

# Hipsters and *jipitecas*: Literary Countercultures on Both Sides of the Border

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Near the end of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Sal Paradise and his friends plan a new kind of trip, one that is "no longer east-west, but magic *south*" (265). Plotting their route on a map leads to flights of fancy as they imagine "flying down the curve of the world into other tropics and other worlds" (265–66). With this episode Kerouac locates his protagonists in a tradition of North American radicals who have looked south of the border for aesthetic and political inspiration. Conceiving Mexico as a place of revolutionary history and colorful landscapes, dissidents from John Reed to William Burroughs sought alternatives to the perceived constraints of their own national culture.<sup>1</sup> But *On the Road* also inaugurates a newer form of travel narrative about driving across the nation's expanding network of interstate highways and, ultimately, its southern frontier. Retracing the steps of Kerouac's journey, the mobile counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s would help to make Mexico a favorite travel destination. So too did things Mexican—huaraches, woven blankets and ponchos, silver jewelry, terra cotta pottery, Carlos Castañeda's best-selling parables of Don Juan, the Yaqui shaman—become an integral part of countercultural iconography in the US.

Although US visitors tended to see Mexico as a land of untainted, primitive charm, they unwittingly contributed to the emergence of Mexico's own modern, cosmopolitan counterculture. Not only were tourists transformed by the experience of travel, but Mexico itself was profoundly changed by the growing tide of Anglo-American tourism that began during World War II and increased in the decades that followed.<sup>2</sup> Intensified contact with the US occasioned a crisis in Mexico's sense of its own modernity. Under the regime of President Diaz Ordaz, the Mexican government enticed foreign investors with promises of modern efficiency and financial security. Political stability, an expanding middle class, and improving infrastructure created new consumer markets as well as an attractive climate for conducting

business. At the same time, the tourist industry promoted a very different Mexico of colorful folkways and rural settings.<sup>3</sup> Regional differences were erased within state-sanctioned constructions of “national tradition” that catered to the northern vacationer’s desire for the indigenous and the primitive. Such invented traditions had little resonance with Mexican teenagers, who gravitated toward a modernity introduced from abroad. By the late 1960s the atmosphere of youthful rebellion fomenting in the US and Europe inspired La Onda, a label that refers to both a literary cohort and the Mexican counterculture that flourished between 1966 and 1972 from which its name is derived. Their enthusiasm for Anglo-American popular culture gave rise to Spanish-language Elvises, James Dean style *rebeldes sin causa*, and *jipitecas* (a hybrid of the gringo hippie and the Mexican *Azteca*). Fusing Anglo- and Latin-American influences, La Onda was a crucible where transnational popular culture met uneasily with the politics and aesthetics of Mexican nationalism.

This alternative history of countercultural travel is an illuminating companion piece to the work of Kerouac’s successors. By reading narratives of the US counterculture’s Mexican adventuring—Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*—against those of La Onda’s most prominent writers—José Agustín and Parménides García Saldaña, this essay presents a story of reciprocal, if uneven, encounter.<sup>4</sup> Until now, each group has been interpreted largely within the parameters of its own national culture. Scholars have described the road narrative as the paradigmatically “American” genre of the post-World War II era while rarely noting how often those narratives traverse national boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, La Onda is studied almost exclusively by Mexican literary critics, who tend to concentrate on its rebellion against national culture rather than its provocative fusion of local geographies with cosmopolitan literary vocabularies.<sup>6</sup> Only when we read the two literary cohorts together can we see how they were shaped by a changing climate of Pan-American relations that had profound effects on both sides of the border.

Kerouac, Wolfe, and Acosta look quite different within a continental, rather than a national, frame of reference. Their concern with freedom of mobility, individual expression, and open land might be read as classically American literary tropes, but in these autobiographical texts such activities also involve actual incursions onto foreign soil. While passage into Mexico could appear to be one more version of lighting out for the territory, these travelers escape into another national space governed by laws and conventions of its own. Instead of uninhibited freedom, their arrival on the other side of the border requires them to negotiate language barriers, the dynamics of citizenship, and cultural difference. Instead of a conflict between wilderness

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and civilization, they find competing versions of modernity. The literary works that result from such turbulent confrontations portray the juncture where national myths collide with foreign policy changes and the transnational circulation of culture.

Whereas Kerouac, Wolfe, and Acosta seek alternatives to modernity in a primitive Mexico, the *Onderos* resist stereotypes of national underdevelopment by fashioning themselves as cosmopolitan sophisticates. Breaking with the heroic, revolutionary nationalism promoted by the PRI, Mexico's official ruling party, middle-class teenagers aligned themselves with an international counterculture. Shared tastes in music, entertainment, and fashion allowed Mexicans to identify with young people around the globe. With the passion of fans, the *Onderos* take every opportunity to incorporate North American popular culture into their fiction, leading to the accusation that they are the "first generation of gringos born in Mexico" (Steele 134). Yet, read in tandem with authors from the US, their work bespeaks the creative modification of familiar countercultural themes—self-realization through travel, the search for exotic Others, experimentation with language and subjectivity—as they enter a Latin-American context.

A comparative reading of countercultures north and south of the border thus yields a better sense of how literature circulating outside of national boundaries acquires unexpected meanings when taken up by new communities of readers and writers. This particular pairing deepens our understanding of the international reverberations of 1960s countercultural expression. Because countercultures are formed in resistance to the mainstream, they tend to look outward for alternatives to their local or national settings, to respond to a tumultuous present with nostalgia for the past or hope for a utopian future.<sup>7</sup> Their attention to the dynamics of inside and outside, self and Other, and the foreign and the domestic makes them a promising testing ground for an American studies seeking to supplant national categories with either more local or transnational perspectives. At the same time, it is important not to overstate a reciprocity between two groups marked by significant disparities in power and resources that have everything to do with national context. As the US-Mexico border has become at once more flexible and more impassable in the half-century since Sal Paradise crossed it, recognizing the extent and limits of cultural traffic has never been more important.

### 1. Magic South

Since the 1950s *On the Road* has made youthful rebellion virtually synonymous with transcontinental travel. Often described

as a product of the particular geographies of North Beach and Greenwich Village, the Beats are more than a local phenomenon. They are among the most popular writers in translation and have been read by audiences around the world.<sup>8</sup> Ann Douglas recalls how Kerouac made readers of her generation aware of a world that extended beyond national borders: “[B]ack in 1959, *On the Road* told me and my friends, all young women from the upper-middle classes reared in privileged, densely settled, even stratified regions of the United States, that we were part of a continent rather than a country, a kind of fabulous terra incognita not fully detailed on any map, shading on one side into a colder, mysterious northern land and on the other into a more tropical and seductive climate” (“Telepathic” 10). As much a landscape of the imagination as a literal geography, Kerouac’s America is more continental than national in scope, extending from the French Canada of his childhood to the Mexico that is the subject of this essay.

