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# **Improvisation in Jack Kerouac's "Jazz" Writing: Intersubjectivity, Authenticity, and the Collectivist Utopia**

**Talal Hochard**

Jack Kerouac's *Duluoz Legend* is a series of interconnected novels that are emblematic of the "Beat aesthetic" that espouses an alternative mode of being in a world that no longer accommodates authenticity. It is a mode that enables confrontation with the Real by encroaching upon the boundaries of the known and venturing into the unknown physically as well as metaphysically. This rebellion emerged from the rejection by the "king of the Beatniks" (McNally 2003, 243) of postwar comfort and security in America as artificial desires, as well as his appreciation of "the intense moment over tradition, intuition over reason shaped by education," (1999, 303) and his search for authenticity in the "outsider status," (1999, 305) as Steve Wilson observes. The *Legend* could be considered simultaneously a product of and commentary on the societal upheaval that was in progress during the late 1940s and the 1950s and that was brought forth by a set of complex and interrelated factors that are particular to the American context at the advent of postmodernism and the Information Age.

Insight into the manifestations of intersubjective experiences in Kerouac's work becomes critical once we realize that the quest of the narrator in *The Duluoz Legend* is essentially one for authenticity, in its various configurations. Intersubjectivity and authenticity are bound together by the assumption that manifesting one's authentic self necessitates the recognition of the self by others as well as the negotiation of aspects of identity and reality. Commenting on the state of the modern world, philosopher Charles Taylor proposes a "work of retrieval" to restore the "ideal of

authenticity” (2003, 23) through the recognition and embodiment of the dimensions of authenticity, the most important of which is its dialogical nature. Taylor believes that

the general feature of human life . . . is its fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining an identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression. . . . No one acquires the languages needed for self definition on their own. We are introduced to them through exchanges with others who matter to us—what George Herbert Mead called “significant others.” (2003, 32–33).

As a hallmark of postwar American art, intersubjectivity was a necessary instrument of resistance against, not only the objectivity of corporate liberalism (Belgrad 1998, 5) but also extreme forms of individualism—it was an attempt to seize the domain of objective reality from, as the postmodernists might say, power structures which, in the specific postwar American model, are represented by the institutions of the technocratic-consumerist society. Indeed, intersubjectivity presented “an alternative metaphysics embodied in artistic forms . . . in which reality was understood to emerge through a conversational dynamic” (Belgrad 1998, 5).

Explaining Husserl’s account of the notion, Christian Beyer maintains that, in its most fundamental sense, “intersubjectivity comes in when we undergo acts of *empathy*. Intersubjective experience is empathic experience; it occurs in the course of our conscious attribution of intentional acts to other subjects, in the course of which we put ourselves into the other one’s shoes” (2020). According to Oxford’s *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, intersubjectivity is

the process and product of sharing experiences, knowledge, understandings, and expectations with others. A key feature of social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenological approaches generally. The existence, nature, and meaning of things is not entirely up to the individual but subject to social and linguistic constraints within a culture or subculture. . . . Cultural identity is experienced through intersubjectivity. (Chandler and Munday 2011)

Christopher Adamo believes that “to the extent that . . . classical utopian visions were collective, the Beats, including Kerouac, align with this anti-utopian sentiment, suspicious that any collective (political) answer to the question, ‘How are we to live?’ threatens to rob man of his individuality, freedom, and dignity” (Adamo 2012, 33). While there is certainly truth in the Beats’ denunciation of a political (institutionalized) hijacking of the idea of a utopia, what Adamo fails to mention is that, in the abstract, they did believe strongly in it—Kerouac’s idealism is proof—and did believe that a utopia can be erected through subcultural forms of collectivism, of which intersubjectivity is a strong example. The following discussion demonstrates the role of improvisation in the manifestation of intersubjectivity in Kerouac’s writing. Following an outline of the anti-representational nature of Kerouac’s style, it analyzes some of the jazz performances that are featured in *On the Road*, locating the intersubjective experiences between musicians and audiences that Kerouac strove to replicate in his writing. The attempt to use bebop jazz improvisation as a writing aesthetic, specifically in the form of “sketches,” demonstrates the potential of the transfer in achieving profound levels of empathy, notably empathy toward strangers, as well as delayed empathy as seen in examples from *Desolation Angels* and *The Subterraneans*.

## The Aesthetics of Jazz Writing: Anti-Representation and “Surrogation”

Kerouac’s method came to be known most commonly as “spontaneous prose,” but also “jazz writing” and “sketching,” and has been said to subvert the representational function of narrative. Michael Hrebeniak describes it as a “rhetorical trajectory that sheds re-presentation or imitation for the performative act: a discovery of form and the world in the process of writing” (2006, 24), while Marco Abel’s Guattari-Deleuzian interpretation of it leads to the following appraisal:

Rejecting the standard interpretive approaches to Kerouac based on critical paradigms such as psychobiography, history, or ideology—all of which frame a text on the level of “representation” and search for “meaning”—Deleuze conceives of Kerouac’s work as productive and is instead interested in what it does. Asserting together with Guattari that “no art is imitative,” Deleuze responds to Kerouac’s spontaneous prose as constituting a literary machine that produces affects, not a signifying, representational system that requires an interpretive search for hidden meanings.” (2002, 228–29)

Abel continues to mention that Kerouac’s

jazz-like, energetic composition forces his language to such an extreme that it leaves behind the level of representation—the classic sense of writing. Instead, it gives the impression of writing akin to the itinerative sound of the jazz saxophone, of the “go, go, go” of Dean’s mad cheering—and of the incessant and speedy clicking and clacking sounds of the typewriter.” (2002, 237)

For Abel, Kerouac’s language references the dynamics and movements, and, most importantly, the spontaneity of everyday life. The method is not spontaneous only for the sake of spontaneity

or for creating a new writing style; it is spontaneous because life is. This conclusion is also arrived at by Ovidiu Matiuc who sees that Kerouac “believed in bridging the liminal space between art and life, between Roman-Catholicism and Buddhism, between himself and the world. Negotiating boundaries was one of his main concerns, in the attempt to create life, not artistic artifacts or representations of life” (2018, 88).

