

A QUEST FOR LANGUAGE: JACK KEROUAC AS A MINOR AUTHOR

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This chapter presents Jack Kerouac, the hero of the beat generation, as a minor, diasporic writer. The first part of the paper describes the author's failed attempt to compensate for the lost French-Canadian community of his youth in Lowell, Massachusetts, through a search for a new 'religious' experience. Kerouac hoped to reach this transcendent state through his association with minorities, outcasts, and 'ethnics', all of whom reminded him of his migrant ancestors. The second part of the paper focuses on Kerouac as a diasporic author, on the way he undermined traditional English prose to both espouse and distort his various experiences, and on his works in which his search for identity completely dissolved, leading to his early death.

Like Kafka's beast, language now listens to this unavoidable and growing noise from the bottom of its burrow. And to defend itself against this noise, it has no choice but to follow its movements, become its loyal enemy, and allow nothing to stand between them but the contradictory thinness of a transparent and unbreakable partition. We need to speak continually, as long and as loudly as this indefinite and deafening noise — longer and louder — so that by combining our voice with it, we might succeed, if not in silencing and mastering it, at least in modulating its uselessness into this endless murmur we call literature (Michel Foucault 1994: 255).

Introduction

Most chapters in the present volume relate to the challenges and difficulties encountered by 'foreign' individuals and communities in new environments. At the center of these experiences are the questions of identity and difference, and of ways in which new identities are shaped. Indeed, most of the time, migrants and their children accommodate to their new countries by adopting some of the values and behaviors (including language) of the receiving cultures and, at the same time, still adhering to some of their ancestors' traditions and habits.

This chapter deals with a special case: that of an author who tried to use language and literature to 'follow the movements' of his new culture, but who ultimately failed in both his attempts to accommodate to American culture and to maintain a French-Canadian identity. This trial was doomed from the start. Indeed, language itself always maintained, in Foucault's words a 'transparent and unbreakable partition' that made it impossible for the author to have a grasp on reality. At the same time, language led him on a road from which there was no way back to his French-Canadian roots.

The first part of this chapter focuses on Kerouac's quest through his life and works. The second part tries to answer the question whether Kerouac should be called a French-American author (an ethnic author), or rather, a diasporic (or minor) writer.

Jack Kerouac: From Lowell to 'America'

Who was Jack Kerouac? What was his 'quest'? How did he weave his French-Canadian heritage with the variety of American cultures and subcultures? What made this 'minor' writer a major American writer? These are the questions we will try to answer in this chapter.

Jack Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, the third child of his French-Canadian parents, Leo and Gabrielle Kerouac (known as *Mémère* in his novels). He spent his early years with his brother Gerard, who died slowly of rheumatic fever at the age of nine. Gerard was considered as a saint in the community, and Kerouac's life has sometimes been seen as a long, not least by himself, quest for his lost brother. Kerouac wrote: 'The whole reason why I wrote at all and drew breath to bite in vain with pen and ink, ... because of Gerard, the idealism, Gerard, the religious hero — *'write in honor of his death'* (*Visions of Gerard* 112).

Kerouac spoke only French until the age of six and still had an accent when he made up his mind, while still in high school, to become a major American writer. However, it was as a football player that he first won any kind of recognition. In 1939, he entered Horace Mann High school in the Bronx with the promise of a football scholarship at Columbia if he could prove himself academically. He had to give up his scholarship after being injured, and joined the Navy, from which he was discharged as a 'schizoid personality'. He returned to New York, where he became a close friend of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and other members of the generation that he would later call 'Beat' and with whom 'he kept talking about the same things [he] liked, long lines of personal experience and vision, nightlong confessions full of hope that had become illicit and repressed by war, stirring rumblings of the new soul' (Plummer, *New York Times*, 30 December 1979). In the middle of the 1940s, he met Neal Cassady, embodied as the character Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*, who became his lifelong fellow-traveler, his

'long lost brother', and the 'Holy Goof', a literary model, an alchemist who redeemed life from darkness, just as Kerouac was trying to do in his writing.