Retreating to Mexico, the Beats followed previous generations of radicals inspired by its revolutionary tradition. But their presence was also a sign of changing diplomatic relations between the US and Mexico in the years following World War II. Having served the US as an important wartime ally, Mexico became the focus of invigorated campaigns for an ongoing Pan-American partnership. The US government sought to bolster economic ties with its southern neighbor by actively promoting Mexico as an investment opportunity and tourist destination. Such efforts were particularly germane to the Southwest, where the buildup of US military bases generated increasing traffic of American service personnel into Mexican border cities.<sup>9</sup> For its part, under the auspices of the Programa Nacional Fronterizo, the Mexican regime played up more attractive national stereotypes, beautified border cities, and constructed highways, resorts, and other amenities for business and pleasure travelers. The success of these developments was a mixed blessing: to the dismay of the Mexican government, along with more mainstream visitors came the Beats, hippies, and other countercultural radicals who had little to contribute to local economies and were a potentially unsavory influence on Mexican youth. A countercultural publication such as Carl Franz’s *The People’s Guide to Mexico*, which instructs nontraditional travelers in how to evade interrogation, arrest, or other “hassles” by government officials, is evidence that no love was lost between hippies and Mexican authorities. But beneath the necessary antagonism, a certain structural reciprocity is at work: police harassment reinforces the travelers’ romantic aspiration to outlaw status while confirming Mexico’s arrival as a modern state with the full capacity to enforce its laws. In Kerouac, Wolfe, and Acosta, scenes of potential arrest are especially meaningful as fugitive fantasies borrowed from an earlier era come up against the modern arm of the law.

The journeying into Mexico that liberated the Beats from the obligations of family, community, and nation was also part of their ongoing search for alternative lifestyles. Desiring contact with the Other—believed to be more spontaneous, free, and inventive—they found inspiration among marginalized people such as addicts, migrant laborers, vagrants, and nonwhite communities.<sup>10</sup> Sal's many encounters with people of color in *On the Road* anticipate the drives that will eventually propel him across the border in search of an immediacy and soulfulness lacking in his own life. In Denver he walks through "the colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me" (179–80). But his fantasies have less to do with blackness per se than with a series of infinitely interchangeable racial substitutions: "I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned" (180). Sal's desire to be of another race is nothing so much as a wish to escape his own whiteness, a self-rending longing to be anything other than what he is.

In *On the Road* the exhaustion of whiteness is countered by the lure of contact with the Other, enticing Sal, Dean, and Stan to diverge from their more familiar east-west trajectory to make the frenzied, sleepless journey "magic south." Given the wild flights of fantasy that precipitate it, the border crossing is a potential site of conflict between imagined freedoms and political realities, but passage into Mexico could not be easier. After being "warned not to drink tapwater now we were over the border," the young men are subject to the most cursory inspection: "The Mexicans looked at our baggage in a desultory way. They weren't like officials at all. They were lazy and tender" (274). The border patrol agents are the first of many Mexican officials Sal will compare favorably with more punitive counterparts in the US. The ease of their entry, despite their bedraggled appearance, is evidence that in the 1950s this kind of traveler is still a relative novelty. What matters is possession of a US passport, which grants the privilege of effortless movement back and forth across the border.

Built into Kerouac's account is a certain awareness that his characters' impressions of Mexico are so deeply informed by desire that they have very little to do with the scenes before their eyes. "To our amazement," Sal enthuses, "it looked exactly like Mexico. It was three in the morning, and fellows in straw hats and white pants were lounging by the dozen against battered pocky storefronts" (274). What is most striking about these fantasies is their regressive quality. With childlike naiveté, the three men behave as if they are the first travelers ever to cross the "magic border" (273). "We bought three bottles of cold beer—*cerveza* was the name for beer," Sal explains, "We gazed and gazed at our wonderful Mexican money that went so far, and played with it and looked around and smiled at everyone"

(275–76). Treating the Mexican currency like a toy, Sal is just as excited by the quantity of pesos he receives for his dollars as what they can buy. The exchange value of money suddenly takes a back seat to the infantile pleasure of possessing the coins themselves. Like a small boy awake past his bedtime, Dean enjoins his friends to “*think* of these cats staying up all hours of the night” (276). Sal is delighted to find that “[t]he *old men* are so cool and grand and not bothered by anything” and adds, “there’s no *suspicion* here, nothing like that” (278). Retreat into a state of childish wonder enables the travelers to imagine themselves liberated from the responsibilities that burdened them on domestic soil. Not surprisingly, Mexico looks very much like an idealized version of the Beats’ own subculture.

Kerouac’s travelers also find larger, collective stories of origin that may help them to rescript the disturbing course of national, and possibly human, history. The ancestors of the “cool and grand” old men lounging on the city streets are the indigenous folk Kerouac sees in the countryside: “[N]ot at all like the Pedros and Panchos of silly civilized American lore . . . they were not fools, they were not clowns; they were great, grave Indians and they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it” (280–81). Sal holds out this image of the Mexican as originary ancestor of all humanity as a corrective to the “crap about greasers and so on” dispensed by North American film and literature (278). Elevating Mexicans to mythic status, he writes them out of modern historical time. Transforming greasers into Indians, Sal also seeks his own origins in an era before Western history and the violent, impure consequences of racial intermixture implied by the slur *greaser*.<sup>11</sup> He calls these aboriginals the Fellahin, a term borrowed from Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, where it describes a people outside of history and culture.<sup>12</sup> As Sal and friends move further into Mexico, the concept of the Fellahin allows them to imagine connections among the ancient cultures of Asia, Africa, and Mexico.

Sal’s impressions of Mexico get jumbled together with images of other remote geographic locales and peoples, just as earlier he conflated black, Mexican, and Japanese Americans. A spatial journey that began with his contemplation of a real map and required passage across a real national divide becomes a form of time travel. The counterpart to the travelers’ individual regression is a grander atavistic return to prehistoric times. They find “[o]ld men [who] sat on chairs in the night and looked like Oriental junkies and oracles” (275) and “thatched huts with African-like bamboo walls” (279) as they drive “across the world and into the places where we would finally learn ourselves among the Fellahin Indians of the world, the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity that stretches in a belt around the equatorial belly of the world from Malaya (the long fingernail of

China) to India and the great subcontinent to Arabia to Morocco to the selfsame deserts and jungles of Mexico and over the waves to Polynesia to mystic Siam of the Yellow Robe and on around, on around" (280). Both ancestors and the unwitting vanguard of a postapocalyptic era, the Fellahin "didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way" (299). The juxtaposition of atomic bomb and Fellahin introduces two competing models of history: one that undulates in perpetual and unchanging cycles and one in which progress has already wrought the potential for self-destruction. Having seen the horrifying consequences of civilization, the travelers look to the Fellahin as a prototype for an alternative historical imaginary.

At bottom, however, the travelers' goal is less social rebellion or historical insight than to, as they say, "learn ourselves" (280). Uncovering the raw simplicity of the Fellahin is part of the quest for pure self-knowledge. Having crossed the border, Dean raves of his ability to "*understand* the world as, really and genuinely speaking, other Americans haven't done before us" (276), but what Dean calls worldly understanding looks a lot like the exploration of his own consciousness. The further they move away from the US, the deeper they probe into themselves. Arriving at a destination they describe as the birthplace of all human civilization, Dean thinks he has "found people like himself" (280). Liberated from the baggage of its own overdeveloped culture, the naked self presumes the ability to turn its gaze outward to comprehend and master all that it sees. Of course, what is actually happening is the reverse: the Mexican landscape and people are incorporated into the travelers' own increasingly grandiose subjectivity.

