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CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS

IN JACK KEROUAC'S PROSE

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BY

EFTYCHIA MIKELLI

DURHAM UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

PhD THESIS

MAY 2009

## CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS IN JACK KEROUAC'S PROSE

Mikelli, E.

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This thesis is inspired by the abiding academic and public interest in Kerouac's work and aims to advance new readings of Kerouac's prose in a contemporary literary and cultural context. It is particularly concerned with a deconstructive reading of Kerouac's prose and engages with his negotiations of race, gender, spirituality and origins within the framework of post-war America's accelerated culture. Kerouac's indebtedness to modernist techniques notwithstanding, this thesis argues that in its historical and thematic preoccupations Kerouac's prose is vividly conversant with postmodern strategies. Without losing perspective of the late forties and fifties background from which Kerouac's works emerged, the thesis explores the ways in which his thematic, linguistic and structural concerns interact with contemporary theory. Tracing the Kerouacian narrator's problematization of the search for meaning in an accelerating culture, it examines his prose in a post-war context of uncertainty and ambiguity. In active dialogue with his contemporary America, Kerouac addresses and often challenges the dominant cultural practices of his time. Foregrounding the conflicts of his era, he anticipates subsequent social developments and philosophical debates, gesturing towards and at times capturing a postmodern sensibility.

The four chapters of the thesis analyse Kerouac's approach to the concept of simulation, his position towards Western representations of Eastern spirituality, his negotiation of the image of the exotic other and his narrative constructions of ethnicity and identity. Using the work of theorists such as Baudrillard, Virilio and Derrida, and also drawing on postcolonial studies, I demonstrate how Kerouac produces a highly performative prose in his projections of identity and heterogeneity. It is this ability to converse with literary and cultural developments up to the present day that best illuminates the contemporary appeal of Kerouac's deconstructive approach to the notions of identity and otherness and most vividly illustrates the continuing vitality of Kerouac's writing.

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## INTRODUCTION

### TOWARDS A POSTMODERN AESTHETIC

This thesis is inspired by the abiding academic and public interest in Kerouac's work, and aims to advance new readings of Kerouac's prose in a contemporary literary and cultural context. Kerouac-related events have proliferated in recent years, attesting to the numerous ways in which his work is still relevant today. A landmark in Kerouac scholarship has been the Viking-Penguin edition of the 1951 manuscript of the *Original Scroll* on which *On the Road* was written. The release of the new edition in 2007 was scheduled to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* in the United States. The Scroll itself has been on display at various venues throughout America and has recently been exhibited in the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham in the UK. The anniversary was also marked by two academic conferences. The 2007 Kerouac Conference held by the University of Massachusetts Lowell had *On the Road* as its main focus, and in 2008 another conference was organized by the University of Birmingham to commemorate the fifty years since the novel's publication in the UK. The British Arts Council sponsored the London International Poetry and Song Festival (LIPS II) in 2007 as another celebration of Kerouac's *On the Road* and the Beats, and in 2008 the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center held a Beat exhibition which included a Beat film series. Robert Holton argues that "*On the Road* now appears more regularly than ever on bookstore shelves and university English course reading lists. Websites devoted to Kerouac and the Beats continue to appear, expressing interests ranging from those of devoted fans to those of sophisticated critics" (Introduction 5). Moreover, there has been a proliferation of articles and book-length studies on Kerouac over the years. The Kerouacian appeal is also vividly

manifest in music. McNally asserts that “*On the Road* decisively influenced two of the demigods of rock. David Bowie got his copy at age twelve, and was never the same again. Janis Joplin found hers in Texas and left for the West Coast, there to become queen of rock and roll” (315-6). Kerouac’s impact on the music industry is further documented in Dave Moore’s impressive list of recordings which relate to Kerouac and Cassady, featuring artists from Bob Dylan and Tom Waits to Van Morrison and 10,000 Maniacs. Moreover, the direct influence of Kerouac’s work upon subsequent literary production is clearly indicated by the publication of two works entitled *Visions of Kerouac*,<sup>1</sup> the former a play by Martin Duberman in 1977 and the latter a novel by Ken McGoogan in 2007.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, *Maggie’s Riff*, a one-act play based on passages from *Maggie Cassidy* was staged by Jon Lipsky in Lowell in 1994. In the UK Richard Deakin’s play, *Jack and Neal Angels Still Falling: the Story of Kerouac & Cassady*, was published in 1997, and Kerouac’s recently published play, *The Beat Generation*, was staged in Germany in 2007. The above testify to Jack Kerouac’s ongoing appeal both in the United States and in Europe, and indicate the extent to which Kerouac continues to be influential both on a literary and a cultural level.<sup>3</sup>

Kerouac’s current allure bears witness to his work’s ability to engage in dialogue with contemporary contexts. This thesis looks at Kerouac’s work from contemporary theoretical standpoints, aiming to advance fresh insights into aspects of Kerouac’s prose that have not so far been sufficiently considered. Developments in cultural studies and literary theory over the past fifty years have provided new tools with which to approach Kerouac’s writing. Moving away from autobiographical approaches, which had, for a certain time, been dominant in

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<sup>1</sup> This should not be confused with a biography bearing the same title which was written by Charles Jarvis.

<sup>2</sup> This is a reworking of the novel published originally in 1993. McGoogan published another Kerouac-related book by the name of *Kerouac’s Ghost* in 1996.

<sup>3</sup> The Beat appeal reaches as far as China, as the “Beat Meets East” conference in Chengdu in 2004 attests.

Kerouac criticism, this thesis focuses on the fictional qualities of Kerouac's prose.<sup>4</sup> My argument advances a deconstructive reading of Kerouac's texts, undertaking a close examination of his negotiation of race, gender, spirituality and the question of origins in the framework of the accelerated culture of post-war America. Kerouac writes at a transitional point, as American culture is struggling to come to terms with the changes precipitated by "the technological revolution, the recognition of the baby boom, the extraordinary surge of black culture, a climate of improvisation in art and mores" (Lhamon xxxvii). Kerouac's prose negotiates such processes in innovative ways that anticipate and often herald discourses that would be more fully shaped in later decades. In its historical and thematic preoccupations Kerouac's prose reflects a considerable overlap between modernist and postmodernist approaches. Kerouac's indebtedness to modernist techniques notwithstanding, this thesis argues that his prose is vividly conversant with many of the features Hassan identifies as constituents of postmodern discourse, such as "Performance, Deconstruction, Dispersal, Surface, Idiolect, Desire, Difference-Différance/Trace, Irony, Indeterminacy" (6). Through an exploration of Kerouac's negotiation of such concepts I aim to shed new light on aspects of his prose that have thus far been neglected. Without losing perspective upon the late forties and fifties background from which Kerouac's works emerged, I examine the ways in which his thematic, linguistic and structural concerns operate within a contemporary context.

The Beats' representation in art, and in particular its filmic manifestations, provides a helpful starting point for an appreciation of the current significance of the Beats. The long history of discussions on the filmic adaptation of *On the Road* vividly illustrates Hollywood's interest in the Beats, which dates back to the 1950s. Ann Charters notes that "Warner Brothers had offered \$ 110,000 for the film rights to *On the Road*, but since Paramount and Marlon Brando were also interested in the book, Sterling Lord hoped to get the studio to raise

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<sup>4</sup> In this my approach follows in the tradition of critics such as Hunt, Weinreich, Ellis and Swartz.



the bid to \$150,000” (*Selected Letters 1957-69* 82). Controversy over the filming of the novel continues to the present day. Mottram’s article on “The Long and Grinding Story of On the Road”, which reports on Francis Ford Coppola’s decision to recruit Walter Salles as the director of the film, offers an update. Before an examination of current representations of Kerouac and the Beats, however, an overview of the developments of the Beat image over the years provides useful insights into the historical and cultural transformations that have conditioned the Beat phenomenon and better illuminates how and why Kerouac’s work remains relevant for contemporary audiences.

The initial representations of the Beat image are suggestive of the media’s attempt to neutralize what was perceived as the Beats’ threatening potential. Mullins notes that in the late fifties and early sixties, TV shows such as *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* presented the beatnik as “amiable buffoon” (37). Such practices aimed to deprive the Beats of any allure they might bear as countercultural characters, while simultaneously trivializing them. The absorption of the Beat counterculture into the mainstream in order to neutralize and contain “deviant” behaviours reflects the power of the visual medium to create simulated images in the service of dominant ideologies. This argument is further supported by an overview of what I see as the “Beatsploitation” films of the time. Mullins cites Charles Haas’ 1959 film *The Beat Generation* and Roger Corman’s *Bucket of Blood* made in the same year as examples (37). To these can be added Rice’s *The Flower Thief* (1960), *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1960), and also Zimmerman’s *Lemon Hearts* (1960) which similarly portray Beat irresponsibility (Van Elteren 80). While Van Elteren also cites films of the period that run counter to this trend, such as Clarke’s *Portrait of Jason*, Cassavetes’ *Too Late Blues*, and Mekas’ *Lost, Lost, Lost* (80), the dominant image remains that of the not-to-be-

taken-seriously Beatnik.<sup>5</sup> Such filmic representations reveal the pervasive power of the media to disempower the “deviants” and then return them “to the place where common sense would have them fit [...] It is through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology” (Hebdige 94). The identification of such practices proves particularly useful when we turn to an exploration of filmic representations of the Beat phenomenon today.

Several scholarly studies on Beat films have recently been published,<sup>6</sup> and notable film adaptations of Beat novels have also been produced. Cronenberg’s film inspired by Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1991) is one such example.<sup>7</sup> Recent years have seen the emergence of another trend in Beat representations, this time through documentaries. Amongst the most accessible Kerouac-related ones are *The Source* (1999), and *What Happened to Kerouac?* (1986).<sup>8</sup> An overview of the film selection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center retrospective attests to an attempt to bring the avant-garde work of the period to the fore, and also to redress the image that had been projected by the mainstream in previous decades. The above developments indicate a revived interest in and a more sustained approach to the Beat

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<sup>5</sup> To this list one could add the landmark Beat film *Pull my Daisy*, and also experimental work done by William Burroughs. Moreover, despite any deficiencies, *Shadows* is a notable and more serious attempt to engage with interracial relationships. Such films however tended to remain out of the mainstream, where the representation of the Beat image mainly involved either the “dangerous delinquent” or the “lovely goof”.

<sup>6</sup> David Sterritt’s *Screening the Beats: Media Culture and the Beat Sensibility* was published in 2004. Moreover, Beat-related films are discussed in Lisa Phillips’ 1995 edition of *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965* and Katie Mills’ work on *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving through Film, Fiction and Television*, published in 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Alongside this, however, stand the rather unsuccessful adaptation of Carolyn Cassady’s *Heart Beat* (1980), and also *The Last Time I Committed Suicide*, a 1997 film purporting to portray Neal Cassady’s younger years.

<sup>8</sup> Extensive lists of Beat and Beat-related films can be found at:

<<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/9/beat.html>> and

<<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/CarneyFilms.html>>

To these citations I would like to add Ferrini’s *Lowell Blues: The Words of Jack Kerouac* (2000) and Sharples’ film, *Go Moan for Man*, which appeared in the same year.

image. In addition to the factual information it provides, however, the examination of the historical continuum of the representation of the Beat image points to yet another significant realization. While contemporary approaches to Kerouac and the Beats encourage a reconsideration of their work, they simultaneously also add to their commodification and facilitate their assimilation into the cultural mainstream (this process, especially when it involves low-budget documentaries, is not always intentional; nonetheless, its effect remains forceful). The Beats no longer present a threat that should be neutralized, and hence the recourse to mid-century practices would in this case be outdated. Turning to more effective modes of assimilation, the media now construct nostalgic images of the Beats, often casting them as romantic memorabilia of a more “authentic” era, thus enabling a process of mythologization. Robert Holton refers to “the Gap’s use of Kerouac in an ad for khakis [which] registers his importance at one cultural level” (Introduction 5). Although the advertisement indeed projects Kerouac’s significance as a cultural icon, it nonetheless downplays his importance as an author, constructing a persona that upsets the correspondence between the author and his projected image. In so doing, contemporary marketing techniques perpetuate a process of identity construction already in place in the 1950s with Kerouac’s appearance on the Steve Allen Show (Johnson 25). Kerouac’s works reflect an acute awareness of the mid-century emergence of such tensions, and engage with representations of identity and otherness in this context. Kerouac problematizes the possibility of establishing firm points of reference in a rapidly shifting cultural milieu, and challenges the dominant practices of mainstream America. The result is a highly performative prose that negotiates definitions of identity and heterogeneity. This thesis traces the Kerouacian narrators’ search for meaning in an accelerating culture, examining Kerouac’s prose in a post-war context of uncertainty and ambiguity. In active dialogue with his contemporary America, Kerouac addresses the cultural trends of his time while simultaneously anticipating social

developments and philosophical debates that would be more fully articulated in subsequent decades.

One of the problems that arise from a systematic study of Kerouac's prose is the appropriate organization of the texts. Methodological approaches to Kerouac's work have so far engaged with "The Duluoz Legend" to varying degrees, prompted by Kerouac's own pronouncement that "*On the Road, The Subterraneans, The Dharma Bums, Doctor Sax, Maggie Cassidy, Tristessa, Desolation Angels* and the others are just chapters in the whole work which I call *The Duluoz Legend*. In my old age I intend to collect all my work and re-insert my pantheon of uniform names, leave the long shelf full of books there, and die happy" (*Selected Letters 1957-1969* 240).<sup>9</sup> In his study of Kerouac, Theado provides an overview of critical approaches to the chronology of Kerouac's work, suggesting a consideration of the novels in their order of composition (*Understanding* 5).<sup>10</sup>

However, recent scholarship on the writing process of *On the Road* has demonstrated that it is a fluid text, thus rendering the historicity of composition a problematic criterion. Therefore, this thesis advances a chronological approach based on the works' order of publication, which I feel more effectively exemplifies the links between Kerouac's work and the cultural processes of his era. Synthesizing such methodology with a thematic approach, the chapters of this thesis generally follow a chronological sequence, although there is occasional chronological overlap within the chapters themselves to facilitate the comprehensive negotiation of the themes explored. The four chapters of this thesis comprise

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<sup>9</sup> In *Vanity of Duluoz* the narrator describes "The Duluoz Legend" as "a lifetime of writing about what I'd seen with my own eyes, told in my own words, according to the style I decided on [...] all together as a contemporary history record" (195).

<sup>10</sup> Theado references Ann Charters' suggestion to correlate the novels with regard to events that took place in Kerouac's life disregarding the order of composition, Weinreich's decision to focus on Kerouac's stylistic development as reflected in his novels and French's distinctly autobiographical approach (3-4). Barry Miles sees the "Legend" as consisting of "*Maggie Cassidy, Vanity of Duluoz, On the Road*, parts of *Visions of Cody, The Dharma Bums, Tristessa, Desolation Angels*, the relevant pieces of *Lonesome Traveller*, parts of *Book of Dreams, Big Sur* and *Satori in Paris*", whilst nonetheless acknowledging the problematic aspects of such a grouping: "they do not fit together easily" (297). Hrebeniak, on his part, argues that in Kerouac's case historicity is problematic and opts for an arrangement of Kerouac's works based on aesthetic themes (1).

a unified discussion of the Kerouacian narrators' negotiation of several recurrent motifs in his prose, such as the quest for authenticity, spirituality, romantic fulfilment, and ethnic origins. A close look at Kerouac's treatment of such issues often reveals a deconstructive approach to projections of identity and otherness. To keep the present study more focused, I have mainly concentrated on an analysis of Kerouac's prose. Hilary Holladay remarks that "when he [Kerouac] died in 1969, the vocabulary and theoretical structures didn't yet exist to describe and probe all of what he was doing in *On the Road*. From our current vantage point, we are able to discuss his 1957 breakthrough in ways that were not available to earlier generations" (xiii). About half a century after the initial publication of Kerouac's works, this thesis aims to apply new theoretical insights to a reading of Kerouac's prose.

The first chapter of the thesis is predominantly concerned with the quest for authenticity in Kerouac's most famous novel, *On the Road*. The chapter begins with a discussion of the stages of the novel's composition in the light of the publication of the Scroll edition. It also considers recent scholarly engagement with the Kerouac archives housed in the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. After an appreciation of the significance of the new findings for Kerouac scholarship, I turn to Kerouac's negotiation of the tension between simulation and the "real" in the novel. Baudrillard's work on simulation informs a reading of *On the Road* that challenges the narrator's claims to authentic experience. Focusing on Sal Paradise's constructions of racial others, which he collectively refers to as the "Fellaheen", this chapter examines how such representations problematize "authenticity". The chapter foregrounds the simulated nature of the images of the Fellaheen that the narrator projects. Through an exploration of the strategies of resistance that Kerouac advances, it demonstrates the novel's questioning of stereotypical attitudes of white western culture. The second part of the chapter engages with a thematically related analysis of the novel, which focuses on Kerouac's preoccupation with acceleration. Speed plays a pivotal role in *On the*

*Road* and its significance is evident on many levels, whether thematic or linguistic/structural. Drawing upon the theoretical work of Paul Virilio, I examine the implications of speed in the novel both on a literary and a political level. This chapter considers the nature of the characters' impetus for perpetual motion and discusses the ambiguity of the desire for speedy driving. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the affinities between these approaches in the post-war framework of uncertainty and vacuity in which *On the Road* is thematically, linguistically and structurally positioned.

Following the problematization of such concepts as "authenticity" and "reality", the second chapter moves on to an exploration of manifestations of spirituality in Cold War America. The chapter traces the narrator's quest for spiritual illumination as exemplified in *The Dharma Bums*, a novel which engages with a discussion of Buddhism as a possible means of spiritual salvation. Having foregrounded the novel's Buddhist concerns, I subsequently look at the ways in which the idea of spiritual salvation through Buddhism poses a challenge to conventional patterns of western thought. Establishing the common ground between Buddhism and deconstructive practices, I examine how the two interact in an analysis of *The Dharma Bums*. More specifically, I demonstrate that in his spiritual explorations the narrator often advances a proto-deconstructive approach which shares common ground with Buddhist thought, but for the most part remains firmly positioned within the confines of western discourse, whilst in my discussion I also acknowledge that there are passages in the novel where traditional patterns of western thought prevail. I then explore the extent to which the adoption of an Orientalist mentality can serve as a response to western discursive patterns in *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac advances a forceful critique of post-War America's spiritual disorientation as reflected in such attitudes, which furthermore render the idea of spiritual salvation through *satori* illumination exceptionally problematic. The chapter reveals that although in their articulations of a proto-deconstructive discourse the

characters gesture towards a better understanding of Buddhism, they nonetheless remain bound within western patterns of thought; thus, their Buddhist pronouncements are subject to parody. In his anticipation of deconstructive strategies, both in his extensive use of parody and also in the performance of language games, which anticipates Derrida's concept of *différance*, Kerouac exposes the vacuity of the narrator's spiritual quest. My study is complemented by references to Kerouac's more theoretical spiritual works, which in various ways illuminate his explorations, namely, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, and the more recently published *Some of the Dharma* and *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha*.

Picking up on the first chapter's concern with representations of the gendered racial other, the third chapter embarks on a sustained discussion of the narrator's romantic involvement with ethnic women. Predominantly focusing on *The Subterraneans*, where the intricate patterns of the interaction with the gendered racial other are more clearly illustrated, the chapter also looks at the manner in which these issues are addressed in *Maggie Cassidy* and *Tristessa*, works which also feature ethnic women as their main characters. The chapter opens with a brief analysis of the filmic adaptation of the novel, expanding on my introductory discussion of Hollywood's manipulation of Kerouac and the Beats. The main argument of the chapter draws upon Said's Orientalist theory, which introduces a discussion of the novel's narratives of white assertion in postcolonial terms. The chapter gives readings of ethnicity which interrogate the narrator's approach to the gendered racial other, already foregrounded with reference to *On the Road*. This part of my study explores the ways in which the narrator's treatment of gender further problematizes representations of the racial other. The chapter examines how the narrator models Mardou Fox's image upon a white discourse fuelled by colonial impulses and considers the implications arising from projections of colonial ideas directly upon Mardou's body. By comparing constructions of femininity with projections of masculinity, the chapter exposes the problems implied in the narrator's

construction of gender, and concludes with an investigation of the ways in which the narrator's simulated images are questioned in the novel. Parodying Perceped's rhetoric of masculine assertion, the chapter examines the possibilities of resistance that the narrative advances. The narrator's engagement with the exotic racial other is contextualized within Cold War America's gender and racial stereotypes, and through the parody of such discourses it criticizes the limitations they impose upon interpersonal relationships in interracial terms.

Having outlined the contexts of uncertainty and ambiguity that frame the Kerouacian narrators' quest for authenticity, spirituality, and romantic fulfilment respectively, the thesis concludes by looking at the final, and perhaps most fundamental, aspect of character formation, as traced in the narrator's search for ethnic origins and identity in *Satori in Paris*. Carrying forward the second chapter's preoccupation with *satori* illumination, the present chapter reveals yet more problematic aspects in the narrator's treatment of this term. Subsequently engaging with a comparison of autobiography and fiction, the fourth chapter demonstrates the hybrid nature of the narrator's identity, as is suggested by his alternating embrace and rejection of a variety of often conflicting personas. Central to my argument here is a narratological approach which places particular emphasis on identity construction while further establishing the complex links between autobiography and fiction. The chapter examines manifestations of performative language in the novel, indicating the dependence of identity upon language. In foregrounding the instability of the concept of identity, it exposes the vacuous nature of the narrator's efforts to establish a firm definition of the self.

Kerouac's novels evince textual tensions that reflect the uncertainty of his era, expressed in the desire to abide by fixed points of reference, while at the same time recognizing the problems such a desire implies in a post-war American context of rapid cultural transformations. Kerouac's prose addresses these challenges, gesturing towards and at times capturing a postmodern sensibility. This largely accounts for the current interest in



Kerouac's work, as for example manifested in, but by no means confined to, academic contexts. In their conversation with deconstructionist practices, Kerouac's novels continue to invite new and original readings. Having as its starting point Tim Hunt's question "why are we still able to *read On the Road* rather than just study it?" ("Typetalking" 170), this thesis seeks to shed light on Kerouac's writing through a fresh reading not only of *On the Road*, but of a wide range of his prose texts. In its exploration of Kerouac's treatment of such fundamental concepts as identity and otherness, my thesis makes extensive use of the new vocabulary that more recent developments in critical theory have supplied.

## CHAPTER I

### SIMULATION AND SPEED: *ON THE ROAD*

*On the Road* marked Kerouac's rise to fame, and the novel continues to bear significant aesthetic and cultural resonances today. It is narrated by Sal Paradise, who, often together with Dean Moriarty, embarks on a series of road trips (five major ones, corresponding to the five parts of the novel) and encounters a multitude of adventures along the way. The legend that has been built around *On the Road* has it that the novel was written in three weeks, specifically "between April 2 and April 22 [1951]" (*Windblown World* xxiii).<sup>1</sup> However, it is the outcome of experiences that had been building up for years; Kerouac had a notebook with him at most times and kept meticulous notes, many of which were later used as material for *On the Road*. In his seminal work, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, Hunt argues that:

Begun 9 November 1948, *On the Road* was three and a half years in the writing, and in that time Kerouac worked on at least five distinct versions of the book. The one ultimately published as *On the Road* in 1957 by Viking is the fourth of these versions. Kerouac's final version, now issued under the title *Visions of Cody*, was drafted after what is now called *On the Road*, and it was this book that Kerouac considered the true *On the Road*. (77-8)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the version of *On the Road* that I refer to is the one originally published in 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Gewirtz similarly notes that Kerouac "had worked on the novel for almost four years prior to creating the scroll, and would later alter its text in significant ways, of his own volition (as well as by compulsion), in 1953, 1954, late 1955, and 1956" (147).

Hunt's study put a decisive end to the myth that *On the Road* was never revised; in fact, he gives a detailed account of what seem to have been the five stages of the composition of the novel, demonstrating Kerouac's development as a writer. He perceptively notes the variations of style in these versions. Starting from a factualist account that features Ray Smith as the narrator, Hunt points to the following developments: "in two long journal entries from late March [1949] and early April, Kerouac outlines plans for a new version of *On the Road* that would dispense with the original factualist or naturalistic sense of the work, in favor of a metaphysical or romantic sense of it" (89). This is to be followed by *Pic*, *On the Road*, and *Visions of Cody*. Hunt concludes that "Kerouac's successive 'Roads' had brought him full circle from the naturalistic conception of November 1948 through the romantic work of 1949 and *Pic* and finally back to the naturalistic project of classifying the experiences of a generation" (107). More recently published texts shed new light on the novel's composition. In December 1948 Kerouac declares that "*On the Road* is naturalistic" (*Windblown* 392), but in 1949 he "resolves to rework completely the plot of *On the Road*, exhorting himself to learn from the lesson of *Doctor Sax*, a fantasy novel he was writing" (Gewirtz 84). Subsequently, 1952 signals the novel's departure from what Kerouac himself referred to as a "conventional narrative survey of road trips etc. into a big multi-dimensional conscious and subconscious character invocation of Neal in his whirlwinds" (*Selected Letters 1940-1956* 356).

Indicative of Kerouac's experimentation with narrative technique is the fact that he shifted through various narrators and a host of characters before deciding upon the ones that feature in the text published in 1957. Both Cunnell (6) and Gewirtz (75) refer to the "*Ray Smith Novel of Fall 1948*", of which Ray Smith is the narrator-protagonist. In his notes dating March 1949 Kerouac declares: "no more Ray Smith

except in the person of a narrator.” The characters of Ray Moultrie, Vern Pomeroy, and Bruce Moultrie are also introduced (*Windblown* 409-410). In April “Ray” changes to “Red” Moultrie (186). Gewirtz, whose position as curator of the Kerouac archives at the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library allows him a particularly informed insight, mentions further additions to the character list in 1949, with “John ‘Red’ Moultrie”, “Smitty, i.e., Ray Smith”, and “Vern Moultrie” among others (83-4). In 1950 Kerouac produces his “Cast of Characters” draft, where he introduces the personas of “Old Bull Seward”, “Clem Lemke” and “Marylou Dawson Pomeray” (90).<sup>3</sup> In 1950 Kerouac considers employing a French-Canadian narrator (Cunnell 17), whereas in a note dating March 1950 he declares: “I decided to use Tony Smith in Road” (*Windblown* 278).

A similar process of changes and substitutions was undertaken with the novel’s title, as Kerouac “considered almost one hundred titles for *On the Road*” (Gewirtz 100). Cunnell notes that Kerouac first mentions *On the Road* by name in an entry dated August 23, 1948 (3). Among early titles Cunnell mentions “Shades of the Prison House” (10), and the “Official Log of the ‘Hip Generation’” which constitutes a continuation of the story began in “Shades of the Prison House” (13). Other titles include “Gone On the Road” (18), and “Souls On the Road” (20). The novel was eventually named “Beat Generation” (40), and in 1955 Kerouac and Malcolm Cowley decided that it should be called “*On the Road*” (43). Gewirtz adds to Cunnell’s list, with the August 1950 “Private Ms. of Gone On the Road” (94) and the ten-page manuscript entitled “On the Road ECRIT EN FRANCAIS”, which considerably departs from the Scroll or the published 1957 version (98). Gewirtz then notes that “the last substantive, English-language draft of *On the Road* that he wrote prior to the

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<sup>3</sup> They are based on William Burroughs, Herbert Hunke and Luanne Henderson respectively.

scroll [...] entitled the ‘Ben Boncoeur Excerpt’ was written in January 1951” (99). “Flower that Blows in the Night” adds to the long list of titles, which is here by no means exhaustive (102).<sup>4</sup>

The multiple changes in character names and draft titles are suggestive of the fluidity of the process of composition, the three typescripts of *On the Road* reflecting different stages in Kerouac’s compositional technique. Recent scholarship has focused on an exploration of Kerouac’s artistic development through the study of the three typescripts of *On the Road* that have now become available for study. Current scholarly engagement with the compositional process of *On the Road* problematizes discussions of a definitive text. Gewirtz argues that “the typescript copy of the scroll, which Kerouac executed so that he would have a readable text to send the publishers, may no longer be extant [...] However, Kerouac prepared at least two other typescripts based on the scroll text” (112). He remarks that the changes made in second typescript largely comply with Cowley’s suggestions (122), and concludes that the need for a third typescript suggests that Cowley did not see the second version. According to Matt Theado it was, nonetheless, this second typescript that Kerouac marketed to “Harcourt, Brace, and thus to the professional publishing industry” (“Revisions” 23). Kerouac subsequently wrote the third typescript in late 1953 and 1954 and added to it in the late fall of 1955 and 1956” (Gewirtz 122). Theado argues that in writing Typescript Three “it seems that he [Kerouac] relied on T [typescript]1 as his base text while selectively including emendations from T2” (26). Upon reception of the third typescript, Viking modified it in accordance with their lawyer’s requirements (Gewirtz 122).

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<sup>4</sup> For a list of additional titles see also Cunnell (27).

The study of the three typescripts of *On the Road* confirms that the text published in 1957 is far from being the “authoritative” version of the novel. Gewirtz argues that “so numerous and significant are these voluntary changes that the researcher is almost compelled to approach the novel as a compilation of texts, each reflecting a slightly different sensibility or refraction of the author’s experience” (127). Cunnell similarly declares that “the scroll does not call into question the authenticity of the published novel but is in dialogue with it and all other versions of the text” (31). The three typescripts demonstrate that *On the Road* is the result of a continuous process of revision and rewriting that cancels out discussions about one “authentic” text. In this context, to see the Scroll version as the “authentic” one is perilous, as this viewpoint constitutes an arbitrary qualifying statement that fails to do justice to the other versions of *On the Road*. Rather, the novel’s successive forms, and the ensuing overlapping confusion between *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* bear witness to the existence of a variety of narrative strands. *On the Road* is more aptly approached as a textual palimpsest, a multi-layered text that reflects a lengthy process of literary experimentation. In this, the composition of *On the Road* reflects a post-war concern with fluidity and lack of stability. Therefore, it is not only in its thematic and structural concerns, as we shall see later on, but also in the physical act of writing that Kerouac interacts with expressions of the postmodern.

The long history of rejections that the novel was subjected to before its publication is well-known. After Harcourt Brace’s initial refusal - the story of Kerouac’s dramatic unfurling of the manuscript in Giroux’s office and Giroux’s subsequent disbelief is well documented<sup>5</sup> - Kerouac switched to Rae Everitt, John Clellon Holmes’ literary agent, who perhaps played a role in Kerouac’s decision “to

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<sup>5</sup> Theado reduces the mythical stature of the incident, stating that it “was almost certainly followed by a more traditional submission of a customary typescript” (“Revisions” 20).

rework the April scroll extensively” (Hunt, *Kerouac’s Crooked Road* 115). Turning to Ace Books in 1952, in an attempt to make the novel more appealing while simultaneously safeguarding his artistic integrity, Kerouac suggested that they should “publish *ON THE ROAD* regular hardcover *and* papercover, extracting 160-page stretch for 25c edition [...and] full ROAD in hardcover” (*Selected Letters 1940-56* 342-3). In a letter sent to Allen Ginsberg about a month later, however, Kerouac changed his mind, declaring that “If Wyn or Carl insist on cutting it up to make the ‘story’ more intelligible I’ll refuse” (355). Finally, after a series of rejections, *On the Road* was eventually published by Viking Press in 1957.<sup>6</sup> In 2007, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the initial publication of *On the Road*, Viking-Penguin published an edition of the Scroll manuscript.

Although considered to be Kerouac’s masterpiece, the novel’s impact caused its author more distress than satisfaction. Clark points out that “never having intended the Beat Generation as a campaign, merely as a description, he [Kerouac] now had no program to present in its support. Nonetheless, critics immediately took him as proponent of a hundred social evils supposedly advocated in his book” (164). Amburn reveals that not long after the novel’s publication, Kerouac developed a dislike for the very novel that made him famous (278). The critical controversy that the novel spawned is well-known and has been addressed in numerous studies. Although the novel received considerable praise by the *New York Times* reviewer Gilbert Millstein, David Dempsey’s article “In Pursuit of Kicks” which appeared in *New York Times Book Review* a few days later verged on the negative and soon Norman Podhoretz

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<sup>6</sup> Gewirtz provides a comprehensive list of the novel’s successive rejections: “within two years he had sent the typescript to Little, Brown; Dutton; Dodd, Mead; Viking; Ace Books [...] and, in late 1954 or early 1955, Knopf. They all rejected it” (110). To these Theado adds Criterion, Bobbs Merrill, Scribner’s and Farrar Straus Young (23) and Ballantine (“Revisions” 27).

gave vent to his own enraged views. The range of critical responses to the novel has been widely documented; however, what is less often recognized is the ambiguity surrounding the critical debate with regard to the quest motif in the novel.<sup>7</sup> Critics generally agree on the centrality of the theme of the quest, but readings of it diverge significantly.

Hunt argues that Kerouac initiates the quest theme as early as 25 March 1949, when in his journal entry he expresses his intention to now organize the book as a quest narrative (23, 89).<sup>8</sup> Amburn states that *On the Road* was promoted by Viking as a novel about a group of youths “roaming America in a wild, desperate search for identity and purpose” (270). The *Village Voice* reviewer of *On the Road*, Arthur Ossterreicher, reads the quest along political lines, as “a rallying point for the elusive spirit of rebellion of these times, that silent scornful sit-down strike of the disaffiliated” (qtd. in Amburn 277). Twenty years later, Koos Van Der Wilt argues that “an experimental prose style effectively communicates the search for a new self” (119), and two years after this Challis reads the novel as a description of a quest for a grail (202). In 1987 Regina Weinreich sees *On the Road* as “an example of the evolution of quest romance as it turns elegiac” (37); two years later, Hipkiss notes that “to them the automobile is the means of escape from unpalatable social relationships, a means of annihilating unwanted feelings of remorse and rejection” (18). In 1999 Omar Swartz suggests that “Kerouac positions his readers to understand social

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<sup>7</sup>Given that overviews of critical responses to the novel have been extensively cited by earlier researchers, an exhaustive account of critical debates at that time here would be redundant. Among the most notable accounts are those of Charters (*Kerouac* 288-91), Amburn (281-2) and in more recent years Robert Holton, who combines past criticism with more recent critical works throughout his study of *On the Road: Kerouac's Ragged American Journey*.

<sup>8</sup>Hunt does not fail to note, however, that Kerouac is aware of the fact that “Sal’s notion of questing is inadequate and that his motives in travelling are still mixed, but Sal [...] is Dean’s disciple” (*Kerouac's Crooked Road* 24).



deviance as both desirable and a spiritual duty [...] any resistance to a static existence becomes a holy quest” (55).

In contrast to such teleological readings, however, as early as 1976 Michel Terrier observes that “movement is not subordinate to anything, it is a goal [telos], an activity on its own, and consequently absurd with relation to any social activity” (471).<sup>9</sup> Richard Sax similarly states that “each successive destination offers the possibility, though never the achievement, of the quest” (4). Concerns about the quest motif in *On the Road* have been voiced by more recent critics as well. In his article “I am Only a Jolly Storyteller”, R.J. Ellis notes “the futility of the quest-process” (46), and in the same vein Morris Dickstein makes a case for the “aimless spontaneity of their [the characters’] cross-country travels” (“On and Off the Road” 44). Robert Holton views Sal Paradise as a “postmodern quester” (“Kerouac among the Fellahin” 274) and when he discusses his “sense of quest” (*On the Road* 34), he finds that it is “conflicted” (50), and eventually concludes that “no sense of finality is achieved” (85) and that “in the end no resolution is offered” (122). Such perspectives question the aims and objectives of the characters’ perpetual motion. Although critical analyses have proliferated over the years and more diverse perspectives have been offered,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> My translation from the original text: “Le mouvement n’est subordonné à rien, il est un fin, une activité en soi, et donc absurde par rapport à toute activité sociale.”

<sup>10</sup> There have been attempts to read *On the Road* through a postcolonial perspective (for example, Saldaña-Portillo’s “‘*On the Road*’ with Jack and Che”, Hill’s “A Well-Travelled Road: the Figure of the Minstrel in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*”, and Martinez’s “With Imperious Eye: Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg *On the Road* in South America”). Geographers have also dealt with the novel (I cite here Cresswell’s “Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac’s *On the Road*”, McDowell’s “Off the Road: Alternative Views of Rebellion, Resistance and the Beats” and Rycroft’s “Changing Lanes: Textuality On and Off the Road”). Other critics have concentrated on the mechanics of writing (Gennaka’s “Writing, Typing, Telepathic Shock” and Wilt’s “The Author’s Recreation of Himself as Narrator and Protagonist in Fragmented Prose” are such examples). Richardson’s “Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road*” is one of many texts dealing with representations of ethnicity. Notable attempts to situate *On the Road* within a historical context are, amongst others, Dickstein’s “On and Off the Road: the Outsider as Young Rebel” and Gussow’s “Bohemia Revisited: Malcolm Cowley, Jack Kerouac and *On the Road*”.

critics remain particularly concerned with the quest motif, increasingly focusing on the ateleological nature of the quest.

As early as 1973, Ann Charters sees the adventures of *On the Road* as a “voyage into pure, abstract meaningless motion” (104), making a point for the “meaningless, driven excitement in cars and buses in strange towns and winding highways” (*Kerouac* 116). In the same year, Carole Gottlieb Vopat points to the “purposeless, uncomfortable jockeying from coast to coast” (392) and the “futility and insanity” of Sal and Dean’s journeys (394). She argues that although initially the travelling starts as “a quest endowed [...] with monastic purity, rigid order, and singleness of purpose” (395), in the end the idea of a noble quest is deconstructed: “regarding his friend without desperate idealism, Sal sees that Dean’s frantic moving and going is not a romantic quest for adventure or truth but is instead a sad, lost circling for the past” (401). Moreover, Gifford and Lee record several critics’ concern over “the absence of solid motivation for the trips in the first place” (89). In 1989 Malmgren explicitly asserts that the characters’ movement “like the novel, has no specific *telos*” (63) and in 2002 Marco Abel agrees that the characters “permanently inhabit an in-between space without continuously yearning for a lost origin or seriously pursuing a preordained end” (234-5).

### **“Whither Goest Thou?”**

Such ateleological readings facilitate an appreciation of the postmodern sensibility that *On the Road* bears witness to.<sup>11</sup> The narrator does not always justify

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<sup>11</sup> Pronouncements about the ateleological nature of the quest are also encouraged by Kerouac’s own declaration that he intends to write a novel “about two guys hitch-hiking to California in search of something they don’t really find” (Gewirtz 73). Moreover, in a letter to Hal Chase in 1948,

his trips, and early on in Part Two, he openly admits: “it was a completely meaningless set of circumstances that made Dean come, and similarly I went off with him for no reason” (105). Later on, Carlo’s question: “What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?” remains unanswered; the narrator and his friend “sat and didn’t know what to say” (108). Language fails them, as “there was nothing to talk about any more” (108). Silence has now taken the place of logical reasoning and this verbal exchange cannot be concluded. In addition is meaning “to what place”, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online* cites that “whither” can also be taken as an enquiry about “situation, position, degree, or end.” Therefore, the inability to reply is suggestive of considerable confusion on the characters’ part. Carlo’s reasonable query cannot be matched with an accordingly sensible answer; language breaks down and his question is left to linger, as Sal and Dean fail to attach a meaning to their trip. Ellis remarks that “the 1957 novel undergoes a constant loss of centering” (“Dedicated to America” 133). Lacking a sense of purpose, the characters show little concern for their destination. The characters’ disorientation reflects America’s wider political impasse; just as the characters’ wanderings are devoid of purpose, so their country similarly lacks direction. The inability to answer Carlo’s interrogation about America’s orientation implies that the country is unable to provide its subjects with a focused sense of orientation. When another character, Old Bull Lee enquires: “Sal, what are you going to the Coast for?”, his question is answered vaguely and evasively: “Only for a few days. I’m coming back to school” (131). Kerouac has Sal respond to Old Bull’s “what” with a “how long”, exposing a hiatus in communication. The use of

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Kerouac explicitly talks about his characters “arriving in California finally where there is nothing...and returning again” (*Selected Letters 1940-56* 170).

arbitrary linguistic exchanges reflects the disorientation of the quest and further exposes the novel's lack of *telos*.

Even when reasons for travelling *are* provided in *On the Road*, they display significant limitations. For example, when Camille solicits an explanation for Dean's departure, he answers: "It's nothing, it's nothing, darling - ah - hem - Sal has pleaded and begged with me to come and get him, it is absolutely necessary for me to - but we won't go into all these explanations - and I'll tell you why...No, listen, I'll tell you why.' And he told her why, and of course it made no sense" (100). Once again, language and reason break down in the attempt to provide explanations, as Dean's utterance refuses to impart substantial information. The fragmented syntax of his response reveals his inability to offer valid reasons for travelling, which now becomes an act beyond articulation and rational justification. His utterances make little sense, reflecting the destabilization of meaning in Cold War America. Though seemingly prosperous, 1950s America contained sharp contradictions, which in turn gave rise to a growing undercurrent of discontent with consumerism and materialism, and led to the questioning of conventional lifestyles. Dean's self-contradictory utterances and linguistic opacity reflect the tensions of an era which is inconclusively struggling to find meaning, and are expressive of the uncertainty that envelops his road trips. Dean's attempt to justify his propensity for continuous motion can only yield disjointed phrases. Shaping Dean's language thus, Kerouac problematizes the rationalization of his characters' desire for perpetual movement. Sal makes a case for "our one and noble function of the time, *move*" (121); their motion is, nonetheless, devoid of intentionality. The ateleological nature of the characters' travels positions their ventures in a context of meaninglessness and uncertainty. The bulk of literature around the quest motif is suggestive of the pivotal role of the quest for novelty and

originality in the novel, while at the same time exposing the various implications of Sal and Dean's aimless travelling.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and the hyperreal proves particularly useful for an exploration of this aspect of Kerouac's novel. Written at a time when the power of simulation was becoming increasingly manifest through the forceful intrusion of television into mid-century American households, *On the Road* evinces signs of awareness of such changes in the social scene. Baudrillard adopts a historical framework in which he studies the development of simulation. Taking as his point of departure the "symbolic order", Baudrillard identifies a stage where the image is the reflection of a basic reality, and subsequently moves on to a stage in which the image masks and perverts a basic reality.<sup>12</sup> As simulation gradually begins to take precedence over the real, Baudrillard sees a stage where the image comes to mask the *absence* of a basic reality, until it bears no relation to any reality whatever and becomes its own pure simulacrum (*Simulations* 11).<sup>13</sup>

Baudrillard, in other words, believes that the process of simulation perpetuates until it comes to eradicate the concept of reality. He argues that this is the case in contemporary society, where "simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum" (*Simulations* 11), to the point where it takes over the reality principle, and, in the absence of the real, poses as the real. Finally, we can no longer talk of reality, but of an empty simulacrum devoid of substance; this introduces the concept of hyperreality. Baudrillard states that "the negation of reality has now been

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<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard explains his conception of the "symbolic order" as follows: "If we are starting to dream again, today especially, of a world of sure signs, of a strong 'symbolic order,' make no mistake about it: this order has existed and it was that of a ferocious hierarchy, since transparency and cruelty for signs go together [...] The signs therefore are anything but arbitrary" (*Simulations* 84).

<sup>13</sup> In his study *Jean Baudrillard: In Radical Uncertainty*, Mike Gane describes the fourth order of simulacra as stage in which "the dominant form is where things are simply and indifferently proliferated and dispersed into the void" (16).

incorporated into ‘reality’ itself. In short, what we have now is a principle of non-reality based on ‘reality’- a principle of ‘hyper-reality’” (*Baudrillard Live* 143). Baudrillard further explains that hyperreality is the condition where “the question of signs, of their rational destination, their real or imaginary, their repression, their deviation, the illusion they create or that which they conceal, or their parallel meanings - all of that is erased” (*Simulations* 104). The value of the sign is highly problematized here. In this context, originality is lost; it is no longer a case of differentiation between the original and its copy, but of reproduction without an original. Reality as such stops being identifiable; the original self ceases to exist in the simulacra, and the real becomes not “only what can be reproduced, but *that which is always already reproduced*. The hyperreal” (*Simulations* 146). Thus, contemporary society is a series of reproductions. As I will argue, it is similarly empty simulations that Sal Paradise confronts in *On the Road*. Although Steve Wilson has argued that “Paradise is on a search for authenticity in a mid-century America bent on conformity and convenience” (304), it frequently transpires in the text that the authentic is unattainable, and there are various instances that challenge conceptions of “reality” and “authenticity”.

### **Simulacra along the Road**

Although the novel claims to be an account of Sal Paradise’s “life on the road” (3), and indeed the initial impression is that of a straightforward narration of Sal’s travels, several passages in the novel problematize representations of reality. As the story unfolds “reality” and simulation mingle, as happens, for example, in the depiction of the Wild West Week:

Big crowds of businessmen, fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire, bustled and whooped on the wooden sidewalks of old Cheyenne: farther down were the long stringy boulevard lights of new downtown Cheyenne, but the celebration was focusing on Oldtown. Blank guns went off. The saloons were crowded to the sidewalk. (30)

Although these characters appear as simulations of real western heroes, the narrator can effortlessly tell the difference: “in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (30). Sal sees these representations as simulations, the original of which he can easily identify. The artificiality of the situation is emphasized by the fact that the Wild West scenes are confined to the Oldtown part of Cheyenne, as naturally this would provide a more suitable setting for the “celebration” (30). Wild West emblems are used, although it is obvious that these are reproductions of the originals: the guns fire blanks, and there is even an air of pretension in the use of the ten-gallon hats, typical cowboy hats. Moreover, the saloons are exceptionally, and one is tempted to believe unusually, crowded. Robert Holton notes that under these circumstances “history has become a parody of the past, a consumer spectacle without depth typifying postmodern historicity in one of its most banal forms” (“Kerouac among the Fellahin” 272). It is mostly businessmen that participate in the celebration, impersonating cowboys. In their re-enactment of the Wild West the “big crowds of businessmen” try to adjust the past of the Native Americans to patterns of white assertion. Sal also points to the comedy generated by the image of “hefty wives” dressed as cowgirls. The celebration is a caricature of the Old West; rather than a device to preserve it, it ultimately serves

as a parody of Cold War America's attempts to authoritatively take over the past by re-enacting it. Satirizing such representations, Kerouac severely questions his contemporaries' pomposity and affectation.

At this stage, the narrator is displeased with the simulations, and while he is able to identify the businessmen and their wives underneath the fancy dress, he is also able to spot the actual Native Americans: "there were Indian chiefs wandering around in big headdresses and really solemn among the flushed drunken faces" (*On the Road* 31). The sobriety of the Native Americans "who watched everything with their stony eyes" (32) functions as a counterpoint to the inebriation of the people in fancy dress. At this relatively early stage, it is fairly clear that the Wild West Week is a playful re-enactment of the Old Days. It is no more than a lighthearted representation, one that, however, fills Sal with apprehension. The fabricated nostalgia that permeates the Wild West Week is suggestive of America's greater need to resort to the past, in which it pursues a substitute for its own inadequacies, but it also aims to authenticate the present. That the "fat businessmen" seek entertainment in re-enactments of the past indicates the cultural void that Kerouac's America experienced. Unable to sufficiently provide for its subjects, America evinces an acute nostalgia for "lost authenticity", anticipating Baudrillard's pronouncement that "we are fascinated by the real as a lost referent" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 47). However, any such attempts are mere simulations, and since the quest for origins is elusive, it results in distortion. Representations of the Wild West unavoidably involve inaccuracy. The Wild West episode introduces a series of instances that exemplify the interplay between simulation and "reality" in *On the Road*; this can be further explored in Sal's experience of Hollywood.