Scholars have observed the connection between the notion of timelessness or nonlinear temporality and the jazz aesthetic in Kerouac’s style. In jazz, improvisation is the aspect of the music that is responsible for establishing this connection as the present, which is so passionately celebrated by the character of Beat hero Neal Cassady (Dean in *On the Road* and Cody in most of the other novels) as well as the Beats in general, seems to unfold most vividly during improvised performances, perhaps as a reminder of the transience of the moments that “never extend beyond a flash” (Hrebeniak 2006, 40).

In his study of temporality in *On the Road*, Erik Mortenson shows that jazz improvisation provides access to the present moment because “it reminds everyone that everything must end” and creates spaces for intersubjective links via “access to a community within the moment” (2001, 63). When it comes to the mysterious notion of “IT”<sup>1</sup> that Dean seeks in all kinds of experiences, Mortenson believes that it “is a connection between the musician, the audience, and individual members of the audience all coming together as a whole.” He also quotes Daniel Belgrad who, in *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*, notes that “the structure of bebop ‘suggests an intersubjective dynamic, one in which the individual and the community empower one another.’” Ultimately, Mortenson deduces that “such an idea of community is emblematic of Kerouac’s novel” and that “like a jazz musician, Kerouac too is trying to catch ‘IT’ through his work, trying to catch the words and phrases that will let ‘everybody know

it's not the tune that counts but IT" (2001, 64). The semblance between jazz improvisation and Kerouac's writing is also observed by Tim Hunt who pinpoints exactly what he believes to be the elements of jazz that are manifested in the novels, namely "melody and chord patterns" and "the vocabulary of the musician":

The role of melody or theme in jazz . . . is roughly equivalent to the role of "image object" in Spontaneous Prose. . . . In Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose quirks of syntax, favored sounds, meters, and individual words . . . that are used and reused in different contexts parallel the jazz musician's vocabulary and make Kerouac's performances as instantly recognizable. (1981, 146)

The transfer from jazz music to jazz writing is underscored in Justin Trudeau's Ph.D. dissertation, which features a dissection of the performative aspects of Kerouac's writing method as outlined in the latter's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" and applied in *The Duluoz Legend*. Commenting on the most important steps of the method, Trudeau remarks:

To begin his subject of "Essentials," Kerouac writes of the "Set-Up" that "The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object." This first section relates the author's affinity for direct observation and immediacy between the writer and subject. The "image-object" is later referred to in the "Center of Interest" section where he writes, "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." Approaching his "image-objects" or "jewel centers" in the now via spontaneous sketching allowed Kerouac to produce meaning on more than one level, documenting multiple lines of thought as they happen between himself and the object of his sketches.

Such an approach allowed Kerouac to distinguish himself from other writers by abandoning established a priori analytical approaches to the novel (for instance, by outlining plot development). For Kerouac, the immediacy of sketching dictated the flow of language as it was happening, not beforehand.

Kerouac's approach to performative timing is not communicating an already discovered reality; it is offering a record of the discovery of a reality. (2006, 29)

What Trudeau sees in Kerouac's "Set-Up" as an "affinity for direct observation" refers to the writer's exploitation of many of the entities of the perceivable world as objects of "study." These range from the people he knows (Dean/Cody, Mardou in *The Subterraneans*, or Tristessa in *Tristessa*), to flora and fauna—for example, a mouse encountered in *Desolation Angels* (1995, 77–78) and the Big Sur vegetation in *Big Sur* (1992, 11, 12)—stars and planets described in *Desolation Angels* (1995, 77–78), places—for example, the church scene in *Lonesome Traveler* (2007b, 656), and random passersby such as the "religious fanatics" in *Lonesome Traveler* (2007b, 717) and the woman at the soda fountain illustrated later in this article.

Trudeau sees in spontaneous sketching possibilities for the manifestation of numerous realities. The "online" or write-as-you-go characteristic of improvisation expands the possibilities of what a thing is and could be and relays to the reader the very important and unique reality of the authentic Real, which is that the experience that one has of a thing is primarily governed by time-constrained subjective impressions. Where spontaneous sketching is concerned, the narrative of *The Duluoz Legend* is as close as it gets to the way the reader experiences things in the real world. Passages that feature this technique transmit the very cognitive mechanism of interpreting the world and thinking about things—what Trudeau calls "a record of the discovery of a reality"—and, as with jazz improvisation, they reflect the emotions felt at the time of contact with a given

entity. By not having a “preconceived idea” of what to say about an object, Kerouac gives rein to the moment in the same way that the jazz improviser’s selection of notes is partly influenced by the emotional situation that they find themselves in and/or the environment surrounding the performance.

