‘It Looked Exactly Like Mexico’: Kerouac, Hemingway, and the Modernist Desire for Underdevelopment

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In the period between the Mexican and Cuban Revolutions, U.S. folklorists, political radicals, writers, and artists traveled to and wrote about Latin America. This paper explores the cultural politics of what I call “latinophilia,” my term for the mid-20th century enthusiasm for Latin America as a source of revitalizing energy for a United States withering under the tyrannies of mass culture and the grey flannel suit. I explore the dynamics of latinophilia in two of the best known American fictional engagements with 20th-century Latin America—Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and Ernest Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea.

One of these dynamics, I argue, is the tautology. In On the Road, when the novel’s protagonist Sal drives across the border at Laredo, Texas, he shares this insight: “Just across the street Mexico began…To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico.” Development, as the name for a process and that process’s endpoint, also conforms to the model of a tautology: a circular argument that returns you where you started. Sal’s tautology expresses the complacency of the comfortable tourist, who confirms exactly what he already thought he knew about the foreign. But what he sees in the “foreign” culture also circles back to himself. And while these novels exemplify U.S. exceptionalism, their tautological structure ends up questioning the distance-cultural, geographic, and otherwise—between the “underdeveloped” and “us.”