The terminus of the travelers' journey across space and into the self is the Mexican capital, where a barrage of noise, dirt, and speed distinguishes city from country. Mexico City, as Sal perceives it, is at once a vast metropolis and the chaotic, infantile landscape of the unconscious. The young North Americans see "thousands of hipsters" (200) and bohemians who are mirror images of themselves. They also believe that "the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city that we knew we would find at the end of the road" (302) is governed by an ahistorical, mythic sense of time far different from anything they have known before. Having traveled through space to travel within, Sal's ultimate destination is the untapped depths of selfhood. For Dean, who defined his journey as the always-elusive quest for "IT," Mexico City cannot be the end of his travels. Wherever he is, "IT" lies somewhere else in wait of his pursuit. Dean takes off back across the border, abandoning Sal to the agonies of dysentery.

Literally, Sal's affliction legitimates the border officials' warning not to drink the Mexican tap water. This is also a more figurative moment in which Kerouac humbles his character, showing the consequences of his arrogant fantasies of incorporation and mastery. If, for Sal and Dean, the Mexican capital represents the untamed bacchanalian reaches of the unconscious, it is a place where the self is so all-encompassing that it loses all awareness of others. Having opened to a foreign culture, Sal's body now violently rejects his earlier excesses. One consequence of his illness, then, might be the development of a more modest and reciprocal approach to difference in which self and Other gradually learn mutual acceptance. Because this episode of physical sickness is so closely aligned with Dean's fickleness, its status as a cautionary tale about American hubris abroad is subordinated to the lesson about the fragile intimacies of the road and the limits of a friendship. The illness becomes part of a recurring pattern in which concerns about the realization of self and the resolution of personal relationships subsume flashes of potential insight about the Other.

*On the Road* does not end in Mexico but with Sal's return to the US and tentative reconciliation with Dean. The last paragraph of the novel finds him once again looking from east to west as he sits on a pier in New York and thinks of California. To preserve his friendship with Dean, as well as his identity as a discrete individual and a US citizen, Sal must leave his Mexican adventures behind. Tantalizing and unresolved, Mexico resurfaces in Kerouac's subsequent writing as a figure and a geographical place. His successors will also escape across the border only to find that their fantasies of unchecked liberation increasingly collide with the political realities of international travel. Those writers who follow are forced to revise Sal's often naively uncritical vision as they contend with a more systematically regulated border zone as well as legal and economic connectivities that transcend national boundaries.

Whereas Kerouac's Mexico looks much like the unchartable morass of the unconscious, Wolfe's account of place is thickly descriptive, ironically so, given that he was not actually on the bus during this particular wild ride south of the border. Written more than 10 years after the publication of *On the Road*, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* follows the path of Kerouac's travelers with significant differences that seem intended to mark the distance between the Beats and the 1960s counterculture. At the vanguard of that counterculture are Wolfe's subjects, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, a radical experiment with nomadic communal living. The Pranksters' escapades are so intensively filtered through the journalist's strong authorial presence that it is difficult to distinguish their perspectives from Wolfe's own. Taking Kerouac's love of travel to the next level,



mobility en masse is built into the Prankster experience; Dean's battered '37 Ford sedan has been traded in for Furthur, a bus painted in psychedelic hues.<sup>13</sup> If Sal Paradise journeyed outward to shed the bland, unremarkable aspects of self, the Pranksters are evangelists of the Acid Age who first discover unprecedented depths of zaniness within, then travel in order to spread the word. For the former, travel emphasizes vulnerability and openness to new experiences; for the latter, a fortresslike egotism turns new experiences into reminders of their own distinctiveness.

LSD is a prime factor in the evolution of Beats into Pranksters. Turned on by his participation in a government-sponsored drug experiment in 1960, Kesey sought ways to convert the individual trip into a collective journey. Among his most notorious enterprises were the Acid Tests, which began in late 1965. Enhanced by electric guitars, light shows, and amplifiers, these communal trips were documented with movie cameras and tape recorders. Oriented toward the fully electronic, mass-mediated, chemical future, Wolfe's Pranksters are impatient with their countercultural predecessors' idealization of the natural and the primitive. Thus, it is not surprising that they respond to Mexico by deflating precisely the things that so enchanted Sal Paradise and his friends.

The trip into Mexico is a crucial chapter in Wolfe's rewriting of Kerouac, as well as the narrative's most experimental episode. For it is here that Wolfe abandons his journalistic stance as participant observer and uses Kesey's letters to reconstruct his protagonist's experiences between January and October 1966. By doing so, Wolfe realizes the fantasy of aesthetic radicalism articulated in his maxim that the New Journalism utilizes "only the outlaw's rule regarding technique: take, use, improvise" (qtd. in Hellman 8).<sup>14</sup> In the Mexico section "outlaw" form mirrors content: Wolfe's transgressive departure from documentary orthodoxy parallels Kesey's flight from the law. The Pranksters' escape across the border brings to life Sal's romantic vision of the road as "the route of old American outlaws who used to skip over the border and go down to old Monterrey" (276). What seemed like a chapter out of frontier history in *On the Road* becomes a reality for the Merry Pranksters who, having pushed at the borders of consciousness with the Acid Tests, must cross national borders to escape punishment for breaking the law.

Although the Pranksters' passage out of the US is uneventful, the border has changed in the nearly 20 years since Sal Paradise first crossed. Whereas Kerouac heightens the exotic qualities of his adventure through oppositions between foreign and domestic, Wolfe describes a depressing uniformity, "a huge superhighway toll station, a huge concrete apron and ten or fifteen customs booths in a row for all the cars pouring over into Tijuana from San Diego and points north, all

plastic green and concrete like part of suburban superhighway America” (258). This difference cannot simply be attributed to divergent authorial temperaments since the border zone has literally been transformed. In 1965, the Mexican government had instituted the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), which allowed foreign-owned maquiladora plants to import raw materials from abroad for low-wage assembly in Mexico.<sup>15</sup> The maquiladora industry, as well as the buildup of US military bases, was responsible for the rapid growth and modernization of the border region documented by Wolfe’s portrait of the busy Tijuana checkpoint.

The scene at the border initiates a pattern in which Wolfe holds up the Pranksters’ jaded perceptions as a corrective to the fuzzy romanticism of previous travelers. This stinkier, trashier Mexico stands in dramatic contrast to the paradise of *On the Road*. Whereas Sal was thrilled that the place across the border “looked exactly like Mexico,” Wolfe’s Pranksters are dismayed to find that

not one inch of it is picturesque burros and shawls or nova Zapata hats or color-TV pink chunks of watermelon or water lilies or gold feathers or long eyelashes or high combs or tortillas and tacos and chili powder or fluty camote vendors or muletas or toreros or oles or mariachi bands or water lilies or blood of the dahlia or tinny cantinas or serapes or movie black marias with shiny black hair and steaming little high round pubescent bottoms. . . . Just the boogering brown dust and bloated rat corpses by the road, goats, cows, chickens with all four feet up in the air at Tezcatlipocan skull rot crossroads of Mexico. (259)

This catalogue derives its force from the juxtaposition of travel brochure stereotypes with an equally lengthy accumulation of nasty details. In an insult that seems aimed directly at the Beats’ proclivity to “drop out” with extended stays in Mexico, Wolfe observes sourly: “[I]t is a truly sad thing when an American boho says fuck this and picks up and leaves this fucking tailfin and shopping plaza and war-crazy civilization and goes to live among real people, the honest folk-type in the land of Earth feelings, Mexico” (269). Wolfe debunks an earlier generation who believed they could find more authentic experience by abandoning “civilization” to commune with indigenous people. He distances the Pranksters from Kerouac and his ilk by treating all things Mexican with tired cynicism.