Trudeau also talks about “surrogation” when explaining Kerouac’s borrowing of the time-controlling and time-manipulating functions of jazz improvisation: “Surrogation, or the symbolic transfer of one commodity for another, provides the link by which Kerouac’s use of bop musical form can be understood as performative within his use of spontaneous prose.” He also cites Joseph Roach in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, wherein the latter writes: “I believe that the process of trying out various candidates in different situations—the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins—is the most important of the many meanings that users intend when they say the word performance.” Trudeau then infers that “Kerouac’s prose functions as a performance of bop (sometimes referred to as spontaneous bop prosody) as it both aspires to imitate and replace the musical genre in the form of literature” (2006, 40).

In his study of Kerouac’s jazz writing, Richard Quinn comments on the cultural significance of this “surrogation”:

Improvisational processes motivate Kerouac’s writing even during those periods when Kerouac’s self-interest or religious anxieties dominated his individual psyche. Improvisation, then, occupies the obverse position of postwar conformity, isolation, and segregation. Like conformity, improvisation dissolves the individual personality, though not as a means of segregating and manufacturing suburban hyper-consumers. Rather, improvisational processes subvert the organizing self in order to further intersubjectivity. Improvisational activity removes the process of meaning-making from the isolated

individual and hands it to an interactive collectivity. . . . This collectivity is defined less by its members' identities than by its affinity for the very improvisational processes that form the collectivity in the first place (2004, 156–57).

Quinn distinguishes between, on the one hand, a harmful dissolution of the self through complete assimilation by the technocratic–consumerist society and, on the other, a rather advantageous dissolution engendered by the transition from the domain of the subjective to that of the intersubjective. In the first dissolution, the self yields to the dominion of the technology of production and the objects that it creates; in the second, it finds itself connected to other selves as part of a community. Furthermore, in the first, authenticity emerges as a product that is manufactured by a centralized authority and is associated with the pursuit and acquisition of objects and/or the idealization and unwavering adoption of certain defined life paths; in the second, authenticity acquires a collective social meaning whereby each member of a community, having played a participatory or creative part in the improvised process, enjoys full access to the fulfilled enterprise. The second dissolution conveys the state of egolessness that Kerouac's narrator achieves during most of his visions, such as the one that he has in *The Dharma Bums*: “It, the vision, was devoid of any sensation of I being myself, it was pure egolessness, just simply wild ethereal activities devoid of any wrong predicates” (2007c, 387–88).

What Trudeau describes as a “symbolic transfer” is actually more literal than one may think as the narrative of *The Duluoz Legend* frequently succeeds in its aspirations to “replace the musical genre.” As the following sections demonstrate, the jazz musicians' “auditioning stand-ins” is successfully replicated by Kerouac, whose auditioning of ideas during his “sketches” of people's lives generates intersubjective experiences with them in the same way that the jazz performers generate intersubjective experiences with their audience.

## Techniques of Improvisation in *On the Road*: Crescendo, Dragging, and Minimalist Variations

Studying the performative aspect of the writings of Beat poet and musician Bob Kaufman, Tom Pynn writes:

The influence of the African American jazz tradition, especially bebop, coincides with the Beat project in general and with Kaufman's work in particular when jazz emphasizes spontaneous improvisation and integrating the subjective experience of the musician with the soundscape; thus, moving the poet from an isolated, or naïve subjectivity, toward a mature or intersubjective interplay with world and others. . . . The uniqueness of the Beat idea of an individual was to place all human beings within an intersubjective context, a co-arising with others and the world through performance. In so doing, the expressive performative self would liberate the individual from all forms of conformity and death-in-life habits. It would release, as Kerouac wrote, "the true blue song of man." In order to attain release into the freedom of intersubjectivity, a co-arising with others and the world through performance, the urge to invincibility has to be replaced with vulnerability, a willingness to encounter and engage all forms of life on their respective terms without desiring to coerce, consume, or conquer. (2012, 80–81)

The Beats' interest in jazz is a natural byproduct of their quest for intersubjectivity. As Pynn reveals, jazz performance triggers a transition from the domain of the subjective—thereby forgoing the ego that is sculpted by individualism and that begets "conformity," "death-in-life habits," and the illusion of invincibility—to the domain of the intersubjective where reality and identity could be constructed collectively. Consequently, not only does improvisation influence the self by contributing to the state of egolessness but also society by extenuating the cultural practices

dictated by “death-in-life habits” such as consumerism and the domination of one group by another, which is entrenched in the desire to “coerce” and “conquer.”

In one of the scenes in *On the Road*, Sal and Dean attend a performance by jazz musician and singer Slim Gaillard. The description of the scene demonstrates the surrogation effect by powerfully relaying the energy inside the club and, at the same time, showing the reader what Kerouac wants to achieve in his writing:

But one night we suddenly went mad together again; we went to see Slim Gaillard in a little Frisco nightclub. Slim Gaillard is a tall, thin Negro with big sad eyes who’s always saying, “Right-orooni” and “How ’bout a little bourbon-orooni.” In Frisco great eager crowds of young semi-intellectuals sat at his feet and listened to him on the piano, guitar, and bongo drums. When he gets warmed up he takes off his shirt and undershirt and really goes. He does and says anything that comes into his head. He’ll sing “Cement Mixer, Put-ti Put-ti” and suddenly slow down the beat and brood over his bongos with fingertips barely tapping the skin as everybody leans forward breathlessly to hear; you think he’ll do this for a minute or so, but he goes right on, for as long as an hour, making an imperceptible little noise with the tips of his fingernails, smaller and smaller all the time till you can’t hear it any more and sounds of traffic come in the open door. Then he slowly gets up and takes the mike and says, very slowly, “Greaterooni . . . fine-ovauti . . . hello-orooni . . . bourbonorooni . . . all-orooni . . . how are the boys in the front row making out with their girls-orooni . . . orooni . . . vauti . . . oroonirooni . . .” He keeps this up for fifteen minutes, his voice getting softer and softer till you can’t hear. His great sad eyes scan the audience.

