PROVOKING ART: EXAMINING NATURAL AND CONTRIVED CONFLICT IN JACK KEROUAC'S NOVELS

THESIS

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." With each scream, the pillow hit the couch again. By now, there were little pieces of cotton floating around the room, escapees from the flailing cushion. I, standing, mortified, watched my inconsolable date have a breakdown in front of everyone I knew. I'd asked Jennifer to the prom, and it had all gone wrong. After the dance, we went, with a group of my friends, to stay at a beach cabin in Galveston. The night before prom, Jennifer ended up on the beach, "making it" with a guy on the soccer team. I wanted to put the situation behind us so we could enjoy our senior prom, but she could not do it. She felt so guilty about the ordeal that after telling me about it, she picked up a pillow and began to pummel the couch. At that point, she refused to be comforted. She was so deliriously angry at herself and the ruined night that she quickly retreated to bed. The rest of our night, and our relationship, was miserable. I imagined that prom night would be the night that we found out whether the relationship could last through graduation. It turned out that it was. The relationship ended bitterly shortly after that night. The memory of my first girlfriend, a relationship of two months in all, always makes me wonder why I chose to ask this girl to be my date. She was beautiful and intelligent, but there was an emotional instability in her, and deep down I knew it would all end badly. From the first date, standing, talking idly about jazz, I could tell that we were hopeless. She never stopped moving, ranting about her domineering Cuban father and Charlie Parker. I felt drawn to her strongly, but there was always something telling me that the relationship would never work. And it did not. The whirling, shrieking couch abuse was merely the aftermath of a day's built-up guilt. Even after I found out the events of the night before, I wanted to move on. I did not want my senior prom to be a night full of guilt and regret. But maybe I did.

Throughout high school, I lived with the weight of knowing that my parents were unhappily living together for me. My family's living situation always felt like an enormous weight. However, to keep me in a school that would offer me opportunities academically as well as athletically, my parents and I endured our miserable home lives. Even so, through all of the conflict at home, I was successful both as a student and a golfer. By the time I reached my senior prom, my life at home was at its worst. My parents were miserable, and both were ready to go their separate ways. On the other hand, I was at the peak of both my academic and athletic high school careers. In my final semester, I received the Houston Chronicle scholar athlete of the year award for male golfer. The award is given every year to a Houston area athlete that stands out both in the classroom and on the golf course. As all of the pressure of my home life converged on me, I was excelling as I never had before. Consequently, I came to the conclusion that the conflict that I had to confront at home was providing a certain creative energy that I brought both to school and to the golf course. In short, I began to believe that the more difficult my personal life was, the better I could perform in other arenas of my life. This realization never fully hit me until the night of my prom.

Six years later, I am curious if it really was the personal conflict that drove me to achieve at a high level in high school. I also want to know if I was subconsciously sabotaging my personal life for the benefit of my golf game, which seems to me a particularly disturbing notion. After all, rationally, I do believe my happiness is more important than any material success I could achieve in school or playing golf. Nonetheless, I am not the first person to find excitement in conflict. Scott Slovic writes of Henry David Thoreau:

> But what Thoreau seems especially intent on doing in his Journal, with only occasional explicit references to the idea of correspondence, is to record the transitions from season to season, not merely isolate the traits of each. It is as if these temporal "borders" between the different phases of the natural year, much like his own spatial and psychological "border life" ("Walking," 130) between the wilderness and civilization, provide a particularly rich realm in which to prompt awareness of harmonies and discords, of shared and individual identity. (17)

Thoreau finds inspiration in his life and art in borders and transitions. Observations in Thoreau's Journal and Walden focus on these transitions. Consequently, the conflict in the changing of seasons—Thoreau existing in the unsettling space *between*—makes Thoreau notice melting snow on the side of a railroad embankment. The sight of sand spilling through the melting snow leads Thoreau to gain insight into the nature of life: "Thus it seems that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature" (Walden 548). The conflict between winter and spring allows Thoreau to gain a greater understanding of the operation of the entirety of Nature. As we observe in

Thoreau's work, the ability to identify the consequences of two different states confronting each other, and communicate them skillfully, is a key ingredient of compelling art. The creative process needs conflict as fuel.

Nearly one hundred years after Walden was published, Jack Kerouac begins his writing career. Kerouac's writing, like Thoreau's, needs conflict in order to energize it creatively. Consequently, since both Thoreau and Kerouac choose to write exclusively about their life experiences, the conflict in the two authors' lives becomes a necessity for their literature. Thoreau writes:

> In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained.... I should not talk so much about myself if there was anyone else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my own experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives. (259)

In the first pages of Walden, Thoreau declares his intention to write only about his own experience. Kerouac makes nearly the same claim. In his "Essentials of Modern Prose," Kerouac writes:

> [T]he best writing is always from the most painful wrungout tossed from the cradle warm protective mind—tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow!—now!—your* way is your only way—"good"—or "bad"—always honest, ("ludicrous"), spontaneous, "confessional" interesting, because not "crafted." Craft *is* craft. (Charters, Beat Reader 58)

Kerouac, like Thoreau, believes that writers should write the stories of their own lives, and then the "reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind" (57). Reflecting this attitude, nearly all of Kerouac's literature is intensely personal (His final novel, Pic, written through the eyes of a young African-American boy, is a telling failure—his editor at the time, Ellis Amburn, notes, "He read some passages to me, but I didn't like his black dialect" (369)—that suggests just how much Kerouac relied on his own life for his art.) Additionally, Kerouac has faith in the power of honesty in writing. He believes that by recording his experience, as he felt it, he could allow readers of his work to connect with the common human impulses he experienced in his life. Kerouac's writing philosophy is a bold yet powerful assumption about the way one should write. Without question, Kerouac's decision to follow his own whims when writing infuses an energy and honesty into his work. However, if, as I propose, creativity must be inspired by conflict, then writing about his personal life put him in a position in which he must have conflict in his life to give him material of interest to write about. Certainly, there is no life that is free of conflict, but when a need for personal conflict meets the ambition of a determined young writer, the results can be disastrous.

Before I go any further, I believe that there is a distinction to be made here. Kerouac uses natural conflicts, like the ones that Thoreau observes in Concord, but there are also *artificial* conflicts that Kerouac creates for his art. The former are an essential part of creating art, while the latter create a potentially self-destructive pattern that has deep roots in American culture. For example, during Kerouac's visit west that inspired the novel Big Sur, he deliberately created a situation in which he was sure that sparks would fly. Kerouac arranged to bring his friend's (Neal Cassady) mistress to Neal's house where he knew she would meet Neal's wife. Unfortunately for Kerouac, the meeting provided no excitement even though the encounter still made its way into the novel (Kerouac 334). The assembly of Cassady's love interests demonstrates Kerouac's desire to create conflict when he sees none around him. Illustrating this same impulse in one of Kerouac's artistic and cultural mentors, Julie Ellison writes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Like a good American, he identifies power with struggle, self-reliance with rebellion" (153). Emerson believes that struggle produces energy that can be harvested for intellectual growth. It is, indeed, an American tradition for individuals to define themselves by the conflict in their lives as well as the sort of "self" that emerges from those experiences. Clearly, I fell into this trap in high school. The pain that I lived with at home defined my existence, good as well as bad. I supposed that all of the positive aspects of my life were born of the suffering I had endured. I believe that I had associated suffering with my successes so closely that, subconsciously, I began to try to find new ways to make my life more difficult. Kerouac's life and writing follow the exact pattern that mine did in high school. Just as I believed that I needed conflict to inspire me to play better golf, Kerouac believes that he needs conflict to fuel his writing. However, once the conflicts that motivate Kerouac to write become contrived, both his life and his work suffer. As his career wears on, Kerouac seems to be perpetually sucked deeper into this self-destructive American myth that he must struggle to be great at what he loves.

Consequently, in this thesis I endeavor to examine the ways that natural conflicts arise in Jack Kerouac's personal life and the way these unavoidable conflicts inspire his personal life as well as his novels. For example, throughout On the Road, narrator Sal Paradise (one of Kerouac's semi-autobiographical alter egos) makes trips back and forth from the east coast to the west coast with little or no money in his pocket. The conflicts that force Paradise to hitchhike and take crowded buses during his journeys are the same conflicts that Kerouac experiences when he really does scrounge his way across America. On a packed bus, Paradise meets Terry, a young Mexican girl with whom he spends two weeks living with first in a cheap Los Angeles hotel, and finally in a tent in the California valley where he picks cotton to make money. Kerouac's descriptions of these fifteen days from his real life are some of the happiest accounts he ever wrote (Kerouac 89). Throughout these trips across the country and his stay with Terry, Paradise is destitute. There is a palpable tension that is created by Paradise's lack of money. However, everything works out. The struggle that comes from Paradise's lack of money is a common struggle for almost all of humanity. It is no coincidence that this struggle nourishes Paradise. Since poverty inspires a conflict that is universal, Paradise is truly happy. This episode directly parallels Kerouac's own experience. Just as the time on the road is a positive experience for Paradise, so is the time that Kerouac the author spent traveling across America.

On the other hand, I will also look at the ways Kerouac actively sought out conflict for his personal life in order to inspire himself. The conflicts that Kerouac could have avoided, but did not, can easily be viewed as a choice to make his literature more important than his life. The choice to disregard his happiness in favor of his writing, in particular, provides an unnatural tension for Kerouac. Consequently, as Kerouac's writing career continues, he begins to develop a more cynical view of the role of the writer. Kerouac's growing cynicism about the role of a writer is a logical extension of Emerson's faith in the value of struggle. Steve Wilson writes that Kerouac, "now believes the writer's true role to be that of extracting meaning from those who live it, because as a writer he cannot live authentically himself" (310). Kerouac, at this point, has embraced Emerson's belief to its fullest implication. If struggling can make Kerouac a more powerful writer, then struggle is what he must do. I propose that this choice is Kerouac's great failing. In his literature, he romanticizes his own life experiences. However, in his own life Kerouac does not give himself that same respect. Instead, his literature is an account of a man who decides that his life's work has doomed his soul. But intensely personal writing does not require a life of misery, and it did not doom Kerouac. Nonetheless, in the end, Kerouac's skill as a writer destroyed his personal life. Kerouac created a script for his life that he followed to his unraveling and eventual death. In the midst of an inspiring writing career, Kerouac decided that his craft removed him too much from real life, and that gap was destined to make him miserable. This choice created a personal conflict within Kerouac; he struggles openly with his desire to be a writer and to be happy as well. The conflict unarguably fuels some of Kerouac's most exciting writing, but in the end it amounted to Kerouac's own death sentence. His alcoholism spirals out of control until we are left with chronicles of almost complete detachment from reality. Kerouac could have chosen to observe the natural conflicts that exist naturally around him, as did Thoreau before him. However, Jack Kerouac chose a different path. I propose Kerouac had ample material to write about; every life, after all, is full of conflict. Instead, he chose a road that led to his death in his forties.

Preview

Chapter two addresses Kerouac's optimism in his novel On the Road. Paradise (Kerouac) finds conflict by setting out on journeys across the continent, with little or no money, accompanied by Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady). However, this conflict—traveling from New York to San Francisco is not an easy task when broke—seems to be inspired by an honest desire to understand America, and the conflicts that he encounters along the way, such as going hungry or having to pick up hitchhikers for gas money, do not appear to be tearing him apart. Nonetheless, the ways in which Kerouac found inspiration for his writing become increasingly less idealistic along the way.

