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THE BEATS IN MEXICO

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THE BEATS IN MEXICO

DAVID STEPHEN CALONNE

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Statue of Xochipilli, Creative Commons

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INTRODUCTION

Mexico has intrigued many American authors including Stephen Crane, Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, John Dos Passos, Conrad Aiken, Muriel Rukeyser, Archibald MacLeish, John Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams, Paul Bowles, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, Katherine Anne Porter, Lucia Berlin, Ray Bradbury, and Kenneth Rexroth. Herman Melville memorialized his March 28–April 16, 1844 visit to Mazatlán in his novel *White-Jacket* (1850). Europeans such as D. H. Lawrence, Malcolm Lowry, Antonin Artaud, and André Breton became important exemplars for Beat writers—Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William S. Burroughs, Philip Lamantia, Margaret Randall, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Bonnie Bremser, Michael McClure, and Joanne Kyger—who also journeyed throughout Mexico over a period of more than half a century. The centrality of Mexico to the evolution of Beat literature and the American counterculture however has been little investigated. Experimentation and research devoted to entheogens and shamanistic practices—shamanism is featured in Rudolfo Anaya's celebrated novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) with its compelling depiction of *brujeria* (magic) and *curandismo* (healing); the popularity of Carlos Castaneda's *Don Juan* series; the study of Mayan and Aztec history, myth, and language; the exploration of

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Mexico's archaeological sites; sensitivity to the plight of women and the oppressed; and increasing awareness about preserving ecological balance: all were of central concern to the Beats. Connections with Mexican literary life were fashioned through Margaret Randall's magazine *El Corno Emplumado* (1962–1969), and both Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Philip Lamantia were friends with Mexican poet Homero Aridjis (1940–). As Daniel Belgrad has observed: "For the Beats as a 'cultural formation' (a term that Raymond Williams used to describe a group engaged in a common cultural endeavor and sharing common cultural practices), travel and residence in Mexico was an important rite of passage and was influential in their evolving aesthetic."[1] Going on a pilgrimage to Mexico became de rigueur for the Beats, just as the Grand Tour to France, Switzerland, Italy, and Greece was an important educational journey for poets and intellectuals in Europe during the Romantic Era.

American authors with connections to the Beats such as Charles Olson (1910–1970) and Denise Levertov (1923–1997) were deeply influenced by Mexico. Levertov lived in Mexico from 1956 to 1958 with her husband Mitchell Goodman. During a trip in October and November 1956, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso stopped in Guadalajara to visit them.[2] Corso, according to the autobiographical note he included in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, composed "most of *Gasoline*" (1958) while in Mexico. The volume includes "Mexican Impressions": "Through a moving window/I see a glimpse of burros/a Pepsi Cola stand,/an old Indian sitting/smiling toothless by a hut," featuring America's imperial capitalism and consumer culture set against Mexico's poverty through the imagistic precision the Beats learned from Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. This photographic clarity also distinguishes several Levertov poems which pay homage to the delights of life in Mexico such as "Pleasures," celebrating the luscious *mamey* fruit—*Pouteria sapota*—native to Cuba, Central America, and Mexico.[3] Levertov's "Xochipilli"—the Aztec (a more accurate term for the Aztecs is the Mexica, after whom Mexico is named) god of pleasure, poetry, flowers, and spring—invokes Xochipilli's divine powers: "'From thy dung/the red flowers,' says the god/'From thy bones/white flowers,' says the god./'From this music/seeds of the grass/that shall sing when the wind blows.'" In her essay "The Sense of Pilgrimage," Levertov explained: "From looking at a small statue of Xochipilli, the actions of the God appeared in my mind as knowledge, rather than as uninterpreted visual images. The representation of Xochipilli, I mean, informed me of what his actions would be and from this intuitive knowledge came visualizations and their verbal equivalents."[4]

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Hart Crane (1899–1932) was an influence on Allen Ginsberg and on African American Beat poet Bob Kaufman—Kaufman is said to have committed Crane's complete oeuvre to memory—who in "The Ancient Rain" declared: "The Ancient Rain fell on Hart Crane. He committed suicide in the Gulf/of Mexico." Hart Crane had contemplated composing an epic poem chronicling the encounter between Cortes and Moctezuma II and alluded to Xochipilli in "The Circumstance": "If you/Could drink the sun as did and does/Xochipilli—as they who've/Gone have done, as they/Who've done . . . a god of flowers in statued/Stone . . . of love—."[5]