Dean stands in the back, saying, “God! Yes!”—and clasping his hands in prayer and sweating. “Sal, Slim knows time, he knows time.” Slim sits down at the piano and hits

two notes, two Cs, then two more, then one, then two, and suddenly the big burly bass-player wakes up from a reverie and realizes Slim is playing “C-Jam Blues” and he slugs in his big forefinger on the string and the big booming beat begins and everybody starts rocking and Slim looks just as sad as ever, and they blow jazz for half an hour, and then Slim goes mad and grabs the bongos and plays tremendous rapid Cubana beats and yells crazy things in Spanish, in Arabic, in Peruvian dialect, in Egyptian, in every language he knows, and he knows innumerable languages. Finally the set is over; each set takes two hours. (2007a, 158-59)

Slim controls musical time by choosing when he wants to decrease and increase the tempo and intensity of his playing. Regardless of the factors that influence these selections—they may be completely random or affected by outside factors such as the venue, the auditory and visual settings, the reaction of the audience, outside noise, etc.—Slim literally controls the crowd: when he slows down, “everybody leans forward breathlessly to hear” and when he speeds up, “everybody starts rocking.” A lot of emphasis is given to these rhythmic fluctuations so that the form—the musical wave or tornado, so to speak—overtops the content (what is actually being played), as the haphazard mixture of instruments, beats, melodies, and even languages and dialects attest to this. It is no wonder, then, that Dean thinks that “Slim knows time.” Any person who has witnessed an improvisational performance, especially (but not exclusively) jazz, can confirm this: the improviser knows time well enough to capture it, freeze it, blow on it (improvise) for as long as they like or simply as long as they can sustain the audience’s engagement. They increase and decrease in order to break the monotony before they return to the starting point or a familiar melody, similar to what Kerouac does when he “returns to that image-object—or melody—once his improvisation has run its course,” as Fiona Paton observes (2002, 127).

From the perspective of the audience, a shared center of attention is formed around the performance of Slim Gaillard whose soft playing on the bongos draws them in and makes them all “lean forward breathlessly to hear.” The members of the audience, including Sal and Dean, become intersubjectively linked via the shared center of attention. In another scene, the group hears a tenor saxophone player blowing across the street, so they go inside the saloon where he is playing and, immediately, Sal captures a moment of deep intersubjectivity between the audience and the musician:

Uproars of music and the tenorman *had it* and everybody knew he had it. Dean was clutching his head in the crowd, and it was a mad crowd. They were all urging that tenorman to hold it and keep it with cries and wild eyes, and he was raising himself from a crouch and going down again with his horn, looping it up in a clear cry above the furor. . . . Everybody was rocking and roaring. . . . Groups of colored guys stumbled in from the street, falling over one another to get there. “Stay with it, man!” (2007a, 177)

For the participants in the improvised moment, namely the musicians and the audience, the deeply investigated “IT” is no longer an elusive phenomenon but becomes emblematic of the intersubjective bond that connects them to one another and of the feeling of empathetic belonging to the human race that they want to stretch for as long as possible.

Being caught in that moment physically affects the audience, who reaches a state of ecstatic frenzy. However, the one who is the most impacted by the performance is Dean, as seen in the following passage when the saxophone player reaches the climax of his improvisation:

The tenorman jumped down from the platform and stood in the crowd, blowing around; his hat was over his eyes; somebody pushed it back for him. He just hauled back and

stamped his foot and blew down a hoarse, baughing blast, and drew breath, and raised the horn and blew high, wide, and screaming in the air. Dean was directly in front of him with his face lowered to the bell of the horn, clapping his hands, pouring sweat on the man's keys, and the man noticed and laughed in his horn a long quivering crazy laugh, and everybody else laughed and they rocked and rocked; and finally the tenorman decided to blow his top and crouched down and held a note in high C for a long time as everything else crashed along and the cries increased and I thought the cops would come swarming from the nearest precinct. Dean was in a trance. The tenorman's eyes were fixed straight on him; he had a madman who not only understood but cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was, and they began dueling for this; everything came out of the horn, no more phrases, just cries, cries, "Baugh" and down to "Beep!" and up to "EEEEEE!" and down to clinkers and over to sideways-echoing horn-sounds. He tried everything, up, down, sideways, upside down, horizontal, thirty degrees, forty degrees, and finally he fell back in somebody's arms and gave up and everybody pushed around and yelled, "Yes! Yes! He blowed that one!" Dean wiped himself with his handkerchief. (2007a, 177-78)

If one were to specify the highest moment of intersubjectivity or locate the exact stretch of seconds where "IT" is found in this passage, it would have to be when the saxophone player "held a note in high C." As the narrator recounts, the improviser knew that this moment was established between him and the audience, specifically between him and Dean, who "cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was." Once again, the notes being played (the content) are superseded by all the other factors that go into sustaining the moment, which is why it does not matter that the player stopped playing phrases and just stuck with "cries." Even though Dean is

not a musician, there is an intersubjective dialogue or “duel” that takes place between him and the saxophone player, which is facilitated by the latter via the medium of music and by the full concentration tendered by Dean.