The third chapter explores Leo Percepied's (Kerouac) affair with Mardou (Alene Lee), a half-black, half-Cherokee woman in The Subterraneans. At the outset of the novel, Leo confesses that he is interested in this woman because she is dark-skinned and he knows the relationship cannot last. This is a subtle shift from the optimism of On the Road, but here there seems to be a part of Kerouac that sought the conflict of an interracial relationship in order to inspire his writing. In On the Road, Paradise and Dean have a relationship where they both are exploiting each other; Dean gets instruction on how to write and Paradise gets to follow Dean around America and be inspired by his wild energy. However, in Leo's affair with Mardou, Leo is doing all of the conning. While at times his intentions with Mardou appear genuine, it is clear that her race plays a large part in his attraction to her. The repercussions of this affair are clearly destructive for Kerouac. His guilt inspires him to separate himself even further from the people around him, mainly through drinking, and he falls into terrible fits of self-loathing.

In the fourth chapter, I will investigate the culmination of Kerouac's growing impulse to torture himself in order to provide fuel for his writing. In Big Sur, Jack Dulouz (Kerouac) goes to stay in a friend's cabin in the woods. By this time, Kerouac was so overcome by his alcoholism that his mind begins to fracture. At his lowest, Dulouz hallucinates a cross coming toward him (Big Sur 205). Now, Jack sees himself as a martyr. All of the years of seeing writing as work, and viewing the consequences of that work as damning, leaves the reader with an insight into both Jack the character, and the author's mind. Kerouac has now fallen into almost complete despair over his life, and this despair could have been avoided had he not chosen to see his writing as a burden.

Chapter Five examines the American aspects of the tendency to identify conflict with creativity. Here, I address the concept of martyrdom in America. Rather than testifying for religious beliefs, in America, we are willing to die for our work. This is, in my estimation, exactly what happens to Kerouac. This typically American tragic end is sadly ironic for a man who was so deeply in love with America. It seemed he believed in the country and its values so much that he died for them. However, I am not suggesting that a miserable death at a young age is the only end offered by the appropriation of conflict in order to inspire creativity. One only has to look as far as his contemporary and friend, Allen Ginsberg, or one of his heroes, Henry David Thoreau, to find Americans who were sufficiently inspired by the natural conflicts around them to produce incredible works of literature as well as inspiring lives.

CHAPTER 2

ON THE ROAD TO CONFLICT

At the beginning of Jack Kerouac's On the Road, we are introduced to Sal Paradise, the struggling and depressed narrator of the novel. Steve Wilson writes of the opening lines of On the Road, "Kerouac establishes that his narrator is on a quest for enlightenment—a search for a spiritual cure" (305). Indeed, there is a clear desperation that initiates the action of the novel. Kerouac writes:

> I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserable weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life On the Road. Before that I'd often dreamed of going west to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off. (5)

Sal attributes his sickness to the end of a marriage, but, more importantly, a feeling that nothing around him has any life. The latter of these two feelings is significant because it represents a cultural, post-war melancholy from which Sal is desperate to break free. Sal attempts to recover from his illness by seeking out parts of America that are still free from the pessimism and conformity that followed WWII. Dean Moriarty, the road, and the struggles that accompany them represent the healing that Sal chases throughout the novel. All of the conflict in the novel is driven by Sal's genuine desire to find a cure for his depressingly mundane and uninspired life. The conflict created by Sal's desire to escape his typical postwar life motivates the action in the novel. However, the belief that conflict is necessary for creativity is not one that suddenly appears in Kerouac's time. One of Kerouac's American Romantic predecessors, Ralph Waldo Emerson, discusses conflict's power. Julie Ellison addresses the role of conflict in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writing:

> Emerson sets himself against one figure in order to propel himself toward another. He attacks, we find, not in order to attain the object of his desire, but to restore or strengthen his self-regard. In opposition, he feels free, distinct, and individual.... "Man is made for conflict, not for rest," he [Emerson] exclaims. "In action is his power, not in his goals but in his transitions man is great." (156)

Emerson argues that one must set oneself against another object in order to achieve greatness. The tension or conflict the writer receives from opposition strengthens the author and his writing. Sal's plan of escape from his melancholy, and his plan for his writing, is to set himself against conventional American society.

As background, it is important to address specifically what being on the road and following mad Dean all over North America has to offer Sal. First, there is the importance of movement. If it is true, as Emerson claims, that "In action is his power, not in his goals but in his transitions man is great" (156), then the frantically active <u>On the Road</u> must be tremendously powerful. Erik Mortenson writes:

> The title itself hints at this; the book is more concerned with movement than with fixed location. In fact, the reader is often surprised by this need to avoid staying in one place, as cross-country trips are undertaken merely to see someone in another city or to stop by for "a few days." Many of the most important events in the novel, for instance, take place in the spaces between, while moving from one location to another. If reification congeals fluid temporality into rigid spatiality, Kerouac's insistence on the motion of travel sunders this bond by replacing stasis with flux. (53)

Clearly, Kerouac's novel is a novel about motion. Kerouac makes a conscious choice to record the traveling of Sal back and forth across America. There is nearly no mention of the time his narrator spends at home. The novel chronicles the continual motion of the narrator and Dean Moriarty. Sal observes this perpetual movement in Dean during one of their cross-country drives:

> He had become absolutely mad in his movements; he seemed to be doing everything at the same time. It was a shaking of the head, up and down, sideways; jerky, vigorous hands; quick walking, sitting, crossing legs, uncrossing, getting up, rubbing the hands, rubbing his fly, hitching his pants, looking up and saying "Am," and sudden slitting of the eyes to see everywhere; and all the time he was grabbing me by the ribs and talking, talking. (95)

Dean's action and movement make him powerful. Sal is amazed by the fanatical motion of his friend. Dean is constantly in flux and it charges both his character and the novel with power. Compare this to the social concerns with "settling down" in 1940s America, and we can see how Dean, and Sal as his fellow traveler, is at odds with the broader American society. "Man is made for conflict," Emerson claims, "not for rest" (Ellison 156), and Dean is the embodiment of Emerson's assertion. Dean refuses to rest, and it inspires Sal while also charging Kerouac's novel with energy. On the Road is successful because the action of the novel and its characters' condition of perpetual *inbetweeness* carries with it a creative power, as Emerson notes, that is essential to humankind.

The importance of *inbetweeness* in Kerouac's writing also shows up in his desire to be a part of the dispossessed of American society. Sal gains from his experiences because of the people he meets throughout the novel. Going on the road and following Dean continually gives Sal opportunities to interact with the dispossessed in society. Kerouac has an essential faith in the value of the wisdom that comes from the experience of being dispossessed. Struggle, Kerouac believes, is the most direct path to enlightenment. The term "Beat Generation," coined by Kerouac himself, is perhaps the clearest expression of this sentiment. Kerouac remembers that one day in 1948, while talking to author John Clellon Holmes, when he said, "So I guess you might say we're a beat generation" (Watson 3). Beat, in this case, is a reference to a group of artists who are oppressed, or beaten down by life. Just as Emerson finds strength in setting himself in opposition to a figure, the Beats find power in setting themselves against the influences of society. Ironically, the movement that is notoriously anti-establishment became a popular culture phenomenon. Holmes brought the term into the public consciousness in 1952 in his article, "This Is the Beat Generation": "It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul, a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness" (Watson 3). Kerouac and his peers believed that the state of being beat allows a person insight into the common truth that all of humanity shares. One's suffering, according to Kerouac and his literary peers, washes away all extraneous traits until a person has nothing left but the absolute essentials of life. If society's influence is beaten out of a person, then that person has a greater opportunity to find truth. Being beat is, in fact, liberating. Steven Watson notes that beat can be liberating on even a spiritual level. He writes in The Birth of the Beat Generation:

> By the early 1950s, Kerouac and Ginsberg had begun to emphasize the "beatific" quality of "beat," investing the viewpoint of the defeated with mystical perspective. "The point of Beat is that you get down to a certain nakedness where you actually are able to see the world in a visionary way," wrote Ginsberg, "which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul." (4)

Being beat, according to Kerouac and Ginsberg, allows spiritual insight. The possibility of achieving greater insight inspired Kerouac to seek out the members of society who were oppressed. However, the ways in which Kerouac links himself with oppressed groups make him a forced outsider, and consequently the connection he shares with these groups is fleeting. For example, critic Joe Panish writes:

> Following in what has been and, to some extent, remains an accepted white American tradition, Kerouac tried to enhance and ennoble his position as a voluntary social outsider by linking himself to the historical status of African Americans as forced outsiders and victims of white oppression. Discursively, Kerouac makes this connection by raiding African American culture for its method of expressing the experience of

> this oppression and its strategy for surviving it. The result of Kerouac's unwarranted identification with the African American experience and his appropriation of African American culture is a depiction of these materials that is distorted because it trivializes the true nature of American racial oppression by blurring (if not obscuring) the difference between voluntary and forced outsiderism. (121)

Panish claims that Kerouac's role as an outsider in society is distinctly different from the outsider role that racial minorities play. Racial minorities are forced into a marginalized role through no choice of their own, while Kerouac and many of his white male beat writer friends only choose to associate themselves with minorities. Unlike the minorities, Kerouac always has the opportunity to pull out of a situation where he links himself with an oppressed group if he so desires. And he often does, giving him the inbetweenness Emerson describes. Nonetheless, Kerouac has faith that if he understands the portion of the American population that is oppressed, he then will achieve a more perfect understanding of America.

Kerouac is enamored with the physical body of America, particularly the idea of the openness of the West, as well. For Kerouac, the West represented the opposite of the east coast life that is responsible for the unhappiness we see in Sal. According to Kerouac, "My subject as a writer is of course America, and simply, I must know everything about it" (Watson 98). Born and raised in Lowell, a small Massachusetts town, Kerouac had always desired to venture west. He believed that the true spirit of America lay in the untamed western United States. The West appeals to Kerouac because it represents a wildness that the more civilized east coast lacks. Kerouac's attraction to the openness of the West is yet another example of his choice to set himself against society in order to gain strength. Kerouac's friend, Hal Chase, is from Denver. Gerald Nicosia notes the way that Hal Chase's hometown affected the way Kerouac viewed him. "Jack responded warmly to that shyness in Hal, who had grown up in Denver, a town as provincial as Lowell. But Hal's small town was in the West, which, to Jack, lent him an overawing majesty. Jack never doubted that the West was the real America" (135). Kerouac was impressed by the simple fact that Chase was from the West. The open wildness of the West fascinated Kerouac, and he desperately wanted to taste it. The wildness of the West acted as the same sort of symbol for Kerouac as did the dispossessed. Just as the struggle of everyday life cleanses the person who is beat, the West is appealing because it is far less socialized or comfortable than the East. Kerouac felt that the comfort that comes with the highly socialized East was detrimental to the growth of a person's soul. Creatively, Kerouac is inspired by opposing society, and the West is another symbol for the portion of America that is untamed by the social influence of the East. When Kerouac romanticizes the West, he rejects the east coast social constraints that are making him ill at the beginning of <u>On the Road</u>. Traveling west and befriending Dean Moriarty appeal to Sal because both offer an opportunity to escape the influence of the East, along with the society and comfort they represent.

Despite Kerouac's romanticized view of the West, Sal's first trip west gets off to an auspicious beginning. Dean and Carlo are living in Denver, and Sal decides it is time to go and visit his friends. Finally, it seems the perfect opportunity to pursue his dream to travel west. Sal is so excited about the trip that he spends months looking at maps, planning his exact path to Denver. Sal's plan to go north to Highway 6 and then hitchhike the entire way west is a complete failure, though. Kerouac writes, "It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes" (<u>On the Road</u> 13). Sal ends up retreating back to New York and spending nearly all of his money on a bus to Chicago in order to stay on schedule. Immediately, Sal learns that hitchhiking is going to be more difficult than it looks. Traveling is complicated. He cannot expect his travels to unfold like an elaborately planned script. Hitchhiking across the U.S. requires an openness that Sal had not prepared himself for.