When in Hollywood, the narrator lists an odd assortment of characters, ranging from families who want to see movie stars to “queer boys” and “little gone gals”. The descriptions of Hollywood oddities verge on the hyperreal, as the narrator continues his account with “Hollywood Sams”, “tall, cadaverous preachers” and policemen that “looked like handsome gigolos” (78). Sal provides these exaggerated images so as to project Hollywood as a simulated (hyper)-reality, where what he perceives as “authenticity” is lost. The caricaturesque descriptions he provides testify to his parodic disposition towards the realization of the lack of depth and meaning in this Hollywood extravaganza. As was the case with Wild West Week, the narrator here chooses to eschew the game of appearances. On his first visit to Hollywood, he refuses to participate in the Hollywood scene and on his last night there he reports: “I was spreading mustard on my lap in back of a parking-lot john” (93). His attitude poses as a criticism of the Hollywood Dream industry, from which he takes pains to maintain his distance at this stage.

Sal’s depiction of Hollywood largely anticipates Baudrillard’s theories, as there are considerable similarities between Sal’s Hollywood and Baudrillard’s conception of Disneyland, yet another dreamland. Like Hollywood, Disneyland is a play of illusions and phantasms (*Simulations* 23). Far from seeing Disneyland as an “idealised transposition of a contradictory reality” (25), Baudrillard claims that it:

serves to cover over a *third-order simulation*: Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which *is* Disneyland [...] Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of

the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (25)

Therefore, for Baudrillard, Disneyland exists in order to suppress the fact that America is a simulation. With its ostensibly artificial constructions, it diverts attention from the artificial nature of the entirety of America. According to Baudrillard, Disneyland is necessary in order to maintain the balance of the country, as it plays a vital role in preserving the polarity between “reality” and artificiality. Posing as an artificial locus *par excellence*, it necessitates a counterforce, which should stand for “reality”. Therefore, it functions as a counterfeit to America, which would otherwise be likely to collapse under the weight of its own hyperreality.

Similarly, the narrator sees that Hollywood is a place given up to simulation, and remarks: “everybody had come to make the movies, even me” (*On the Road* 78). In this he anticipates Baudrillard’s argument that the entirety of Los Angeles “is nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture” (*Simulations* 26). There is no escaping hyperreality here, as it has become the desired *status quo*. In this context, Sal’s satire of Hollywood simulacra constitutes a forceful observation on America’s simulations, which operate as a substitute for the vacuity of the post-war experience.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, when Sal makes an attempt to approach Hollywood for his own financial benefit he fails, as the script he writes is rejected (*On the Road* 66, 92). His failure is indicative of his misconception: for Sal, Hollywood is only a poor reproduction of reality, and he can’t perceive of it as a simulacrum that masks “the absence of a basic reality” (*Simulations* 11). In this context “authenticity” is doubly

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<sup>14</sup> Kerouac offers another take on film and simulation in the “Joan Rawshanks in the Fog” passage in *Visions of Cody* (318-336).

undermined, and Sal's quest is further disorientated. In his attempt to distance himself from what he considers to be a simulated reality, he ultimately becomes trapped in the workings of more complex simulations. That Sal is convinced about the authenticity of his road experience when he is, in fact, unable to identify the complexities of his simulacra adds a parodic twist to the narration. Sal Paradise's misconceptions reflect the experience of disorientation which was acutely felt in an era in which the distinction of "reality versus appearances" had become a problematic issue.

Ann Douglas argues that deception and lies were common political practice in Cold War America (81). It should not be overlooked, however, that the 1957 text of *On the Road* was the result of compositional practices that Kerouac had been developing for almost a decade; therefore, to strictly position it in a 1957 context would be limiting. R. J. Ellis examines the novel in the historical context of the late 1940s, remarking that "the cultural matrix that *On the Road* could have been enmeshed in had it been published in 1952 [...] would have been quite different from the one into which it was launched in 1957" ("Scandalous for being Scandalous" 102). Although the composition of *On the Road* admittedly bears the cultural influences of the late forties, the 1957 text also in many ways reflects the historical and social conditions of 1950s America. Whereas the apparent affluence of the fifties seemed to ensure a successful living for middle-class Americans, it was in fact a largely simulated idea of happiness that was projected. A closer look beyond the seeming prosperity reveals "the stifling uniformity of modern suburban and organizational life" (A. Brinkley 71), whereupon "employees of large corporate organizations [...] were becoming something close to automatons" (70). Moreover, of exceptional importance is also the expansion of the mass-media, and in particular television, which became increasingly prominent in 1950s America. The media

started revealing their full potential at instances like the televised McCarthy-Army debates and Nixon's "Checkers Speech" (1952), which played a decisive role in the continuance of Nixon's political career. The media's ability to construct simulations has had a direct effect on Kerouac's image, prompting Ronna Johnson to remark that "the disappearance of a Kerouac real by the 'image of Kerouac' is an effect of simulation" (24). Focusing on Kerouac's bohemian image, the media were more concerned with the myth surrounding the man, rather than his abilities as a writer. Johnson comments on the "notoriety caused by intrusive, sensationalizing media attention" (23). Especially during Kerouac's later years when he was considerably affected by alcoholism, the media were particularly interested in turning Kerouac's persona into "the celebrity simulacrum" (25). Not very attentive to Kerouac's authorial breakthroughs, the media were more concerned with Kerouac as an entertaining and scandal-provoking image.<sup>15</sup>

Another prominent feature of the fifties was a large-scale hysteria against communism. This anti-communist frenzy found its most powerful expression in the face of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who unleashed a witch-hunt on suspected communists, causing significant disturbance until his exaggerated accusations led to an eventual loss of his credibility. This discourse against possible contamination from an "alien", infectious body led to a frantic nuclear arms race that was focused on a fear of a nuclear attack. Ligairi notes that the image of the atomic bomb became an object of mass consumption (140), nurturing a simulated Cold War *threat*, when the probability of a disastrous war breaking out was in fact minimal. Ann Douglas further elaborates on the power of simulation in the Cold War context: "World War II had established the city as the logical object of bomber raids intended to demoralize and

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<sup>15</sup> Ellis notes that the mass media also helped shape the scroll myth, and draws attention to their aim of arousing public interest ("Scandalous" 111-112).

destroy civilians as well as defense factories” (83). Artistic representations of the city made in the 1950s are striking. Dickstein argues that “the fifties saw a vogue of low-budget horror and science fiction films that reflected pervasive anxieties about the cold war, nuclear war, and the blight of conformity in this atmosphere of fear” (“On and Off the Road” 35). In these conditions, the city is presented as “a place that is changing far less rapidly than the suburban landscapes developing all around it; it has become a museum, a site of nostalgia as well as innovation” (Douglas 83).

Synopsizing the Cold-War situation, Alan Brinkley asserts: “they constructed and came to believe in an image of a world that did not exist” (72). Such historical and social contexts had a considerable impact on Kerouac’s writing. Much as the characters of *On the Road* proclaim a revolt against what Jane Sherron De Hart defines as domestic containment, namely the “strenuous, systematic efforts to maintain traditional gender and sexual boundaries, ideologically as well as behaviorally, through cultural imperatives and social policy” (130), I will demonstrate that Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty ultimately reproduce the dominant practices of the society that spawned them. Kerouac shapes Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty as characters who indulge in the construction of simulacra, reflecting the social and political practices of the American fifties.

### **“Magic” Mexico**

The Wild West Week and Hollywood provide examples of Sal’s engagement with simulated constructions. In the early stages of *On the Road* the narrator is able to pit simulacra against a backdrop of a conventionally defined “reality”. As the narration unfolds, however, simulation seems to gradually take over, reaching a

climax when the characters of *On the Road* arrive in Mexico. Mexico is discussed mainly on the level of appearances, as is suggested by Sal's exclamation: "To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico" (250). With this comment Kerouac sets the tone of his narrator's perception of Mexico. Sal's phrase exposes his preconceived ideas about this place; the new image of Mexico here conforms to the narrator's preset notions about it, which have been shaped by the "media-informed preconceptions of it" (Ligairi 150) and the Old West myths that have been built around it.<sup>16</sup>

The new territory the characters enter is described as "magic" (241), signaling their departure from "reality". Their physical leap into this "new and unknown phase of things" (251) is symbolically signposted: "But everything changed when we crossed the mysterious bridge" (249). This is the bridge that connects America to the hyperreal Mexican land, a new world for the characters of *On the Road*. By virtue of its geographical position and history, Mexico is a liminal space; its marginal quality inspires Sal and Dean's self-inscription as explorers of a new territory. Dean states their mission: "so that we can [...] *understand* the world as, really and genuinely speaking, other Americans haven't done before us - they were here, weren't they?" (251-52). He thus sets the framework for the characters' particular conception of Mexico: he desires their impressions to be different from those of the other Americans that went there before them, so that they can discover the land anew. Dean believes that the earlier Americans failed because they lacked the necessary perspective. However, his approach is not as "real" and "genuine" as he claims. Cast in the role of explorers of a new territory, Sal and Dean try to perpetuate the myth of the Old West pioneers. By attempting to conquer the frontier anew, they want to re-enact the

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<sup>16</sup> Kerouac's own idealization of Mexico is clearly expressed in *Selected Letters 1940-1956*: "fiestas almost every day and attendant fireworks [...] now no worries any more. Just sit on roof hi enjoying hot dry sun and sound of kids yelling and have us wives & American talk of our own as well as exotic kicks and regular old honest Indian kicks" (245).

western myth. Mexico is endowed with an aura of adventure; fascinated by the old American outlaws myth, Sal and Dean desire to enter Mexico in their footsteps. However, they do not go there as society's outcasts, but, as Ellis has pointed out, as "moneybag Americans" (*Liar! Liar!* 72). Rather than outlaws who need to escape punishment and therefore exile themselves to Mexico, Sal and Dean enter Mexico with wealth that allows them an air of supremacy.

Various instances which reveal the characters' fascination with the western myth appear in *On the Road*.<sup>17</sup> It is predominantly in Mexico, however, that the attraction of the myth of the Old West appears with particular force. The attempt to revive the Old West is striking: "this road [...] is also the route of old American outlaws who used to skip over the border and go down to old Monterrey, so if you'll look out on that graying desert and picture the ghost of an old Tombstone hellcat making his lonely exile gallop into the unknown" (252). Ellis remarks: "Where Parts One and Two's repetition of Westward movement provides initial irony, the latter half of the novel dislocates the conventional orientation of the western myth; it becomes patently vacuous" (*Liar! Liar!* 72). Sal and Dean's attempts to cast themselves as pioneers of the Old West ultimately exposes the vacuity of the western myth. Not only is the Old West myth devoid of meaning, but there is also an attempt to turn it into a commodity, as the Nevada desert signs "Rattlesnake Bill lived here" or "Broken-mouth Annie holed up here for years" suggest (*On the Road* 165). Sal heeds

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<sup>17</sup> Sal openly admits to his fascination with western myths: "We were permeated completely with the strange Gray Myth of the West and the weird dark Myth of the East when morning came" (222), thus to a degree accounting for his tendency to construct simulacra. The Old West exercises a powerful attraction for Sal, who is often keen on unquestioningly accepting, or even unintentionally facilitating its replication. Ann Charters has commented on Sal's tendency to see everybody either as "cowboy" or "rancher" (*Kerouac* 82). In Omaha, Sal labels everyone he sees as such (*On the Road* 17-18), and even meets somebody that "looked like a sheriff" (and of course is not) (20). Not everybody that Sal meets is a cowboy; but he is too immersed in his romantic conception of the myth of the West, and goes on to produce his own customized reproductions of the West. The comedy that results from such situations ultimately parodies Sal's excessive enthusiasm for the western myth. Sal's propensity to avoid the "sheer reality of reality" has been noted by Carole Vopat (386-7).

the possibility that such signs may be advertising gimmicks for tourists, simulacra of the Old West that are meant to produce profit. Although Sal's perspective is limited, Kerouac makes sure to expose the simulated nature of such endeavours. Aware of the impossibility of the exact reproduction of history, he criticizes America's attempts to glorify the past so as to take advantage of it as a marketable commodity, or construct a nostalgic sense of identity that would distract from the crisis of the present moment. Positioning Sal within a context of simulated images, Kerouac subsequently satirizes Cold War America's fascination with the western myth, which is projected as a diversion and substitute for the country's inadequacies.

Such revivals of the Old West emphasize Sal's inability to shape an informed opinion of Mexico. Although he briefly remarks that Mexico "was the bottom and dregs of America where all the heavy villains sink, where disoriented people have to go to be near a specific elsewhere they can slip into unnoticed" (249), he refrains from making any evaluative comments about it, and does not ultimately allow it to interfere with the romanticized image of Mexico he entertains. Similarly, his fleeting remarks about the sad hospital (248), the "sad kiddy park" (266) and the deterioration of "a broken-down general store with sacks of flour and fresh pineapple rotting with flies on the counter" (268) further emphasize the irony of Sal's idealizations, and thus his simulated conception of Mexico, created by myths and nostalgic constructions.<sup>18</sup>

Dean's utterances seem to be governed by a similar mentality when he exclaims: "Real beat huts, man [...] These people don't *bother* with appearances" (252). Dean fails to see Mexican huts in their actual context of poverty and suffering; rather, he lets himself be absorbed into his own constructions of simulacra, rejoicing in what he perceives to be merely a lack of concern for appearances. Sal and Dean's impressions

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<sup>18</sup> In Kerouac's later text *Desolation Angels*, the narrator again projects an image of Mexico as "as gay, exciting" (249), but at this stage he also emphasizes the "drear, even sad, darkness" (250) which eventually leads one of the characters to exclaim that "there's *death* in Mexico" (262).



of Mexico are thus significantly misguided, shaped as they are by a willingness to accommodate the white man's need for escape into an ideal place.<sup>19</sup> Sal's constant romanticizing excludes the possibility of an understanding of Mexico, and his perception of Mexico is altered by the image he projects upon it.

Soon Mexico becomes not only "the magic land" (251), but also acquires a mystical quality: "it was only Nuevo Laredo but it looked like Holy Lhasa to us" (250). The narrator exaggerates his description, endowing Mexico with supernatural qualities. This is further emphasized by Sal's description of Mexico as the Promised Land: "We've finally got to heaven" (253), and later its labeling as a "strange Arabian paradise" (265). Vopat suggests that "in Mexico Sal hopes to escape from the self, civilization, and their discontents. At the bottom of his primitivism is a desire to confront the primal sources of pure being, to discover life as it was - shapeless, formless, dark - before being molded into self or society" (402-3). Lardas offers another explanation for the Beats' association with Mexico, arguing that "they saw contemporary Mexico as a land of Edenic innocence [...] It represented the pastoral ideal on which America was founded and the state of cosmic harmony to which it could once again return" (180).

Whereas such interpretations can partly account for Sal's fascination with Mexico, they are not without problems, as it soon transpires that Mexico is not the only "Promised Land" in the novel. Sal's obsession with the idea of a "Promised Land" is repeatedly manifest. At the beginning of the narration, Denver is compared to the Promised Land (15). Later, Hollywood is referred to as the "promised land" (74) and a few pages further on, while in Sabinal, Paradise exclaims: "It *is* the

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<sup>19</sup> With their repetitive visits to Mexico, Kerouac and the rest of the Beats perpetuate the Bohemian tendency to seek refuge and inspiration in this country. Such countercultural practices indicate that the counterculture eventually helped to sustain a simulated conception of Mexico.

promised land” (82). In this context of proliferating “Promised Lands”, there is no reason why Mexico should qualify as the “Promised Land” more than its predecessors of the title. If Sal wants to locate the “Promised Land”, then he is always doomed to stop short of the lack of a stable corresponding signified. The “Promised Land” is but another simulated image, ever-shifting in Sal’s frame of reference. There is considerable irony implied in the narrator’s statement, as his confusion and lack of clarity of vision do not allow him to see that there is indeed no “Promised Land” to be found in the novel.

In this context, even Sal’s surname, “Paradise”, can be viewed as yet another ambiguous signifier of the “Promised Land”. Although Sal’s name suggests that the “Promised Land” can be located in the narrator (full name: Salvatore Paradiso, which translates as: Salvational Paradise), the fact that he identifies so many different places as Promised Lands suggests otherwise. The proliferation of “Promised Lands” further voids Sal’s quest of authenticity and substantial meaning. Sal is caught in a matrix of simulation where proliferating “Promised Lands” expose the aimlessness of the attempt to locate one and ultimately parody such endeavours. Sal’s inability to find firm points of reference suggests that an “authentic” centre cannot be traced. Whereas Sal and Dean enter “magic *south*” hoping that “this will finally take us to IT!” (241-2), this “IT” remains elusive and indefinable. Dean has repeatedly referred to: “IT! IT!”, promising to clarify: “I’ll tell you” (115), but at Sal’s behest for an explanation of “what ‘IT’ meant”, Dean’s subsequent answer is not so clear: “now you’re asking me impon-de-rables-ahem!” (187-8). Dean outright declares that “IT” is indeterminable; it becomes a versatile concept resisting an authoritative or final interpretation. The ambiguity implicated in “IT” is reflected in the fragmented language used to describe it. Further dislocation is generated and the way to “IT” is

invested with considerable confusion. Like the “Promised Land”, “IT” becomes yet another shifting signifier. As the Mexican episode is largely engulfed in simulation, this “IT” for which the main characters struggle is similarly devoid of stable meaning. Ligairi sees Sal’s quest for “IT” as a “fetishization of the authentic” (141). Casting their “imperious eye”<sup>20</sup> (215) upon Mexico, the characters of *On the Road* project upon it the image of “the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-childlike city that we knew we would find at the end of the road” (275), validating Hill’s suggestion that “it is in the magic dream world of fictive mental construction that the end of *the road* - and a stable identity - supposedly exists” (147). In their desire to conquer the land that is unknown to them, Sal and Dean create the necessary conditions for the conquest. Kerouac has his characters construct Mexico as a simulation which provides the illusion of fulfilment. The Mexican journey ends with Sal’s health failing, which incidentally brings his road adventures to full circle, ending in the way they started: with an illness. The Mexican simulacrum resists its role of a “Promised Land” and finally takes its revenge, as it turns nightmarish. Mexico has now become a double simulation. Never having been to Mexico before, Sal has fabricated its image according to his expectations of the country; entering Mexico, he builds yet another image, to duplicate his earlier one. However, the simulacrum that the narrator constructs resists interpretation along the lines of his preconceptions. Having witnessed the narrator’s construction of the country, it now remains to examine the portrayal of the characters who populate this hyperreal land, referred to in the novel as the Fellaheen.

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<sup>20</sup> The reference to Martinez’ article is intentional.

## The Fellaheen

The term Fellaheen occurs repeatedly in *On the Road*.<sup>21</sup> It is the plural form of “fellaah”, which denotes “a peasant or agricultural laborer in an Arab country (as Egypt)” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). The caste of the Fellaheen inspired German historian Oswald Spengler, who reappropriated the term to accommodate his theory of historical progression, which, in turn, exerted a major influence on Kerouac and the Beats. His most prominent work, *The Decline of the West*, appeared at the end of the First World War, coinciding with his country’s defeat. According to Spengler, Cultures succeed each other in a cyclical manner.<sup>22</sup> Spengler conceives of Cultures as living organisms that go through the stages of birth, growth and death. When a Culture begins to decay, it passes on to the stage of Civilization. While a Culture can be seen as the soul and is a period of creativity and growth, offering “new possibilities of self expression” (1: 21), the Civilization that follows it is strongly associated with the “intellect”, and is marked by artificiality (1: 31-2). It is at this stage that the Fellaheen make their appearance. The Fellaheen experience life as “a planless happening without goal or cadenced march in time, wherein occurrences are many, but, in the last analysis, devoid of significance” (2: 170-171). Spengler sees them as a new type of nomads, without tradition or substance. He defines “the fellaah-peoples” as “that which follows a Culture” (169). They are depthless creatures placed outside the historical period of Culture, a “*formless and therefore historyless mass*” (2: 185). Spengler elaborates: “A Culture-people which is coincident with ‘all’ does not exist - this is possible only in primitive and fellaheen peoples, only in a mere joint being

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<sup>21</sup> Kerouac himself seems to be unsure as to the spelling of the word. Whereas in the 1957 text of *On the Road* it is spelt “Fellahin” (89, 255), in the Scroll version he opts for “Fellaheen” (199, 381), a spelling he prefers also in *Selected Letters 1940-1956* (347), and throughout the *Book of Sketches*. This spelling is also the one preferred in *Dr. Sax* (42, 63, 87).

<sup>22</sup> I am here capitalizing the term “Culture” following Spengler’s practice.

without depth or historical dignity. So long as a people is a nation and works out the Destiny of a nation, there is in it a minority which in the name of all represents and fulfils its history” (2: 172-3). Therefore, the Fellaheen lie latently in the Culture, but do not fully emerge until it reaches a state of dissolution. They are the life forms that survive the downfall of a Culture, and are conceived of as the leftovers of a Civilization. Spengler explains that “at the last, only the primitive blood remains, alive, but robbed of its strongest and most promising elements. This residue is the *Fellah type*” (2: 105). The Fellaheen are the unimportant residue that remains after the decadence, a homogenous and purposeless mass.

That the Beats should be influenced by Spengler’s notion of cyclical patterns of history does not come as a surprise considering the similarities between Spengler’s theory and the cultural and political situation of Cold War America. The Spenglerian conceptualization of the downfall of the West is comparable to the spiritual decline of America at the time, as the average 1950s American was mostly preoccupied with materialistic pursuits. Stimely asserts that Spengler was “certain that he lived in the twilight period of his Culture” (2), and the Beats were likewise concerned that the future of America would validate Spengler’s ominous predictions regarding the downfall of the West.<sup>23</sup> Lardas argues that “Spengler’s philosophy of cultural cycles enabled the Beats to see themselves at both the end and the beginning of an era” (11); therefore, Spengler’s pronouncements of downfall and the subsequent rebirth of a new power gave them hope that America would similarly rise again after its decline.

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<sup>23</sup> Explicit social criticism features more predominantly in the works of other Beats; Allen Ginsberg’s writings, among others, constitute such a case. Social commentary is not completely absent from Kerouac’s work either. In addition to the criticism of consumer culture that is passed in *On the Road*, in *The Dharma Bums* the narrator criticizes consumerism and “the work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume” mentality of the 1950s (83). In *Vanity of Duluo* there is an explicit attack on the bourgeois concept of success: “You kill yourself to get to the grave. Especially you kill yourself to get to the grave before you even die, and the name of that grave is ‘success’, the name of that grave is hullabaloo boomboom horseshit” (24). Younger Kerouac’s “The Birth of a Socialist” passage in *Atop an Underwood* also evinces signs of social critique (85-92); in the same collection of stories Kerouac concludes that “America is sick” (130).

Spengler's model of history offered the Beats a means to negotiate their own anxiety about America and at the same time fuelled their optimism about the possibility of change. In this critical era there was no time for inertia, and Spengler opened up new prospects for the Beats both on a political and artistic level.

Even stylistically Spengler and Kerouac share common ground. Stimely points out that Spengler has been accused of "insufficient references" and of his "unique and unapologetic 'non-scientific' approach." He explains that "scorning the type of 'learnedness' that demanded only cautionary and judicious statements - every one backed by a footnote - Spengler gave freewheeling vent to his opinions and judgments" (2). Such an approach could have provided an inspiration for Kerouac's "Spontaneous Prose" method, his unobstructed recording of successive ideas.

Although "such key matters as Spontaneous Prose and his allegiance to a 'confessional' literature all developed after what is now known as *On the Road*" (Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road* 77), *On the Road* already anticipates such techniques, with Dean's musings on "how to even *begin* to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears" (6). Much in the manner of Spengler, Kerouac displays a disregard for conventional writing methods.

Spengler makes an appearance in *On the Road* at an instance when Old Bull Lee reads his works (130). Spengler's impact upon the creation of Sal and Dean is also evident on a thematic level, when Kerouac adapts the term "Fellaheen". However, considerable differences can be traced in the use of the term between the two. Initially designating Arab peasants, in Spenglerian discourse the term Fellaheen

comes to represent a timeless and debased residue, and in *On the Road* Sal Paradise provides yet another interpretation of the Fellaheen:

driving 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 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, so that you hear the same mournful wail by the rotted walls of Cádiz, Spain, that you hear 12,000 miles around in the depths of Benares the Capital of the World. These people were unmistakably Indians [...] they had high cheekbones, and slanted eyes, and soft ways [...] they were the source of mankind and the fathers of it [...] the earth is an Indian thing. As essential as rocks in the desert are they in the desert of 'history'. (255-6)

Whereas the attribution of a marginal quality to the Fellaheen is apparent both in Spengler and Kerouac, Spengler does not ascribe particular importance to the racial origins of the Fellaheen. In Kerouac, however, they are specifically described as the racial other, the term “Fellahin Indians” being used indiscriminately to refer to people of different ethnic groups whether Asian, African, South-American or other.<sup>24</sup> They

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<sup>24</sup> It has been suggested that Kerouac’s use of the term “Fellaheen” can expand to include a variety of groups that deviate from the mainstream. Prothero cites the following as members of the “fella groups”: “hipsters and hoboes, criminals and junkies, jazzmen and African-Americans” (212). He then identifies Huncke and Cassady as “Fellaheen” (216). Lardas subscribes to such a definition of

are all portrayed as having the same physical features, and as behaving in similar ways, regardless of race or individuality. This delineation of the geographical space which the Fellaheen inhabit is indicative of Sal's understanding of them as a racially different, primitive mass entity. Sal here portrays the Fellaheen as historyless; spread throughout "the desert of history", they cannot be located in a specific point in time. In a passage that bears direct Spenglerian influences, he continues: "for when destruction comes to the world of 'history' and the Apocalypse of the Fellahin returns once more as so many times before, people will still stare with the same eyes from the caves of Mexico as well as from the caves of Bali, where it all began and where Adam was suckled and taught to know" (256). This apocalyptic passage resonates with Spengler's idea that the Fellaheen survive the death of Cultures. They are the ever-remaining residue that exists in its primitive abode as Cultures successively die out.

Lardas argues that the depiction of the Fellaheen in *On the Road* serves to project the "search for authenticity onto a racial other" (185). Such a claim is not without complications, however, as in spite of Sal's conception of the Fellaheen in terms of race, there is a poignant failure to acknowledge the distinct qualities of each race and individual. Tearing them away from their historical and social context, Sal places his Fellaheen on the periphery of history. They seem to be in a perpetual primitive present and are endowed with a primordial quality, reaching back to "where Adam was suckled."<sup>25</sup> The Fellaheen are thus associated with the concept of origins,

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the Fellaheen, arguing that "each [Beat] writer looked to the 'folkbody blood of the land,' derelicts, criminals, and Harlem jazzmen, as precisely those who had been so psychologically and physiologically oppressed that they no longer subscribed to or followed the dominant modes of expression, communication, or representation" (118). He goes on to associate "the various depictions of Neal Cassady and, later, Kerouac's brother Gerard, Gary Snyder, 'desolation angels,' and various bums, outcasts, and hobos - all 'subterranean' saints" with "Spengler's notion of the fellaheen" (124). Invested with a primordial quality, these people partook of the "authenticity" the Kerouacian narrator considered to be inherent in the Fellaheen. However, in *On the Road* at least, it appears that the term's application is confined to the racial other.

<sup>25</sup> This is yet another point of departure from the Spenglerian definition of Fellaheen. Whereas Spengler clearly describes them as "religionless", (1: 32), here they are associated with Christian



and they are portrayed as the source of human life, reaching back to the primal man, Adam. Theado notes that “Kerouac suggests that sometime in the far-away past, people lived in harmony with nature in the Garden of Eden [...] Sal seeks the ‘beat’ genuineness that he believes nonwhite races possess in America” (*Understanding* 65-6). As ancient as the earth itself, the Fellaheen are endowed with a primeval quality; of a kind and peaceful disposition, with “soft ways”, they stand as reminders of an earlier age of bliss and happiness. Sal constructs simulated images of the Fellaheen so as to satisfy his need for a rooted existence. He wants to partake in “the world beat”, that is “the conga beat from Congo, the river of Africa and the world” (262) and projects a Fellaheen image that is closely associated with connotations of origins. The “original” quality that Sal ascribes to the Fellaheen is further emphasized by his description of the Fellaheen land as “the Valley of the World” (147). The permanence that is implied by the Fellaheen image is intended to compensate for Sal’s destitution, which is implied when he talks about “the eastward view toward Kansas that led all the way back to my home in Atlantis” (243). The displacement of the concept of origins is striking: associating his home with the mythical land of Atlantis, the legendary island that Plato first mentioned, Kerouac transposes it as an imaginary and illusory locus, thus further emphasizing Sal’s experience of dislocation.<sup>26</sup> An *estia*<sup>27</sup> is not attainable for Sal, and it eventually transpires that it is a simulacrum of origin that the narrator is reaching towards, “the origin” being an elusive and constantly deferred concept.

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imagery. In another passage from *On the Road* the Fellaheen land is described as “vast and Biblical” (274).

<sup>26</sup> The existence of Atlantis is an issue that has been heavily debated over the centuries; the uncertainty as to whether it had indeed once existed further reveals the complexities of Sal’s utterance here.

<sup>27</sup> The term *estia* is here used to denote “home”, “house”, “one’s dwelling place”.

There is one instance when Dean is described “like the Prophet that had come to them” (272),<sup>28</sup> prompting Saldaña-Portillo’s observation of a “manic, messianic” quality in Dean (92). However, there is a certain amount of irony implicit in such a reading of Dean’s character. Sal and Dean cannot partake of the “authentic” quality they believe their Fellaheen to contain merely by assuming an attitude of superiority. It eventually transpires that rather than wanting to be like the Fellaheen, as he maintains, Sal adopts an authoritative stance which stems from the Cold War fear of otherness and the “mania of national security which ruined the lives of some, touched many others with the cold hand of fear and conformity, and helped foreclose the political options of all” (Dickstein, *Gates* 27). Sal thus fabricates his Fellaheen as subordinate to a pattern of white masculine assertion that desires the control of the Other.

Under these conditions, the association of the Fellaheen with “authenticity” appears yet more problematic.<sup>29</sup> To define the “authentic” is not a simple task. Even within the countercultural tradition and its long-standing association with “authenticity”, a precise definition cannot be traced. Hebdige discusses “the process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as ‘style’ in subculture” (3) and locates this process at the “superficial level of appearances”, seeing it as “a struggle for the possession of the sign” (17). No matter which particular signification practices each countercultural group uses, the signs are meant to interrupt the process of “normalization” (18). Hebdige sees the struggle as a play of signification. Signs,

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<sup>28</sup> The image of Dean as a prophet also appears elsewhere in *On the Road*: “for years he had been chief prophet of that gang and now they were learning his technique” (175). Dean here figures as the spiritual leader of yet another group (the Bohemians), whose alterity is of a social, rather than racial, nature.

<sup>29</sup> In the *Oxford English Dictionary* “authenticity” is defined as: “The quality of being authentic, or entitled to acceptance: 1. as being authoritative or duly authorized, 2. as being in accordance with fact, as being true in substance, 3. as being what it professes in origin or authorship, as being genuine; genuineness, 4. as being real, actual; reality.”

however, are subject to fluctuation depending on historical and cultural factors, rendering the definition of the “authentic” increasingly problematic. Moreover, “different youths bring different degrees of commitment to a subculture” (122), bearing witness to further variations in degree and intensity that further complicate definitions of the “authentic”.

As even countercultural definitions of authenticity are so variable, “authenticity” becomes a highly ambiguous concept that in turn challenges conventional associations of the bourgeoisie with affected behaviour. Although such associations are often valid, to suggest that the middle class is by definition pretentious remains largely a cliché. Conceptions of authenticity are unstable and fluctuating, further exposing the problems that arise from the attempt to associate it with marginality. Sal wants to escape the mainstream, because he sees it as “inauthentic”, and goes on to locate “authenticity” at the margins of society. This attitude is problematic from the outset, as Sal defines authenticity as the privilege of exclusive social groups. Sal chooses to project the idea of “authenticity” upon the margins; in this he reproduces the imperatives of the established counterculture of the time, which endorsed such “cool” and “hip” views. Therefore, Sal’s quest starts with a handicap, as he is pursuing simulated, socially constructed ideas of “authenticity”, modelling the image of his Fellaheen upon such notions.

Several critics, such as Omar Swartz, have argued that the Fellaheen fate is romanticized in the novel (78). Such approaches illustrate the tension between the alleged “authenticity” of the Fellaheen and the empty simulacra Sal constructs. Sal associates the Fellaheen with an “authentic” existence; however, his construction of Fellaheen simulacra deprives the Fellaheen image of depth and severely challenges the narrator’s association of the Fellaheen with the “authentic”.

### “Wishing I Were a Negro”

Phrases like “the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (*On the Road* 164) reveal the extent of Sal’s tendency to romanticize his Fellaheen; the image of the carefree African-American is emphatically projected throughout the novel. Mr. Snow, Remi Boncoeur’s African-American neighbour is described as having “positively and finally the one greatest laugh in all this world” (55), and Sal continues to associate African-American culture with a lack of worries: “Don’t worry ’bout *nothing!*” (127). It seems that Sal’s African-Americans dwell in a hyperreal universe where they lead a “really joyous life that knows nothing of disappointment and ‘white sorrows’ and all that” (165).

The extreme naïveté of Sal’s descriptions is challenging and invites serious reflection; one cannot help but wonder whether this is deliberate on Kerouac’s part. Gunther Kodat makes a case for “the anxious and uncertain white Beats living in an era marked by shifting and unstable race relations” (120). At the time *On the Road* was published, African-American writers were strongly protesting about their people’s rights, and it would be surprising if Kerouac did not take heed of these protests; some came from people closely related to the Beat Generation movement, such as LeRoi Jones. Saldaña-Portillo talks about Sal’s attempt “to re-script white freedom so that it might discursively include those historically left out of its practice in the United States”, but sees this attempt as “dimmed” (92). Richardson, for his part, argues that “White Americans reduce Mexican-American and Black farm workers to poverty only to flatter them with suggestions that their lives are idyllic and charmed, free of White worry, White responsibility, White inhibitions - in a word, with suggestions that they are ‘natural’” (225). However, rather than hastily subscribing to

such a reading, a closer look at the text reveals the irony implied in Kerouac's decision to deprive his narrator not only of a sharp critical ability but of a basic cultural awareness as well.<sup>30</sup>

The apparent problems of Sal's construction of the African-American image are forcefully projected: "There was an old Negro couple in the field with us. They picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfathers had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama; they moved right along their rows, bent and blue, and their bags increased" (*On the Road* 87). Geoffrey Hill remarks that this passage "underscores how the history of slavery that Sal is revising and using as the base from which to re-make himself is unavailable to the Negro couple beside him" (145). Sal speaks from a privileged point of view that allows him to appropriate history at will. He has never been placed in the position of enforced labour that the African-Americans of Ante-bellum Alabama suffered. Although the African-American situation had improved at the time Kerouac was writing, African-Americans remained among the underprivileged population of America, and segregation continued to be rife. African-Americans were at a disadvantage from early on in American history, as "the legal decisions constructed an identity meaning of whiteness that reflected the negative image of Afro-Americans and the positive image of whites" (Minda 337). Furthermore, during the Cold War era, African-Americans were far from prosperous. Rose remarks that at a time when "nearly every family owned an automobile, a radio, and a telephone [...] probably a majority of the black population lived badly and had few prospects for advancement. Those few whose salaries or pensions doomed them to permanently fixed incomes experienced anxiety for the future" (10). Moreover,

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<sup>30</sup> To accuse Kerouac of deliberately racist intensions would be unfair: that he did not discriminate against African-Americans is also suggested in a writing log in *Windblown World*, in an entry that reads: "it's the sheer humanness of a man that comes first, whether geek, fag, 'Negro', or criminal, whether preacher, financier, father, or senator, whether whore, child or gravedigger" (56).

African-Americans were also often in political disfavour. Rose notes that “the association of black activism with the Red menace was easily made in the apprehensive environment of November 1950. In later years it would become habitual” (279).<sup>31</sup> Field concludes that “as the USA emerged as a world leader in the wake of the Second World War, the ‘Negro problem’ became damaging and detrimental to the narratives of democracy and equality that America sought to project” (88). It is such socio-political narratives that condition the logic of Sal’s statement, which becomes all the more forceful through the particular register employed to describe the African-American couple.

The language Sal uses is suggestive of older slave narratives. Moreover, Sal’s choice of words further reveals his tendency to over-romanticize. Even in their construction through language, the Fellaheen seem to be highly problematic nostalgic simulations of an earlier era. This image is historically inaccurate and is projected on the level of hyperreality; it does not correspond to an actual situation of the past, and is also discordant with the concrete conditions of African-American people’s lives in Sal’s present. This is blatant distortion of history on Sal’s part; he romanticizes an era of slavery and nostalgically reminisces about it. The African-Americans are not viewed objectively as poor, oppressed and exploited people. Rather, they are

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<sup>31</sup> Rose’s reference to November 1950 points to Senator McCarthy’s Anti-Communist Activities. There is an instance in *Big Sur* when the cultural other is also associated with Communism: “I always thought Romana was a Communist being a Rumanian” (167). Sal’s description of Mill City is of particular relevance with regard to the negotiation of otherness in this context: “it was, so they say, the only community in America where whites and Negroes lived together voluntarily; and that was so, and so wild and joyous a place I’ve never seen since” (*On the Road* 53). That such living arrangements were indeed rare in 1950s America is confirmed by Alan Brinkley who argues that “few were the places where white Anglo Americans lived alongside African-Americans or Hispanic Americans or other minorities. One of the reasons for the massive movement of middle-class whites into suburbs [...] was the desire to escape the racial and class heterogeneity of the cities” (69). Therefore, the “voluntary, wild and joyous” connotations that Sal reads into the scene are open to questioning, and this statement, as many others before and after it, should be viewed in the context of Sal’s extreme romanticizing.

modelled upon a misconceived image of a past situation and are invested with an unlikely meekness and placidity.<sup>32</sup>

The constructedness of Sal's African-American Fellaheen image has led Vopat to comment on Sal and Dean's tendency to "idolize Negroes" (388). Hebdige similarly notes that Kerouac "carried the idealization of Negro culture to almost ludicrous extremes" (48), and Holton also discusses Sal's "romantic pastoralism" (*On the Road: Kerouac's Ragged American Journey* 62). Sal's utterances might be better understood in the light of Graham Huggan's theory on *The Postcolonial Exotic*. Huggan talks about the aesthetics of decontextualisation that is "at work in so-called 'ethnic' and/or 'tribal' products whose authenticity is a function of their cultural dislocation" (16). Divesting the African-Americans of their actual historical and social contexts, Sal portrays them as one-dimensional, not fully developed characters. However, he does not end here: he goes on to contextualize them anew in the simulated African-American image that was largely shaped by minstrel shows and mid-century Hollywood films and their mostly derogatory portrayal of African-Americans. Moreover, Sal's representation of African-Americans is influenced by the countercultural stereotype of the African-American at mid-century America, an outline of which is provided in Mailer's essay "The White Negro". Sal constructs his Fellaheen so as to fit into these simulated images that conform to the dominant white ideology. Sal's Fellaheen are simulacra dictated by a hegemonic white discourse that wants the racial other subordinated and controlled. Albeit not perhaps consciously hegemonic, Sal's words are expressive of a latent desire to maintain a hierarchy that suits white discourse. Having his narrator reproduce such cultural trends, Kerouac thus exposes the racially biased ideas that were shared even by members of the

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<sup>32</sup> In *Book of Sketches* there are also references to "the Meek Fellaheen" (180, 181, 224).

counterculture. According to Sal, it is normal for the African-Americans to be picking cotton, and, furthermore, it is expected that they should be happy doing this. This image of servile serene existence is a simulacrum fabricated in accordance with an extreme attitude of white supremacy. The absurdity of Sal's statement indicates the simulation implied in the image of the cheerful, passive racial others that Sal constructs.

The credibility of the simulation here is so weak that Kerouac redresses the negative impact of Sal's comments and soon has him praying for a better future for these people (87).<sup>33</sup> Thus, although Sal gladly participates in the act of cotton picking despite the fact that his fingertips bleed because of it (87), and shortly after muses "I thought I had found my life's work" (*On the Road* 87), he ultimately expresses doubts over the "blessed patience" (87) that cotton-picking involves. Sal's contradictory views are articulated within the limited space of one page and create significant textual tension. His conflicting perspectives eventually challenge the validity of his comments, justifying Omar Swartz's argument that such descriptions of African-Americans constitute a symbolic slap in the face of traditional America (86) and represent a form of "resistance" (87). Kerouac undercuts Sal's romanticized perceptions with a sharp edge of irony, laying bare Sal's confusion, and it again transpires that Sal's constructed simulacra are finally only vacuous images.<sup>34</sup> That the narrator is lacking the insight necessary to realize this adds yet more complications to his quest for "authenticity".

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<sup>33</sup> An African-American's perspective on this passage is offered in James Baldwin's observation: "I would hate to be in Kerouac's shoes if he should ever be mad enough to read this aloud from the stage of Harlem's Apollo Theatre" (182).

<sup>34</sup> The simulated nature of the African-American image is further exemplified in *Desolation Angels*, where the narrator refers to "big *empty* Negroes standing by mailboxes" (289) (my italics).



The narrator's hegemonic stance is further maintained and intensified when he negotiates gendered representations of African-Americans. The narrator's attitude toward African-American women is foregrounded in *On the Road* with Sal's remark: "I looked with some sadness at the big pile of wash Remi and I were scheduled to do in the Bendix machine in the shack in the back (which had always been such a joyous sunny operation among the colored women and with Mr Snow laughing his head off)" (70-1). His idealization of African-American life is here again exaggerated, this time with particular reference to the construction of the female image. Whereas the narrator finds menial work distressing, he assumes that African-American women are positively disposed towards it. The absurdity of such a claim bears witness to Kerouac's parodic disposition towards the social conventions that provided fertile ground for such approaches in his time.

Sal's portrayal of Walter's African-American wife further exemplifies these ideologies. She is described as "the sweetest woman in the world" (185). Dean subsequently comments: "now you see, man, there's *real* woman for you. Never a harsh word, never a complaint, or modified; her old man can come in any hour of the night with anybody and have talks in the kitchen and drink the beer and leave any old time. This is a man, and that's his castle" (185). Dean's utterance is highly controversial; what he views as a "*real* woman" is, in effect, the projection of a simulated image of servility and serenity, one that conforms to the norms of conventional white patriarchal culture. The African-American woman is not even given a name, and is not granted individual status: she is described as "Walter's wife" (185), and this is the only distinguishing feature allocated to her. That Dean sees this simulation as "*real*" is suggestive of the extent of his confusion, and also constitutes

an ironic remark on the lengths to which white male hegemony can go in order to create the conditions necessary for its assertion.

Even though not necessarily making a conscious attempt to manipulate the African-American image, Sal in the end seems to be doing exactly this. He appears to be moving in and out of the African-American persona easily and swiftly, as is suggested not only by his enactment of the cotton-picker's role but also, and more strikingly, in his musing: "wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (163). Having made a case for the "authenticity" of the Fellaheen, Sal then articulates a desire to become like them; unhappy with his own identity, he expresses a wish to appropriate the African-American one. Leland notes that "in order to be his own man [...] Sal must become his own invention" (83). The complications of self-invention here are illuminated by Saldaña-Portillo's observation that the Fellaheen "access to a primitive vibration of joy marks them as an original chapter in a history of hyper-civilization that has long surpassed them." She then remarks that: "He [Sal] cannot be these coloured folk, because he cannot go back in time to an earlier stage of his own development" (96-7). This exposes the problems in Leland's argument, as Sal not only cannot, but, in effect, does not actually want to be an African-American; what he wants to do is to provide an image of what he thinks an African-American should be like, and then to cast himself in the same, conveniently happy and exciting simulacrum.

The narrator's representations of African-Americans can be better understood in the wider context of racial theorizing. In their introduction to *Theories of Race and Racism*, Black and Solomos provide an overview of several basic approaches. Tracing the beginning of systematic research in the field to "the period since the 1960s" (4),

they refer to Banton's historically-oriented approach and Rex's model of "a racially structured social reality" (4-5). Among the later theorists that have emerged since the 1980s, Black and Solomos pit Robert Miles' neo-Marxist approach against the views expressed in the volume *The Empire Writes Back* (8). Despite their differences, both approaches deal with race as a socially constructed concept. More recent theories of race also consider a variety of political, cultural, identity and gender issues. Making a case for the constructedness and plasticity of the term "race", Banton argues: "'Race' is a concept rooted in a particular culture and a particular period of history which brings with it suggestions about how these differences are to be explained" (62). Winant, for his part, offers "another view of race, in which the concept operates neither as a signifier of comprehensive identity nor of fundamental difference, both of which are patently absurd, but rather as a marker of the infinity of variations we humans hold as a common heritage and hope for the future" (188). It thus transpires that it is extremely problematic to form one coherent theory of race, as its constituent parts are diverse and often escape precise definition, revealing the performativity of the concept. Race is shaped according to historical and cultural factors, as well as individual perspectives. Such flexibility allows for a multiplicity of interpretations, but with the freedom it affords, it simultaneously leaves space for the emergence of colonial practices. Black and Solomos trace the connection between colonialism and racism back to the late nineteenth century and point to "the linkage of colonised peoples with images of the 'primitive'" (14). Sal seems to perpetuate this attitude in *On the Road*, further affirming his distance from the African-American characters that he nonetheless desires to resemble. Hill comments on the narrator's adopted practice of blackface, and goes on to expose its limitations: "one can put on the mask and pretend to be the other but never truly exchange worlds and take up residence in the

other's space" (146). Sal can only stretch his identification to the occasional performance of negritude: "*like* an old African-American cotton-picker" (88) (my italics) or *the expression of the desire* to reach towards African-American identity. Obviously, Sal cannot resemble an old African-American worker, not only because of the simulation implied in his conception of the African-American image, but also because of his more privileged social condition. Moreover, the "fact of blackness" also prevents the narrator from complete identification with African-Americans. A contemporary of Kerouac, Franz Fanon, explains: "I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (116). Obviously, Sal cannot resemble the physical appearance of an African-American, unless he resorts to extremely caricaturesque gimmicks, and although Kerouac spares his narrator the display of such witlessness, the naive romanticizing of Sal's views is emphasized yet again.