Although decidedly unromantic, Wolfe shares the Beats’ tendency to locate Mexico in a prehistoric past, concluding that Mexicans are “all thrust back permanently into a primitive time” (281). For the high-tech, multimedia Pranksters there is nothing desirable about being left behind by the march of progress. Exiled in Mexico,

Wolfe's Pranksters undergo their own atavistic regression, "reliving the primitive life of man with only the dwindling hope of a bountiful miracle from the sacred Telegrafo to possibly break the spell... of 3,000 years ago" (292). Their ecstatic return to the US is described as a temporal rather than geographical movement "from the Stone Age into the Acid Age" (306). Although the Pranksters fled to Mexico as outlaws, Wolfe frames their dismissive leavetaking in the consumerist language of American tourism: "[T]he Rat lands were spent anyway. They had junked it through on the fabulous junk of Mexico. They had gorged it up... [I]n truth, Major, there were no more spas to water at in the Rat lands" (306-07). Within Wolfe's imagined geography, the "Rat lands" of Mexico are disposable commodities. The space across the border, even at its best, is little more than a vacation resort where voracious Westerners feed on its "fabulous junk" and then return to life as usual.

Following the trail of Kerouac and the Pranksters, Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* brings wacky countercultural antics together with radical coalition politics. A saga of travel, lawlessness, and social transgression, the *Autobiography* is very similar in structure to previous road narratives.<sup>16</sup> The difference is that for Acosta, a disaffected Chicano lawyer, the self-discovery resulting from his climactic trip into Mexico eventually leads to affiliation with La Raza, the organized movement for Chicano rights. Instead of an alternative to politics, Acosta's countercultural journey heightens his awareness of the politics of mobility, border crossing, and citizenship, particularly as they affect the mestizo traveler. Acosta, self-described mongrel of Mexican and US heritage, is an important connective link between narratives of renegade North Americans south of the border, and Mexico's own countercultural literature. His concerns with the political and subjective dimensions of *mestizaje* distinguish the *Autobiography* from countercultural writing more firmly rooted within the boundaries of either national culture.

Described in an introduction by Hunter S. Thompson as "crazier than Neal Cassady," Acosta is presented as an heir of the Beats and the hippies (7). If the Pranksters' Cassady outweirded the Beats' Dean Moriarty, Acosta, aka the Brown Buffalo, aspires to up the ante for zaniness on the road. From the start, the narrative's geographical trajectory promises to retrace, with a difference, the manic travels of its literary predecessors. Instead of concluding in San Francisco, the home of two rebellious generations, Acosta's story begins there, with a sense that an era has ended: "Christ, what happened to the culture of the fifties?" he rants, "Don't these silly females from Toledo know this is San Francisco?... They do their shopping in Sausalito and on Grant Street now that the Beatniks have been driven out by the narcs and slick Italians with fast money. Not that I ever *identified*

with those purple-faced winos, for Christ sake—I merely beat them at chess because I could drink more Red Mountain than they could” (17–18). Acosta’s bilious stream of consciousness segues from the Beats (now aging alcoholics) to the contaminating influences of women and commerce. Like Wolfe, Acosta claims legitimacy by virtue of his cynicism, a disgruntled historian unencumbered by nostalgia about grizzled radicals: “[A] recorder of events with a sour stomach. I have no love for memories of the past. Ginsberg and those coffee houses with hungry-looking guitar players never did mean shit to me. *They* never took their drinking seriously. And the fact of the matter is that they got what was coming to them. Its their tough luck if they ran out and got on the road with bums like Kerouac, then came back a few years later with their hair longer and fucking marijuana up their asses, shouting Love and Peace and Pot. And still broke as ever” (18). Neither a Beat nor a hippie, the narrator poses as the knowing successor to two generations of rebels who have not held up well under the strain of decades of drink, drugs, and protest.

Despite this vociferous dismissal, the irreverent style and narrative structure of the *Autobiography* are indebted to its radical literary precursors. Although it begins somewhat later in the protagonist’s life cycle (Oscar is 33 and gainfully employed when he explodes into crisis), Acosta’s story retraces the pattern of previous road narratives. He rejects the demands of his career and social connections, embarking on a frenzied, spontaneous tour of the Western US. Unplanned movement across physical space becomes a metaphor for travel into the uncharted depths of subjectivity. Exploiting the parallelism between physical mobility and self-discovery, Acosta frequently links his whacked-out adventures in the present to recovered childhood memories. “All my life strangers have been interested in my ancestry,” he explains, “There is something about my bearing that cries out for history. I’ve been mistaken for American Indian, Spanish, Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan and Arabian” (68). A man whose indeterminate racial features prompt constant attempts at interpretation by others, Acosta travels in search of a more rooted and confident understanding of self.

Believing that the stability of place may hold the answer to elusive questions of identity, Acosta journeys back to his hometown at the southern edge of Texas and then into Juárez, Mexico. Unlike Sal Paradise or Ken Kesey, Acosta experiences some anxiety at the border, where the dilemma of national belonging is exacerbated. Because the official categories of citizenship leave little room for racial ambiguities, his legal status as a US national jars uneasily with a more subjective sense of alienation. Acosta is braced for conflict, but the guard “merely grunted to clear his throat as he passed right by without so much as a look in my direction” (187). This uneventful crossing gives rise to a

felicitous moment of self-recognition as he looks out on a sea of faces that seem much like his own: “All the faces are brown, tinged with brown, lightly brown, the feeling of brown. Old men with coarse black hair, wrinkled weather-beaten hands, Levis and Mexican ranchero hats of tough, slick, matted straw” (185–86). Complementing this colorful stoic masculinity are women “speaking in that language of my youth . . . a language of soft vowels and resilient consonants, always with the fast rolling r’s to threaten or to cajole; a language for moonlit nights under tropical storms, for starry nights in brown deserts and for making declarations of war on top of snow-capped mountains; a language perfect in every detail for people who are serious about life and preoccupied with death only as it refers to that last day of one’s sojourn on this particular spot” (186). Couched in such stereotypical terms, everything about this Mexican border town seems familiar to Acosta. Not only do the women look like his relatives, but they speak a language that recalls his childhood. Like Sal Paradise, who feels that he is Mexican and then acts on that feeling by having sex with Mexican women, Acosta imagines that these brown women hold the answer to unifying his painfully divided identity.