All of Sal's life in the highly socialized east coast has not prepared him for the hardships of the road. Sal needs to be able to depend on himself now. His first attempt at hitchhiking is a rude awakening. However, in a strange way, Sal's unfortunate introduction to travel contributes to a more authentic hitchhiking experience. Since Sal blows most of his money on a bus to Chicago, the rest of the trip is characterized by a lack of money. Struggling against his lack of cash contributes to a fuller realization of what a real life on the road is really like. As Emerson does, Sal chooses to oppose something in order to inspire himself. In Sal's trip west, he opposes society's influence and the comfort it represents. After all, comfort, for Kerouac, was a barrier to true insight.

In Sal's first journey, he meets many interesting people while on the road. These traveling westerners that Sal encounters give him a greater appreciation of the wildness of the West. The conflict produced by Sal, an easterner, encountering the openness of the West for the first time lends the novel excitement. On his way to Denver, Sal hitches a ride with a truck driver. The truck driver turns out to epitomize the beautiful beatness of life on the road. Kerouac writes, "And he balled that thing clear to Iowa City and yelled me the funniest stories about how he got around the law in every town that had an unfair speed limit, saying over and over again, 'Them goddam cops can't put no flies on *my* ass'" (15). Screaming over the road noise, the trucker explains the precise ways in which he escapes the looming arm of the law. More and more, the West appears to be a land of unending possibility to Sal. His kind trucker is able to avoid the pressure to conform to the speed limit while gleefully escaping the consequences. To punctuate his experience with this truck driver, when the trucker must make a turn that does not take Sal closer to Denver, he takes the time to find another truck to help Sal continue on his journey. With the blinking of the truck's lights, Sal found himself in the cab of another truck, speeding along, ever closer to Denver. The comradery between the truckers and the exhilaration of speeding through the night elates Sal (15). He is now gaining an understanding of life on the road and the closeness of those who share it. The trip west is still new and exciting.

Sal soon meets a fellow hitchhiker, Eddie, a New Yorker of Irish descent. The man says he is heading to Denver to meet a girl, but Sal notes, "I think he was running away from something in New York, the law most likely" (17). Once again, Sal finds a companion who escapes the common rules of American society. The New Yorker is interesting enough that Sal decides to buy him some drinks. It is now that Sal feels a true kinship with his new friend. "There he got drunk as he ever did in his Ninth Avenue night back home, and yelled joyously in my ear all the sordid dreams of his life. I kind of liked him; not because he was a good sort, as he later turned out to be, but because he was enthusiastic about things" (17). Sal continually identifies with the outcasts of society who are not defeated by life. Instead, these rare displaced souls are overflowing with enthusiasm. In this case, Eddie excites Sal because he is an outcast, apparently fleeing the law, who refuses to let his status in society keep him down. Eddie's life, like Sal's, has forced him west to search for a new beginning. Sal is beginning to catch a glimpse of the America he set out to find. Unfortunately, though, Sal's identification with Eddie never develops past the point of observation. Lacking in Sal is the ability to be deeply enthusiastic despite the hardships of his life. Despite the excitement that Sal experiences on the road, he, unlike Eddie, cannot leave the comfort of his civilized east coast life behind. Sal is destined to return home. Here, we see the beginnings of perhaps the largest conflict in Kerouac's life and writing. Sal wants to be one of the outcasts of society, but also wants to separate himself from his role as an outcast so that he may write about his experience. Kerouac's choice to withdraw himself from the world around him in order to write is one of the primary conflicts in his life, and, as such, is one of the most powerful themes in his writing.

Perhaps the most distinct example of Sal's quest to understand the displaced in society while on the road, and his inability to give up his previous life in order to fully experience it, occurs when he meets a Mexican girl on a bus to Los Angeles. On the bus, Sal works up the courage to go ask Terry if he can sit next to her. Once she agrees, she and Sal hit it off, trading stories about their lives. Sal describes her: "Her story was this: She had a husband and a child. The husband beat her, so she left him, back at Sabinal, south of Fresno, and was going to LA to live with her sister awhile. She left her son with her family, who were grape-pickers and lived in a shack in the vineyards" (69). Again, the road leads Sal to a person who is beat. Terry, aside from being poor, has recently endured hell. Terry's husband was abusive, and to escape she had to leave her child behind. However, Terry's difficulties make her more attractive to Sal. The two begin a fifteen-day affair that takes them to Sabinal where they live in a squatter's tent and Sal picks cotton. The appeal for Sal is clear. Barry Miles writes of Kerouac's real-life experience upon which he based Sal's adventure:

> Through Bea [Terry] he saw what poverty was like, visiting her relatives, drinking with her five brothers, living day to day with a child to feed and no prospects, no safety net to fall back on. It put the claims of poverty and "Beatness" of people such as Herbert Huncke into true perspective. These were the true *falaheen* that he saw himself as one of. (118)

In Sabinal, Sal experiences real poverty and struggle. He is even beginning to see himself as a true Falaheen. However, he cannot seem to embrace the dispossessed life completely. Ultimately, Sal knows that he is only a visitor in this life and will end up retreating home after only a couple of weeks. Kerouac, at this point in his life, seems to have a strong conscious desire to be one of the Falaheen, but there is something pulling him back east that he cannot put into words. Despite always having identified with the dispossessed in society, Sal never could make that life his own. Working to complete exhaustion and still making barely enough money to feed his family is new to Sal. Sal embraces his life working in he fields and the struggles that accompany it: "My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life's work" (81). By this point, Sal has come a long way in his journey to find a cure for his depression. His search for a more authentic life lands him in Sabinal; and finally, if only briefly, he is at peace. The physical pain and struggle of this new life does not bother Sal. The simplicity of his life as a cotton picker grants him a deeper kinship with the world around him. Even the birds serenade him. He has found the antithesis of his previous sense that "everything was dead." (5). However, the time comes for him to return to his life, and his writing, in New York. Sal's aunt sends him money and he is on his way home. Kerouac writes, "I was through with my chores in the cottonfield. I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back" (83). The abrupt jump from his serenity in the cotton fields to his return home highlights Sal's inability to completely embrace beatness. Sal's return to his aunt's house mirrors Kerouac's impulse to return to live with his mother. Throughout his life, Kerouac often put aside his own chance for happiness in order to return to the comfort of his mother's home and care. However, the perpetual return to comfort is not an indication of a lack of authenticity behind Sal's, or Kerouac's, desire to understand America. It was, instead, an indication of a growing personal battle within Kerouac. Kerouac's concept of what a writer must be would not allow him to find true and lasting happiness with Bea. The strong sense of duty that Kerouac felt towards "his work" drove him away from the life that he finally found satisfaction in.

By the end of Sal's first trip, he finds himself in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, completely out of money. For the first time, Sal understands the feeling of being stripped bare. He is beat. He describes the situation he faced:

> That night in Harrisburg I had to sleep in the railroad station on a bench; at dawn the station masters threw me out. Isn't it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father's roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and

> miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life. I stumbled haggardly out of the station; I had no more control. All I had left in the form of calories were the last of the cough drops I'd bought in Shelton, Nebraska, months ago; these I sucked for their sugar. I didn't know how to panhandle. I stumbled out of town with barely enough strength to reach the city limits. I knew I'd be arrested if I spent another night in Harrisburg. Cursed city! (89)

Sal's stay in Harrisburg yields precisely the experience that Kerouac and his beat philosophy cherished. Reduced to nothingness, Sal now has the opportunity to truly understand what it is like to be beat. Sal finds himself without a bed, shelter, or food. However, Sal does not see this experience as an opportunity for growth. Instead, hunger and sleeplessness leave Sal irritable, waiting for the nightmare to end so he can get back home to familial comfort where his aunt will have as much food as he can eat, and he has his own bed. Sal leaves the house looking to gain insight into America, but when he makes his way back home, all of his loftier concerns are tossed aside in favor of regaining a taste of the comfort of his normal life. At this point in the novel, Sal is completely in limbo. He has just experienced a rewarding couple of weeks with Terry, but he seems intent only on returning home. It seems that there is a limit to the beatness that Sal is willing to experience.

Nonetheless, Sal's night in Harrisburg is representative of Kerouac's real-life conflict. Kerouac is suspended between his life on the road and his life at home, and, like Thoreau, the space between these two opposing themes of his life inspires Kerouac to write. However, existing between two seasons of the year, like Thoreau worked to explore, is a natural conflict that occurs four times a year. The temptation for Kerouac, since he is writing about his desires, is to manipulate the circumstances around him so that the results are more explosive. In this case, Sal's conflict in the railroad station appears innocent enough. After his first extended trip west, he is exhausted and wants to be comfortable again. But Sal's ability to remove himself from the suffering that Eddie and Terry endure gives us an insight into the extent to which Sal, as well as Kerouac, is in control of how he experiences the world around him. Kerouac's ability to control his own suffering becomes more problematic as his career moves forward, but we can see the seed of this problem even here.

As discussed earlier, Sal identifies with many of the people he meets in the West. Sal's desire to be close to all of these wild characters is indicative of his desire to set himself against the norms of society. Of course, the character with whom Sal identifies most in On the Road is Dean Moriarty. Dean embodies the spirit of the West that Sal initially sets out to find. Dean is impulsive and wildly irresponsible. Sal chases Dean and his insatiable thirst for life back and forth across North America, still seeking a cure for his spiritual illness. Sal describes why he feels compelled to follow Dean:

> I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because 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, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like

> spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes Awww! (9)

For Sal, Dean's mad passion about life is a sign of holiness. Sal is drawn in by the enthusiasm Dean exudes about everything in his life. Simultaneously, Dean is representative of the two things that Sal sets out to find at the beginning of his first journey across America. Dean is an outcast of American society and an embodiment of the spirit of the West, both of which are indicative of Kerouac's Emersonian desire to set himself against society in order to find strength.

First, Dean is clearly an outcast. Dean does not fit comfortably into any acceptable roles in society. Sal describes Dean as he first came to know him:

> And a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his excitement and his visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the "overexcited nut." In the West he'd spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library. They'd seen him rushing eagerly down the winter streets, bareheaded, carrying books to the poolhall, or climbing trees to get into the attics of buddies where he spent days reading or hiding from the law. (8)

Dean's life inspires so much energy in him that he is forced into the role of an outcast. He is entirely committed to chasing his own kicks, whether they be in the poolhall or the library. Dean's devotion to his own interests often gets him in trouble. Sometimes the trouble is as minor as a look of disdain from a passenger on a bus, but other times his wild desires get him in trouble with the law. In Dean, Sal finds a companion who is truly beatific. All of the troubles in Dean's life inspire a crazed excitement for living. Sal sees in Dean the spark that he is missing. Dean is the antithesis to the world that has beaten Sal down. Sal's choice to oppose the American society he found at home on the East Coast causes him to find in Dean the object of his spiritual desires. However, as Ellison notes about Emerson, it is not enough to find an object of desire. The impulse to oppose the influence of society should "restore or strengthen his self-regard. In opposition, he feels free, distinct, and individual" (156). Opposition is how Sal seeks to cure the spiritual malaise that he expresses at the beginning of the novel.

Dean embodies the spirit of the West as well. Kerouac's friend Gary Snyder pinpointed Dean's appeal as a character by discussing Neal Cassady, their mutual friend who inspired the creation of Dean Moriarty:

> Neal's a beautiful memory because it's so archetypal. My vision of Cassady is of the 1880s cowboys, the type of person who works the plains of the 1880s and 1890s—like he is the Denver grandchild of the 1880s cowboys with no range left to work on. Cassady's type is the frontier type, reduced to poolhalls and driving back and forth across the country. (Charters, Kerouac 289)

Dean does seem to be a man who is born to roam the western plains. However, society's expanding influence has shrunk the amount of space for Dean to roam. This cowboy is displaced. No longer is he king of the range, and so Dean's inherent need to be a frontiersman drives him to frequent poolhalls, and to speed back and forth from coast to coast in search of the space and freedom that he was born to taste but doomed never to find. Dean is the lost America that Sal is searching for. Dean will not give into the pressures of society around him. He is, by birth, destined to oppose the influence of the

America into which he was born. Sal's relationship with the world around him is not so straightforward, or "American," as Kerouac might say. Nonetheless, he attempts to absorb by association some of Dean's natural opposition to society. However, unlike Emerson and Thoreau, as Sal continues to oppose the society around him, his individuality and self-regard are not inflated. Steve Wilson identifies the trend in On the Road.