Charles Olson, rector of Black Mountain College from 1951 to 1956, is known for his concept of "Projective Verse" which emphasized measuring spacing of verses on the page—as in a musical score—in accordance with the energy of breath rather than conventional metrical form. Olson was appealing to the Beats since both Kerouac and Ginsberg in their elaboration of a Buddhist poetics advocated spontaneity, open revelation of consciousness and the body's rhythmic powers: *prana* in Sanskrit is "breath" or "spirit energy." Olson influenced Diane di Prima, Michael McClure, Ed Dorn, and Joanne Kyger, identifying with the revolutionary ideals of the Beat and hippie movements: he was also a participant in the early investigations of the psychological effects of entheogens on creativity. Olson published a section from his *Maximus Poems* in *The Psychedelic Review: Aldous Huxley Memorial Issue* in 1964. As we shall see in chapter 9, Joanne Kyger's account of a 1985 journey to the Yucatan, *Phenomenological* (1989)—in which she describes reading Olson's *Mayan Letters* during her stay in Mexico—was published as volume 24 in a series of texts by a variety of writers inspired by Olson entitled "A Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul." Ed Dorn was Olson's student at Black Mountain, and Olson provided his pupil with a reading list entitled "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn," advising him to consult sources about Mexico including "Indian texts on migrations, such as the Toltecs being pushed out of Tula by Chicmecs, etc.—also codices in which feet (like on floor after bath) are as arrows in Klee." In his poem "Twenty-Four Love Songs," Dorn lamented the destruction of Maya codices by the Christian Spanish invader: "It is deep going from here/from the old world to the new/from Europa home/the brilliant scrolls of the waves/wave/the runic secret of homeward/when Diego de Landa the glyphic books destroyed." Dorn met Margaret Randall in the late fifties when she was living in Santa Fe, and she provided Dorn—who would later publish Randall in his magazine *Wild Dog*—and Gordon Brotherston with texts which they translated and included in *Our Word: Guerilla Poems from Latin America* (1968).

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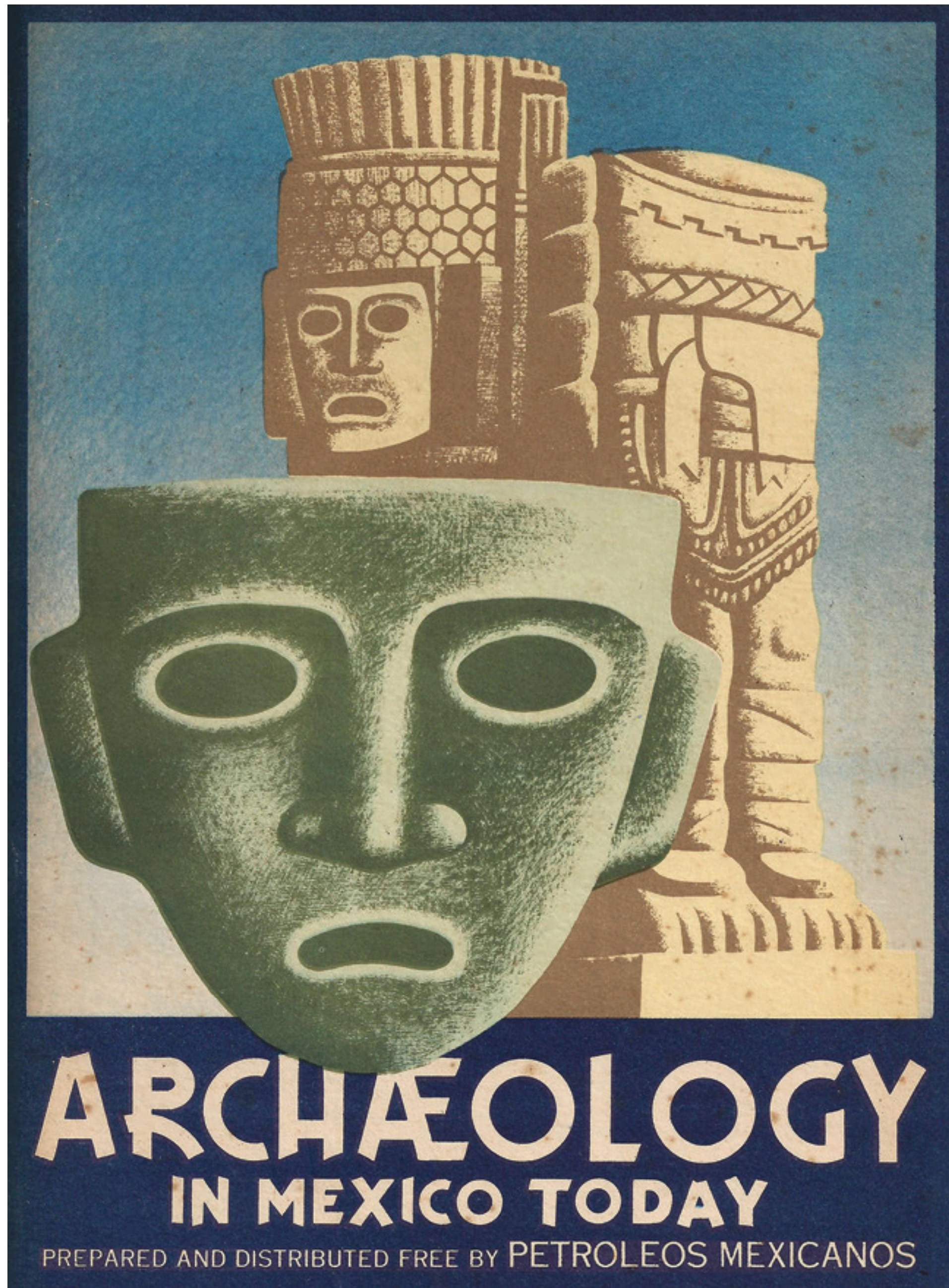

Cover of magazine *Archaeology in Mexico Today*

Dorn also collaborated with Brotherston to prepare translations included in the groundbreaking volume *Image of the New World: The American Continent Portrayed in Native Texts* (1979).

