

# Continenting: An Interview with Jean-Christophe Cloutier, editor of Jack Kerouac's *La vie est d'hommage*

*“Sé dur pour mué parlé l’Angla parse jé toujours parlé le Canadien chez nous dan ti-Canada. Encore plus dur d’écrire en Angla ; je sé comment mais je peu pa.”*

— Jack Kerouac, *La vie est d'hommage*

Jean-Christophe Cloutier is the editor of Jack Kerouac's French language writings, which were published in 2016 under the title *La vie est d'hommage*. Most of these writings were not known to exist until quite recently. Cloutier also translated the novellas *La nuit est ma femme* and *Sur le chemin* for the recently published volume *The Unknown Kerouac*. The former is a short Bildungsroman, the latter a kind of prologue to *On the Road* set in the 1930s. The publication of these writings is an event in two languages, two literatures. By bringing these writings together for publication, Cloutier has helped situate Kerouac more securely in the place long claimed for him by his compatriots, that of a Québécois writer, or a writer of the Québécois diaspora. This claim was convincingly made as early as 1972 by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu in his *Jack Kérouac: Essai-Poulet*, which has been in print ever since. The publication of Kerouac's French writings has also helped to shift the axis of Kerouac's so-called “road” novels from the shuttle back and forth from origin to frontier (New York–San Francisco), to a biaxial of crossroads—or “continenting” as Kerouac called it in one of his notebooks—that more clearly includes Mexico and Québec. In these ways, the writing is subjected to a necessary reinterpretation in which Kerouac is made visible through the veil of his reception, and the Anglo myth of Kerouac, so impermeable to its outside, like the American Dream itself, may be finally shattered. This interview was conducted by email over the course of several weeks this summer.

**Ted Byrne:** Thank you for suggesting that I read Hassan Melehy's book *Jack Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory*. After reading it, and after rereading your preface to Kerouac's *La vie est d'hommage*, I now think it's necessary for us to begin this conversation with the historical context that lies beneath both Kerouac's desire to be assimilated and his will to survive. In what way do the ghosts of the massive forced migration of the Québécois to the factories of New England

haunt Kerouac's writings and his writing practice? These tensions play out in various personal dramas in the lives and thoughts of his fictional narrators but, as you show, they are rooted in actual historical, social, and even legal pressures toward assimilation, as well as in the countervailing cultural reaction of *survivance*. Doesn't *survivance* itself seem to harbour a doubleness similar to the one that troubles Kerouac—a response to a despising and oppressive other that seems, in turn, to draw much of its strength from a repressive and reactionary ideology?

**Jean-Christophe Cloutier:** Yes, Hassan's book is particularly useful in providing that crucial historical context and in outlining the social and legal pressures you bring up. As a literary scholar, I like to think through these issues via Kerouac's writings themselves; I think it's all there. After all, it's part of why he so painstakingly chronicled his life in his "bookmovies." *Visions of Gerard* is helpful here, because the novel takes us back to Kerouac's beginning. Well actually, *Doctor Sax* is where he narrates the very moment of his birth—if you can believe it—a "red day" that he also alludes to in *La nuit est ma femme*, when he says, "J'me semble que j'men rappelle ce jour la." But *Gerard* is the book in which Kerouac shares some of his earliest memories (from womb to 4 years old, from the perspective of 33), and so brings us right into the thick of French-Canadian *survivance* in New England.

Since detailed information concerning *survivance* can be found in extant scholarship, let me summarize by saying that "*La survivance*" was both a period and a set of practices that emerged through the massive "exodus" of French-Canadians into the United States that took place roughly around 1840 to 1930. It was a call to keep, nurture, and defend the French-Canadian language, culture, and religion—remember that these were Catholics heading into a largely Protestant nation. And as with any plan that hopes for long-term cultural and ethnic survival, the battles were to be fought in churches, in schools, in courtrooms, and in the press. On that last note, it's interesting to recall that Kerouac's father, Leo, was a printer who had his own printing shop for a while in Lowell.