However, Kerouac would never be satisfied with this kind of wandering life and his sense of loneliness and search as a 'religious wanderer' or 'Dharma bum', as he called himself, would be clearly expressed as he delved into Buddhism in the late 1950s. This new experience would not bring him to the end of his search for the sainthood of his lost brother. He increasingly withdrew into paranoia and alcoholism and died in 1969, after going to France and Quebec in search of his roots.

Why did Jack Kerouac leave Lowell?

Kerouac's life and writings mainly emerge from his dissatisfaction with American society and from his relentless quest for a condition that would transcend himself and America. In his first book, *The Town and the City*, the decline of the Martin family is presented as a result of their naïve belief in the American Dream. The negation of the myth of success and upward mobility comes to the fore in George's (the father) letter to his wife:

The poor American people! All the world takes us for millionaires living in mansions. ... Some poor devil who works his heart out because his parents and grandparents had to work so hard and taught him the life of work too. And he is such a peaceable man, the American, the first really peaceable man (cited in Weinreich 1983:76).

The Martin family represents the ideal good, hard-working American family that deserves its share of the pie, but they never get it. George dies poor, his business swallowed up by large money concerns. As a reaction against this state of affairs, the three Martin brothers struggle to set themselves free from their father, and through that struggle, from the life-styles associated with authority and responsibility.

However, all of them experience loss, including the loss of their hopes, as they move from the town to the city, even though this 'rite of passage' is seen as a necessary rebellion for survival. The paradise lost can only be regained through a quest for new meanings and new identities, through a series of acts of transgression. Unfortunately, these acts only lead the three brothers to restlessness and often to despair. At the end of the novel, the father dies a poor man, and the sons still have not found an answer to their questions about their identity and their place in American society.

In *Doctor Sax*, Kerouac expresses his doubts about the Catholic religion. Through Doctor Sax, a figure that represents both the author's anxieties and fears and his literary development, Jacky Duluoz (alias Kerouac) rejects Catholicism, which, for him, is inextricably linked with death. At the beginning of the book, he writes: 'I gave up the church to ease my horrors — too much candlelight, too much wax' (1959:66). However, Kerouac's position was always more ambivalent.

Indeed, not only would he describe himself 'a Catholic mystic' at the end of his life, but even in *Doctor Sax*, he suggests that Jacky's allegiance to Doctor Sax is, in fact, rather dangerous, as it may involve the loss of heaven. Unlike his friends, who, by living the lives of workingmen, will be protected from hell on earth, Jacky may lay himself open to mutilation of body and soul in his search for a world beyond Lowell. For Kerouac, leaving the church in search of a mystic experience also meant leaving behind all certainty about life. The feeling of loss was immediate. He felt that there was no turning back, he judged that 'he was being torn from [his] mother's womb, from home Lowell into the Unknown — a serious lostness that has never repaired itself in [his] shattered flesh' 111).

Kerouac's disillusionment with a self-satisfying but oppressive post-war America is also a recurrent motif in his 'road novels'. During the first of the four trips in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise (alias Kerouac) arrives in Cheyenne during 'Wild West Week'. The streets are crowded with 'fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowboy attire'. Sal is 'amazed, and at the same time [he] felt it was ridiculous' in [his] first shot at the west [he] was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition' (33). Sal, who was searching West for the 'real' and the 'authentic' American identities, only finds, in Baudrillard's terms, simulacra, that is, a world in which reality and tradition have been lost and replaced with another reality that is similar, but 'even better', and even 'more authentic'. In the novel, the 'real' is represented by some native Americans who 'watch everything with their stony eyes' (35).

At the end of the novel, as they travel through Mexico, Sal and Dean meet a group of shawled Indians:

All had their hands outstretched. They had come down from the back mountains and higher places to hold forth their hands for something they thought civilization would offer, and they never dreamed the sadness and the poor disillusion of it. They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads, and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way (299).