Olson—along with Lawrence Ferlinghetti and William S. Burroughs—was one of the first countercultural travelers to Mexico.[6] In 1937 at the Convention on the Pan-American Highway, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia,

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Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Canada, and the United States agreed to construct a highway connecting their countries, and Mexico was the first to complete its section of the road in 1950. Between 1939 and 1951, the total number of Americans making the journey to Mexico more than tripled. Similar in purpose to the American Automobile Association, Petroleos Mexicanos initiated the Pemex Travel Club which, beginning in 1940, published tourist guides titled *Archaeology in Mexico Today*, which Charles Olson perused.[7]

Olson spent six months in Lerma, Campeche in the Yucatan—the Maya referred to the Yucatan peninsula as *Peten*, or "the Land," and *Mayab*, signifying "flat"—and although Olson never again returned to Mexico, his brief sojourn in the country significantly shaped his poetic imagination.[8] He came to the Yucatan at the beginning of 1951, first reaching shore at Progreso. He arrived in Merida—later a destination for Allen Ginsberg as well—and was eager to begin exploring the archaeological sites he had previously known only through books.[9] Cid Corman, the editor of *Origin* magazine and publisher of Olson's work, ransacked used bookstores back in Boston to find texts for Olson and mailed him Alfred M. Tozzer's *A Maya Grammar*.[10]

Like William S. Burroughs—Olson entered graduate school at Harvard the same year Burroughs earned his bachelor's degree there—Olson was fascinated by Mayan history, archaeology, and language. One-fifth the size of America with which it shares a two-thousand-mile border and composed of thirty-one individual states, Mexico represents a tremendous variety of ecosystems, distinct cultures, and languages. Olson was keen to meet local speakers of Maya. There are about thirty Mayan languages which are still alive today in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco, as well as the three states comprising the Yucatan peninsula: Quintana Roo, Yucatan, and Olson's place of residence, Campeche. Throughout the Yucatan, Lacandon, Mopan, Itza, and Yucatec are spoken. The Maya had been writing for a thousand years when English literature made its debut in the seventh century. They invented their own script and inked inscriptions on paper, painted them on pottery, and carved them in stelae. Olson's references to the Maya appear in *Mayan Letters*—which features seventeen letters composed during his stay in Mexico addressed to Robert Creeley—as well as his essay "Human Universe" in which Olson remarked that the Maya "invented a system of written record, now called hieroglyphs, which on its very face, is verse, the signs were so closely and densely chosen that, cut in stone, they retain the power of the objects of which they are the images." Allusions to the Maya appear in Olson's poem "The Kingfishers": "They buried their dead in a sitting posture/serpent cane razor ray of the

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sun/And she sprinkled water on the head of the child, crying 'Cioa-coatl! Cioa-coatl!'/with her face to the west." Cihuacoatl, "woman snake"—Olson spells her name slightly differently—is an Earth/Mother goddess worshipped in Postclassic central Mexico and is one of the goddesses of midwifery. Olson's interest in the Maya was long-standing. In the early forties (nearly a decade before his journey to the Yucatan), he had read *The Maya and Their Neighbors*—a Festschrift for Alfred M. Tozzer—shortly after it was published in 1940. It is possible William S. Burroughs knew this text as well, for it contains reflections concerning the Maya priests which, as we shall see in chapter 2, recall a central theme in Burroughs's own view of Mexican history: "Priestcraft waxed until it attained to amazing power over the minds of the people and over all that pertained to the forms of worship. Native art and tradition, and also modern scientific studies, agree in informing us that, from the earliest quasi-historical period, at Teotihuacan and elsewhere in Mexico and in Yucatan and Guatemala, down to and even beyond the time of the Spanish conquest, the people were held fast in spiritual and moral slavery to an enormous and baleful priesthood serving a confused throng of fearful gods."[11]

The Beat affinity for Mexico had roots in cultural currents appearing in American and European culture decades previously. As the overgrown ruins of Chichen Itza, Tikal, Dzibilchatun, Uxmal, Tulum, Calakmul, Ek Balam, Palenque, Bonampak, and Yaxchilan were revealed and their archaeological sites excavated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both scientists and artists were spellbound. And during the early twentieth century, excavations began in earnest at the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan. The American diplomat John Lloyd Stephens (1805–1852) and British artist Frederick Catherwood (1799–1854) published their illustrated *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841). As we shall see in chapter 2, Catherwood's work entered the Beat imagination of Mexico through William Burroughs and Malcolm McNeill's collaboration on the graphic narrative *Ah Pook Is Here*. The stately architecture of the grand pyramids and refined, delicately poised figures in newly discovered sculptures illustrated with lifelike verisimilitude the lives of the Maya and Aztecs. The creative genius exhibited in the art of these ancient peoples—whether one considers the choreographic, poetic pose of the celebrated Chac Mool of Chichen Itza, or violent scenes of bloodletting on the elaborately carved stone lintels of Yaxchilan—seemed eerily palpable and relevant to American writers and poets. Public interest in the Maya increased during the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition where gigantic replicas of the facades of buildings from Labna and other settle-

