in the San Francisco cityscapes, and as in much of Kerouac’s time-conscious prose after Town and the City (1950), readers move with Kerouac and experience his moments as they occur, through a poetry that approximates real-time as closely as any poetry

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Standing on his head also indirectly evokes the idea of standing one’s ground, a figure of speech used to convey conviction. In this case, the ground stood is the ground of one’s head or mind, suggesting a conviction in the superiority of one’s own thoughts and ego. Connecting these two types of “ground,” literal and metaphorical, may be reinforced in the visual layout of these first lines which are squared and linear, suggesting a rock-solid stillness and fortitude as opposed to the erratic and mobile layout of lines in the *San Francisco Blues* series.

If the first line of the poem does speak to a firmness in one’s own beliefs and mind, the lines that follow preclude such an ego-centered worldview by moving readers’ perspectives away from the concrete and atomized head and unto the world and even more expansively, to “an ocean of endless space.” These lines reverse the modern predilection towards centering the human mind, a predilection that Dr. Martin Luther King names an “attempt to substitute a man-centered universe for a God-centered universe” in a world in which “the scientist became a substitute for the prophet” (King 101). Kerouac’s poem, in contrast, positions the human mind (metonymically symbolized by the head) within a larger, even “endless” (w)hole that is likely more than mortal minds can comprehend. As we travel through the Desolation choruses, we inch towards this infinity and away from the confined corridors of mind which had almost trapped us in *San Francisco Blues*.

In this vaster, re-centered world, the mountains no longer rise into the sky but are “dripping rock by rock/like bubbles in the void.” Whereas mountains are often associated with dormancy, with inertia, with rest and immobility, here in this almost surrealist reversal (reminiscent of Dali’s melting clocks), the mountains are moving, “dripping,” partially because Kerouac is standing on his head and partially because outside of the ego, perception is liberated to absorb reality in a plethora of ways beyond normative conceptions of time and things. By extension, “the void” itself into which the mountains drip is liberating, not the fearsome, empty absence that existentialist philosophy would hold it be. In the void, the mountains are free and “tending where they want.” The diction here is telling because it highlights that the mountains, whose drips are determined by the forces of gravity, are endowed with an agency to land “where
they want,” an agency not often granted to natural bodies in the modern era which prides itself in its Enlightenment-spawned ability to conquer and control nature. Norman Mailer, in his account of the late 1960s Anti-War protests, *Armies of the Night* (1968), summarizes American, mid-century modernity and industrialization as such:

They were servants of that social machine of the future in which all irrational human conflict would be resolved, all conflict of interest negotiated, and nature’s resonance condensed into frequencies which could comfortably phase nature in or out as you please. (16)

Given Mailer’s observations, imbuing the mountains with agency is thus another means Kerouac employs to reverse his contemporary paradigms and humble the human ego and domain.

Kerouac continues in this first poem to reverse human egotism and traditional notions of direction, connection, and what it means to walk the earth. He writes:

That we walk around clung
To earth
Like beetles with big brains
Ignorant of where we are, how,
What, & upsidedown like fools
Talking of government & history, (11 – 16)

We as humans are chained to our heads, “clung/to earth,” and we are naturally upside down, top-heavy. Our emphases and valuations tend to gravitate towards workings of the mind, towards discussions of “government & history” rather than towards the “shooting stars” (7) that “Are swimming up to meet us/Yearning from the bottom black” (8 - 9). In a sense, we are making mountains of the mole hills of mind, acting, “like fools,” as if earthly and embodied happenings are of any consequence while “Mount Hozomeen/The most beautiful mountain I ever seen / Does nothing but sit & be a mountain” (17 – 19). Kerouac clarifies this idea further in *Desolation Angels*:
[M]y God look at Hozomeen, is he worried or tearful? Does he bend before storms or snarl when the sun shines or sign in the late day drowse? Does he smile? Was he not born out of madbrained turmoils and upheavals of raining fire and now’s Hozomeen and nothing else? Why should I choose to be bitter or sweet, he does neither? (5)

Kerouac valorizes nature’s ability to sit comfortably with the void, to allow life to pass through it, while human beings cling to earth and earthly matters and become tangled in “comments, complaints, criticisms, appraisals, avowals, sayings, shooting stars of thought” (Kerouac, DA 5). In a 1950s culture that prides itself upon new technologies, that hails its remodeled and more efficient kitchens as its strongest weapon against the evils of Communism, and that proudly produces more and more commodities to flood mental and physical energies and vacuum an individual’s time, Kerouac stands apart, saying essentially, “perhaps the world is too much with us.”