All this to say that we can detect the "doubleness" that you allude to in your question all over the map during Kerouac's formative years. The country is going through it, in the midst of the Great Depression, but Kerouac is living all sorts of personal tragedies and dramas of a peculiar sort as the son of French-Canadian immigrants in an adopted nation, learning an adopted language. In fact in *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac gives us a formal enactment of his doubleness through the "split" page where his "French-Canadian side" speaks on the left column and the



Anglophone side translates the speech into English on the right column. He calls this, in his 1951 journal, his “Canuck dualism crap.” Isn’t that great? And as I say the doubleness is palpable in *Visions of Gerard*: we can detect both an effusive pride, love, and nostalgia for French-Canadian culture and manners of being, yet simultaneously a disgust, a shame, a desperation to get away from the hermetic snare of it. To give you an example, he writes with such tenderness and warmth about family suppers, everybody together at the table, including his beloved brother Gerard, and explains one of his fondest memories involving the gliding of bread into homemade gravy, a process he and his brother had baptized “passes.” Kerouac also makes sure the reader understands this is a French word, and that it had a particular pronunciation: “because of our semi-Iroquoian French-Canadian accent *passé* was pronounced *PAUSS* so I can still hear the lugubrious sound of it and comfort-a-suppers of it, *M’ue’n pauss*.” I’ve always loved this passage because of its familial intimacy, and because of the perfect way he found to “sound-spell” the phrase “donne moi une passe,” rendering it phonetically as “*M’ue’n pauss*.” Now we can really hear it, we can properly reimagine the scene and conjure up the history as it was lived and remembered.

And yet in this same novel, Kerouac can spew some potent venom at his own people and origins, describing what he calls the “bleak gray jowled pale eyed sneaky fearful French-Canadian quality of man”—and he doesn’t stop there, he really goes on and on with a pretty negative series of descriptors, culminating in a line that’s always stuck with me: “I don’t want to be buried in *their* cemetery—” Note the emphasis on the italicized “*their*,” distancing himself from the group as if he was not one of “them”—distinct from the “our” of the previous passage regarding the French-Canadian language.

So the doubleness, the vacillation between pride and shame, is always present, and manifests itself on the page. It’s also apparent in one of his earliest short stories called “Search by Night,” included in *Atop an Underwood*, edited by the poet and Lowellian Paul Marion. There, Kerouac is nineteen and really writes disparaging things about French-Canadians, especially the men—and men are fundamentally what Kerouac writes about the most. I used “Search by Night” to open my translator’s introduction in *The Unknown Kerouac*, in part because it helped me underscore Kerouac’s duality, and the sense of shame he developed as he grew older, and also because it’s proof that he was already using “sound-spelling” as a fledgling writer, already dedicated to this kind of authenticity in writing. In his life, you can also see this duality manifested in the way Kerouac tried to embody so much of what was “American”—football, fast cars, jazz, ice

cream and apple pie—efforts that, when read against the backdrop of his ethnic and linguistic origins, can become the desperate measures of an outsider trying to assimilate, trying to fit in, trying to be loved and accepted.

What all this also reminds me of is another French-Canadian tradition, another core of doubleness that seems to haunt the bones of our ancestors, and that is the duality of the *habitant* and the *voyageur*. In his review of *La vie est d'hommage* and of *The Unknown Kerouac* in the *InRoads Journal*, Bob Chodos appropriately brings this up, and says this duality was a constant in Kerouac's life. It's true that Kerouac does seem like a 20th-century version of the *coureur des bois* figure—always heading out into the open road, into the wild, searching for new adventures and new people, to be away from the “civilized” world—but in many ways this is largely the mythic Kerouac, the public icon and legend in the media. In truth—or perhaps in another version of the truth—he was quite sedentary—quite the *habitant*—mostly living with his mother, and importantly living with his files, his manuscripts, his notebooks, letters, childhood boxscores—his archive flanking his writing desk. Perhaps this is why Kerouac continues to hold such a powerful place in the Québécois imaginary—he seems to incarnate all our hopes, our dreams, our past and our future, but also our fears and nightmares.