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ments in the Puuc region of the Yucatan were displayed. During the twenties, what has become known in the history of architecture as the "Maya Revival" began. Throughout the United States, from Illinois to California, a vogue commenced for erecting buildings in the Mayan style as demonstrated by Marjorie I. Ingle in *Mayan Revival Style: Art Deco Maya Fantasy*. Frank Lloyd Wright's Hollyhock House (1917–20), which he built in Los Angeles, borrows features from the imposing buildings of Uxmal and Chichen Itza. Fantastic structures created by architect Robert Stacy-Judd with baroque Mayan figurations sprang up in southern California.

The new love for things Mexican would also catch up in its enthusiasm poets such as Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams. The magazine *Broom* published a "Maya theme" issue in which Crane's poem "The Springs of Guilty Song" appeared, while Williams contributed work on the Aztecs, "The Destruction of Tenochtitlan." Williams also composed an essay on Cortes and Montezuma (1923) and proclaimed in *The American Grain*, "The New World is Montezuma." In a 1941 lecture delivered in Puerto Rico, Williams argued that "from the old and alien soul of America itself, may the reliques of its ancient, its pre-Columbian cultures still kindle something in me that will be elevated, profound and common to us all, Americas. There is that path still open to us." Another author significant to the Beats, D. H. Lawrence, explored in his novel *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) the myths of Quetzalcoatl as a part of his quest for the instinctive "blood-knowledge" which Lawrence associated with sexual and spiritual transcendence. Archibald MacLeish composed a long poem entitled *Conquistador* (1932) employing Bernal Diaz del Castillo as narrator and depicting the Spanish domination of Tenochtitlan. And as Carrie Gibson has remarked in *El Norte: The Epic and Forgotten Story of Hispanic North America*, by the thirties, "Hollywood was booming, and it fell in love with all things Mexican, a fashion that reached its peak during the Great Depression. Even the *New York Times* reported in 1933 on the 'enormous vogue of things Mexican.' The daring romantic heroes of the Mexican Revolution, such as Pancho Villa, had captured the public imagination, and Mexico's proximity played a part in the culture's popularization as well." The American composer Aaron Copland met the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez in 1926, spent four months in Mexico in 1932, and returned to the United States to create one of his most popular works, the rhythmically syncopated, riveting, and tuneful *El Salon Mexico* (1936), based on Mexican folk melodies.

In San Francisco, a number of cultural forces were preparing the way for the Beat fascination with Mexico. The French writer Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) participated in peyote rituals of the Tarahumara Indians. Excerpts from

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Artaud's writings appeared in the underground publication *Semina* edited by Wallace Berman, which circulated in California's Bay Area, and Michael McClure's second book, *For Artaud*, appeared in 1959. Artaud was prescient in his intellectual itinerary which presaged not only the Beat fascination with Mexico but their spiritual orientation as well. In a letter composed in 1937, Artaud advised a friend to read "the *Bardo Thodol* [*Tibetan Book of the Dead*], *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, the *Tao-Te-Ching* and the *Vedas* and *drop all the rest!*": each of these classics would also become favorite Beat texts. The "founder" of Surrealism, André Breton, visited Mexico for four months in 1938. Diego Rivera introduced him to Leon Trotsky, and Breton and Trotsky collaborated on their essay against Fascist and Stalinist repression, "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art." Breton was entranced by Mexico, famously remarking: "I don't know why I came here. Mexico is the most surrealist country in the world." Breton inspired the Guatemalan writer and Nobel Prize–winner Miguel Angel Asturias (1899–1974), author of the novel *Hombres de maiz* (1949) based on the Mayan belief that their flesh was made of corn. Asturias translated in 1927, along with Mexican Jose Maria Gonzalez de Mendoza, the French version of the Quiché Maya *Popol Vuh*, and Asturias also incorporated surrealist elements in his writings. Breton lyrically invoked Xochipilli—as did Levertov and Hart Crane—in his essay "Remembrance of Mexico": "Half awakened from its mythological past, Mexico still evolves under the protection of Xochipilli, god of the flowers and of lyrical poetry, and of Coatlicue, goddess of the earth and of violent death, whose effigies, filled with more pathos and intensity than all the others, seem to exchange over the heads of the Indian peasants (the most numerous and meditative visitors of the National Museum's collections) winged words and raucous calls that fly from one end of the building to the other. The power of conciliating life and death is without doubt the main attraction that lures us to Mexico."[12] In addition to Artaud and Breton, one of the earliest publications of a third Frenchman—Georges Bataille's (1897–1962) "L'Amerique disparue"—was included in Jean Babelon's *L'art precolombien* (1930). Although he never made the journey to Mexico, Bataille investigated the Aztecs as an important aspect of his theorizing concerning the sacred, violence, and transgression. Finally, the Surrealist Spanish director Luis Bunuel (1900–1983) arrived in Mexico in 1946, where he resided for the rest of his life and created several of his greatest films. Beat poets such as Philip Lamantia sought inspiration from their Surrealist predecessors, seeking transcendent powers from the unconscious, from dreams, from allowing the mind to roam free from the constrictions of "logical, rational thought," and discovered in the dark gods of

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Mexico a way to contact the primal energies which they felt were still alive in pretechnological culture and which preserved what Gary Snyder called the "Old Ways" of relating to nature and the cosmos.