The sense of dissatisfaction can also be found in Kerouac's earlier and later novels. In *Doctor Sax*, when the Merrimac river threatens to flood the town, the boys wish that it would rip through the dull, adult dominated life of Lowell. When it does, they are shocked, but Kerouac regrets that 'there was something that can't possibly come back again in America and history, the gloom of the unaccomplished mudheap civilization when it gets caught with its pants down from a source it has long lost contact with' (180). America is about to lose contact with man and nature, and the 'mudheap civilization' is about to repress the natural forces of life and nature. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith (Kerouac), who is told that it is against the law to sleep on the river bed, reacts: 'The only alternative to sleeping out, hopping freights and doing what I wanted. I saw in a vision would be to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a

madhouse where we could be "supervised"" (96). Again, we find some of the themes that would become dominant ten years later.

Kerouac's literary pursuits

Kerouac's main quest should be seen as above all a literary pursuit. Indeed, his trips through America are motivated more by his urge to write and his need to find materials than by a personal quest for identity. It is to a large extent the American author Thomas Wolfe who sent him 'on the road'. In *Vanity of Duluoaz*, Kerouac remembers that: 'He just woke me up to America as a Poem instead of America as a place to struggle around and sweat in. Mainly this dark-eyed American poet made me want to prowl, and roam, and see the real America that was there and that had never been uttered' (1968:75). Kerouac suddenly realized that all his dreams as a football player had been futile, and that 'we were all crazy and had nothing to work for except the next meal and the next good sleep'. Pushed into the 'American night, the Thomas Wolfe darkness', he sees that 'little winding dirt road going west to my lost dreams of being an American man'. However, Thomas Wolfe also reminds him, through the title of one of his most famous novels, that 'You Can't Go Home Again'. Unfortunately, as we will see, Kerouac would be less successful in following this part of his master's precepts.

Kerouac's road goes west, but it is also a road that leads him into the uncertainty of future. At the beginning of *On the Road*, Sal Paradise makes it clear that his trip is pure exploration. When a car picks his companion and himself up, the driver asks them: 'You boys going to get somewhere, or just going?' Sal answers: 'We didn't understand the question, and it was a damned good question' (1957: 22). What seems to be most important in the road novels is for Kerouac to turn his back on the past. In *On the Road*, Alain Fournier's novel *Le Grand Meaulnes* is used to illustrate the choice he makes between the past and the future, between east and west. As Sal travels through Arizona, he gives up reading Fournier's novel and prefers 'reading the American landscape'. This sense of anomie, of not belonging to any specific place or group, also appears in other parts of the novel. After a few days of his first trip, Sal

woke up as the sun was reddening, and that was the distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was ... I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my Youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened there and then ... (1957:17).

However, the distinction between past and future, between East and West is not always clear-cut. A little later, Sam meets the Ghost of Susquehanna who claims that he is headed for 'Canady'. He looks for a bridge which he never finds, and is going west while he thinks that he is going east. The same confusion reappears in Kerouac's later novel *Pic*, where he asks:

Slim, who was that man?' I asked him, and he said 'Shoo, that was some kinda ghost of the river, he's been looking for Canada in Virginia, West Pennsylvania, North New York, New York City, East Arthurtis and South Pottzawattony for the last eighty years as far as I can figure, and on foot too. He'll never find the Canady and he'll never get to Canady because he's going the wrong way all the time (cited in Waddell 1990:13).

These situations reflect the whole difficulty and ambiguity of Kerouac's search. The America 'that is there and has never been uttered' is that of lost identities, or at the very least, of identities that have been marginalized by the mainstream of American society. Throughout *On the Road*, Kerouac celebrates America's racial diversity. Mill City, where Sal Paradise's friend Remi Boncoeur lives, is described as 'the only community in America where Whites and Negroes live together voluntarily', and in California, Sal, the Franco-American, and Terry, his Mexican-American girlfriend, eat in a Chinese restaurant and spend a pleasant evening with an African-American family – a racial 'mixture' that was much less common in the fifties than today. Sal wishes he were anything but a white American:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro ... I stopped at a little shack where a man sold hot red chili in paper containers; I bought some and ate it, strolling in the dark mysterious streets. I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions ... (1957:180).