> Sal's life with Terry and her friends is idyllic, harsh, unforgiving and comforting all at once—authenticity that, like Dean's, is born of hardship and the prejudices of mainstream Americans. Too, though, Sal the writer illustrates that a writer's place may not be within such a life, but removed from it and back in front of the typewriter sifting through experiences to put into words the truths of human existence. (309)

Sal the writer does not allow himself to fully engage in the sort of life that Dean has. Kerouac, through the characters in his novel, illustrates his own belief about the limiting nature of what a writer can experience. We can already see Kerouac's role as a writer holding him back. He denies himself the authenticity of life that he sees in the people he admires most.

The quest that Dean and Sal embark upon is a quest that is inspired by a mutual need. Both require a wild portion of America that is increasingly being marginalized and corraled. This journey leads them to much conflict. However, this conflict nourishes the two rather than destroys. Sal and Dean pick up a hitchhiker, Solomon, whom they drop off in the city of Testament. Dean has an epiphany:

> Now you see, Sal, God does exist, because we keep getting hung-up with this town, no matter what we try to do, and you'll notice the strange biblical name of it, and that strange biblical character who made us stop here once more, and all the strange things tied together all over like rain connecting everybody the world over by chain touch.... (On the Road 114)

At this point in their trip, Sal and Dean are almost completely broke. Solomon promises to go get some money and bring it back to them. Of course, once they let Solomon off at his destination, they never see him again. However, rather than see this conflict as a betrayal by a man who they had helped, Dean believes that the entire ordeal is simply a sign from God. Dean expresses the exact sentiment that Thoreau does when he sees sand running down a melting snow bank in Walden. Thoreau's insight, like Dean's, is driven by conflict. In his case, Thoreau witnesses the conflict of the changing of seasons. The transition from winter to spring gives Thoreau divine insight. He describes the sand as it flows:

> As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down at them, the laciniated, lobed, and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopard's paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.... The whole cut impressed me as if it were a cave with its stalactites laid open to the light. (545)

As the sand flows, it begins to resemble the veins of a leaf. The leaf-like designs transform into patterns that remind Thoreau of all sorts of living organisms. He gets the impression that the conflict between the seasons is shedding light on a part of life that would have otherwise been left in the dark. Thoreau continues, "Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The maker of this earth but patented a leaf" (548). Like Dean, Thoreau receives a divine insight by simply observing the conflict in the world around him. This is the insight Sal, and by implication Kerouac himself, hope to discover in their journeys.

Throughout On the Road, Sal seeks a cure for his spiritual melancholy. On his journey, he encounters conflict at every turn, and this conflict drives the action of the novel. However, the conflict that Sal finds is overwhelmingly the product of an honest attempt to make his life better. By setting himself against the society that produces his unhappiness Sal creates a conflict—he rejects highly civilized east coast life for the wildness of the West—that drives his character throughout the novel. Moreover, the conflict created by Kerouac's own desire to be at once an outcast, and then remove himself from that group and return to his comfortable life where he can write, begins to show itself in the actions of his narrator. Kerouac's difficulty in choosing between beatness and comfort escalate in the next novel we explore.

CHAPTER 3

THE SUBTERRANEANS: THE PEAK OF TENSION

Between the famous writing of the first draft of On the Road on a 120-foot roll of teletype paper in 1951 and the novel's eventual publication in 1957, Kerouac wrote The Subterraneans. The novel recounts Leo Percepied's relationship with Mardou Fox; Kerouac punctuated his real-life relationship with Alene Lee by writing this novel. Thus, as in On the Road, Kerouac's real-life conflict inspires The Subterraneans. At this point, Kerouac is more conflicted than in any other time in his life, unsure about his cultural identity, his sexuality, and his role as a writer. These tensions drive his most exciting writing. In his biography, Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats, Barry Miles notes the development of Kerouac's prosody, "*The Subterraneans* is written in spontaneous prose, with page-long sentences which do not obey strict rules of grammar but do retain a thread of meaning. This is Kerouac's spontaneous style at its best: perfected, mature, free-flowing, superb" (193). Kerouac's prosody is significant in my examination of conflict in his novels because it can act as an indicator of the level of inspiration the author feels at the point of writing. The heightened level of real-life conflict in Kerouac's life inspires him to find a new level of spontaneity and power in the prose of The Subterraneans.

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the intense conflict that fuels Kerouac's writing breakthrough has a theoretical lineage reaching back to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson writes of the importance of conflict in the act of creativity:

> Our strength is transitional, alternating; or, shall I say, a thread two strands. The sea-shore, sea seen from shore, shore seen from sea; the taste of two metals in contact; and our enlarged powers at the approach and at the departure of a friend; the experience of poetic creativeness, which is not found in staying at home, nor yet traveling, but in transitions from one to the other, which must therefore be adroitly managed to present as much transitional surface as possible. (Ellison 155)

Creativity, for Emerson, comes from the alternation between the comfort of home and the danger of travel. Kerouac's explosion of creativity in the writing of The Subterraneans has to do with his being caught between these two elements. While Sal is caught between his desire to be a part of the fellaheen and to be at home with his aunt in On the Road, in the end, Kerouac chooses to romanticize the novel's dispossessed hero, Dean Moriarty. On the other hand, in The Subterraneans, Kerouac is caught directly between his desire to be with Alene and his desire to be with his mother. The alternation between these two desires in Kerouac's life inspires what many critics consider to be his most shining example of spontaneous prose. Even Kerouac immediately realized the genius of his newest work:

> Only the names and identifying circumstances are changed. The book is modeled after Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a full confession of one's most wretched and hidden agonies after an 'affair' of any kind.

> The prose is what I believe to be the prose of the future, from both the conscious top and the unconscious bottom of the mind, limited only by the limitations of time flying by as your mind flies by with it. Not a word of this book was changed after I had finished writing it in three sessions from dusk to dawn at the typewriter like a long letter to a friend. This I believe to be the only possible literature of the free future, uninterrupted and unrevised full confessions about what actually happened in real life. It's not as easy as it sounds since it hurts to tell and print the truth. (Miles 190-1)

Like Sal and his predicament in On the Road, Leo (Kerouac's alter ego) is torn between his desire to feel like an outcast in society and to have the comfort of a calm life. In The Subterraneans, Leo becomes involved with Mardou Fox (Alene), who is half Cherokee and half African American. By simply being around Mardou, Leo comes to a greater understanding of the struggle of the dispossessed of society. Sitting with Mardou, Leo realizes the marginalized existence of the Native American:

> But they were the inhabitors of this land and under these huge skies they were the worriers and keeners and protectors of wives in whole nations gathered around tents—now the rail that runs over their forefathers' bones leads them onward pointing into infinity, wraiths of humanity treading lightly the surface of the ground so deeply suppurated with the stock of their suffering you only have to dig a foot down to find a baby's hand.—The hotshot passenger train with grashing diesel balls by, browm, browm, the Indians just look up—I see them vanishing like spots— (20-1)

Mardou is a descendant of the original Americans. The Native Americans inhabited the U.S. before any European ethnicity. However, they have become an impoverished minority within the nation, relegated long ago to reservations in order for whites to control the land. Therefore, Mardou's Native American heritage provides a chance for Leo, as Sal does in On the Road, to explore the cultural foundation of America from the "outside."

However, Leo also understands that his family and 1950s American society will not tolerate an interracial relationship. Leo recalls, "Doubts, therefore, of, well, Mardou's Negro, naturally not only my mother but my sister whom I may have to live with some day and her husband a Southerner and everybody concerned, would be mortified to hell and have nothing to do with us" (45). Interracial couples were not tolerated in the 1950s, and Leo has no delusion about how he and Mardou would be treated by the broader society and his racist family in particular. His mother's approval meant a lot to Kerouac and she was openly racist. Barry Miles mentions an incident of memere's hatefulness: "Once, when she heard that Jack was going to see his Black friend Al Sublette in San Fransisco, she sent him a newspaper clipping of a story of a Black man who raped a White woman on the subway, with a note saying 'There's your damned niggers!'" (189). Kerouac's racist mother adds fuel to his already burning conflict within.

Mardou is not only an outcast because of her race; she is mentally unstable as well. Early in her relationship with Leo, she confesses a psychotic episode she had recently experienced at a friend's apartment. Leo recalls her story, "She can't understand suddenly what has happened because she's lost her mind, her usual recognition of self, and feels the eerie buzz of mystery, she really does not know who she is and what for and where she is" (23). Mardou proceeds to walk, naked, out into the street. She adds, "I had no clothes on in the alley, it didn't disturb me, I was so intent on this realization of everything I knew I was an innocent child" (24). Even this episode appeals to Leo. He transforms her volatility into a romantic meditation on her ancestry:

> She squats on the fence, the thin drizzle making beads on her brown shoulders, stars in her hair, her wild now-Indian eyes now staring into the Black with a little fog emanating from her brown mouth, the misery like ice crystals on the blankets on the ponies of her Indian ancestors, the drizzle on the village long ago and the poorsmoke crawling out of the underground and when a mournful mother pounded acorns and made mush in hopeless millenniums.... (25)

Mardou's emotional conflict inspires Leo despite the fact that many of Leo's friends fear her volatility. Her crazed, naked journey through the night streets becomes as much a reminder of her racial heritage and of social oppression as it is an indicator of her mental instability.

Mardou's racial background and mental instability are both enormously attractive to Leo because he, like Sal, wants to feel like an outsider. Ann Charters notes:

> With his black girl, Jack felt in touch again with what he called "the fellaheen Darkness" in Mexico, sympathizing with her thoughts about the blacks and Indians and America. Her background reminded him of Neal's, with the same rootlessness, the same sad losses, and her beatness

> had the quality of the redbrick neons, further proof of the price of American life. (Kerouac 184)

Like Neal Cassady, Alene becomes a symbol for Kerouac. She represents the outcasts of American society. Through Leo's relationship with Mardou, we receive a window into Alene's appeal to Kerouac. Steve Wilson describes why Mardou fascinates Leo:

> What makes Mardou of interest to Leo is that she has gained access to understanding through pain – generations of oppression.... This has not led to her collapse but to the insight that living is a painful journey toward enlightenment and acceptance. What Leo only understands intellectually Mardou has lived and knows viscerally because of her social status and ties to a history of oppression. (317)

Kerouac, again, feels connected to the portion of America that is truly beat. In turn, Alene's fictionalized ego, Mardou, stimulates long and excited passages of prose connecting her state of mind to the plight of the dispossessed. Alene's racial heritage appeals to Kerouac in the same ways that Neal's status as a social outcast does. However, despite Kerouac's narrator's similarity in identifying with the dispossessed, there is an enormous leap in Kerouac's confidence and ability as a writer in The Subterraneans. Kerouac's relationship with Alene inspires a new level in prosody because the novel is based on experiences driven by a higher degree of conflict than his earlier work.