Margaret Astrov's anthology *The Winged Serpent: American Indian Prose and Poetry*, published in 1946—a volume Philip Whalen recommended to Joanne Kyger—contained two sections devoted to texts from pre-Columbian Mexico, including the Aztec "Prayer to the God Titlacaon" and "A Song by Nezahualcoyotl"; "The Eagle and the Moon Goddess" from the Cora people; as well as Mayan works including "Three Fragments from the Book of Chilam Balam Chumayel" and "Prayer before Preparing Milpa." A. Grove Day's *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians* appeared in 1951, and by the early sixties, Mexican literature and thought had become increasingly visible in American cultural life. As we shall see in chapter 4, underground magazines such as Wallace Berman's *Semina* (1955–1964) and Margaret Randall's *El Corno Emplumado* (1962–1969) were significant in the dissemination of knowledge about Mexico for the counterculture. Both became important venues where both Beats and Surrealists submitted their poems, essays, translations, photographs, and artwork. The *Evergreen Review* published an issue entitled "The Eye of Mexico" in 1959 containing translations by Paul Blackburn, Lysander Kemp, Denise Levertov, and William Carlos Williams, an article on Aztec culture by Manuel Leon-Portilla, and a review of *Mexican Poetry: An Anthology* compiled by Octavio Paz and translated by Samuel Beckett. Wallace Berman published the fifth number of *Semina*, entitled "Mexico Issue," in 1959. The front cover depicted a Mayan stone phallus from the Stella Museum in Campeche while the back featured the famous painting of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz by Miguel Cabrera.

Also in 1959, Thomas Mabry Cranfill edited *The Muse in Mexico: A Mid-Century Miscellany*, originally a supplement to the *Texas Quarterly*, volume 2, no. 1. Cranfill included in *The Muse in Mexico* William Carlos Williams's versions of Aztec poetry, "Three Nahuatl Poems," which Jerome Rothenberg also featured in his anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*. By the late fifties, Tuli Kupferberg (1923–2010)—co-founder with Ed Sanders of the band the Fugs—declared in the first eight-page issue of his magazine *Birth* entitled *Beating* (Summer 1959): "The Beats link themselves & are linked to the new rising energies of Africa & Asia, to the primitive current life-loving peoples of Mexico & the Caribbean, to the old wisdom of Asia, to the crazy Bohemian poets of 19th century France breaking their heads against the coming calamities & yet raging after joy, digging life."[13] Upon the arrival of the sixties, the connections between American and Mexican cultural life had palpably strengthened.

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Cover of *Semina*, Mexico issue 5, the Estate of Wallace Berman and Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

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Margaret Randall's *El Corno Emplumado*, *Evergreen Review*, published by Barney Rosset of Grove Press—Grove would bring out *Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico* by Laurette Sejourne in 1960—and Berman's *Semina* were specifically aimed at the burgeoning counterculture. The rich literary tradition of Mexico—beginning with the ruler of the Chichimec kingdom of Texcoco, Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472), who was also a philosopher, poet, and the subject of a long work by Ernesto Cardenal, to the great religious poet Sor Juana de la Cruz, to contemporary authors such as Octavio Paz—began to reveal itself to readers in the United States.

This increasing appreciation on the part of American writers for the written and oral literatures of Indigenous peoples had one source in Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982), who served as a mentor for several Beats including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Diane di Prima. Rexroth traveled widely and met Edward Sapir (1884–1939), the renowned scholar of Native American languages.[14] During a trip to the Southwest, Rexroth encountered Jaime de Angulo (1887–1950), the charismatic linguist and anthropologist who had lived among Native Americans and influenced several Beat writers including—as we shall see in chapter 9—Joanne Kyger. Rexroth became interested in Native American poetry and song, learning from several scholars including Mary Austin (1868–1934) and Alice Corbin Henderson: "Mary Austin knew more about Indians, and more about Indian song especially, than anybody else in the country, except Frances Densmore and Natalie Curtis Burlin, whom I never met. She understood my interest in the, so to speak, non-Aristotelian syntax of Indian and African languages a generation before Whorf. She played cylinder records of Indian songs for me, and gave me a list of books to read." Austin was also admired by Gary Snyder as "a very insightful nature essayist."[15] In his review of *American Indian Songs: The United States Bureau of Ethnology Collection*, Rexroth praised Densmore, who visited the Plains Indians—specifically the Teton Sioux—and recorded information concerning the celebrated Sun Dance.[16] In his review, Rexroth included samples of Densmore's translations of songs of the Chippewa, Teton Sioux, Northern Ute, Mandan, Hidatsa, Pawnee, Menominee, Papago, Yuman, and Yaqui peoples.