He envies the Negro family that 'knows nothing of disappointment and 'white sorrows'.

However, while finding inspiration for his writing in these margins of society, Kerouac never goes very far in experiencing Black or Mexican 'sorrows'. In spite of his sincere and profound sympathy for the outcasts of society, his descriptions of racial difference often dissolve into stereotype or cultural fantasy. He does not have, nor does he take enough time for such experiences, since, as he later writes in *On the Road*: 'I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it' (1957:205). His failure to live the lives of other minorities is highlighted by his returns to his mother at the end of his trips. Not only does Kerouac fail to understand other identities, but he also fails to extricate himself from the grip of his own French-Canadian roots. Indeed, much has been written about Kerouac's pathological relation to his mother. The same could be said concerning the way he essentialized the French and French-Canadian communities. Indeed, these were changing rapidly, but Kerouac always represented them as the 'paradise lost' of his childhood. Thus, he somehow succeeded in exploring the many margins of America, but forgot that such an enterprise also means that 'you can't go home again'.

It must be noted, however, that Kerouac's quest is not foremost a search for his own identity. It is also a quest for a form of transcendence, for a new sort of religious experience that would enable him to go beyond identity. The inherent contradiction and tension between these two quests and his inability to solve them ultimately explains why he failed in both.

Thus, *On the Road* can also be read as Kerouac's search for his lost brother. To the sainthood of Gerard corresponds the symbolism of Dean Moriarty as a passionate American youth, the hero of the beat generation. In a church in his hometown, Kerouac had a vision that told him that the real meaning of 'beat' was 'beatific'. In the novel, Dean is 'beat' as a member of the beat generation who could not care less about the rules and conventions of mainstream middle-class America, and also 'beatific' in the sense that he converts his rejection of conventions into a mystic experience.

Dean is a kind of Nietzschean hero, beyond good and evil. He represents pure transgression (as does Kerouac's writing) and the antithesis of the good father, the faithful husband, and the hard-working middle-class American, all of whom he abhors and despises. At the beginning of the novel, Kerouac presented him as 'a youth tremendously excited with life', and though he was a con-man, he was only conning because 'he wanted so much to live and to get involved with people who would otherwise pay no attention to him' (1957:10). Kerouac compares Dean with his New York intellectual friends and finds Dean's intelligence 'every bit as formal and shining and complete without the tedious intellectualness'. Dean is the symbol of what Kerouac is looking for: 'A western kinsman of the sun, Dean. Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon' (10). The clash between Dean's exuberance and traditional American values is best depicted in what has been called his 'trial'. In the scene, the wife of one of his disciples accuses him of being guilty of irresponsibility, of using people, and other buffoonery. However, Kerouac makes it clear that it is his moralistic assailants, not Dean, who are guilty. In fact, Dean is 'purely uplifting', 'never complains' and has given all of his ungrateful aggressors 'a damned good time'. This scene gives Kerouac an opportunity to criticize societal institutions, as well as all the influences that try to curtail individual attempts to invigorate this dormant society. Indeed, unlike George Martin who 'did everything right' in *The Town and the City*, but died poor, Dean Moriarty violates all rules; he is beyond conventions, and, therefore is a real American hero.

This transcendent character, this higher state of being which irrepressibly attracts Kerouac is referred to in his novels as 'IT'. In *On the Road*, it is in movement and in exuberant characters that he tries to find this state of ecstasy:

The only ones 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, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow Roman candles, exploding like spi-

ders across the stars and in the middle you see the centerlight pop and everyone goes, Awww! (1958:8).