Given such an explanation, it is tempting to align Kerouac with many of his Romantic predecessors. In fact, in a recent conversation, John Tytell specifically pointed out that Kerouac’s writing was oftentimes a reaction to the “modern denial of the romantic spirit,” an honoring of the Romantic spirit that had disenchanted the Modernists. Any serious study of Kerouac’s life and works will reveal that Kerouac was a voracious reader of all time periods, moving through “Twain, Emily Dickinson, Melville, Sherwood Anderson, Whitman, Emerson, Hemingway, Saroyan, Thomas Wolfe” (Krim xiv) before college. Kerouac distinguishes himself from his Romantic or Transcendentalist literary peers, however, by observing that while worldly entanglements may defile a certain sanctity of the natural world, and while they do not allow for the peaceful detachment called for by Kerouac’s Buddhist teachings, such earth-bound engagements may be necessary. After noting that Mount Hozomeen “does nothing but sit & be a mountain” (19), Kerouac writes:

A mess of double pointed rock

Hanging pouring into space
O frightful silent endless space
—Everything goes to the head
Of the hanging bubble, with men
The juice is in the head (20–25)

We move directly in this poem from the mountain’s calm acceptance of the void into an honest description of this empty “space” as “frightful silent endless.” The terrors and frights presented by the void immediately plunge Kerouac back into “the [mortal] head” in order to avoid the anxiety-inducing confrontation. (Juice) Laden heads and social constructs are refuge from the terror of “frightful silent endless space.” Thus we have here not necessarily a move away from the head, not necessarily an egolessness, but complicated and ambiguous musings upon the ego. These musings acknowledge the ego’s limitations but also do not deny that the ego can act as a life preserver, a defense against the terrible void.

This movement between seeking the void and avoiding it permeated Kerouac’s life. His discussion of the terrors involved in confronting the void may help account for his sporadic and oftentimes nomadic lifestyle, his criss-crossing cross-country treks, and his incessant desire to “end [his] life as an old man in a shack in the woods” or to “escap[e] reality to go into simplicity,” as he describes it in a letter to former girlfriend Edie Parker in 1957 (Charters, Letters 1957 - 1969). But, as Joyce Johnson (2000), author, publisher, and Kerouac’s girlfriend from 1957 – 1958 during Kerouac’s rise into fame and popularity, illustrates, the “old man in a shack” dream often failed him:

Toward the end of September, Jack almost proposed to me during a weekend away from the stresses of fame in Lucien Carr’s old farmhouse in upstate New York […] The next weekend we returned to Lucien’s house. This time the plan was that we would leave Jack alone up there for a week. He still believed solitude would help him heal himself – it had worked for him in the past, he insisted, forgetting how close he’d come to cracking up on Desolation Peak. The
The experiment lasted one day – Jack thumbed a ride with a truck driver who brought him back to New York very embarrassed and disappointed with himself. (67) The empty “space” of solitude was too much for Kerouac to bear, so he bashfully slunk back towards the city and its cluttered “heads,” and then again hopped a train to Orlando and his mother, “the only remaining vestige of his old life” (Johnson, Door Wide Open 67). Though a discussion of Kerouac’s notorious and intimate relationship with his mother is not necessarily called for by the Desolation poems, future studies of Kerouac’s texts, such as Desolation Angels in which he discusses his mother a great deal, might want to consider his recurrent retreats into either solitude or into the safety of his mother’s home as incomplete efforts to re-inhabit a womb of one kind or another and the implications this womb-envy of sorts has for Kerouac’s art and ideas.  