The "ethnopoetics" movement—the study by Rexroth and Snyder of Indigenous cultures and the effort to "translate" oral compositions into "written texts"—was one component of emerging Beat poetics. Poets began to explore Indigenous cultures and anthropology. The works of Claude Levi-Strauss such as *La Pensee Sauvage* (1962) and *Mythologiques* (in four volumes, 1964–1971) were admired by Gary Snyder, Ed Dorn, and Jerome Rothenberg. Snyder

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thought Levi-Strauss a "genius," while Dorn featured Levi-Strauss—along with Martin Heidegger and the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides—in his epic poem *Gunslinger*. Dorn revealed in an interview: "I feel very close to the mind of Levi-Strauss—very respectful of it because I like the kind of mental nets that he sets up." Rothenberg composed a poem named after a famous Levi-Strauss essay, "The Structural Study of Myth." Another important development in the assimilation of Indigenous literatures into American intellectual life was the magazine *Alcheringa*, founded in 1970, edited by Dennis Tedlock and Rothenberg. Snyder wrote essays for *Alcheringa*, while Ed Dorn and Gordon Brotherston contributed their translations of Indigenous oral tales, myths, and poetry. Rothenberg described *Alcheringa* as "a collaborative project that would bring together poets and scholars in the attempt to uncover and to find new ways of presenting the largely oral and traditional poetry in a contemporary context." As we shall see in chapter 9, Joanne Kyger in her poem "Visit to Maya Land" chronicles her visit to Chiapas in the fall of 1976 through her adaptation of an oral anthropogonic myth of the Tzotzil Maya.

The relationship between archaic oral literatures and the yearnings of the counterculture for new sources of inspiration is apparent in the anthology *America: A Prophecy, a New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present* (1973), in which Rothenberg and George Quasha presented selections from the *Popol Vuh*, the *Chilam Balam*, the Florentine Codex, and Aztec and Toltec texts, as well as reproductions of Mayan glyphs from the Dresden Codex. The collection also features American authors including Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Denise Levertov, Charles Bukowski, Philip Lamantia, and Michael McClure, thus emphasizing a subterranean yet continuing historical tradition of the poetry of the Americas. The title *America: A Prophecy* alludes to William Blake's eponymous 1793 poem, thereby connecting the revolutionary Blake—a hero to the Beats and also a much-admired genius during the hippie dawning of the Age of Aquarius—with the voices of Indigenous peoples. Allen Ginsberg (who had chosen Blake as his "guru"), during a reading in Australia, participated in a joint performance with aboriginal poets. Philip Whalen, in a list of recommended books he sent to Joanne Kyger—which included Keats, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth—declared in his typically chatty, funny, and obsessively exacting style: "The best of this whole lot is WILLIAM BLAKE (Complete writings which is to say prose, letters & notebooks as well as all poems with variant readings ed by Geoffrey Keynes, Oxford University Press, which is a reprint of the elegant Nonesuch Edn which was too expensive to talk about)."[17] The Beat immersion in the oral and written literature of Mexico

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and the nascent fascination with ethnopoetics were part of a developing awareness by American writers of the global context of their own philosophical and spiritual trajectory. The realization heralded by Beat transnationalism that the curriculum taught in American schools and universities has been hampered by a U.S. and Eurocentric bias has in the present day begun to be ameliorated.

The connection of the Beats to Mexico pointed in both directions: Mexican as well as Central and South American writers responded to the liberatory, egalitarian, and joyful energies of the American counterculture. The Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal edited, with Jose Coronel Urtecho, the *Antologia de la Poesia Norteamericano* (1963) which contains not only the canonized figures of American poetry—Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound—but also an impressive list of Beats including Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen, figures in the San Francisco Renaissance such as Kenneth Rexroth, and Cardenal's mentor and friend, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton.[18] Cardenal, in his quest for spiritual values and social justice, was in solidarity with the American counterculture, forging friendships with Beat writers who traveled widely in Mexico such as Ferlinghetti and Lamantia; Cardenal's book *Apocalypse and Other Poems* (1971) also contains translations by Rexroth and Merton. Cardenal made common ground with Indigenous peoples, publishing *Homage to the American Indians* (1973), as did Beat writers such as Diane di Prima, who composed a poem entitled "Montezuma," fought against the injustices perpetrated upon the Native peoples of the United States, and worked as a teacher in an Indian reservation school in Wyoming where she first conceived her great epic poem *Loba*.

Because the Beats felt alienated from the ruling religious, cultural, economic, and political institutional Establishment of the United States, they experienced their predicament in ways which recall the experience of the Aztecs who questioned their "Christian" conquerors and overlords. When the Aztec priesthood encountered at Tenochtitlan the "Twelve Apostles" in 1524—a posse of Franciscan friars on a mission representing Pope Hadrian VI as well as the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V—the Aztecs inquired, "Why should your rituals and your ideas of divine power be better than ours? How can you *know* you represent the true God?" There was additional irony in the fact that Bernal Diaz del Castillo and Fray Toribio de Benavente had both described impressive libraries—in Nahuatl, *amoxcalli*, "houses of books"—in which the knowledge of the supposedly barbaric and "primitive" Aztecs preserved by priests and nobles had been stored which were then

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burned and obliterated by the "enlightened" Spaniards. These inquiries by the Aztecs match very closely the unanswered questions the Beats and members of the counterculture were posing to their elders regarding not only religious orthodoxy but institutionalized racism, homophobia, unjust wars, the threat of nuclear apocalypse, and the destruction of the environment: they—like the Aztec priests—were not satisfied with the answers they received from those in authority. A similar failure of the Spanish to fathom the complexities of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico occurred when the Spaniards arrived in Yucatan. In 1588, Antonio de Ciudad Real reported: "When the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called, as they did not understand him, and they said *uic athan*, which means, what do you say or what do you speak, that we do not understand you. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called *Yucatan*."