Later, Rollo Greb, a minor character that Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty meet at a party in New York provides us with a complete embodiment of the state of 'IT'. Indeed, Rollo danced in an almost subconscious way, 'he lisped, he writhed, he flopped, he moaned, ... he fell back in despair, ... he was so excited with life', and Dean tells Sal: 'That's what I want to be, I want to be like him ... If you go like him, you'll finally get it' (1957:127).

Kerouac's search for 'IT' leads him to an exploration of Buddhism in the novel *The Dharma Bums*. According to his friend Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac was particularly interested in the Three Marks of Existence: first, existence contains suffering; second, experience is transitory, and third, there is no permanent self. At this stage, Kerouac seems to have given up his search for a single unified identity, but rather sees suffering and impermanence as a way to move beyond both his roots and his idea of an American hero. He now seems to have accepted loneliness as his fate. In *Dharma Bums*, as he hitch-hikes, the narrator Ray Smith sings a song called 'Everybody's got a home but me'. He also speaks of the bleak feelings of homelessness that oppress him in cheap hotel rooms along the road. However, at the end of one of his later novels (*Lonesome Traveler*), Kerouac reaffirms his faith in the ultimate goodness and oneness of existence; he minimizes life's significance and sums up man's purpose here as the need to suffer to prepare for golden Eternity; a very Catholic conclusion to a Buddhist experience.

It is in *Desolation Angels* that Kerouac comes the closest to pure mystic experience, to the Void that constitutes the 'IT'. On top of the mountain where he works as a guard for the army, he realizes that 'Homozeen is the Void — at least HOMOZEEN means the void to my eyes' (cited in Charters 1995:320). For a few days at least, he has managed to free himself from all contingencies, 'to be *and* not to be'. He sees the future as one in which he will no longer experience any need for identity and territory: 'regain [his] life and go down from this mountain and simply be-be-be the infinite fertilities of the mind of infinity, make no comments, complaints, criticisms, appraisals, ... just flow, flow' (322). At this point, he no longer feels the need to travel or to physically move since 'I will be the void, moving without being moved' (323).

Unfortunately, Kerouac's descent from the mountain also turned out to be a descent into hell and to his own death as he fell prey to alcohol, drugs, and prostitutes. His visit to his friends at Big Sur (also the title of one of his novels) becomes a metaphor of his own death. The sandy paths that lead to the sea are there to engulf him. He is scared by the sight of the carcass of an old car which he sees as his own body, and when he accidentally poisons a mouse, he compares himself to Cain, the first murderer of humanity. The sainthood of his brother is forever lost. Kerouac turns away from his Buddhist inspirations and returns to his Catholic imagery. As he wakes up one morning, he hears the cries of a Salvation Army priest: 'Satan is the cause of your alcoholism, Satan is the cause of your immorality, Sa-

tan is everywhere working to destroy you ...' (Charters 1995:388). As one of his friends later wrote: 'Jack clung to his origins. He was given the benefit of a lot of rope, but the road was always that rope that would finally hang him'¹ (Hamelin 1988:386).

Kerouac: A French-American writer

In a letter to Franco-American journalist Yvonne Le Maître, Kerouac writes: 'All my knowledge rests in my 'French-Canadianness' and nowhere else. The English language is a tool lately found ... so late (I never spoke English before I was six or seven), at 21, I was still somewhat awkward and illiterate sounding in my speech and writings. The reason I handle it so easily is because it is not my own language. I refashion it to fit French images, do you see that?' (Anctil 1990:v).

Kerouac learned the art of story-telling in the French-Canadian community in Lowell, Massachusetts, where his parents came together with other families in the traditional *veillées* where people sang, drank, and told numerous stories. His famous novel *On the Road* can be read as a series of little stories on America.

However, the French language only appears in his three 'Lowell novels', those that relate directly to the time when he was using French in his family and his community. Furthermore, Kerouac was very much aware that his readers would not understand his *joual* (French-Canadian) dialect and therefore translated all his French phrases into English.