Yvonne Le Maître's 1950 review of his first novel, *The Town and the City*, is also instructive in regards to these issues because it comes from a Franco-American intellectual steeped in the struggles of *survivance* in New England. In the review she really nails him, I mean, sizes him up and reads through Kerouac's pretense and the artifice of his construct. She calls him out for trying to hide the fact that he's of French-Canadian stock, using a botanic metaphor that equates what he's done to presenting a big tall tree and pretending that it had no roots from which to draw its strength...at least that's what I seem to recall about the review. This is also why he's so moved in his letter to her, because he knows he can't fool her, and his love for his family—Le Maître mentions his parents—makes him feel ashamed for his deception. Peter (Martin) renouncing Christ! Catholic guilt! The whole letter is remarkable and is worth a read—he reveals much to Le Maître, including that he'll never try to hide his ethnicity again, and that he'll write a French-Canadian novel one day. And in fact shortly after this letter you begin to see Kerouac, in his journals and his letters to friends, re-immersing himself in his childhood memories, and allowing himself to remember much of what he'd been trying to repress about himself. This search for the self—for the candid immediacy of the intimate



core self—will become the basis and driving force behind spontaneous prose. Kerouac's lifelong literary project is one that tries to recapture the truth about his life through writing. In this sense, as a means of preservation, the Kerouac archive is a continuation of *survivance*. I believe this is part of why he kept such careful records—"I've kept the neatest records you ever saw," he told Ann Charters in 1966—so that future generations could know what he had left us, as a Franco-American who dared to forge a new way of writing, and as a son of French Canada who conjured, in the heart of his solitude, a means of giving a scripturality to the orality of his mother tongue. *Now that's survivance!*

**Ted:** Kerouac's letter to Yvonne Le Maître is stunning, as you say. She was clearly someone that Kerouac knew he had to answer to. Not small-town. She covered the Paris literary scene before the first war, for instance, publishing in the *The Smart Set*, under H.L. Mencken's editorship. She knew Colette! (Melehy 21). The Le Maître review of *The Town and the City* comes at a moment when he's struggling with the question of how to write the next book, or even how to write *tout court*, struggling toward a method, a poetics. And the key French writings—*La nuit est ma femme* and *Sur le chemin*—are written in that moment, are they not? How does this writing contribute to his eventual method, and how does it affect his writing in English?

**Jean-Christophe:** Yes, Le Maître was a towering figure in the French-Canadian New England scene and in Franco-Canuck literature writ large. Kerouac's letter is a gem of a document, but her review of his *The Town and the City* in *Le Travailleur* is equally stunning, and quite prescient. You know, there's a letter from Le Maître in the Kerouac archive at the Berg—it's playfully signed "Tante Yvonne," written after she's read Kerouac's letter to her. Her response is playful—she's clearly touched by the impact her review had on "John Kerouac"—but it's also informative in regards to Le Maître's reach on other authors. She's struck by the fact that Kerouac calls her "intelligent," and goes on to share that many other authors have given her similar feedback following her reviews and essays, that she's "understood" them—including none other than Gabrielle Roy and Germaine Guèvremont.

In any case, to get back to what you are asking regarding the timing of the Le Maître letter and Kerouac's struggle to find his voice and his composition of the major French texts... The truth is the French writings come in the wake of that letter, though not necessarily immediately in its wake. In my view, the letter triggers, or revives, a process of self-(re)discovery in Kerouac, one that

will eventually lead to his breakthrough into spontaneous prose, into finding his voice. When I look at the trajectory of Kerouac's evolving poetics, and when I try to think about the "major" or "essential" moments, episodes, or events that had a crucial impact, the Le Maître review seems to be an *élément déclencheur*.

1950 is a turning point year for Kerouac and the new path he will take as a writer. His first novel is published, but it does not make the "splash" he was hoping for, and by the time it is released, he's already consumed with a new conviction in his project of finding a way to revitalize prose. His journals record the re-emergence of a ghostly presence in his dreams and visions: his "French-Canadian older brother," whom he calls his "guardian angel" and who speaks to him in French and tells him to get back to his roots. The Le Maître letter is September 1950. Then, in late December 1950, he receives the famous "Joan Anderson" letter from Neal Cassady. This is the letter that he's often credited as being one of the all-time greatest pieces of American writing—see what he says in his *Paris Review* interview, for instance—and one that left an indelible impact on him, on what one could do with written language when it is modeled after the indefatigable flow of a great talker like Neal Cassady. The letter was thought to be lost forever—that all that survived were a few pages that Kerouac had retyped, and this is what has been included in some anthologies like the *Portable Beat Reader*—but it was recently discovered in full. It would take too long to get into the circumstances of this story, but once the legal tangles get figured out, it will be a great resource for scholars to finally get to read the letter in its entirety. I've read the available sections of it, and have seen whatever Kerouac and Ginsberg have said about it.