In On the Road, Kerouac's desires to be a part of the fellaheen and oppose social norms drives the novel forward. However, Kerouac reaches a new level in the development of his prosody in The Subterraneans because there is a new level of conflict that he feels in his life. In the novel, Leo is caught squarely between his desire to be beat and his desire to be a comfortable writer living with his mother. In On the Road, Sal experiences the same conflict, but his focus remains on the dispossessed. The "aunt" in Kerouac's earlier novel plays a far less significant role than the mother in The Subterraneans. Sal's aunt sends money to Sal when he is broke and provides food when he returns home, but Leo's mother plays a prominent, even central role in his conflicts. In fact, Leo's mother even enters his mind when Leo spends a night crying in a railroad yard, mourning the relationship that he knows will soon end with Mardou:

> Cried in the railyard sitting on an old piece of iron under the new moon and on the side of the old Southern Pacific tracks, cried because not only I had cast off Mardou whom now I was not so sure I wanted to cast off but the die'd been thrown, feeling too her empathetic tears across the night and the final horror both of us round-eyed realizing we part—but seeing suddenly not in the face of the moon but somewhere in the sky as I looked up and hoped to figure, the face of my mother—remembering it in fact from a haunted nap just after supper that same restless unable-to-stay-in-a-chair or on-earth day—just as I woke to some Arthur Godfrey program on the TV, I saw bending over me the visage of my mother, with impenetrable eyes and moveless lips and round cheekbones and glasses that glinted and hid the major part of her expression which at first I thought was a vision of horror that I might shudder at, but it didn't make me shudder— (103)

Mardou and Leo's mother compete in Leo's daydreams. As Leo laments the way he has treated Mardou, the face of his mother appears to him. Kerouac's stronger feeling of responsibility toward his mother, and his mother's more vital role in his narrator's life, create a conflict that inspires some of Kerouac's most passionate and affecting writing. The conflict between the two women in Leo's life and mind spur a passage that spans hundreds of words without a period. Kerouac writes in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," "No periods separating sentence-structure already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musicians drawing a breath between outblown phrases)" (Charters, Beat Reader 57). In The Subterraneans, Kerouac succeeds in finding the right prose for his confession. The creative inspiration that Kerouac receives from the conflict within himself about the two women he loves gives birth to a novel free of unnecessary punctuation that would interfere with the free flow of his confession. Kerouac's love for Alene, his love for his mother, and his inability to resolve this conflict inspire an explosive confession of the feelings that normally remain below the surface.

Leo is torn between his desire to be with Mardou and his mother. It is Kerouac's alternating desires to be, at once, one with the oppressed, and be comfortable living with his mother, that allow the heightened degree of creative power that he achieves in The Subterraneans. However, the conflict is so deeply seeded in Leo that he cannot even recognize how his relationship with his mother takes away from the relationship he has with Mardou. One day when Mardou confronts Leo about leaving her to go be with his mother, Leo defends himself:

> I really do love her and love you too and don't you see how hard I try to spend my time, divide my time between the two of you—over there it's my writing work, my well-being and when she comes home from work at night, tired, from the store, mind you, I feel very good making her supper, having the supper and a martini ready when she walks in so by 8 o'clock the dishes are all cleared, see, and she has more time to look at her television—which I worked on the railroad six months to buy her, see. (47-8)

Leo creates a situation where Mardou and his mother compete for his time. Leo's time with Mardou restores his feelings of beatness, while his time at his mother's allows him to be comfortable and to have a place where he can write. Both of these elements are crucial to the success of his writing, but the emphasis on Kerouac's narrator's need to return home to write is heightened in this later novel.

On the surface, his mother's house is an attractive place to write because he has a place where he can work undisturbed. However, Leo's impulse to return home in order to write is a concept that has deep romantic roots as well. French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes:

> The house we were born in is more than the embodiment of home; it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming. And often the resting place particularized the daydream. Our habits of a particular daydream were acquired there. (15)

Leo's home is appealing to him also because it represents the place that he began his daydreaming, which are the roots of his creativity. A return home for Kerouac means a return to his childhood creative spirit. Additionally, the retreat home to stoke creativity is appealing due to the fact that Leo already feels old when he is with Mardou. Leo reveals his insecurity:

> I in my scowlingness and writer-ness…kept telling myself "You're old you old sonofabitch you're lucky to have such a young sweet thing" (while nevertheless at the same time plotting, as I'd been doing for about three weeks now, to get rid of Mardou, without her being hurt, even if possible "without her noticing" so as to get back to more comfortable modes of life, like to say, stay at home all week and write and work on the three novels to make a lot of money and come in to town only for good times if not to see Mardou then any other chick will do... (81)

As the older man, Leo feels the pressing need to be responsible and work. The drive Leo feels to write makes Mardou seem less important, even expendable. Leo confesses his hidden desire to escape his relationship with Mardou, and return home where he can be comfortable and write. Here, Leo reveals the opposing influence to his desire to be beat. The older Leo in The Subterraneans suffers a strong desire to be comfortable with his mother and sees his younger love interest as a competing influence.

On the other hand, Leo's returning home is not only a romantic inspiration for his writing. Leo's relationship with his mother has obvious Oedipal overtones. The narrator's name itself is a clue. Gerald Nicosia writes:

> The narrator's name is Leo Percepied. "Leo" was Kerouac's father's name, and "Percepied" is French for "pierced foot." Oedipus of Greek Legend has his feet pierced as a child and derived his name indirectly from that fact, "Oedipus" being Greek for "swollen foot," the condition caused by his injury. While punning on *percipient*, one who perceives, Kerouac identifies Leo with Oedipus on a number of levels. (449)

Kerouac promised his father on his deathbed that he would take care of his mother (Charters, Kerouac 61). Literally, Kerouac replaces his father in the relationship with his mother. Leo bears this same overwhelming feeling of responsibility toward his mother in The Subterraneans. The deep psychological drive to be with his mother perpetually drives Leo away from Mardou. Brendon Nicholls recognizes Kerouac's Oedipal relationship with his mother and writes:

> Finally, as in all Oedipal narratives, the American melting-pot of Kerouac's fiction boils down to the overarching significance of the mother—or, more precisely, the *motherland.* It is well documented that Kerouac never fully established autonomy from his mother, Gabrielle. What is more important, though, is how Kerouac invests his black and brown characters with attributes that properly belong to Gabrielle. (535)

Not only do Kerouac's fictional characters have to compete with his fictional mothers, but the real-life personae that his characters are based on must compete with his mother in order to gain autonomy. Again, I must refer to Leo's response to his realization that his relationship with Mardou is doomed. While mourning the loss of his love in a railyard, his mother appears to him. Mardou and his mother merge into one inescapable, conglomerated Female. However, perhaps an even more telling example of Kerouac's investing of his love interest with maternal qualities begins with a description of Mardou's pubic hair:

> . . . (fearing secretly the few times I had come into contact with the rough stubble-like quality of the pubic, which was Negroid and therefore a little rougher, tho not enough to make any difference, and the insides itself I should say the best. The richest, most fecund moist warm and full of hidden soft slidy mountains, also the pull and force of the muscles being so powerful she unknowing often vice-like closes over and makes damup and hurt, tho this I only realized the other night, too late—). And so the final lingering physiological doubt I have that this contraction and greatstrength of womb, responsible I think now in retrospect for the time when Adam in his first encounter with her experienced piercing unsupportable screamingsudden pain, so he had to go to doctor and have himself bandaged and all… (76)

Leo's sexual description of Mardou is powerfully loaded with images of fertility. The focus on the strength and warmth of Mardou's "womb" shifts the emphasis away from sex and toward the power of motherhood. When Kerouac invests his girlfriend with motherly qualities, we again witness the power of transition that Emerson endorses. As Kerouac transitions from a description of pubic hair, he gains momentum until he exhausts himself at the contemplation of the "greatstrength of womb."

The sort of manipulation involved in turning Mardou's sexuality into an image of the power of motherhood causes the reader to begin to question Kerouac's motives when writing. One way that Kerouac shapes the novel is by excluding much of the happy times that he and Alene shared. Barry Miles refers to a night when Kerouac and Alene are at author John Clellon Holmes' apartment, and Holmes notices how much Kerouac and Alene care for each other:

> Whenever John saw them together, Jack's thoughtfulness and openness with her were extraordinary. With no other woman had he seen Jack capable of expressing such intensity. Partly what disarmed Jack was her ability to reach out and hug him, kiss him, or even laugh at him. John also felt Jack's fascination for someone—one of the very few people—as raw as himself. Also on the verge of cracking up, Jack sought the raft of (in Holmes words) "a child of the night adrift on a flood." (442)

That night, Holmes sensed in Kerouac's interactions with Alene that he loved and respected her. However, Kerouac chooses to leave out scenes such as these where Leo and Mardou could have appeared truly happy with each other. Rather than giving a full picture of his affair with Alene, Kerouac decides to paint a picture of a relationship that is doomed from the start. More so than in his earlier novels, Kerouac seems to be conscious of what will make the best story. The fact that Kerouac would omit a part of his life in which he is happy in a novel that is very much about his life as a writer shows the growing conflict within Kerouac that inspires the novel. Kerouac wants a happy life but does not see how that part of himself fits into his conception of the role of a writer—the writer must suffer for his/her work—in the world.

Only weeks after the relationship ends, Kerouac writes The Subterraneans. It takes him only three nights of typing to complete the novel (Charters, Kerouac 185). A buildup of creative tension growing throughout the relationship explodes once the affair ends. Kerouac recalls the experience of writing the novel, "Writing the Subs in three nights was really a fantastic athletic feat as well as mental, you shoulda seen me after I was done… I was pale as a sheet and had lost fifteen pounds and looked strange in the mirror" (Miles 192). All of the conflict that had built up pours out of Kerouac once he decides to write about it. Kerouac's desire to be part of the fellaheen, his desire to be with a woman, and his desire to be with his mother all fester for the short time he is with Alene. When the relationship ends and Kerouac returns home to mix the comfort of his mother and his typewriter with the tension of the relationship and the pain of the breakup, the results are amazing. However, there is also a sense of pride in his ability to break himself, not only emotionally but physically as well, in order to create art that is important to Kerouac's shifting attitude toward life. Kerouac's work is taking on a greater importance than his happiness.

Finally, we see in the novel a concept opened up in On the Road that is now building momentum. When Sal returns home to write, often he leaves behind something fulfilling. For example, when he leaves Terry and his job picking cotton in California, he leaves behind two of the best weeks of his life. The reader begins to question whether Sal's writing or his own happiness is more important to him. In On the Road, I am satisfied that in the end, Sal still identifies most with his experience with Dean rather than his writing. Sal's final words show his sustained dedication to Dean: "I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think if Dean Moriarty" (254). Clearly, Sal is, above all, committed to Dean. The narrator even seems to suggest that they share a lineage as strong as blood by mentioning "*the* father *we* never found" rather than *his* father *he* never found. However, in The Subterraneans, Leo's priorities are far less clear. Throughout the novel, a theme of indecision with regards to the importance of his writing appears:

> [I]t was the recognition of the need for my return to world-wide love as a great writer should do, like a Luther, a Wagner, now this warm thought of greatness is a big chill in the wind—for greatness dies too—ah and who said I was great—and supposing one were a great writer, a secret Shakespeare of the pillow night? or really so—a Baudelaire's poem is not worth his grief—his grief—(It was Mardou finally said to me, "I would have preferred the happy man to the unhappy poems he's left us," which I agree with and I am Baudelaire, and love my brown mistress and I too leaned to her belly and listened to the rumblings underground). (9-10)

In the end, Alene is left with the unhappy novel that Kerouac left her. Kerouac at this point in his career is beginning to give in to the idea that a writer must detach himself in order to write, always running home to the comfort of his mother's house, often leaving happiness behind. The notion of the necessity of detachment is a part of Kerouac's American writing heritage. Julie Ellison writes of Emerson's belief in, "the fundamental notion of detachment as the origin of art and…regards it as both loss and gain" (154). Kerouac believes he must lose a part of his life in order to gain the writing that he produces.