Thus, French is used only as a private code to talk about the Church, the family, his brother Gerard, and the kitchen where he spent most of his time. It helps the Franco-American reader penetrate the intimacy of Kerouac's family while keeping others out. It also helps Kerouac give a better picture of how restricted the use of French had already become, with most public functions being performed in English.

It is upon his literary style, however, that Kerouac's French heritage had the most profound influence. In 1951, Kerouac began experimenting with language, sketching his words on paper in the manner of an impressionist painter or a jazz musician. This method allowed him to write words as they came to his mind² — in standard English, in slang, or in French — and freed him to explore his French heritage. It was a way for him to deal with his bilingualism — the riddle of how to assimilate his first language to the development of an American prose style. As literary critic Maurice Potteet recognized:

The spontaneity of Doctor Sax (do not stop to think, baroque phrasing and form, word-play, bilingual texts, film-book comparisons) permits Kerouac to build bridges to and from a number of inner and local realities which otherwise might not 'become' American at all. In other words, 'spontaneous' writing and effect are one answer at least to an ethnic situation that in many ways resembles the 'double bind' of psychology: if a writer cannot be himself in his book (a minority

background) he is lost; if he becomes an 'ethnic writer' he is off on a tangent. Also, 'spontaneous' writing, as a technique, reflects a cultural set of values which pins hopes upon the individual ('I had a dream') who can come up with something original and new (cited in Charters 1990:185).

Thus, it is not his use of French that made Kerouac a 'French-American' writer, but rather that fact that, in Henri Miller's words: 'Kerouac did something to our immaculate prose from which it may never recover'. According to Deleuze & Guattari (1997:105), Kerouac is a minor author who writes in a minor language. In these authors' definition, a minor language is not a minority language, but rather 'the dialect or rather idiolect, on the basis of which one can make one's language minor'. Thus, minor languages are 'not simply sublanguages, idiolects or dialects, but potential agents of the major languages entering into a becoming-minoritarian in all of its dimensions and elements' (Deleuze & Guattari 1997:106). Thus, the authors conclude, 'That is the strength of authors termed "minor", who are in fact the greatest, the only greats: having to conquer one's own language, in order to place it in a state of continuous variation (the opposite of regionalism³)' (Deleuze & Guattari 1997:106). In their book on Kafka, Deleuze & Guattari argue that minor literatures are characterized by three main features: (1) deterritorialization; (2) a political aspect; and (3) a collective nature. In our discussion of Kerouac's writing, we should add a fourth one: writing against death.

(a) Deterritorialized language

As a user of English as a foreign language, Kerouac first tried to reterritorialize his language. He rewrote his first novels many times, trying to adopt the style of the major American writer he respected most (Thomas Wolfe). However, when he later developed his own style, this style reflected the intensity of his writing,⁴ the beat of jazz music. He uses the dash, just as Céline, one of the authors he admired most, used exclamation.

When William Burroughs writes about Kerouac that 'he was a writer', what he is telling us is that, in spite of the autobiographical nature of his writing, Kerouac's novels should *not* be read as the story of his own life. He recognizes that there is a gap between speech, language, and writing on the one hand, and memory on the other, between 'the saying' and 'the said' (Ducrot), between the act of enunciation and what is enunciated. As Deleuze writes in *Proust and the Signs*: 'The work of art not only interprets and not only emits signs; it produces them, by determinable procedures' (cited in Mottram 1983:53). Kerouac was deeply aware of these procedures as he exposed them in his 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose'⁵. He was also aware that, as Deleuze adds for Proust, 'the search is oriented to the future, not the past'. However, he also attempted to shape the materials he collected during his numerous trips and changing experiences. Therefore, the search gives rise to an inevitable tension between past and future, between memories and words. As Roland Barthes writes in his *Degré zéro de l'écriture*, 'it is because there is no reconciliation within present society, that lan-

guage, necessary and necessarily oriented, creates a situation fraught with conflict'.