Thus, "the great fellahin peoples of the world" (*On the Road* 89) turn out to be simulacra fabricated to satisfy a need for white identity assertion, and Sal's performance of African-American identity is enacted within the framework of dominant white discourse. Gibson asserts that "the White creates the Black" (74), and the narrator's simulated image of the Fellaheen ultimately serves to reproduce this white colonizing mentality. Despite the apparent fascination that the Fellaheen exercise upon him, the narrator fails to recognize their individuality and tries to construct them according to his social training in the ways of the western world, and in particular, of white culture's more hegemonic and dominant nuances.

As if Sal's simulated image of African-Americans as happy carefree people were not extravagant enough, Dean goes on to provide another image of the African-American: "Man, do you imagine what it would be like if we found a jazzjoint in these swamps, with great big black fellas moanin guitar blues and drinkin snakejuice

and makin signs at us?” (142). African-Americans are thus explicitly associated with swamps, filth and grotesque gesticulations. Dean here reproduces white stereotypes that validate Gibson’s argument that colonialism caricatures all kinds of cultural rituals, such as black magic, primitive mentality and animism (79). The image Dean projects casts the African-Americans as inferior creatures given up to primitive instincts; they cannot even speak: they moan, or gesticulate. This simulated image of the African-American takes us back to an extremist Pre-Abolitionist discourse that Dean Moriarty is here brought to recycle. He goes so far as to deny his simulacra of one of the most basic human attributes, the ability to speak. Deprived even of this, his simulacra are degraded to a sub-human level. The absurdity of Dean’s comment in this instance most forcibly exposes the flawed aspects of the main characters’ simulated constructions.

Moreover, Sal’s reaction when he is faced with the reversal of the African-American stereotype is striking: “The old Negro man had a can of beer in his coat pocket [...] and the old white man enviously eyed the can and groped in his pocket to see if *he* could buy a can too. How I died!” (165). The subtle irony that Kerouac has infused in this statement is remarkable; it would appear that Sal is questioning his own constructedness of simulacra. By expressing his shock at the reversal of social norms, the narrator implicitly acknowledges his acceptance of them and consequently undermines his own alleged affiliations with the Fellaheen. We see thus that Sal’s image of the Fellaheen is “always already reproduced” (*Simulations* 146) to support the narrative. Fabricating such an image of African-Americans, Paradise places them in a hyperreal universe, where he expresses a desire for “authenticity” and simultaneously tries to reproduce it through them, but in a manner that accommodates his own and mainstream Cold War culture’s vision. Although he expresses a yearning

for identification with the African-American Fellaheen, he constantly misses the fact that what he wants to identify with is his simulations of them, which are, moreover, based upon dominant white culture's practices. It is this tension that Sal is not able to fathom, let alone master. And it is in this sense that all conceptions of African-Americans as "the real" people not only lose validity but ultimately serve to parody Sal's quest for "authenticity". Sal's identity becomes dissolved amidst layers of simulation, and it transpires that his effort to become one of the Fellaheen in the hope that this will vouchsafe him an authentic existence is doomed to fail. The contradictions in Sal's character reflect the social tensions of 1950s America. Kerouac's characters are often brought to reproduce the dominant ideology of Cold War America so as to lay bare its inadequacies. The construction of exaggerated African-American images reveals the absurdity of the social structures that nurture them, and the tension created by the reproduction of such ideologies often produces a parodic effect that ultimately undermines and subverts them.

It is similarly simulated images that the characters of *On the Road* project upon Native Americans, which constitute the other major ethnic group in the novel. Again Dean's attitude reveals considerable misconceptions, as he expects to find a place in South America "where the Indians are seven feet tall and eat cocaine on the mountainside" (209). Dean's expectations with regard to the indigenous population are suggestive of significant confusion, and the disrespectful nuances of his remark emerge with particular force. Native Americans are virtually portrayed as idle junkies, having an appearance that verges on the grotesque. Dean here constructs an image of the Fellaheen as passive creatures, who can, consequently, be easily subordinated, modelling the Native American Fellaheen image upon white culture's stereotypes. It

is similar ideologies that seem to govern Sal's own constructions of the Mexican Fellaheen image.

### **“We Mexicans”**

The significance of the Mexican Fellaheen in the novel becomes apparent from early on; whether in Sabinal in North America, or actually in Mexico, Sal Paradise is enthusiastically drawn to the Fellaheen lifestyle. However, it is not before long that the particularity of his perceptions of the Fellaheen is exposed. The narrator's idealization of the Fellaheen lifestyle is vividly manifested in his remarkable disregard for their actual living conditions. In Sabinal he is unable to see the tragedy of the fact that his friend Ponzio has to sleep in his truck, because he no longer has a home. Similarly, he does not seem to realize the anxiety behind Mexican Terry's question: “where we going to sleep tonight, baby?” (84). He has already made up his mind that he would enjoy “living in a tent and picking grapes in the cool California mornings” (81), refusing to consider the actual hardships of such a life. His idealizing tendency is obvious even on the level of language, when he interprets *mañana* as “a lovely word and one that probably means heaven” (85). The narrator claims that he understands the meaning of *mañana*, but he interprets the word wrongly. *Collins Dictionario Ingles Nuevo* translates “*mañana*” as “tomorrow”, “future” and “morning”, and although Mortenson believes that “rather than designating a fixed time, the use of the word ‘*mañana*’ allows for open-ended possibility in the future, which is precisely why Sal thinks it ‘means heaven’”, there is no indication that the Fellaheen future will improve. In fact, this is not likely to occur; therefore, the positive connotations of *mañana* only hold for Sal himself. It is this

fabricated image that Sal Paradise wishes to believe in, sanctioning the simulacrum of carefree Fellaheen existence, when, as we shall see, his mere depiction of the Fellaheen living conditions indicates otherwise.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin see the insertion of untranslated words as a “device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness” (*The Empire* 64). Sal appropriates the word *mañana* in order to lessen the (at least linguistic) distance between him and his Fellaheen; however, by providing the wrong translation, he fails. As a result, language is released from “the myth of cultural authenticity” (Ashcroft et al., *The Empire* 66). Sal’s erroneous translation reveals the problems inherent in his conception of “Fellaheen authenticity”, and exposes Sal as a colonizer of the Fellaheen language, albeit a deficient one. Considerable irony is implied here, as Sal’s deliberate attempts to approach the “authentic Fellaheen mode of being” are simultaneously undercut by his misinterpretation of their language.

Sal’s particular use of *mañana* indicates that he is not free from the Cold-War conditions that enabled his creation as a fictional character, as he adopts a linguistic practice that is highly compatible with the era. Ann Douglas remarks that “Cold war-speak, like cold war military activity, was a form of extreme displacement, language split off from visible reality” (81). The narrator unwittingly reproduces a Cold War mentality: with the same ease that language was manipulated in Kerouac’s times to suit the Cold War policy of containment, Sal displaces the actual meaning of *mañana* to stand for “Heaven”.<sup>35</sup> In order to create his ideal “Paradise”, Sal Paradise twists language around and transfers meanings, in the same way that Kerouac’s contemporaries did. The irony inherent in Sal’s use of *mañana* reaches new peaks with his vision of Mexican Rickey “in New York, putting off everything till *mañana*”

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<sup>35</sup> Providing an example of language manipulation in a Cold War context, Ann Douglas cites the US psychiatric practice to use the word psychopath “to designate a person beyond the reach of society’s values, one who failed to internalize the norms of social behaviour”(80).



(*On the Road* 90), when it is highly doubtful that Rickey would have been able to adhere to the patterns of his Fellaheen life in hectic New York.

When not trying to actively express himself in Spanish, the narrator tries to reproduce the Mexican dialect: “Thassall! [...] Welcome Mehico. Have good time. Watch you money [...] Everything fine. Is not hard enjoin yourself in Mehico” (250).<sup>36</sup> However, Sal Paradise is not a Mexican; moreover, he is not a recording machine; hence, he cannot possibly offer an exact reproduction of this dialect, and merely manages a simulation.

Interestingly, the Fellaheen dialect deviates from Standard English and ostensibly exhibits grammatical and syntactical digressions. Whether this divergence from white language can be taken as an affirmation of the power of the Fellaheen to appropriate mainstream English according to their own needs, Sal’s particular appropriation of it nonetheless bears witness to a colonizing mentality, one of the main features of which “is control over language” (Ashcroft et al., *The Empire* 7). Cleverly, Kerouac does not allow Sal to offer a “white” rendition of Fellaheen language; rather, Sal attempts to reproduce the dialects as he perceives them. Filtering them through his own conception of what Fellaheen dialects should be like, Sal wants to appropriate, and then master Fellaheen speech. Language is thus another tool for the textual construction of simulacra, which not only behave according to Sal’s prefabricated image of them, but now speak in the same manner as well. In this context, a discussion on “authenticity” is highly problematic, as in his appropriation of the Fellaheen language the narrator complicates the distinction between “authenticity” and counterfeit, even on a linguistic level. When he confronts the Fellaheen people in their own land, he realizes: “It was hard to come around without a

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<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere in *On the Road* Sal attempts a reproduction of the African-American dialect: “Lord, I ain’t never been there and they tell me it’s a real jumpin town but I ain’t got no cause complainin where I am [...] I tole you”(181).

common language” (259). Indeed, there are evident misunderstandings in their communication: “What do you *talk* about?”/”Talk? Yes, we talk” (259). This is a most interesting instance of Sal’s confronting his simulacra. In addition to the obvious level of a difference in language, as the Fellaheen speak in Spanish and the narrator in English, there is a deeper level of signification here. Sal and Dean’s position of superiority is subject to questioning. It appears that the simulacra now resist interpretation; the simulation becomes overwhelming and causes complications that expose Sal and Dean’s inadequacy to live up to their simulated constructions.

The problems connected with Sal and Dean’s simulacra are further exposed as the over-romanticizing extravaganza persists. When Sal and Terry move into a tent, it is described as having “a bed, a stove, and a cracked mirror hanging from a pole”. The narrator patronizingly adds: “it was delightful” (85). Further on, the description of Terry’s house is dismal: “Flies flew over the sink” (90). That Sal perceives this as a standard “California home” is disturbing (91). The narrator here is so impressed by the exotic aura that surrounds his Mexican girlfriend’s relatives that his perceptive faculties are affected. Huggan has defined the exotic as a description of “a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* - one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery” (13). It is exactly this perception of exoticism that can account for Sal’s behaviour. By temporarily living their life, and getting romantically involved with a Fellaheen woman, Sal comes as close as he can to the domestication of his Fellaheen. However, the apparent distance between them is never overcome. To a large extent this is due to the fact that Sal does not ultimately wish to bridge this distance, despite his claims to the contrary. That he is fond of this exoticism that envelops the Fellaheen but simultaneously keeps them at bay is already

detectable in Sal's particular interpretation of *mañana*, but perhaps it is most strongly articulated in his rapid expression of feelings of discontent with their lifestyle.

Therefore, his identification with the Mexican Fellaheen in his bold assertion: "we Mexicans" (88), is from the start problematic, and serves to highlight Sal's enjoyment in performance. Nonetheless, the degree to which Sal can keep up with the performance of the identity of the racial other is questionable. Having distanced himself from the Fellaheen, referring to them as "the little people I loved" (87), he subsequently emphasizes his conception of himself as a Mexican: "they thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am" (88).<sup>37</sup> To add to the obvious tension created by these contradicting statements, Sal refers to Terry's child as his "baby boy" (85); the assumption of this role of surrogate father to the Fellaheen child however is only passing, and before long Sal has no inhibitions to abandon his adopted son, thus exposing the uneven terms on which the identification is performed. The racial cross-dressing that is at work here reveals Sal's power to choose the persona he prefers at will. Sal's identification with the Mexicans can indeed be viewed as a passing whim and suggests a certain playfulness on his part, as it lasts for only fifteen days. The narrator delights in performing a Mexican identity which he can easily discard whenever he so wishes. Not only does Sal construct Fellaheen simulacra, he goes on to cast himself in that image. He thus turns himself into a simulacrum to fit into the image of the Fellaheen simulacra he and his Cold War culture have constructed. Vine Deloria Jr. has claimed that "the white man knows that he is alien and he knows that North America is Indian - and he will never let go of the Indian image because he thinks by some clever manipulation he can achieve an authenticity which can never be his" (qtd. in Weaver 228). There is a significant degree of manipulation involved in

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<sup>37</sup> This identification is stronger in the Scroll version, which reads: "They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and I am" (198).

Sal's approach to the Fellaheen, and his desire to be "authentic" through the assumption of a Mexican identity remains inconclusive, to say the least.

Sal's affinities with the Fellaheen are not exhausted in his identification with Mexicans and African-Americans and the occasional attempts to appropriate their language, but expand to include other ethnicities. In fact, the ease with which Sal is willing to perform various racial identities is striking: "I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned" (163-4). Leaving aside the critical trend that is "so concerned with denouncing or defending his [Kerouac's] patronizing representations in this passage", Saldaña-Portillo detects here "a genuine ambivalence about the ideal of white freedom" (96). The use of inverted commas around 'white man' validates her viewpoint, as they act as markers of the author's awareness of the constructedness of 'white male' identity. It is white social structures that dictate the fabrication of the exotic Fellaheen simulacra, and although the narrator expresses the desire to discard his white persona in favour of an exotic Fellaheen one, the interchangeability of this racial pell-mell suggests that his understanding is considerably limited. Sal's blindness to racial differences is striking; he filters his perceptions through white culture's frames of reference, and subsequently applies this processed image to his Fellaheen, creating a simulation that pleases him. Sal's Fellaheen are quasi-identical simulacra that spring from Kerouac's cultural repository of available images and are subsequently adjusted to fit the needs of the narrative. This process of fabrication of simulacra is contradictory to the alleged purity of Sal's vision. Although *Paradise* light-heartedly unites all his Fellaheen under the rubric of racial otherness, the poignant differences between such diverse ethnicities should not be overlooked.

The gross display of cultural ignorance on Sal's part is therefore foregrounded. Huggan has argued that "the exoticist discourses are more likely to mystify than to account for cultural difference" (17), and indeed Sal displays considerable lack of familiarization with the particularities of any ethnic group that is not white American. In this context, further questions are raised concerning the narrator's perception of "authenticity": if "authenticity" is indiscriminately located in all expressions of racial otherness, then this is too vague a categorization, as it cannot account for individual differences. Moreover, Sal's own racial alterity poses additional concerns (he has Italian roots). If Sal is cast as the racial other himself, then why can he not locate any "authenticity" in his own existence, but rather projects this on his exotic Fellaheen? Saldaña-Portillo maintains that through Sal's usage of "a translated, anglicized version of his given name", "the history of racialising Italians gets erased in favour of the de-ethnicised white universal he wants to represent" (97). Indeed, Sal's Italian descent is for the most part underplayed in *On the Road*. Sal does not display any notable concern for his racial hybridity and it would be difficult to say that he appears less American than Dean is. However, if the narrator makes a conscious attempt to project an image of a united brotherhood of whites, this is undermined by the caricaturesque nature of his Greek simulacra: "we gaped at these ancient people who were having a wedding party for one of their daughters, probably the thousandth in an unbroken dark generation of smiling in the sun" (173). Furthermore, no matter how much Sal understates his Italian background, this emerges when he suggests a journey to Italy (172). At any rate, the fact remains that the narrator is particularly concerned with safeguarding his status as a member of the dominant white masculine order. Sal's constructions of ethnic simulacra become more complicated when the focus

shifts to the gendered manifestations of the racial other, as we have seen in the case of “Walter’s wife”.

Although the narrator engages in a brief romance with a Mexican woman, it is not before long that he decides to depart: “I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back. I shot my aunt a penny postcard across the land and asked for another fifty” (89). Unable to keep his white identity on hold for longer, he turns to his aunt; in other words, he resorts to his middle-class background for assistance, admitting that in his involvement with the Fellaheen he was merely “adventuring in the crazy American night” (91). His affair with Terry is indicative of his reproduction of the mainstream’s objective “to keep the margins exotic - at once threateningly strange and reassuringly familiar” (Huggan 22). The Mexican Fellaheen pose exactly this challenge for Sal, and he responds to it by temporarily sharing the Fellaheen lifestyle, but at the same time retaining the right to opt out at his convenience. While mixing with Terry’s people, the narrator goes to lengths to establish a bond with them, but at the same time always keeps them at a distance. Sal refuses to introduce the Fellaheen into the mainstream. This would not be socially acceptable, and Sal does not appear to wish to challenge his society so openly. He keeps his blending with the Fellaheen on the safe side; this is why he spends only two weeks with them in San Joaquin, and then subsequently visits their land for further Fellaheen experiences in the knowledge that he can go back to his previous lifestyle when he so desires. It is precisely the potential threat of the margins taking over his “white ambitions” that compels him to abandon “a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley” (164), not managing to finally transgress the prevalent social norms of his times.

An overview of social circumstances in America at the time Kerouac was working on the novel is revealing of considerable complexity in gender relations.

Ehrenreich notes that even among white people there were still strict norms to be observed: “the possibility of walking out, without money or guilt, and without ambition other than to see and do everything, was not even immanent in the middle-class culture of the early fifties [...] there was no real way out of the interlocking demands of job and marriage” (55). Stability and order were highly valued in Cold War America. Beneath this relatively stable surface however, emerging tensions can be detected. James Gilbert comments on “the implication that conformity is emasculating and that modern mass society is feminizing” in the 1950s (63). He goes on to explain that “mass culture, consumerism, and suburbia were often portrayed as soft, manipulative, seductive, feminine, and weak, while the remedy for contemporary cultural ills lay in the assertion of vigor, criticism, energy, authority, and a whole range of attributes associated with traditional male individualism” (66). Mainstream everyday life was over-refined, and in these conditions emasculation seemed an imminent threat. The Beats felt that this was the right time to start their rebellion; contrary to their simulated counterparts, the beatniks,<sup>38</sup> who according to Ehrenreich were portrayed as effeminate, passive creatures (62, 64), the Beats projected:

a vision of human adventure beside which the commodified wonders of an affluent society looked pale and pointless. Yet their adventure did not include women, except, perhaps as “experiences” that men might have. And in their vision, which found its way into the utopian hopes of the counterculture, the ideal of personal freedom shaded over into an

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<sup>38</sup> Ehrenreich maintains that the beatnik figure was a creation of the media: “By 1959 there were just enough real-life counterparts to the media’s beatniks - college students and arty people drawn to the Beat centers of North Beach and Venice - to give the image credibility” (60).

almost vicious irresponsibility to the women who passed through their lives (171).

Cold War society projected an idea of domesticated femininity in conflict with the Beat lifestyle. To try to partake of such a male-centred way of life posed a substantial challenge to the women associated with the movement. Amy Friedman emphasizes that “while both men and women were writing, reading aloud, editing and publishing, the Beat milieu was male-dominated, with patriarchal attitudes and an overwhelmingly male orientation” (201). Regardless of their individual artistic merit, Beat women were habitually playing second fiddle to the men’s artistic explorations. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Kerouac’s major characters are to a large extent modelled upon patterns of assertive masculinity. Their disposition towards white females prefigures their treatment of ethnic women, who are actually meant to suffer doubly both as females and on account of their race.

### **“Teresa, or Terry”**

Sal’s girlfriend in the first part of the novel, Terry, is Mexican. When Sal sees her for the first time, he suspects that she is “a common little hustler” (75); this image of Terry as prostitute can alone serve to unsettle the narrator’s idealizations of the Fellaheen.<sup>39</sup> Although the narrator admits that his suspicions were “paranoiac” and “a

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<sup>39</sup> This mode of reasoning is reciprocal, as Terry herself cannot refrain from suspecting that Sal is a pimp: “like all the rest I meet, everybody’s a pimp” (76). Mexican women’s suffering under white males finds its expression in Kerouac’s prose via Terry’s distrust of Sal. However, as the narrator largely refuses to evaluate the Fellaheen condition within its social context, he is unable to understand the mentality behind Terry’s comment, is highly offended, and responds by ordering her to leave.



fit of sickness” (75), it transpires that he is nonetheless still not free from the burden of Cold War America’s ideological baggage of white assertion.

The compatibility between Sal’s views and established social norms is illustrated by the fact that “in *Life*, this [the Mexican girl] episode becomes a soft-porn celebration of ‘the delights of drinking with cheap Mexican tarts’” (Ehrenreich 63). Martinez asserts that “the novel reveals a misogynistic and neo-imperialist framework that undermines much of its acclaimed subversiveness” (46). The particular novelty in the romantic affair with Terry is that she is a Mexican woman, and hence qualifies as the exotic other. Although it can be argued that through his involvement with a Mexican Sal overcomes racial prejudice, his conquering disposition towards Terry invalidates such a claim. Terry’s racial alterity exercises a particular sexual appeal for Sal, who thinks that Fellaheen women are endowed with an original and primordial quality; thus, through his involvement with them he hopes to achieve a return to origins. Homi Bhabha explicitly talks about “the fantasy that dramatizes the impossible desire for a pure, undifferentiated origin” (*The Location of Culture* 81). Terry is for Sal the image upon which he can project his colonizer’s fantasy of reaching and conquering that origin. However, it should not be overlooked that the Fellaheen woman’s association with such concepts is the outcome of Sal’s own colonial reasoning. Sal transposes his need for an origin upon the exotic female; she thus becomes a simulacrum, an *image* rather than a person. In Terry’s case, Sal fabricates a simulacrum which satisfies both his desire for a rooted existence and the affirmation of his masculinity. Instead of being approached on its own terms, the Fellaheen female body becomes a hyperreal image; it is the locus upon which colonial male desire is projected. Sal describes “her tiny body [...] her legs were like little sticks. She was only four foot ten” (*On the Road* 76). Such imagery suggests that she

is perceived more like an accommodating doll than a fully developed character. When Sal is cotton-picking, she takes her son and goes to help him (87), and later offers to support him, while he'd "have nothing to do but sit in the grass all day and eat grapes" (89-90). Therefore Terry is portrayed as delicate, readily available, submissive, passive and servile. Conflict is almost absent from Sal's relationship with Terry, despite Sal's claims otherwise when he asserts that "love is a duel" (92). Even when the narrator decides to abandon her, Terry seems resigned to the situation (91). Wishing to leave no space for disappointment, Sal constructs Terry's simulacrum in a way that satisfies his urge to dominate.

That the entire "Mexican girl"<sup>40</sup> story is built upon simulated images that expose the narrator's indulgence in performing the colonizer's role is highlighted by Sal's chosen way of departing: "See you in New York, Terry [...] She was supposed to drive to New York in a month with her brother. But we both knew she wouldn't make it" (92). Sal, however, cannot in fact be sure that Terry knows this; he revels in the projection of a simulated image, one which complies with the imperatives of a colonial attitude towards otherness and simultaneously affirms his white male identity. As Hipkiss perceptively points out, the affair with Terry "is broken off when it threatens male freedom" (19). At this stage, the narrator's hegemonic stance towards his simulacrum appears with full force. In a cruel gesture that refuses to grant any complexity to Terry's already flat portrayal, Sal departs: "With little explanation, Sal leaves Terry to her *fellahin* fate (a fate romanticized by Kerouac but always from a safe distance)" Swartz notes (78), and he later points out that "Kerouac is promoting a male privilege of sexual conquest" (80). The Fellaheen woman ceases to be interesting to the white male once she has been conquered. The affair with Terry was

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<sup>40</sup> This is the title by which this passage was originally published in *The Paris Review*.

only an escapade for the narrator; his masculinity affirmed in his knowledge that he has colonized Terry, he is subsequently anxious “to get home” (94), back to his old life. Once the challenge of the unknown woman or the unknown Fellaheen land, which is similarly “inviting and seductive [...] soft and weak” (Martinez 49), is over, the narrator returns to his familiar white society.

### **“For She Was the Queen”**

Colonization operates on a twofold axis for the Fellaheen women, who are doubly affected due to their race and their gender. Their situation is further exemplified by the Mexican brothel scene. Sal and Dean are yearning to affirm themselves through the Fellaheen women; this will not only validate their superiority but their masculinity as well. Martinez has observed Sal’s tendency of “being ‘Mexican’ in the United States, but becoming ‘white’ in Mexico. This biracialization results in some astonishing shifts” (48). When he finds himself in his familiar American surroundings, Sal is attracted to the exoticism of the Fellaheen, as it presents an escape from the boredom of his everyday life. Interestingly, while in the United States, Sal is happy to apply this exercise of submission to only one female, who is at this stage singled out from the Fellaheen mass and is given a proper name, albeit an Anglicized one: “Teresa, or Terry” (*On the Road* 75). Sal’s hegemonic attitude is displayed along relatively subtle lines in his desire to financially support Terry and her son: “What kind of old man was I that couldn’t support his own ass, let alone theirs?” (87). He appears to be protective of his Fellaheen, albeit in a patronizing way. He feels he has to provide for them because they rely on him, and

although he advances a relationship of dependence, this is veiled under his seemingly good intentions.

However, in exotic Mexico the situation is different; such pretences and social conventions are discarded, and Sal straightforwardly asserts that he wants to “buy señorita” (256). Although it could be argued that this utterance is half-English and half-Spanish because Sal’s knowledge of Spanish is limited, the fact that he decides to perform the language switch to Spanish is suggestive of an arrogant assumption of superiority, and there is obvious tension in the juxtaposition of the two languages. Sal, the imperious Westerner, invested with the privileges that his money grants him, wants to “buy”.<sup>41</sup> The powerful western verb is placed before the Spanish noun: not only is *señorita* female and thus, along the lines of Sal’s reasoning, belongs to the “weaker sex”, but also the use of the Spanish language here positions her among the Fellaheen that Sal wishes to subordinate. There is no indication in *On the Road* that Sal desires to “buy lady” while in America; he does not subject the white woman to the same debasement as the Fellaheen one (unsurprisingly, the woman he settles down with in the end is white). The Spanish word *señorita* further emphasizes the cultural differences that are at play, and it is these differences that Sal uses and manipulates in the exertion of his authoritarian behaviour.

As in the case of Terry, it appears that once again “Sal fetishises impoverished racialised subjects as the condition of possibility for his white freedom” (Saldaña-Portillo 99). Sal chooses to “buy señorita” because he cannot risk his masculinity to be placed under threat in the unknown land. Kerouac shows that in this exotic setting, one woman cannot provide enough confirmation for Sal, and leads his narrator to the

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<sup>41</sup> This attitude is probably motivated by the greater financial prosperity of America at the time. Speaking of the “expansion of the American economy in the post-war years”, Alan Brinkley talks about “the greatest and most dramatic capitalist expansion in American history” (63) and, although in their own land Sal and Dean are not wealthy, in the Fellaheen land they can flaunt their financial superiority.

place where the threat of rejection is minimized: the brothel. In the strange Fellaheen land, lacking the security that his familiar America offers him, this is the one place he can be certain that his white masculine identity is safe. Sal ultimately buys his women in order to safeguard his manliness. His attitude can be seen to bear wider political implications, as manhood and individuality are now associated with expansion and colonization largely made possible by the possession of capital.<sup>42</sup>

The white men see the Fellaheen women in the brothel as largely interchangeable: “Dean and Stan switched the girls they’d had before” (*On the Road* 264). The only girl that the narrator specifically mentions is referred to as “Venezuela” (265). As in the case of “Walter’s wife”, this woman is refused a proper name, and Sal merely remarks that she “came from Venezuela” (262). As Huggan argues, “difference is appreciated, but only in the terms of the beholder; diversity is translated and given a reassuringly familiar aesthetic cast” (27). The Fellaheen prostitutes are deemed as a collective entity existing to give satisfaction to Sal and his friends; Swartz goes so far as to suggest that “sex becomes a perverse spectacle of colonization and consumption. The women are not even whores: they are leeches” (79). The only distinctive features they are permitted are determined by geographical space. Fellaheen women are defined by the Fellaheen land, and it would appear that by buying their services, Sal and his friends are trying to lay claim to the prostitutes’ countries.<sup>43</sup> The simulated image that Sal imposes on the prostitutes allows them an exceptionally limited identity.

However, “in this welter of madness” (263), there was one girl who “glanced coolly and imperiously [...] for she was the queen” (264). Whereas Sal’s limitations as a character do not allow him to realize the full impact of his utterance, the inclusion

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<sup>42</sup> American politics during the Korean War also come to mind here.

<sup>43</sup> Colonizing the prostitute who comes from Venezuela can be seen as a metaphor for colonizing Venezuela itself.

of this comment is indicative of Kerouac's own perspective on the brothel scene. Bhabha has argued that "if the outward show - the simulated *performance* - of obedience is seen as containing the traces of its own resistance, it then becomes possible to envision colonial subjects as tacitly resisting subordination by appearing to embrace it" (qtd. in Huggan 88). Bhabha's statement sheds light on the prostitutes' practice of turning over glasses so as to make the whites pay more for drinks (*On the Road* 262). In the end, the whites are charged with a bill of "over three hundred pesos, or thirty-six American dollars, which is a lot of money in any whorehouse" (264). It would appear that in the Mexican brothel the women have taken on a will of their own, putting on a simulated performance to outsmart their colonizers. Further clarification is in order here: Sal sees that "Mexicans are poor" (264), but as soon as he pronounces this he turns a blind eye to it, and goes on to project a hyperreal image upon the Mexican prostitutes, turning them into the exotic, sensuous, licentious simulations he desires them to be. However, these subjects fight back, and put on a simulated performance of their own; although seemingly accommodating and fitting into the image projected upon them, they are, in fact, opposed to it. The mechanisms that are at play in the text here reveal the depth of Sal and Dean's fallacy and inadequacy, as the Fellaheen women challenge the dynamics of white male power and authority in the novel.<sup>44</sup>

The permissiveness associated with the simulated idea of Mexico is further undermined by "a baby wail in a sudden lull", reminding the narrator that he "was in

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<sup>44</sup> Another example of Mexican Fellaheen resistance to the colonizers comes with the persona of Victor. Although he is ready to take Sal and his friends to the brothel (thus participating in the unpleasant task of aiding the prostitution of his people), he resists total subordination to the white man. Hence, when Dean offers to take him back to the United States if Victor so desires, in another instance of Fellaheen dialect simulation, Victor replies: "I got wife and kid - ain't got a money - I see" (266). Victor's words pose a challenge to white authority, as he refuses to identify with the projected image of the Fellaheen as subordinate and submissive characters.

Mexico after all and not in a pornographic hasheesh daydream in heaven” (265).<sup>45</sup> This sudden interruption unsettles Sal’s hyperreality; the baby’s cry comes to challenge Sal’s idealized simulacrum of Mexican licentiousness. The narrator’s phrase further problematizes the concept of Mexico as “Promised Land”. Mexico’s association with sexual permissiveness and drugs comes to contradict earlier views of Mexico as Edenic Paradise, and the conflicting aspects of Sal’s Mexican simulation ultimately expose its vulnerability.

There are multiple layers operating in the simulation that is the brothel scene, of which the novel’s main characters remain largely unaware. Their construction of simulacra heavily undermines their quest for “authenticity”. Sal and Dean force their colonial gaze upon Native American women, taking no heed of the fact that they construct simulacra dictated by the social exigencies of white masculine assertion. Nevertheless, the ethnic subjects resist, as they do not conform to their simulated images. Thus, the prospect of significant involvement with ethnic women is now invested with considerable irony. In the case of the Fellaheen prostitutes, the very locale chosen, (the brothel), from the outset forbids substantial romance; even in the case of Terry however, the potential for romantic fulfillment is severely challenged, since she is approached as an image modelled upon the narrator’s expectations. In this context, the possibility of a fulfilling relationship with the Fellaheen woman is negated, as Sal’s interaction with the Fellaheen is considerably biased and shaped so as to accommodate his and mainstream Cold War America’s vision.

Eventually, Sal and his friends leave the brothel in the same way they entered it: like colonizers of the Fellaheen land, using the power of money to dominate. Upon

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<sup>45</sup> Another example of Mexican permissiveness is offered by the characters’ “realization that we had never dared to play music as loud as we wanted, and this was how loud we wanted” (261).

their arrival to the brothel, Sal talks of “the good times going on” there (261). When they depart, they leave behind “hundreds of pesos [...] and it didn’t seem like a bad day’s work” (265). However, it remains doubtful whether the Fellaheen share Sal’s perspective on “good times”. Presumably, this is not the case for the prostitutes whose “work” was to offer sexual services. Sal’s judgement is based on purely financial terms, and as with Terry before, he now again chooses to depart once his desires are satisfied. “It was all over” Sal declares, distancing himself yet another time (265). However, “nothing ever ended” (275) for the Fellaheen prostitutes. Refusing to give this fact appropriate recognition, Sal and his friends guiltlessly run away. Sal declares: “So much ahead of us, man, it won’t make any difference” (265). The Fellaheen land is projected as a locus of pleasure; the images of Mexico and the Fellaheen are created as simulations in such a way as to accommodate a predominantly white male hegemonic discourse that sees them as entertaining diversions for the colonizers. In an instance of momentary awareness that undermines the seamlessness of the simulation, the narrator admits that his attitude has been egoistic: “in the poor atomistic husk of my flesh” (276).

Sal and Dean’s egocentrism and hegemonic attitude towards Mexico and its people are also suggested by the transience of their journey through the Fellaheen land. “Our broken Ford, old thirties upgoing America Ford, rattled through them [the Indians] and vanished in dust” (273). They are only passing through Mexico, which has become a simulated hyperreality modelled upon their cultural expectations. Therefore, when they are satisfied that they have fathomed and subjugated it, Mexico is no longer interesting, and Sal and Dean eventually opt out. They know that their stay there is only temporary, and at one instance Sal even heralds the end of the journey (273). Assuming the colonizer’s role, Sal and Dean can manage their affairs



and come and go as they please, validating Chanda's remark that "in 'post' colonial words, instability and volatility apparently mark the social scenario" (487). Having taken what they wanted from Mexico, Sal and his friends ride their car and rapidly exit the postcolonial scene.

### **"Passing Everybody and Never Halting"**

Traffic moves fast in Mexico, precipitating Dean's exclamation: "Everybody goes!" (274). However, the experience of speed is not exclusive to the hyperreal Fellaheen land. Earlier, I discussed Sal Paradise's representation of Hollywood and pointed to its simulated nature. A closer look at the text reveals that Hollywood simulations operate against a backdrop of frantic speed: "Hollywood Boulevard was a great, screaming frenzy of cars; there were minor accidents at least once a minute; everybody was rushing off toward the farthest palm - and beyond that was the desert and nothingness" (78). Hollywood is described as a hectic place bustling with constant movement. However, the barrenness and emptiness beyond the surface of ultra-fast mobility reveal the vacuous nature of the experience of speedy driving. Hence, the constructedness of Hollywood's hyperreality is further exposed, and the pivotal role of speed in the novel is forcefully introduced.

While Baudrillard's views on simulation provide interesting insights into Kerouac's negotiation of race in *On the Road*, they can also be applied to a reading of the experience of speed in the novel. In his travelogue *America* Baudrillard is constantly on the move, hastily traversing the landscape. Richard Lane comments that the position "he takes *passing through* American culture, of necessity situates

Baudrillard in the collapsed perspectival space of the hyperreal” (104).<sup>46</sup> While driving through America Baudrillard takes on two distinct roles that expose the tension inherent in his experience: he is both a transient visitor, and simultaneously a watchful cultural critic. The versatility of his perspectives excludes the possibility of an authoritative point of view. Baudrillard as a subject cannot be contextualized into an objective “reality”, speeding as he is through the American landscape. Moreover, the simulations he encounters have so deeply merged into the “real” that he cannot experience his American journeys outside of this context.

There are many instances in *On the Road* which anticipate Baudrillard’s study of *America*. Brian Turner has drawn a direct parallelism between Baudrillard’s observations and the experiences narrated in *On the Road*, noting a similar kind of flâneurism. He argues that “depthlessness is brought about by cruising through the landscape”, suggesting that in both cases the travels depicted are associated with the hyperreal (153-4). Indeed, *On the Road* prepares the ground for several of Baudrillard’s remarks. Baudrillard talks about “the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways” (*America* 5), and it appears that Sal’s entire road narrative is experienced along these lines in a whirlwind of speed (“the whirlwind road”, as it is eloquently described in *On the Road: The Original Scroll* 212). Fast movement, in turn, can be associated with the hyperreal, since the differentiation between “reality” and simulation becomes problematic under the effect of high speed. Hence, the possibility of meaningful interaction with the landscape is seriously questioned: “with frantic Dean I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it” (187). Sal’s narrative is based on a surface reading of the landscape; it is precisely this quality that fascinates Baudrillard in his own American journeys. Baudrillard points out that

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<sup>46</sup> This feeling of transience is dominant in Kerouac as well; I am here particularly thinking of the “Passing Through” section of *Desolation Angels*.

“driving like this produces a kind of invisibility, transparency or transversality in things, simply by emptying them out” (*America* 7). This experience of emptiness is pleasant for Baudrillard, and he is directly echoing Sal Paradise when he speaks of “the only truly profound pleasure, that of keeping on the move” (53), pointing to the satisfaction that is to be derived from the experience of surfaces. Moving at these speeds, Sal’s “spectral” America resonates with Baudrillard’s own conception of America as “astral” (27).<sup>47</sup> Baudrillard elaborates on this notion, explaining that “everything there seems removed from the reality principle”, and explicitly acknowledges the “artificiality within my sort of fictionizing”, which is inspired by the fictional quality of America itself (*Baudrillard Live* 132). Such an understanding of America does not allow for intense reflection. Baudrillard’s “fictionizing” appears to be influenced by Kerouac’s own creation of fictions, and further heightens the hyperreal quality of the landscape traversed. The simulacrum and the “real” have become so interchangeable for Kerouac’s narrator that his earlier assertion, “but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along” (*On the Road* 93), has limited application. Movement and emptiness challenge the “real” and facilitate the transition into the hyperreal. Speed allows no space for insightful judgement, merely rushed impressions. Not having time to pause and understand his surroundings, Sal can thus with relative ease construct his simulacra.

The sense of hurried movement is reflected not only in the novel’s fast-paced plot and thematic concerns, but also in its structure. The freewheeling dynamics of speed, movement and motion are most forcefully exemplified in the one uninterrupted extensive paragraph that runs through the Scroll version of *On the Road*.

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<sup>47</sup> In this light, the remark on “men and women [...] spitting at the stars” (*On the Road* 179) can be seen as bearing strong ironic overtones, as “astral America” now becomes the object of contempt and derision.

Nevertheless, in his introduction to the Scroll version editor Howard Cunnell points out that the text is “for the most part and contrary to mythology, conventionally punctuated, even to the extent that Kerouac presses the space key before each new sentence” (24).<sup>48</sup> Punctuation issues notwithstanding, the novel’s flowing speech and the speed with which the characters’ words unfurl deserve particular attention. One of the most powerful linguistic manifestations of speed is reflected in Dean Moriarty’s “excited way of speaking” (9). Dean’s explanations are overwhelming when he is just about to leave Camille in the text published in 1957:<sup>49</sup>

‘It is now’ (looking at his watch) ‘exactly one-fourteen. I shall be back at exactly *three*-fourteen, for our hour of reverie together, real sweet reverie, darling, and then, as you know, as I told you and as we agreed, I have to go and see the one-legged lawyer about those papers - in the middle of the night, strange as it seems and as I tho-ro-ly explained.’ (This was a coverup for his rendezvous with Carlo, who was still hiding.) ‘So now in this exact minute I must dress, put on my pants, go back to life, that is to outside life, streets and what not, as we agreed, it is now one-fifteen and time’s running, running - ’ (39)

Dean’s distinct conception of time has been the subject of much critical debate.<sup>50</sup> I will here focus on the rapid pace of Dean’s speech and his particular speech patterns. Here, utterances succeed one another in parataxis, and are only loosely interlinked

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<sup>48</sup> Cunnell’s point is confirmed by Ellis (“Dedicated” 119) and Theado (“Revisions” 21).

<sup>49</sup> Such instances of language use however are not the norm in the novel, and I agree with the general critical consensus that Kerouac’s most audacious linguistic experiments are to be located in other works, such as *Visions of Cody*.

<sup>50</sup> One example is Erik Mortenson’s article “Beating Time: Configurations of Temporality in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*.”

with commas. The word “tho-ro-ly” is broken up, stressing each syllable and thus adding more emphasis. The word is also misspelled: it appears that Kerouac opts for a transcription that favours phonetics. The sentence is abruptly broken off with a dash just as Dean Moriarty is about to run off, almost as if he were chasing after the time that is “running, running -”. Authorial commentary is inserted into Dean’s speech in such a rapid and unobtrusive manner that it is barely noticeable and provides no hindrance to Dean’s torrential explanations. I am transcribing here the passage from the Scroll version, with my added emphasis on the points at which it differs from the 1957 text cited above:

‘It is now’ (looking at his watch) “exactly one-fourteen----I shall be back at exactly **THREE** fourteen, for our hour of revery together, real sweet revery darling, and then as you know, as I told you and as we agreed, I have to go and see **Brierly** about those papers---in the middle of the night strange as it seems and as **I too roughly** explained”-- (this was a coverup for his rendez-vous with Allen who was still hiding)---  
 “so now in this exact minute I must dress, put on my pants, go back to life, that is to outside life, streets and **whatnot**, as we agreed, it is now one-**FIFTEEN** and time’s running, running..’ (146-7)

The capitalization of words (“THREE, FIFTEEN”) conveys more robust overtones than the italics. “Revery” appears with an alternative spelling in the Scroll version; this can either be unintentional, suggesting that in his unobstructed writing Kerouac has little concern for spelling, or it can be read as a deliberate display of disregard for such conventions in order to prioritize the uninhibited flow of speech over

conservative formal considerations. “Tho-ro-ly” appears in place of “too roughly”, a much weaker utterance. Since the emphatic overtones of “Tho-ro-ly” are not necessary in the Scroll, its replacement, “too roughly”, appears in standard spelling. Moreover, the “s” of “so” is not capitalized in the Scroll version, further adding to the sense of flowing language. The capital “S” of the text that was published in 1957, on the other hand, implies a halt. “Whatnot” is also coined into one word in the Scroll text, so as to eliminate the risk of speech slowing down.

There are considerably fewer commas in the Scroll version, allowing for a more unrestrained flow of words. Moreover, the author takes more liberties with the use of dashes. In the Scroll passage dashes replace full stops, and thus more forcefully communicate a sense of orality. Although in the Scroll version Neal’s passage is not as abruptly broken off as its counterpart in the text published in 1957, the dots that mark the end of the sentence suggest that something is left pending. The number of dashes in the Scroll is inconsistent (first we have a set of four dashes, then three, then two and in the final instance another set of three), indicating a lack of concern with punctuation.

In the introductory part of this chapter I discussed the stages of composition of *On the Road* and questioned the legend that the novel was written in three weeks. However, although Kerouac admittedly reworked the material used for the composition of *On the Road* for years, the fact still remains that he did indeed produce one version of the novel typing almost non-stop for three weeks. Cunnell quotes Kerouac’s account of averaging “6 thous. [words] a day, 12 thous. first day, 15,000 thous. last day” (24). Kerouac’s compositional technique precipitated Truman

Capote's indictment that "Kerouac's prose isn't writing, it's typing".<sup>51</sup> Kerouac expresses his discontent at Capote's remark explicitly in his *Selected Letters: 1957-1969* (237). The impact of Capote's intended denunciation has been pointed out by Ronna Johnson in her discussion of the image of Kerouac created by the media: "the sign (the author Kerouac and his art) is negated by the simulacrum (the 'image of Kerouac' and his typing) that consumes and annuls its source in the real" (25). Yuki Gennaka provides an excellent overview of critical responses to the writing/typing binarism, and interprets this dualism as a "literary text versus cultural record" debate (203). Exposing the problematic aspects of the either/or approach with regard to *On the Road*, Gennaka demonstrates how these binary ends converge in the novel, showing that "typing" cannot stand alone as a valid description of the compositional technique of *On the Road*. Marco Abel, for his part, argues that "Capote's judgement is transformed into an excellent *descriptive* evaluation of Kerouac's writing style that immanently resonates with the content, structure, and style of *On the Road*" (249), asserting that:

from the moment of the book's conception, (the) writing (of) (American) (literature) has become typing. In short, Kerouac's poetics, first introduced in *On the Road*, demarcates a new form of writing: not the slow, deliberate sentence of the dominant modernist tradition, but the speedy, visceral, combinatory, over-exuberant conjunction of words that form sentences radically different from their predecessors.

(232)

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<sup>51</sup> On the David Susskind TV show (Abel 232 references Nicosia 588; also in Charters, *Selected Letters 1957-69* 237).

The speed and rhythm of the compositional process itself therefore produces language that is equally fast and pulsating. The unconventionality of the method through which it is produced (virtually non-stop typing) is suggestive of the freshness of this language; speedy composition favours the creation of language that moves beyond conventional formal considerations and rises to new forms and shapes. Processing predictable linguistic patterns through the filter of fast typing, Kerouac emerges as an innovator of language, articulating his own vocabulary, and setting up an influential precedent for future generations of American writers such as Thomas Pynchon.<sup>52</sup> Atop Kerouac's typewriter<sup>53</sup> language is infused with groundbreaking energy; this constitutes a radical turning point in American literature, as new dimensions of artistic expression are opened up. Even the sound produced by Kerouac's repetitious rapid pressing of the typewriter's keys must have contributed towards the general sensation of the urgency of speed. Theado notes that "Kerouac's tremendous feat in typing - some 125,000 words in twenty-one days - stands at the apex of typewriting, a climax at the intersection of typing and literature, the occasion of an artist approaching the peak of his ability while driving the available technology to its limits" ("Revisions" 12). The typewriter assumes a double quality here: on the one hand a symbol of mechanisation carrying connotations of reification, it also physically embodies freedom and new artistic energies, suggesting a physical

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<sup>52</sup> In *Slow Learner* Pynchon acknowledges his intellectual debt, identifying *On the Road* as "one of the great American novels" (xvi). The road theme has constituted a source of inspiration for several authors and filmmakers. Among the most notable road novels that followed in the wake of *On the Road*, Lackey cites Jim Harrison's *A Good Day to Die* in 1973 (141), and turning to road narratives that negotiate representations of ethnicity he discusses Williams' *This is my Country Too* and Fuller's *I Hear them Calling my Name: A Journey through the New South*, published in 1965 and 1981 respectively (116-128). Sorrentino's *The Sky Changes* represents a different take on the road narrative in the 1960s. Among notable films that have engaged with the road motif are the cult classic *Easy Rider* (directed in 1969), Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (originally a book published in 1971 and subsequently made into a film in 1998) and James Fogle's *Drugstore Cowboy* (made into a film in 1989 and published in 1990). In more recent years the road narrative has also been adapted to reflect feminist concerns, as for example in the film *Thelma and Louise* from 1991.

<sup>53</sup> Intended here is a reference to *Atop an Underwood*, a volume containing Kerouac's early stories.



analogue experience. Speedy typing does not allow time for much linguistic trimming and editing, mirroring the way in which the rapid movement of Kerouac's characters does not allow time for a reflective understanding of their environment. The text becomes performative, its language reflecting the characters' progress through space, and the reading process is subsequently defined by the quick pace of the narration, which is even more forcefully communicated in the Scroll version. Hunt emphasizes the performative nature of Kerouac's prose, arguing that "Sal is [...] a performance of Kerouac and *Road* is, in turn, a sequence of performances enacted through what might be thought of as a performative identity (a constructed stance for performing)" (181), and articulated in a kind of performative "typetalking" (182), which he defines as "a recorded performance of talking as if talking to the actual reader" ("Typetalking" 183).