Kerouac's insistence that a writer must lose something in order to gain a work of art creates a conflict. He must choose between his desire to be fulfilled by his sense of accomplishment that he receives when completing a book, or to be fulfilled by his life by participating in it fully and losing the perspective he believes he needs to be a writer. In The Subterraneans, there is a profound sense of loss due to his status as a writer. The novel ends:

> And I go home having lost her love.
>
> And I write this book. (111)

Kerouac recognizes that in order to write this novel, he sacrifices a relationship that is fulfilling. The final lines of the two novels offer a stark contrast. In On the Road, Sal is concerned with his relationship with his friend. Conversely, in The Subterraneans, Leo's attention is divided between his relationship with Mardou and his need to write. His growing belief that the act of writing necessarily pulls him away from those that he loves gains momentum until Kerouac comes crashing down in Big Sur.

CHAPTER 4

BIG SUR: KEROUAC'S INEVITABLE DESTINATION

By 1960, at age 38, Jack Kerouac was nearly out of material. Barry Miles writes, "Jack was actually in need of more experience to write about. He had virtually exhausted his Beat Generation memories.... A trip to Big Sur might provide a subject" (267). It did indeed. Jack arranged to stay in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's cabin at Bixby Canyon, Big Sur, for three months so he could get away from his life as a now-famous writer that was spiraling out of control on the east coast. This trip west provided the experience that inspired Kerouac's novel, Big Sur.

Unlike the trip he fictionalized in On the Road, Kerouac's trip to Big Sur was more than he bargained for. His alcoholism was out of control, and spending extended periods of time at the cabin without alcohol had devastating effects on Kerouac's mind and body. However, the conflict created by the trip gave Kerouac a reason to write again. Kerouac's insistence on writing about personal experiences necessitated mining a personal conflict. After living with his mother for so long, he needed to get away to find conflict and stoke his creative fires. Curiously, though, this time Kerouac withdraws from his friends and society when searching for a topic. Earlier in his writing career, Kerouac always used other people and drew from his circle of friends to inspire his work. Although there are others in Big Sur, the work is almost entirely about his own struggle, giving little regard to those around him. Kerouac finally has detached himself from his surroundings even when he is away from home. Since Kerouac is detached from the life that inspires his earlier novels, he is left in a position where he must create conflict rather than simply experience it.

Detachment is an essential part of the creative process. Ralph Waldo Emerson recognizes the value of detachment in art long before Kerouac practiced it. "From the philosophers," Julie Ellison writes of Emerson, "he receives the fundamental notion of detachment as the origin of art and, like them, regards it as both loss and gain" (154). Emerson's position is significant because it acknowledges a price the writer must pay to reap the fruit of creative labor. An essential part of Kerouac's writing process was his retreat home to gain the distance from his experiences that he needed in order to write about them. Kerouac's retreats often pulled him away from a life that he found rewarding, like his two-week relationship with Bea in California and his affair with Alene. Kerouac's need to detach in order to write necessitated the end of both relationships. However, without this basic level of detachment, Kerouac could not produce the work that he did. In order to create the sort of work that had made him famous, he sacrificed several chances at a life that could have been fulfilling, but gained an outsider's perspective that inspired his work.

Considering the relationships that Kerouac sacrificed for his craft, one would hope that the fame he had received for his work as a writer would have satisfied him. Unfortunately, this was not the case. One of the primary conflicts from Kerouac's life that fuels <u>Big Sur</u> was his growing difficulty with the fame his life as a writer had brought him. In fact, <u>Big Sur</u> starts in much the same way that <u>On the Road</u> does, with a narrator in search of a cure for the unhappiness in his life. Kerouac's fictional persona, Jack Dulouz, is overwhelmed by the notoriety that came with his writing success. He decides he must escape:

> It's the first trip I've taken away from home (my mother's house) since the publication of "Road" the book that "made me famous" and in fact so much so I've been driven mad for three years by endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, reporters, snoopers (a big voice saying in my basement window as I prepare to write a story:—ARE YOU BUSY?)... Me drunk practically all the time to put on a jovial cap to keep up with all this but finally realizing I was surrounded and outnumbered and had to get away to solitude again or die— (5)

Dulouz believes that he must escape home and sets out west to stay in a friend's cabin at Big Sur on the Pacific coast. Ironically, the sacrifice Kerouac makes for his art by detaching from the people he cares about requires him to detach even further by escaping the haven he could always retreat to as a writer: his mother's house. If Kerouac's work in <u>The Subterraneans</u> is powerful because he alternates between his desire to feel beat and his desire to be removed from that struggle, then <u>Big Sur</u> must lack that power. In Big Sur, Kerouac is not longer pulled between two desires; he only wants to detach. However, Kerouac's unwillingness to pursue the bohemian lifestyle anymore leads him to a new type of creative drive. At this point, Kerouac chooses to detach from his previous life, and retreat to nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson endorses this type of escape in his essay, "Nature":

> To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough. (14)

Kerouac seeks, as Emerson suggests, a retreat to the woods. Like the tradesman and the attorney, Kerouac desperately needs the healing that nature provides us all. Yet, it is not enough for Kerouac to simply go into nature. He must escape from himself as well. Section one of "Nature" begins:

> To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. (9)

Indeed, Kerouac must retire from his writing, as well as from society. In an Emersonian attempt to feel the sublime once more, Kerouac attempts to retreat from his persona as a writer. In a 1960 letter to fellow beat writer Phillip Whalen, Kerouac complains, "I'm completely sick of mad beat scenes at last. I quit that for sure, right now, I am going to exert my will from now on. Most of my lushness arises from having to be with bores like locally, I drink from nervousness and ennui, social and everyotherway they're bores"

(Charters, Selected Letters 1957-1969 278). Clearly, Kerouac is tired of the beat society of which he is a part, and the social persona with which he feels he must keep up. As Emerson suggests, Kerouac detaches from society and indeed from himself, and heads to the cabin at Bixby Canyon. However, Kerouac's detachment still comes with its own conflict.

By the early 1960's Kerouac is a raging alcoholic. His drinking of Johnny Walker has become so heavy that he is starting to suffer from abdominal hemorrhages (Amburn 320). While in Kerouac's early adulthood, alcohol was part of his social life, as his life wore on it becomes a way of escaping reality. Drinking is, in Kerouac's later life, an excuse not to interact with the world around him. Conversely, in 1944, Kerouac and his friends, Allen Ginsberg and Lucien Carr, were beginning to conceive of what came to be known as "The New Vision." The three had many discussions about the purpose of art. These conversations had an enormous impact on Kerouac's writing career, as well as other Beat Generation writers, and can be used as a guide to help understand many of the choices he made in both his writing and his personal life. Ginsberg later synthesized these conversations about "The New Vision," and recorded the three principle values:

> 1) Uncensored self-expression is the seed of creativity. 2) The artist's consciousness is expanded through nonrational means: derangement of the senses, via drugs, dreams, hallucinatory states, and visions. 3) Art supersedes the dictates of conventional morality. (Watson 40)

The second principle of "The New Vision" encourages writers to use drugs in order to change the way they experience the world. Although this principle refers largely to heavier drugs, alcohol unquestionably alters the way a person experiences life. The use of alcohol in this case would expand one's range of experience in the world and thus stimulate a writer's creativity. In the case of the aging Kerouac, however, his drinking served the opposite purpose. Kerouac's binge drinking in later life only removed him from the people around him. While Kerouac's drinking starts in a social setting that aims to use alcohol as a way to advance one's writing ability, it ends up creating conflict later in his life as an artificial means to fuel his creativity.

One clear example of Kerouac using alcohol to escape his life was in his ongoing friendship with Neal Cassady. Alcohol was one of a number of reasons that Kerouac's relationship with Cassady was deteriorating in the early 1960s. The winter before Kerouac's trip to Big Sur, Neal was in prison at San Quentin on a drug charge. Kerouac had agreed to travel there and read, but as Ann Charters notes, "he had been too cowardly to show up at prison, getting drunk…in San Francisco instead" (Kerouac 328). Due to a growing insecurity about his choice to use his friends' lives in his writing—for example, Kerouac worried that cataloguing Neal's criminal activities, especially his drug use, contributed to Cassady's arrest and conviction (Kerouac 329)—he feared that Neal would be angry with him. Consequently, Kerouac chose to get drunk rather than face his friend. The alcoholic binges, for the adult Kerouac, have become a way for him to hide from reality. Alcoholism is a real conflict in his life, although this conflict carries different implications from other conflicts I have discussed due to the fact that it is in many ways a self-inflicted wound. Since the conflict created by alcoholism is primarily driven by a desire to get away from his life, it has both a negative effect on his writing and a damning effect on his health.

In Big Sur, Kerouac documents a chilling account of serious alcohol bingeing and then the enduring of violent withdrawals. The theme of drinking to escape reality in the novel is illustrated when Cody (Neal) takes Dulouz to stay with Cody's mistress, Billie. Dulouz is unhappy about the situation (Cody dropping him with Billie and going on with his life) and his life in general, so he withdraws, sitting in the same chair all day long for days:

> I do understand the strange day Ben Fagan finally came to visit me alone, bringing wine, smoking his pipe, and saying "Jack you need some sleep, that chair you say you've been sitting in for days have you noticed the bottom is falling out of it?"—I get on the floor and by God look and it's true, the springs are coming out— (160)

Dulouz's drinking withdraws him from everyone. He is so unhappy with his life, he resorts to sitting in the same chair for days, drunk, until finally he re-enters the world only when the chair cannot support him anymore. Dulouz, like Kerouac, detaches from the world by drinking. Kerouac had always detached himself to at least some extent in order to write about the experiences he accrued. Detachment is a crucial part of the creative process. However, the detachment he achieved via alcohol was a level of detachment that was detrimental to both his life and his writing because his alcohol abuse led him away from the life, and the conflict that life carried with it, that inspired his best literature. Rather than finding himself torn between a desire to be beat and to be comfortable, Kerouac found himself always seeking the comfort of a place to drink.

Kerouac's choice to avoid the conflict that had inspired so much of his work left him with far less to write about. The disengagement from his own life inevitably softens the impact of the prosody of much of his novel. Gerald Nicosia writes:

> In so far as it avoids more issues than it grapples with, *Big Sur* is one of Kerouac's minor novels, and though there are a few passages of lyrical beauty, his prose is often tiresomely repetitious. Once so deft with motifs, he now resorts to larding almost every page with the words *death* and *madness* or some variation thereof. (628)

The bulk of Kerouac's novel is so far removed from the primary conflict that inspired the beautiful prose of The Subterraneans—Leo wants to be with both Mardou and at home and comfortable—that its prosody is often without excitement, matching Kerouac's own dulled senses from years of heavy drinking. Indeed, the final passage of the novel is hard to recognize as Kerouac's writing. Dulouz has recovered from his alcohol driven delirium and explains:

> All the dark torture is a memory—I know now I can get out of there, we'll drive back to the city… I'll stay with Monsanto at his home a few days and he'll smile and show me how to be happy awhile, we'll drink dry wine instead of sweet and have quiet evenings in his home… Something good will come out of all things yet—And it will be golden and eternal just like that—There's no need to say another word. (216)

After all the years of drinking, his trip to the cabin inspires a devastating case of withdrawals. Unfortunately, instead of facing up to his serious alcoholism, Dulouz claims that a change in wine will solve his problem and everything will be wonderful.