Not only does the movement from “space” to “head” in the Desolation poem speak to Kerouac’s personal life and ways of life, but it also represents the compassion and open-mindedness for which he was so well known among his peers, the “quiet, solitary, continual, and conscious compassion for all sentient beings” that he refined and reaffirmed through his Buddhist followings (Tytell, Naked Angels 76). That is, rather than lambast those who fall victim to the lure of the ego, Kerouac extends a poetic gesture of understanding and commiseration by noting that the dark and deep of “endless space” is a difficult and repellent concept for most people, even himself. While mainstream media sources and high-level public officials and politicians were busy delineating the likes of “us” versus the ills of “them” for the popular imagination, Kerouac was working to dismantle such binaristic thinking by drawing connections among all people, locating and writing about those aspects and struggles of life that make of humanity one “us” rather than aligning his loyalties with the categories imposed through social codes and mores. In a 1960 journal entry, Kerouac even rejects the categorical beliefs of his own community: “The ‘beatniks’ love Castro – a murderer (of the opposition in Cuba) – Thus

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5 I am indebted to Dr. Barbara McCaskill for this astute observation.
I shd. really resign from my Presidency of the Beatnik Kingdom in writing. – Why shd. Allen & Ferling go there?” (Kerouac, Box 57, Envelope 7). He writes later in this same journal, “There shall be henceforward no reason whatever for the murdering of anybody.” Kerouac’s sympathies stretch wide, bypassing political affiliations and social locations, but they do stop short of murder.

As in such journal entries, we find in this first Chorus a natural and honest contemplation, one that does not adhere neatly to any one category of mind, matter, or whatever is beyond, but that appreciates and engages complexities, indicative of an intellectual maturity not often granted to Kerouac. On account of his ascribed status as “Father of the Beat Generation,” or his self-proclaimed “Presidency of the Beatnik Kingdom,” his writings have traditionally been subjected to thematic readings in which complexities or even blatant textual truths are simplified or effaced in order to accommodate his label as a “counter-cultural” icon. This propensity towards incomplete readings was, for example, the subject of a debate between geographer Tim Creswell and feminist geographer Linda McDowell in the late 1990s. While Cresswell (1999) reads Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) as a subversion of 1950s conformity and domesticity, McDowell (1996) argues that “a more nuanced reading of the novel […] suggests a set of more complex interconnections between the public and the private, between the road and the home, and between men and women,” (414) such as the fact that rather than escaping the “traditional family values of middle America,” Kerouac and his Beat counterparts, at least as depicted in *On the Road*, sought and found comfort in either a real or “idealized ‘home’” (414). Though not necessarily focusing primarily on the text – McDowell derives much of her argument from a biographical reading, supported specifically by Carolyn Cassady’s memoir of her life and times living with Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac, *Off the Road* – McDowell’s attempts at a nuanced analysis do highlight the fact that Kerouac’s texts do at times stand contrary to a purely counter-cultural position, or might at the very least not easily be nestled within any particular ideological paradigm.
As the first Chorus of the *Desolation Blues* series demonstrates, his texts instead are always in flux, moving between contradictory poles and searching for syntheses, comfortable with ambiguities and paradoxes, as any true Buddhist practitioner must learn to be. Thus, Kerouac’s “1ST Chorus” explores the idea that while detachment from life and its worries may be a fine ideal, the lived reality of such a feat is far more challenging and complicated than the ideal suggests. Still, Kerouac continues to try, ending this first Chorus not by succumbing to worldly and grounded existence, but on a note that hopes for the liberation and inner peace that Buddhist philosophy believes can only arise through detachment from the material world: “So mountain peaks are points / Of rocky liquid yearning” (26 – 27). That is, though the void is terrifying, the mountains will continue their “rock by rock” drippings into it and in so doing, display an unyielding “yearning” to transcend earthly chains and enter into interminable mental and physical space. Allowing mountains the human emotion of “yearning” not only points to the constant struggle, for all natural organisms, of transcending the confines of an earthly and mortal existence, but again, as before, acknowledges the agency of mountains.