I think this letter does two main things for Kerouac: it disregards all decorum in both form and content—it's all about Cassady's sexual escapades—and just *flows*, capturing on paper the way Cassady actually talks. That's important. But it is also an exercise in exploring one's past, one's own origins, trying to get to "defining" moments of identity, and it does so through language. Liberated, authentic language becomes the means through which the past can be recovered and recorded, a kind of archiving that Kerouac will later call "memorying."

In the wake of the "Joan Anderson" letter, Kerouac enters a year of amazing output and inspiration: 1951. In January 1951, he sends Cassady a ton of long, detailed, magnificent letters—his own writing back to Cassady's epistolary gift from December. In these letters, he delves deep into his exploration of his Lowell childhood, with fascinating forays into the culture, language, rituals. There are reflections on French-Canadian women, on the old timers who



appeared mysterious to the young *ti-cul* that he was, and he expands, in this series of letters, what he repeatedly calls his “French-Canadian knowledge of the world.” I’m writing about this for my book so some of these are still fresh. Here’s a quote that I think will convey the vibe of these letters: “I want to get on and tell you about all the real fleshly wonderful people and things of my childhood in Lowell and how it lives in my brain and how it will be the only knowledge of the world I can ever have” (*Selected Letters* 292). As I discuss in my introduction to *La vie est d’hommage*, it’s also in these letters that he begins to do some amazing phonetic experiments with language—or rather, I should say, with bilingualism and translation. So this is what he is doing in January 1951—and in February–March he writes his French masterpiece, *La nuit est ma femme*. He’s decided to fully explore “the only knowledge of the world” he can ever have, and to do so in the language of that world. It is an exploration of his past, of “labors” he has had—much as Cassidy’s letter was about a series of sexual “conquests” he had had—and it tries to capture on paper the way the French-Canadian language is spoken in Lowell. As such, it is not standard French as you know, but rather uses that written French as a baseline from which to be transformed and morphed to match its unique living self on the American continent. And once this manuscript is done, at the very same desk, Kerouac tapes together those sheets of tracing paper and types up the famous *On the Road* scroll in April 1951. Thus, as Joyce Johnson and Hassan Melehy and Yannis Livadas and others have also underscored, the breakthrough of *On the Road* comes in the immediate wake of his first sustained effort to write in French.

But that’s not the end of Kerouac’s stylistic evolution—still ahead in 1951 will be the “sketching” technique, an essential component of spontaneous prose, and his stay at the Kingsbridge Veteran Hospital in the Bronx after he suffers another severe attack of phlebitis in his legs. It is during his sedentary convalescence, as Todd Tietchen makes sure to emphasize in his superb introduction to *The Unknown Kerouac*, that Kerouac writes the invaluable *Journal 1951*, which chronicles his breakthrough into the spontaneous method, his reflections on the need for a new poetics, his thoughts on his perpetual sense of exile and outsiderdom, the power of Anglophone assimilation, and on and on and on. It really has it all, even the moment he heard about William Burroughs’ killing of Joan Vollmer in Mexico.

So that’s my sense of the timeline in broad strokes. And the following year, 1952, will see Kerouac pursue his new style to even more experimental heights, writing *Visions of Cody*—which was considered too wild for publication in his lifetime—*Doctor Sax*, and many of his French texts, including his longest, the short novel *Sur le chemin*.

**Ted:** The Le Maître review is great. She gets right into her case and stays with it. It's a "good" review, but she spends much more time on her central critique than I had imagined. It's a real scolding, such as one would get from a mother or an aunt—that's why he's not alienated by it, and responds apologetically, guilty as charged. She also thoroughly demonstrates, with first-hand knowledge, that the novel is purely autobiographical, and therefore even more shamefully assimilationist from her perspective. Amazing.

Could you tell us what it means to say that he writes in "patois"—he calls it "sound-spelling," as you note in your first response. How unique is that? Are there any precedents? In your introduction to *La vie est d'hommage*, you cite Kerouac as saying "[La langue canadienne-française] est non écrite; elle est la langue de la parole et non de la plume" (26) "...sa relation avec le monde extérieur passe en premier lieu par son oreille" (28). Is he truly writing "by ear," transcribing the sounds of an oral language into the standard Roman alphabet? The language he has in his head, his first language, the spoken language of his home, of his neighbourhood, must be syllabic—a sound, a rhythm, not a standard language, and not a literary language either. And yet we also know that he studied and read French, was deeply influenced by Céline, among others, and was not writing out of some kind of illiteracy. His "patois" also carries a degree of resentment against standard French, does it not?

