

A Specific Elsewhere: Taking Beat In

Steven Schroeder
Shenzhen University

1

I offer this paper as a report on work in progress – my ongoing struggle as a poet and a scholar of religion to come to terms with a “mainstreaming” of Beat culture that was crystallized for me at the 2004 “Beat Meets East” conference in Chengdu, Sichuan, China, when a representative of the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu officially welcomed the conference and spoke in glowing terms to an audience of scholars and Chinese students of the place of writers such as Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder in American culture. While the official was perfectly correct in affirming the place of Beat writers in American culture, it was a bit jarring to hear the announcement from a representative of the Bush Administration. What was a decidedly fringe movement (a bunch of people, as Amiri Baraka put it, “who came to the conclusion that society sucked”) in the middle of the twentieth century had found its way into the mainstream, as exemplary of American culture, by the beginning of the twenty-first.

This would, perhaps, make more sense if there had been a revolution. But, *sans* revolution, it became, for me, a question of incorporation. There is an *implicit* religiosity in the image of “the road,” which works as a sort of American Daoism and feeds the traditional “American” dream in ways that make being taken in more likely.

The revolution, perhaps, is simply one more turn of the wheel (as Patti Smith, arguably one of the more important descendants of the movement, suggests) – an affirmation of the

essentially conservative role religion has so often played in society in spite of the revolutionary insights of various founders and prophets. Culture (particularly in its “American” and advanced Capitalist form) has exhibited an uncanny ability to swallow movements that would fundamentally transform it – taking revolution in, typically, with little more than minor course adjustment.

2

Cornel West describes American philosophy as a record of “America” talking to itself. If we begin with that definition – also bearing in mind West’s observation that this locates the practice of “American” philosophy beyond academically defined disciplinary borders – Jack Kerouac is a quintessentially American philosopher. His best known work, *On the Road*, is America singing America to America in America, from a perspective that is almost entirely contained within the continental United States. The novel routinely crosses disciplinary borders with the sure step of a nomad at home on the road; but it crosses political borders as a tourist, and the crossing almost always looks like the penetration of an “other” thought exotic, almost always looks like a crossing made by a traveler who will finally say (as Dean Moriarty does when he leaves Sal Paradise recovering from dysentery in Mexico) “Gotta get back to my life” (301).

Kerouac’s road trip maps the continent the way the United States has always mapped “America.” It begins in the east, in greater New York City; escapes to the west, which it settles only to the extent that it can be made to orbit New York; mostly assumes the north, which goes without saying; and figures the south (concentrated in Laredo, Texas) as “the bottom and dregs

of America where all the heavy villains sink, where disoriented people have to go to be near a specific elsewhere they can slip into unnoticed” (273). This is a slightly twisted manifest destiny (twisting what was twisted to begin with), but Sal Paradise moves across the continent like a pioneer; and he names what he sees the way eighteenth and nineteenth century Anglo explorers (who had also often lost their east) did, on the fly, as though, seeing it, they see it first, as though, telling it, they tell it (as story tellers most often do) for the folks back home. San Francisco is not a promised land; it is an escape. And Denver, like Chicago, is on the way. Texas is undeniable, but it ends in the bottom and dregs of America. Mexico is beyond the bottom, and everything beyond Mexico City is mapped nowhere but in the naming of a highway that continues on after travelers have stopped and travel has come to an end. Kerouac’s travelers call Mexico “Indian,” but they see the inhabitants as nothing more than children – possessed of a redemptive innocence – but finally nothing other than resources to be used. This is an old “American” tune.

Most interesting, though, is the bayou country of southwestern Louisiana, “a manuscript of the night we couldn’t read” (157). This country is more radically *other* even than Mexico. Traveling west from New Orleans, “America” resumes when Texas does – when the language of the manuscript becomes, if not familiar, at least readable again. Kerouac’s travelers know how to read night everywhere except the bayou between New Orleans and Port Arthur. *Others* have always defined the contours of “America.” In *On the Road*, those most radically other inhabit the bayou: “America” is not this, and, to a lesser extent, it is not Mexico. It certainly is not women, who are introduced, for the most part, as decoration.

What it is is something else.