However, Kerouac's prose betrays his sentiment. Missing is the "undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image" that Kerouac describes in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (Charters, Beat Reader 57). Kerouac, when ending the novel, has lost his poetic jazz breath prosody. In its place, we find the voice of a sad, boring, even careful alcoholic who is trying to convince himself that everything will be okay. The artificial detachment Kerouac found in alcohol could not inspire him to create great art. Critic Ann Douglas notes of this period in Kerouac's writing:

> Kerouac has grown angry with his readers; they have come to represent the forces of constraint rather than the possibilities of expansion. The reader no longer echoes and varies the author's existence, but checks and misunderstands it. He's writing in the flatter deader style of Vanity of Dulouz, he tells us, because he's learned that no one understood the enchanted bravura style of the books he valued most. (18)

The bitterness of Kerouac's later years drives him away from the elevated style of prosody of his earlier work. He even ends Vanity of Dulouz by telling his wife that nothing matters but his desire for another bottle of wine (268). Kerouac loses faith in the ability of his writing to inspire his readers, and uses alcohol to escape the pain of this realization. In turn, we are left with a style that is "flatter" and "deader" than much of his earlier work. Without the conflict of his earlier work, Kerouac's creativity appears stifled.

Sadly, Kerouac never seems to grasp that the unnatural conflicts he creates in his life could not sustain great writing. For example, Kerouac, after spending enough time with Neal's mistress, Jackie, decides he is ready to go back to the cabin and that he will take Jackie with him. He convinces his friend Lew Welch to come pick them up, and then creates a situation that never had to happen. Ann Charters writes:

> Continuing to drink steadily, Jack was feeling aggressive enough to bully Welch into detouring past Cassady's house on the way to Bixby Canyon, ostensibly so that he could pick up some clothes he'd left there, but really so that he could watch the fireworks when Carolyn met Jackie. Nothing happened, of course, except silence between them, Kerouac the unhappy witness to everyone being strangers. (Kerouac 334)

Kerouac masterminded a plan to bring together Cassady's wife and mistress. Expecting an emotional furor, he disappointedly witnessed the uncomfortable women act toward each other as the strangers they were. Dulouz notes, "The meeting is not eventful of course, both girls keep their silence and hardly look at each other" (178). In the sad, flat prose characteristic of much of Big Sur, Dulouz describes the failure of the scene he creates.

A skeptic might note that in The Subterraneans, Leo consciously sets out to be with Mardou as an experiment. However, his experiment is redeemed by his oscillating desire to both be with her and use her in order to write about the relationship. Leo confesses, "And so having had the essence of her love now I erect big word constructions and thereby betray it really—telling tales of every gossip sheet the washline of the world—and hers, ours, in all the two months of our love" (17). Unlike the situation that Dulouz manufactures at Cody's house, Leo really does love Mardou, and truly does express contrition about his inability to make the relationship work. Although both narrators are conscious of the situations that they create, Leo is conflicted about his role as manipulator, whereas Dulouz is simply resigned to it. The conflict Leo feels drives the excited prosody of the novel, while Dulouz's resignation leaves the scene at Cody's house stagnant.

On the other hand, there are also natural conflicts that are positive influences in Big Sur. The clearest natural conflict Kerouac found in Bixby Canyon was a difficulty in adjusting to his natural surroundings. Kerouac, as would nearly any person of the late twentieth century, had trouble adjusting to the harsh natural surroundings at Bixby Canyon. Kerouac's response to his destination on the coast was not what he expected. As a romantic, a large part of Kerouac's conception of nature is of innocence and purity. Kerouac writes in his introduction to Lonesome Traveler, a collection of articles he wrote while traveling the world:

> Always considering writing my duty on earth. Also the preachment of universal kindness, which hysterical critics have failed to notice beneath frenetic activity of my true-story novels about the 'beat' generation. Am actually not 'beat' but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic… Final plans: hermitage in the woods, quiet writing of old age, mellow hopes of Paradise (which comes to everybody anyway)… (viii)

Kerouac explains that he had no intention of just being 'beat.' Instead, Kerouac claims that he was always seeking *salvation* in his life and writing. He sees nature as his final destination in this grand plan to find salvation. In nature, Kerouac expected to find peace once he arrived at the cabin in Bixby Canyon. But that was not the case. His new home in the wild was terrifying for Kerouac. Not only was the solitude difficult, but the actual sensory experiences of the canyon frightened him. In her biography, Kerouac, Ann Charters writes:

> At Bixby Canyon, the mountain he called Mien Mo, the aerial bridge over the beach and the wrecked car in the sand below were living horrors to Kerouac, constant reminders of his vision of death-in-life. The rest of the world went on its way ignoring the signs, but he couldn't get them out of his mind. To make matters worse, he was spending his time at the cabin correcting galleys of the *Book of Dreams*, all the while witnessing some of his nightmares materialize right in front of his eyes outside the door. At the beginning of his retreat he tried to relax and enjoy the solitude of the canyon. He attempted to make friends with the bluejay and the raccoon who hung around for scraps of food. (322)

Kerouac's attempts to appreciate the solitude of his surroundings were overwhelmed by his own fears of the place. Kerouac hoped that his trip to Big Sur would be an escape where he could unwind and work, but it was not. The sight of the towering canyon wall and the sound and smell of the ocean were too much for Kerouac to bear. Charters goes on to note, "After a little over two weeks in Bixby Canyon in August 1960, Kerouac couldn't take any more of the solitude. He scattered the perishable food for the bird and the raccoon, closed up the cabin and left the Canyon" (323).

Kerouac, as a modern man, was in conflict with his natural surroundings at the cabin, and that conflict inspired one of the most memorable passages in the novel. Kerouac's paranoia is illustrated with horrific eloquence in chapter nine. Jack Dulouz, the narrator of Big Sur, goes to the ocean one afternoon and takes a deep breath. The experience turns bad, as if he is having a bad drug experience. Dulouz fears that the breath of sea air is full of evil. The terror he endures drives him away from the cabin and back to San Francisco. Dulouz notes:

> When I went to the sea in the afternoon and suddenly took a huge deep Yogic breath to get all that good sea air in me but somehow just got an overdose of iodine, or of evil, maybe the seaweed cities, something, my heart suddenly beating—Thinking I'm gonna get the local vibrations instead here I am almost fainting only it isn't an ecstatic swoon by St. Francis, it comes over me in the form of horror of an eternal condition of sick mortality in me—In me and everyone. (41)

Dulouz's fear that the sea air has poisoned him inspires him to contemplate his own existence: first as a human and also as a writer. As a human, Dulouz sees himself as tragically flawed and vulnerable. Rather than feeling a Franciscan brotherhood with the natural world around him, he experiences terror when breathing the fresh ocean air. Dulouz realizes that everything living must die, but finds no comfort in nature or God. He continues:

> I see myself as just doomed and pitiful—An awful realization that I have been fooling myself all my life thinking there was a next thing to do to keep the show going and actually I'm just a sick clown and so is everybody else… so I'm left sitting there in the sand after having almost fainted and stare at the waves which suddenly are not waves at all, with I guess must have been the goopiest downtrodden expression God if He exists must've ever seen in His movie career. (41)

Dulouz's despair continues to gain momentum. God is a movie producer who controls the waves that carried in the terrible breeze, and all of the mortal dying creatures on earth. Or maybe God does not exist at all. Neither option is comforting for Dulouz. He despairs that he ever tried to do anything in his life, especially write:

> *Eh vache*, I hate to write—All my tricks laid bare, even the realization that they're laid bare itself laid bare as a lotta bunk—The sea seems to yell to me GO TO YOUR DESIRE DONT HANG AROUND HERE—For after all the sea must be like God, God isnt asking us to mope and suffer and sit by the sea in the cold at midnight for the sake of writing down useless sounds, he gave us the tools of self reliance after all to make it straight thru bad life mortality towards Paradise maybe I hope... but I ran away from that seashore and never came back again without that secret knowledge: that it didn't want me there, that I was a fool to sit there in the first place, the sea has its waves, the man has his fireplace, period. (41-2)

Perhaps the most chilling realization that Dulouz has is that his writing is meaningless. The one thing that he has lived for his entire life is now meaningless. Nature, rather than reassuring him of his place in life, has the opposite effect. Dulouz identifies himself by his writing and now he doubts the merit of his life's work. At the cabin at Bixby Canyon, Kerouac encounters conflict in his natural surroundings. Kerouac's conflict, once again, inspires remarkable prosody. The reader witnesses the poetic unraveling of a literary icon in the same inspired mode as his previous spontaneous prose masterpiece, <u>The Subterraneans</u>.

Although Kerouac's description of his natural surroundings at the canyon restores the potency of his prose, it does not restore his optimism. Earlier in his writing career his examinations of the world around him shared much of the optimism of his Romantic predecessors. Like Kerouac, Thoreau finds tension in his natural surroundings and that tension drives him to write. However, Thoreau's insight could hardly be more opposed to Kerouac's. Unlike Kerouac, when Thoreau observes nature, he is reassured about his life. In Walden, Thoreau observes the redemptive quality of spring:

> You may have known your neighbor yesterday for a thief, a drunkard, or a sensualist, and merely pitied or despised him, and despaired of the world; but the sun shines bright and warm this first spring morning, re-creating the world, and you meet him at some serene work, and see how his exhausted and debauched veins expand with still joy and bless the new day, feel the spring influence with the innocence of infancy, and all his faults are forgotten.... Why the jailer does not leave open his prison doors—why the judge does not dismiss his case—why the preacher does not dismiss his congregation! It is because they do not obey the hint which God gives them, nor accept the pardon which he freely offers to all. (554-5)

Studying nature in the spring, Thoreau sees that everyone is innocent. Just as plants are renewed with life in the spring, so is humanity. The conflict created between the death of winter and the renewal of spring creates inspiration for Thoreau. Kerouac and Thoreau oppose each other in their views of nature and their peace of mind. However, both feel real conflict when they are inspired, and the prose of both are bursting with energy because of it.

Kerouac's perception of his surroundings as inhospitable in Bixby Canyon, and Thoreau's understanding of harmony gained within the transition between two seasons at Walden Pond, both inspire the creativity of the authors. The stark contrast between the two authors and their observations make this a unique opportunity to illustrate the tremendous power of conflict to inspire creation. The conclusion that Kerouac and Thoreau come to could not be more different. Nonetheless, a similar conflict drives them both to write powerfully. In spite of Kerouac's poor emotional state, the conflict of an alcoholic modern man trying to exist in nature aroused the passage above that once again feels of an outblown jazz riff. The center of Kerouac's interest, the breath full of iodine, carries Dulouz from the sea to St. Francis to God and finally to his despair about his writing career. In his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," Kerouac describes his method, "Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment of writing*, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion" (Charters, Beat Reader 57). When writing about his experience by the ocean, Kerouac executes his rule perfectly. The free association of details that follow his breath full of iodine seem to flow uninterrupted from the author as if it were launched from Charlie Parker's saxophone. The natural conflict that Kerouac found in the Canyon motivates a singularly powerful passage within the novel.