**Jean-Christophe:** First I think it's important to point out that Kerouac himself calls his French writings "French patois." On the cover page to his partial translation typescript of *Sur le chemin*—which he titled *On the Road: Old Bull in the Bowery*—he writes, at the bottom, "Written in French patoi" (without the "s"—because it's silent! Just like there's no apostrophe in *Finnegans Wake*, yet we still "hear" it). Kerouac used many different terms to name his French, patois being one of the recurring ones. And he is not using it pejoratively; it's a descriptor, and in many passages you can tell that he's proud of the brand of French that is his. He consistently distinguishes his French from "standard" French, and it is often precisely that: a mark of *distinction*. He likes to point out how the French as it is spoken on the American continent has preserved more ancient words, is of older, more aristocratic blood, as he likes to think.

In one of the texts included in *La vie est d'hommage*, he even calls his French "Cajun." There is a deliberate effort to unite the French speaking populations of the American continent—or a consciousness aware of this unity. This is part of why I was so enchanted by the verb he coined in the notes he had tucked away in one of the *Sur le chemin* manuscript notebooks: "continenting." He declares, in



these notes, that this novel is “continenting.” And say what you will, Kerouac’s oeuvre continents, it continents from coast to coast, and up and down. As I mention in the book, Kerouac even ends up using words that are part Haitian Creole—like “chwal” for “cheval” (horse), which is also where we get “joul” up in Québec. For me, therein lies an important part of the tremendous value of his French experiments; capturing orality on paper suddenly makes visible commonalities between a “continenting” array of peoples and diasporas. Kerouac was aware of this, and in some ways what is often read as overly romanticized and naïve affiliations between his characters and the “fellaheen” or peoples of color can be grounded in this continenting and oral unity.

The bit about “sound-spelling” comes from his “Author’s Note” to *Memory Babe*, an unfinished text—a marvelous, warm, lively text—that has now finally been made available in *The Unknown Kerouac*. There, he’s trying to explain the peculiarity behind his oft-singular spellings of French in his works. This is the presence of French we already knew from reading *Visions of Gerard*, *Doctor Sax*, *Maggie Cassidy*, etc.—the recorded moments of dialogue or stream of consciousness where French erupts onto the pages of his published works. “Sound-spelling” becomes a way for Kerouac to give scriptural form to his French, which only exists in speech—it is a living language, but it needs a new kind of spelling to faithfully reflect its phenomenological reality. Kerouac is interested in capturing a living record; he wants to preserve the unique flavor of his culture. To do so, he needs to use, and thus create, this new written French.

In relation to the question of whether or not we can truly say that he is writing “by ear,” I think the Joyce link is instructive. When we think about *Finnegans Wake*, we can see that its language is polyphonic, that it is a blend of multiple European languages, and yet it retains the structural logic of English as its primary vector. I believe something similar is taking place in Kerouac’s French writings, only with French as primary vector.

**Ted:** Just a couple of further points on language. You quote Kerouac as saying, “la langue canadienne-française est la plus puissante au monde...c’est une des langues les plus ‘langagées’ du monde....” What do you think he means by ‘langagées’?

**Jean-Christophe:** What you cite is actually my translation of Kerouac’s description of the French-Canadian language from a short piece called “The Father of My Father.” It’s a great little piece that was included in *Atop an Underwood*. The original English goes: “it is one of the most languagey languages in the world.” It’s an interesting question, what does he mean exactly

by that phrase? I think part of the key to what he means comes in the next line: “It is unwritten; it is the language of the tongue and not of the pen.” It has to do with the tongue—*la langue*, in French, which also means language, as in “*la langue maternelle*”—it’s a language that has thrived and expanded itself to fill the “new” American continent, like a swelling tongue—“terrific and huge” he says—full of big loud words—“words of power” as Kerouac says later in this same passage. A language made for talking, for yakking, for velocity—it’s a quick, thick language, toothsome yet meant to roll off the tongue...and you know Kerouac rolled his ‘r’s when speaking French. When I was transcribing the French manuscripts, I would often, in the evening, listen to the bits of French interviews Kerouac gave. In order to properly decipher some of the phrases, I needed to really *hear* its languageyness.