And that is “American exceptionalism,” a homegrown *dao* weaving from John

Winthrop's city on a hill through Whitman's song and Emerson's self reliance to Ronald Reagan's farewell address and the "only in America" rhetoric of this year's Presidential campaign.

3

Criticism of Kerouac's Buddhism has been consistent since Alan Watts wrote *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*. For Watts, much of the criticism boils down to Kerouac being too self-conscious to be Zen – a criticism that is apt for the America singing America in *On the Road*, which is nothing if not self-conscious. In Kerouac's defense, it is difficult to conceive a *novel* without self-consciousness; and what he is writing here more closely resembles a folk variation on philosophical Daoism than the *dharma* talk of a Zen master. But Daoism is the native language of Zen – which, where it begins, is *Cha'an*. So we would do well to make nothing of the distinction and keep our eyes on the *dao* where Kerouac's travelers find themselves, all that road going, like water.

Early in the novel, Sal Paradise says, "This is the story of America. Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do" (68). Writing of a book as rich in lyrical descriptions of places and characters as this one, it seems almost criminal to single out such a prosaic line. But, prosaic though it may be, this line captures the American *dao* Kerouac envisions with admirable clarity. And it is perfectly consistent with the simplicity of *Cha'an* and the focus of philosophical Daoism on the ordinary to locate the *dao* in the prose of the world rather than a lyric that rises above it.

Doing what they think they're supposed to do applies as well to the compliant citizen

following the orders of a repressive State as to the revolutionary practitioner of civil disobedience who follows a law they think “higher.” And it applies, too, to the poser keeping up appearances. “America” contains them all – and therein, perhaps, lies the key to the uniquely powerful and destructive place the United States has taken in the world.

Kerouac’s Catholicism inclines him to theistic language even when he struggles to articulate the Dao, particularly at the beginning of his “mysticism”: “Troubles, you see, is the generalization-word for what God exists in. The thing is not to get hung-up. My head rings!” he cried, clasp ing his head. He rushed out of the car like Groucho Marx to get cigarettes – that furious, ground-hugging walk with the coattails flying, except that he had no coattails, “Since Denver, Sal, a lot of things – Oh, the things – I’ve thought and thought.... You see what I mean? God exists without qualms. As we roll along this way I am positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us – that even you, as you drive, fearful of the wheel” (I hated to drive and drove carefully) – “the thing will go along of itself and you won’t go off the road and I can sleep. Furthermore we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do. We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side.” There was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant to say was somehow made pure and clear. He used the word “pure” a great deal. I had never dreamed Dean would become a mystic. These were the first days of his mysticism, which would lead to the strange, ragged W.C. Fields saintliness of his later days” (120-121). Here the existence of God is equated with the confidence that “everything will be taken care of.” God exists “without qualms.”

This is a strange *dao*, not an eternal one: not a matter of what it is, but of what it will be, a

“will be” that requires a God who exists without qualms. Dean moves in the middle of this report of his thinking to “the thing” going along “of itself,” but his mysticism makes him confident not that all is or that all is *well* but that all will be well, all will be well, all manner of things will be well. In his own mad way, Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty is *building* the city of America’s dreams, and that is American to the core. America “is the same in every corner,” but we do not see the same at every turn on this strange *dao*. Dean, we are led to believe, does; and that, perhaps, is what leads to his “strange, ragged W.C. Fields saintliness.” But the question, as A. G. Mojtabai suggests, is whether this seeing everywhere the same is saintliness or cluelessness (Mojtabai, “Road Fatigue”). It is often difficult, as both Zen and Daoism have been well aware, to tell the difference.

Not many pages after this, Sal has his own mystical experience on the Algiers ferry: “Old Big Slim Hazard had once worked on the Algiers ferry as a deckhand; this made me think of Mississippi Gene too; and as the river poured down from mid-America by starlight I knew, I knew like mad that everything I had ever known and would ever know was One.” (147) But eleven pages later, we are in the Louisiana bayou night manuscript neither Sal nor Dean can read.