Time manipulation is also a feature of the saxophone player’s playing, which rises and falls in the same way Slim Gaillard’s playing does. As soon as the ecstatic number is over, the improviser alters the mood by playing a song called “Close Your Eyes,” during which

his mouth quivered, he looked at us, Dean and me, with an expression that seemed to say, Hey now, what’s this thing we’re all doing in this sad brown world?—and then he came to the end of his song, and for this there had to be elaborate preparations, during which time you could send all the messages to Garcia around the world twelve times and what difference did it make to anybody? because here we were dealing with the pit and prunejuice of poor beat life itself in the god-awful streets of man, so he said it and sang it, “Close—your—” and blew it way up to the ceiling and through to the stars and on out—“Ey-y-y-y-y-es”—and staggered off the platform to brood. (2007a, 179)

Sal registers the euphoric intersubjective moments that are associated with the fast and chaotic playing but is not inclined to participate in the frenzy himself. For him, a slower pace and more concentrated playing are what constitute the peak of the intersubjective experience which, in a way, sums up and foregrounds the main differences between him and Dean: while Dean revels in the chaos of the present that the intersubjective moment offers, Sal exploits its potential in engendering reflections on the condition of existence. This crucial difference shows that for Dean, everything that is to know about the authentic Real is found in the present moment, whereas for Sal, although living in the present moment is desirable (but virtually impossible for him to achieve), the authentic Real is always one rumination away. Even though he does not realize it, in

his own private and silent way, Duluoz experiences “IT” when he shares the intersubjective moment with the saxophone player that culminates in his interpretation of the player’s singing as an inquiry about the absurdism of existence: “what’s this thing we’re all doing in this sad brown world?”

Trudeau makes the important observation that “improvising, or blowing on the subject image as Kerouac calls it, actually refers to a complex intersubjective approach to artist and subject through the use of calculated combinations” (2006, 39), although he fails to clarify what he means. I would argue that the “calculated combinations” that are responsible for some of the intersubjective moments are the small variations on ideas, which are similar to variations on musical notes in jazz performance. During the same wild night of jazz and alcohol, the group kept bar-hopping and ended up at a club called Jamson’s Nook where they attended a performance by an alto saxophone player who was

very simple in his ideas. What he liked was the surprise of a new simple variation of a chorus. He’d go from “ta-tup-tader-rara . . . ta-tup-tader-rara,” repeating and hopping to it and kissing and smiling into his horn, to “ta-tup-EE-da-de-deraRPP! ta-tup-EE-da-de-deraRUP!” and it was all great moments of laughter and understanding for him and everyone else who heard. (2007a, 181)

We can discern in the alto player’s performance a technique that is based on maintaining the simplicity of the musical ideas being introduced and creating the desired effect from the small variations added to them. Once again, the differences between Sal and Dean are put in the spotlight: whereas Sal finds the gist of the performance in the alterations between simple ideas and small variations, Dean finds it in the crescendo that we can associate with the manner in which he speaks—“I’m *hungry*, I’m *starving*, let’s *eat right now*” (2007a, 9)—and that Sal tries to emulate

during his conversation with an eighteen-year-old girl in *On the Road* (2007a, 219) and with Mardou in *The Subterraneans* (2007d, 498–99).

Even if their perception of the essence and intersubjective effect of the performance differs, Dean's understanding of improvisation contains the cipher of Kerouac's writing technique. Observe his commentary on the alto player's 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 lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the 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. (2007a, 185–86)

Dean's take on jazz is an illustration, however underdeveloped and unintended, of Kerouac's writing style. Dean defines “IT” as something so heroic, ephemeral, and rare that it becomes urgent for those whom “it is up to” to try to capture it and sustain it for as long as possible. It is the role of the alto player and, as Kerouac understands it, the role of the writer as well, to harness the power of improvisation in order to create intersubjective moments that reveal the authentic Real to a community of people. It could be argued that Dean's comments constitute the groundwork for the

“Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” or the “surrogation” that Trudeau describes. Notice, for example, the resemblance between Dean’s comment about the musician’s filling empty space with either “confessions” or “remembrance of ideas” and Kerouac’s “Set-Up” section where “the object is set before the mind, either in reality . . . or is set in the memory” (1993, 69). Kerouac’s illustration of his writing technique through Dean’s view of jazz reveals the core of what improvisation is: an anti-representational mode of spontaneous expression that blends random sketches of the surroundings with ideas (“vocabulary,” as per Hunt) in order to create intersubjective experiences.

Furthermore, Dean’s belief that in the moment of peak intersubjectivity “everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT” resembles Kerouac’s suggestion for writers in the “Center of Interest” section of “Essentials” to “blow! — now! — your way is your only way — ‘good’ — or ‘bad’ — always honest” (1993, 70) in that, in both, the intersubjective bond established between the participants or experiencers (audience or readers) is given more importance than the content. The pre-eminence of the formal aspect of the intersubjective moment echoes Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” thesis, which suggests that a shift in the medium of transmission may be more culturally consequential than the content of the information being transmitted (Lister 2009, 84). For Kerouac, intersubjectivity is dependent on the improviser’s experimentations with the medium. This is why, for example, his narrator in *Desolation Angels* does not appear so excited when the group goes to a poetry reading by a character called Merrill Randall (Pulitzer Prize poet James Merrill), stating that “it might be interesting to hear him converse spontaneously but I will not sit thru his crafty productions on a typewriter dedicated as they are usually to the imitation of the best poetry hitherto written, or at least the approximation—I’d rather hear Raphael’s new bombs of words, in fact I’d rather hear Lazarus write a poem—” (1995, 205).