He reinforces this anthromorphization of the mountain in the beginning lines of “2ND Chorus”: “Mountains have skin, said Peter / Orlovsky of San Francisco –” (1 – 2). Peter’s presence is first and foremost, given Kerouac’s Catholic upbringing and interests, likely an allusion to Jesus’s disciple. Peter, whose name means “rock,” was born into the name of Simon but is renamed by Jesus as reward for his faithfulness in understanding that Christ is “the Son of the living God.” It is upon this rock, this solid foundation of faith that Jesus builds his first church, and it is upon the Desolation rock that Kerouac had hoped to build his own connection to something divine or transcendent. Jesus says to Simon Peter:

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven […] *(NIV Bible, Mathew 16.13 – 19)*
Thus, by evoking Peter’s highly symbolic name and by pairing “mountains” with “skin,” Kerouac is bringing together the mortal and divine, flesh and spirit, man and nature, just as these divergent elements were brought together in the life and body of Jesus Christ.

Immediately, however, Kerouac removes his readers from this philosophical high ground – just as Peter was removed from this high ground upon betraying Jesus three times (NIV Bible Mathew 26.69 -75) – and dives down from the mountain, into the city streets and into the San Francisco Beat Generation scene, by specifying that the Peter he is referring to is also “Peter/Orlovsky,” poet and life-long partner to Allen Ginsberg. Perhaps this commingling of the two “Peter”s is a means of highlighting the both/and nature of existence that appeared in “1ST Chorus,” the fact that we are all simultaneously seeking to attain divinely inspired enlightenment at the pearly gates of heaven and enmeshed in the mortal realm of skin and cities. The disciple Peter’s betrayal of Christ exemplifies the ultimate and imperfect humanity of even the most divinely touched beings. And in evoking the Beat disciple, Peter, Kerouac is asking his readers to view his Beat Generation contemporaries and fellow writers as exemplars of this incessant tug-of-war since so much of Beat Generation literature, from Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen’s Buddhist haikus to Allen Ginsberg’s Blakean meditations on the holy and even to William Burroughs’ meticulous dissections of bodily processes and physicality, can be read as an attempt to discover the divinity lurking between the skyscrapers and beside the railroad tracks of the United States’s modernization.

In calling attention to his literary community, Kerouac continues to hover around the ego and the process (or possibility) of eliminating it. As Seymour Krim points out in his introduction to Desolation Angels (1965), the Beat Generation set itself apart not only because it spoke those truths that 1950s society wished to hide behind its black-and-white curtains, but also because “the Beats, […] and Jack Kerouac in particular, evolved a community among themselves […]; the group or the gang, like society in miniature, was at least as important as its most glittering stars” (Krim x). While it is of course important to study each individual artist and creator of the Beat Generation in her or his own light, we must also not neglect to note the effects of the
cohesion, care, and connectedness of the larger group. For example, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso and Burroughs had all been writing poems on their own before meeting in New York, but it was not until these young minds gathered to experiment with drugs, life, and art together that they were able to find and refine the voices that would eventually be asked to speak for an entire generation.

These friends continued to encourage and inspire each other throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s. In extensive and abundant letters, they would share poems and observations, play with new styles and stories. For example, on December 26, 1956, Kerouac writes to Allen Ginsberg:

But you know what I think, while I gave you “America,” which you finally dug from Visions of Neal type-America, you actually gave me “Visions of Neal” type prose, it was not only from Neal’s letters but from your wild racing crazy jumping dontcare letters that all that sketching came out, it broke me off from American formalism a la Wolfe. (Charters, Selected Letters, 1940-1956 595)

Thus, the influence that Ginsberg frequently cites Kerouac as having had on his work is here redefined as a more reciprocal relationship between the two poets. This relationship may be further clarified in reading both the San Francisco and Desolation Blues series for traces of Howl, which was written and popularized roughly around the same time that Kerouac worked on his poems. Specifically, San Francisco Blues was penned in 1954, one year before the Six Gallery Reading, and the Desolation poems only one year after. Perhaps it is the “ululatory” Howl that creeps onto Kerouac’s mountain in the “5TH Chorus” of Desolation Blues: “It’s (as I look) nothing but mist/As it rises ululatory responding/to every shift of wind” (18 – 20). A more in-depth discussion of this connect, and more generally of the connections among the poems and between the poets, is beyond the scope of this paper, but future scholarship would gain much from pursuing this line of thinking.