That move is critical, because it’s all one, it’s all the same – but these others, these others don’t fit. Kerouac’s America is an endless poem, but there are *others* who do not scan. And Kerouac’s Sal Paradise senses the strangeness of this (not the strangeness of the others but the strange poetry of One that doesn’t scan in places). There is an “enormous loneliness that differs just a shade and a cut of hair as you move across the Mississippi” (267). It’s all the same but a shade of difference here and there – the story of America.

Another mystical experience, on Market Street in San Francisco, calls to mind the “watercourse way” of Daoism: “I stopped, frozen with ecstasy on the sidewalk. I looked down Market Street. I didn’t know whether it was that or Canal Street in New Orleans: it led to water, ambiguous, universal water, just as 42nd Street, New York, leads to water, and you never know where you are” (172). *Here* is a tension that precipitates another look. The unitive experience is like the ambiguity of water. Sameness that is supposed to make you always feel at home – the relentless homogenization of the dream of America – leaves you lost – not at home but at sea. The restlessness of the American *dao*, the endless highway, the unmistakable air of being adrift, not at home, on the road, appears here all at once. Kerouac, at the end of the 1950s, gives all this back to the containment culture that has formed him and the generation of which he is a part.

Kerouac writes “spontaneous” prose because he cannot contain himself – but rootlessness, homelessness, are hauntingly contained in these pages.

The inexplicable *dao* is most nearly explicated in a conversation about IT that draws on the specific elsewhere of a particular jazz performance: “Now, man, that alto man last night had IT – he held it once he found it; I’ve never seen a guy who could hold so long.” I wanted to know what “IT” meant. “Ah well” – Dean laughed – “now you’re asking me impon-de-rables – ahem! Here’s a guy and everybody’s there, right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of a chorus he *gets it* – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the

tune of the moment that everybody knows it's not the tune that counts but IT – " Dean could go no further; he was sweating telling about it" (207-208). IT is connected explicitly with time and with the road.

Yes. The road is life, so, on the road, there is no life to get back to. But Dean, lost as America is lost, speaks about it nonetheless.

4

Now, what would happen if it suddenly dawned on the saxophonist that he was lost and he blew to get back to where he had begun – as though the melody were a road he'd gotten so far off of he didn't know how to get back? All he'd played then would be lost, all he'd play then would be loss – and the melody would become nothing but an abstraction always elsewhere and the music would be nothing but the difference between the here now note the saxophonist's blowing in a here now you share as part of the audience, part of a community formed in the being here making of it, and everything about you would bend to the music of what is neither here nor there.

I suppose we could call that a New York state of mind, because it is all the ambiguous water 42nd Street leads to. What a strange way to dig San Francisco or Denver or Abilene or Laredo or Lhasa or Mexico City or Chengdu. But I can see why it might give the Consul General reason to smile: "we'll dig Denver together and see what everybody's doing although that matters little to us, the point being that we know what IT is and we know TIME and we know that everything is really FINE" (209).

No time.

Two phrases leap from Grace Mojtabai's 2008 novel *All That Road Going*, which takes its title from the end of Kerouac's work: "¿Dondé quieres ir?" and "You can't get lost in America." The first, a sign in the Greyhound station, calls to mind the Cheshire Cat's response to Alice, lost, when she asks him which way she ought to go from here. He says it depends on where you want to get to; and when she says she doesn't much care, he says it doesn't much matter, because you're bound to get somewhere if you just keep going long enough. The second, spoken by the driver of the bus that is the setting for the novel when he is undeniably lost, calls to mind just how powerful the combination of fear and denial can be – especially in the dark on an unfamiliar road. "Anywhere but here" is the most common answer to the first question. And the driver, lost, plunges forward hoping for a sign.

FORGET HOURS AND MINUTES – IT'S LATE, PLENTY LATE. Peering through the face, as a veil, its gauzy surface thins; Eileen sees car lots and salvage yards sweep past. Power lines unspool . . . Billboards proclaim and vanish. Stars, drifting, slip from containment beyond the borders of the frame. The world is slipping away . . . She touches one hand to the glass.

Then turns.

Inside the bus, around her, a deep lightless well. She listens. The sound is muffled but coming through – close, but not next to her, two, maybe three rows back. No one is speaking. Something else.

Behind her, she hears a man weeping in darkness...

(A.G. Mojtabai, *All That Road Going*, 196)

Something else.

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