Kerouac's narrator sees Randall's poetry as a dull, mechanical imitation that lacks variations of medium and prefers to listen to the incoherent poetry of his less skilled friends because it possesses the element of spontaneity. His search for medium-centered intersubjectivity inspires him at times to abandon the alphabet altogether and take his improvisation to the next level, which is what he does during his rant on the condition of existence in chapter thirty-seven of *Desolation Angels*:

Enough I've said at it all, and there's not even a Desolation in Solitude, not even this page, not even words, but the prejudiced show of things impinging on your habit energy—O Ignorant brothers, O Ignorant sisters, O Ignorant me! there's nothing to write about, everything is nothing, there's everything to write about! . . . come, now, children, wake up—come, now is the time, wake up—look closely, you're being fooled—look close, you're dreaming—come, now, look—being and not being, what's the difference?—Prides, animosities, fears, contempts, slights, personalities, suspicions, sinister forebodings, lightning storms, death, rock, WHO TOLD YOU THAT RADAMANTHUS WAS ALL THERE? WHO WRITES WRONG ON THE WHO THE WHY THE WHAT WAIT O THING I I I I I I I I I I I I O MODIIGRAGA NA PA RA TO MA NI CO SA PA RI MA TO MA NA PA SHOOOOOOO BIZA RIII — — — — — I O O O O—M M M—S O—S O—S O—S O—S O—SO—S O S O—SO—S O



triumph of the (variations of the) medium over the message, reminding the reader of the time James Agee “wished he could dispense with words and paper altogether” and rely merely on photographs to express the complexity of experience (Fishkin 2008, 149).

## Improvisation and the Construction and Retrieval of Empathetic Opportunities

### *The Woman at the Soda Fountain in Desolation Angels*

During one of his reflections or “studies,” Kerouac’s narrator in *Desolation Angels* confronts the apathy that he sees in others and associates it with the inauthentic condition of the universe. This happens in a scene where he is observing a seemingly overworked 38-year-old blond woman running a soda fountain. Seated in front of the woman are two teenagers and a drug clerk who are waiting for their orders and who are either completely unaware of the woman’s distress or unempathetic toward it. As she searches for the ketchup, she reaches a tipping point and almost breaks down, voicing her distress “I cant find the catsup!” to which the clerk insensitively replies “Is that a fact” while turning over a page from the newspaper. This interaction prompts the narrator to investigate the man and the woman: “I study him—the cold neat white-collar nihilistic clerk who doesn’t care about anything but does believe that women should wait on him!—She I study, a typical West Coast type, probable ex-showgirl, maybe even (sob) ex-burlesque dancer who didn’t make it because she wasn’t naughty enough.” After profiling the characters, he concludes that, even though the woman is “very attractive, works very hard, very good hearted . . . somehow something’s wrong and life deals her a complete martyr deck I don’t know why—” (1995, 127).

On the face of it, the reason why the narrator is immediately able to empathize with the woman is that he himself has spent a large portion of his adult life trying to find a sense of justice

in the world. To him, her suffering at the soda fountain must be symbolic of the more profound suffering that she experiences on a daily basis, and what may have appeared as an isolated and unique occurrence becomes emblematic of the condition of the world at large: her plight is indicative of the overall absurdity and arbitrariness of the universe. As he begins sketching, he imagines that the woman will

age with all that beauty in that selfsame rockingchair by the potted-flower window (O West Coast!)—and she'll complain, she'll say her story: "All my life I've tried to do the best I could"—But the two teenagers insist they want the catsup . . . One, an ugly kid, takes his straw and to pop it out of its paper wrapper stabs viciously at the counter, as tho stabbing someone to death, a real hard fast death-stab that frightens me— . . . Her hair is falling over one eye, she's almost *weeping*—Nobody cares because nobody notices— . . . An angel of a woman— And yet a bum like me, with no one to love her tonight— That's the way it goes, there's your world— Stab! Kill!—Don't care!—There's your Actual World Face— exactly what this empty universe holds in store for us, the Blank—Blank Blank Blank!  
(1995, 127–28)

Observe the construction of the scene: the narrator first contemplates the situation before him from an objective standpoint, noting and recording everything, focusing on the apathy of the customers as a potential stimulator of improvisation. Once registered, he improvises on the spot a backstory for the woman as a reaction against the apathy that he witnesses toward her. Because of the imbalance that he finds between her helplessness and innocence, and the insensitivity of the customers, he magnifies her situational suffering and transforms it into an existential crisis. He also magnifies the apathy of the customers, transforming the benign act of removing a paper wrapper into an act of murder. The improvised sketch leads to the realization of the “emptiness”

of the universe, one of the major motifs in *The Duluoz Legend*, as well as the construction of a shared center of attention around (what becomes) the existential plight of the woman. The improvised backstory of the woman prompts an empathetic response from the readers via the ubiquity of the characteristic of emptiness and the intersubjective effect of improvisation.