Typewriting enacts "typetalking" in a manner that enables the novel to enact speed and perform movement, at a time when "the new technology [of the fifties] made information available so much faster that audiences could develop and exhaust forms as they had always done, but at unprecedented speed" (Lhamon 25). Influenced by its cultural background, *On the Road* examines the implications of frenetic speed in the main characters' motion. One such instance occurs when Sal's fellow hitchhiker, Eddie, is reported to "ball that jack ninety miles an hour out of sheer exuberance" (18); later, one of the people that offer Sal a ride is said to be "gunning the truck to the limit" (25). However, speedy driving reaches its peak with Dean Moriarty. At the beginning of "Part Two" it is stated that Dean "had come all the way from San Francisco to my brother Rocco's door in Virginia, and in an amazingly short

time” (99).<sup>54</sup> Further on, Sal narrates: “We had come from Denver to Chicago via Ed Wall’s ranch, 1180 miles, in exactly seventeen hours [...] for a mean average of seventy miles per hour across the land, with one driver. Which is a kind of crazy record” (216).<sup>55</sup> In the Scroll version the account of the journey differs from the text published in 1957, offering more detail. Moreover in the Scroll “seventeen hours” is replaced by “23 hours”, and the total of miles covered is “1178 mis. in all. Which is a kind of crazy record in the night” (335). In the 1957 text the accomplishment is more notable, as it also accounts for a total of seven hours of incidents that disrupt the driving. In the Scroll, however, the same incidents are said to have taken place within three hours, allowing for more driving time to cover the mileage. It thus appears that in the 1957 version Kerouac makes a particular effort to highlight the hyperreality of speed. The version that was published in 1957 is a revision of the Scroll, allowing time for Kerouac to more carefully rework his prose and produce the artistic conventions necessary to most effectively convey the depthlessness and liminality of the experience of speed. Although many characters in the novel display a propensity for rapid movement, it is with Dean Moriarty that speedy driving exceeds worldly limits and takes on a hyperreal aspect, as the act of driving is performed at incredible speeds.

Instances of speedy driving abound in *On the Road*, for example when Dean offers to move Sal’s brother’s furniture from Virginia to Paterson, “thirty hours for a thousand miles north and south. But that’s the way Dean wanted it. It was a tough

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<sup>54</sup> The Scroll version reads: “He had come all the way from San Francisco to my sister’s door in North Carolina, and in an amazingly short time” (212).

<sup>55</sup> In Kerouac’s times such a record must have indeed been impressive. Challis has grasped the novelty of this kind of travelling at the period, pointing to “the new post-war mobility awesomely seized for the first time” (50).

trip, and none of us noticed it” (104-5).<sup>56</sup> High speed heightens the hyperreal context of the characters’ driving experience as their senses are now in a numb state. Their perceptive faculties are dulled; in these conditions, Sal perceives everything as a dream: “as in a dream, we were zooming back through sleeping Washington and back in the Virginia wilds, crossing the Appomattox River at daybreak, pulling up at my brother’s door at eight A.M.” (108).<sup>57</sup> The association of extreme speed and dreaming is persistent. On another occasion, Sal and Dean “go 110 and talk and have all the Nebraska towns [...] unreel with dreamlike rapidity” (209). Dream and “reality” fused, they are now cruising on pure impetus. Interestingly, Sal conceives of his past in a spectral manner: “where I had lived and loved and worked in the spectral past” (153). As he is covering very long distances in a very short period of time, temporal boundaries become unclear and blurred. Speed alters Sal’s perception of time; his past can now only be “spectral”, partaking of the same hyperreal quality as his present. The novel thus suggests that speed affects temporal organization, distorting conventional conceptions of time; past experiences are re-considered and re-ordered so as to match the frenetic pace of driving. However, the characters of *On the Road* are not confined to a dream-like understanding of speed; their experience is of a more radical nature: “the unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, of a beyond or a within, it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself*” (*Simulations* 142). Moving beyond the experience of their journey as a dream, the characters arrive at a stage where the “unreal” and the “real” merge into the hyperreal. The faster they

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<sup>56</sup> The characters’ route is as follows: Virginia - Richmond - Washington - Baltimore - Philadelphia - New Jersey - New York - Paterson, and then back: Paterson - New York - New Jersey - Washington - Appomattox river - Virginia. This is a distance of some 800 miles, so it roughly coincides with Sal’s “a thousand miles north and south”. Again here there is a discrepancy between the two published texts of *On the Road*, as the names of the places change in the scroll, revealing Kerouac’s preoccupation with fictionality.

<sup>57</sup> In the scroll version “the Appomattox River” is replaced by “the North Carolina line”, and “eight A.M.” becomes “nine A.M.” (221). These discrepancies yet again reveal the fictionality of the narrative.

move, the more their impression of space is shaped by their movement, to the point where Dean declares: “we know America, we’re at home. I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same at every corner” (*On the Road* 109). As he is cruising through America at a hyperreal speed, he cannot perceive anything in depth nor notice changes. In these circumstances the differences that would normally exist between different geographical locations are eradicated; taken over by simulation individual places become indistinguishably homogenous. Every place in America looks the same because speedy driving allows only for a partial understanding of space. The proliferation of simulated images eliminates individuality. The fleeting quality of fast movement facilitates these arbitrary constructions; not having enough time to ponder on the actual situation of America while rushing through it, Dean projects a simulacrum where everything is “the same”.

Dean’s statement illustrates the degree to which his perception of space is affected by speed. Its implications, however, supersede spatial concerns and can be said to envelop the whole edifice of American society. Viewed in this light, the uniformity of the American landscape can be seen as a trope for the uniformity of mainstream post-war middle class America. Conforming to patterns of popular culture, the average American sought to establish a stable and repetitive lifestyle (life in the suburbs constitutes a major indication of this). Accustomed to the regularity of American patterns, Dean has learned to move through them effectively so as to get what he wants. Set apart from the mainstream by the sense of power that speed grants him, Dean can authoritatively cruise America at will. Moving exceptionally fast through the landscape of the novel, Dean is engaged in the dialectics of speed that inform *On the Road*.

## A Virilian Approach

The vast potential of speedy driving is perhaps best communicated when Sal Paradise reflects upon the distances covered: “We left Sacramento at dawn and were crossing the Nevada desert by noon, after a hurling passage of the Sierras that made the fag and the tourists cling to each other in the back seat” (191). Dean’s rapid movement annihilates distances, advancing a discussion of the implications of speed with reference to the novel’s themes, language and structure. *On the Road* forcefully conveys an imperative for fast motion, rendering Paul Virilio’s theorization of speed and the effects of acceleration particularly relevant here. Virilio advances the theory of “dromology” and explains: “dromology originates from the Greek word, *dromos*. Hence, dromology is the science of the ride, the journey, the drive, the way” (“From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond” 35). In a collection of essays that bears the same title, Armitage defines dromology as “the ‘science’ of speed” (Introduction 1); similarly, Sandy Baldwin describes dromology as the “speed philosophy of Paul Virilio” (134). Whether signifying “race” or “road”,<sup>58</sup> “dromology” can provide illuminating insights, as fast movement is at the core of the novel and accelerated motion constitutes the novel’s driving force. Virilio asserts that “the straight line prefigures high speed” (qtd. in Der Derian 23), and Sal Paradise anticipates this

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<sup>58</sup> Both Der Derian (6) and Redhead (49) translate “dromos” as “race”. However, the term can also be taken to stand for “road”, and additional meanings also include “street”, “course” and “(connecting) route”. “Dromos” originates from the Greek “δραμεῖν” (“to run”), which is the infinitive of the verb “τρέχω”. Etymologically “dromos” probably refers back to the Indo-European stem der- (again, “run”).

standpoint when he talks of the “white line” of the road (*On the Road* 105, 121, 125). Speed plays a decisive role in the characters’ quest for “authenticity”, which now becomes dependent on the various impressions they acquire while rapidly moving through space.

Dromology and simulation are closely connected for Virilio, and he introduces the notion of the “dromoscopic simulation” that is at work in speedy driving, explaining that: “Shrinking its passengers’ field of vision, the frame of the dashboard gives rise to an increase in acceleration of the sequencing that reinforces the effect of the acceleration of the vehicle. The dromoscopic simulation results from this double reduction: that of the distance-time of the trip and that of the narrowness of the frame of the sighting of the dashboard” (*Negative Horizon* 107). Fast driving defines the way in which automobile passengers perceive the world: their optical frame is limited, as they cannot have a panoramic view of their surroundings. Moreover, speed introduces new standards by which time and space are measured. In order to substantiate his theory, Virilio provides an example of how dromoscopic simulation makes inanimate objects resemble animate ones: “the trees that file past on the screen of the windshield, the images that rise up on the television... all substitutes for reality, these apparent movements are only simulacra” (*Negative Horizon* 115). The credibility of the televised images and the impression that the trees are moving are mere side-effects of speed, optical illusions.

In his preoccupation with simulation, Virilio’s thinking is reminiscent of Baudrillard’s. In his discussion of Baudrillard’s conception of speed, Mike Gane introduces Virilio’s work, pointing out the similarities in the two theorists’ concern with speed and simulation, but also noting a significant difference: “Virilio’s ‘simulations’ are representations of the real world, representations which are

substituted for one another as technology develops. Baudrillard's conception of these relations is more complex: the real is not a brute given, but an historically and socially evolved form of appropriation of the world (and replaces other forms through their constant and systematic destruction)" (82). Virilio's simulations are mostly related to the sensory alterations caused by different representations of reality, and do not outright contest the concept of reality. Baudrillard, however, argues that the proliferation of simulated images takes over the reality principle. In Virilio the "real" continues to exist as a concept, albeit distorted by the simulation generated by speed, and he observes that "the real is turned inside out like a glove" (*Negative Horizon* 108). He further clarifies: "To me, what takes place is substitution" ("From Modernism" 43). Therefore, his simulations do not constitute an outright eradication of the real. On the contrary, when Baudrillard speaks of the higher orders of simulacra, he suggests that the distinction between the real and simulation is eradicated because the two are so deeply merged with each other they become indistinguishable. Virilio's theoretical approach has been described as "hypermodernism", an apt term and one that meets Virilio's approval; "hypermodernism" is aimed "not only at intensifying but also at displacing traditional forms of thought about the modern world and the way it is represented" (Armitage, "From Modernism" 26). "Hypermodernism" should not be conceived of as a negation of reality (in the same sense as Baudrillard's hyperreality is), but rather as a challenge upon the ways in which manifestations of "reality" are understood.

Virilio's "dromoscopic simulation" is associated with the technology of speed; his active engagement with technological advancements reveals his intense preoccupation with the social. On the other hand, in his historicizing of simulacra and hyperreality Baudrillard focuses mainly on the problems involved in the

representation of “reality”. Virilio’s ideas can therefore be used to generate a more comprehensive discussion of *On the Road*. The nature of Virilio’s work (his thought largely relies on the mechanics of warfare) might make him appear as an unusual choice for an analysis of *On the Road*. However, I will demonstrate that many of his views on speed and technology can prove useful to this study, as they shed light on the mechanisms that are at work in the speed experience of *On the Road*, and can thus help map previously uncharted aspects of the novel.

Kerouac’s engagement with the road theme follows the line of a long American tradition ranging from Walt Whitman’s poems (Lackey 10), to Sinclair Lewis’ 1919 novel *Free Air* (133-135) and John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 (119). Although initially American mobility was limited due to the relative lack of a proper road network (Bryson 190), when the first railways appeared in the nineteenth century they were particularly attractive in spite of uncomfortable travelling conditions, as they provided Americans with a chance to see and explore their vast country in the spirit of their ancestors. Trains, however, presented a variety of problems as they were slow, monotonous, and especially in the early years, dangerous. Therefore, when the automobile appeared, the nation immediately turned its affections to it. Bryson notes that “the first car most Americans saw was one designed by Karl Benz, which was put on display at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair” (198). The expansion of the automobile was phenomenal; within a short time it became indispensable for Americans and an entire new enterprise evolved around it as car factories proliferated. However, despite the American obsession with the automobile, highways in America were initially scarce. “The Lincoln Highway - the first transcontinental highway in the world” officially opened in 1923 (Bryson 204), while “Route 66 opened in 1926” (Eyerman and Löfgren 56). Nonetheless, it was not



until 1956, when a substantial roadside industry of restaurants, hotels and motels had already grown and flourished, that President Eisenhower put into effect the Interstate Highway Act, launching the construction of 42.500 miles of superhighway (Bryson 211). By this time driving had become a way of life as well as a state of mind. A new lifestyle was shaped, having as its main point of reference the automobile's power to reduce the time needed to move from place to place. In *On the Road*, however, the automobile surpasses this stage, as Dean's driving invalidates the concept of distance. The speed of Dean's movement is emphatically projected: "so now Dean had come about four thousand miles from Frisco, via Arizona and up to Denver, inside four days, with innumerable adventures sandwiched in" (106).<sup>59</sup> Contracting vast territories, Dean prefigures Virilio's particular concern with "the extermination of distances. In less than half a century, geographical spaces have kept shrinking as speed has increased" (134). Virilio believes that "speed metamorphoses appearances" (*Negative Horizon* 105) and that "territory no longer exists except by the violence of the advancing movement" (*Negative Horizon* 112). In Virilio's theory space is defined by speed, and rapid movement radically alters one's perception of space. Focusing on the speed of transportation, *On the Road* heralds these changes and anticipates their systematic theoretization. The leitmotif of the novel can be summed up in Sal's declaration: "the only thing to do was go" (108). However, when he wonders: "where would it all lead" (192), the complications that the characters' rapid movement gives rise to appear with particular force.

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<sup>59</sup> The place names, distance, and time span are the same as in the Scroll version (219). This quote is obscure however, as there appears to be a miscalculation: the San Francisco - Arizona - Denver distance is approximately 1.600 miles. Therefore, it could be suggested that here Sal refers to the entirety of miles that Dean covered after setting off from San Francisco. This route is as follows: San Francisco - LA - somewhere in Arizona - Tucson, Arizona - Las Cruces, Mexico - Denver - Colfax - Missouri - Memphis - Great Smoky Mountains - Virginia - Richmond - Washington - Baltimore - Philadelphia - New Jersey - New York - Paterson - admittedly an impressive accomplishment!

### “Where Would It All Lead?”

On one occasion in the novel the characters move so fast that the speedometer breaks (205). There is, hereafter, no practical way for them to estimate their speed, and they are liable to lose all awareness of the frantic pace they move at. Virilio conceives of the speedometer as a means of controlling speed, and therefore subjecting the individual to realistically imposed inhibitions (*Speed and Politics* 94). Consequently, when the speedometer is damaged, realistic conventions can be overcome. Freed from authoritative restraints, Sal and Dean can now go about their depthless, surface travels unhindered. Movement at such high speeds severely challenges traditional western conceptions of space and time and opens up liberating prospects. Unconstrained by conventions aimed at regulating speed, Sal and Dean are now endowed with a new sense of power. At the same time, however, the damage to the speedometer bears ominous overtones; in addition to the sense of freedom that unrestrained speed grants, it can also display significant side-effects.

Sal’s realization that he is “in the middle of Coyote Nowhere” (205) indicates that his incessant mobility involves an experience of dislocation, further expressed in his subsequent recognition: “I realized I was beginning to cross and re-cross towns in America as though I were a traveling salesman - raggedy travelings, bad stock, rotten beans in the bottom of my bag of tricks, nobody buying” (223). The earlier freshness has now disappeared; repetitious travelling has become pointless. The narrator’s initial energy has waned and the former enthusiasm has worn off. All this speedy going back and forth in America has taken a considerable toll on Sal; he now sees himself as a deterritorialized travelling salesman.

Virilio describes the experience of “deterritorialization as a loss of identity” (*Speed and Politics* 78), and argues: “Our embedding in our native soil [...] has been overtaken by the acceleration of history - by the acceleration of reality itself” (“From Modernism” 27). This situation implies a relativity that, although to an extent liberating, is also associated with alienation, as the human becomes increasingly dependent on the technological. Hrebeniak similarly comments that “distance ceases, along with the fundamental qualities of time-space: duration, extension, and horizon - the modes against which man measures himself” (55). Identity becomes a shifting concept, and in the absence of firm points of reference, Sal’s perception of himself is subjected to modification. Sal is now reduced to the status of a trickster, and, what is more, an unsuccessful one. The narrator associates repetitive speedy movement with deterritorialization and lack of origins. His identity is problematized at other points in *On the Road* as well: “I didn’t know who I was” (15); at this stage however, and having already covered considerable distances, he does not only display identity confusion, but active disenchantment with the identity that the experience of speed has enforced on him. His deterritorialization is not limited to geographical displacement (and hence detachment from home and origins) but also destabilizes his sense of self, which is now defined by the accelerated pace of his movement. If Sal is to continue with his quest he can now only do so in a confused, and predictably unproductive, manner. Kerouac indicates how the narrator’s quest has lost its direction; rather than gaining “authentic” experience, a problematic venture in itself, Sal finds himself transformed into a swindler. Although he has opted for speedy movement as an alternative to a conventional lifestyle, he now sees that this option is not viable either, and his deterritorialization can thus be seen as a parody of his initial intentions. Sal’s identity crisis is better understood when contextualized in “the

deliberately speeding aesthetic of the fifties”, which incorporated “more of the nonlinear complexity of the nature of reality” (Lhamon 135). Whether in Jackson Pollock’s action painting, be-bop improvisations or the emergence of rock and roll, the country evinced signs of an accelerated reality which recognized that “there can be no reality about ends in a matrix shifting so speedily and continually” (135). Under these circumstances identity becomes an elusive concept. The culture of speed which shaped Kerouac’s writing implies constant dislocation and subjects identity to multiple transformations which can, as in Sal’s case, often be disorienting. Towards the end of *On the Road* there is an instance when Sal, while on his Mexican road trip, admits to being directly integrated into the landscape and merging with his surroundings: “the atmosphere and I became the same” (268). Carole Vopat witnesses here:

a loss of self, for the self is projected until it loses all boundaries and limits and, hence, all definition. Sal in the Mexican jungle completely loses his identity; inside and outside merge, he becomes the atmosphere [...] erasing both ego and world, nothing remains save motion and sensation, passive, self-effacing and mechanical. Only the sheer impetus of their frantic, speeding cars holds their scattered selves together. (389)

Sal has abandoned his sense of self; his experience here anticipates Baudrillard’s idea that movement into immense open spaces is absorbed by space itself (*America* 10), and at the same time prefigures Virilio’s notion of deterritorialization. Sal has now become an integral part of his surroundings. His body disappears in the landscape. It

would appear that Sal's individuality has decomposed in the jungle. His identity dissolved, Sal's existence fuses with space. Unable to define himself against a firm geographical boundary, Sal can no longer hold on to any notion of identity. His sense of being has evaporated in speedy driving, and speed has robbed him of a sense of stability and direction. Sal is at the mercy of fast and continuous movement.

### **The Accident**

It is not only accelerated speed that can be disorientating for the narrator however. Ian James directs attention to Virilio's position that "in technologies of speed [...] the axes which orientate spatial experience are disturbed and subjected to different structuring principles - those of the experience of speed, and specifically of acceleration and deceleration" (325); hence, it is not only accelerated driving, but deceleration as well that can have an impact on narrative sequence.

Immobility is upsetting, as it disturbs the temporality of *On the Road*. Time seems to freeze: "Suddenly he stopped the car and collapsed [...] His face was down on his good hand, and the bandaged hand automatically and dutifully remained in the air" (191). Not much unlike a machine that has run out of fuel, Dean runs out of energy and collapses. The image is almost caricaturesque; the narrative cannot advance further, and there is a pause. The characters now have to wait for "poorchild Angel Dean to wake up again" (192). When a static moment is described, the narrative slows down, and focuses on a particular time frame that cannot be shaken, unless mobility is reinstated.

Liberating as speed may be, it is not beyond harm, and it is not before long that an accident occurs in the novel: "In the morning the car skidded on an icy hill and

flapped into a ditch” (102). High-speed cruising has been interrupted, and the accident that takes place compels the characters to sudden immobilization. “From the Latin *accidens*, the word ‘accident’ signifies what arises unexpectedly - in a device, or system or product; the unexpected, the surprise of failure or destruction” (Virilio, *The Original Accident* 70). The automobile accident carries with it the element of surprise; partly because of its unexpectedness, its disruptive power is significant. It interferes with the characters’ plans and causes temporary stasis. Virilio argues that “the accident is inseparable from *the speed with which it unexpectedly surges up*. And so this ‘virtual speed’ of the catastrophic surprise really should be studied” (*The Original Accident* 12). High speed engenders the unexpected, with disastrous consequences. The main focus is now upon the shock value of the accident, which remains forceful, despite the fact that “each and every invention of a technical object has also been the innovation of a particular accident” (Virilio, “From Modernism” 26). In *Pure War* Virilio elaborates on the intricate connection he sees between technological advances and the accident: “every technology produces, provokes, programs a specific accident” (qtd. in Crogan 171). The accident in turn leads to the fractalization of space, where “dimensions are no longer whole, they are broken up.” Virilio explains: “the entire unity of space [...] is deconstructed, fractionalized. This is what I call an ‘accident’” (“From Modernism” 33). Spatial, and by implication, temporal unity are disturbed by the occurrence of the accident; obviously, the faster the movement through space, the more forceful the impact of the accident when it occurs.

Speed and accident are interconnected; perhaps this is what is meant by Sal’s description of Dean as being “all troubles and ecstasy and speed as ever” (225). Enticing as speedy driving can be, it also engenders high risk. Eventually Sal expresses a fear of high speed, and he recoils to the back seat (213, 215). He

apprehensively counsels Dean: “you’re really going much too fast” (206). Dean refuses to heed Sal’s words of warning though and, as a result, once again confronts the grim aspects of speeding, as soon another accident occurs:

And he was flying along there on that slippery mud [...] and Dean socked the wheel over to make it but the big car skidded in the grease and wobbled hugely.

‘Look out!’ yelled Dean, who didn’t give a damn and wrestled with his Angel a moment, and we ended up backass in the ditch with the front out on the road. (206)

Once more here speedy travel is brought to an abrupt halt; when the medium that makes speed possible breaks down, there is considerable disarray. External help is now sought, and after both accidents a farmer comes to aid Sal and Dean.

The description of this accident conveys an additional sense of ecstasy and Dean appears to be in a state of trance for an instant, as he “wrestled with his Angel.” Just at the point when the accident occurs, Dean is in a frenzy. Prompted by another crash narrative, Sandy Baldwin is led to suggest that “high velocity produces a delirium broken only by the crash” (130) and that “the ecstasy of the crash illuminates the internalization of speed [...] the merging of driver and machine” (131).<sup>60</sup> His attempt to prevent the accident having failed, Dean is now in a delirium that culminates in the characters’ deviation from their route and their landing in a ditch in a prairie. Stillness follows this abrupt unforeseen termination of the characters’

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<sup>60</sup> The narrative that Sandy Baldwin refers to here is that of Craig Breedlove: “October 15, 1964. A year later, Craig Breedlove will set the world land speed record at 600 mph on the Bonneville Salt Flats of Utah, driving a metal shell with a B-47 bomber engine strapped to its back-side, but on this day he loses control at 400 mph, shears off a few telephone poles, sails airborne and upside down, and lands in a pond” (129).

speedy road continuum.<sup>61</sup> When the accident occurs, it creates disturbance and disorder. Crogan goes on to discuss Virilio's conception of the accident, applying it directly to the case of the car accident:

The accident is unforeseen; when it happens it changes everything suddenly, like a vehicular accident that violently and unexpectedly breaks a journey [...] the accident threatens the possibility of achieving a rational, homogeneous, linear development. While the accident will come to be incorporated in a narrative which will assimilate it after the fact to a sequence of events (the 'original' journey started, the accident happened, new journeys/a delayed journey resulted), the accident will always have been experienced as the irruption of another temporality, other to the anticipated continuity of the journey [...] The accident is this spatio- temporal/conceptual disjunction. (174)

The accident intrudes upon the narrative and forcibly disrupts it. The characters are obliged to slow down and adjust their perception of their surroundings to the exigencies of the new situation. Such disturbance bears considerable social repercussions, given that efficiency and prosperity in Eisenhower post-war America were highly connected with mobility. Kuznick and Gilbert point out that after 1945, there was considerable "physical movement of Americans out of older eastern and

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<sup>61</sup> In this sense, Kerouac has Dean Moriarty fail where Virilio seems to emerge triumphant. In an interview with *Der Derian* Virilio declares that he is in love with technology. Knowing that this statement comes in direct contradiction to Virilio's general avoidance of technology, *Der Derian* concludes that Virilio "wrestled with the angel of technology not to prove his disbelief, but to prove his *freedom* to believe" (6). Considering Dean's struggle "with his Angel" along similar lines, we witness his defeat, as ultimately the debilitating accident occurs.



midwestern cities into the suburbs. Huge population shifts occurred as Americans moved from these same, older urban areas into the West, the Southwest, and the South” (6). This movement was associated with upward class mobility, as the suburbs were promoted as emblems of prosperity. The people who lived in the suburbs were highly dependent on their cars for a variety of everyday activities: driving was an integral part of their lives, whether for business or entertainment purposes. In Cold War America success became largely connected with the ability to move quickly, whether this involved class mobility, or automobile motion. The more mobile one was, the more prosperous one was deemed. Therefore, viewed through the lens of the mainstream social practices of Kerouac’s time, the enforcement of stasis caused by the automobile accident can be seen as bearing potentially disastrous consequences.

The disruptive power of the accident is reflected on the level of narrative composition as well, as the narrative slows down when accidents occur. The first accident is described in short paratactic sentences. Whereas in other parts of *On the Road* entire paragraphs are devoted to the intensity of one particular moment, when an accident occurs the narration suddenly becomes detached and condensed: “A farmer offered to help them out. They got hung-up when they picked up a hitchhiker who promised them a dollar if they’d let him ride to Memphis” (102). The accident is only mentioned in passing, as if a detailed account of it would put the narrative under threat of dissolution. Although little space is reserved for the accident’s depiction, the syntax in which it is articulated suggests the interruptive power of the accident. Small straightforward sentences are typically chosen to describe an accident: towards the end of his first trip to Denver, the narrator observes: “Everything seemed to be collapsing [...] Babe slipped and fell flat on her face” (50). Here, the characters’ physical deterioration is suggestive of the narrative’s own. The text performs

deceleration; Kerouac's prose is shaped so as to reflect the incapacitating results of the accident. Kerouac generally refrains from linguistic experimentation when the impending end of a journey is stated, and resorts to flat and almost clichéd ways of writing. Whereas at other parts of the novel phrases such as: "Blowblowblow!", with their breathless repetition of encouragement and improvisational zest, aid the narrative's propulsive drive (182), and onomatopoeic words like "zoom!" (165, 209) and "*hump, snap*" (8) express the intensity of speedy experience, the accident poses major disturbance to the narrative flow. Even the impending threat of an accident affects the form of the narrative. Linguistic stability is called upon to counterbalance the breakdown of the narration and safeguard the text from collapsing under the weight of the accident.

However, as the narrative moves forward, it appears that this writing mode is no longer adequate to convey the intensity of the progressive deterioration. Towards the end of the novel, Dean's speech breaks down dramatically: "He couldn't talk any more [...] But he forgot what he wanted to say. 'Really listen - ahem. Look, dear Sal - sweet Laura - I've come - I'm gone - but wait - ah yes.' [...] 'Can't talk no more - do you understand that it is - or might be - But listen!'" (278). So far, the description of the accident on the level of plot has carried with it the risk of a textual accident. In order to avoid textual and structural disintegration, and to establish linguistic stability, the author has resorted to highly conventional syntax. Now, as the novel nears its end, Kerouac wants to foreground the impact of speed on its most ardent champion, Dean Moriarty. Simple straightforward language is not sufficient to demonstrate the degree of Dean's decline anymore. Linguistic stability can no longer counterbalance the disruption caused by the accidents, and Dean's language becomes exceedingly disjointed, his words repeatedly divided by dashes. This is far removed from the bold

and happily assertive linguistic torrents that Dean indulges in (as in the lengthy quote about time I cited on page 79). It is also distinct from Dean's linguistic manoeuvres elsewhere in the text, for example when he tries to explain: "just as we passed that other lamp I was going to tell you a further thing, Sal, but now I am parenthetically continuing with a new thought and by the time we reach the next I'll return to the original subject, agreed?" (224). Although the disorderly nature of Dean's erratic shifting from one thought to another prefigures the linguistic disintegration that is to follow, Dean here still manages to put his intention across. In contrast to these earlier examples, however, Dean's final speech represents a failed attempt to communicate coherent meaning. Dean declares: "I've come - I'm gone", uttering these contradictory meanings almost simultaneously and thus further adding to the confusion created by his already indecisive mutterings. Therefore, when later on he attempts to redress the balance maintaining: "But of course, Sal, I can talk as soon as ever" (278), his utterance fails to convince.

The accident thus causes narrative disruption. However, apart from the obvious impediments it inflicts upon meaningful interaction between the characters, Dean's linguistic breakdown also bears stylistically challenging aspects, as his experimentation with syntax produces unconventional writing. Fragmented language can thus be perceived either as an indication of textual crisis or as a radical writerly gesture, introducing a textual tension that cannot be easily resolved. However, rather than a handicap, this tension is emancipating, as it invites a multiplicity of not necessarily mutually exclusive interpretations. Dean's linguistic accident can thus be seen as a failure or, alternatively, as an act of rebellion. In the latter case, it introduces a discourse of power that is associated with the mechanics of speedy driving and the logistics of the accident.

There is another instance in *On the Road* when the occurrence of an accident leads to an accusation of theft: after their involvement in a minor automobile accident with an African-American character, Sal and Dean are stopped by the police (214). The policeman has been informed that the two characters are driving a stolen car, and there is considerable delay until the falseness of the accusation is proved. Here the accident not only leads to immobilization, but it also invites a consideration of the power dynamics at work in Sal and Dean's interaction with the policeman; the control of speed arises here as a serious issue with significant implications in the novel. Moving exceptionally fast through various locales, Sal and Dean are engaged in an intricate matrix of power dynamics, most vividly exemplified in their interactions with the law.

**“You Can't Stop the Machine!”<sup>62</sup>**

The above, however, is not the only instance when Sal and Dean interact with the law; the characters have already been stopped by the police: “we had a speeding ticket in spite of the fact that we were going about thirty. It was the California license plate that did it” (109-10). Here a higher political authority acts as a conditioning factor, preventing speed from reaching extreme and therefore potentially menacing degrees, in a manner that anticipates Virilio's views on the political implications of technological acceleration. “The reduction of distances has become a strategic reality bearing incalculable economic and political consequences, since it corresponds to the negation of space” (*Speed and Politics* 133). Fast driving upsets the spatio-temporal continuum and consequently the established power relationships that operate within it.

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<sup>62</sup> This quote cancels out the earlier imperative to “Stop the machine!” in *Windblown World* (229).

Directly engaging with the political, Virilio declares that “speed is power” and that “it is of paramount importance to analyze acceleration as a major political phenomenon” (“From Modernism” 35). He sees speed as a controlling factor. Examining the impact of high speed on urban space, he reads the contemporary city “as a machine whose streets act as channels for rapid communications” (Leach 74). Those who are in control of speed regulate the transmission of information and thus the dissemination of knowledge. Moreover, fast movement affords an increasing sense of power. Virilio argues that “this *intoxication of grandeur* that drives us to pass certain levels of acceleration is formidable. The grandeur of the world, its spatial extension is suddenly confused with the will to power of those driving” (*Negative Horizon* 112). The power dynamics that acceleration gives rise to thus affirm that “dromology was always, then, a political theory, not some kind of ‘objective’ commentary on technology and society” (Redhead 60). Virilio identifies strong political overtones in the laws of the speed limit, which “remind us of the continuity of displacement, of movement, that only the speed laws modulate. The city is but a stopover [...] where the spectator’s glance and the vehicle’s speed of displacement were instrumentally linked” (*Speed and Politics* 5-6). When state control interferes, speed is under threat; speedy driving is subjected to the vigilant eye of the law and eventually disturbed by the enforcement of lawful order. This abrupt intrusion constitutes an interruption to the characters’ accelerated cruising. Speed laws slow the automobile down, and thus enforce stillness. The characters’ speedy experience is disrupted, as they are obliged to stop their fast travelling and confront the agents of civilian power in America.

There is a similar occasion in *On the Road* when Dean “gunned the car up to eighty, bad bearings and all [...] the cop took after us with his siren whining. We were stopped” (122). The intervention of the law once again forcibly and immediately

inhibits the driver's freedom, imposing immobilization. Later on, when Sal and Dean stop in Denver, they are described as causing "a horrible mess" (202). The Denver incident affirms that (even voluntary) stasis at a particular locus can create confusion and disarray. Dean and Sal's alternative to this decomposition is to seek refuge in the "protective road" (203). In this case motionlessness would have fatal consequences, as the characters risk being stopped and again subjected to the compliance measures of the law. However, their decision to continue their speedy cruising introduces a vicious circle, as high speed exposes them again to the risk of an accident and hence further immobilization; thus, the irony of their current appreciation of speed as panacea is revealed.

When stopped by the police Sal and Dean are forced to conceive of space in the new framework that American law ordains. Virilio sees a close connection between state control and speed limitations. He argues that "*it is the polis, the police, in other words highway surveillance [...] confusing social order with the control of traffic (of people, of goods), and revolution, revolt, with traffic jams, illegal parking, multiple crashes, collisions*" (*Speed and Politics* 14). It is a similar process of containment that seems to apply to the control of speed; therefore, Sal and Dean's travels can be viewed as a straightforward confrontation with the established norms of society. Their deviance is expressed through their abandonment to a constant, exceedingly fast driving experience and its consequences. Even in Cold War America where speed is largely associated with prosperity, the necessity to keep the destructive potential of high speed at bay is also recognized, and therefore a degree of moderation is vital. Virilio discusses the powerful impact of the dissemination of fear (*Speed and Politics* 39), and alludes to "the balance of terror" (147), which in Cold War America was sustained by the Red Scare. He is particularly preoccupied with "the quarantine

years of the balance of terror between East and West, that Third World War that remained undeclared under the pretext of ‘nuclear deterrence’ between the two antagonistic blocs” (*The Original Accident* 43). The horror aroused when considering the devastating consequences of the disruption of this delicate balance, and the arms race that ensued, further encouraged a policy of containment. The need to preserve the established order thus soon rose to the level of collective psychosis. The “expectation horizon” (43) of nuclear disaster gave the state a powerful means of control. In this context, deviation from conventional standards was objectionable. Unrestricted speed had to be contained, and the speed limitations enforced were widely observed. Therefore, when Dean exceeds the driving standards of Cold War America, he is met with discontent both by the authorities and civilians; this is reflected in the reactions of the passengers in the cars Moriarty drives (*On the Road* 192). Even when there is no straightforward conflict with state regulations, their controlling power is still indirect, for example when the traffic forces Dean to “fall in line at a crawling and miserable sixty” (212), a situation that he cannot tolerate for long.

In *On the Road* driving becomes the dominant activity and its urgency is often overwhelming and supersedes all other concerns: “but we absolutely must make Forty-sixth and Geary in the incredible time of three minutes or everything is lost” (184). The utter necessity of speed and keeping “on the road” is emphasized. The absolute need for the uninterrupted continuance of speedy driving is further highlighted when Dean realizes that his headlights are not working. To the reasonable suggestion: “Maybe we ought to go back, though?” Dean passionately retorts: “No, never - never! Let’s go on” (267). Under no circumstances should there be stasis or backward movement. It would appear that Dean’s life is defined by his ability to move forward, if only just for the sake of motion itself.

In this sense, we could see Sal, and more emphatically Dean as “dromomaniacs” in their defiance of authorities, moving as they are at such high speeds. In Virilio’s “dromology” dromomaniacs are marginal and rather subversive figures. In *Speed and Politics* a subcategory of dromomaniacs includes “the bands of ‘lost soldiers’ of the workers’ army” (4). Later, they are compared to the sans-culottes of the French revolution (20). It is also explained that “dromomaniacs” is a “name given to deserters under the *ancient regime*, and in psychiatry to compulsive walkers” (153). Leach describes them as “the mobile revolutionaries of the modern age” (74). The versatility of the concept indicates its adaptability and the variety of its possible interpretations is suggestive of the complex nature of Sal and Dean’s interactions with the agents of civilian power in America.

Virilio argues that “for the dromomaniac the engine is also a prosthesis of survival” (*Speed and Politics* 94), and Dean’s wellbeing is indeed intractably bound to his driving performance. His bond with the engine is of utmost importance, more than familial or other bonds. The automobile is necessary for Dean’s existence and plays a decisive role in his life. However, the degree of his control over the vehicle is open to questioning, and eventually the road is perceived as an active agent, a subject that is “unfurling and flying and hissing at incredible speeds” (*On the Road* 213). Speed and the dromoscopic simulation that is associated with it determine the framework of Dean’s perception. Now the road appears to be almost alive: the verbs chosen to describe it (“flying, hissing”) would imply an animate entity, and furthermore a very restless one, as they bear connotations of rapidity and unexpectedness. “Hissing”, in particular, could be seen as conveying ominous and sly overtones. Control has now passed from the individual to the road itself. Not much later Dean declares: “This road drives *me*!! [...] he knew the road would get more



interesting, especially ahead, always ahead. He drove like a fiend and never rested” (254). The road has become an autonomous entity, almost with a will of its own. The importance has shifted from the people and their journey to the car and the road. In *Speed and Politics* a striking description is provided of “the armored car: the overman is over-grafted, an *inhuman type* reduced to a driving - and thus deciding - principle, an animal body that disappears in the superpower of a metallic body able to annihilate time and space through its dynamic performances” (Virilio 62). At this stage Dean’s willpower is eliminated by speed. McQuire explains that “from Virilio’s ‘vehicular’ perspective, automobiles are less ‘riding’ animals than frames (in the optical sense), and the self-propelled vehicle is not only a vector of change in physical location but also a new means of representation” (144). Kerouac suggests that in order to cope with such a situation, Dean has to surrender his humanity altogether, and he takes on fiendish and supernatural qualities.<sup>63</sup> The disappearance of the human into the technological, seductive as it may be, also constitutes a severe threat to his individuality. In these conditions, it is not only identity formations, but existence that is at stake.

Speeding thus, and to a large extent managing to escape state-imposed speed limitations (they are constantly speeding, but only twice penalized for it), Sal and Dean here partly contradict Virilio’s suggestion: “Let’s make no mistake: whether it’s the drop-outs, the beat generation, automobile drivers [...] the military-industrial democracies have made every social category, without distinction, into *unknown soldiers of the order of speeds* - speeds whose hierarchy is controlled more and more

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<sup>63</sup> There is an instance in the novel when Dean is described as “the Angel of Terror” (212), and on another occasion Sal declares: “Suddenly I had a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating toward me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed [...] I saw his huge face over the plains with the mad, bony purpose and the gleaming eyes [...] It came like wrath to the West. I knew Dean had gone mad again” (*On the Road* 236). Sal here expresses if not a fully conscious, at least an instinctual awareness of Dean’s transformation.

each day by the State (headquarters)” (*Speed and Politics* 119-20). It is more predominantly driver Dean who does not adjust his pace according to the regulations imposed by society, and it is this that eventually causes problems to him when he is caught displaying disobedience. What differentiates Dean from Virilio’s “unknown soldiers” is that in his urge for speed he is often evading state control; he repeatedly speeds more than he is supposed to. Interestingly, Dean’s speedy attitude is not limited to fast driving. Dean Moriarty displays a remarkable ability to do “everything at the same time” (*On the Road* 104). It could be suggested that accidents - whether automobile accidents or the mere fracturing of his thumb (168) - and state control can only slow Dean down temporarily. Although he may seem to be the one at a disadvantage in his confrontations with the powerful state, there is no indication in the novel that he ever complies with the directive to completely abandon his bond with rapidity. In the final pages of the novel, albeit temporarily bereft of the automobile’s aid, Dean is still on the move.

However, more serious consideration suggests that the extent to which Dean has emerged victorious from his confrontation with the state is debatable. Although his motion seems unstoppable, he is ultimately wrecked by this activity (the aforementioned failure of his speech is one such indication). While Dean appears to be successful in his defiance of state-imposed restrictions, and initially seems to reverse the power relations primarily suggested in this confrontation, he is nonetheless subject to another force that exercises a stronger influence on him: much as he is able to revel in unlimited speed, he knows no alternative to this. Therefore, rather than being free, he is, in effect, caught in the imperative for more, and perpetual speed. The initial semblance of power that seemed to envelop Dean’s driving thus turns out to be illusory. Kerouac provides a final image of exhaustion to expose the irony involved in

the alleged freedom of Dean's speedy driving. Up until the end of the novel Dean refuses to stay still: he "walked off alone [...] eyes on the street ahead, and bent to it again" (280). Ciardi remarks that "speed is some sort of death wish" (qtd. in *Selected Letters 1957-1969* 195), and Dean's final state cannot actively contradict this suggestion.

### **"All of It Inside Endless and Beginningless Emptiness"**

Eventually the frustration with the problems speed causes is straightforwardly expressed in the novel, and the road journey is ultimately endowed with a horrendous quality, even for the character whose life is intractably bound to it, and Dean comes to ponder over "the mere thought of crossing that awful continent again - Sal, we haven't talked straight in a long time" (*On the Road* 228). The earlier quest for road "kicks" is now transmuted into the upsetting idea of travelling across the "awful continent". This transformation is stunning; Dean appears to have lost his faith in the road. Whereas earlier he merely needed "a wheel in his hand and four on the road" to be contented (191), now he is distressed by the idea of having to go "on the road". The road has had disastrous effects on him, and in the end he remains a ragged wandering figure, ultimately a victim of the new social and political order that acceleration has introduced.

The narrator similarly muses: "never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, our actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance. Good-by,

good-by” (231-2).<sup>64</sup> The “pearl” has transmuted into a “nightmare”. Sal’s road expeditions are viewed as the foolish satisfaction of a whim, which when considered retrospectively is found pointless, and speedy driving is perceived as a vacuous activity. In place of the earlier assertion that “the road is life” (192), the road is now associated with “night” and “hell”. The narrator’s road adventures are retrospectively experienced as expressions of ignorance, and his waving goodbye to Dean is suggestive of a more generalized farewell to romanticized youthful joy. Confident that “this madness would lead nowhere” (116), in the final pages of the novel Sal opts for a new life of stability with his new girlfriend<sup>65</sup> and his “formal gentleman” friend (280). Rather than linear development, the narration follows circular patterns, reflecting the circularity and ateleological nature of the characters’ quest. It is only the final denunciation of high speed that offers hope of fulfillment. The irony implied here is striking: if there is to be any solution, it is not to be found “on the road” anymore. However, Kerouac does not altogether renounce speed. Although the novel ends with a projection of stasis as suggested resolution, this is playfully challenged by Kerouac’s final nostalgic reminiscence of Dean Moriarty. Whereas the final pages of the novel might seem to imply a conservative twist, the closing passage unsettles such assumptions. Not entirely comfortable with his newly acquired existence, the narrator evokes Dean Moriarty’s image. The final passage constitutes a parodic comment on the seeming didacticism of the novel’s ending, and the novel finishes at an impasse. Clearly, embracing the values of mainstream America is problematic for Sal; however, the return to Dean Moriarty’s lifestyle is not viable either, given Dean’s

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<sup>64</sup> A draft of this passage can be located already in Kerouac’s “stolen” 1948-49 *On the Road* journal: “All the horror in the world lies before Red’s eyes when he can’t *move on* (in hitchhiking or anything). Inhospitable earth, malign struggle. But then gravity returns, + the sorrow of it. ... the humility of travelling-life ... (travailing-life). Look here, all, goodbye now” (*Windblown* 417). Ironically, Cassady predicts his deterioration in *Selected Letters 1940-1956* (316).

<sup>65</sup> The Scroll version reads: “wife” (407). The narrator explains: “That night I asked her to marry me and she accepted and agreed” (405).

ultimate deterioration. The ending of the novel is equivocal, and speed remains an ambiguous concept throughout; its negative repercussions notwithstanding, its seductive nature cannot be overlooked. Ultra-fast mobility complicates power relationships, revealing considerable tensions in the new political order it introduces. In Sal and Dean's propensity for more and more speed, *On the Road* foresees and already in mid-twentieth century problematizes the implications of acceleration, capturing them precisely at the historical point when they started to acquire increasing political relevance, and anticipating the critical debates that they would subsequently give rise to.

The multiplicity of interpretations that *On the Road* lends itself to is indicative of its vast literary scope and can largely account for its appeal to contemporary audiences. Scholarly engagement with the text proves highly rewarding, as an analysis of the novel through more recent theoretical approaches sheds new light on relatively neglected aspects of *On the Road*. Baudrillard's theory of simulation illuminates Kerouac's negotiations of race, through which he ultimately advances a criticism of Cold War America's racial tensions. Moreover, a Virilian approach that engages with the implications of speed enables a clearer understanding of Kerouac's stylistic and structural choices and also reveals the political dimensions in the characters' rapid motion. Both approaches are concerned with the context of uncertainty and flux which frames the narrator's quest for "authenticity", and expose the highly problematic nature of this quest. Rather than "the pearl" (10), a poetic symbol for authentic, pure and unblemished experience, Sal arrives at the realization that authenticity is an elusive concept. Foregrounding the tensions generated by such

a recognition, Kerouac creates a novel the appeal of which relies significantly on “how much it leaves unsaid or unresolved” (Leland 199).

## CHAPTER II

### EXPLORATIONS OF SPIRITUALITY: *THE DHARMA BUMS*

R. J. Ellis positions *The Dharma Bums* at the start of the late phase of Kerouac's writing (*Liar! Liar!* 210). Written in 1957 and published in 1958, a year after the publication of *On the Road*, the novel was promoted by Viking as its sequel (Theado, *Understanding* 27). *The Dharma Bums* is narrated by Ray Smith, who, together with friends Japhy Ryder and Henry Morley, embarks on a climbing expedition in quest for spiritual enlightenment; meanwhile, the reader is also offered glimpses of the characters' boisterous life in the city. Having foregrounded the difficulties that the quest for authentic experience engenders, Kerouac now sets out to explore definitions of spirituality in Cold War America, and to establish the degree to which Buddhist practices of the time can lead to spiritual fulfillment. Clark believes that *The Dharma Bums* "was a more conventional work than anything Jack had published since *The Town and the City*" (172), a viewpoint also shared by Jones (140). Woods expresses his appreciation for the novel, but also notes the general discontent it spawned: "I'd crowned as Kerouac's best, a book ordinarily held to be his slightest, accomplishment" (8), explaining that "this is not - or was not, in the middle '50s - the usual subject matter of the American novel" (10). Nicosia, on the other hand, makes a case for the novel's abiding popularity "if only because it remained in print throughout the sixties and the seventies." He argues that "the 'rucksack revolution' prophesied in the novel became a reality a decade later, when millions of hippies criss-crossed the continent [...] and *The Dharma Bums* served many as a survival manual" (563).