Despite his fervent sense of discovery, Acosta’s perceptions echo the clichés of countless literary depictions of Mexico. Instead of describing his particular experiences, the language of tourism speaks through him, resulting in an outpouring of stereotypes. The sounds of Spanish evoke romance and revolution; the passersby express timeless patience; huaraches, sombreros, silver jewelry, and colorful woven blankets are everywhere. Where Acosta differs from previous authors is a greater self-consciousness about how these formulaic images are linked to his own compensatory fantasies. Just as he is contemplating the delights of marriage to a Mexican woman, our traveler is hailed by a pimp with “a slight, natty mustache and the same silk suit you see on all barkers in San Francisco, Panama or Juárez,” standing “in front of a bar blaring Grace Slick and ‘White Rabbit’” (189). He realizes that Ciudad Juárez, which had seen booming expansion of its economy and population since the 1950s, is hardly the rustic village of his imagination.<sup>17</sup> Unevenly saturated by a global consumer culture, its dirt and sleaze are virtually undistinguishable from many other corners of the world. Acosta’s faith in the transformative power of border crossing is continually rattled by such signs of Mexico’s interface with the global economy. If Juárez is just another version of San Francisco, Acosta concludes that travel may not be the antidote to his painfully divided loyalties.

The longer Acosta’s stay in Mexico the more his fantasies about cultural purity disintegrate. Inside the bar he meets a blonde woman who appears to be a gringa but then identifies herself as a Mexican who speaks no English. Having “imagined the Mexican as a

dark-skinned person, a brown buffalo," he must unlearn his assumption that skin color is a reliable indicator of national identity (190). So too, when his money runs out and he is thrown into jail, Acosta expects to appeal to his US citizenship, gender, and professional stature by addressing the judge man to man, explaining in reasonable tones that he is "not a hippie. I'm an attorney at law, your honor. A member of the bar, just like you" (192). But in a final reversal, the judge is a woman who refuses to hear his prepared speech. His final impression of Juárez contrasts strikingly with the hopeful scene that greeted his arrival: "I walk slowly in the late morning hours through the city of sin and colored lights. Gone are the finely shaped women with mascara and ruby lips. The bars are silent. I see no pimps. The city is grey. Dust covers all the walls of cheap paint. The streets are filthy with corn husks, corn leaves from tamales, apple cores, empty beer cans and dog shit. Juárez in the morning, when you have two cents in your pocket and been ordered out of town at gun point, is as depressing a city as you can find" (195). Daylight is a cruel and revealing metaphor for the painful insight Acosta has gained through his misadventures. His frenetic energies finally subdued, he sees not only filth and disrepair but the trashing of the fantasy that his exile will end in Mexico.

Like the Pranksters and the Beats, Acosta flees south to escape his problems, but the *Autobiography* goes beyond its predecessors in exploiting the jarring moments when Mexico does not accord with North American fantasies, whether positive or negative. Endlessly interpellated as a foreigner in the US, Acosta finds in Mexico not a long-anticipated return to origins but further alienation. A true border subject, he is incapable of becoming a fully assimilated citizen of either nation, despite a US passport. The *Autobiography* concludes with his growing understanding that assimilation is an undesirable goal. The sensation of being out of place inspires his plan for a coalition among those who are similarly dispossessed. Having traveled in search of a place where he will feel at home, Acosta eventually realizes that it does not yet exist; he will need to create a community for those who are "neither a Mexican nor an American" (199). The end point of Acosta's countercultural odyssey is thus the discovery of a political identity as an activist.

Acosta is distinguished from Kerouac and Kesey/Wolfe because he translates the feeling of displacement that stimulates him to travel into the basis for alignment with a political movement. However, what these authors share is that they return to the US having learned a great deal about their own commitments and remarkably little about Mexico itself. Each is countercultural in that protest against the constraints of national culture leads him to travel outward in search of alternatives. Ironically, the Mexico so attractive to these North American dissidents is not far from the Mexico promoted by

the tourist division of a paternalistic and authoritarian Mexican state. In an added irony, the freedom to cross borders is enabled by the very citizenship they rebel against. Possessing a US passport turns the border into a revolving door. Its bearer returns transformed by the experience of travel but believing that the people and places he has encountered remain untouched. Reading across the border, we see how wrong he is. In a mutually reinforcing cycle, Mexico enables North American expressions of protest and escapism, while a mobile and commodified counterculture moves south to remake the landscape of urban Mexico.

## 2. Outside Gringolandia

What if, instead of “the essential strain of the basic primitive, wailing humanity” across the border, Sal Paradise had found pimply, oversexed teenagers high on marijuana thrusting their hips to Elvis tunes? These are the protagonists of *La Onda*. According to Cynthia Steele, “the term that has been applied both to the counterculture and its narrative equivalent derives from the slang term *estar en onda*, ‘to be with it’ or ‘in,’ suggesting its connection with a yearning to be contemporary, to not be *fresa* (‘straight,’ ‘uptight,’ bourgeois), even—or perhaps especially—in the midst of underdevelopment” (112). Steele’s gloss is useful because it highlights *La Onda*’s dual resistance to Western stereotypes about Mexico’s economic and cultural backwardness, as well as to the values of the Mexican bourgeoisie. Literally translated as “the wave,” *La Onda* is also associated with the electronic mass media that made US popular culture increasingly accessible to Latin Americans.<sup>18</sup> Enamored of cars, rock music, and urban spaces, the *Onderos* aspired to share a rebellious cosmopolitan subculture with other young people around the world but especially the US. As Carlos Monsiváis described it, “*La onda* aparece como hambre de ‘contemporaneidad,’ una vez establecida como modelo de lo ‘contemporáneo’ la cultural juvenil de Norteamérica.” (“*La Onda* appears to be hungry for ‘contemporaneity’ once the youth culture of North America is established as a model of the ‘contemporary’”; 236). For the *Onderos* a hip and youthful contemporaneity is thus inextricably bound up with the popular cultures of Anglo-America.

Much like its North American counterparts, *La Onda* reflects intensified connections between the two neighboring nations but with a considerably different emphasis. Whereas writings from the US provide particular insight about Mexico’s expanding tourist industry, as well as the rapid development of the southwestern border region, Mexican literature of the same period reveals more about the destabilizing impact of imported consumer goods and cultural production

on constructions of national identity. Not only did Mexico actively seek a North American tourist market, but its border opened to foreign investment and products as official development strategy shifted from radical redistribution to capital accumulation in the post-World War II decades (Zolov, "Discovering" 235). Since the 1960s the favorable business climate attracted such corporations as GM, Ford, Chrysler, RCA, and Zenith to Mexico (Martinez 128). The presence of transnational industries, consumer items, English-speaking tourists, and popular film and music from North America made ordinary Mexican citizens increasingly familiar with the language and culture of the US. Their responses ranged from enthusiasm to charges of cultural imperialism and fear that Mexico would lose a sense of its own traditions.

On the literary scene a group of authors, all under 30 themselves, expressed the mood of their generation by writing "una literatura sobre jóvenes escrita desde la juventud misma" ("a literature written by and about young people"; Monsiváis 95). Foremost among them were José Agustín, Gustavo Sainz, and Parménides García Saldaña, whose best-selling novels and short stories were influential among young readers but largely decried by the literary establishment.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the three countercultural authors from the US treat Mexico as an exotic antidote to modern life, Mexican authors espouse a cosmopolitan sophistication that resists the conventional view of Latin-American underdevelopment. For these young men, fast cars and rock music are far more romantic than the rural landscapes and indigenous peasants associated with state-sanctioned Mexican nationalism. The teenage characters in their fiction thirst for knowledge about Europe and North America that would align them with an international youth culture dispersed in space but drawn together by common tastes in music, entertainment, and styles of dress.