**Ted:** Further to the question of “sound-spelling,” and the effect of patois on his English language writings, I was fascinated by the following example on page 29 of your introduction:

We jam on frere gyre are.  
Yes I love my brother Gerard.  
Oui j’aime mon frère Gerard.

You say that he remodels the sentence in English gibberish (*baragouin*) “in order to arrive at an English translation of the hidden meaning of the sentence and then finally to offer a French ‘translation’.” Could you comment further on this? I think you’ve made a good case that he came to his ultimate style partly through writing the French texts, through sound-spelling. I guess I’m asking the same question again: What is the effect of patois on his English?

**Jean-Christophe:** This question is worthy of its own book-length study, of course, and it’s impossible to do it justice here, but I’ll try to hit on what I see as key aspects. And in doing so I’ll be poaching from my current book chapter on Kerouac. The example you cite came as a revelation to me when I encountered it in the *Selected Letters* volume; it was like a key that unlocked much of what I’d been circling around in the Kerouac Labyrinth. Another key was from his letter to Le Maître, when he explains that “the reason I handle English words so easily is because it is not my own language. I refashion it to fit French images.” That verb “refashion” here is interesting because it’s a substitute for translation. Thinking about translation as a form of refashioning was a helpful realignment for me; etymologically, translation means the “carrying across” of something,



but here that something, that lump of meaning, remains in place yet morphs, is refashioned into a new shape. Also dropped into this stew of thoughts was Allen Ginsberg's use of the word "gibberish" in "The Great Rememberer"—a piece that has always accompanied every edition of *Visions of Cody*. Addressing the perplexing, apparently nonsensical passages from the "Imitation of the Tape" section of *Cody*, Ginsberg asks: "How does this differ from gibberish?" and answers simply, "It's Kerouac's gibberish, Kerouackishly inspired, full of gemmy little fragments of Literature." I realized that what Ginsberg calls "Kerouac's gibberish" is often encoded French phrases being written phonetically through English words or syllables, along with some onomatopoeia, just like in the example you cite in your question about Gerard from my introduction. There, the transposition of French sounds into English nonsense cuts through the English translation of the line's intended meaning, and finds its end point—which is also its beginning—in the proper French translation of the phrase. Another example I cite in my intro is the calluses/câlisses one that always makes me laugh.

So that's one level where French comes to affect how he can refashion English; there's a playfulness and hidden meanings. It dislocates English, makes it more malleable. This is not uncommon in the immigrant experience; when we learn a new language much of it happens through sound; at first it's all gibberish, and can be overwhelming, but we can relate to the foreign language in other ways than communication of meaning. It gives us that distance to appreciate it aesthetically—Kant would say we can judge it as beautiful because it has a "purposiveness without purpose," precisely because we do not understand it yet are aware that it functions teleologically, for a certain purpose. Kerouac was thus able to better appreciate the musicality of American English, and be attuned to the particular ways in which it is spoken, delivered. This kind of phonetic attention to language was common in the comic strips Kerouac grew up with and loved—in fact these strips were all being written, for the most part, by first generation immigrants, which I believe explains a lot.

In "Private Philologies," written in 1949 and included in *The Unknown Kerouac*, we get more hints about Kerouac's complex relation to language(s), and I believe—or at least I'll be arguing for this in my book—that in that text Kerouac firmly anchors his translative poetics in a Joycean mode. In "Philologies," Kerouac is tracing moments in the history of American literature—both older and contemporary—that more or less constitute instances of what he calls "brilliant *counter-poetry*," in other words new

American phrasing that “*recognizes the poetry* of the original,” notably in the ways in which it retains traces of languages other than English. There’s thus an awareness on his part that the languages spoken in the Americas have been cross-pollinating for centuries. “*Philologies*” culminates in Kerouac offering his own—I think brilliant—French translations of phrases from Joyce’s *Wake*. In my view, these Joycean translative exercises become the basis for Kerouac’s most significant poetic experimentations undertaken in the early 1950s, and after that, as he himself says in a letter, he’s now “writing directly from the French in my head.” What others might see as gibberish—even close friends and collaborators like Ginsberg—or as “incorrect” or “unsound” grammar and punctuation...it all misses the point. He’s coming at English with an older historical sense and with French orality at its foundation. It’s also important to remember that when Kerouac is writing his French manuscripts, he has no model to go on, he’s pioneering and crafting a new scripturality of his own, on his own. That boldness, to capture onto paper the sounds, rhythms, and cadences of his mother tongue, is later put in the service of doing the same for American English. And for that he also had to abandon the “rules” of standard English. There’s so much more to say, but I’ll stop here.