The Beats influenced each other in ways other than these stylistic ones, however. In their local hangouts, they’d pass around each other’s writings to whomever was interested, help promote or even name each other’s books (as Kerouac did for Burroughs’s Naked Lunch), and
would frequently help find temporary residences for their squatting or traveling friends and for each other. As Joyce Johnson writes in *Minor Characters* (1983), a graceful memoir detailing her relationship with Kerouac, it was Ginsberg who first goaded Kerouac to call and meet her on a “blind date” (128) knowing that Kerouac needed a place to stay after running from “a place Allen had found Jack […] in the Village with two women” (124). “Hello,” Jack had said in their first phone conversation. “Allen tells me you’re very nice. Would you like to come down to Howard Johnson’s on Eight Street? I’ll be sitting at the counter. I have black hair and I’ll be wearing a red and black checked shirt” (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 126). Ginsberg was also well-known for his relentless efforts to help have his friends published and recognized. Kerouac substantiates Allen’s supportiveness to Edie Parker in his January 28, 1957 letter: “Allen never loses track of me even when I try to hide. He does me many favors publicizing my name” (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957 – 1969* 6).

The most notorious example of the Beat community’s lasting imprint and influence is in Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956) which is essentially a collection of observations about the people around him, written in a style inspired by the guidance of Kerouac and William Carlos Williams. The Six Gallery Reading at which *Howl* first premiered on September 5, 1955 itself was a community-shaped event. As Gary Snyder recalled recently to *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Heidi Benson, the Six Gallery Reading “Gave a sense of the possibilities of an alternative culture […] And it wasn’t just poetry that moved people. It was the sense of a community, of people with a vision” (SFGate.com). These insights suggest that while one way to overcome or at least to humble the ego is through the isolated hermitage that Kerouac has undertaken atop the mountain, yet another way exists in collectivizing, in solidarity with other like-minded individuals.

Connecting with other individuals also encompasses connecting with like-minds that have come before and left their mark through their creations. Such a conversation begins to take shape in “2ND Chorus”:

–Why do I sit here crosslegged
On this steaming rocky surface
Of a planet called earth
Scribbling with a pencil
Unmusical songs called songs
And why worry my juicy head
And look around for more
   And nothing means nothing
as of yore?—
   T is the primordial essence
Manifesting forms, of happy
And unhappy, stuff & no-stuff (13 – 25)

In these lines, Kerouac highlights his isolation atop the mountain as well as the isolating work of writing, which in this poem amounts to nothing more than sitting “crosslegged” atop “a planet called earth / Scribbling with a pencil.” Referring to this world as “a planet called earth” de-centers earth from its conventional ideological position as the center of the Universe. Instead, Kerouac says, this land upon which he sits is nothing more than a “steaming rocky surface” that just happens to be a part of a “planet called earth,” which could very likely be only one of many planets with their own “steaming rocky surface[s]” and their own atomized bodies “scribbling” and writing “Unmusical songs.” In de-centering earthly existence, Kerouac is also humbling his own ego, disallowing homo-sapiens exceptionalism and uniting all humans beneath the domain of some greater fabric.

Unity and connectedness are also intimated in the poem’s harkening to the past in lines such as, “And nothing means nothing / as of yore,” or even in “T is the primordial essence.” This latter line is interesting for the simultaneous allusion to T.S. Eliot, a poet who, in many ways, is to High Modernism what Kerouac is to the Beats, and to the misspelled word, “Tis.” Read as “T.S.,” the line evokes the community of writers which preceded the Beats and helped shape Beat ideals, even if only negatively: the Modernists. While being well-versed in the
Modernist tradition, Kerouac knew “that he would have to turn his back on the Eliot-Trilling-Older Generation dicta and risk contempt in order to keep the faith with reality as he knew it” (Krim xx). This relationship that “the generation which came of age in the late ‘40s and mid-‘50s” had with those “stars who lighted the way” (Krim xxi) is yet another example of the tension Kerouac embodied between connection and isolation. While connecting with and deeply immersed in his preceding literary peers, Kerouac also sets himself apart by creating a newer aesthetic, his own “personal quavering sound […] which took [him] so long (15 years of writing) to find and tap and only after removing all that literary and grammatically-inhibited and unenlightened debris” (Charters, Selected Letters 1957 – 69 15).