### *Mardou's Letter in The Subterraneans*

In *The Subterraneans*, the narrator reads a letter that his lover, Mardou, sent him, and cannot help becoming overtaken by an antithetical mixture of adoration and contempt:

so I remember admiring her intelligence even then—but at the same time darkening at home here at my desk of well-being and thinking, “But cope that old psychoanalytic cope, she talks like all of em, the city decadent intellectual dead-ended in cause-and-effect analysis and solution of so-called problems instead of the great JOY of being and will and fearlessness—.” (2007d, 513)

Even though his appreciation of her intelligence deters him from confronting her, the narrator does not miss the opportunity to express how badly he wishes that she would drop the psychoanalytic intellectualism that he senses in the style of her letter. His comments blend the recollection of the letter and the situation at the moment of writing, which happens to be Mardou's visit to her therapist. This merger is a feature of the sketching technique in which observation and improvisation are essential components. In the context of *The Subterraneans*, the letter itself comes rather as a surprise because of the events that had taken place a few nights before. As the narrator and his friends were bar-hopping in the city, Mardou asks him if they could go back home as it was getting late. Preferring to stay with Dean and the others, he refuses and sends Mardou home in a cab, promising to follow her shortly, which he does not do. When she returns to her place a

few nights after, she writes him an affectionate letter that becomes a vehicle for the intersubjective exploration of identity and reality through the written form. The letter begins as follows:

DEAR BABY,

Isn't it good to know winter is coming . . . and that life will be a little more quiet—and you will be home writing and eating well and we will be spending pleasant nights wrapped round one another—and you are home now, rested and eating well because you should not become too sad— (2007d, 510–11)

The narrator explains to the reader that the reason why Mardou mentions that he “should not become too sad” could be because one time she witnessed him get overwhelmed by a feeling of sadness while they were at a friend’s house. Realizing the importance of emphasizing it, he repeats the phrase “because you should not become too sad” twice, supplementing each repetition with a reflection on the mismatch between his mistreatment of her and her continuous “forgiving, forgetting” (2007d, 512). The letter evokes in him a sense of empathy with Mardou that would not have otherwise been evoked: While the events were taking place that night, all he cared about was spending the night in the hotel room of a famous writer that they had met, but the affection that he finds in the letter, specifically in her wishing that he does not become sad, especially after he had abandoned her, changes something in him.

More important than guilt-induced empathy is the development of the character of Mardou through the narrator’s construction of crucial aspects of her background and upbringing by employing the content of her letter. A particular line initiates this construction: “*I am full of strange feelings, reliving and refashioning many old things*” (2007d, 512). Similar to his clarification of the underlying reasons for her concern about his sadness, he attempts to explain what she means

by “strange feelings.” However, the explanation here is a synthesis of his imagination as improvised fiction and (allegedly) actual things that Mardou had told him about her past.

Immediately after the line is quoted, he draws the following sketch:

when she was 14 or 13 maybe she'd play hookey from school in Oakland and take the ferry to Market Street and spend all day in one movie, wandering around having hallucinated phantasies, looking at all the eyes, a little Negro girl roaming the shuffle restless street of winos, hoodlums, sams, cops, paper peddlers, the mad mixup there the crowd eying looking everywhere the sexfiend crowd and all of it in the gray rain of hookey days—poor Mardou— (2007d, 512)

It is possible that Mardou has an ulterior motive for mentioning her “strange feelings” in the letter, which reminds us of Dan Sperber’s warning that some communication tactics may be used by a person to make the other “infer the content of the mental representation she wants him to adopt” which, in this case, could be to prompt the narrator to imagine the hardships of her life growing up as an African American girl in a rough neighborhood in the 1930s and 1940s. If this was indeed her intention, writing about her “strange feelings” in the letter would certainly be more evocative of a potential reconstruction/imagination of her past than talking about them since reading allows the freedom of uninterrupted reflection, especially to a person like him. This does not mean that the sketch is not spontaneous or that it betrays Kerouac’s commitment to the non-revision of ideas, which is found in “Essentials” and *Desolation Angels*<sup>2</sup>; it simply suggests that improvisation could be triggered by certain media. In fact, the improvised nature of the sketch is in the fact that each time the narrator repeats the same line from the letter, he contemplates a different idea or aspect of Mardou’s life—think of Roach’s comment on “auditioning stand-ins” and the variations on musical ideas that Kerouac witnesses in the saxophone player’s performance.

Following the sketching of what her life might have been like at thirteen or fourteen, Kerouac uses quotation marks to signal an actual confession that Mardou once made about strange dreams that she had, one of which was about her father leaving her, which strangely gave her an orgasm, and another one that was filled with the anxiety accumulated from movies that she had seen. Consequently, his narrator finds himself reacting again to the line about the strange feelings: “‘Honey’ (*out loud*) [emphasis added] ‘wished I could have seen you walking around Market like that—I bet I DID see you—I bet I did—you were thirteen and I was twenty-two—1944, yeah I bet I saw you, I was a seaman, I was always there, I knew the gangs around the bars—’” (2007d, 512–13). The remembrance of Mardou’s confession causes him to react “out loud” to something that she had told him in the past as if she were sitting in front of him. The improvisation that ensues from the content of the letter activates the construction of missed communication opportunities between the two. Like a hologram, it projects a version of Mardou at the time of reading the letter and provides the narrator with the opportunity to say to her what he would and probably should have said to her at the time of the confession. Missed empathetic and communicative opportunities continue with the repetition of the second part of the line (“*reliving and refashioning many old things*”) which enables the improvisation of another sketch based on the same original idea. This time, the narrator remembers Mardou telling him about a darker period of her childhood when her aunt “hysterically beat her,” her sisters “giving her a bad time,” and “men trying to make her” (2007d, 513). Here, the reader gets the impression that when this particular confession took place, the narrator did not empathize and probably did not even sympathize with her or console her in any way, and that the evocation of the confession during the improvised sketch functions as a means for him to make up for the lost empathetic opportunity.