So too the Beats were speaking a different language than their elders, and the two generations had difficulty understanding each other. The Beats were in revolt against monotheism and were eager to explore the traditions of other cultures. Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* which investigated Indigenous Mexican peyote rituals would carry on the Beat tradition of fascination with Mexico for the new hippie generation: a primal land where materialism and technology had not yet run rampant and where a vital, archaic, ritualistic, and mythic culture still flourished. Young people who came of age after the Beats during the sixties also made common cause with Native Americans. As Sherry L. Smith has documented in *Hippies, Indians, and the Fight for Red Power*, the struggle of Native Americans for justice and an end to oppression intersected with the counterculture's concern with ecology, spirituality, and communal living. The poster for the January 14, 1967 "Be-In" at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco—where Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Lenore Kandel, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti congregated together with the new sixties generation—featured Native American iconography with an Indian in full regalia on horseback beneath the title "Pow-Wow: A Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In." The counterculture was now conceiving of its members as a kind of separate "tribe" located but in many ways isolated within the larger American society.

Gloria Anzaldua (1942–2004) in her advocacy for the rights of speakers of Spanish, her struggle against homophobia and freedom for LGBTQ people, her celebration of the intuitive and magical, her questioning of identity and selfhood based on linguistic, "ethnic," or "racial" categories (a more inclusive definition of what it means to be an "American"), and her feminist reinterpre-

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tation of Aztec mythology was also part of the countercultural critique of patriarchy, racism, repression, and "rationality."[19] Anzaldua was at the vanguard of a larger American liberatory movement during the sixties and seventies when those who had been disenfranchised sought to validate a sense of identity through establishing a connection with the archetypal symbols of their mythic past. Chicano writers such as Rodolfo Gonzales (1928–2005) in his poem *I Am Joaquin* invokes a litany of names including the heroic Cuauhtemoc—the last Aztec *tlatoani*, or ruler (1520–1521)—Pancho Villa, Benito Juarez, Emilio Zapata, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. And Alberto Baltazar Urista Heredia, known as "Urista" (1947–), published *Festival de flor y canto: An Anthology of Chicano Literature* (1976) which features in its title an allusion to *flor y canto*, "flower and song," which is the Nahuatl expression for poetry. The quest for the ancestors is the search for one's authentic beginnings and identity: the journal dedicated to Chicano studies, *Aztlan*, was named after the mythical homeland of the Mexica who traveled from Aztlan—which means "White Place" or "Place of the Cranes"—to Tenochtitlan.

Merely changing location in physical space is not the goal of many travelers. Rather, one may be eager for a new way of seeing things, a renewal of one's pleasure in life and perhaps a transformation of consciousness. Graham Greene in *Another Mexico* points out: "The border means more than a customs house, a passport officer, a man with a gun. Over there everything is going to be different; life is never going to be quite the same again after your passport has been stamped and you find yourself speechless among the moneychangers. . . . The atmosphere of the border—it is like starting over again." The *border* with Mexico for the Beats signifies not just an imaginary line on a map but rather entry into the Other, the unknown. As we shall see in chapter 8, they wanted—as Jim Morrison sang—to "break on through to the other side," and in the case of Mexico this meant the break into a primal, ancient mode of being, the quest for ecstatic states, the confrontation with death. Indeed, as Alberto Escobar de la Garma has declared: "Mexico, legendarily, has long been Beat terrain."[20] The sheer beauty of the landscape of the country—volcanoes, lovely beaches, the eerie silence of deserted archaeological ruins, broken stones, cenotes, interminable jungle, men on bicycles carrying bundles of wood on the highway, unfinished cement buildings, straggly thin dogs—makes a powerful impression upon the visitor.