At the end of his life, Kerouac became disillusioned with himself, but also with his success (or lack thereof) as an author. In his novel *Vanity of Duluoz*, he writes to his wife: 'a WRITER whose very 'success' far from being a happy triumph as of old, was the sign of doom himself'; and he adds: 'Insofar as nobody loves my dashes anyway, I'll use regular punctuation for the new illiterate generation' (1968:9). It is therefore not surprising, in view of his return to 'his roots', that Deleuze & Guattari present Kerouac in their *Anti-Oedipus* as: '... the artist with the soberest means who took revolutionary 'flight', and who later finds himself immersed in dreams of a Great America, and then in search of his Breton ancestors of a superior race. Is it not the destiny of American literature that of crossing limits and borders, causing deterritorialized flows of desire to flow, but also always making these flows transport fascisizing, moralizing, puritan, and familialist territories' (Deleuze & Guattari 1075:232). Therefore, for Deleuze and Guattari, Kerouac represents the contradiction within certain forms of American ideology which see American society as 'future-oriented', but whose values always refer to territory, nation, religion, and 'order'.

(b) The political nature of Kerouac's language.

Kerouac was not interested in politics. Yet his writing is one of the most powerful political statements of his generation. It is the search for the communal soul that was being dissolved following WWII, the search for the many 'paradises' and roots that were forever lost; it is the rejection of new middle-class America. Through Kerouac's books, a whole generation expresses its anxieties, its anger, and its desire to live. Kerouac's literature represents all minorities (Mexicans, African-Americans, etc.), those rejected by mainstream society, those who are burned, and burn to live 'like fabulous roman candles'.

(c) Everything has a collective value.

Kerouac is always a 'we': the 'we' French-Canadians, the 'we' Catholics, the 'we' Americans, the 'we' beat generation. His identity is not characterized by hybridity, but rather by constantly shifting identities. Allen Ginsberg explains how Kerouac's discovery of general semantics helped him dissociate 'words from ideas and events', avoid the 'is of identity', so that he could empathize with the American boy, the football hero, the sophisticated litterateur, or the old drunk, alternatively. In every situation, the other is himself and he is the other.

(d) Writing against death

The death of his brother Gerard, but also that of many other children in Lowell developed an early awareness of mortality in Kerouac. The events recalled in his Lowell trilogy (*Visions of Gerard*, *Doctor Sax*, *Maggie Cassidy*) are most often related to mortal visions and remembrances. These visions are most vivid in *Doctor Sax*, a product of Kerouac's imagination which represents both death itself, and a superhero that helps him fight death and his other anxieties. Schooled by

the dead (many of his Lowell friends died at a very young age) and the memory of his brother who died a saint at the age of nine, Jacky (Kerouac) fears death, but finds it seductive at the same time. Interestingly, these flights of imagination also lead to the awakening of his interest in art and literature. At the end of the novel, Doctor Sax takes Jacky to 'the pit' for 'judgement day': 'I leaned on a stone, the Pit yawned below, I looked down to face my horror, my tormentor, my mad-face demon mirror of myself I found myself looking into the dark. I found myself looking into IT. I found myself compelled to fall. *The snake was coming for me!*' (238). When the snake disappears, when Jack's fears are released in language, Doctor Sax is transformed into a man, his purpose is fulfilled. Kerouac's quest, his courage to face 'IT', the Void allows him to build walls against death through language. However, since 'IT' and the void also represent language, he needs to keep writing against death. This is only possible because he reappropriates and 'minoritizes' the English language and turns against it as a majority language.