## Conclusion

One of the main functions of improvisation in Kerouac's jazz writing seems to be related to disclosing intersubjective experiences and possibilities that are related to the innate belief system, which is shared among human beings and which is composed of information, principles, ideals, and ideologies that are most emblematic of our authentic selves. Improvisation separates the narrative of Kerouac's *Duluoz Legend* from the traditional representative function that corresponds to the subjective view of the world and grants it the unique function of mirroring life as it happens—its “prunejuice” in Sal's words or “IT” in Dean's. When Michael Hrebaniak suggests that Kerouac “assigns a function to the improviser that is instinctive rather than cultural-historical” (2006, 253), and when Nancy Grace characterizes him as one of the “neoromantics who tap a collective unconscious linking all human minds” and whose readers “may be unable to translate or paraphrase what the author is saying, but one will ‘know’ intuitively what the text means” (2007, 28), they are referring to the manifestation of these intersubjective experiences. This is because improvisation divulges an intersubjectivity that occurs without narrative mediation and, therefore, is natural and inherently linked to human empathy, characters' and readers' alike.

Despite the surrogation, improvised sketching and improvised music have a very obvious and crucial dissimilarity, which is that writing, at least as done traditionally, is an individual endeavor, while jazz improvisation involves the presence of others (audience and often other musicians) during the performance. This begs the following question: could intersubjectivity in *The Duluoz Legend* be achieved in the same manner that it is achieved in jazz where performers manipulate the audience by capturing, suspending, reorienting, and recentering their attention? Could readers bask in the ecstasy of the moment (“IT”) as Dean does when he watches the performances?

To answer the question, we must go back to Taylor's notion of authenticity and his argument for its dialogic character. Taylor recognizes perfectly well that defining one's identity or sense of self *in relation to others* implies the dependence on others for authenticity, which might seem to some people "a limitation, from which one might aspire to free oneself" (Taylor 1991, 34). To solve this dilemma, Taylor considers the very convenient examples of the hermit and the solitary artist who seek to detach themselves from society and other people, and explains that there is within this detachment "a certain kind of dialogicality. In the case of the hermit, the interlocutor is God. In the case of the solitary artist, the work itself is addressed to a future audience, perhaps still to be created by the work itself. The very form of a work of art shows its character as *addressed*" (Taylor 1991, 35). As an occasional hermit and solitary artist himself, Kerouac's "ideal of authenticity," as Taylor would prefer to call it, is dependent occasionally on his relationship with God, but certainly and endlessly on his perceived relationship with his readers, a relationship that is solidified by the improvised aspect of his art. Through the dialogism afforded by improvisation, the narrative of *The Duluoz Legend* can no longer be viewed as the product of a solitary practice but is rather like jazz, dependent on an audience whose attention is intersubjectively captured.

Observing the jazz performances and studying Dean's interpretation of them, Kerouac, through his alter ego, identifies certain techniques that he can emulate in this writing. Indeed, his scene construction becomes a mixture of recording real-life situations, exploring these situations through improvised imagination, and constructing identities and past lives of the people he meets. The effort that goes into the observation–recording part of the process is essentially what is behind its effectiveness since there is no improvisation without knowledge of the "vocabulary" required to initiate it. Kerouac mastered the art of observation that allowed him to record everything that he

sees and hears down to the most minute detail, using the entities and elements as objects of study or “vocabulary” to break free of the constraints of narrative conventionalities and discover intersubjectivity by experimenting with form. In the words of David Sterritt:

Jack Kerouac was keenly attuned to the sounds and structures of modern jazz, which provided the basis for his spontaneous writing and his conviction that in-the-moment intuition is the best route to authentic creativity. His musical attachments were paired with visual ones, since he felt that words must grow organically from concrete images held continuously in consciousness, and woven into memory as well. . . . He described his method as “blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image,” thus linking sound and picture in a proto-cinematic manner. In this way Kerouac regarded himself as the verbal equivalent of a visual artist, using words to capture and convey the images that swarmed in his mind’s eye, but doing so with a musical sensibility that transforms static images into dynamic flows. Equally cinematic was Kerouac’s capacity for recording the sights and sounds of the cultural environment in which he worked. Like an anthropologist or journalist, he didn’t so much originate as chronicle the linguistic tenor of the current scene. He imagined making a movie in which his friends would appear as both real-life people and fictional characters, much as they do in his autobiographical novels. (2017, 266)

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In *On The Road* and *Visions of Cody*, the character of Neal Cassady mentions “IT” whenever he talks about the concept of time, jazz music, or Mexico, a notion that he cannot fully explain as seen in his response to Sal’s question about it in *On the Road* (2007a, 185–86). Michael Hrebaniak sees that “‘IT’ surfaces in passages where Cassady’s speech rhythms are internalized within the narrator’s own thought patterns” (2006, 47) while Hassan Melehy sees that “Kerouac conveys the sound and rhythm of Cody’s voice. In its manner of creating texture and meaning, this voice resembles both the jazz improvisation that it describes and the prose that it is part of and supports: tentative, multidirectional, stopping and restarting, it conveys less through clarity

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of syntax and meaning than through motion, assembly, and gaps—as such it expresses a definition of IT at least as much as it states one” (2016, 111).

<sup>2</sup> In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac’s narrator reflects on his “spontaneous” style, seeing it as a discovery of “a new way of writing about life, no fiction, no craft, no revising afterthoughts, the heartbreaking discipline of the veritable fire ordeal where you cant go back but have made the vow of ‘speak now or forever hold your tongue’ and all of it innocent go-ahead confession” (1995, 256).

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