However, there was also a dark side to travel in Mexico. Ambrose Bierce (1842–ca. 1914) mysteriously disappeared in Chihuahua while attached as an observer to Pancho Villa's (1878–1923) revolutionary army, setting the precedent for the deaths of poets Hart Crane and John Hoffman as well as Joan

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Vollmer, the common-law wife of William S. Burroughs. Mexico is the stage upon which Bonnie Bremser enacts an often life-or-death struggle against her fate as a sex worker. Neal Cassady—"Dean Moriarty" of Kerouac's *On the Road*—perished along the railroad tracks of San Miguel de Allende. Gregory Corso in Kerouac's *Desolation Angels* (where he is named "Raphael Urso") employs the same imagery he featured in his poem "Mexican Impressions," exclaiming: "There's *death* in Mexico—I saw a windmill turning death this way—I don't *like* it here." Margaret Randall waged a powerful fight against political oppression and was forced to leave the country. In addition, writers have fallen ill—sometimes seriously—while in Mexico: D. H. Lawrence contracted malaria and Jack Kerouac became bedridden during his trip with Neal Cassady. During Ed Dorn and family's 1955 trip they were stricken by a variety of maladies while traveling through Matamoros, Ciudad Victoria, Tamazunchale, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Mazatlán, and back through Nuevo Laredo.[21] Philip Lamantia was afflicted by a nearly fatal scorpion sting which he chronicled in his poetry. And while the author of *Under the Volcano* Malcom Lowry did not die in Mexico, the tragic hero of his novel—the consul Geoffrey Firmin—is murdered. Oscar Zeta Acosta (1935–1974), author of *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, activist in the Chicano movement, and friends with Hunter S. Thompson, was not immune from Mexico's enveloping powers: Acosta disappeared in May 1974 in Mazatlán.

The Beat response to Mexico was by no means monolithic; each of the Beat authors approached chronicling their travels in Mexico from a different angle and employed a variety of literary genres to convey their experiences: poetry, autobiographical memoir, novel, short story, journal. The Beat relationship to Mexico was also often a *shared* relationship: they wrote letters to each other concerning their experiences in the country and communicated antipathies and enthusiasms in their close friendships with one another. They traveled widely throughout Mexico—from Baja to Mexico City to Oaxaca to Chiapas to San Miguel de Allende to the great archaeological sites of the Yucatan—and the country became an inspiration for their literary creativity. The Beats also sympathized with the oppression of the Mexican people and were in opposition to American "manifest destiny." Mexican president Porfirio Diaz (1830–1915) famously quipped: "Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States." In this regard, the Beats had an illustrious predecessor, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), who opposed the Mexican-American War (1846–1848), spending a night in jail for refusing to pay his poll tax which supported both the enslavement of African Americans and the

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war against Mexico. Half of Mexico's territory was lost when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) ceded California as well as large areas of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah to the United States. Out of this experience of principled rebellion against unjust laws grew Thoreau's great essay "Civil Disobedience" (1849), and Thoreau's position opposing American imperialism would inspire the Beats a century later.

In *The Beats in Mexico* my purpose is to explore in depth five interrelated topics: (1) the importance of hitherto understudied women—Margaret Randall, Joanne Kyger, and Bonnie Bremser—in Beat literary history; (2) the significance of Mexico as a place of spiritual exploration and mystical experience for the Beats, especially their interest in shamanism and the use of entheogens; (3) the Beat confrontation with the "Other" in Mexico; (4) the centrality of Mayan and Aztec history, archaeology, and literature in their works; and (5) the ways the Beats adapted and incorporated ancient Mexican myth—such as the myth of Quetzalcoatl—into their poetics while simultaneously commenting on contemporary issues. The organization of *The Beats in Mexico* is chronological: I have arranged the chapters to reflect roughly the order in which the Beats each arrived in Mexico across the decades. Chapter 1 begins with the first Beat to set foot in Mexico, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ferlinghetti made several trips to the country and in his Mexican writings, refers continually to other authors and creates an intertextual pastiche through which he weaves his own voice. In chapter 2, I discuss William S. Burroughs's lifelong fascination with the Maya as well as his collaboration with artist Malcom McNeill in the creation of their "graphic novel" *Ah Pook Is Here*. In chapter 3, I explore Philip Lamantia's travels throughout Mexico, his important friendship with poet John Hoffman, and several poems which incorporate Mexican themes. In chapter 4, I study the importance of Margaret Randall's pioneering magazine *El Corno Emplumado* and the ways her feminism and political activism are reflected in her work; I also analyze her poems devoted to archaeological sites. In chapter 5, I review the ways Neal Cassady influenced Jack Kerouac's prose style in his Mexican writings as well as the desire Kerouac expressed to find in Mexico a place of spiritual retreat. Chapter 6 is devoted to Allen Ginsberg, and I analyze several poems including "Siesta in Xbalba" and the ways Ginsberg continues the quest of William Burroughs through his study of hallucinogens and his familiarity with the Madrid Codex. In chapter 7 I continue my survey of Beat women writers with Bonnie Bremser, analyzing the ways Bremser developed Kerouac's spiritual search in Mexico from the female perspective and how her voice provides an important complement to the predominantly male Beat perspective on Mexico.

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Michael McClure and Jim Morrison are the subjects of chapter 8. I discuss McClure's friendship with the biologist Sterling Bunnell and their work in collecting psychedelic mushrooms in Mexico as well as several McClure poems including "Song of Quetzalcoatl." I also analyze the ways McClure's friend Jim Morrison explored Mexican themes in his songs and poetry. And last but not least, in chapter 9, I explore an unjustly neglected writer, Joanne Kyger, reviewing the ways her studies in philosophy affected her writings about Mexico. In the epilogue, I draw the various strands of my argument in *The Beats in Mexico* together, emphasizing the ways the Beat vision of Mexico still remains relevant today.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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