Pleased with the success of *On the Road*, Viking wanted something that would follow in its tradition. Kerouac proceeded to write what he was expected to. Whereas most critics

agree that the style of the novel was shaped at the behest of his editor Malcolm Cowley, Cowley himself denies his involvement (Gifford and Lee 242-3). Considering that the novel had been written on commission - a viewpoint held by both Clark (166) and French (51) - it is not difficult to see why Kerouac thought of it as a potboiler.<sup>1</sup> However, there seems to be a degree of confusion about the author's actual feelings about the novel, as there are accounts both in Nicosia (564) and Theado (*Understanding* 151-2) that testify to the contrary.

Upon publication, *The Dharma Bums* triggered a similar variety of diverging views: Allen Ginsberg gave it a generally favourable review in the *Village Voice*<sup>2</sup> and "The Dharma Bums elicited a laudatory letter from Henry Miller and an invitation to visit D.T. Suzuki" (Nicosia 579).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there were those like John Clellon Holmes who felt that the prose was lax (qtd. in Gifford and Lee 244).<sup>4</sup> Indicative of the diverging viewpoints with regard to *The Dharma Bums* is the fact that the *New York Times* published two opposing reviews of the novel. One was written by Charles Poore on 2 October 1958, describing the novel as "a sort of juvenile, machine-age parody of the great American migrations in the nineteenth century" (qtd. in Nicosia 576); the other appeared just three days later in their Book Review section and was by Nancy Wilson-Ross, who praised Kerouac's literary merits, noting that "in his often brilliant descriptions of nature one is aware of exhilarating power and originality" ("Beat - and Buddhist").

Kerouac scholars are also similarly divided. Nicosia notes that "there are many marvelously long sentences in the novel that utilize an oral syntax simple enough for a child to follow, and yet admit a complexity of perceptions into a single flow of thought" (564).

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<sup>1</sup> French mentions this (17, 51) and in a footnote on p. 51 he refers the reader to Tom Clark's use of the term (166). Amburn also states that Kerouac thought of the novel as "a potboiler" (286) and "hackwork" (298). Ellis quotes that "Along with *On the Road*, Kerouac described *Dharma Bums* as a 'pot-boiler' to John Montgomery, in 'Jack Kerouac and the San Francisco Renaissance', unpublished typescript, 1974, Nottingham Trent University Library, p.26" (*Liar! Liar!* 211).

<sup>2</sup> Many years later in his introduction to *Visions of Cody*, Ginsberg did not fail to make a note of "the brilliant Buddhist exposition *Dharma Bums*" (11).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of positive reviews see Clark (173) and Nicosia (577).

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive account of the negative reviews see Nicosia (576).



Perhaps the most ardent champion of the novel is Ellis Amburn, who declares that “Kerouac’s account of the climb in *The Dharma Bums* is a spectacular foray into nature writing” (231) and concludes that “Kerouac’s new, leaner style represented a technical advance” (298). Tom Clark has labelled *The Dharma Bums* a “testament to positive thinking, Zen-hipster style” (142), and although Norman Leer believes that in this novel Kerouac’s writing is “sometimes uneven in its control”, he acknowledges that in his descriptive passages “Kerouac often reaches a state of exultation” (83). Warren French on the other hand is openly critical of the novel. He argues that “certainly it is one of his most poorly structured works” and protests that “the episodes are not paralleled by any climatic dramatic structure that gives the narrative shape as a whole”, accusing Kerouac of an unwillingness to find a unifying device (51). Paul Maher describes *The Dharma Bums* as an “easy-to-swallow” work (408). Critical debate also addresses the spiritual issues raised in the novel, introducing a lively discussion on the narrator’s treatment of Buddhist concepts.

### ***The Dharma Bums* as Spiritual Pilgrimage**

The novel’s title from the start indicates its Buddhist concerns. Amburn reports that “the phrase ‘dharma [truth] bum’ was given to Kerouac by Snyder” (223).<sup>5</sup> Nancy Wilson-Ross has described *dharma*, which is a central concept in Buddhism, as “meaning variously, according to context, the way, the law, righteousness, reality. ‘The path which a man should follow in accordance with his nature and station in life’” (*Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen* 192). The dictionary definitions of “bum” are illuminating. *The Oxford English Dictionary* translates bum as “a lazy and dissolute person; an habitual loafer or tramp” and in *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* “bum” can also stand for “one whose time is devoted to

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<sup>5</sup> Gary Snyder was Kerouac’s inspiration for the character of Japhy Ryder in the novel.

a recreational activity”, and moreover can signify “a drinking spree”. Thus, “Dharma Bums” can be taken to suggest alternatively “people who misappropriate the Dharma”, “people who spend their time constructively studying the Dharma” or “people who are intoxicated with the Dharma”. The multiplicity of possible interpretations anticipates the confusion that envelops Smith’s spiritual explorations.

Although Buddhism had a strong influence on Kerouac for a certain period of time, eventually his interest waned. Amburn believes that Kerouac’s Buddhist phase ended in 1959 (312). Giamo suggests “March 1956 (when he wrote his last entry)” as the date for Kerouac’s departure from Buddhist beliefs (*Kerouac, the Word and the Way* 88). At any rate, “by 1960 Kerouac had become somewhat flippant about the whole Buddhist venture” (French 53). Predictably, Kerouac’s spiritual concerns are reflected in the prose he wrote during that period. *The Dharma Bums* therefore draws considerably on Buddhist terminology, and an exploration of the ways in which Buddhism is appropriated in the novel sheds useful light on the development of Ray Smith’s spiritual quest.

As in the case of the novel’s literary merits, critical opinions also vary considerably with regard to its engagement with Buddhism. Nicosia believes that the novel offers substantial guidance as to “how to live in this world as a Buddhist” (627), and Charters sees Ray Smith as “a committed seeker after truth” (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 8). Theado argues that in *The Dharma Bums* Kerouac developed the social and cultural ideas of Buddhism (*Understanding* 127), and Thurman declares that the novel is “perhaps the most accurate, poetic, and expansive evocation of the heart of Buddhism that was available at that time” (vii). Prothero, on the other hand, has been quick to note Kerouac’s religious pluralism (216). Adopting a more critical viewpoint, Ellis argues that the narrator’s resort to religious consolation is sentimentalized and remains unconvincing (*Liar! Liar!* 257), and French does not hesitate to describe the main characters’ discussions of Buddhism as “inconclusive

palaverings about Buddhist theory and practice” (52). Miller asserts that Smith’s Buddhism is by no means absolute: “he never had experienced it [Buddhism] as an exclusive practice: he was experiencing and practicing the Truth, a reality in which all religions participated. Buddhism just furnished the best way for him and for this particular time” (44). Similarly, although Woods admits that “the persistent theme of freedom - of enlightenment, of liberation - that’s at the heart of Kerouac’s work is sounded in these pages”, he ultimately agrees with “most critics” that “have found the note forced” (12). *The Dharma Bums* is nonetheless heavily preoccupied with Buddhism, whether in its thematic or stylistic concerns. The characters display an intense and seemingly committed interest in Buddhist credos. An indication of this can already be found in the opening pages of novel, where the narrator declares: “I was a perfect Dharma Bum myself and considered myself a religious wanderer” (8). Smith thus sets the mood, suggesting that what is to follow will be the narration of a religious quest.

The novel extensively deals with notions of emptiness and the void, and evinces an attempt to explore these ideas from a Buddhist perspective. As I follow the narrator in his religious explorations, I will examine how his quest for spirituality in post-war America is influenced by these concepts. I will particularly concentrate on the narrator’s interpretation of emptiness as spiritual experience and see how it functions in a Buddhist context. Kerouac engages with Buddhism in other works as well, most prominently in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (written in 1956 and published in 1960 by Totem Press),<sup>6</sup> *Some of the Dharma* (written between 1953-56 and published in 1997 by Penguin), and *Wake Up: A Life of the Buddha* (published in its entirety in 2008 by Penguin; according to Thurman the text

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<sup>6</sup> I am here following Sandison’s chronology. Eric Mottram has noted the importance of *The Scripture* in a 1960s setting: “since the *Scripture* appeared in 1960, ways of living through a traditional sense of oneness with all energy and form have become a common basis for survival in a disastrous time for the intelligent young in America” (xiii).

was written during the first half of 1955 [xvi]).<sup>7</sup> The above provide useful theoretical insights to the religious quest undertaken in *The Dharma Bums*. Ray Smith's preoccupation with concepts such as emptiness and the void will be examined alongside similar Buddhist considerations, as these largely inform his quest for spiritual enlightenment. In *The Dharma Bums* there are several references to Catholicism as well, for example when Ray Smith talks about "Buddha's peace under the Bo Tree [...] Christ's peace looking down on the heads of his tormentors and forgiving them" (169). An extensive discussion of the possible overlap between the two religions could yield interesting observations with regard to Kerouac's approaches to spirituality. However, in my present study I have chosen to deal with Buddhism, as the narrator of *The Dharma Bums* is for the most part engaged in dialogue with a predominantly Buddhist discourse.

*The Dharma Bums* engages with spiritual concerns in a late 1950s American setting, exposing the problems implicit in a quest for spirituality in Cold War America. Writing within a social and historical context of ambiguity and uncertainty, Kerouac reflects on representations of spirituality in his times. In its preoccupation with Buddhism, *The Dharma Bums* comments on the Buddhist trends that were increasingly forceful at the time, examining the nature of American appropriations of Buddhism. Representations of Buddhism in the novel explore the various complications that arise from the attempt to find firm spiritual bearings in Western appropriations of Eastern systems of religious belief. Trying to distance himself from conventional western patterns of thought, the narrator often engages in a discourse that anticipates western deconstructive strategies, which, as we will see, often share common ground with Buddhist thought. The textual tensions that subsequently arise from this narrative endeavour invite careful consideration as to the narrator's Buddhist aspirations.

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<sup>7</sup> Thurman cites various earlier titles: "Originally called 'Your Essential Mind: The Story of the Buddha,' Kerouac also referred to it at various times as 'my Buddhist handbook,' 'Buddha Tells Us,' and 'Buddhahood: The Essence of Reality'" (xvii).

### “For All is Empty and a Vision Throughout”

The narrator of *The Dharma Bums* sets the tone for his involvement with Buddhism early on: “I didn’t give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism, but was just interested in the first of Sakyamuni’s four noble truths, *All life is suffering*” (14). Despite this assertion, however, Ray Smith seems particularly preoccupied with Mahayana and Zen Buddhist concepts. His frequent reflections on the notion of emptiness largely condition his quest for spirituality in the novel. Wilson-Ross has described Zen as a blend of “Indian metaphysical abstraction, Taoist paradox and Confucian pragmatism” (*Hinduism* 140) that was further developed in Japan. She classifies it “as one of the branches belonging to the permissive, many-sided Mahayana school of Buddhism” (139). The narrator’s acute interest in the notion of emptiness invites a reading of the text against a Buddhist background, as the idea of emptiness is fundamental there too; therefore Buddhist, and in particular Mahayana and Zen texts, will be used where necessary to shed light on the progression of Smith’s quest for spiritual guidance.<sup>8</sup>

Kerouac himself was well-acquainted with Buddhist concepts, as an organized Buddhist sect already existed in America in his time. “By the latter half of the fifties, the idea of Zen had become so popularized that it achieved the status of a fad” (Fields 205).<sup>9</sup> Jones (7,133), Prothero (217) and Giamo (*Kerouac* 88) state that Kerouac’s involvement with Buddhism began in 1953. Theado confirms Jones’ account of Kerouac’s discovery of

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<sup>8</sup> As Glass has argued in *Working Emptiness: Toward a Third Reading of Emptiness in Buddhism and Postmodern Thought*, various readings of emptiness are possible. In my discussion I draw, among other sources, upon works that have directly shaped Kerouac’s writing, for example Goddard’s *Buddhist Bible*, which Kerouac read ardently, and the works of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, which were influential upon American Buddhist thought at the time. Nancy Wilson-Ross’s work was chosen on the grounds that she was an American contemporary of Kerouac.

<sup>9</sup> According to Fields “the World Parliament of Religions, which took place in Chicago in 1893, is usually considered the beginning of the introduction of Buddhism - and Eastern religion in general - to America. But the Parliament could also, I found, just as easily be seen as the culmination of a movement that had begun much earlier” (xiii). Fields’ study provides an overall comprehensive account of the development of Buddhism in America. For a detailed account of the social organization of Buddhists in America, especially during the Second World War see also Kashima, *Buddhism in America* (47-68).

Buddhism in the late winter of 1953 and spring of 1954 but nonetheless suggests that Kerouac “had been exploring key Buddhist issues since *The Town and the City* without the background of Buddhism’s rich traditions” (*Understanding* 123).<sup>10</sup>

Various explanations have been offered for Kerouac’s interest in Buddhism. Gifford and Lee advocate that “a philosophy that began with the premise that all life is suffering helped him to make sense of his own situation” (186), a perspective also shared by Charters (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 581).<sup>11</sup> Blackburn similarly asserts that “Kerouac, obsessed as he was with [...] his piercing awareness of human suffering, and with his sense of himself as a holy wanderer seeking an end to this suffering, seems to have found in the career of Prince Siddhartha (later the Buddha) both an emblem of his own life and a pattern for his major fiction” (9). Giamo (*Kerouac* 89) and Charters (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 582) validate Blackburn’s statement, and Nicosia also comments on the possibility that Kerouac might have identified with the historical Buddha (457).

The issue of whether Kerouac was a conscientious Buddhist disciple has given rise to much discussion. Considerable debate has followed since Blackburn’s statement that the “conviction that Kerouac is really just a failed Catholic after all, and that his Buddhism is too emotional and too eccentric to merit serious consideration, discourages any attempt to

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<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, Gifford and Lee provide another version of Kerouac’s first discovery of Buddhism, suggesting that this may have occurred when he was a student at Columbia University: “whether Jack’s interest in the Buddhists had begun with Professor Weaver’s reading-list in the mid-1940s or was a later discovery, he now became absorbed in the subject, vanishing often into the San Jose Public Library [...] His main source of raw material was a volume that collected the essential texts of Buddhism, Dwight Goddard’s *The Buddhist Bible*” (185-6). In his 1976 *New Age* interview with Peter Barry Chowka, Allen Ginsberg reports that “Weaver gave Kerouac a list of books to read after he read an unpublished early novel of Kerouac’s titled *The Sea Is My Brother* - a list which included the early gnostic writers, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.” Clark provides another account of Kerouac’s involvement with Buddhism: “at the Richmond Hill Public Library, studying Thoreau, he stumbled on a reference to Hindu philosophy that led him to look up Ashvagosha’s *Life of the Buddha*, which made him go home in a hurry to meditate for the first time” (131); a similar interpretation is provided by Prothero (217). Nicosia notes that Kerouac had been substantially involved in Buddhism by the end of 1953, but nevertheless points out that “there is some evidence that he was at least familiar with the story of Buddha’s life as early as 1951. He would have acquired some knowledge of Buddhism simply from Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, and Thoreau’s *Walden* familiarized him with a number of Indian and Chinese religious texts” (451). In the chronology of Kerouac’s life she includes in *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, Charters identifies 1954 as the year in which Kerouac began his study of Buddhism in New York and California (xxii, 581).

<sup>11</sup> The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is that “existence is suffering” (Clark 5).

explore the place of Buddhism in the pattern of his fiction. And yet [...] Buddhism has a central place in both the structure and meaning of what Kerouac called the Legend of Duluoz” (9).<sup>12</sup> Gary Snyder is generally sympathetic to Kerouac’s Buddhism (Gifford and Lee 203), and Giampo points out that “as *Some of the Dharma* attests, Kerouac was a serious and devout student of Buddhism” (*Kerouac* 93). However, in “Enlightened Attachment” he notes the ambivalence of Kerouac’s Buddhist beliefs (181), and Charters shares his viewpoint (*The Portable Jack Kerouac* 582). On another note, Philip Whalen suggests that Kerouac’s “interest in Buddhism was pretty much literary” (qtd. in Gifford and Lee 217). Nancy Wilson-Ross (*Hinduism* 188) and Alan Watts (qtd. in Fields 221) are outright critical of Kerouac’s appropriation of Zen, and scholars French (94) and Jones (146) tend to share their disapproval. In her recent study of Kerouac’s appropriation of Buddhism in his nature writing, Lott summarizes a variety of critical attitudes, ranging from widely positive (169) to considerably negative (170) responses. The attention that critics have paid to Kerouac’s Buddhist pronouncements is indicative of the influence Buddhism has exerted upon his prose. At any rate, the focus of this chapter is not so much on Kerouac’s own spiritual explorations, as on Ray Smith’s negotiations of Buddhism, which, as I will argue, give rise to considerable complications in the novel.

*The Dharma Bums* displays a particular concern with the notion of emptiness, which in turn bears specific Buddhist resonances. The special emphasis that the narrator places on the role of the mind begs particular attention, as it foregrounds his conceptualization of emptiness. Ray Smith declares to his family that:

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<sup>12</sup> Kerouac positions *The Dharma Bums* among the works that comprise “The Duluoz Legend” (*Selected Letters 1957-69* 240).

Your mind makes out the orange by seeing it, hearing it, touching it, smelling it, tasting it and thinking about it but without this mind, you call it, the orange would not be seen or heard or smelled or tasted or even mentally noticed, it's actually, that orange, depending on your mind to exist! Don't you see that? By itself it's a no-thing, it's really mental, it's seen only of your mind. In other words, it's empty and awake. (122)

Smith uses the example of the orange to illustrate his perception of emptiness. The orange (representing a manifestation of the world as it is conventionally understood by the western mind) is here placed under a different conceptual angle. Negating its conventional existence, Smith sees it as being contingent upon the mind. Thus, it is empty of meaning, depending on the mind's interpretation of it. Denying the orange an autonomous existence, Smith anticipates deconstructionist approaches that theorize relativity and destabilization.

In a volume aptly entitled *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* Park sees Buddhist philosophy at odds with western metaphysics, and instead traces affinities with more recent developments that undermine representational thinking, finally acknowledging similarities between Zen and deconstruction, for instance in their perception of identity as a particularly fluid concept (xiv-xv). The publication of a number of studies that seek to draw parallels between various strands of Buddhism and deconstructive thinking is indicative of a substantial overlap between the two.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Kerouac's interest in emptiness is significantly informed by a deconstructive mentality that challenges conventional representation, as is suggested by the example of the orange the narrator provides. Smith's projection of the image of the orange bears similarities to the Zen perception of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). "The Lankavatara Scripture" explicitly states that "the objective world, like a

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<sup>13</sup> Among the most notable studies are *Buddhisms and Deconstructions* (ed. by Jin Y. Park) and Olson's *Zen and the Art of Postmodern Philosophy: Two Paths of Liberation from the Representational Mode of Thinking*.



vision, is a manifestation of the mind itself” (Goddard 283); such a reading is further justified in the context of spiritual awakening (“awake”) that Smith professes.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Smith’s discussion of the orange is particularly evocative of Derrida’s notion of *différance*. Derrida defines *différance* as “the systematic play of differences” (“Différance” 11), and explains that *différance* “differs from, and defers, itself” (20-1). In Smith’s example, the existence of the orange is differentiated from traditional representations, and is also deferred in space and time, resisting inscription within an orderly system of western metaphysics. Conceived thus, the orange *per se* becomes an empty simulation, devoid of significance and finitude. Smith’s representation destabilizes conventional meaning, introducing a new conceptual framework in which “the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself” (Derrida, “Différance” 11). The image of the orange is contingent upon an interplay of signs, the arrangement and interpretation of which is fluid and dependent upon each individual’s perception; hence its shifting nature is emphatically projected. Derrida particularly refers to the “forces of dissociation, dislocation, unbinding, forces, in a word, of difference and heterogeneity” that are in operation in deconstructive processes (“Et Cetera” 291). It is exactly these forces that Smith evokes in the example of the orange he provides. No longer a concrete and fixed image, the orange now becomes a mental construct. As such, it is subject to displacement; since the image of the orange exists only within a system of mental processes which are themselves subject to modification, any attempt to attach precise signification to it remains inconclusive.

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<sup>14</sup> The idea of emptiness is emphatically projected in Kerouac’s other overtly spiritual works as well. In *Wake Up*, which comprises an account of the life of the Buddha, Prince Siddhartha reaches enlightenment and eventually comes to see the “sumptuous palace of his youth [...] as unreal now, in his enlightened mirror-like reflection, as an indicated castle in a child’s tale designed solely to make children believe in its existence” (50). Rather than a structure laden with symbolic power, the palace becomes an empty image, a mere simulacrum of affluence and authority. The enlightened being does not allow himself to be deceived by appearances and outer shapes, the vacuity of which he now recognizes. In *Wake Up* the “human frame” is also understood as “a thing of unreality” (59), further suggesting “an ever-changing, dynamic, pulsating, chaotic world that is in a state of flux” (Olson 210). Moreover, In *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* trees and mountains are likewise referred to as “unreal” (37). The characters in *The Dharma Bums* try to follow a similar line of reasoning, negotiating a conceptualization of emptiness as the means that will lead them to spiritual enlightenment.

In a similar vein the narrator's friend, Japhy Ryder, declares: "the world is nothing but mind and what is the mind? The mind is nothing but the world' [...] The Horse Ancestor said 'This mind is Buddha.' He also said 'No mind is Buddha'" (82). In Japhy's reasoning the world is intractably bound to the way the mind perceives it. Here the mind and the world are so closely associated that they are presented as interchangeable and the idea that the world has an autonomous existence is rejected.<sup>15</sup> Similarly to the image of the orange, the image of the world is now devoid of substance, and exists only in relation to the mind. Japhy's statement dislocates meaning and again brings to mind deconstructionist strategies with their emphasis on the fluidity of representation. To further strengthen his point, Ryder uses a Buddhist example: his statements on the Buddha-nature and its dependence on the mind belong within a Zen *śūnyatā* system that explodes the binary opposition between existence and non-existence. Ryder's focus on the non-duality of the Buddha-nature is a major preoccupation of Zen and its *śūnyatā* (emptiness) doctrine. At this stage, Ryder's proto-deconstructive thinking displays an affinity with Buddhist doctrines, accepting not only "the emptiness of Buddha-nature" (Olson 201-2), but its all-pervasiveness as well, aligning himself with a *śūnyatā* approach that "includes both being and nonbeing" (Olson 206), and consequently, I would add, "mind and no mind". Thinking thus, Ryder is distanced from western metaphysics and their insistence on duality, and *The Dharma Bums* puts forth the promise of Buddhist illumination.

The novel displays a strong preoccupation with the notion of emptiness, and Ray Smith soon pronounces that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form and we're here forever in one form or another which is empty" (124). Elsewhere he declares that "it's only through form that we can realize emptiness" (23), directly echoing the "The Maha-Prajna-Paramita-

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<sup>15</sup> In *Wake Up* it is pronounced that "the phenomena of the thinking brain-mind are only empty and transitory things" (122), and in *Desolation Angels* the narrator states that "everything is the same emptiness" (166). With its multitude of intertextual allusions referring back to *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels* (89, 102, 169, 312) can be viewed as a re-negotiation of the Kerouacian narrators' involvement with Buddhism.

Hridaya Sutra” (known as “The Heart Sutra”).<sup>16</sup> Appropriating these pronouncements, he asserts: “I am emptiness, I am not different from emptiness, neither is emptiness different from me; indeed, emptiness is me” (117).<sup>17</sup> This mode of reasoning again explodes the concept of duality. Form and emptiness are traditionally regarded as two distinct and opposing notions in the western world, and the narrator’s merging and use of the two interchangeably points to a conceptualization of selfhood far removed from traditional western formations of identity. Smith’s Buddhism-influenced utterances pose a challenge to western metaphysics and advance a proto-deconstructive thinking that is heavily preoccupied with the unstable nature of identity. In his discussion “on Dōgen and Derrida” Bredeson argues that “the deferral of meaning and the deferral of presence that *différance* puts into play do not imply anything regarding the absence of meaning or the absence of presence. As was the case with Dōgen, we must not succumb to thinking on the basis of a presence-absence dialectic” (74). Deferral does not necessarily imply negation, but rather opens up the field of interpretation, and meaning is left pending amidst differences and traces. Distancing himself from binary thinking, the narrator projects an alternative conception of identity; an empty and volatile concept, it resists precise definition. Bredeson defines “that element of *différance* that always and by necessity exceeds metaphysical reappropriation” as “absolute emptiness” (74). *Différance* radically departs from western metaphysics as it defies grounding in a system heavily reliant on binary structures, and questions this system’s emphasis on the importance of meaning. In his anticipation of Derridean *différance* Kerouac sees identity as devoid of signification, and foregrounds the emptiness of the concept of identity, advancing an alternative mode of thinking, which shares many affinities with Buddhist thought.

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<sup>16</sup> The Sutra reads: “form is emptiness, emptiness is not different from form, neither is form different from emptiness, indeed, emptiness is form” (Goddard 85). The “emptiness-form” motto is recurrent in Kerouac’s work: other such instances appear in *Desolation Angels* (72), in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (40), and in *Some of the Dharma* (241, 381, 418).

<sup>17</sup> An extended version of this reasoning can be found in *Some of the Dharma* (392).

Japhy Ryder soon remarks that ““it don’t make a damn frigging difference whether you’re in The Place or hiking up Matterhorn, its all the same old void, boy”” (49). Smith similarly admits: ““it’s all the same thing,’ I heard my voice say in the void that’s highly embraceable during sleep” (11). Further on, he declares: “my pride is hurt, that is emptiness; my business is with the Dharma, that is emptiness; I’m proud of my kindness to animals, that is emptiness; my conception of the chain, that is emptiness; Ananda’s pity, even that is emptiness” (121). It seems that for the narrator everything is empty, and this idea brings him close to Zen *śūnyatā*. Aligning himself to a Buddhist conception of the world, the narrator at the same time articulates a proto-deconstructive position that poses a challenge to stability and permanence. Ray Smith’s declaration that emptiness is everywhere and nowhere at the same time brings to mind Derrida’s pronouncement that: “the center is not the center” (“Structure” 90). Smith conceives of emptiness as all-expansive, endlessly disseminating in all domains of existence. As such, it cannot be contained or strictly defined, but rather pervades attempts at representation. However, much as the characters’ proto-deconstructive pronouncements present strong affinities with Buddhist thought, their Buddhist assertions do not remain firm throughout the novel, and it eventually transpires that their devotion to Buddhism is not beyond doubt, as multiple complications arise from their interpretations of *śūnyatā*. The novel abounds with obvious tensions between the characters’ claims of adherence to Buddhist credos and the simultaneous subversion of these claims. The inconsistency between the characters’ interpretations of Buddhism and their subsequent Buddhist pronouncements infuses their Buddhist appropriations with considerable irony, and the contradictory approaches to Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums* ultimately constitute a vivid illustration of and forceful comment upon Cold War America’s negotiation of expressions of spirituality that diverge from its own signifying patterns.

Soon a series of instances where emptiness can be a locus of amusement is introduced: “all Japhy’s doing is amusing himself in the void” (*The Dharma Bums* 30). Smith finds his insight into emptiness delightful and exclaims: “how strange, how worthy, how good for us! What a horror it would have been if the world was real” (114). Therefore, he wants to celebrate emptiness: “all belongs to the same emptiness, glory be!” (117), and makes an effort to embrace it. Prompted by the narrator’s proclamations of faith in the positive quality of emptiness, most critics have read *The Dharma Bums* as a quest that results in the attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. Blackburn, for example, believes that up on the mountaintop Smith’s “isolation has finally given him an insight into the voidness of all phenomena, including his own existence, and so he has achieved the union of *prajna* (insight) and *karuna* (compassion) that characterizes true enlightenment” (17). Hart also trusts that Smith’s Buddhist vision “guides and comforts him” (58). In a similar vein, Giamo concludes that “Kerouac attains an aesthetic and idealized form of enlightenment for his main character in which dualism is transcended and serenity prevails” (“Enlightened Attachment” 190). Although he does not fail to pinpoint the hindrances that occasionally block Smith’s path on his way to Buddhist enlightenment (*Kerouac* 142-3), he seems confident that these are overcome in the end.<sup>18</sup> He even suggests that the novel’s ending is open to the possibility of Smith being able to carry his enlightenment into the world (“Enlightened Attachment” 191). His reading converges with Miller’s interpretation of Smith as *bodhisattva* (49, 50, 52).<sup>19</sup> However, such interpretations do not give due recognition to the fact that since he does not manage to remain neutral, Smith deviates from the Buddhist path; whereas the experience of emptiness is for Buddhists associated with spiritual awakening and illumination, for the characters of *The Dharma Bums* the enjoyment of the void lacks a substantial spiritual

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<sup>18</sup> In “Enlightened Attachment”, Giamo also acknowledges that “any tracing of the infusion of Buddhist teaching in the progression of Kerouac’s work, and the uneven nature of the earnest quest that results, must also center on *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*” (174).

<sup>19</sup> Blackburn also feels that the novel’s ending projects an image of Smith as a *bodhisattva* figure (18).

dimension alongside Buddhist pronouncements. Smith is here closer to Derrida's "joyous affirmation of the play" ("Structure" 102); emptiness and the lack of centre at this stage are experienced as an exhilarating liberation. Thus, in shaping Smith, Kerouac anticipates and foregrounds deconstructive approaches, which nonetheless remain bound to a western mode of reasoning that in Buddhist terms forbids the leap to a state of neutral *śūnyatā*. In its ability to generate intense pleasure, such an experience of emptiness is far removed from the adherence to the principle that "Zen is not nihilistic, nor is it merely positivistic" (Suzuki, *The Awakening of Zen* 54). It would thus appear that Smith's interpretation of Buddhism is conditioned by a mentality that is almost Orientalist in its scope: his conception of emptiness is fashioned according to his needs and desires, anticipating Said's description of the practice of "Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient" ("Crisis" 274). Focusing here on expressions of Oriental spirituality, Smith now perceives the practice of Buddhism as a means for enjoyment, adjusting his Buddhism to western patterns of thought in order to gain control over it. In the previous chapter we witnessed the narrator's indulgence in performing the role of the colonizer of the Fellaheen and their land. Here we see that he is perpetuating this practice, this time with regard to Eastern expressions of spirituality. Through his narrator Kerouac exposes his contemporaries' tendency not only to appropriate "the exotic" (Buddhism here being an expression of exotic mysticism), but also to re-cast it in a western, and hence more familiar mode, in an attempt to domesticate it. The narrator manipulates Buddhist dictums and tries to reshape Buddhism into more recognizable patterns. In thus doing, he sees emptiness (a fundamental concept of Buddhist thought) functioning as a sanctuary from the evil potential of the "real" physical world (114). The novel bears witness to a process through which "the Orient can return as something one writes about in a disciplined way. Its foreignness can be translated, its meanings decoded, its hostility tamed" (Said, "Crisis" 280). The rapid proliferation of simulated constructions in

Kerouac's Cold War society already foregrounds an experience of spiritual vacuity. Seeking substitutes for its own spiritual impasses, which the recourse to western metaphysics seem no longer adequate to master, a section of 1950s America turns to Buddhism as an alternative spiritual mode. However, as Kerouac makes clear, this is done through the modification and reformation of Buddhist dictums. The characters of *The Dharma Bums* re-inscribe Buddhism in a western framework in an attempt to contain it. Departing from mainstream religious practices they turn to Buddhism, and to the extent that an engagement with Buddhism leads to deconstructive thinking that challenges expressions of mainstream spirituality in post-war America, they align themselves to a Buddhist conception of the world. However, it is not before long that they project a version of Buddhism that best suits them, heavily problematizing the promise of Buddhist enlightenment. Whereas Smith and Ryder embrace several aspects of the Buddhist discourse, they refuse to accept Buddhist belief systems in their entirety, foregrounding a tendency already present in Cold War America's effort to "capture it [the Orient], treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it" (Said, "Crisis" 274). It eventually transpires that in *The Dharma Bums* the characters project a simulated conception of Buddhism, one modelled upon western mentality and expectations. Kerouac is not sympathetic to such attitudes however, and as I will demonstrate, he proceeds to a forceful critique of America's spiritual confusion and disorientation. Kerouac's criticism is all the more poignant as he chooses to express it through characters that are positioned within Cold War America's counterculture, further complicating the counterculture's relation to constructions of authenticity, already problematized in the first chapter.

### “Happy Little Sage No Mo”

The tensions arising from the characters’ appropriations of Buddhism appear with exceptional force when Smith finds that the experience of the void spawns nightmarish visions: “the wheel of the quivering meat conception turns in the void expelling tics, porcupines, elephants, people, stardust, fools, nonsense” (25).<sup>20</sup> Here the void embraces incongruous items that are randomly thrust and left suspended in it. “Tics” signify undesirable muscle twitches which often betray stress and anxiety, “porcupines” connote harmful quills, and the unpleasant denotations of “fools” are obvious. In this context, “stardust” loses any romantic connotations it usually bears, and “elephants” and “people” are to be perceived with similar negativity. All these disjointed and, by their very bizarre linkage, disturbing elements that are produced by the “quivering meat conception” (a troubling image in itself) eventually charge the void with a fearful quality. Emptiness is distressing for the narrator, who muses: “why do we have to be born in the first place, and only so we can have our poor gentle flesh laid out to such impossible horrors as huge mountains and rock and empty space” (72). Smith is eventually overwhelmed by feelings of sadness, and he can only feel sorry for sentient beings in the Tathagata universe: “it’s all too pitiful” (168).<sup>21</sup> Images of terror and destruction are closely connected with emptiness, and now death, defeat, failure and vanity pervade “emptiness”. Woods declares that in the end “it’s as though his [Smith’s] salvation could be only temporary” (10). Similarly, Leer admits that the narrator’s quest involves “a painful loneliness which the hero of *The Dharma Bums*, Ray Smith, never overcomes completely” (82). The conception of emptiness in negative terms bears witness to a remarkable inconsistency, as it is in direct contradiction to the intense joy the narrator derives from the experience of the void on other occasions. The joyous experience of

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<sup>20</sup> This is a paraphrase of the 211<sup>th</sup> Chorus from Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* (211).

<sup>21</sup> Burt provides an explanation of Tathagata as literally meaning: “‘He who has fully arrived,’ i.e., the Perfect One” and notes that this is a title of the Buddha (247).



emptiness, itself already problematic when approached from a Buddhist perspective, is thus further undermined. Such a reading of emptiness departs significantly from Buddhist conceptions of *śūnyatā*. The novel's recourse to traditional western patterns of thought reveals much confusion on the narrator's part. Ray Smith here interprets Buddhism in a manner that contradicts his earlier approach, and considerable tension is generated by the opposing viewpoints expressed in *The Dharma Bums*. Although there is an attempt to approach Buddhist spirituality, this gesture remains partial and incomplete. *The Dharma Bums* evinces a multitude of forceful textual contradictions, stemming from the narrator's contradictory perspectives. There are instances when through his articulation of a proto-deconstructionist discourse Smith seems to achieve an approach to Buddhist emptiness that can open the way to spiritual enlightenment. At other times, his proto-deconstructionist gestures are firmly positioned within the confines of western discourse. Moreover, there are occasions when traditional patterns of western thought prevail, reflecting Cold War America's response to systems that do not conform to its own signifying patterns. This variety of approaches intensifies textual tensions and exposes the degree of the narrator's disorientation when confronted with the spiritual vacuum of post-war America's effort to come to grips with historical processes that inaugurate a *status quo* of uncertainty and ambiguity. Such contradictions destabilize the narrative of *The Dharma Bums*, evincing a significant degree of dislocation instigated by the experience of emptiness. The idea of spiritual salvation through Buddhism thus becomes highly problematic; inconclusively fluctuating between western metaphysics and Buddhism, the narrator recognizes the vacuity of his spiritual quest.

From the beginning of *The Dharma Bums* Smith confesses to the pretentious quality of his Buddhist ways: "I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-

service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral” (8). In her Zen reading of the novel Kayorie notes that Smith’s assertion shows that “he no longer holds fast to the tenth precept, not to revile the three treasures of buddha [...] dharma [...] and sangha” (19).<sup>22</sup> Smith’s prompt confession strongly cautions the reader about the validity of his spiritual aspirations, and straightforwardly questions the motives of his involvement with Buddhism. Furthermore, when problems arise on the characters’ trip to the mountaintop, Smith reacts by questioning the usefulness of the expedition: “what’s the sense of killing yourself like this, you call this fun? Phooey” (*The Dharma Bums* 77). His assertion downplays the spiritual context of the trip and the characters’ goal of attaining enlightenment. Finally his admission: “I wasn’t exactly unconscious of the fact that I had a good warm fire to return to” after his meditations in the woods (117) suggests that his Buddhism is highly contingent upon material circumstances. Such efforts to attain spiritual illumination through individual effort, further foregrounded in the narrator’s interactions with Japhy Ryder, have been interpreted as an expression of Hinayana Buddhism (Miller 48-9).<sup>23</sup> However, this argument is not without problems, as the narrator’s faith is based on a partial and rather tailor-made understanding of Buddhism, and there is one instance whereupon he straightforwardly confesses: “I hadn’t yet digested the Lankavatara Scripture which eventually shows that there’s nothing in the world but the mind itself, and therefore all’s possible including the suppression of suffering” (14). Although Smith displays an acute interest in Buddhism, as the ensuing parodies suggest, he remains unable to “digest” the Scripture throughout the novel.<sup>24</sup> Finally, he plainly admits to his inability to reach “ecstasy”,

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<sup>22</sup> Quoting Kapleau (290-6), Kayorie describes *sangha* as “the community of people practicing Buddha’s way” (19).

<sup>23</sup> Hinayana is the more conservative branch of Buddhism that lays special emphasis on individual effort. Even if one were to subscribe to a Hinayana approach, one would eventually find that this comes in direct contradiction to Smith’s claims to “bodhisattvahood” (which I will discuss later on), as “bodhisattvahood” is a fundamental concept of Mahayana, and not Hinayana Buddhism.

<sup>24</sup> Kerouac’s more theoretical texts evince similar problems, for example when Kerouac takes Buddhism to foster an attitude of unlimited licentiousness, as is suggested by his prompting to “do what you

musings wistfully: “if I could forget myself and devote my meditations to the freeing, the awakening and the blessedness of all living creatures everywhere I’d realize what there is, *is* ecstasy” (120). Nonetheless, he finds it difficult to reach this realization, and thus his spiritual quest starts with a handicap. Departing from Buddhist dictums that do not conform to his western mentality, Smith relentlessly adjusts Buddhism to a western perspective. Such an Orientalist approach however is heavily criticized; emphatically projecting the contradictions it gives rise to, Kerouac introduces a series of parodies that further expose the problematic aspects of his characters’ approaches to Buddhism.

The ambiguity of Smith’s preferred practice of Buddhism is foregrounded in his self-contradictory statement: “I am not a Zen Buddhist, I’m a serious Buddhist, I’m an old-fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism [...] my contention being that Zen Buddhism didn’t concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect to make it perceive the illusion of all sources of things” (*The Dharma Bums* 15). The various branches of Buddhism are now perceived as traces that can be combined, organized and reassembled at will. These arbitrary syntheses and arrangements heavily undermine any claims to a serious engagement with Buddhism, even when Buddhism allegedly provides the spiritual backdrop of the novel. The narrator appropriates Buddhist principles with extreme selectivity; the parodic aspects of such an approach, however, are soon exposed, validating Woods’ suggestion that Smith’s various escapades are “experienced with comic detachment as adventures in the world-as-void” (9). Early on, the narrator describes a monastery garden in Kyoto, remarking that it “is nothing but old boulders placed in such a way, supposedly mystically aesthetic, as to cause thousands of tourists and monks every year to journey there to stare at the boulders in the sand and thereby gain peace of mind” (23). The infusion of such irony downplays the significance Buddhism holds for the narrator, and Smith’s oddly

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want” (*Scripture* 34, *Some of the Dharma* 311). Zen-oriented as this phrase might be, it encourages the disavowal of fundamental Buddhist principles.

idiosyncratic Buddhism directly undermines basic Buddhist principles. Moreover, the description of Japhy praying is imbued with an intensely comic element: “once I opened my eyes and saw Japhy sitting here rigid as a rock and I felt like laughing he looked so funny” (61). Although as soon as the narrator makes this pronouncement he tries to lessen its impact, his ambivalent feelings towards Buddhism are emphatically projected. When Smith subsequently mentions that he “prayed for Japhy, for his future safety and happiness and eventual Buddhahood. It was all completely serious, all completely hallucinated, all completely happy” (61), one cannot help but question whether the narrator indeed takes Buddhism as a mere droll hallucination, and the quest for spiritual guidance becomes so destabilized in *The Dharma Bums* that it reads more like a parody.

Kerouac makes extensive use of parody in order to negotiate the problems implicit in his characters’ spiritual quest, exposing the pitfalls of the westernized appropriations of Buddhism that were in vogue at his time. At another instance Buddhist dictums are ironically compared to “the minds of banana peels” (104), and parodies persist when Japhy Ryder imagines himself as “a head monk of a zendo with a big jar full of crickets” (84)<sup>25</sup> and then envisages “a series of monasteries” where the “waves of salvation can flow out of nights like that” (85). Ryder’s vision is evocative of an idea of a corporate chain overflowing with promises of salvation, and his crickets add a further comic tone to his aspirations. Later, he has another vision, when he talks of the Dharma Press: “we’ll get a printing press and print our own poems, the Dharma Press, we’ll poetize the lot and make a fat book of icy bombs for the booby public” (168).<sup>26</sup> The fact that Buddhist terms should be thus approached is all the more interesting coming from Japhy Ryder, allegedly the more committed Buddhist in the novel. Ryder here challenges the referential power of language, and arranges words in a manner that subverts pre-established meanings. He manipulates language in a manner that

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Watts describes the *zendo* as a “monks’ hall or meditation hall” (176).

<sup>26</sup> Apart from its more usual meaning of “an explosive device fused to detonate under specified conditions”, *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* asserts that “bomb” can also be used to denote “failure”.

upsets signification; in so doing, he adheres to systems of western logic that anticipate deconstructive thought, pointing to “an infinite play of differences which cannot be fixed and determined” (Mabbett 24). Ryder’s register bears witness to such play, destabilizing meaning in an utterance where there is not a strict correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. Resisting conventional interpretation, Ryder’s phrase presents fertile ground for the parody of typical Buddhist imagery. The effect of Ryder’s utterance becomes even more powerful when considered within the scope of the Orientalist mentality that conditions it: “Icy bombs for the booby public” can be fully appreciated in the context of Ryder’s American experience, and its disruptive potential can be best understood within such culturally-defined boundaries. Therefore, whereas the characters’ spiritual quest relies heavily on a Buddhist vocabulary, the appropriation of Buddhist terminology is largely on their own terms, and witnesses a hegemonic attitude over expressions of Oriental spirituality, which, however Kerouac does not fail to openly criticize.

Were we to take the narrator’s Buddhist pronouncements seriously, we should expect that his Buddhist faith would lead him to spiritual enlightenment. Adherence to the “Four Noble Truths” of Buddhism should lead to the eradication of desire and the annihilation of suffering;<sup>27</sup> the realization of emptiness should result in a *satori* to the benefit of the practicing disciples. Suzuki describes the nature of the illumination that is to be acquired through Zen: “in Zen there must be a *satori*; there must be a general mental upheaval which destroys the old accumulations of intellection and lays down the foundation for a new life”

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<sup>27</sup> Smith is however unable to eradicate desire, and seems to be deeply bound to earthly pleasures, as is suggested by Psyche’s remark: “how oral you are, Smith, you’re always eating and drinking” (151). Moreover, although he makes an effort to eradicate sexual desire “I was really sincerely keeping lust out of my mind by main force and gritting of my teeth” (148), he is not always successful in abiding by his decision to maintain celibacy, and is subsequently tormented by feelings of guilt and remorse. Kerouac’s viewpoints on sexual desire are also expressed in *Wake Up* (66, 68), where his (admittedly gendered) discussion culminates in the suggestion that desire destabilizes the emptiness-form equation; he then hastens to demonstrate the disastrous consequences of the adherence to the physical manifestations of form. Seen in this light, desire is intractably bound to the “wretchedness of form” (70), and “form” is thus charged with negative associations that cancel out its previous “emptiness”. In *Some of the Dharma* it is also stated that “FORM IS PAIN” (246).

(*An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* 96). Watts confirms that Zen emptiness ultimately leads to a “new vision of reality which is revealed when its work is done” (87). However, Smith’s understanding of Buddhism is, as we have seen, highly complicated; therefore, the multiple claims that he bears to *satori* enlightenment in *The Dharma Bums* should be approached with caution.

The narrator often comments on the strong impact of his professed *satori* experiences: “that made me change my plans in life” (15), “and I promised myself that I would begin a new life” (66), and “I felt like a new man” (92), associating spiritual enlightenment with a newly acquired existence. While on the mountain, Smith’s friend Morley identifies another *satori* for the narrator: “ah a little *satori* for Smith today” (75). Further on, the narrator puts forth another claim to enlightenment: “and instantly the tender bliss of enlightenment was like milk in my eyelids and I was warm. And I realized that this was the truth [...] that is realizable in a dead man’s bones and is beyond the Tree of Buddha as well as the Cross of Jesus. Believe that the world is an ethereal flower, and ye live” (115-6). However, Smith’s existence is neither ethereal nor flowery, as he admits to being “the worst bum in the world” (116). A closer look at *The Dharma Bums* reveals the problems inherent in the narrator’s alleged *satori* experiences. While on the climbing expedition, Smith realizes that “you just can’t fall when you get into the rhythm of the dance” (57); soon after, he similarly declares: “I realized it’s *impossible to fall off mountains*” (sic) (74). Ellis aptly remarks that “even his moment of epiphany is faintly ridiculous” (*Liar! Liar!* 205). Indeed the narrator displays an awareness of the absurdity of his pronouncements, and immediately undermines the force of his *satori*: “whether you can fall off a mountain or not I don’t know, but I had learned that you can’t. That was the way it struck me” (75). Thus, Smith draws attention to the lack of deep spiritual insight of his sudden illumination, which ultimately reads like a satire of *satori* enlightenment. Later, we learn that the narrator and his friends were “shouting haikus and

hoos and satoris at everybody we saw in the street” (82).<sup>28</sup> The ease with which they have instant and easy-to-communicate *satori* experiences further parodies the concept of *satori*, which now becomes an empty signifier, open to a variety of different interpretations. *Satori* is devoid of its initial meaning, and re-grafted in a western context; the alteration of its initial signification however defers the possibility of spiritual illumination.