For Mexican observers like Monsiváis, La Onda's more transnational identifications made the *Onderos* look derivative and apolitical, "the first generation of gringos born in Mexico" (Steele 134). Despite its glibness his quip exposes a provocative scenario in which authors adopt a sensibility so alien that they are identified with another national culture altogether. The feelings of displacement that Monsiváis's description connotes should not be so easily dismissed as evidence of a uniform Americanization. If the *Onderos* are indeed gringos born on foreign soil, the Mexican setting of their work merits as much attention as do their Anglo-American influences.<sup>20</sup> Enthusiastic consumers of US popular culture, they chart the transformation of that culture's meaning as it is absorbed by a Latin-American market.

The *Onderos* embrace an aesthetic of youthful spontaneity that is forged, in part, through their rejection of literary predecessors, although they draw on many established tropes and narrative concerns.<sup>21</sup> As



Manuel de Jesus Hernández-Gutiérrez has argued, the *Onderos* are distinguished from earlier generations by their relative disinterest in issues of Mexican history or national identity. According to Luis Leal, “The young writers did not want to be identified as partisan to specifically Mexican causes, or accused of writing under the influence of major national writers. They wanted Mexican literature to be considered as part of Western letters. It did not interest them to write exclusively for the Mexican people, nor the Spanish-speaking countries, but rather to be translated and read in other countries” (qtd. in Hernández-Gutiérrez 388). Conceiving of the break with national literary tradition in generational terms, the *Onderos* saw young people as both their subject and intended audience. “Habíamos despotricado,” Agustín wrote of himself and Gustavo Sainz, “él *just for the sake of it* y yo por ardido, en contra del Centro Mexicano de Escritores, especialmente en contra de Juan Rulfo y (horror parricida) de Juan José Arreola. Presumíamos de estar-al-día en literatura contemporánea, la gringa en particular” (“We had ranted and raved, [Sainz] just for the sake of it and me with vehemence, against the Mexican Writers Center, especially Juan Rulfo and (parricidal horror) Juan José Arreola. We thought ourselves up to date on contemporary literature, particularly from the United States”; *El rock de la cárcel* 10). At once a description and a performance of Agustín’s unorthodox Spanglish, the phrase “just for the sake of it” evokes the spontaneity so important to the Beat generation. Hip and ultramodern, Agustín’s disregard for established literary institutions and ancestors Arreola and Rulfo is a gesture of adolescent rebellion (Kirk 17). Even more significantly, Agustín distances himself from these patriarchs because they have been so closely identified with national literature. The *Onderos* perceive the canon of Latin-American authors that has set the terms for Mexican literature as limited and parochial; the international acclaim for the work of Octavio Paz, Rulfo, or Carlos Fuentes only contributes to stereotypes about Mexican backwardness.

If the *Onderos* share the Beats’ irreverence for literary forefathers, their rebellion assumes a different form. Rather than literally fleeing from adult responsibilities, these teenagers tend to remain within narrowly circumscribed areas of Mexico City that include the middle-class neighborhoods of Navarte and La Condesa and the hip Zona Rosa. There they often find themselves under the curious gaze of Western tourists. Far from any national border, foreign travelers turn Mexico City into a contact zone as the vacationer in search of an antidote to modernity clashes with a local population, which believes itself to participate fully in that modernity.<sup>22</sup> This figurative borderland is very different from *la línea*, where cultural dynamics are overshadowed by the political and economic dominance of the US. The citizens of the *Onderos*’s Mexico City occupy positions of

authority in relation to Western visitors. Unlike the diffident, welcoming natives of tourist brochures, these teenage *chilangos* (inhabitants of Mexico City) are crude and disrespectful. For example, when the protagonist of Agustín's *De perfil (In Profile)* realizes that a group of North American sightseers has observed him smoking an illicit cigarette, he rants, "Me importa un pito que me vean, canallas, para eso soy joven, para hacer lo que se me antoje, para correr, pegar de brincos y fumar hasta el ombligo. Qué les importa lo que haga, gringos americanos. ¡Mocos güeyes!, les hago violines y gestos que seguramente no comprenden: sonrien como buenos turistas que son. Qué país." ("I don't give a shit if they saw me, jerks, that's why I'm young, to do what I please, to run, jump around, and smoke until I'm blue in the face. What do I care what those gringos do? Snotty S.O.B's! I gave them the finger and gestures they surely don't understand: they smile like the good tourists they are. What a country"; 282). Later, the tourists approach "con cara de muy monos, sonriendo y toda la cosa" ("with cute faces, smiling and the whole bit"; 285) and attempt to communicate with him in an incomprehensible Spanish. He responds with a mental catalogue of the useless English he has learned in school: "What do you do today Sir? My little dog is name little Peluso. My sister has a doll. The doll es pretty. Very. How old are you? Very old thank you and you? I am very old too thank you too" (285). Like Acosta, Agustín sees translation (or its failure) as a key element of the intercultural encounter. But whereas Acosta struggles for a language that would grant him a more unified sense of identity, Agustín represents the inability to communicate as a form of resistance against becoming a "native" in the eyes of the Western tourists.

Agustín's 1973 novel *Se está haciendo tarde (It's Getting Late)* makes even more pointed connections among English, the global economy, and the rise of a Mexican counterculture. Its setting is Acapulco, where a nomadic population of hippies, wealthy tourists, and seasonal workers speak in a confusion of tongues. Although the resort is saturated by Western commercial interests, the narrative's vacuous characters seem uninterested in benefiting from a Mexican economy bolstered by tourism and foreign investment. As the protagonist Rafael is driven through the streets by his friend Virgilio, "Dos hippies pedían aventón bajo un letrero que decía ACAPULCO WELCOMES YOU, cerca del Club de Pesca, y Virgilio los ignoró, se siguió de largo. Por todas partes letreros en ingles" ("Near the Fishing Club, two hippies were hitchhiking under a sign that read ACAPULCO WELCOMES YOU!, and Virgil ignored them and drove on. Everywhere signs in English"; 134). In a moment of obvious irony, Virgilio undermines the sign's welcoming gesture to English-speaking tourists by refusing to pick up the hippies, who are not its intended audience anyway. It is impossible to ignore the

billboards that pepper the landscape with slogans addressed to foreign consumers, however. One reads, “EASY NON-STOP FLIGHTS TO NEW YORK, L.A., AND SAN FRANCISCO, WHERE THE ACTION IS!” (135). Another commands, “INVEST IN ACAPULCO THE LAND OF EXTRA PROFIT!” (136). The easy nonstop flights indicate not only how much times have changed since Kerouac’s long drive, but also Agustín’s very different emphasis on modern Mexico’s commercial ties with the US. Against this backdrop, Rafael—who ekes out a living as a tarot card reader—Virgilio, and two Canadian women pass the day trading insults, driving aimlessly, drinking to excess, and finally dropping acid. These patently unproductive diversions stand in jarring contrast to the ads that promote Acapulco as a site of economic expansion.