**Ted:** Finally, I’d like to ask you about your adventure in the archive. Although we’re familiar with the use of French phrases by Kerouac, especially in the Lowell novels, I understand that it came as a surprise to everyone that he had written the substantial texts collected in *La vie est d’hommage*. How did these texts come to light? How did you first become aware of them? What did you find when you entered the archive?

**Jean-Christophe:** In a way, it’s a long story, but perhaps the main reason the texts came to light lies in Kerouac’s own meticulous classification of his own archive, in his care of preservation. In my book, I hope to use the history of the Kerouac Archive as a particularly fascinating case study in 20th-century literary papers, and there I’ll have the room to really trace the material from Kerouac’s death in 1969 up to the opening of his processed archive in 2006. But I’m afraid I’ll have to give just a sketch here. There were a few hints that he had written substantive French texts in letters, but these were hard to corroborate without access to his archive. Notably there’s a letter from January 1953—so just a few days after he’s written *Sur le chemin*—where he tells Neal Cassady that he’s just written a novel in French in five days. I talk about this in the intro to *La vie est d’hommage*, and others have touched on it as well. Ann Charters was the first to



bring up this letter in her 1973 biography of Kerouac—all Kerouac scholarship owes such a gigantic debt of gratitude to Ann Charters and what she's done for five decades now. But the next big hint comes in the mid-1990s. At this point, Kerouac's brother-in-law John Sampas—brother to Stella Sampas, Kerouac's wife at the time of his passing—had been appointed literary executor of the Kerouac Estate and he had access to the archive Kerouac had left behind. As Sampas began perusing the imposing holdings, much of it carefully catalogued by Kerouac using an alphanumeric system he had designed, Sampas discovered that some of the manuscripts Kerouac had kept were written in French, notably a 57-page story kept in a folder marked "The Night is My Woman." The title page of the holograph manuscript within reads as follows: "La nuit est ma femme, ou, Les Travaux de Michel Bretagne." Since he did not know how to read French, Sampas asked a local Franco-American Lowellian, Roger Brunelle, to do a rough translation of the text into English. And a short time later, in June 1996, the first big public proof that Kerouac had written in French was released in France: *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, a literary journal published by Gallimard, did an issue directly discussing *La nuit est ma femme*. The number included an interview with Brunelle, but also a short excerpt from *La nuit* transcribed by Brunelle, as well as a facsimile of a detail from a manuscript page. One might imagine that after this, the cat was out of the bag so to speak in regards to whether or not Kerouac had written in his native language, but outside of France this French publication did not really appear on the radar of most, if any, American scholars, many of whom can't read French and to this day prefer to preserve a false image of Kerouac as All-American white male hitchhiking drunk on some highway. North of the border, however, some Québécois scholars did pick up the *NRF* issue, intrigued and fascinated by the language's proximity to Québécois joul. But without being able to access the full text or the rest of the archive, things kind of died down. There were other hints here and there—but it all really only came to light once the Kerouac Archive was acquired, processed, and opened to the public in 2006.

One person who truly deserves our scholarly gratitude is Declan Kiely, the archivist who processed the Kerouac papers. It is largely thanks to Kiely's masterful handling of the materials, as well as his carefully detailed finding aid, that scholars were later able to find many of the French manuscripts. Kiely arranged the Writings series in two large categories: "Jack Kerouac's arrangement of his archive," and the rest, "Writings by Jack Kerouac (not arranged by Kerouac in an alphanumeric system)." This *respect des fonds* alone

is an ongoing gift to future Kerouac scholarship that gives us a tremendous amount of information into Kerouac's classification practices and writerly craft. But when it comes to clues to the French texts, Kiely towers above anyone else; as he processed the materials, Kiely would take note whenever he encountered French in a manuscript, even if he spotted a small amount of it mixed in with the usual English prose, and indicated its presence in the container list. Here are a couple of examples of what I mean from his Finding Aid:

- 2.43 Holograph fragment "On The Road" with note in French on verso of first leaf, March 23, 1951. 2 leaves.

- 6.4 Holograph story, signed. "Search by Night." (Dialogue in French-Canadian. "Searching for the eye of the war"; written just after Pearl Harbor, set in New England mill town.) December, 1941.