Perhaps Smith’s most important claim to *satori* is when he has “the astonishing idea: ‘Everything is empty but awake! Things are empty in time and space and mind’” (121-122). Giamo discusses the problems Smith’s statement gives rise to, arguing that Smith is “too self-conscious about his attainments” (“Enlightened Attachment” 187).<sup>29</sup> He adds that “the intention appears somewhat parodic - in the sense of drawing a caricature of pure enlightenment” (187). Both in this article (187) and in his book-length study Giamo makes a similar comment about Smith’s exaggerated affirmation “I’ve become a Buddha” (*Kerouac* 142-3), and goes on to explain that he deems the sense of parody here “slight and light-handed” (“Enlightened Attachment” 204). The irony of Smith’s claims to enlightenment is further established in declarations such as: “well I’ve learned everything now, I’m ready” (*The Dharma Bums* 82) and “I could rightly get to feel a kinship with all living things as being empty and awake and saved already” (143). Whereas the idea that everything is “empty and awake” is also theorized in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (23, 36), in *The Dharma Bums* faith in this pronouncement cannot be ultimately sustained. The absurd ease and frequency of the instances of enlightenment suggests that the narrator cannot acquire any substantial spiritual insights, and he confesses “I was hurting deep inside from the sad business of trying to *deny* what was” (121). What are initially presented as sudden illuminations, therefore, finally result in parodies of *satori* experiences.

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<sup>28</sup> Although this utterance might well be taken to reflect a Zen mode of thinking, it still invites serious contemplation as to whether “the dharma bums” have actually fully grasped the meaning of *satori*, it being the ultimate goal of the Zen Buddhist disciple.

<sup>29</sup> The narrator’s attitude is here in conflict with Kerouac’s directive in *Wake Up*: “to gain the end of wisdom first banish every ground of ‘self’; this thought of ‘self’ shades every lofty aim” (134).

Royle asserts that “any text is haunted by the possibility of non-arrival” (6), and this seems to be the case with the narrator’s professed illuminations. Reaching towards a signifying system that would provide him with the possibility of spiritual fulfilment, the narrator nonetheless remains caught in an infinite play of contradictions, and his quest for enlightenment remains inconclusive. At the same time, with the infusion of bleak humour, Kerouac makes a poignant comment upon the superficial and ineffectual nature of western appropriations of Buddhist principles. Smith’s half-achievement constitutes a critique of the Orientalist approach towards Buddhism, and, as the non-arrival at *satori* suggests, the text resists the Orientalist mentality the characters try to impose. Kerouac demonstrates that western appropriations of Buddhism in the end lead to the deconstruction of Buddhist discourse and collapse any hope of spiritual fulfillment along those lines, exposing the simulated nature of the characters’ Buddhist constructions.

Particular linguistic registers intensify the strain of parody running through *The Dharma Bums* and the characters’ continuing engagement with Buddhist terms bears witness to the problems that further arise from their idiosyncratic negotiation of Buddhist terminology. A striking example is the use and, more often than not, abuse of terms such as *bodhisattva* and *bhikku* in the novel.<sup>30</sup> Not only does Smith declare himself to be a *Bodhisattva*: “as though I’d lived before and walked this trail, under similar circumstances with a fellow Bodhisattva” (54), but other characters share this opinion as well. Early in the novel Ryder claims that Smith is a *Bodhisattva* (14) and Rheinhold Cacoethes asserts: “I guess he’s a Bodhisattva in its frightful aspect” (162).<sup>31</sup> In fact, the narrator and his friends

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<sup>30</sup>A *bodhisattva* is “in Mahayana Buddhism one who having attained enlightenment (bodhi) is on his way to Buddhahood but postpones his goal to keep a vow to help all life attain salvation” (Wilson-Ross, *Hinduism* 192). *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* defines a *bhikku* as “one who has renounced worldly life and joined the mendicant and contemplative community. While individuals may enter the monastic life at an early age - some renunciate communities include children in their pre-teens - a candidate for ordination must be 21 years of age, have parental permission, and be physically healthy, free of debt, and possessed of a sound mind.”

<sup>31</sup> That a *bodhisattva* can be of frightful countenance is verified by the wrathful appearance of *Bodhisattva* Vajrapani, who is frequently depicted as a furious deity. Despite his appearance, however, he is compassionate and benevolent like every other *bodhisattva*.



easily either assume or attribute a *Bodhisattva*-like identity to numerous people: Princess claims to be a *Bodhisattva* herself (28), an assertion that is verified both by Alvah (28) and Ryder (34). Moreover, during a party, “a crazy colored guy showed up and began playing bongos on his own head and cheeks and mouth and chest, whacking himself with real loud sounds, and a great beat, a tremendous beat. Everybody was delighted and declared he must be a Bodhisattva” (163). Finally, “a sweet young mustached one-kidney Bodhisattva Okie” picks the narrator up while hitchhiking (184). *The Dharma Bums* makes use of an extremely popularized version of the Buddhist term *bodhisattva*, now used invariably even for characters who may not have any association with Buddhism. The various and extensive applications of “bodhisattvahood” forbid serious Buddhist consideration of the term. Even if there were grounds for a character to embody “bodhisattvahood”, the attribution of the term to a multitude of different characters makes it difficult to identify actual *bodhisattva* qualities in any of them. The narrator’s use of *bodhisattva* destabilizes the Buddhist signification of the term and “introduces everywhere, between all the disciplinary fields or domains, a principle of contamination, of transference and even of translation, but a translation without transparency and without adequation, without pure analogy” (Derrida, “Et Cetera” 297). In these conditions, the term *bodhisattva*, torn from its Buddhist context, spills into other domains of signification, causing textual disturbance. Translating the Buddhist term into a western context, the narrator endows it with a multiplicity of traces in a process of endless substitution. *Bodhisattva* now becomes an empty signifier in need of a supplement, which, however, can never be present, and the dispersal of meaning is suggestive of the more general dislocation of Buddhist principles. It seems that in *The Dharma Bums* everyone who is of a pleasant disposition generally qualifies as a *bodhisattva*; adding to the interplay of signification in this context, it can be suggested that Princess’s claims to “bodhisattvahood” only serve as a disguise of her lustful nature, which she satisfies through the practice of

sexual games called *yabyum* in the novel.<sup>32</sup> Even the validity of the *yabyum* practice is called into question, however, when one of its main exponents, Ryder, cruelly throws his girlfriend out of his ship in the name of the Dharma (180). This convenient dismissal of the importance of *yabyum* is further suggestive of the adaptability of the characters' Buddhist practices, and the repeated revisions and re-inscriptions of Buddhist terminology constitute a strong parody of Buddhism in the novel.

The characters of *The Dharma Bums* seem to have a similarly all-inclusive attitude with regard to the typical attributes of a *bhikku*. Smith repeatedly proclaims himself to be “a bhikku” (8, 157) and Ryder also describes himself as such: “I’m just an old bhikku” (80). Later, Smith declares both himself and Ryder to be “bhikkus” (91). This is followed by an overt case of parody: “I am Bhikku Blank Rat” (123). Such register is suggestive of an ironic disposition towards those who have devoted their lives to the study of Buddhism. Any connotations of *śūnyatā* that the word “blank” might convey are automatically undermined by its juxtaposition with “rat”, producing an image that borders upon caricature. Further on, Smith refers to himself and Japhy as “the two famous bhikkus” (149), openly challenging the suggestions of moderation that are associated with a *bhikku*. On another occasion the narrator’s friends are light-heartedly described as “bhikkus” (152). The word is so versatile in the novel that it is even used as a verb: “to bhikku in” (167). Smith and Ryder’s groceries are readily classified as “bhikku food” (179) and when he arrives at his new job Smith regrettably asserts: “I wasn’t a free bhikku any more” (187). To add to the long list of people with *bhikku* qualities, Smith goes on to invent some more, when he informs his “imaginary bhikkus” that it is “time for hot coffee and a cigarette, boys”(198). The colloquial language (“boys”) that he uses for his “imaginary bhikkus” indicates unexpected informality, questioning western representations of the *bhikku*. Smith has arbitrarily misappropriated the

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<sup>32</sup> In *The Dharma Bums* we are informed that *yabyum* has its roots in Tibetan Buddhism (27-28). Wilson-Ross provides more information about this (*Hinduism* 131).

*bhikku* image, and he profusely uses it regardless of its actual signification. In this context *bhikku* becomes “a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather marking them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines” (Derrida, “Living On” 69). In an overt proto-deconstructive gesture, Kerouac opens up his text to free language play, making extensive use of language’s performative potential. The multiplicity of signification problematizes meaning and deixis. Terms cease to have importance within a precisely defined discourse, and the concepts extend into further territories of signification, ultimately deferring meaning. Experimenting with the limits of language, Kerouac thus explodes Buddhist discourse. Throughout *The Dharma Bums* the terms *bodhisattva* and *bhikku* are used excessively. Smith attributes these qualities to himself, and generously to everybody else, enacting a process through which “the trace is sheltered, and therefore dissimulated, in these names” (Derrida, “Différance” 25). The terms become empty linguistic constructions, open to infinite substitutions, and their Buddhist significations are lost amidst a sea of endless signifieds. The characters indulge in projecting *bodhisattva* and *bhikku* images, the simulated nature of which, however, cannot signpost the successful conclusion of a spiritual quest, and Kerouac ultimately exposes the vacuity of his characters’ spiritual ventures.

Language games persist in the novel, and there is considerable misunderstanding when Smith takes Japhy’s words “Outfittin me friends for the Apocalypse” (91) literally. Japhy’s comment is intended as humorous justification for the supplies purchased for the climbing expedition, but the comedy more emphatically lies in Smith’s failure to see the humour of this remark. Kerouac makes extensive use of satire to challenge his characters’ Buddhist pronouncements, at the same time making a forceful comment upon the rapidly accelerating culture of Cold War America, which is shaped by a “prevailing form of

deliberate speed”, as manifested “in the sequences of Robert Frank’s photographs, in Vladimir Nabokov’s prose, in Thelonious Monk’s music, in Chuck Berry’s performances, in Jack Kerouac’s prose sketching, and in Martin Luther King’s voice” (Lhamon xxxvii). In this context of cultural transformation and acceleration, spirituality becomes a highly complex issue, and Cold War America ultimately remains perplexed when faced with the complications the attempt to define itself in spiritual terms involves. The caricaturesque aspects of post-war America’s Buddhist fad soon appear, as America’s partial and incomplete gestures towards Buddhism produce nothing but simulated constructions that fail to capture Buddhist spirituality. Further ironic overtones transpire when, having thoroughly equipped himself for his climbing journey, Smith gives the bums he meets the impression that he is going uranium hunting (93). The bums’ comment can be read as a parody of Smith’s “hunting” for spirituality. Further on, Smith states: “I wrote ‘The Four Inevitabilities: 1. Musty Books. 2. Uninteresting Nature. 3. Dull Existence. 4. Blank Nirvana, buy that boy.’ Or I wrote, on dull afternoons when neither Buddhism nor poetry nor wine nor solitude nor basketball would avail my lazy but earnest flesh, ‘Nothing to do, O phoo! Practically blue’” (115).<sup>33</sup> Smith’s “Four Inevitabilities” can be seen as an ironic variation on Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths; moreover, his scornful “buy that boy” implies that ultimately “he is not buying that”. The narrator’s family mock his *satori* and refuse to acknowledge his “enlightened” explanations: “nobody would buy even that” (122). Smith’s brother-in-law is openly sarcastic, and, in another quote drawn directly from *Some of the Dharma* (393), he is brought to declare: “if you grow through suffering by this time I oughta be as big as the side of the house” (*The Dharma Bums* 118). Such repeated parodies of Buddhism in the novel strongly criticize the narrator’s Buddhist appropriations, and Smith eventually concludes that: “Mind is the Maker, for no reason at all, for all this creation, created to fall” (84). Although there is

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<sup>33</sup> This last phrase is quoted verbatim in *Some of the Dharma* (370); Kerouac seems to have drawn considerably from this earlier work for the composition of *The Dharma Bums*.

some playfulness in the rhyme scheme here, the predominant feeling is one of disappointment, as “the Lankavatara Scripture” dictum that “the objective world rises from the mind itself” (Goddard 283) fails to provide substantial spiritual solace.

The language that the narrator uses is revealing: “all the irking hurts and tedious wrongs of the world, the human bones are but vain lines dawdling, the whole universe a blank mold of stars [...] I was dealing in outblownness, cut-off-ness, snipped, blownoutness, putoutness, turned-off-ness, nothing-happens-ness, gone-ness, gone-out-ness, the snapped link, nir, link, vana, snap!” (123).<sup>34</sup> Linguistic playfulness again borders on parody, and fragmented language forcefully conveys the breakdown of the narrator’s Buddhist pronouncements. Whereas in *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* the rupture is perceived as rewarding, “you snap the link and open the golden door and disappear into the bright room, the everlasting ecstasy” (42), in *The Dharma Bums*, written a year later, there is uncertainty as to whether the “snapping” of the “link” is a satisfying condition. A peculiar compound of three elements distinctly separated by dashes, by the very way it is coined together, “nothing-happens-ness” sets a mood of disintegration and incoherence. In this context, nirvana cannot be achieved - it is the “snapped link” to spiritual fulfillment. The narrator is left in a disorderly state, and the use of so many dashes and commas is suggestive of the confusion generated by the inability to find firm spiritual signposts.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the language employed produces a disruptive effect that undermines his narrator’s capacity to reach Zen’s ultimate

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<sup>34</sup> The second half of the quote directly echoes a passage in *Some of the Dharma*: “Nirvana, is, OUTBLOWNNNESS, CUT-OFF-NESS, SNIPPED, BLOWNOUTNESS, PUTOUTNESS, TURNED OFF NESS, NOTHING-HAPPENS-NESS, GONE-NESS, GONE-OUT-NESS T H E S N A P P E D L I N K (*Nir*, link; *vana*, snap!)” (415). In this earlier passage capital letters emphatically project the narrator’s point. Similarly, at the end of *Some of the Dharma* Kerouac declares: “NIRVANA, is, Snapped Link Ness, or, T h e S n a p p e d L i n k.....”(420). The gaps between the letters indicate a fragmentation that disorients the narrator from the Zen goal of unity and heavily undermines the possibility of a *satori* illumination. Thus, even at his most vivid Buddhist phase, Kerouac does not fully embrace the Buddhist edifice.

<sup>35</sup> Similar disappointment is expressed in *Desolation Angels*, when the narrator exclaims “That’s the way it goes, there’s your world - Stab! Kill! Don’t care! - There’s your Actual Void Face - exactly what this empty universe holds in store for us, the Blank - Blank Blank Blank!” (143). The sheer force of repetition (“blank” is reiterated four times) indicates the Kerouacian narrator’s discontent with the Buddhist conception of emptiness, which he now associates with images of violence and death. In *Desolation Angels*, the narrator comes to outright declare “O I’m not a Buddhist anymore” (215), eradicating any expectations that Buddhism might offer spiritual solace.

goal of unity. Smith's utterance is destabilizing; lacking a centre, it stretches language to the point where its representational potential is challenged. In this Kerouac seems to anticipate Derrida's idea that "language embodies a supplementary aspect [...] that moves it toward disorientation" (Olson 30). The suffix "-ness" is used repeatedly to arbitrarily qualify the narrator's experience of emptiness, and prefixes succeed one another in a series of substitutions, further unsettling meaning. Olson refers to Derrida's theoretization of repetition as "an aspect of iteration which alters, blurs, undermines and dislocates an utterance" (33). The reproduction of Buddhist terms ("nir, link, vana, snap") occurs here with a difference, as Buddhist terminology is re-applied in a western context of fragmentation. The inscription of Buddhism upon different registers indicates that the characters' spiritual explorations are in a perpetual need for a supplement, which however is volatile and ever-shifting, endlessly suspending the arrival to *satori* illumination.

Furthermore, utterances like "I am the Buddha known as the Quitter" (150) and "I am Buddha Empty-Eat" (151),<sup>36</sup> continue to demonstrate the narrator's discomfort with Buddhist principles and his parodic disposition towards them. What seemed to be a possible means of spiritual illumination in *The Dharma Bums* can no longer work as such, and the narrator's projections of Buddhism are inconclusive, running into double binds that cannot be resolved. A double narrative is in operation, as systems of Buddhist spirituality are caught in a discursive web of interaction between western metaphysics and narrative strategies which anticipate western deconstructive practices. The engagement with Buddhist concepts is indicative of a disenchantment with mainstream 1950s' attitudes. *The Dharma Bums* exposes the inadequacy of conventional interpretations, signaling Kerouac's turn towards strategies that can help him more effectively negotiate the problems implicated in his characters' post-war search for spiritual fulfillment.

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<sup>36</sup> The idea of Buddha as the quitter is repeated in Kerouac's *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (19).

### “Some Kind of Koan Business I Wasn’t as Much Interested In”

*The Dharma Bums* does not only destabilize basic Buddhist concepts, but also playfully engages with traditional Zen Buddhist formulas of expression. Along with occasional haikus (52), little riddles are also often interpolated in the narration; these are, or resemble, Zen *koans*.<sup>37</sup> Ryder quotes a famous Zen *koan*: “Great Plum Zen Master was asked what the great meaning of Buddhism was, and he said rush flowers, willow catkins, bamboo needles, linen thread.” Japhy explains that this *koan* signifies that “the ecstasy’s general” (82). Smith provides another *koan*, although it is not clarified whether this one is part of the Buddhist tradition or Smith’s own invention: “‘is there a certain and definite teaching to be given to all living creatures?’ was the question *probably* (my italics) asked to beetlebrowed snowy Dipankara, and his answer was the roaring silence of the diamond” (132).<sup>38</sup> Later, Japhy cites a very prominent Buddhist *koan*: “did ya hear about the disciple who asked the Zen master ‘What is the Buddha?’”, the enlightened answer to which is: “the Buddha is a dried piece of turd” (145). Moreover, early in the novel, Smith asks an old cook “why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” and the cook replies “I don’t care” (17), providing an impressive example of Zen *koan* imitation.<sup>39</sup> On another occasion Arthur Whane is asked for an answer to “what is Buddhism”, and replies: “to me Buddhism is getting to know as many people as possible” (163), offering another example of Zen *koan* improvisation. Such interest

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<sup>37</sup> Suzuki provides a comprehensive definition of *koan* in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*: “*Ko-an* literally means ‘a public document’ or ‘authoritative statute’ - a term coming into vogue toward the end of the T’ang dynasty. It now denotes some anecdote of an ancient master, or a dialogue between a master and monks, or a statement or question put forward by a teacher, all of which are used as the means for opening one’s mind to the truth of Zen. In the beginning, of course, there was no *koan* as we understand it now; it is a kind of an artificial instrument devised out of the fullness of heart by later Zen masters, who by this means would force the evolution of Zen consciousness in the minds of their less endowed disciples” (102). Faure, on his part, defines *koans* as follows: “in Chinese: *gong’an*, literally ‘juridical cases’ that serve as precedents, riddles of a kind” (98). Moreover, Olson cites Zen exponent Hakuin’s view that “the objective of the *koan*, a process of holding up before the mind a problem unsolvable by rational means, is to stimulate the mind to move in a totally new, uncharted direction, which means toward enlightenment (*satori*). The *koan* does not give factual information; it is neither true nor false” (90).

<sup>38</sup> In *The Dharma Bums* Smith describes Dipankara as the Buddha “who never said anything” (179).

<sup>39</sup> Smith explains that “Bodhidharma was the Indian who brought Buddhism eastward to China” (17).

in the *koan* form suggests that the characters are in active dialogue with distinctively Zen modes of expression. However, their engagement with the *koan* form is partial and considerably biased: soon an instance occurs when Smith straightforwardly scorns an improvised Zen Buddhist *koan*, dismissing it as “a lot of silly Zen Buddhism” (15). Then, he talks about “some kind of koan business I wasn’t as much interested in” (23), overtly asserting his scorn for Zen practices. His use of the *koan* form further testifies to a parodic disposition towards Buddhism. Smith freely experiments with the *koan* genre when he sadly muses:

“Who played this cruel joke, on bloke after bloke, packing like a rat, across the desert flat?” asked Montana Slim, gesturing to him, the buddy of the men, in this lion’s den. “Was it God got mad, like the Indian cad, who was only a giver, crooked like the river? Gave you a garden, let it harden, then comes the flood, and the loss of your blood? Pray tell us, good buddy, and don’t make it muddy, who played this trick, on Harry and Dick, and why is so mean, this Eternal Scene, just what’s the point, of this whole joint?” (89)<sup>40</sup>

The narrator uses what can be read as an extended self-improvised *koan* here with substantial sarcasm. Smith adjusts the *koan* form to western standards, and the language chosen for it (“bloke”, “Harry and Dick”, “joint”) reflects informal speech patterns. Whereas such language might suggest superficiality and lack of gravity, Smith’s *koan* in fact addresses fundamental questions. Despite the playful rhymes, the urgency of the narrator’s queries is overwhelming: repeated questions beg a clear answer. Rather than an obscure and suggestive Zen *koan* exchange that would typically unsettle the cause-and-effect binary, the narrator

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<sup>40</sup> An almost identical quote, this time in verse form, can be found in *Some of the Dharma* (132).



needs clarification as to what constitutes the “point”. However, Kerouac’s earlier suggestion: “The point/ Of this whole joint/ Is stop, sit/ And thee anoint” (*Some of The Dharma* 134) is not satisfactory for Ray Smith, the fictional construction that was to follow Kerouac’s theoretical explorations. Questioning the adequacy of his earlier interpretation, Kerouac now charges Ray Smith with the task not only of searching for alternative meanings, but of altogether challenging the idea that meaning can be found. The narrator’s question is left unanswered, and the *koan* remains inconclusive, in the hope that the answer to it will be provided “from these Dharma Bums” (89). Considering the characters’ various (mis)interpretations of Buddhism, however, it is highly questionable whether the *koan* can be successfully supplemented. It remains pending, just as the characters’ Buddhist simulations are partial and deficient. The narrator cannot ultimately obtain an answer to his question, and his efforts to find firm spiritual bearings remain incomplete. Smith’s *koan* moves towards a deconstructive mode that places particular emphasis on the performative nature of language. Bennett and Royle define parody as “an imitation of another work of literature (usually with exaggeration) in order to make it seem ridiculous and/or amusing” (294), and the narrator seems to be doing just this in his reproduction of the *koan* form (a reproduction which, of course, occurs with a difference). Smith’s *koan* departs from its codified Buddhist counterparts, offering a differentiated version. The parodic simulation that derives thereof attests to the dependence of the narrator’s (here spiritual) identity upon language: “The subject [...] is inscribed in language, is a ‘function’ of language, becomes a *speaking* subject only by making its speech conform - even in so-called ‘creation,’ or in so-called ‘transgression’ - to the system of the rules of language as a system of differences, or at the very least by conforming to the general law of *différance*” (Derrida, “Différance” 15). Smith’s self-improvised *koans* inscribe him onto the narrative of *The Dharma Bums*; the narrator’s character is largely defined by the manner in which he verbally negotiates his

Buddhism. Transgressing standard Buddhist forms of expression, the narrator's spiritual identity is grafted within a web of different interpretations of Buddhism; the parodies that ensue ultimately lay bare the inconclusiveness of Smith's spiritual pursuits.

The interplay of *différance* conditions Smith's revisions of the *koan* form, the deconstruction of which in turn heavily displaces his search for spirituality. Unsurprisingly, Smith's improvised *koan* "light a fire, fight a liar, what's the difference, in existence?" (115), is not followed by an answer; the exchange is left incomplete and the narrator's desire to locate meaning remains unfulfilled.<sup>41</sup> Smith later improvises "the banana sermon" (146), an outright sarcastic comment on Ryder's account of the flower sermon. The narrator's last self-improvised *koan*, to which he does provide an answer, makes use of Christian terminology: "What is a rainbow, Lord? A hoop for the lowly" (202). Nonetheless, the blending of Christian religion with a specifically Buddhist formula of expression ultimately undermines Smith's idiosyncratic version of Buddhism. Smith's liberties with the *koan* form further indicate a gesture towards free language play. Resisting conventional modes of expression, the narrator is grasping towards alternative signifying practices, but remains caught in a state of transition he cannot overcome. Now that Buddhism's initial potential of spiritual comfort has been heavily undermined, Smith parodies his earlier assumption that spiritual meaning can be found. The disagreement between his alleged espousal of Buddhism and his stylistic practices is most evident in the particular use of *koans*. The formulation of mock-*koans* suggests that much as Smith lays claim to a Buddhist conception of the world, his points of departure from Buddhism are of far greater significance, and the *koan* form is used to parody his Buddhist pretenses. In *The Dharma Bums* language is manipulated and occasionally torn apart; it is sometimes used playfully and frequently with a parodic effect in mind, as for example in the creation of *koans*. The *koan* form is repeatedly employed, but with a twist,

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<sup>41</sup> This is another direct quote from *Some of the Dharma* (369); Kerouac's *koan* is left unanswered in this earlier text as well.

revealing Kerouac's critical distance from Buddhist formulas. Inverting the typical features of the *koan* exchange, Kerouac upsets the balance of this traditional form, introducing new approaches, which in turn problematize the possibility of *satori* illumination. Smith's Buddhist explorations are displaced, as he discovers that Buddhism's particular forms of expression can only be used to frame the parodic attitude he adopts after the realization that *śūnyatā* has moved beyond his reach. No satisfying conclusion can be achieved, and the narrator's attempt to locate spiritual meaning is left pending. However, rather than enjoying the liberating potential that such destabilization and fluidity can engender in the postmodern context, the characters of *The Dharma Bums*, firmly rooted in their historical moment, experience emptiness and lack of a spiritual centre as a source of anxiety, and try to master it through the adoption of Orientalist strategies of domestication and subjugation of the exotic. The lengthy series of parodies that Kerouac introduces in the novel, nevertheless, exposes the vacuity of such endeavours.

Leer notes that "to Ray Smith 'Dharma' means 'true meaning'" (83).<sup>42</sup> In *The Dharma Bums*, however, this "true meaning" is never reached, and we can only trace the narrator's futile attempts to attain it. Smith's repeated convictions that "something will come of it" (62), "everything is all right forever and forever and forever"(117), "everything's all right" (124), and "that everything was all right forever and forever and forever" (142) are eventually undermined by his acknowledgement that "all was not well" (157). The narrator fails to derive substantial spiritual fulfillment from his alleged Buddhist practices, and he is ultimately left disoriented and confused in the realization that he cannot find firm spiritual bearings.

In *The Dharma Bums* Buddhism is at times straightforwardly questioned on the level of plot, and the language and style of the novel similarly challenge Buddhist principles.

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<sup>42</sup> In *The Dharma Bums* Smith has defined *Dharmakaya* as "the body of the True Meaning" (31). Watts describes "*Dharmakaya*, the 'Dharma Body'", as "the void" (91).

Repeated parodies have a disruptive effect on the quest for an insightful understanding of Buddhist emptiness, and eventually demonstrate that there is no solace to be found there. The narrator cannot find spiritual comfort in *śūnyatā* and achieve *satori* illumination, and the modifications and re-adjustments of Buddhist dictums and terminology effectively illustrate the inconclusiveness of Smith's religious quest. Misappropriations of Buddhist concepts, misunderstandings, language play, irony and parody all operate against a background of western logic. Although in his articulations of a proto-deconstructive discourse Smith gestures towards a better understanding of Buddhism, he nonetheless remains bound within western conceptual frameworks that prevent him from fully embracing the Buddhist edifice.

Ben Giamo suggests that one of Smith's ultimate goals is "returning to the origin" ("Enlightened Attachment" 188). However, the narrator does not arrive either at a spiritually comforting origin or a meaningful spiritual edifice.<sup>43</sup> Rather, through parodying his narrator's efforts to be enlightened, Kerouac problematizes Cold War America's spiritual explorations and advances a forceful critique on its hegemonic attitude towards Eastern expressions of spirituality. Giamo is of the opinion that "were Kerouac with us today he would remain discouraged, for the [...] trends of irony and cynicism he discerned early on have become symptomatic of our era. No doubt he would bemoan the blank parody that merely plays off the glut of cultural infotainment with no clear boundaries or hierarchies" (*Kerouac* 209). However, his statement is charged with a negativity that is not necessarily justified, given that Kerouac often uses irony and parody as legitimate means of artistic expression in his novels.

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<sup>43</sup> Recourses to Catholicism in *Big Sur* (169) and *Vanity of Duluoz* (131, 276) finally present similar problems.

### CHAPTER III

#### PROJECTIONS OF RACE AND GENDER: *THE SUBTERRANEANS*

Whereas a gendered discourse does not fall within the major concerns of *The Dharma Bums*, as we have seen in *On the Road* the narrator repeatedly constructs simulated images of the ethnic woman. However, this is not the only text where the Kerouacian narrator's penchant for the female racial other emerges. These issues are most poignantly addressed in three other novels that feature ethnic women as their main female characters, namely, *Maggie Cassidy*, *The Subterraneans* and *Tristessa*. This chapter will focus on *The Subterraneans*, where the intricate patterns of the narrator's approach towards the gendered racial other are more emphatically addressed. I shall also make references to *Maggie Cassidy*, although this novel constitutes a prelude to ideas more thoroughly explored in *The Subterraneans*. Published by Avon in 1959, *Maggie Cassidy* refers back to its narrator's first significant romantic attachment; interestingly, it was written in early 1953, several months before the composition of *The Subterraneans*, therefore constituting a continuity in thematic concerns.<sup>1</sup> The difference between the female characters of the two novels is that whereas Mardou in *The Subterraneans* is of Native American and African-American parentage, in *Maggie Cassidy* the racial other is white (of Irish descent), and bears strong connotations of purity, as she is mostly operating within a context of innocent adolescence. *Tristessa*, on the other hand, was written after these novels, between 1955 and 1956, and published by Avon in 1960. It could thus be seen as a sequel to *The Subterraneans* (featuring a much more controversial version of the ethnic woman - a Mexican drug addict). During the course of this chapter there will be references to recurring motifs that appear in the narrator's interactions

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<sup>1</sup> I am here following Ann Charters' chronology (*Kerouac* 404), as it is in this case more precise than the updated version Sandison provides (158).

with ethnic women in these three novels; however, the main focus will remain on *The Subterraneans*, as it is here that the Kerouacian narrator's views are most fully articulated. The thematic concerns and narrative mode of *The Subterraneans* bear upon racial attitudes already encountered in *On the Road*, and reveal considerable complexities in the manner Kerouac engenders the racial other.

*The Subterraneans* was written in 1953, shortly after the end of Kerouac's affair with Alene Lee, who is described by Sandison as a "young petite mixed-race woman" (96). Sandison reports that "two months into their affair, and spurred by a massive intake of benzedrine, he spent only 72 hours committing their relationship [...] to the pages of *The Subterraneans*" (96). The novel is a fictional representation of the romance, set against the backdrop of San Francisco's countercultural scene, with Leo Percepied and Mardou Fox as its main characters.

The novel's publication was not without problems. Criterion Press had already rejected it (Sandison 102); Don Allen wanted to publish it in the second issue of the *Evergreen Review* after heavily editing it, but Kerouac raged over what he considered to be a "horrible castration job" (*Selected Letters 1957-1969* 12). Kerouac's "October in Railroad Earth" was eventually published in its place.

For the actual publication of the novel, Kerouac spent "five exhausting nights correcting the galleys of THE SUBTERRANEANS restoring the original freeflowing prose according to the original manuscript" (*Selected Letters 1957-1969* 94-5). To avoid libel suits, locales and individual names were changed. Barry Miles argues that there are major differences between the original manuscript and the published text, and explicitly cites several such instances, one of them being that "in the original manuscript, Jack ends the book with a fight with Gregory Corso but, in the published version, the fight becomes a daydream, a fantasy" (191-2). The novel was finally published by Grove Press in February 1958, but

was met with generally negative reviews. An exhaustive account of the critical backlash it received would not be appropriate here, as comprehensive accounts of reviews have already been cited in the relevant literature.<sup>2</sup> As examples of the extremity of the critical reaction, one could offer Dempsey's article "The Subterraneans", where he caustically remarks that: "The best ways to read Kerouac is with an oxygen mask [...] And in the meantime, our oxygen is running low", and also Dorothy Parker's rather disdainful criticism of the subterranean group's attitudes (559). Sandison asserts, however, that "despite the negative reviews, or maybe because of them, *The Subterraneans* became a best-seller" (125).

The publication of the novel caused even greater turmoil overseas. In Italy, the novel was accused of bearing pornographic content and was briefly banned. William Lawlor mentions that "the publisher of the Italian translation of Jack Kerouac's *The Subterraneans* faced legal problems in 1963" but states that these problems were solved by the end of that year (54). In his "Written Address to the Italian Judge" Kerouac defends his novel, explaining: "*The Subterraneans* is an attempt on my part to use spontaneous modern prose to execute the biography of someone else in a given circumstance and a time, as completely as possible without offending the humanistic, in any case, human, tastes, of myself or anyone else" (*Good Blonde & Others* 82-3). Eventually, the case was won.

In his "Written Address to the Italian Judge" Kerouac exposes his views on the stylistic and moral outline of the novel. His mastery over language has been widely acknowledged by critics. Weinreich calls attention to Kerouac's "language of passion" (123), and Miles asserts: "*The Subterraneans* is written in spontaneous prose, with page-long sentences which do not obey strict rules of grammar but do retain a thread of meaning. This is Kerouac's spontaneous style at its best: perfected, mature, free-flowing, superb" (193). Miles believes that Kerouac's subsequent "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" was inspired by the

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<sup>2</sup> Charters provides such accounts in Kerouac's *Selected Letters 1957-1969* (137, 139, 172). Sandison (124-5) and Nicosia (567-68) also refer to several reviews of the time.

language of *The Subterraneans* (193). In a letter to Don Allen, Kerouac elaborates on the nature of the “spontaneous modern prose” he uses: “my phrases that I separate by dashes when ‘I draw a breath’, each of which pours out to the tune of the whole story its own rhythmic yawp of expostulation” (*Selected Letters 1957-1969* 17). Taking their cues from such a stylistic practice, both Weinreich (132) and Tytell (199) point to the influence of jazz on Kerouac’s writing. However, there are deeper implications to the adaptation of such a writing model; the “spontaneity” involved is a complex issue that I will discuss in more length in the course of this chapter.

Considerations of style aside, when the focus shifts to Kerouac’s treatment of his subject matter, it transpires that his “humanistic” and “human tastes” are open to discussion. Identifying a vein of romantic idealism in Kerouac’s work (147), Weinreich makes a case for the courtly love motif in the novel, with Percepied acting as the squire in service to his knight Mardou (131). Weinreich adopts a romanticized perspective here: she is, however, at the same time aware of Kerouac’s “creation of a language of *mythic* (my italics) ascension” (123). Thus, the fictionality of the narrative comes into sharp focus. Discussing *The Subterraneans*, Miles is also quick to note that Kerouac’s view of African-Americans is “hopelessly sentimental” (193); a closer reading of the text bears witness to a host of complexities that arise from Mardou’s portrayal as the racial other.

The problems in Kerouac’s representation of the ethnic woman were noticed as early as 1958. In a review that is rarely mentioned among critics, Esta Seaton notes that “Mardou as an individual is swallowed up in the cliched mystique of the Negro as possessor of the truly basic and vital life-forces, a mystique which, after all, is only a fancy version of the stereotype of the Negro woman as the ultimate in sexuality” (343). Exposing the narrator’s tendency to stereotype the racial other, Seaton is among the first critics to hint at the colonial dynamics that are at work in the novel.



The Beat involvement with the “subterranean” group provides fertile ground for such practices. According to Miles, Allen Ginsberg appropriated this term to describe the Bohemian types who congregated in Fugazzi bar in Greenwich Village (187).<sup>3</sup> Eburne attributes the Beats’ fascination with this Bohemian group to the fact that it constituted “not simply a *deviance* from standard cultural formations but a ‘discovery’ of an American racial, ethnic, and cultural underclass who lived in a manner very much at odds with mainstream culture” (68). Such a “discovery” could lend itself to multiple interpretations, and therefore provide ample material for fiction. Jon Panish argues that the Beats modelled racial others upon “Noble Savage” images (108). He is critical of what he perceives as an openly racist approach, and notes the inclination to see the “other” (in this case, mostly the African-American individual) “as a static, unreal image” (108). At this point Panish seems to be making a case for the construction of simulacra, a practice that Kerouac does not employ only in *The Subterraneans*. Here, the narrator does indeed “discover” an underground scene, and re-invents it in a fashion reminiscent of the construction of Fellaheen simulacra in *On the Road*. Deviating from mainstream standards of normalcy and acceptability, the “subterraneans” stimulated the Beats’ interest, and provided an attractive terrain upon which the Beats could pursue their similarly unconventional literary endeavours. Treated more as a pliable discovery than an actuality, their “subterranean” condition could then be appropriated at will. As material for literature, they were filtered through the highly individualized perspective of the Beats.

In the same vein as Panish, Van Elteren also points to the Beats’ “romantic primitivism” (67). He then hastens to deconstruct the association between bohemians and “authenticity”, emphasizing the social constructedness, and hence, I would like to add, the unavoidably simulated nature of the concept of “authenticity” (76-7, 90). Such approaches

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<sup>3</sup> The novel is set in San Francisco rather than New York to avoid libel suits.

complement my earlier discussion on countercultural notions of “authenticity” and “artificiality”. *The Subterraneans* embodies these tensions, placing significant emphasis on portrayals of the racial other and the problematization of such representations, especially with regard to the ethnic female. “The novel ends, too, narrating its own (fictionalized) conception” (Eburne 58), and one cannot help but question the nature of the confessions in the “gnarled naked confessional” that Grace perceives *The Subterraneans* to be (50).<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I will examine the extent to which Mardou’s image is modelled upon the narrator’s particular viewpoint so as to enable him to articulate his conquering mentality towards the exotic female.

## **The Film**

The vast interpretative potential that the appropriation of the image of the racial other allows is perhaps most evident in the filmic adaptation of the novel. The fact that the Hollywood industry decided to engage with Kerouac’s “subterranean” novel is also another indication of the nature of the interaction between the Beats and popular culture.

The film was directed by Ranald MacDougall and released by MGM in 1960. Mullins notes that “although the film is a poor reflection of Kerouac’s work and hostile reactions to it are understandable, *The Subterraneans* actually succeeds as a love story in the standard Hollywood mold” (34). However, Mullins’ moderate position is an exception, as upon its release the film was generally met with unsympathetic reviews, both from the counterculture and mainstream film critics (38).<sup>5</sup> That Beat aficionados should be annoyed at the treatment

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<sup>4</sup> Grace here echoes Kerouac’s own point as to the “confessional” style of the novel, expressed in “Written Address to the Italian Judge” (80). Regina Weinreich has similarly noted the “liturgical” overtones of *The Subterraneans* (121, 130), and Joy Walsh offers an extensive analysis of the influence of Roman Catholicism on Kerouac in her article “Jack Kerouac: Roman Catholic Conscience and the Body.”

<sup>5</sup> Such attitudes seem to prevail to the present day; for example, biographer David Sandison still believes that it was “an unforgivably silly film” (125).

the novel suffered at MGM's hands is justifiable, considering that a white woman (Leslie Caron) was cast as Mardou. Moreover, the film ends with Leo (George Peppard) marrying Mardou, rather than with the affair breaking down. Interestingly, in the film version it is Leo who commits adultery and not Mardou. Such modifications bear witness to Hollywood's representation of interracial couples as a taboo issue, and reproduce the 1950s social convention that erotic liaisons need to be legitimized through marriage. Moreover, it reflects a patriarchal mentality whereby it is acceptable for the male to be promiscuous, whereas female licentiousness is severely criticized. Finally, the film is shot in a "cinematically conventional manner" (35) that makes it all the more digestible for mainstream 1950s audiences.

Accounting for the hostile reaction of the more conservative press, Mullins points to "the subversive nonconformity of Beat sensibilities" (38). In his discussion of Hollywood's appropriation of the Beats, he observes the tendency to demonize them: "despite the film's attempts to portray its Beat characters sympathetically, it simultaneously presents them as maladjusted outsiders, and this embedded devaluation of their ethos and lifestyle comprises the process of cultural incorporation taking place" (36). The bohemian scene is associated with gloom, promiscuity and loose morals that are to be shunned by respectable audiences. Perpetuating the policy of containment of the time, the agents of mainstream ideology operate so as to prevent the development of other forms of "social deviance". In this case, Hollywood appropriates Kerouac's portrayal of the "subterranean" bohemians so as to serve the industry's own purposes of maintaining the established order. The "subterranean" representation that is offered to the viewer is an increasingly simulated one, as the film is based on the narrator's already simulated images. The bohemian image finally projected is a highly processed one, and sheds interesting light on the cultural processes at work in post-war America. Despite the "sympathetic portrayals of Beat concerns" that Mullins traces in the

film version of *The Subterraneans* (33), it is more often than not the case that cinematic images of bohemian promiscuity flood the theatres, ultimately inspiring anti-bohemian sentiment. With the popularization of television in mid-century America, the establishment gains a means to further influence public sentiment. With eighty-six percent of American homes owning a television by the end of the decade (Lhamon 14), it is easier for the government to channel propaganda through televised images, and for corporations to advance a mentality of “prosperity” directed and defined by consumerism. Thus, the image of the “harmless witless Beatnik” with which American homes are repeatedly bombarded, serves as a counterpoint that is aimed at safeguarding “normality” and order. It should not come as a surprise that such simulation-promoting practices would influence Kerouac’s writing, and the interplay of simulated images and “reality” often comes to the fore in his work.

Interestingly, despite the already existing strains of 1950s racially biased attitudes and gendered discourse in the novel, Hollywood was resolved upon altering the text of *The Subterraneans*, and specifically its portrayal of race and gender. Such interference bears witness to the subversive potential of the novel at the time; the filmic appropriation of *The Subterraneans* suggests a lack of awareness of, or a dissatisfaction with, the already simulated nature of the representation of Kerouac’s bohemians. Despite the narrator’s desire to trace patriarchal societal practices in this underground scene, the novel apparently still posed a challenge to mainstream viewers, and they were ultimately offered a processed and sterilized version of it. Mullins ends his article on a rather temperate note, arguing that “comprising both pro-Beat sentiment and a discourse supportive of traditional values, *The Subterraneans* serves as a useful site for consideration of the cultural climate of 1960 America” (38). Taking the film as a “cultural map of the time”, he identifies “conflicting value systems [...] in a process of struggle and negotiation” (39). When dancer/painter Roxanne decides to join the ranks of mainstream society, voicing the tritest of bourgeois

dreams, her choice is checked by one of the subterraneans, who exclaims: “All that wonderful madness, gone to waste!”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the instance when Mardou discloses to her analyst that she is pregnant is of particular significance, as it is followed by the analyst’s implicit suggestion that she should abort the child if the pregnancy is the result of a loss of control attributed to madness. Although “madness” admittedly constitutes a very powerful disclaimer in the 1950s context, within the same context, the analyst’s suggestion of abortion can be nothing short of shocking. Of course, the implementation of this suggestion would be scandalous for 1950s mainstream moral codes, so Mardou discards the idea; predictably, the analyst is pleased with her decision. However, that such an issue is brought to the fore - and in fact voiced by a representative of the mainstream - automatically makes the film less reproachable for its moralizing assertion of “normality” in the end. It still remains the case, however, that ideological conflicts are most conventionally resolved in the film’s ending, and although mainstream values are questioned, they ultimately emerge triumphant. Leo and Mardou break their ties with the subterranean group, who are sent away and wander off into the night. Marking the distance between himself and this odd assembly, Leo from the start exclaims: “You’re all crazy!” His agreement to start a family with Mardou voices an established trust in 1950s’ American youth culture: “nothing really terrible can happen to anyone who’s young”; this is immediately checked by Mardou’s cautionary remark: “Not too young.” Such utterances reveal the power of integrationist social forces to set strictly and rigorously defined standards of acceptability.

In the filmic adaptation of *The Subterraneans* we witness the extent to which 1950s and 1960s society was dependent on and influenced by simulation. A more popular medium than the written text, the visual image was more likely to have an immediate effect upon mainstream audiences. Thus, the typical American of the time would be more liable to be

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<sup>6</sup> This and subsequent quotations are my own transcriptions from the film.

influenced by the repetitious onslaught of visual simulations than their more gently presented literary counterparts (themselves simulated constructions). “Reality” and simulated image thus intertwined, post-war individuals can only get fragmented and biased glimpses of the “subterranean” bohemia, and they are ultimately more likely to perceive the counterculture in the manner it is mediated through the visual apparatus (to many more readily available than the literary). Thus, despite its indications of engagement with Beat sensibilities, *The Subterraneans* film remains another - perhaps milder - expression of the “Beatsploitation” tendency of the time, discussed in the Introduction of this study.

### **Colonial Desire and *The Subterraneans***

Nonetheless, when attention shifts from the visual appropriation and adaptation of Kerouac’s work to the prose itself, the power and intensity of the writing emerges. Leaving aside the filmic manipulation of *The Subterraneans*, I will focus on the novel itself in order to explore the complexity of the issues it gives rise to; this complexity has hardly been done justice to in the film, which ultimately presents a distorted view of the narrator’s quest for romantic fulfilment.

Mardou’s portrayal as white in the film deprives it of the intricate race dynamics that operate in the novel.<sup>7</sup> Mardou’s racial heritage plays a decisive role in this text as it introduces a white discussion of power similar to the one that is usually encountered in colonial texts. Closer scrutiny of the romance between Leo and Mardou reveals that the narrator largely operates within a framework of a colonizing mentality, not unlike that defined by Said in his study of the Orient. Discussing Western civilization’s treatment of the East, Said maintains that the West has styled the Orient in ways that facilitate “dominating,

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<sup>7</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that filmic Mardou is French, and therefore cultural alterity is not altogether negated. Moreover, African-American characters form part of the subterranean group in the film; however, they appear as extras, attesting to Hollywood’s refusal to grant them full subjectivity.

restructuring, and having control over it” (88). Totalizing as Said’s theory may be, in its tendency to homogenize colonial practices and its adoption of a predominantly masculine point of view, Said’s Orientalist discourse nevertheless offers useful insights into *The Subterraneans*’ narrator’s attitude towards his ethnic partners. In Percepiéd’s narrative there is a particular attempt to construct a center-periphery power relationship that enables him to emerge as the controlling male. In this process, the image of the female racial other is adjusted in accordance with the dictums of the “dominant discourse, which achieves hegemony precisely by its capacity to convert, recode, make transparent and thus represent even those experiences that resist it with a stubborn opacity” (Chow 332). Percepiéd here acts as the mouthpiece for the dominant discourse; in the process of enacting such transformations, he reconstructs Mardou’s image in a manner that enables him to assume an authoritative attitude towards her. In order for Mardou to be appropriated her individuality has to give way to a fictive construction that is compliant with the narrator’s imperatives for masculine dominion.

### **“Negro Mother/Cherokee-Halfbreed Father”: Mardou’s Racial Heritage**

As in *On the Road*, the narrator of *The Subterraneans* also displays an inclination to construct simulated images of the gendered racial other. In this case, the woman in question is Mardou Fox, an offspring of a “Negro mother dead for birth of her - unknown Cherokee-halfbreed father a hobo” (22). It is soon rendered apparent that Mardou’s racial hybridity, rather than being dealt with on its own terms, becomes the medium through which the narrator’s simulated images of the racial other are expressed. Mardou is described as having “eyes of Indian watchfulness” (24), and the narrator also refers to “the lost Indianness of Mardou” (50). This can be read as an allusion to Mardou’s lost father, whom, as the narrator

informs us, she never had the chance to meet. Mardou is subsequently cast as the embodiment of this “Indianness”: “And I also see the earth in your eyes that’s what I think of you, you have a certain kind of beauty, not that I’m hung up on the earth and Indians and all that” (94-5).