La Onda’s Mexico is strikingly different from the place described by Kerouac, Wolfe/Kesey, or Acosta. Its primary settings are the upper middle-class urban neighborhoods where its characters live, recreate, and go to school. Although typically located in the vast, sprawling Mexican capital, a feeling of claustrophobia pervades these narratives. Their teenage protagonists counter the restrictions of their immediate surroundings by inventing their own highly localized vocabulary and rituals while simultaneously expressing affinities with larger, more dispersed communities of consumers. Their sensibility thus seems a byproduct of the urban space they inhabit, manifesting the qualities anthropologist Nestor García Canclini associates with contemporary Mexico City:

The disintegration of the city as a result of demographic expansion and urban sprawl diminishes the organizational significance of the historic center and shared public spaces that once encouraged common experiences in the Mexican capital. Territorial expansion and the massification of the city that reduced interaction among neighborhoods are processes that date from the 1950s to the present, precisely the same period in which radio, television, and video spread throughout the city. These are the new, invisible electronic links that have reorganized relations among inhabitants in a more abstract and depersonalized manner, while connecting us all to a transnational symbolic order (74).

By the mid-1960s when the *Onderos* are writing, Mexico City’s more traditional, centralized urban core is already giving way to a series of dispersed localities. Mass media has created transnational communities of consumers that supplant local or national affiliations. La Onda is thus somewhat paradoxically rooted to a specific time and place while looking outward to more abstract and

disembodied forms of collectivity. Setting their fiction within a cacophonous, modern city filled with cars, television, and rock music, these authors resist the stereotype of Mexican underdevelopment promoted by North American film and literature. They also reject the quaint, colorful folkways of the state-sanctioned *indigenismo* intended to promote nationalism and attract foreign tourists of the kind depicted in *De perfil* and *Se está haciendo tarde*. The modernity advanced by their fiction is thus particular to the Mexico context, but it belongs to a Mexico saturated by economic and cultural interests that are transnational in scope.

To show off their literacy, the *Onderos* look not to great Mexican authors but to the cultures of Western Europe and the US. Gabriel Guia, protagonist of Agustín's *La Tumba (The Tomb)*, catalogues his purchase of records by "Satchmo, Adderly, Debussy and Grieg" and books by Verlaine, Beckett, and Kerouac (78). Agustín's *rebeldes* drop these names to indicate their avant-garde tastes. Familiarity with high art and literature that might be a sign of nerdish conformity (or what Kerouac called "tedious intellectualness" [*On the Road* 7]) in North America grants worldliness to Mexican teenagers who chafe at the constraints of an oppressive national culture. Amidst such predictable topics as friends, sex, and rock music, their conversations often turn toward matters of culture. During these rather implausible moments, the characters seem directly to voice the tastes and ambitions of their authors. At a party a character named Ziper scolds his friends for thinking that he invented the concept of "pop-scribbling": "No han leído nada de literatura pop? En el Village, después del tramp-writing, es la onda en turno" ("Haven't you read any pop literature? In the Village, it was the next new wave after tramp writing"; *De perfil* 164). In Ziper's short lesson New York's Greenwich Village is not a particular place but a symbolic geography, a point of reference for the Mexican teenager's own version of a radical literary history. He aspires to participate in an international community of readers who would understand his allusion to "el Village" and the bohemian generations that congregated there. Later that evening, the narrator's cousin Esteban criticizes a friend's painting, "Pinta horrible, puras indias gordas, fofas, cubistas. ¡Válgame Dios, cubistas en esta época! Que país" ("He paints horribly, only fat, flabby, cubist indians. Good god, cubists in this era! What a country"; 168). Ironic and pretentious as they may be, Esteban's complaints also bespeak his knowing contemporaneity. Rejecting the themes and styles of high modernism, particularly the primitivist reverence for indigenous peasants, the urbane teenagers of *La Onda* locate themselves within a culturally progressive, modernized Mexico far different from the underdeveloped zones so striking to the North American traveler.

The *Onderos*'s cultural literacy is wide-ranging and democratic. Indeed, more important than avant-garde art and literature is the Anglo-American rock music that provides a soundtrack for their everyday activities. We might say that La Onda's fiction is the literary counterpart to the *rocanrol* that was increasingly popular among Latin-American consumers in the 1960s and '70s. As Eric Zolov has shown in *Refried Elvis*, the promotion of North American bands south of the border gave rise to numerous Mexican imitators and spurred the development of a broader youth counterculture. The stories in Parménides García Saldaña's collection *El rey criollo (King Creole)* are saturated with references to rock and rock music. Likewise, entitling his memoir of the 1960s *El rock de la cárcel (Jailhouse Rock)*, Agustín acknowledges the centrality of Elvis to his life during this formative period. His 1996 study of the Mexican counterculture includes a section called "El lado oscuro de la luna" ("The Dark Side of the Moon"), with chapters on punks, "rock mexicano," and "bandas." Explaining his distinctive use of colloquial language, Agustín cited rock music as an inspiration: "*De perfil* realmente no era literatura, al menos tal como se le concebía entonces. Era una proposición distinta: como el rock, se trataba de fundir alta cultura y cultura popular, legitimarse artísticamente de una vez por todas el lenguaje coloquial" ("It's true, *De perfil* wasn't really literature, at least not as it was conceived of back then. Rather, it was a new proposition: as with rock, it sought to fuse high and popular culture, to legitimate artistically once and for all a colloquial language"; *El rock* 18). Modeling his fiction on the rhythms and cadences of rock, Agustín claims to have invented a hybrid alternative to known literary forms.

Although rock music was initially marketed to Mexican elites, the *Onderos* embrace it less as an acquiescence to middle-class values than an effort to break away from their own bourgeois origins by transgressing rigid class barriers. Their early fiction anticipates the powerful allure *rocanrol* would exert for working class Mexicans in the 1970s and '80s. As Elena Poniatowska writes, "¿Quiénes sostienen en México el rock? Los jodidos, los fregados, los chavos que viven en las colonias más pobres" ("Who maintains rock in Mexico? The down and out, the fucked-over, the kids who live in the poorest colonies"; 175). Having captured the prized middle-class consumer demographic, rock took hold in Mexico among more economically and socially marginalized audiences. These fans may not have understood the lyrics but responded to the element of *desmadre*, or vulgar disregard for social conventions and established figures of authority (Zolov, *Refried Elvis* 27,160).<sup>23</sup> Taking advantage of these associations, the *Onderos* use rock music to show up alternating currents

of shallowness and rebellion within their privileged adolescent protagonists.

Anglo-American rock music also enables La Onda's radical experimentation with language. Rock lyrics play an important part in making Saldaña's work into what Juan Bruce-Novoa has called an "interlingual text," writing that exploits the juncture between two linguistic traditions while remaining stubbornly resistant to translation. Beginning each story in *El rey criollo* with the Spanish translation of a Rolling Stones song, Saldaña uses these lyrics not only to satirize the superficiality of his bourgeois teenage protagonists but also to portray their more deep-seated rage and frustration. Like the interlingual Chicano fiction Bruce-Novoa describes, Saldaña's *El rey criollo* could not be translated into any one language without diffusing the unsettling effect of Spanish prose interrupted by banal rock lyrics in English. Saldaña's language, a distinctive hybrid of Anglo-American rock and the colloquial speech of working class *chilangos* and young people, demands a reader who is multilingual and, ideally, versed in contemporary music as well as literary history.