In Chapter 2, I noted that Kerouac's passage about Solomon and the town of Testament in On the Road is quite similar to the hopeful tone in Walden. Dean interprets the signs in the world around him to be divine and comforting, and so does Sal. Being taken out of their way and lied to is not a setback, but rather a reminder of the beautiful structure implicit in all of life. Kerouac's literary persona responds to Dean's optimism: "He and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there" (114). From this starting point, we see Kerouac's attitude about life descend a long way. By the time Kerouac writes Big Sur, his connection with the dispossessed, like Solomon the hitchhiker, is nearly entirely severed. Approaching age 40, Kerouac is overcome with despair. What truly charges Kerouac's writing is an intense need to be part of the fellaheen and a similarly intense need to be comfortable and write. By the time he wrote Big Sur, he had lost his desire to be dispossessed. All Kerouac wanted by 1960 was to be comfortable. Sadly, even his faith in writing is shaken. Unfortunately, without that primary conflict in his life, Kerouac lacked the creative spark, the conflict mixed with detachment, that he needed to make great literature.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Jack Kerouac the writer set out to accomplish one task above all else: to express his subjective experiences in writing. In his list, "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose," he instructs his readers to "[w]rite for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it" (Charters, Beat Reader 59). Kerouac's belief in sharing his "exact picture" of the world is aimed at a specific purpose. Through the honesty of his writing, Kerouac hoped to connect with his readers on an essential level of shared human experience. In a letter to Neal Cassady, he explained that his confessions "are designed & aimed to your knowing that which I know" (Charters, Selected Letters 1940-1956 247). He continues, "I have renounced fiction and fear. There is nothing left to do but write the truth. There is no other reason to write" (Charters, Selected Letters 1940-1956 248). The desire to convey, honestly, to his readers his deepest secrets creates a personal relationship with each of his readers. Ann Douglas writes, "Kerouac makes the reader his confidant, taking her into his most private thoughts and experiences, into areas which the world sometimes seems to prohibit us from sharing with anyone—our feelings about our bodies, our self-imagings, the moods that inspire and afflict our need to believe" (9). Kerouac purposefully creates an intimate relationship with all of his readers. The intimacy of the readers' relationship with Kerouac allows them to gain insight into the author's mind during both the highs and lows of his life. Consequently, if all human experience is shared, then the reader stands to learn something from Kerouac's novels that trace his rise to stardom and his demise as an alcoholic. Through sharing in Kerouac's decline in his novels, readers gain both a greater understanding of the real-life Kerouac, and an opportunity to gain knowledge about themselves.

Surely, Kerouac's tragic decline and death at age 47 not only tells us something about Kerouac, but something about the human experience as a whole. As a young man, Kerouac is deeply in love with America. On the Road, in fact, is largely an account of a young Kerouac's love affair with the American West. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Sal is drawn to Dean because he represents the wildness and openness of the West. Kerouac even asserts that his entire project as a writer was to understand America (Watson 98). However, by the end of his life, Kerouac has rejected the openness he once admired. One of the clearest indications of Kerouac's diminishing appreciation for the openness that America had to offer was his support of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who in 1952 declared that "McCarthyism is Americanism with its sleeves rolled" (Miles 201). However, that was clearly never the case. McCarthy initiated a hysteria within America by claiming there were communists working within the U.S. government. McCarthy, of course, created the scandal for political gain and had nothing substantial upon which to base his claims. Barry Miles notes of McCarthyism that "to most Americans it eventually became a pseudonym for everything repressive, reactionary, anti-intellectual, illiberal and totalitarian in American life" (201). Despite all of this, Kerouac was still sympathetic to McCarthy. It is a telling sign that Kerouac would defend a man who is synonymous with repression when, once, he identified so strongly with the oppressed of society. Kerouac's fall from openness to McCarthyism is a disheartening indicator that along the way he must have taken a wrong turn. Consequently, since Kerouac wants his readers to gain from the detailed account of his own experience, we must take seriously his choice to continue writing through his mental and physical decline at the end of his life and gain something from his loss.

I believe the primary failing for Kerouac was his inability to see past the subjective world of his own experience that played such a crucial role in his life as a writer. Kerouac, early in his career, developed a notion that in order for him to be a powerful writer he must remove himself from those around him. As he aged, Kerouac continually invested more into the idea that he would have to sacrifice his own happiness for his art. After he wrote The Subterraneans, Kerouac documented in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" that "the best writing is always the most painful personal wrungout tossed from cradle warm protective mind" (Charters, Beat Reader 58). Clearly, he had a comprehension of what he was doing to himself when he wrote. Not only did his work have to be inspired by "painful" and "personal" experience, he also had to be removed from the world so that he could write "from cradle warm protective mind." The distance Kerouac felt he had to create between himself and the world he sought to describe led to his coming to a sad understanding of his role as a writer. Steve Wilson addresses Kerouac's realization:

> [W]hat Kerouac will discover in the course of reinventing his quests as literature is that the writer, through the act of making art, removes himself from the very experiences/suffering he seeks to embrace, and indeed, from

> the enlightenment he had hoped to find. He learns that art requires distance, sacrifice of one's life to creating rather than experiencing. (303)

While on the surface it might seem that alcohol was the primary contributor to Kerouac's demise—he did die from "hemorrhaging esophageal varices, the classic drunkard's death" (Nicosia 697)—alcoholism was but a symptom of a larger problem. Kerouac's insistence on his concept of writing as a form of self-sacrifice is the key to Kerouac's tragic decline in later life. Since Kerouac believed that he must withdraw from the world around him, he used alcohol as a tool to accomplish that end. Ann Charters writes in Kerouac that "Jack was never too drunk to remember, when he wanted to. He used the drunkenness as a defense, a barrier between himself and the others" (242). Alcohol could artificially produce the distance and suffering Kerouac believed he needed to be a great writer.

The influences that led Kerouac to the notion that artists must struggle for their craft appear throughout his work and his personal life. Undoubtedly, Kerouac's belief in the necessity of suffering in order to create powerful art is tied up in his complicated religious beliefs. The notion that one must suffer in order to gain spiritually exists in both Buddhism and Christianity, Kerouac's two significant religious influences. First, in his studies in Buddhism, Kerouac found the concept of the bodhisattva. In his The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche defines the bodhisattva as:

> … the being who takes on the suffering of all sentient beings, who undertakes the journey to liberation not for his own good alone but to help all others, and who eventually, after attaining liberation, does not dissolve into the absolute or flee the agony of samsara, but chooses to return again

> and again to devote his or her wisdom and compassion to the service of the whole world. (364)

Like the bodhisattva, Kerouac made his own happiness secondary to his contribution to others. As he saw it, Kerouac's endeavor to share his experience through his writing doomed him to always be removed from the aspects of life that could provide him happiness. Steve Wilson notes of Kerouac in his novels, On the Road and The Subterraneans, an "increasing awareness, and deepening despair, that life as a writer will make him only at best a Boddhisatva—one guiding others to possible enlightenment—always describing what he can never himself obtain" (303). Kerouac, as his career progressed, decided that his writing alienated him from those around him, and as a necessary condition of being a writer, he had to endure the pain that goes along with that alienation. Buddhism helped Kerouac develop a belief that he must suffer for his craft.

However, Buddhism was not the only religious influence that fueled his notion that he must suffer to be a writer. As a Catholic, Kerouac had a strong sense of the value of martyrdom. In Big Sur, Kerouac's fictionalized ego, Jack Dulouz, has a vision of the ultimate sign of Christian martyrdom: the cross. Dulouz declares, "I see the cross, it's silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, I hold out my arms to be taken away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out to the Cross standing in a luminous area of the darkness…" (205). Dulouz's vision of the cross is telling because of the power that the symbol carries. Christ dies on the cross in order to insure the possibility of salvation for all humanity. In the tradition of Christ's sacrifice, the martyrs of the early Christian Church died because they refused to renounce their faith (Weaver 54). Kerouac, in fact, did die for his faith.

However, his death, rather than stemming from religious piety, was inspired by a belief that writers must suffer to create great art. Just as early Christians died rather than compromise their religious conviction, Kerouac died as a result of his refusal to denounce his belief that powerful writing requires pain and self-sacrifice. While on the surface it would seem curious that a man would hold as fast to his belief in his work as did the early Christian martyrs to their religious beliefs, it is not a surprise to see an American put such a high value on work.

Kerouac's willingness to die for his work is rooted in an American tradition that stretches back to Colonial America. Herbert Applebaum writes in his book, <u>The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force</u>:

> Colonial American history is about a land that was wild and unspoiled, about a people full of hope and opportunity, and about a culture brimming over with youth and energy. It was a time when America was greening, with its vast canopy of forests and unspoiled mountains, its rivers and lakes all teaming with fish, and game roaming the grassy plains, woods, and deserts, while at night only a few sparkles of light appeared from campfires lit by human hands. (3)

It was not very long ago that the first European immigrants settled in an enormous and wild land that was untouched by European society and technology. The early settlers were forced to work hard to make a place on this continent where they could survive. The natural surroundings, while unspoiled, were also untamed. Applebaum continues, "the colonial period was the time when the ideology of work, the American work ethic, took root, and that too has withstood the test of time. Americans still value work and still consider it an obligation to society, to oneself, and to one's family" (3). Since early times were so difficult, all Americans had a responsibility to everyone in their community to put in a full, hard day's work, a tradition of valuing hard work that did not escape Kerouac. Steve Wilson notes this trend in Kerouac's life:

> To prove—to himself and his working class relatives—the validity of his vocation, Kerouac repeatedly referred to his writing as "his work," and set goals for himself that required physical and psychological sacrifice for his art: drinking to excess, taking speed to fuel three-day writing orgies, developing his technique of trancelike composition, abandoning relationships that might lead to stability. He sought to create real suffering in a life that seemed sheltered. (305)

Kerouac felt the characteristic American drive to work; his choice to make writing difficult is an inherited characteristic. Like a good American, Kerouac placed the burden of work upon himself as if it were a religious conviction. He eventually did, as all martyrs do, demonstrate his faith in his role as a suffering writer, and gave his life.

However, Kerouac did not have to give into the temptation to make his art more important than his happiness. He would have had to look no further than one of his literary icons, Henry David Thoreau, or his friend, Allen Ginsberg, to find an example of an American writer who made a significant literary impact without sacrificing his happiness, much less his life. Kerouac created a script for his life as a writer that he followed, and wrote about, all the way to his death. Kerouac practiced what the French existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre calls *mauvaise foi*, or bad faith. When Kerouac told himself that he must suffer for his art, he was lying to himself. Sartre claims, "We shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself" (87). Kerouac does not truly have to be miserable to make great art, but he chooses to believe in the myth that asserts that he does. Sartre continues, "The essence of the lie implies in fact the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding" (87). As Sartre claims, Kerouac was in possession of the truth. He was well aware of Thoreau's life as a writer, which did not end tragically. However, Kerouac hid this knowledge of Thoreau, a writer he loves, in order to carry out his desire to be a suffering artist. Sartre gives an example of a person practicing bad faith by referring to a case from a Viennese psychiatrist's book:

> There is the question, for example, of women whom marital infidelity has made them frigid; ...these pathologically frigid women apply themselves to becoming distracted in advance from the pleasure which they dread; many for example at the time of the sexual act, turn their thoughts away toward their daily occupations, make up their household accounts.... Yet if the frigid woman thus distracts her consciousness from the pleasure which she experiences, it is by no means cynically and in full agreement with oneself; *it is in order to prove to herself that she is frigid.* (95)

Despite observable evidence to the contrary, the woman believes that she cannot enjoy sex with her husband. The woman fulfills her prophecy by distracting herself from the pleasure that she experiences. Consequently, the woman dooms herself to one way of experiencing her sexual life. Similarly, Kerouac decided that there is only one way for a writer to experience the world: the writer must suffer to create. Once he had decided that this was the case, he hides the truth—the truth is that he could have been happy and written great literature as Thoreau and Ginsberg did—from himself. Kerouac created a script that his life, as a writer, had to follow. Ironically, in his quest to be a great writer, it is his skill in creating a script for himself that caused his demise.

Nonetheless, Kerouac's life and writing, however flawed, have inspired many people, myself included. In the end, Kerouac achieved what he set out to do. He shared his subjective experience in his writing, and, in turn, allows his readers to come to a greater understanding of many of our common human experiences. Through Kerouac's art, I learn both about his experiences and my own life. Personally, since high school, I have tried to re-evaluate my self-destructive choices to pursue conflict in order to inspire myself competitively in golf. Part of what I consider to be a successful move away from my injurious tendency to create conflict in my life, I owe to what Kerouac shared through his literature. Julie Ellison, when discussing Emerson's belief in the importance of detachment in the creation of art, mentions that he believes separation results in "both loss and gain" (154). It seems that in my relationship with Kerouac's literature, Emerson is correct. Through Kerouac's detachment and sacrifice, I have gained a perspective I might not have otherwise achieved; and so Kerouac and his belief in the suffering artist is redeemed.

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