Thus, thanks to Kiely, the interested researcher can systematically locate each entry that is marked as containing French. As my own research over the years has shown, however, more French manuscripts were part of the Kerouac Archive than the finding aid listed. This is not a failing of the instrument, but an inevitable reality of the archival profession.

Many of the texts that are in *La vie est d'hommage* were already listed in the finding aid. Those that weren't, like one of my favorites, "Je suis tu capable d'écrire avec mon doigt bleu," I found during a long research process that lasted several years. I found "Mon doigt bleu" on the verso side of one of the *Visions of Cody* notebooks. I knew *Cody* was composed during his most French-heavy phase—1950–1953—and I systematically looked at everything from those years—and believe me, he wrote a lot in that period. I was also floored when I discovered that several chapters of *Maggie Cassidy* were originally composed in French. Again, this was me being thorough and looking at what he had done immediately after writing the French novel *Sur le chemin*. *Sur le chemin* itself, though, was a pain to reconstitute. What is listed in Box 39 Folder 10—"Holograph notebook Old Bull. Includes On the Road by Jack Lewis, and *Sur le chemin*—Jack Lewis Dec. 16, 1952"—is really only the first notebook containing parts of the *Sur le chemin* manuscript. I quickly discovered that there was a second major notebook, and over the years as I was deciphering Kerouac's system for inserts and writing process, I realized that there were missing parts...I address some of that process in my translator's introduction to *The Unknown Kerouac*. It took me a long time to fully reconstitute the text—let



alone transcribe faithfully Kerouac's French idiolect! But I have to admit, as a scholar, I live for these kinds of detective chases—it's incredibly thrilling and keeps me awake at night like Lisbeth Salander.

But I first became aware of the existence of the French texts in 2007 when I arrived in Manhattan to begin my PhD at Columbia University. The summer I arrived, Isaac Gewirtz, the director of the Berg Collection—where the Kerouac Papers are kept in the New York Public Library—had curated the most wonderful exhibition of the Kerouac materials. It was called “Beatific Soul,” commemorating 50 years of *On the Road*, and the opening of the Kerouac Archive. The original scroll was there, unfurled as long as the room would allow, bifurcating the space...but the exhibition also included some pages from the French manuscripts, as did the accompanying catalogue. That catalogue, by Gewirtz, is an enormously helpful resource to Kerouac scholars, something I cherish to this day. Anyway, I fell in love with Kerouac all over again. As a transplanted Québécois, to encounter what looked and sounded exactly like my own native language on those manuscript pages, the language of my secret thoughts and dreamscapes, was a profoundly moving and unforgettable experience. And around the same time, the Quebec newspaper *Le Devoir* also published an article about the fact that there were multiple French manuscripts in the Kerouac Archive in New York. That piece resonated with a lot of people in Quebec and the news spread in the wider francophone world. As for me, after being in direct contact with the manuscripts, I couldn't get them out of my mind, and I was lucky enough to be in New York for the next six years doing my doctorate. Through Columbia Libraries, a small group of us were able to get a private tour of the Berg Collection with Dr. Gewirtz—they have a ton of treasures, from Dickens to Woolf to Bellow—and I was hooked for the duration. It was a long process, and of course it's not all I did the whole time I was in New York, but sitting down in the Berg awaiting the next Kerouac folder has always been one of my favorite things to do, and it still is.

**Ted:** You mention your current project has a Kerouac component. What further research are you doing on Kerouac?

**Jean-Christophe:** My current book project is called “Archival Vagabonds: The Peripatetic Lives of Literary Papers,” and it has to do with novelists and their archives. It's partly a study of the rise of literary papers across the 20th-century, using specific authors as case studies. One of them, a major one, is Kerouac, but I'm also looking at Claude McKay, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Patricia

Highsmith... and I throw in a little Stephen King to spice things up. In relation to Kerouac, I want to debunk many of the misconceptions about him in the popular imagination by demonstrating how meticulous and careful he was as an archivist of his own papers, to show the amount of craft that went into his work. Along the way, I'll touch on much of what we talked about together in this interview: his translative practices, the importance of his native French language to his poetics, and also his multifaceted relation to archiving as a life practice, as a method of *survivance*, and how very often his novels serve an irreplaceable archival function, preserving memories of times, places, people now gone. ▲

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