The personality embedded in Kerouac’s self-constructed sound is emphasized in reading “T.S.” as “Tis.” Doing so draws readers’ attentions away from the literary community and to the missing letter: I. That is, the underlying root, the foundation, the “primordial essence,” the original, inherent essence, that which predates modernity, is missing its connecting link, “I,” or ego. Interestingly enough, the absence of “I” is often associated with T.S. Eliot who is regarded as the father of impersonality, of egolessness, of the effacement and obliteration of the personal “I” in poetry (Maio 6). Perhaps this Chorus’s lines can be read then as a literal manifestation of the idea that egolessness can be achieved through a connection with one’s history and literary community, that in embracing all of his literary and historic predecessors as well as his contemporary artistic community, Kerouac can abdicate the “I” and its accompanying “forms, of happy / And unhappy, stuff & no-stuff.” On the other hand, as Kerouac noted in “1ST Chorus,” the “stuff” that the I “manifest[s]” is actually quite useful, or at least tempting, and even more difficult to relinquish would be the “forms, of happy” that ego can create.

The persistence of ego and the relentless efforts to circumvent it are taken up again in “4TH Chorus”:

I’ve T S Elioted all the fogs
Faulknered all the stone
Balanced nothing against something
played solitaire, smoked,
[...]
And pondered history, myths,
stories, artistic plans, plays,
French movies, phalanxes
of disordered human crazy
Thought, & still it’s upsidedown –
Silent—stiff—wont yield— (7 – 25)
That is, Kerouac has engaged the highest of intellectual pursuits, has combed the thickets of his memory, has relied on the masters and attempted to locate himself within a literary community, has “played solitaire,” sought to be content within his isolation, and still, enlightenment is out of reach. Even the embedding of “stiff” between hyphens in line 25 highlights the confining, restricting, and thwarting nature of all these endeavors of thought. Perhaps Kerouac’s liberation is out of reach precisely because he attempts self-reflexively to reach it through the same tangles that brought him to the need for enlightenment: the labyrinth of thought, that exact rock that will not be broken, that rock that keeps humans grounded and tied to the material world. He might more productively conceptualize enlightenment literally as a true lightening, accomplished either through a lessening of the load imposed by ego and mind that bring the “stuff & no-stuff” of “2ND Chorus,” or through an embrace of it.

In this vein, Kerouac decides, by “7TH Chorus” that he would rather
[...] get down
Off this Chinese Han Shan hill
and make it
To the city & walk the streets
And drink good wine (2 – 6)
Rather than continue scribbling alone atop the “Han Shan” hill, referring to the Chinese poet, the “legendary back-country hermit-sage of China’s misty T’ien Tai mountains” notorious for
writing “his poems on precipitous basalt cliffs or the broken walls of forgotten mountain villages” (Suiter 162), Kerouac proclaims his humanity and instead wishes to descend as even Han Shan would do from time to time “for a meal of leftovers, hobo-like, at the back door of Kuo Ching monastery” (Suiter 162). Thus, in the tradition of his working-class predecessor and peer, Walt Whitman, Kerouac exclaims, I have wants and I actually want to engage these wants and I do not really care to live like the mountain! I want to feel foolish and explore the extremes of human experience and be tangled up in bodies and drink alcohol and allow my belly to feel the sentient satisfaction of Chinese food and whiskey and movies and consumerism and

[…] tortilla beans
   ice cream
   And crime—and banana splits
   and tea
   And benzedrine & broads—
   and waterfronts
   And plays & play marquees
   and Square Times
   And you – I’d like to celebrate
   upside
   Down in cities (17 – 27)

He rejects the stream of mental peace, throws caution to the wind and wants to run down and into the pleasures of worldly and earth-bound mortal experience. He is careful to note, however, that despite his status as a counter-cultural icon and despite his association with “drugs, with criminal excess, and the pursuits of ecstasy” (Tytell, Naked Angels 11), he is as much interested in “benzedrine” as he is in “plays and play marquees,” as much hungry for the innocence of “banana splits” as thirsty for the highs of “tea” (marijuana), as much looking forward to “Square Times” as to their antithesis, Times Square. Another nod to his compassionate streak and sympathies, Kerouac embraces and valorizes in one verse a diversity of experiences that span the
binary between culture and counter-culture, innocent and criminal. It is in this boundary crossing, he suggests, this complication of simplistic binaries, that we walk the path towards enlightenment. Otherwise, we merely continue to construct societies that claim some sort of “difference between bombing of ‘civilians’ in one town and bombing of ‘women and children’ in another, and ‘reprisals’ instead of raids,” societies in which one can sadly “get a Ph.D. in the distinguishing of this ideological difference, become expert, disinterested, warm” (Kerouac, “After Me” 61).