This statement is self-contradictory: as soon as the narrator associates Mardou with the earth, and thus ascribes to her a primordial quality, he goes on to assert that he is not particularly concerned with the connotations his proclamation bears. Yet his observation suggests that through his association with Mardou the narrator wants to come closer to an “original” quality. Trinh Minh-ha argues that “the search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized” (“Not you/Like You” 415). Kerouac’s narrator is modelled upon such preconceptions. In order to conform to Perceped’s simulated notions of authentic existence, Mardou must be purged of associations with the contemporary Western world, and her bond with primordial elements must be emphasized. Her image is constructed upon the narrator’s presumption that Native Americans partake of a primitive quality that renders them more “authentic”.

To further emphasize Mardou’s association with origins, the narrator of *The Subterraneans* summons the (archetypal) father image to his aid. Lacking factual data about Mardou’s father, Perceped imagines “that Cherokee-halfbreed hobo father of hers lying bellydown on a flatcar with the wind furling back his rags and black hat, his brown sad face facing all that land and desolation. - At other moments I imagined him instead working as a picker around Indio [...] I saw the vision of her father, he’s standing straight up [...] nobody knows his name, nobody cares -” (27).



Mardou's father is denied an identity; that he is unknown and nameless facilitates the construction of his image at will: an array of stereotypes is employed to describe him. The first one is an image of train-hopping, typically associated with hobos.<sup>8</sup> Downplaying any positive implications that such a lifestyle might bear, the narrator emphasizes the sadness in it, thus initiating a process of victimization of Mardou's father that later expands to include Native Americans in general. The subsequent image of her father is similarly stereotypical: in a passage reminiscent of the one about the fellaheen cotton pickers in *On the Road*, Mardou's father is envisioned as a manual labourer. The narrator chooses to position him geographically in Indio. The assonance between "Indian" and "Indio" goes without saying; moreover, Indio has a large Hispanic community, which makes it an all-the-more suitable locale for the "Cherokee halfbreed hobo."

Mardou's father is portrayed in stereotypical ways that highlight his status as a victim of white expansion. This victimization is not exhausted on the individual level; the image of Mardou's father triggers off an array of associations, as Percepied sees him as a symbol of the Native American nation. Inspired by the image of Mardou's father, the narrator muses on "the ground filled with the bones of old Indians and Original Americans" (28). However, he fails to provide adequate clarification as to what constitutes an Original American, and it remains unclear whether the term should be taken as a tautology to the previous "old Indians", or as signifying something distinct from it. The term "original American" is itself problematic, for it is almost impossible to provide its exact definition in the hybrid context of American society, itself an amalgam of various races and cultures.

Emphasizing the bleakness of the Native American situation, the narrator evokes the "wraiths of humanity treading lightly the surface of the ground so deeply suppured with the stock of their suffering you only have to dig a foot down to find a baby's hand" (29). Native

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<sup>8</sup> In *Lonesome Traveler* there is a passage entitled "The Vanishing American Hobo", in which Kerouac expands on his ideas on the life of the hobo. In many ways, Mardou's father is modelled upon these notions.

American identity is here closely connected with suffering and debasement. Steve Wilson claims that “what makes Mardou of interest to Leo is that she has gained access to understanding through pain - generations of oppression” (311). The victimization of Native Americans, articulated mainly through the simulated image of Mardou’s father, is now invested with a historical background. Even if the narrator makes an effort to acknowledge the injustice by bringing it to the fore, his tendency to construct ethnic simulacra ultimately transpires. Moreover, the pompous language (“worriers”, “keeners”, “protectors” [28]) used to describe the past/present continuum gives an ironic tone to the description. In the end, it is the simulated image of the victimized Native American that prevails, and the narrator’s colonizing stance is further established: the victimization of the racial other only serves to affirm white supremacy.

This is no longer a case of images of individuals, but of a nation; the narrator takes the simulated image of the Native American individual and projects it as representative of the entire Native American nation. Thus, we can no longer talk of a nation but rather of a simulated image of such, based as it is upon a collection of replicas of Mardou’s father. Constructing the nation upon simulated images, the narrator, in effect, fictionalizes it. Franco asserts that “as soon as the nation is described as discourse, it simply becomes a provisional framework” (133). Likewise, as soon as Percepiéd begins narrating the Native American nation, he transforms it into a plastic entity that can be shaped according to the exigencies of the narrative. In her work Boehmer discusses “the nation as fiction”, and notes a gender-based “fictionalization of the community” (35). Similar nation-construction is at work in *The Subterraneans*, where Percepiéd shapes the nation according to his own white male perspective. Employing a multitude of stereotypes, he verbally constructs a fictional nation that complies with the imperatives of patriarchal white society. Not surprisingly, it is not only

the Native American nation that is subjected to such treatment, but the African-American as well, as Mardou is represented as the offspring of an African-American mother.

The simulated image of Mardou and the equally simulated image of her father provide the setting for a generalized simulated conception of the racial other, rendered explicit when Percepiéd declares that the two “formed just the background for thoughts about the Negroes and Indians and America in general” (27). Not only does the narrator revel in constructing Mardou and her father in an exaggerated or stereotypical mode, but he also goes on to cast them as representatives of two races, and applies his personalized notions of a section of the American population to a more generalized American context. That all African-Americans and Native Americans should be similar to the way Percepiéd describes Mardou and her father is an overstatement on the narrator’s part, and its impact can hardly be overwritten by his subsequent comment regarding “the overtones of ‘new generation’ and other historical concerns in which she [Mardou] was now swirled just like all of us” (27). Mardou has already been burdened with such a heavy legacy that the narrator’s attempt to cast her as an equal member of the subterraneans group is feeble at best - in fact, the narrator has emphasized Mardou’s racial alterity so strongly that any claim of inclusiveness now seems ironic.

Prompted by what he sees as “that Indian warmth”, the narrator asserts:

“Honey what I see in your eyes is a lifetime of affection not only from the Indian in you but because as part Negro somehow you are the first, the essential woman, and therefore the most, most originally most fully affectionate and maternal” - there now is the chargin too, some lost American addition and mood with it - “Eden’s in Africa” (129).

Steve Wilson argues that Mardou “*contains* authenticity” and that “Leo’s love affair with Mardou, then, gives him what must have been remarkable access to a way of life most Americans in the 50s had never seen” (312). The novelty of such an affair notwithstanding, the remark about Mardou’s authenticity is severely challenged by Nancy Grace, who argues that the narrator fetishizes Mardou’s blackness “as a magical device that will transfigure him into his vision of the essential American” (52). Thus, the simulated nature of the narrator’s constructions transpires yet again, this time with regard to Mardou’s African-American heritage. It is through simulation that Mardou becomes more interesting, and also more useful to the narrator. Mardou’s African-American descent is used to establish a connection with an American quality that has been lost, and the narrator sees Mardou as the link that will help him rediscover (t)his lost Americanness.

Through the stereotypical visions of her father, Percepied does indeed “imagine the nation into being” (Boehmer 14). When he concentrates on Mardou, the narrator does not stop short of the fictional construction of the Native American nation, but he extends this line of thought to the construction of the African-American nation as well. Mardou’s racial identity here initiates a multitude of new associations: it becomes a signifier for the primal woman, for lost American values and finally it takes on Biblical allusions as well, as Africa now becomes synonymous with the blissful Garden of Eden. There is apparent confusion in this quote, and this pell-mell proliferation of linkages further affirms the constructedness of Mardou’s persona, which is modelled upon Kerouac’s “inability to leave the ethnic myth alone” (Harney 379). Mardou is not treated as an individual character, but rather as an object of cultural observation, associated either with the Native American or the African-American nation. Rey Chow notes:

As we keep switching channels and browsing through different “local” cultures, we produce an infinite number of “natives”, all with predictably automaton - like features that do not so much de-universalize Western hegemony as they confirm its protean capacity for infinite displacement. The “authentic” native, like the aura in a kind of *mise en abîme*, keeps receding from our grasp. Meanwhile our machinery churns out inauthentic and imperfect natives who are always already copies (338-9).<sup>9</sup>

A similar process is at work in *The Subterraneans*, where the narrator constructs such ethnic simulacra. Continuing unperturbed with his creation of simulated images, he goes on to associate Mardou with the same sense of warmth that her African heritage embodies for him. The generic image of Africa as origin (“Mama Africa”) is deeply rooted in popular culture. The narrator goes to lengths to establish Mardou’s rapport with origins so that through his involvement with her he can come closer to these origins himself. However, the problematic aspects of his intentions soon emerge as the notion of “authenticity” that the narrator associates with Africa is open to much debate. Stuart Hall warns:

But whether it is, in this sense, an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt. The original “Africa” is no longer there. It too has been transformed. History is, in that sense, irreversible. We must not collude with the West which, precisely,

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to the simulated images of the racial other that are projected in *On the Road*, simulated constructions can also be detected in *Tristessa*. The world is perceived as “a Golden Movie” (20), whereby “reality” and simulation fuse inside the narrator’s mind, who later admits membership to a “movie by God” (96). Moreover, the closing line of the novel: “This is my part of the movie, let’s hear yours” (96) comes as a straightforward acknowledgement of the simulation techniques that operate in *Tristessa*.

normalises and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past (399).

Therefore, the narrator's attempt to reach the "origin" through his involvement with Mardou starts with a handicap. Africa as Perceived imagines it does not exist, as it has been subjected to alterations and transformations brought about by historical change. What we are presented with in *The Subterraneans* is a distorted image of Africa, one that is shaped at best by romanticized notions of primitive innocence, and at worst by arrogant intentions of postcolonial expansion. Whatever the narrator's motives, Mardou's elevation to such a symbolic status only serves to perpetuate another stereotypical fantasy: that of Africa as changeless continent where the primitive, and consequently original, is to be located. As I have already noted, the 1950s anti-Communist paranoia and policy of containment bred a climate of uncertainty and insecurity; moreover, television facilitated the proliferation of simulated images. In this context, the need for the "authentic" became exceptionally felt; a readily accessible image was the pre-existing stereotype of "Mama Africa", with all the connotations of exoticism and placid simplicity it conveyed.

Hall explains how cultural transformations encourage a "narrative of displacement, that [...] gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plentitude, recreating the endless desire to return to 'lost origins', to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning" (402). Such an approach is, of course, purely illusory. It provides only a simulacrum of origins, one that the narrator subscribes to in order to satisfy his own needs.<sup>10</sup> However,

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<sup>10</sup> Fascination with the concept of origins is a recurring theme in Kerouac's novels. The quest for romantic fulfillment through association with ethnic women constitutes one expression of this tendency, as the racial other is habitually associated with origins in Kerouac. In *Maggie Cassidy*, Maggie is linked to a vision of tranquil domesticity in their native Lowell; not surprisingly, she stirs archetypal connotations of "womb, nature" (74). When she leaves her familiar surroundings to visit Manhattan her dislocation is vividly expressed (144), and she subsequently issues a call for return to the native land: "Lowell Jacky Duluoz. Come on home leave here" (148). Similarly, Tristessa is closely associated with "her native earth" (28), Mexico. The tendency to idealize Mexico is present here again. In *The Subterraneans* Mexico is projected as an escape haven (49,55), and in *Tristessa* the narrator finds in Mexico "the biggest junk den in Latin America", where he lightheartedly

Perceived seems to be insufficiently wary of the inaccuracy of his conceptualization of Africa and readily provides a simulated image of Mardou as the embodiment of this vision.

The African-American situation in 1950s America further undermines the narrator's romanticized images. In *The Subterraneans*, Mardou's stance eloquently complements this picture: "she would not have me hold her arm for fear people of the street there would think her a hustler" (93). Perceived fails to understand Mardou's concerns and devalues her fear: "In fact baby I'll be a famous man and you'll be the dignified wife of a famous man so don't worry' but she said 'You don't understand' but her little girl-like fear so cute, so edible, I let it go" (94). The narrator's lack of social sensitivity has been strongly criticized by Miles, who calls attention to the fact that at the time "ten million Black people were living under segregation in the South, denied the vote, denied decent education and medical care, forced to ride in the back of buses [...] unable to even watch Black entertainers except in Blacks-only venues" (193). Panish is not sympathetic to Perceived's utterance either, arguing that "Kerouac clearly reveals not only that he does not understand the 'palpable' effect even the most mundane form of racism has on African Americans but also that he does not really believe it exists, and, furthermore, does not care. Moreover, Kerouac belittles Mardou's feeling of oppression" (120). Panish concludes that "Kerouac's romantic racism is clear" (121). To this I would add that Perceived also fails to acknowledge Mardou as an independent character, measuring her value against his own accomplishments: "the wife of a famous man" (94). Being female, she is fated to be defined by her partner. Later on, however, Perceived abandons this line of reasoning and goes on to reproduce even more forceful stereotypes: "now [...] every time I see a Mexican gal or Negress I say to myself, 'hustlers'"

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declares that he saw "interesting types!" (78). Having already been subjected to colonization, Mexico is particularly attractive to the aspiring neo-colonizer. However, in *Tristessa* (and as I have already noted, also in *Desolation Angels*) the idealization is much more understated than in *On the Road*.

(129).<sup>11</sup> The obstinate repetition of Mardou's social exclusion (128) betrays Percepiéd's insistence upon such notions, and could be suggestive of an acceptance of such practices. That Mardou's discrimination on account of her race should be so openly asserted would appear to encourage the perpetuation of racial prejudices and hinder an appreciation of Mardou's own merits as an individual character. Therefore, her status as a "dark woman" makes the potential for substantial romance an increasingly complicated issue.

It is true that at this stage Kerouac does not actively question his narrator's stance, leaving the text seemingly vulnerable to criticisms like those of Miles and Panish. However, Kerouac does not fail to indicate his skepticism towards his narrator's views by emphasizing the arrogance of Percepiéd's assumed salvational mission, and ultimately showing his incapacity to rise to such a task.<sup>12</sup> Percepiéd's final subjection to ridicule by the ethnic woman emphasizes the inadequacies of his character. The opening page of the novel declares that the story is narrated by "an unself-confident man, at the same time [...] an egomaniac" (1). Kerouac has from the start warned that he will employ an unreliable, inconsistent narrator, suggesting that his utterances should not be taken at face-value.<sup>13</sup> By foregrounding the unreliability of his narrator, Kerouac undermines the validity of his pronouncements. This is a powerful disclaimer that distinguishes the author's views from those expressed by the

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<sup>11</sup> As I have already pointed out, in *On the Road* Mexican Terry is similarly described as "a common little hustler" (75).

<sup>12</sup> Kerouac's narrators often revel in what they perceive as their authority to guide and improve their ethnic women's lives. In *Maggie Cassidy*, Maggie pleads for salvation: "save me! - I need you!" (59), "you wont come save me" (147). Thinking about Tristessa, the narrator undertakes to "save her yet" (*Tristessa* 65). His arrogance is further displayed in his conviction that his intervention would be crucial to Tristessa's life (67, 81). Kerouac, however, is critical of such assumptions of superiority: his narrators invariably fail to fulfill their duty. Interestingly, Tristessa's "salvation" is particularly associated with coitus. The narrator claims: "My touch might have saved her" (65), and a similar idea is expressed later on (84). However, there is no actual intercourse between them. Self-conscious of the weakness of his pronouncements, the narrator then straightforwardly wonders "what would it solve to sleep with her?" (84). Hence, *Tristessa* seems to offer no answers save that of taking flight.

<sup>13</sup> The narrator employed in *Tristessa* is similarly, and even more emphatically, unreliable. He performs a range of identities. He is "a comedian" (14), "playing the befuddled American" (65), he then appears as "the baggy-trousered gringo jerk with combed hair" (87), and also evinces signs of egomania "I'm so smart" (85). His performance of assumed identities culminates in his warnings "I'm a liar, watch out!" (83) and "Liar! Liar! I'm a liar!" (84). Such utterances further intensify textual ambiguities, as they can be taken either as self-conscious, straightforward confessions, or as strongly parodic comments. At any rate, they are in open dialogue with Camille's accusation in *On the Road*: "Liar! Liar! Liar!" (170).



narrator, and invites more complex readings of the text that ultimately challenge overtly negative criticisms such as those cited above.

### **Race and Gender: The Problematization of the Mother Image**

Whether as a symbol of the Native American or the African-American nation respectively, however, Mardou's characterization involves subtle nuances directly related with her biological origins. A distinction is to be made regarding her own originators. As we have seen, Mardou's racial origin emerges as subordinate to her father's dominating presence in the narrative. Her power as a symbol of a nation is overshadowed by her father's image. Mardou's Native American heritage is not self-contained, since her father's prevailing image looms as the source of it; hence the narrator's insistence on the vision of the father. Mardou's Native American image is modelled upon that of her father, and her status as an individual character is thus further undermined. Mardou as Native American is under the power of the father, as in this case it is he who, albeit continuously absent, repeatedly defines her national identity.

However, when Mardou's African-American heritage is addressed, there is a shift in emphasis. Mardou's mother is scarcely mentioned except as a bridge to facilitate the association with the concept of origins; it is largely Mardou herself who now becomes the focus of the narration. Whereas simulated "Indianness" generally distances Mardou by putting her in the shadow of her father, it is her African-American side that renders her more accessible, a haven rather than an alienating force. Therefore, it is Mardou's African, rather than her Native American, racial origin that more emphatically introduces associations with domesticity and maternal qualities ("most originally most fully affectionate and maternal" [129]). Boehmer points out that "the image of the mother invites connotations of origins -

birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord” (27). However, she challenges the assumption that these images actually benefit the (post) colonial woman, remarking that “national structures in post-independent nations have conventionally been organised according to masculine patterns of authority [...] Women, by contrast, are cast into the more passive roles/metaphors of motherland, Mother Africa, Bharat Mata” (14).<sup>14</sup>

It is indeed along such lines that Leo Percepied pursues his own simulated constructions. That he associates Mardou with an image of archetypal maternity is not as flattering as it would initially seem. Rather, the narrator is here once more reproducing an authoritative postcolonial mentality that wants the exotic woman to be subdued and passive, confined to motherly chores; subject to such domestication, she is barred from active participation in social life and decision-making processes. Therefore, the association of the ethnic woman with the mother image is an artful device to perpetuate the narrative of victimization which the “exotic” woman has been subjected to in the history of colonization. Anzaldúa reports that “the dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage [...] for 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people” (44). Similar situations are encountered beyond the Latin American postcolonial scene. McClintock notes that “in the voluminous Afrikaner historiography, the history of the *Volk* is organized around a male national narrative figured as an imperial journey into empty lands” (101). In the context of the French empire, “*Métissage* (interracial unions) generally, and concubinage in particular, represented the paramount danger to racial purity and cultural identity in all its forms” (Stoler 360). Moreover, drawing upon the “Sati” example in India, Sunder Rajan makes a case for “the historically victimized [...] female subject” (11). Women’s constant victimization in such a variety of (post)colonial contexts exposes a male colonizing mentality that wants the

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<sup>14</sup> “Mother India”. For an interesting gallery of “Bharat Mata images” see [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/meaac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800\\_1899/congress/bharatmata/bharatmata.html](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/meaac/pritchett/00routesdata/1800_1899/congress/bharatmata/bharatmata.html).

ethnic woman in a weak position. Sunder Rajan eloquently comments on “the very device of victim narratives” (2).<sup>15</sup> Such narratives appear as a necessity for the perpetuation of a white discourse of authority assertion. In order for colonial power to be established, the ethnic woman must be placed in a position where she can be controlled. Her portrayal as inferior is a prerequisite for her colonization.

In such cultural contexts, racially hybrid Mardou Fox is not likely to receive different treatment under Percepiéd’s pen. Mardou’s powerlessness in *The Subterraneans* is the outcome of her victimization both because of her race and her gender. The power discourse implicated in Mardou’s association with the mother concept is clear. The attribution of passive maternal qualities to Mardou automatically invests Percepiéd with commanding power. Having been shaped according to prevalent models of white masculine assertion, Percepiéd indulges in disseminating postcolonial stereotypes throughout the narrative. Therefore, dominant Percepiéd regularly displays an inclination to leave the *estia* in order to treat himself to drunken soirées with his friends, whereas Mardou is more restrained. She often expresses a desire to stay at home: “I want to go home” (72), “I want us to stay quiet at home” (77), or at best acts as Percepiéd’s escort to the parties.

The passivity inflicted upon Mardou’s persona is in accordance with yet another postcolonial imperative. Stressing the pivotal role of gender, Boehmer argues that “without this marking for gender, it is well-nigh impossible to conceive of the modern nation [...] in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition” (22). Any sense of power that might be implied in Mardou’s connection to the image of mother(land) is thus undermined as associations of femininity with origin and source of life give way to more conservative images. At best, the female is presented as an awe-inspiring

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<sup>15</sup> Sunder Rajan believes that the perpetuation of such stereotypes is not only men’s fault, and she goes on to discuss “how the international women’s rights movement has reinforced the image of the woman as a victim subject, particularly through its focus on violence against women (VAW)” (8).

symbol. Adjusting Mardou's persona to fit into expressions of western symbolism, in *The Subterraneans* her character is invested with Christian imagery. Hence, she is on occasion: "wifelike Ruthlike" (55) (the name bearing strong Biblical allusions), "like a nun in profound prayer" (70), and "like a funny solemn unwanted probably angel in the house" (123). Even when she acquires angelic status, however, Mardou is undesirable. Typical connotations of elevation and innocence are undermined and parodied; even when endowed with a metaphysical aura, Mardou is "funny" and fails to command respect. Thus, in spite of the symbolic overtones imposed upon her persona, she remains a significantly incapacitated figure.<sup>16</sup> At any rate, Mardou is not dealt with as an individual character. She is at a double disadvantage, both because she is an African-American and a woman; as in the case of the ethnic females in *On the Road*, her gender renders her doubly colonizable. Mardou's representation is largely constructed around the axes of simulation and symbolization; in this context, the possibility for a successful romance is minimized. Mardou's racial otherness becomes the terrain upon which the narrator chooses to project his simulated notions of the gendered racial other. Hence, the entire affair with Mardou appears as a narrative of chauvinistic personal fulfillment rather than an attempt at a meaningful rapport.

Mardou's linkage to strong maternal archetypes presents further complications in *The Subterraneans'* narrative. Mardou's association with maternal images is pitted against her motherlessness; her status as an orphan is the first suggestion of her victimization, which is illustrated more forcefully as Mardou is said to have been brought up in an orphanage (16), and also to have had an abusive uncle (61). Considerable tension is created by the (re)presentation of an essentially rootless person as the embodiment of origins. There is an

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<sup>16</sup> *Maggie Cassidy* and *Tristessa* are also similarly sanctified on occasion. Until the final pages of the novel Maggie is too pure for the narrator to endeavour to have intercourse with her (141), and Tristessa's "holy countenance" (52) and "sacrificial sick body" provide "holy friendship" (53). According to the narrator, "holy Tristessa" (86) is "an Angel" (57) and "longs to be in a monastery" (58). Given Tristessa's drug addiction and overall fictional representation, one cannot help but appreciate the irony behind these characterizations. Part One's inscription "Trembling and Chaste" sets the tone for the ensuing ironies, as neither the narrator nor Tristessa actually qualify for these characterizations.

instance when Mardou outright declares: “I’m jealous that you have a home and a mother who irons your clothes and all that and I haven’t -” (54). Hence, Mardou’s character is heavily decontextualized from connotations of motherhood; her representation along such lines ultimately makes it difficult to perceive her as “the source”, and her connection with such notions is problematized.

The irony inherent in Mardou’s association with motherhood is further emphasized by the decision that she should not make use of her life-giving capacity: she uses a diaphragm (98). Although Mardou has the potential to be a mother, she is not allowed to bear the narrator’s children. Trinh Minh-ha points out that “Men name ‘womb’ to separate a part of woman from woman (to separate it from the rest that forms her: body and mind), making it possible to lay legal claim to it. By doing so, they create their own contradictions and come round to identifying her with their fabrication: a specialized, infant - producing organ” (*Woman, Native, Other* 37). Mardou however is denied even this. In postcolonial contexts a woman’s value is appreciated on the basis of her reproductive capacity. The disgrace of such choice of criteria notwithstanding, Mardou is further degraded by being deprived of this basic reproductive ability. Percepiéd seems to believe that she is not suitable for such a role: Mardou should not have children, as this would be disastrous to the narrator’s fantasy of raising a family in the South (62). Interestingly, “the narrator’s instinct in this speculative situation is not to challenge the social forces that would make being an interracial couple in the South difficult but to sacrifice the relationship to the fantasy” (Panish 118). When racial alterity becomes threatening to the white male’s plans, it is the ethnic woman that is at a disadvantage. A similar case appears in *Maggie Cassidy* where marriage is initially envisioned along the lines of conventional domesticity, as the narrator aspires to be a “railroad brakeman in red house of red babycribs and the joyous wash Saturday morning in the glad ragged yard” (62), and elsewhere envisages having a son with her (117). However,

even in his earliest encounter with the ethnic woman the narrator already hints at her unsuitability to be his wife. The idea of marrying Maggie is soon undermined by the narrator's readiness to replace her with "some gorgeous new blonde gold sexpot" (133) (a figure much better integrated into mainstream American society than its dark, ethnic counterpart), and later on his doubt "'is it true I want a woman? -' [...] 'Ruin all my -'" (143). At the end of the novel, the earlier dream degenerates into a nightmare, adding to the list of "dream[s] that screwed up" in *On the Road* (12). Not a brakeman but a garageman now in *The Subterraneans*, and so detached from the narrative that he shifts to third-person narration, at one instance using only his initials (J.D. [152]) instead of his full name, Duluoz has a disastrous encounter with Maggie. Moreover, in *Tristessa* the main female character's drug habit from the start problematizes the idea of marriage. The narrator's statement "I wanted Tristessa to be my third wife" (90) fails to be convincing, as it is constantly undermined by the instability of his feelings towards her, for example when he wonders: "trouble is, what would I do with her once I'd won her?" (66). The self-conscious irony in the use of inverted commas when the narrator refers to his "great love" (86) is striking. Not surprisingly, "Tristessa has never had a child and probably never will because of her morphine sickness" (22), and predictably, in *On the Road* Mexican Terry is abandoned after a very brief affair. The Kerouacian narrators' romantic interactions with ethnic women are modelled upon a recurring pattern: while initially sanctifying them, shortly into the affair the narrators find flaws with them so as to legitimize their refusal to seriously commit to any of them. The narrative of *The Subterraneans* presents no exception to this and once more here the dark-skinned female is cast as inferior to her white male partner. In another attempt to demonstrate Mardou's unsuitability to be a mother, the narrator undermines her sexuality as well, describing Mardou as "being unsexual in her entire life" (24). Thus, Mardou is

essentially denied the motherly aspect that had been automatically associated with her because of her African roots.

Mardou's capacity, or rather her incapacity, to (re)produce is not only limited to the sphere of the physical, however. Even on an artistic level she is blocked: "the art teacher the old gal at school was saying I could become a great sculptress" (32). Mardou is not only made to renounce the natural reproductive ability of her body, she is also denied reproduction on the spiritual level. Artistic creation cannot come to Mardou's aid even as a partial substitution for her physical reproductive ability. Mardou is deprived of active agency. Rendered essentially barren and powerless, it is now up to the narrator to manipulate her image at his discretion, and he goes to lengths to eliminate any threat the gendered racial other might pose.

In a further assertion of colonial power, Perceped does not fail to exercise his domineering impulses on the level of language. By linking Mardou with images of passive femininity, he expands his control over her linguistic abilities. In *The Subterraneans* the issue of narrative self-emergence is complicated, and the narrator's manipulation of Mardou's linguistic properties lends itself to much discussion. Although Mardou poses as one of the central characters of the novel, she is seldom allowed speech. As I will demonstrate, the linguistic patterns associated with her are not only indicative of the limited control she yields over her personal narrative, but also constitute an astute affirmation of the fact that "gender, like the nation, is composed by way of fictions" (Boehmer 12).

## Mardou's Language

Mardou is generally silent in *The Subterraneans*. Direct quotes of Mardou's speech are scarce, and her words are conveyed mostly through Percepied's versions of her stories. The narrator sets the tone for Mardou's speech from early on:

the cultured funny tones of part Beach, part I. Magnin model, part Berkeley, part Negro highclass, something, a mixture of *langue* and style of talking and use of words I'd never heard before except in certain rare girls of course *white* and so strange [...] but definitely the new bop generation way of speaking, you don't say *I*, you say "ahy" or "Oy" and long ways, like oft or erstwhile "effeminate" way of speaking [...] it's charming but much too strange (10).

Mardou's speech is an amalgam of many influences: the hip language of (North) Beach fuses with posh consumer accents and educated Berkeley nuances. Percepied is fixated upon Mardou's race as a conditioning factor; in this instance, language is associated with race to exemplify a fashionable way of speaking. The introduction of the term *langue* here invites a Saussureian reading. Both Mardou's *langue* (system of rules underlying a language) and *parole* (the way an individual uses language) strike the narrator as unusual mixtures. Thus, Mardou is not hybridized only on the level of race, but on that of language as well. Her particular idiom is associated with that of white women. Hence, even her speech can be seen as a simulation, in this case of white linguistic patterns. In the attempt to emulate white speech, however, Mardou is said to produce "strange" and exotic language. Particular emphasis is placed on phonetics, which deviate from Standard English pronunciation. Hence, after being cast as the "racial" and the "gendered" other, Mardou now becomes the



“linguistic” other as well.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the narrator does not miss the chance to endow her with a symbolic quality once more, and now she becomes the representative of an entire generation of new “others”, namely “the bop generation”.

Mardou’s speech is modelled so as to conform with her exotic image. Taking into account the manipulation that Mardou’s image is subjected to, the issues that Griffiths’ argument gives rise to cannot be overlooked: “even when the subaltern appears to ‘speak’ there is a real concern as to whether what we are listening to is really a subaltern voice, or a subaltern being spoken by the subject position they occupy within the larger discursive economy” (240).<sup>18</sup> Initially, Mardou’s speech is patterned upon “sweet cultured hip tones” (*The Subterraneans* 23). The narrator wants Mardou to sound crisp and fashionable and thus exercises extensive control upon her language. Hence, when he asks “where did you learn [...] that amazing way you speak?” (131), the ironic overtones of his enquiry cannot be ignored. Percepiéd has already meticulously identified the influences used to shape Mardou’s speech; therefore, now his amazement seems ostentatious. Having taken pains to define her linguistic patterns even to the level of sounds, Percepiéd’s subsequent refusal to acknowledge his interventions exposes a remarkable inconsistency and instigates further textual tensions.

Even at the rare instances when direct quotations of Mardou’s speech are used, however, it is highly debatable whether the language employed should be attributed to Mardou or to the narrator. Perhaps the most prominent example of the degree to which Percepiéd’s narrative aspirations shape Mardou’s utterances is to be located in the “quoting” of a letter Mardou sends. The citation of Mardou’s letter spans several pages. Rather than

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<sup>17</sup> *Tristessa* also qualifies as a similar, or perhaps more extreme, case of the “linguistic” other, as she heavily distorts the phonetic qualities of the English language, for example in phrases like “It’s not you moany, that I want, it’s you l o a v e” (10), and “I go to the do it to - *morra* - TO - MORRAR -” (53). *Tristessa*’s interactions are limited to the rudiments of verbal communication: “and with her he just conducted routine junky talk in baby Spanish” (94). Reaching peaks of grotesqueness, *Tristessa*’s broken language is shaped so as to conform to her generally dismal condition.

<sup>18</sup> The exact definition of the “subaltern” in postcolonial theory is debatable, as critics have tended to attach to it their own specific interpretations. Broadly speaking, it is perceived to signify “those who are never taken into account (the subaltern social groups)” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Introduction 8).

providing a coherent account of the letter, however, the narrator interposes long passages of his own commentary after each line. Even when claiming to quote Mardou, Percepiéd cannot refrain from providing his point of view, incorporating flashbacks and interpretations of his own.

A close reading of the letter problematizes the assumption that it is Mardou who “speaks”, for example, when there is a twofold repetition of “reliving and refashioning many old things” (77-8). So far, there has been no indication that Mardou is capable of and inclined to such ornate diction; rather, the narrator, with his emphasis on craft, is the one that has displayed a penchant for such constructions.<sup>19</sup> Actively engaging with this “reliving and refashioning”, the narrator relishes in the possibility of reconstructing Mardou’s narrative. Unsurprisingly, the recreation of Mardou’s past involves a victimized image, as she is provided with an anguished childhood: “earlier cruder horrors of home in Oakland where her aunt hysterically beat her or hysterically tried and her sisters [...] giving her a bad time, and she roaming the street late, deep in broodthoughts and men trying to make her, the dark men of dark colored-district doors” (79). The image of lecherous men also adds to her victimization, this time on account of her gender. Percepiéd chooses to endow Mardou with such a past and re/enact a narrative of suffering in order to project the image of a weak and vulnerable Mardou, so that she may more easily be conquered and appropriated.

Further experimenting with the interplay of “reality” and representation, the letter continues with a reference to “my image of you” (80). This quotation points more emphatically to the fact that the narrative is heavily reliant on the construction of images. Not only is Mardou fashioned upon the exigencies of the narrator’s image of her, but also here Percepiéd implicitly admits that he too is projecting an image. To complicate the interaction between the “authentic” and the image more, Percepiéd subsequently refers to a rewrite.

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<sup>19</sup> Percepiéd takes great pride in his writerly abilities, describing himself as a “great great writer” (73).

Thus, even on a typographical level, the original is blurred by alterations. In this context of rewrites and artificiality, any claims to a substantial romantic rapport with the ethnic woman are problematized, and the ambiguity of Mardou's fictional representation ultimately undermines the prospect of romantic fulfillment. As in the case of the construction of her image on a narrative level, now even on the level of language "originality" becomes blurred amidst layers of reconstruction. Mardou's persona is shaped each time anew, depending on the narrator's preferred viewpoint.

There is an intense tone of lyricism and linguistic sophistication that runs through the entire letter and reaches a peak towards the end, when there is a plea to "forgive the conjunctions and double infinitives and the not said" (82). Trinh Minh-ha has warned about "the danger of speaking for the other" ("Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism" 265). The text of *The Subterraneans* emphatically affirms this danger, as Leo Percepiéd continually talks on behalf of Mardou Fox. The linguistic tokens that he provides of her speech, however, are contradictory. Fluctuating between "hip Negro speech" and linguistic adornment, they reveal considerable confusion. That the above utterance (82) should be attributed to Mardou is highly unusual, as it conflicts directly with the "hip" tones of her speech; the irony involved here is striking. The alternation between these two distinct speech patterns points to the artificiality of Mardou's speech and the degree of the narrator's control over it. Mardou is but a verbal construction, and her words are subject to the narrator's mood. Lyricism and depth are forced upon her persona; this creates a chasm in the narrative and exposes Percepiéd as colonizer of Mardou's language. The utterances attributed to Mardou are in a constant conflict that ultimately bears parodic resonances.

In order to justify this peculiar change in Mardou's register, Percepiéd attributes her erudition to the fact that she was "for the first time self-conscious of writing to an author" (82). However, this appears more as another instance of exertion of superiority on the

narrator's part. By attributing such motives and diction to Mardou, the narrator is implicitly engaging in yet another exercise of self-flattery. It is in this light that his earlier comment on the "nice rhythm" of her letter (79) should also be viewed.<sup>20</sup> Mardou's inferiority is thus also foregrounded on the level of language. In this context, the attribution of decorous speech to Mardou seems to be a highly ironic enterprise. To add to her previous direct verbal undermining: "but no mind, she's just a girl - humph" (80), the narrator subsequently accuses Mardou of misspelling the word "friend" as "freind" (83). This mistake comes to parody the letter's ornate diction and exposes the artificiality of this venture. The humorous aspects of the attribution of such poetic decorum to Mardou are ultimately revealed, and finally the claim that the letter is signed by Mardou (83) fails to convince. Mardou's letter seems highly affected and its diction strengthens the suspicion that its authorship belongs to Percepied rather than Mardou.

The parodic overtones of the letter become more obvious when parts of it are repeated later in the novel. The optimistic suggestions of the beginning of the letter are quoted again (139), but now with the explicit intention of parody. The narrator has made it clear that he does not opt for the more tranquil life described in the letter, but rather prefers late night binges. At this point, it is only the beginning and the ending of the letter that are quoted. Tailoring the narrative at will, the narrator chooses the fragments that best suit him in order to shape a self-conscious parody of the possibility of a successful romance with the ethnic woman.

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<sup>20</sup> Similarly, when the narrator is happy to "flatter myself I have a rhythmic girl in any case" (81), given the artificial register of Mardou's speech one is led to infer that these lines are products of Percepied's own pen rather than Mardou's. Thus, Percepied is in effect indulging in self-congratulatory praise for his artistic creations, with romance playing only second fiddle to linguistic craft.

## Mardou's "Madness"

The manipulation of Mardou's linguistic abilities is further indicative of the narrator's control over her image. To add to her victimized image, Mardou is also portrayed as a mentally unstable character. Early on in the narrative there is mention of "her inadequacy to work" (16). Instead of being employed, she is attending regular therapy sessions (except when her schedule is disturbed by the narrator).<sup>21</sup> Perceped makes various references to Mardou's "madness" throughout the narrative, with declarations like: "I knew she'd been seriously insane" (59), "still believing her actively insane", and "madness, repeated chances of more madness" (60). The narrator places explicit emphasis on Mardou's madness: "something that not only made me fear her madness, her hospital type insanity" (87). Later, he displays remarkable insensitivity to what he perceives as "the great now-crushing weight and fear of madness" (124). Mardou's description as "mad" further intensifies her victimization. Mardou, both as the racial other and a female is blemished by the narrator's postcolonial tendencies; this is not a case of bodily scars, of the kind that would appear, for example, in earlier slave narratives, but of a more modern version of postcolonial power assertion. The white subterranean men have inflicted more subtle wounds on Mardou: it is her psyche, rather than her body, that is scarred.<sup>22</sup>

Mardou's professed "madness" has been projected so strongly that it has remained unquestioned by critics. Seaton describes Mardou as "half-mad" (342), and in his article on "The Subterraneans" Dempsey sees her as "psychologically sick". In a similar vein, Gaffié remarks that "Mardou is also suffering from mental illness" (13). Among more recent critics, Miles describes her as "quite neurotic" (187), and Steve Wilson contends that Mardou has "a

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<sup>21</sup> The importance of her psychotherapy is illustrated by the fact that when Mardou misses a session, her day is "wasted" (50). Her "need" is further highlighted later on (51).

<sup>22</sup> A product of Kerouac's later years, *Tristessa* is a far more problematic character. A "junkey", *Tristessa* is both physically and mentally ill, and hence a deteriorated version of "mad" Mardou.

history of mental instability” (309); a similar idea is also shared by Mullins (34). Detailed information about Mardou’s “madness” is provided in the narrative of her breakdown. However, before moving on to examine the manifestations of her “mental instability”, an exploration of the social context of the time and the subterraneans’ place in it is in order, as a close reading of the text reveals that Mardou’s temporary derangement is largely triggered off by her being treated as a sexual object (32).<sup>23</sup>

Although Mardou is not physically forced to offer her body, the psychological pressure that she is subjected to is undeniable. This is a more insidious form of colonization, whereby traces of conquest cannot be visibly seen on the dark subject’s body, but bear a deep imprint upon her mind. The subterraneans may not display the same kind of overt brutality involved in physical rape, but they are nonetheless guilty of a fierce attack upon Mardou’s intellect. Indeed, the subterraneans evince signs of being an “incestuous” (6) and sexist group. The moral standards of the group are highly questioned also by the dubious methods they employ to attract women: “we bring all these people to the house and give em all that tea and now all my beer from the icebox, man we gotta get something out of it, work on it -” (14). Their practice of inebriating women in order to take advantage of them indicates their ruthlessness and contempt for the female; this is also affirmed by their conviction that women are interchangeable: “like in the old days Leroy and I always swapping” (116). Mardou’s description as “their play doll” (64) reflects the group’s attitude, and later the narrator proclaims his intentions to “come in to town only for good times if not to see Mardou then any other chick will do” (111).<sup>24</sup> Therefore, when he tries to set himself apart from the rest of the group, alerting Mardou to the fact that “those guys really treated you bad” (40), one cannot help noticing the ambiguity of his pronouncement. Van Elteren points out that such

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<sup>23</sup> The narrator mentions that before her mistreatment Mardou had been “a healthy girl in her own right” (31).

<sup>24</sup> Similar attitudes feature in Kerouac’s play *Beat Generation*, where gendered language is used to describe female characters in phrases like “a nice little old broad [...] big old broads” (9), “some fancy dolls” (23), and “a sweet lilltle baby pussy” (25).

“discourse on gender, with its truculent masculinity and tendency of immature and non-binding commitments to women [...] was not really something new among male Bohemians, or, more generally, non-Bohemian male chauvinists, who have displayed similar irresponsible behavior in the past and present” (90). Helen McNeil explains that in the 1950s “freedom means not being interfered with by women” (182). Although there is obvious tension between the narrator’s pronouncements and actions, the gravity of his comment regarding Mardou’s mistreatment, especially considered in the context of the gendered attitudes of the time, should be acknowledged. Although Leo Percepied’s character is ostensibly influenced by both the mainstream and countercultural imperatives of the 1950s, Kerouac at the same time advances a criticism of such practices, having Percepied straightforwardly condemn them as “bad”.<sup>25</sup> *The Subterraneans* abounds with expressions of such tensions. Although not always able to eschew social pressures, if only by exposing the maladies of his time, Kerouac testifies to the need for negotiation and re-consideration of the problematic aspects of his culture.

There are striking differences in the way Mardou and Yuri, both racial others, are treated. Despite the fact that Yuri is Yugoslavian, and also cast as the enemy (13, 75), by virtue of his gender he is welcomed into the brotherhood of the subterraneans. Predictably, he shares their views, and at one point he declares: “I’m going out and find me a girl” (60), treating female characters as interchangeable commodities. Yuri’s membership in the subterranean group is so significant that he is ultimately forgiven for his involvement with Mardou. On the penultimate page of the novel the narrator sees him as “a jester angel who made his presence on earth all a joke and I realize that this too with Mardou was a joke and I think, ‘Funny Angel, elevated amongst the subterraneans’” (151). The narrator now elevates Yuri to an angelic condition that is conventionally beyond criticism. Yuri’s final sublimation

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<sup>25</sup> The gendered discourse of the 1950s is further foregrounded in *The Subterraneans* film, in which Percepied exclaims: “What else do you want? We gave you the vote, you wear pants.” However, his utterance is not left unquestioned by Roxanne, who makes clear that more changes are needed.

constitutes an interesting twist, and the introduction of humour alleviates previous tensions between the two men. The affair with Mardou is now seen as a joke; its importance is diminished, and the coherence of the male group is restored through comedy. By parodying the affair, the narrator undermines its importance for the sake of male camaraderie, in an attempt to safeguard the image of the authoritative male that, as I demonstrated in the first chapter, seemed threatened by rapid changes in the social scene of the 1950s. Therefore, not only is Yuri excused for his misdemeanour, but he is now transformed into the “divine jester”, reminiscent of “HOLY GOOF” Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* (176).

Mardou is openly subjected to sexist attitudes. Her function among the subterraneans is very specifically defined: she is expected to indiscriminately provide pleasure to them. In these conditions, her reaction against such attitudes may not be a sign of madness, but rather a justified action (although admittedly extravagant). In a group where women are depreciated, Mardou is to suffer doubly, because she is an African-American woman. Not only is the subterraneans’ discourse heavily gendered, but there is also a daunting racism among the group, clearly expressed in Adam’s reluctance to get involved with Mardou “because you’re Negro” (102). Adam’s pronouncement here affirms the racist attitudes of 1950s America, and legitimizes Mardou’s afore-mentioned fear of being mistaken for a hustler. Kerouac is not blind to the chauvinistic discourses of his time;<sup>26</sup> rather than necessarily recycling them, however, he uses them as a platform from which he can project his own critical views, anticipating the Civil Rights movement that would soon emerge.

It is in the context of such attitudes that Mardou’s mental breakdown occurs; therefore, her “madness” is open to much questioning, as it appears as the outcome of the manipulation she has been subjected to. The very concept of “madness” is problematic, as in

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<sup>26</sup> Despite multiple indications to the contrary, neither is Percepied, as at one instance he expresses awareness of the African-American predicament: “damn the lynchers, the not-likings” (83).



Cold War America definitions of “madness” were often exaggerated.<sup>27</sup> Seeing them as potential madmen, Seaton argues that the “leather-jacketed lost young and not so young men living disordered lives on the under-side of society and passing their years drinking, taking dope, talking long into the night about jazz and Ezra Pound - is one that should be, and undoubtedly already is, a subject of study for sociologists and psychologists” (342). Another indication of conceptions of madness in the 1950s appears in *The Subterraneans* when Mardou’s sisters decide to call the police and have Mardou hospitalized because “she smokes dope, she hangs out with all those queer guys with beards in the City” (48); such comments reveal the exaggerated nature of conceptions of madness in Kerouac’s time.<sup>28</sup> Bringing into perspective various definitions of madness, Kerouac foregrounds the problematic aspects of the narrative of Mardou’s mental breakdown. It is not only expressions of “madness”, however, that lend themselves to questioning, but also the means chosen to narrate it. Rather than a straightforward account offered by the character that has undergone the experience, the story is recounted from the narrator’s point of view. A closer look at the narrative of Mardou’s mental breakdown is revealing of the liberties the narrator takes with the projection of her image, and further exposes the constructedness of her “madness”.

### **The Narrative of Mardou’s Mental Breakdown**

From the outset the narrator defines the narrative framework, stating that what will follow is the story of a madwoman: “she’s lost her mind” (32). The story itself is mostly

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<sup>27</sup> The Cold War definition of “psychopath” has been cited earlier in this thesis (p.59). In his article “Beatnik Bogeyman on the Prowl” David Dempsey accuses Kerouac’s work of displaying “largely psychopathic” fantasies. Alert to constructions of madness in his times, Kerouac subtly challenges these notions in the narrative of *The Subterraneans*.

<sup>28</sup> *The Subterraneans* film emphatically illustrates the threatening potential of “madness” in the 1950s. “Flipping” Mardou is pursued by the police, and it is only another representative of well-established institutions (here, religion) that is allowed the authority to “save” her by “normalizing” her. Thus, some of the most prestigious agents of the established order are summoned to ensure that “madness” is contained (Mardou’s analyst is yet another such force).

narrated in the third person, with the insertion of the occasional quotation attributed directly to Mardou. When Mardou's speech is finally quoted, the narrator does not hesitate to interpose his own comments, which are not favorable to Mardou, as is indicated by the repeated affirmation of her madness: "Adam's right she's crazy" (33). The credibility of the narrative is dubious however, since the focalization is largely Percepied's. Thus, when he urges Mardou to "go on with your amazing story" (38), the irony of his utterance is strongly felt.