Following Foucault's definition of literature used in the epigraph to this chapter, Kerouac listened to 'the unavoidable and growing noise' of post World War II America. He followed its movements on the road and its discourse, and opposed his own language to it as a loyal but distorting mirror image, hence the different styles that correspond to his various experiences, and the numerous fights he had with his editors who wanted to change his use of punctuation. He successfully managed to make himself understood in English, while maintaining an unbridgeable distance with the 'conventional English sentence'. Even though, through his death, he eventually fell into the Void he had created for himself, this Void (his writing) is still with us as a sign (or signifier) of the English of all the American English-speaking minorities he encountered, a Void that needs endless shaping and reshaping to give voice to the constantly changing conditions of these minorities.

Kerouac's life and works have often been described as a quest, both by his many biographers and by himself. The variety of his experiments with writing indicates that this quest could not be satisfied. It was Foucault again who pointed out that the search for identity and immortality through language was something of the past when he wrote that: 'Where a work had the duty of creating immortality, it now attains the right to kill, *to become the murderer of its author*' (my emphasis). He added that: 'If we wish to know the writer in our day, it will be through the singularity of his absence and in his link to death, which has transformed him into a victim of his own writings' (Foucault 1977:117). Kerouac may have failed to understand that, once his writing had led him on the inextricable network of American roads, avenues, streets, and dead ends, a single, well-defined identity could no longer be recovered. While he succeeded in becoming a diasporic writer, his quest for his roots went in the opposite direction. These could not survive together; the writer survived, but the author died.

NOTES

¹ The French writer and philosopher Bataille defines this tension between the 'I' and the 'void', between identity and the language into which this identity dissolves, as an opening which is communication: 'at this point, there is no need to elaborate; as my rapture escapes me, I immediately reenter the night of a lost child, anguished in this desire to prolong his ravishment, with no other end than exhaustion, no way of stopping short of fainting. It is such excruciating bliss' (cited in Foucault 1977:43).

² In his *Visions of the Great Rememberer*, Ginsberg writes: 'The mind supplies the language, if you don't interfere. That's something I learned from Jack Kerouac — how to let the mind supply the language ... Language is a vehicle for feeling, language itself does not mean anything' (cited in Mottram 52).

Indeed, if Kerouac's style varies incredibly from novel to novel, if he experienced with poetry, music, and other forms of art, it is because he was giving expression to his experiences to language. Writing for him does not mean shaping reality into a linguistic form (that of the novel, the poem, etc.), but rather *shaping language* to make it fit feelings and experience.

³ As his friends and biographers often noted, Kerouac was very 'intense' when writing: he wrote extremely fast (it took Kerouac only three weeks to write *On the Road*) and typed vigorously. This led literary critic Truman Capote to write that 'this isn't writing, it's just typing'.

⁴ Kerouac describes his 'procedure' as follows: 'Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on the subject of image'. It is interesting to observe how Kerouac integrated the different cultural rhythms (linguistic, musical, etc.) in his own language. It is mainly through these rhythms, most notably jazz music, that he managed to weave the expression of these groups in his own language.

⁵ See for example the rather peculiar syntax and the use of dashes in the following extract from the *Book of Dreams* :

FOR THE FIRST TIME — dreamed I climbed a gradual cliff from slope to slope and got up on top and sat down but suddenly in looking down I saw it was not a gradual cliff at all but sheer — in the dream no thought of getting down on other side — in the dream as always in Highplaces Dreams I'm concerned with *getting down the way I came*, or rectifying my own mistakes — and even though I know it's a dream, within the dream I insist I must get sown off the high cliff I climbed — the same old fear grips me in mortal throes — 'but if it's a dream then the cliff is not real', I tell myself 'so just wake up & the cliff will vanish' — I hardly believe its possible, and trembling, open my eyes & the dream is gone, the cliff is gone, the terror is gone This is the sign ... (cited in Charters 1985:587).

Kerouac writes about his own style: 'My position in the current American literary scene is simply that I got sick and tired of the conventional English sentence which seemed to me so ironbound in its rules, so inadmissible with reference to the actual format of my mind as I had learned to probe it in the moderns spirit of Freud and Jung, that I couldn't express myself through that form any longer' (cited in Charters 1995:486).

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