

# Jack Kerouac, the Québécois Diaspora, and Québécois Literature

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## Abstract

In response to her review of *The Town and the City* in a French-language newspaper in Worcester, Massachusetts, Jack Kerouac wrote to Yvonne Le Maitre, “Because I cannot write my native language and have no native home any more, and am amazed by that horrible homelessness all French-Canadians abroad in America have — well, well, I was moved” (*Letters* 228). Kerouac here shows full awareness of what is well known in Quebec studies as “the Québécois Diaspora,” the condition of exile that many persons of Québécois origin have known since early nineteenth-century, economically motivated migrations. There was much travel to all the New England mill towns, and Lowell still figures heavily in Quebec studies as a site of interest. One speaks of the Diaspora as continuing through the *révolution tranquille* of the 1960s whose stakes are still at play in Québécois politics, where separatism and autonomy continue to be raised as electoral issues. In Quebec, the experience of the Diaspora is not ancillary or one cultural question among many, but rather seen as central to what it means to be Québécois: as a linguistic and cultural minority in Canada for hundreds of years, the Québécois have regularly experienced marginalization and even the threat of cultural extinction through attempts at English-only policies. Diaspora is part of the cultural memory of many Québécois even in the territory they call home. Because of this, one of the principal aims of much Québécois literature since at least the 1960s has been the preservation and cultivation of the French language as it is spoken in Quebec, as well as of a distinctly Québécois

literature.

It might surprise those outside Quebec as odd that for close to four decades Kerouac has been one of the towering figures of Québécois literature. One of the most recognized novelists of this period, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, wrote of Kerouac in 1972, “It is important that we annex his work” (214). This is partly because of *Dr. Sax*, which is the “best document we possess on Franco-American life of the 1920s and 1930s” (31), since the experience in the Diaspora city of Lowell is important. It is also because Kerouac’s valorization of nomadism, usually seen in the United States as quintessentially American, is essential to Québécois identity. And indeed, in the most important Québécois road novel of the last twenty-five years, Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* (1984), Kerouac is an important figure. By way of a trip across the United States that alludes heavily to Kerouac’s work, Poulin’s book is the tale of a search for identity through travel in exile, both geographic and linguistic. The main character, whose name is Jack, looks everywhere for his lost brother, finishing the quest in a San Francisco that even in the 1980s is recognizably still that of Kerouac and the Beats.

In this paper, then, I examine Kerouac’s accounts of nomadism, vagabondage, and having an outsider status as an effect, though not solely, of his Québécois identity. Part of this examination involves Kerouac’s relationship to the French and English languages, and his use of French in the Lowell novels. I also consider the role that his explorations of Québécois identity, particularly diasporic, nomadic identity, has had in Québécois literature for the last forty years, in the context of its cultural and linguistic stakes. My focus will be especially on Beaulieu and Poulin's books. Finally, I consider what this perspective on Kerouac brings to explorations of Americanness in Beat literature, which, much more than dominant American ideology would prefer, valorize the United States as a land of innumerably multiple exiles and nomadisms.

### Works Cited

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