Perhaps because “7TH Chorus” advocates a more interconnected philosophical and ideological approach to social life and a less categorical and divisive one, this Chorus also presents the first instance of second-person point-of-view: “And you – I’d like to celebrate.” From this point forward, the remaining Choruses speak to or from a variety of perspectives. For example, the elegant and elegiac “8TH Chorus” premieres first-person plural voice and intermingles it with a repeat second-person reference:

Saying, “It’s okay, girl, we’ll make it
Till the sun goes down forever
And until then what you got to lose
But the losing? We’re fallen angels
Who didn’t believe
That nothing means nothing” (19 – 27)

In *On the Road* (1957), Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty travel back and forth across the country and back and forth across the country vertiginously, but the real turning point in their relationship and in the evolution of their own personal consciousnesses comes about during their final trip in Mexico, a new country, a new space, a new direction charted. After their Mexico trip, the two friends part ways and Paradise moves on to find a girl with whom he can and wants
to settle down in New York. “8 TH Chorus” is in a sense the Mexico of the Desolation Blues series. This Chorus shifts Kerouac’s focus from intimately exploring his own mind to attempting to intimately engage with others, shifts his focus from avoiding his ego to embracing it, to acknowledging his humanity, his imperfections, his “fallen angel” status, and moving from that point to forge relationships with other humans, as exemplified by the dialogue form. He continues employing “we” and “you” throughout the remaining four Choruses of the Desolation Blues series, and it is perhaps by nature of these (imagined) relations with egos outside of his own that Kerouac actually moves closer to his original goal and can more confidently say, in the very last lines of the very last poem, “12TH Chorus,”:

But now I guess
I’m just talkin
thru my
empty head (27 – 30)

Contrary to what he thought he’d find in ascending the mountain, Kerouac’s sixty-three day long hermitage (Johnson, Minor Characters 128) leads him, at least textually, to consider that while seclusion in the woods may have helped create Walden (1854), it may ultimately be reading and discussing Walden with friends and lovers that will help expand our understandings and lift us out of ourselves, “empty”ing us of ego in line with Buddhist doctrine. Such an insight not only defies Kerouac’s own expectations, but is also contrary to the atomized, compartmentalized, and nuclearized ideologies of Kerouac’s day, a day in which “a great fissure had occurred in the American psyche, an uprooting of family relationships, of the sense of place and community that was compounded by a fear of imminent devastation” (Tytell, Naked Angels 9). While some of his Beat counterparts aimed to recreate a sense of community by organizing with those similar to themselves, Kerouac struggled to see beyond superficial distinctions and beneath dogmatic assertions to the stillness that could potentially flow within all persons, regardless of whether they wear grey flannel suits or “red and black checkered shirt[s]” (Johnson, Minor Characters 126). As he writes in the last piece he wrote before he died,
published posthumously, “I’m trying to figure out where I am between the established politicians and the radicals, between cops and hoods, tax collectors and vandals. I’m not a tax-free, not a hippie-yippie – I must be a bippie-in-the-middle” (Kerouac, “After Me” 1). It is precisely within the middle that the Desolation poems locate him. He is in these poems not a Kerouac statically trapped within a “counter-cultural” box but a Kerouac in and moving through the middle of ego and egolessness, of world and void, of normative ideologies and transformative spiritualities, and finally, of beat and beatitude.
CONCLUSION