Language is thus the domain where La Onda most evidently moves beyond derivative imitation to become a unique countercultural expression in its own right, one that simultaneously claims affiliation with young people around the globe and reaffirms its ties to specific localities within Mexico City. Recognizing the importance of linguistic experimentation to literature's oppositional potential, Octavio Paz observed that "when a society decays, it is language that is the first to become gangrenous. As a result, social criticism begins with grammar and the reestablishing of meanings" (48). La Onda's early fiction coincides with violent clashes between the Mexican state and student protestors demanding freedom of expression. Its language suits the mood of restless frustration among Mexico's young people, who often speak less because they have something urgent to say than simply to announce their capacity for self-expression. In the context of longstanding government repression of free speech—climaxing in the massacre of student demonstrators at Tlatelolco in 1968—this assertion of voice has broadly political connotations.<sup>24</sup> As if to claim this right to freedom of expression, circular and repetitive dialogues may go on for pages with no apparent concern for narrative expediency. Agustín is known for the invention of defiant, unlovely compound words such as *circuloliterariomodernistas*, *de alto wattage*, and *seudoBeatnik*. This is the impure, miscegenated language of a metropolis shaken by the fusion of cultures resulting from globalization.

Whether they seek to access rebellious currents among young people or to criticize the superficiality of Mexico's privileged classes, La Onda's colloquialisms remain virtually untranslatable. One unanticipated consequence of such linguistic innovation is that

while these texts aspire to an international audience, they have rarely been read outside of Mexico. The crucial role of translation, marketing, and distribution in forming a canon of world literature is often overlooked in discussions of literary influence.<sup>25</sup> Questions that might seem to reside entirely in the realm of literary value in fact have everything to do with the production and circulation of books themselves. Countercultures, which may wish to imagine themselves exempt from the marketplace, are no exception. Not only do the Beats and hippies who cross national borders enjoy the privilege of a US passport, but editors, publishers, and reviewers have guaranteed that their experiences will be transmitted posthumously to readers around the world. Their Mexican counterparts, no matter how inventive and worldly in scope, have been constrained by the borders of nation and language.

The *Onderos*'s obscurity is unfortunate because they articulate an important transitional moment with particular clarity. Even more significantly, neglect of their work has impeded a deeper and more textured context for assessing countercultural traffic across the US-Mexico border. It is often the case that even the most original North American authors tend to rely uncritically on stereotypes about Mexican travel. Formally inventive and radically nonconformist, their work seems to suffer a failure of imagination once they cross the border. The *Onderos* are savvy readers who appropriate the innovative aspects of the North American counterculture, while replacing its flat portraits of Mexico with their own vivid representations. Read together, the two cohorts are a fascinating and complex study of cross-cultural exchange. It is impossible to conceive of the *Onderos*'s project without an understanding of North American literature and popular culture; so too, new dimensions of Anglo-American countercultural production are exposed when it is located in an inter-American context. This pairing attests to the inevitable but unpredictable circulation of culture across national boundaries. At the same time, it underscores the formative impact of the nation state and foreign policy on cultural production. A literary history that takes such issues as free trade, tourism, and national security into account can thus perform a new kind of cultural diplomacy, one that seeks to reconcile the history of grave inequities with the rich imaginative traffic generated by the US-Mexico border.

### Notes

1. On the impact of Mexico on North American culture, see Gunn and Pike.
2. See Saragoza and Zolov, "Discovering."

3. On modernity and the crisis in Mexican national identity caused by contact with the US and Europe, see Lomnitz, ch. 6.
4. There are a number of other authors frequently associated with La Onda, including Gustavo Sainz, René Avilés, Gerardo de la Torre, Juan Tovar, Elsa Cross, Alejandro Aura, Jorge Arturo Ojeda, Margarita Dalton, and Federico Campbell. I focus on Agustín and Saldaña because they are the most well-known and prolific members of this loose confederation and because they each have clear ties to the US.
5. On the road narrative and national culture, see Lackey and Primeau.
6. On La Onda, see Bruce-Novoa; Calvillo; Glantz; Kirk; Monsiváis; Poniatowska; Ruffinelli; and Steele. Zolov's discussion (in *Refried Elvis*) of the *Onderos* gives serious consideration to the group's transnational affiliations and influences.
7. Gilroy theorizes the relationship between countercultures and modernity. Many of his insights about countercultures are indebted to Bauman.
8. See Gutman and Lee. On the Beats in Mexico, see Patán. Douglas connects the emergence of the Beats to the particular cultural geography of New York City in "The Birth of the Beat." On the Beats' internationalism, see Miles.
9. See Martinez; Saragoza; and Zolov, "Discovering."
10. See Belgrad 196–221. See Ross on the allure of blackness for the white hipster of the 1950s.
11. The pejorative *greaser* to which he objects originates in the mid-nineteenth century during the period of conflict over the southwestern border, when it referred to *Californios* of mixed Spanish and Native American heritage. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *greaser* is first used in this respect in 1849, which situates the term's emergence as precisely coincident with the consolidation of the US-Mexico border in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo (1848).
12. On Kerouac and the Fellahin, see Holton; Nicosia 390; and Jones 63–64.
13. Gitlin, who identified the Beats' penchant for mobility, finds similar qualities in the psychedelic generation, noting parenthetically in reference to the band name Jefferson Airplane, "a major theme: transportation and flight" (208).
14. On the New Journalism, see Frus; Hellman; and Wolfe's own *The New Journalism*.
15. On the growth and industrialization of border cities, see Dominguez and Fernández de Castro and Martinez.
16. See Lee for an analysis of Acosta's relationship to the Beats.
17. For a more extensive discussion of the booming Mexican economy, see Martinez.
18. See Zolov, *Refried Elvis*.



19. The term *La Onda* was first applied to this group of authors by Margo Glantz, with the encouragement of Saldaña. Agustín has been more resistant to the concept. His short story, “¿Cuál es La Onda?” deals parodically with the bourgeois pretensions of Mexican teenagers. However, he also leveled the more serious accusation that Glantz misunderstands the group’s scope and complexity in *El rock de la cárcel*, 78–79. See also Poniatowska for an account of the term’s controversial legacy.
20. See Poniatowska.
21. See Juan Bruce-Novoa, “*La Onda*.”
22. The term is borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt’s important formulation of the contact zone as a cultural meeting ground.
23. Zolov notes that rock music’s movement from top to bottom of the class hierarchy in Mexico is the opposite of its trajectory in the US and Britain, where it emerged as a working-class cultural form and then caught on with middle-class young people.
24. Agustín claimed that his work became more explicitly political in the wake of the student movement, and particularly the massacre at Tlatelolco (*El rock* 61–64).
25. Venuti makes an important contribution to such discussion by foregrounding translation as both a form of labor and creative activity in an effort to rescue it from its marginality within intellectual, legal, and corporate discourse.

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