On the same 1957 episode of *The Steve Allen Show* in which Kerouac labels the Beat Generation as “sympathetic,” Kerouac attempts to describe his scroll-method for writing *On the Road* (1957). Allen asks, “I’ve heard that you write so fast that you don’t like to use regular typing paper but that instead you prefer to use one big long roll of paper. Is that true?” Kerouac responds: “Yeah. When I write narrative novels, and I wanna change my narrative thought, I keep going,” and as he rounds out his sentence with these last words, Kerouac gestures a sense of prolonged “going” by reaching his right arm back, back, back far behind him, into the dark distance, into the void of Steve Allen’s studio (YouTube, Steve Allen). This gesture symbolizes much of Kerouac’s aesthetic. He is a writer whose words and lines, like his arms in the Steve Allen clip, reach out and “run far beyond the limits of one page-width” (Charters, *Selected Letters 1957 – 1969* 11). And while his lines scuttle past the margins, and while his texts trespass national and geographic borders, while his dialects move beyond the academy to include the “Greyhound voices and fleabag hotels” (Pynchon 22), so too do his ideas transcend traditional categories. As we’ve seen throughout the *San Francisco Blues* and *Desolation Blues* poetic series, Kerouac is not so much adhering to a standard “counter-cultural” world-view, but is instead engaging his surrounding culture and society in a fluid and open conversation.

In this conversation, change is linguistic, revolution aesthetic, transformation philosophic. In this conversation, Kerouac is as much implicated in society’s flaws on account of his battles with ego as are the privileged producers of culture, the elitist keepers of the academy and consequent shapers of culture, and as are rebellious leftists who align with murderous leaders merely to maintain an oppositional ethic. In this conversation, the sounds of the words being used are as important as their meanings and in this conversation, every sound and every voice is honored, not simply those of the Beat community or the jazz musicians, but also those of the “Square Times.”
When asked in a conversation on October 27, 2006, whether the Beats, specifically thinking of Kerouac, can be considered “multicultural,” Beat Generation scholar John Tytell answered, “The Beats invented multiculturalism.” Not only did Kerouac and his immediate contemporaries valorize indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities and members of the working-class, and not only did their international travels open them to what are traditionally dubbed “eastern” religions and ways of life, but true to a multicultural approach, they also embraced ambiguity, consistently questioned American and individual identities, and above all, created art that complicates simplistic binaries. On the other hand, as Douglas Malcolm (1999) reminds us, it is important to question whether Kerouac’s appropriation of certain cultural idioms and philosophies reflects a tendency towards racist or imperialist cultural appropriation. Malcolm thus opens the door for a more nuanced discussion of Kerouac’s work, a discussion that does not take his counter-hegemonic status for granted, but that is attuned to the obdurate, conservative and potentially oppressive threads weaving through his work. Such an engagement might also pave the way for a re-reading and re-articulation of mainstream 1950s culture, which in itself was complicated and multi-faceted but was reduced to a happy hearth-and-home on television shows that now linger in the popular imagination as the definitive statement on what 1950s culture was “really like.”

Complicating our understandings of the Beats and of the 1950s more broadly is not only important for the artistic and intellectual avenues such a move will open in our readings of Beat literature, but also provides a helpful guide for Multicultural American Literary Studies. This discipline, despite itself, can tend towards categorical paradigms, drawing strict cultural boundaries, dubbing people either in or out of a certain cultural location, be it “Chicano” or “Native American” or “white, middle-class.” That is, in an increasingly pluralistic world, Multicultural American Literature can benefit by borrowing from Kerouac’s example and walk the fine middle line between valuing different cultures and acknowledging that every cultural boundary is constructed, fluid, and constantly changing. Just as Kerouac embraces the tension of both diving into earthly pleasures and attempting to transcend them, or the tension inherent in
being pulled both by a tugging need for solitude and the desperate urge for community, just as he
toes the tension between observation and participation, so too must Multicultural American
Literature engage the tug-of-war between identifying different cultures (such as Hispanic
American, Native American, and so forth), and constantly keeping in mind that such
identifications are, in the final analysis, largely arbitrary. After all, as the “most openhearted
writer of his generation” (Tytell, *Paradise Outlaws* 142) and the “blue, bruised eye”
and “melancholy” author (Johnson, *Minor Characters* 128) himself notes, all the work of life,
the disciplinary distinctions, the “politics, gambling, hard work, drinking, patriotism, protest,”
are all “therapeutic shifts against the black void” (Kerouac, “After Me” 61) and nothing more
and everything more at the same time.
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