The narrative itself spans several pages (32-50), but it is mainly between pages 33 and 36 that the actual suicide attempt is depicted. Even in her hour of spiritual torment Mardou is not granted the right to be treated as an individual character. Her relentless symbolization soon reaches new peaks. Not only does Mardou stand as a symbol of race, but also closely bound to the narration of her breakdown is her own search for a symbol, which takes the shape of a brooch. Despite the use of inverted commas, the highly ornate language suggests that it is actually the narrator who speaks when Mardou is quoted as declaring: "it was the first symbol I was going to allow myself" (37). Mardou, a symbol herself, is verbally invested with a need for and fascination with symbols.<sup>29</sup> Such an overuse of symbolism eventually causes a comic effect, as the allure of the symbolic woman is overshadowed by the inadequacy of the symbolization. As if her association with an (already absurd) overabundance of ethnic simulations were not enough, now the hyper-ethnic woman is in need of further self-defining symbols. Interestingly, her chosen symbols are an inexpensive brooch and two postcards worth ten cents; the triviality of the objects further exposes the comedy implied in this abuse of symbolization practices.

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<sup>29</sup> Percepied chooses to endow this brooch with religious overtones, but there is not enough evidence in the text to support such an interpretation.

Although the text purports to offer an insight into Mardou's psyche, it soon transpires that Mardou in fact becomes the victim of Percepiéd's narrative exploits, which largely either deprive her of speech or model her speech upon his need for linguistic assertion. Discussing the mental breakdown, the narrator summons decorous imagery: "danger in the air - it was writ in the shadows, in the gloomy dust behind the drawing table in the corner, in the garbage bags, the gray drain of day seeping down the wall and into the window - in the hollow eyes of people" (33). This clichéd film-noiresque imagery, however, has a twofold effect. On the one hand, it sets the mood for calamity, as romantic lyrical overtones are often conventionally attached to suicide attempts in literature. However, on the other hand, given the context of Mardou's particular deed, and the harshness and urgency associated with it, lyricism here can be seen as striking a dissonant chord and ultimately adding an almost cartoonish dimension to the incident. Similarly, a previous attempt at a subtly poetic tone, in "the rainy night blooming all over, kissing everywhere men women and cities in one wash of sad poetry" (34) vividly alerts the reader to the problem of the aesthetization of experience through art. Finding formulas appropriate to convey Mardou's experience through language becomes a pressing issue. Oscillating between such decorous passages and the "hip" verbal patterns associated with the subterraneans, Kerouac swerves through conflicting registers. The result here is a discordant text, in which the harmonious integration of different styles does not necessarily take place. Rather than a textual weakness, however, this could be taken as a self-conscious exposition of the complexities of artistic expression. Filtering it through the lens of his perceptive faculties, Percepiéd manoeuvres the narrative of Mardou's mental breakdown and shapes it according to his own writing ambitions. Having established himself as the craftsman *par excellence*, he indulges in further affirming his superiority over Mardou on the level of linguistic ability. Mardou is described as incapable of creating linguistic structures similar to those of the narrator: "I'd make up my mind, I'd erected some structure, it was like, but I

can't -" (35). While elaborating on his narrative craft, Percepied is trying to confine Mardou to a disorderly personal narrative (of "madness"). The disorganized arrangement of her words is meant to suggest confusion. However, the tensions involved in Percepied's artistic explorations ultimately challenge his authority to negotiate Mardou's predicament.

We are well into the first three pages of the narrative of her "madness" when Mardou is actually allowed to express her own point of view. As in the case of the letter, again Mardou's speech, when offered as a direct quotation, is highly affected: "why did God make all this all so decayable and diable and harmable and wants to make me realize and scream - why the wild ground and bodies bare and breaks - I quaked when the giver creamed, when my father screamed, my mother dreamed" (36). Intent on endowing Mardou's character with lyrical depth, the narrator's exaggerated attempts ultimately expose the artificiality of Mardou's speech. Suleri touches upon the issue of speech manipulation drawing attention to "the great difficulty posited by the 'authenticity' of female racial voices in the great game that claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want" (247). Not only does the narrator of *The Subterraneans* appropriate Mardou's story, he subsequently narrates it in a mode that conflicts with Mardou's previous characterization. Rather than arousing sympathy, these displays of writerly virtuosity are so flamboyant that they produce a comic effect. Such subversions ultimately downplay the story of "spiritual suffering" (50). The possibility of a substantial romance with Mardou fades as Percepied takes advantage of her anguish to gain material for literature. The narrator takes control over the narration of the breakdown and reconstructs it. However, his approach is not without problems; the linguistic tension that builds up in the passages relating to Mardou's narrative of "madness" is indicative of Percepied's intense experimentation with linguistic formulas. More than a comment on Mardou's breakdown, the narrative of the suicide attempt ultimately reads like a parody of Percepied's own artistic confusion.

## Narrative as Psychotherapy

The narrator admittedly takes great pains to establish Mardou's "madness". However, in his avid efforts, indications of his own mental state are provided. Hence, when he declares that "the fear of madness haunts her - not Me Not Me by God" (79), we cannot help but wonder about the ambiguity of this statement. Could it be that "not Me" refers to the narrator's own disavowal of madness? Kerouac complicates representations of madness so as to expose the problems implicated in his narrator's accounts of mental instability in the novel.

Although he adopts an ostensibly macho attitude and commits himself to protect Mardou in case of another "flip", Percepied nonetheless openly admits that he is "in reality himself flipping more often" (108). Now madness is no longer monopolized by Mardou Fox. In a bold admission that also undermines his macho image, the narrator confesses the uncertainty of his own sanity. Percepied is not himself a stranger to breakdowns, as previously he has admitted to a personal narrative of "flipping" (41).<sup>30</sup> Later, he straightforwardly acknowledges his own paranoia: "Mardou and I both seeing the same thing, some madness shape" (95). He refers to "what I saw, what my quick eye and hungry paranoia ate" (110), and again openly confesses his insanity (143).

Thus, serious consideration is invited as to whether it is only Mardou who is in need of treatment. Mardou's breakdown can partly be explained in the light of the racially biased and heavily gendered attitudes she had been subjected to. Percepied's case however is different, as he has not had to suffer on account of his race or sex. Hence, his mental instability is a far more complex issue. Having his narrator admit to his own mental

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<sup>30</sup> Instances of narratives of "flipping" are not confined to *The Subterraneans*. In *Big Sur* we find another such narrative, which, however, is constructed along considerably different lines, as it is interwoven with the account of an alcoholic breakdown (160-168).

problems, Kerouac here challenges the legitimacy of Percepied's definitions of madness and further exposes the tensions that arise from Percepied's ambiguous positions.

The narrator seems to be experiencing a considerable amount of guilt with regard to his perspective on Mardou's persona. As if seeking redemption, he repeatedly chastises himself for having doubts (59, 60, 68) and embarrassedly admits to a feeling of "almost revulsion" (24) towards Mardou. The narrator also alludes to "histories of respect and shame. - For the greatest key to courage is shame" (29), suggesting that it is disgrace that prompts him to narrate the story of the affair with Mardou. Thus, narration becomes a means of purgation, and the narrative now seems to function as a form of psychoanalysis, something that is directly affirmed by the exclamation: "psychoanalyst, I'm serious!" (105). Nicholls notes that "by constructing the reader as psychoanalyst, *The Subterraneans* already establishes neurosis as a narrative mode" (541). The narrator of *The Subterraneans* indirectly affirms his own need for psychoanalysis, thus contradicting his former declaration that "psychoanalysis [...] only scratches the surface" (98). That he now should actively seek the psychoanalyst's help, despite having previously declared his distrust of psychoanalysis, is highly ironic.

Moving on to the dynamics of textual construction, a surface approach to the text would imply an uninhibited endorsement of Percepied's views. However, more serious consideration points to the realization that Percepied's narration is indeed "only scratching the surface", whereas Kerouac moves beyond this surface to lay bare his narrator's deeper motives and flaws. Thus, it can be said that the author is indeed structuring the narrative as a form of psychoanalysis, one, however, that leaves the narrator openly exposed: psychoanalyzing his narrator, Kerouac reveals a character that is incapable of engaging in a meaningful relationship with the ethnic woman. Emotionally castrated, it is artistic creation that is now the narrator's priority, and Mardou's fictional representation has to be

subordinated to the narrator's artistic aspirations; in this context, the potential for romantic fulfillment is sacrificed.

### **Mardou's Fetishized Dark Body and Devouring *Vagina Dentata***

Mardou's victimization, however, is not complete. Having artfully drawn associations of madness with her race and gender, the narrator now moves on to trace Mardou's racial alterity directly upon her body. Mardou's African-American identity is a focal point in *The Subterraneans*. The insistence on colour is striking; images of darkness regularly accompany Mardou's descriptions. From early on, she is set apart from the others as "the dark one" (6). Later, there are references to "her Negroness" (43), her "little brown body" (57) and "her brown breasts" (99). Even her madness is indirectly associated with her race, when she is described as a "naked browngirl, frightened" (36). Let us not forget Percepied's declaration that he wanted to "get involved" with her "maybe too because she was Negro" (3). The fascination that the racial other exercises upon Kerouac's narrators has already been discussed in the first chapter. In *The Subterraneans*, however, the interrelation of nation and gender is more emphatically brought to the fore. Mardou's African-American identity actively conditions the construction of her body through Percepied's narration. Even in his sexual fantasies the image of darkness is predominant: "her dark feet [...] dark eyes, little soft brown face [...] a little thin brown woman disposed to wearing dark clothes" (15). Darkness is at this point invested with fetishistic dimensions.<sup>31</sup> Having made the association of Mardou with Africa as "original motherland", the narrator directly projects these images on her body,

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<sup>31</sup> Fetishistic dimensions of darkness can also be traced in the other novels that focus on the female racial other. Although of Irish descent, *Maggie Cassidy* is often described as "dark" (23, 29, 148). There are also references to *Tristessa's* darkness, for example her "coffee complexion" (8) and her looks: "dark, 'As Negra as me?'"(91).

which is perceived as the site upon which his desire to reach the origin can be granted.<sup>32</sup>

Perceived's interest now focuses on the act of intercourse, and particular emphasis is laid on the description of Mardou's reproductive organs, which are invested with an actively threatening quality. The narrator of *The Subterraneans* offers a fixated view of Mardou's genitalia; they are not only exotic, but also actively frightening: "I thought I saw some kind of black thing I've never seen before, hanging, like it *scared* me" (63).

Drawing on the work of John Tytell, Nicholls explains that "a Freudian reading [...] would suggest that it is the disavowed ('some kind of black thing') phallus" and further elaborates that "the confession that hinges more on insinuation than on revelation functions in a very similar way to the formation of the fetish" (539). The (fetishistic) emphasis on colour is striking. The fact that Mardou's genitalia should be described as "a thing" indicates the narrator's refusal to provide a more precise definition, and thus signals his unwillingness to further analyze his fetish. Moreover, this black mass is "hanging", suggesting a sense of doom that plagues the narrator. Perceived declares that Mardou's genitalia are a novel sight to him. Attractive as novelty might be, however, it is often accompanied by fear of the unknown; this is the case with the narrator, who italicizes the word "*scared*" to convey his emotional state more emphatically (63).

Hence, it is not only Mardou's mind that bears traces of disturbance; her body is also affected. As the racial other, Mardou is mysterious and primitive. Her gender poses a challenge for the narrator; her mind is unstable and her genitalia are frightening. That her bodily deformation should be located in her genitalia is not without precedent; this association of primitivism and sexual promiscuity is based on a long history of white colonization. The prejudices upon which Perceived feeds have a long tradition. Low reports that "the black woman became a symbol of regressive sexuality and sexual promiscuity in the

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<sup>32</sup> Early on the narrator states that he sees "women as wells" (12).



nineteenth century” (23) and that “the black woman’s ‘primitive sexual appetite’ was bodily manifested in the possession of ‘primitive’ genitalia” (23-4). From a more generalizing perspective, Bhabha asserts that “Black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body” (“Of Mimicry” 132-33).

Thus, when Perceived elaborates on the anatomy of Mardou’s genitalia, he is perpetuating already existing colonial associations of sexuality and race:

fearing secretly the few times I had come into contact with the rough stubble-like quality of the pubic, which was Negroid and therefore a little rougher, tho not enough to make any difference, and the insides itself I should say the best, the richest, most fecund moist warm and full of hidden soft slidly mountains (104).

Perceived attributes Mardou’s particular anatomy to her African heritage. Eburne comments that “such sexual appropriation points to a conflation of the ‘abjecting’ effect of racial and ethnic otherness with the human object of desire herself, which charts this appropriation as a fantasy-identification by means of which the object [...] becomes a repository of what the subject lacks” (69). Dark Mardou’s “Negroid” genitalia are different to a white woman’s, and this difference ultimately renders Mardou more desirable. Having already portrayed Mardou as possessing a variety of racial markers, the narrator now moves on to project his fantasy upon her actual anatomical features. Eversley argues that “Fox’s subjectivity - her race and her gender - is not more real than Perceived’s, yet his narration fixes it as visible and tactile” (261), transforming the fantasy into tangible imagery. Thus, his desire is magnified; the words chosen to depict the inside of Mardou’s body abound with suggestions of warmth and

fertility: “richest, most fecund moist warm” (104). The narrator seems to be charting Mardou’s body as a country “full of hidden soft slidy mountains”, thus rendering the associations of Mardou’s “Negroid pubic” with the African continent all the more powerful. Union with Mardou is vital now as the narrator constructs her anatomical features as welcoming loci that will help him compensate for his own distance from and craving for the origin. This emphasis on the physicality of the affair with Mardou Fox verges on the racist; the narrator finds Mardou’s association with primitive sexuality intriguing. Having already sketched her as an exotic figure, he now further emphasizes her difference on a sexual level.

That the narrator grants Mardou’s sexuality such a centre-stage position seems a daring gesture considering the mainstream conservatism of the 1950s. Eversley contends that Kerouac “imagine[s] a tangible resolution to the neuroses of postwar conformist culture achieved through interracial sex”, projecting interracial intercourse as a way out of the impasses established by conformism (260). Such an approach is not free from political implications, considering that “in the 1950s culture of conformity, such ethnic differences as Mardou’s also insured one’s outsider status” (Wilson 312). Further contextualizing the political dimensions of Percepied’s erotic involvement with Fox, Nancy Grace argues that Kerouac’s engagement with ethnic women “is especially noteworthy considering that Kerouac wrote both books [*The Subterraneans* and *Tristessa*] in the early fifties, a time when anti-miscegenation laws existed in more than fifteen states” (50). Grace makes explicit that “Leo is well aware that by dating Mardou he breaks a social taboo, one so powerful that even some of his friends [...] choose not to violate it”. Discussing Leo’s acceptance of Mardou’s body, she defines it as “a personal example of the larger civil rights movement gaining momentum in the fifties” (53). Dittman similarly emphasizes the narrative’s radical overtones, affirming that “with its interracial plot, *The Subterraneans* was controversial at the time, published a year before the Supreme Court voted to desegregate schools and 10 years

before the Civil Rights Act” (56). Viewed in this light, Percepied’s sexual involvement with Mardou constitutes a statement of resistance to dominant cultural practices of the time. Union with the racial other takes one further into the fringes of society and demarcates one’s clear differentiation from the norm. The mere theme of interracial romance poses a challenge to 1950s mainstream America’s morality. By (partially, or at least erotically) reaching out towards Mardou’s outsider status, Percepied attempts a considerable rupture not only with the racially biased attitudes of his time, but more expansively with the wider ideological and cultural conventions of the 1950s.

However, despite the liberal overtones of Kerouac’s narrative, the above critics broadly agree with Eversley’s view that “*The Subterraneans* and ‘The White Negro’ get fabulously close to the edge of integration’s potential [...] They acknowledge colour-consciousness when, with integration, ‘colour-blindness’ is the lie of postwar American democracy” (266). However, in accordance with Eversley, most critics believe that Kerouac’s novel ultimately fails to go further than that, and “relinquish[es] the opportunity to come, finally, to cross the most sacrosanct boundaries of postwar U.S. culture” (267). Despite such limitations it still remains the case that *The Subterraneans* manages to openly bring to the fore the subversive power of interracial romance; the fact that the dynamics of interracial union are hushed in the filmic adaptation of the novel further underscores their disruptive potential. Actively challenging middle-class patterns of social exclusion, Kerouac makes a case for the acceptance of the racial other. The vigorous introduction of the ethnic woman into white male-dominated America upsets established social norms; that the dark woman should be accepted as a partner to the white man openly defies the *status quo* of 1950s America. Rejecting the conventional practices of the time, Kerouac does not shy from explicit references to intercourse and orgasm. The openness with which he deals with such controversial issues turns *The Subterraneans* into a forceful statement against conservatism.

The tension created by Percepied's prejudiced statements notwithstanding, the boldness of Kerouac's liberal treatment of interracial romance continues to be of considerable significance. In fact, the text seems to be torn between the desire to integrate the ethnic woman on the one hand, and the chauvinistic discourse advanced by its narrator on the other.

The racially biased overtones of the novel are of course not negligible. Even when in comparison with white women it is Mardou that seems to be the one at an advantage, her explicit anatomical description ultimately highlights the narrator's prejudiced attitude and further emphasizes his colonizing attitude towards her. Boehmer explains that:

From the point of view of the colonizer specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the strange or "the primitive", are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. The seductive and/or repulsive qualities of the wild or other, as well as its punishment and expulsion from the community, are figured on the body, and as (fleshy, corporeal, often speechless) body. To rehearse some of the well-known binary tropes of postcolonial discourse, as opposed to the colonizer (white man, centre of intellection, of control), the other is cast as carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloguing, possession, penetration. Images of the body of the other are conventionally conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession (129).

In *The Subterraneans* the repulsive outweighs the seductive, as Mardou's sex is not only exotic but also considerably menacing. However, the fear that her genitalia inspire

makes her colonization even more challenging. The narrator projects the racial stereotypes Boehmer enumerates directly upon Mardou's genitalia. There is even an implicit admission of doing so, as his description of her vagina is preceded by the disclaimer "I thought", warning that what follows is likely to be the depiction of a fantasy as much as an actual sight. When specific anatomical characteristics are described, suggestions of a fetishistic tendency are again present ("fearing secretly" [104]). Thus, the passages on Mardou's genitalia are heavily influenced by the narrator's personal visions and expectations. It is imperative for the narrator that Mardou should be invested with primitive and raw qualities, so that he can enact his colonizing role.

His conquering attitude is distinctly expressed when he speculates that Mardou is prone to masochistic tendencies: "giving her the sadistic treatment she probably loves" (13). The narrator is particularly keen on associating Mardou with sexual deviance, as elsewhere she is described as having perverse sexual fantasies (78). Mardou's sexual power has to be subdued not only because it is disturbing to the narrator, but also because it poses an active threat to the male species. It is reported that while having intercourse with Mardou the narrator's friend Adam "experienced piercing insupportable seaming sudden pain, so he had to go to the doctor and have himself bandaged"; the narrator concludes: "I now wonder and suspect if our little chick didn't really intend to bust us in half" (104). Mardou's vagina thus poses a threat of emasculation, and her demonization reaches new peaks. Mardou is not only a menace to the narrator's social life (as in the narrator's southern fantasy discussed earlier), but an immediate threat to the phallus and masculinity. Finally, she becomes hazardous to the narrator's existence, as she is eventually defined by her *vagina dentata*.<sup>33</sup> There is one instance in *The Subterraneans* where the narrator is concerned that "she was really a thief of

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<sup>33</sup> That such an image should find its way into Kerouac's prose does not come as a surprise; Percepied's (often gendered) narrative perpetuates a long history of demonization of the female organ which can be traced back to ancient folktales. A sinister tool of emasculation, Mardou's vagina now becomes horrific, and the urgency to control her overwhelming.

some sort and therefore was out to steal my heart, my white man heart, a Negress sneaking in the world sneaking the holy white men for sacrificial rituals later when they'll be roasted and roiled" (67). Perceped concludes: "she'd thieve my soul and eat it" (68). Now Mardou is endowed with cannibalistic tendencies.<sup>34</sup> She is conceptualized as a gaping "orifice"<sup>35</sup> actively seeking to devour him; in her capacity as *vagina dentata*-become-cannibalistic mouth, Mardou is perceived as a destructive man-consuming vortex. Thus, she is turned into a *miasma* from which it is necessary to seek protection. However, in his attempt to escape Mardou's destructive potential, the narrator fails to stay alert to another danger: that of being eventually consumed by his art. Indeed, he seems to be having difficulty maintaining the balance between his association with Mardou and his obsession with artistic creation. Kerouac leaves us with a text seething with tensions that expose the problems implicated in interracial relations in the 1950s; these difficulties are aestheticized through the use of vivid and often unfamiliar imagery.

Grace notes the grotesque quality that can be traced both in Mardou Fox and Tristessa, making a point for their "membership in the 'low' culture of the grotesque" (51).<sup>36</sup> Discussing Mardou's body, she argues that it is "the badge of membership." It is "black and

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<sup>34</sup> In *Maggie Cassidy* the cannibalistic element is also present: "If I'd laugh, and throw love teeth in her face" (99); moreover, Maggie's lips are described as "biting and foaming in the ocean of my face" (127). Interestingly, the idea that "women are cannibals" is repeated twice in the film version of *The Subterraneans*, revealing the intensity of the racially biased standpoints of the 1950s.

<sup>35</sup> The term is Eburne's (80).

<sup>36</sup> In *Tristessa* in particular, the connotations of "sadness" the name bears notwithstanding, projections of grotesque distortion are particularly forceful, for example when the narrator states that "her arms were covered with cysts" (65). Such imagery is carried to lengths when the body is altogether annihilated: "that little frail unobtainable not-there body" (87), "she *has* no body at all" (91). These images go beyond distortion to the de-substantiation of Tristessa's body. Although not of comparable intensity, the grotesque images in *Maggie Cassidy* also shape the nature of the relationship. The adolescents' kisses are of a bizarre quality: "sometimes our teeth'd grind, our mouths burn from interchanged spittle, our lips blister, bleed, chap" (30), associating displays of affection with discomfort and pain. The suppression of the erotic urge for the sake of chastity is channelled through distorted images that ultimately question the desirability of being chaste. In any case, erotic involvement with ethnic women is significantly problematic. In both *Maggie Cassidy* and *Tristessa* the narrator does not actually consummate his passion. When a sexual fantasy is mentioned in *Tristessa*, the decorum is contaminated by the presence of a peculiar assortment of animals and junk infusion (49). Moreover, Tristessa indulges in a clownish imitation of the sexual act, her "legs spread a little, pumping with her loins at the air in the direction of my bed" (53). This imitation is the closest that the narrator can get to Tristessa. It is only in *The Subterraneans* that actual intercourse takes place; even when this occurs, however, the particular imagery and the problems associated with it point to the general malaise that invariably accompanies attempts at romantic involvement with the ethnic woman.

small, wrecked by drug and alcohol use, psychic breakdown, male violence, and sexual excess” (51). To this should be added the attribution of grotesque anatomical features that ultimately recreate the image of the *vagina dentata*. Eburne perceptively notes that “Percepied’s fear of being used up by Mardou - of being chewed up and devoured by the *vagina dentata* - represents the flip side of the romance of blackness which seems most actively at work in Kerouac’s acceptance of its promise of rebirth and self-evacuation in the first place” (80). Of course, this initial promise is from the outset based on simulation. As we have seen, there are several problems pertaining to the artificial construction of Mardou’s image. When the simulated surface is finally tarnished, Mardou is demonized. Percepied’s vacuous search for origins, when in fact “there is no return to any origin which is not already a construction and therefore a kind of writing” (Chow 333), is not a risk-free endeavour; it can potentially be destructive. Death has to precede rebirth, and conquest comes at a high price indeed. Mardou’s exoticism is not only seductive, but demonic as well, and the *vagina dentata* image further undermines any possibility of successful union with this exotic woman.<sup>37</sup>

### **Narrating Mardou’s *Vagina Dentata***

The narrator, however, cannot tolerate this threat upon his masculinity for long, and attempts to eradicate it through linguistic appropriation: the detailed description of Mardou’s genitalia in *The Subterraneans* resembles the discourse not of a lover as much as that of a scientist. The meticulousness with which the body is examined is striking: “We both of us childlike examined said body and looked closely and it wasn’t anything pernicious and pizen

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<sup>37</sup> For a different take on the *vagina dentata* concept in *The Subterraneans* see Nicholls (541).

juices but just bluedark as in all kinds of women and I was really and truly assured to actually see and make the study with her” (63).<sup>38</sup>

Here the examination of “said body” is evocative of a medical dissection almost. More as objects of scientific study than of affection, Mardou’s anatomical features are minutely inspected. The body is fragmented as the focus is now on the detailed description of the vagina, and the narrator is not reassured until he is able to establish a similarity between her and “all kinds of women” (63). It is only through this rigorous examination that he can neutralize the threat of the *vagina dentata* and eliminate Mardou’s power. Percepied is determined to gain mastery over Mardou; through the meticulous familiarization with the exotic body he can overcome his fear of it and render it harmless. However, one remains perplexed as to the degree of reassurance a term as vague and abstract as “bluedark” can inspire. Nicholls reads fetishistic dimensions into this: “the body is another color which approximates blackness (‘blue dark’ - ‘BL(ued) A(r)K’), but which also displaces blackness” (540). The oscillation between the pragmatic examination of the body and the act of fetishization problematizes the nature of Percepied’s interest for Mardou, as he now seems to fluctuate between rationalizing Mardou’s otherness so as to domesticate it, and fetishizing it for his individual pleasure.<sup>39</sup>

More forceful than the fetishistic connotations, however, is the narrative insistence on Percepied’s analytical bent. The meticulous inspection of Mardou’s body can be seen as a micrograph for the structure of the novel. In *Selected Letters 1957-1969* Kerouac openly ponders: “What about Subterraneans, an analysis of the affair with Mardou more than a narration, after all” (502). The minute exposition of incidents is the prevalent narrative mode of the novel. The narrator of *The Subterraneans* often relies on examples to clarify his points.

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<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, Kerouac’s explicit sexual references are absent from the filmic adaptation, as they would directly impinge upon mainstream moral conservatism.

<sup>39</sup> Such lack of emotion follows the accusation initially voiced in *Maggie Cassidy*: “you look [...] cold hearted er sumpin” (155).



These examples are dispersed in the narrative and do not necessarily follow a linear progression, as for example happens when a pre-announced example is left pending half-way through the novel (58). The arrangement of episodes suggests a sentimental detachment that allows for the foregrounding of the narrator's intense preoccupation with form. Percepiéd's priorities lie predominantly in the crafting of his episodes. Incidents that could potentially carry affective weight are neutralized by being reduced to "examples", as in "example 2" (76). The aloofness with which Percepiéd shifts through flashbacks and flash-forwards in the narration, as in the case of the pushcart incident (84,105), is further indicative of his concern with narrative structure. As Percepiéd is motivated by a colonizing impetus, he fetishizes Mardou's body and subjects it to meticulous examination and excruciating linguistic scrutiny. Eburne has defined *The Subterraneans* as a "broken-up book itself" (77), and the structure of the text, largely comprising of a catalogue of examples that are often in disarray, bears witness to this.

### **"Tender Love Scenes Together"**

Such narrative techniques affirm the narrator's sentimental distance from Mardou. Therefore, when love is discussed in *The Subterraneans*, Percepiéd's declarations seem problematic to say the least. The quasi-scientific register and narrative structure employed for the description of the affair grossly undermine the narrator's allegations of "true love" (26). Even after familiarity with Mardou's anatomy is established, the narrator continues to use a detached register when referring to coitus: "stimulation as applied by myself (an old trick that I had learned with a previous frigid wife)" (65). Thus, intercourse with Mardou becomes a mere performance whereby the narrator can coolly apply his "tricks". Therefore, when Percepiéd declares: "my love for Mardou has completely separated me from any previous

phantasies valuable and otherwise” (63), and later asserts that Mardou is his love (115), the parodic resonances of his pronouncements are exposed.

Highly lyrical confessions of love abound in the novel, for example when the narrator muses: “O love, fled me - or do telepathies cross sympathetically in the night? Such cacoëthes him befalls - that the cold lover of lust will earn the warm bleed of spirit” (26). However, in the light of the above, the romantic language the narrator uses sounds more like a parody than an affirmation of love. The lyrical extravaganza continues, and the narrator soon pleads: “bear with me all lover readers who’ve suffered pangs, bear with me men who understand that the sea of blackness in a darkeyed woman’s eyes is the lonely sea itself and would you go ask the sea to explain itself, or ask woman why she crosseth hands on lap over rose? no -” (62).<sup>40</sup> Such language is strongly evocative of romantic poetry and these exceptionally lyrical proclamations of love strongly contrast with the earlier, almost pornographic descriptions of Mardou’s genitalia. Whereas in the recreation of the *vagina dentata* image romantic decorum gives way to sentimental detachment, here the opposite effect is in operation, and the consequences of these narrative inconsistencies soon emerge.

Interestingly, the narrator is highly self-conscious of having modelled his utterances upon early nineteenth-century romantic poetry formulas. However, several problems arise from such use of language. That poetic register should be employed when talking about the narrator’s love for Mardou sounds ironic, considering the degradation that he has subjected her to. Moreover, the incongruity of lyrical passages in a narrative interspersed with affirmations of macho-style masculinity and “hip” language is striking. This kind of language thus ultimately reads as a parody of Percepied’s declarations of love. Later on, he displays an awareness of the inappropriateness of “19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic general talk” (83). However,

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<sup>40</sup> Lyrical descriptions of love also appear in *Maggie Cassidy*: “O wind, songs have ye in her name? [...] congeal, cark, sink and seal my blood -” (58). Although they seem to be more compatible with the connotations of innocence that adolescent romance bears, it would appear that such ornate language is the result of a retrospective consideration of the affair. Therefore, given the ultimate failure of the romance, these lyrical pronouncements strike an ironic chord.

this realization is only temporary and he soon continues with his lyrical outbursts. His propensity for drama reaches further comical heights with musings like: “that east and west, north and south of soulless loveless bleak” (100). Not only is such lyricism discordant with the narrator’s professed “lecherous and so on propensities” (5), but it also alludes to literary styles that have little to do with African-American narratives of the time.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the artificiality of the lyrical gimmicks transpires and their parodic resonances are exposed. The narrator is more interested in shaping elaborate prose than in deeply engaging with Mardou. However, his prose is laden with an exaggeration that fails to convince; the language the narrator uses produces a comic effect that parodies the possibility of considerable romantic involvement with Mardou.

### **“One of the Most *Enwomanded* Women I’ve Seen”**

Contradictions and inconsistencies persist throughout the novel, and conflicting portrayals of Mardou, as, for example, in the archetypal image of the virgin-prostitute, further expose the constructedness of her image. Her earlier sublimation is eventually incongruous not only with her *vagina dentata* representation but also with her being labelled a “hustler” (129) and a “whore” (102).<sup>42</sup> Mardou’s demonization is further pursued with her reduction to the status of beast; her description as “a nice convenient dog” (72) however is in contrast to her final assertion of independence (152). This erratic attribution of so many

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<sup>41</sup> Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* is one such example.

<sup>42</sup> Evidence of the Kerouacian narrators’ tendency to degrade the ethnic woman is also provided in *Maggie Cassidy* and *Tristessa*. In the former text, there is an instance when Maggie puts on a “loose ugly grin of self-satisfied womanly idiocy - flesh” (74). Interestingly, she is “too dumb to graduate from Junior Hi” (48). Moreover, she is frivolous, as “she always flirted” (71), and although she considers marriage, she soon develops “another crush” (122-3). Finally, she is openly described as “a devil” (149). *Tristessa* similarly falls from grace and in the end is prone to fits of violence (67), becomes “an Aztec witch” (68), and is envisaged as “the leader of the gang of thieves” that robs the narrator (75).

incompatible qualities upon Mardou's persona is indicative of considerable ambiguity with regard to her characterization, and Mardou emerges as a fragmented and shifting character.

Further complications arise from the narrator's uncertainty as to whether he should see Mardou as a child or a fully grown woman. At various points Mardou is portrayed as a child: "Mardou was just like a kid" (112), "like kids again" (115); also at one instance she is quoted as exclaiming: "I'm big and a naked child again" (36). Nudity here is not laden with connotations of a sexual nature however, as it is linked with childhood and innocence. Later on, Mardou seems to be beyond harm "because she was like a child" (39). Thus, childlike Mardou is associated with an almost asexual purity. However, these images are contradicted by another representation of Mardou that marks the narrative leap from innocence to experience, and she is soon described as "one of the most *enwomanded* women I've seen, a brunette of eternity incomprehensibly beautiful and for always sad, profound, calm -" (71). Now Mardou's persona carries suggestions of desire and sexuality, giving expression to the narrator's perspectives on gender representation. The use of the term "enwomanded" is indicative of a highly subjective conception of femininity. The signification of an "enwomanded" woman is subject to much debate in *The Subterraneans*. Although it may appear that "enwomanning" Mardou grants her certain power, whether this is actually the case is open to question. Trinh Minh-ha explains that:

Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one's consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, not - I, other. In such a concept the other is almost unavoidably either opposed to the self or submitted to the self's dominance ("Not you/Like You" 415).

The narrator codifies Mardou's image upon personal conceptions and thus engenders her accordingly. Having himself (rather than the "other") as a point of reference, he conceives of Mardou's femininity as a construct to be defined by his own persona. Therefore, he fabricates her image at will, and subsequently refuses to give up his simulated conception of her, assuming strict control over her identity. Having exhaustively dealt with her racial alterity, he now shifts his attention to Mardou's gender construction, modelling it upon his own views on femininity. Mardou as individual character is largely ignored; her "enwomaning" is allowed only to the extent that it is carried out according to the narrator's domineering impulses. Mardou's "enwomantment", like her racial alterity, is tailor-made.

Sangari's idea that "female-ness is not an essential quality" is well-founded in postcolonial theory.<sup>43</sup> In *The Subterraneans* it is the narrator, and not Mardou, who defines constructions of femininity. "Enwomaning" Mardou does not ultimately grant her any sense of authority, and her power is only illusory. Kanneh talks about "female liberation and a paternalistic notion of empowerment, which, in practice and at base, is a politics of ownership and control" (347). A similar case can be made concerning Mardou's "enwomaning"; it is defined only within the scope of signification that the narrator allows. Acting upon his colonizing impulse, Percepied shapes Mardou's femininity in ways that he will be able to supervise and manoeuvre at will.

The definition of an "enwomanted" woman is not clear in *The Subterraneans*. If we are to take beauty (Mardou is "incomprehensibly beautiful" [71]) as the main attribute of womanhood, then not only do we fall prey to the subjectivity of the term, but we are also faced with a considerably gendered and superficial discourse. In an attempt to elucidate his definition of "real womanhood", Percepied later declares that Mardou is "great, buddy like, joining in, humble and meek too and a real woman" (90). This description causes further

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Sunder Rajan (129). The diverse, and often conflicting, theorizations of the female subject in postcolonial discourse confirm the constructedness of the concept of "femaleness".

complications. Not surprisingly, Mardou is “humble”, as would befit a colonized woman. However, this definition of “real” femininity is selective and includes only a few of the multitudes of qualities that have been assigned to her. If the above are to be taken as characteristic features of a “real” woman, it nonetheless remains doubtful whether Mardou is indeed such a woman, considering some of her earlier characterizations (for example, her “buddy like” quality conflicts with a previous image of Mardou as possessing “dame-like majesty” [121], and her meekness is in direct contradiction to her earlier demonization). Thus, the narrator’s exceptionally subjective notion of femininity is further foregrounded in what seems to be another parody of his verbalisms.

In an additional twist to the construction of her femininity, Mardou is infused with a masculine quality. It would appear that in order for her to be integrated in the subterranean group, she has to renounce traditional conceptions of femininity. “Buddy like” Mardou now indulges in fist-fighting: this is a very rare instance whereupon Mardou is allowed to interact with the subterraneans in ways other than sexual. Just at the point when Mardou seems to be accepted on her own merit, imagery of male camaraderie prevails and she is portrayed as deviating from conventional notions of femininity.

If we are to position Mardou’s gender construction in a strictly patriarchic context, then we are likely to stop short of the “macho” attributes of Mardou, as in male-dominated societies women are expected to be passive and docile, rather than strong and aggressive. Although this may at first seem as an upgrading of Mardou’s status among the subterraneans, one cannot help but wonder along with Judith Butler “whether [this] parodying [of] the dominant norms is enough to displace them - indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms” (“Gender is Burning” 384). It appears that the narrator of *The Subterraneans* endows Mardou with masculine attributes only to demonstrate their incongruity with her “feminine” nature. Mardou’s

acceptance as an equal to “the boys” is only momentary, and her macho aspect is immediately overtaken by the emphasis on her meekness in a rushed attempt to restore the established order. Her passing transgression ultimately serves to confirm the patriarchal order, and the narrator rapidly returns to his typically simulated constructions of Mardou’s persona.

Mardou’s gender is thus structured upon white hegemonic norms. Sunder Rajan talks about “the imagined constructs in and through which women emerge as subjects”, and points to “the need to negotiate with these mediations and simulacra” (10). Kerouac displays an awareness of this need when he debates not only dominant representations of femininity in the American fifties but also racial tensions that according to Panish existed even in Bohemian enclaves such as Greenwich Village (110). Rather than unquestioningly reproducing such stereotypes, Kerouac problematizes their validity by laying bare their social constructedness. Largely the result of white male-dominated cultural expectations, Mardou’s simulated image subsequently becomes the terrain upon which mainstream values are negotiated. The complex expressions of her “enwomanment” expose the problematic nature of constructions of femininity in Percepied’s America. Mardou’s image seems to be adaptable on demand, the multiplicity of her mutations ultimately parodying the ease of adjustment to a substantially chauvinistic discourse. Mardou becomes an odd assortment of various definitions of womanhood, which, when subjected to critical examination, finally fail to convince. Adopting such a narrative approach, Kerouac projects the need for a different, perhaps more sensitive, treatment of the female racial other.

Eventually it becomes apparent that Percepied’s colonial impulses structure Mardou’s femininity on dubious premises, and when her behaviour is judged to be unacceptable, the verdict is easily passed: “‘This ain’t no woman.’ - ‘That crazy Indian she’ll kill somebody’” (39). Such notions further problematize the definition of womanhood in *The Subterraneans*.

Is Mardou less of a woman now because of her “madness”/ race/ aggressiveness? Are these features enough to deprive her of her gendered nature? At this instance the fear that Mardou inspires is so intense that it invalidates her feminine quality. When she looms as an active threat, her behaviour is either labelled as sexually transgressive in a 1950s conservative context (“the lesbian!”[105]), or she becomes ridiculously monstrous as in the quote cited above, where, having already experimented with her gendered nature, the narrative goes so far as to altogether negate it (“ain’t no woman”) in order to neutralize her menacing potential.

That Mardou’s persona should be so dependent on the narrator’s desires and expectations further affirms the simulated nature of her image. Mardou is engendered only to the extent that it suits narrative purposes, exposing the narrator’s unwillingness to engage with her seriously. When the object of love is so blatantly constructed according to the colonizer’s gaze, the love affair becomes a parody. The possibility of romantic fulfillment is considerably undermined, overshadowed as it is by the simulated images that the narrator indulges in. The blending of white social norms with individualized visions further emphasizes the narrator’s hegemonic tendencies towards the ethnic woman. Already a simulation of the racial other, Mardou’s representation now expands to include an image of simulated womanhood. The construction of her femininity is a delicate issue for the narrator, as his masculinity is closely bound to it. When “the female body enters an unstable arena of scrutiny and meaning” (Kanneh 347) the stakes become higher for the male body as well: the narrator’s manhood is structured alongside Mardou’s gendered aspects.

### **“I am Crudely Malely Sexual”**

The manifestations of what would have been considered as transgressive sexuality in the 1950s are revealing of further complications in gender representations in *The*



*Subterraneans*. We have already witnessed Mardou's portrayal as a lesbian; elsewhere, there is a description of her friend "Alice dike-like silent unpleasant and strange and likes no one" (101-2). Female homosexuality therefore bears negative connotations for the narrator, as he associates it with disagreeable behaviour. As this quote exemplifies, Mardou's alleged lesbianism is intended as yet another expression of her inferiority.

However, a closer look at the construction of the narrator's own sexuality generates confusion as to his criticism of homosexuality and casts into doubt his initial claim of being "crudely malely sexual" (5).<sup>44</sup> Trying to project this image of virility, Perceived foregrounds his colonizing impetus from early on. The narrator builds up a masculine image of himself, laden with connotations of aggressive heterosexuality. He fabricates his masculinity at will in accordance with his conquering attitude towards Mardou, and also with 1950s norms of masculine assertion.

Osgerby argues that gender should not be taken as a fixed and stable category and makes a point for its constructedness. Quoting Butler, he explains that "gender can be understood as a historically dynamic 'performance' - a 'corporeal style' that is fabricated and sustained through a set of performative acts and 'a ritualized repetition of conventions'" (ix). Thus, it is not only Mardou's femininity but also Perceived's masculinity that is socially conditioned and dependent on a variety of factors. Osgerby then elaborates on the cultural constructedness of white masculinity, arguing that it has been "historically fabricated" (13); he provides one such example:

The ideal of prosperous family life was [...] central to the exercise of "domestic containment" during the Cold War. Images of affluent suburbia were pivotal to the ideological strategies through which American capitalism

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<sup>44</sup> Assertions of machismo also appear in *Maggie Cassidy*: "So dont manage me off tonight [...] I'll show ya" (154), and more forcefully in *Tristessa*: "Am a caveman" (56).

asserted its claims to economic and moral supremacy, while the promotion of family-oriented gender roles sought to reign-in and safely corral the cultural changes perceived as threatening the social order. For women this meant conformity to an ideal of home-making domesticity. But men were also objects of containment - the dominant ideal of domestic femininity finding its counterpart in an equally powerful ideology of family-oriented masculinity (67).

In the Cold War context, traditional values were considered to be the cornerstone of the success of American society; individual merit was assessed in terms of financial prosperity and flourishing family life. The family unit was thus a safety valve against deviance from “normalcy”. Traditional gender roles were to be observed within the confines of the family, not only by women, but as the social exigencies of the time made clear, by men as well. The structure of the Cold War family was such that it secured the preservation of conventional norms. Allowing little space for flexibility, however, it was also regarded by some as oppressive. Hedged by “domestic containment”, several men felt that their freedom was substantially limited and their masculinity was cast under threat. Strictly defined by his role as husband and father, the 1950s male often suffocated under the pressures of family life. Considerable discontent grew among a section of the male population, which finally sought refuge in (white) masculine archetypes that “aspired to a relaxed hedonism through which they could be more at ease with the universe of bodily pleasures, more comfortable with the world of carefree fun” (Osgerby 13).

Seen in this light, Perceived’s chauvinistic assertions reflect the 1950s penchant for powerful hedonistic masculine assertion. The association of the Beats with *Playboy* magazine (and its championing of the above-mentioned archetypes) has not remained unnoticed:

“Indeed, during the late 1950s *Playboy* magazine [...] featured several contributions from Beat luminary Jack Kerouac, together with ‘The Beat Mystique’ - a lengthy dissection of the Beat phenomenon” (Osgerby 184). The Beat Generation, despite its countercultural character, did not remain unaffected by popular trends, and the Beats’ attitude towards masculinity shared much common ground with the models *Playboy* promoted. The freedom and liberation that the Beat Generation advocated was fascinating to males who wanted to break free from the confines of domesticity. However, *Playboy* values did not challenge membership to the mainstream social corpus in the ways the Beats, to a large extent, did. *Playboy* wanted men to enjoy sexual freedom, but as well-integrated members of society, not as “Beat” outsiders. Moreover, *Playboy* moved along strictly heterosexual lines. Further conflicting with the Beat tolerance of gay culture, *Playboy* placed particular emphasis on heterosexual manifestations of male sexual liberation (Osgerby 184).

With such cultural interactions at work, the challenge that the departure from heterosexual attitudes poses to 1950s traditional gender representation is clearly projected. In *The Subterraneans* masculinity is explored under a new light that would initially seem to conflict with mainstream values. The narrator’s “crude sexuality” is by no means exclusive, and eventually it is severely questioned. Percepied expresses the first signs of divergence from dominant images of potent masculinity when he remarks: “‘She sure has wandering feet to hell with her I’ll get another chick’ (weakening at this point as reader can tell from tone)” (61). Reflection is invited here as to where the narrator’s “weakening” lies, and it could be suggested that the anger implied in swear words ultimately bears witness to the narrator’s vulnerability despite the overtones of machismo; the tension that is generated by the narrator’s phrase poses a challenge to notions of conventional masculinity.

Having exposed the ambiguities implicated in his narrator’s masculine image, Kerouac proceeds to problematize Percepied’s attitude towards the ethnic woman, and it soon

becomes clear that Percepied is not free from the display of homosexual tendencies. There is an instance when he refuses to go home with Mardou, choosing instead to stay on and look at his friend's "pornographic (homo male sexual) pictures" (52). Male company is preferred to that of female, but there is an obvious suggestion that this gesture goes beyond "buddy" camaraderie, laden as it is with the erotic. Theorizing the dynamics of male bonding, Sedgwick emphasizes the significance of "homosocial desire" and its considerable influence upon social interactions between men (2). Bennett and Royle clarify that "homosocial desire is not the same as homosexual desire. It does not need to be explicitly expressed as desire, and it is not necessarily physical. In fact, homosocial desire is often concerned rigorously to exclude the possibility of homosexual relations" (175). If, nonetheless, there is a latent homoeroticism to be traced in homosocial desire, Kerouac boldly acknowledges this in *The Subterraneans*, as the two mingle in the passage where Percepied follows a homosexual writer "to his suite in some hotel" (74). This is not the only instance of the narrator's homosexual exploits however, as later there is a reference to "the redshirt faun boy" (84), with whom the narrator seems to have experienced involvement. Thus, serious reflection is invited as to the narrator's earlier assertions of female "conquest" (25); such a conventional conception of authoritative masculinity would automatically exclude the homoerotic. When suggestions of homosexuality are introduced, Percepied's definitions of raw virile sexuality ("I am crudely malely sexual" [5]) intensify textual tension, as it becomes clear that the narrator's sexuality fluctuates between strong assertions of a heterosexual colonizing attitude and more suggestive instances of homosexual encounters.

Although understated, such assertions of homosexuality are admittedly challenging, homosexuality being a particularly sensitive issue in Cold War America. Homosexual cultures had existed in America before the Beats: "the 1940s saw the emergence of gay and lesbian community networks that included bars, social clubs and incipient political

organizations” (Osgerby 52). However, such an expression of “transgression” at a time when “normalcy” and homogeneity were the dominant social imperatives was a grave matter. The extent of the danger homosexuality implied is suggested by the fact that “psychologists, child-development experts, sociologists, and educators all chimed in a growing chorus of anxiety about the gender development of boys” (Kimmel 243). By 1950s conventional standards, homosexuality was a threat that had to be contained. Osgerby points to the “suspicion of bachelors and [the] vigorous affirmation of fatherhood, [that] was, at least partly, informed by contemporary fears surrounding homosexuality - gay men figuring prominently in the McCarthyite demonology of specters threatening national security” (67). Hence, 1950s America took serious measures to suppress homosexuality. In this context, the fact that the narrator of *The Subterraneans* does not hesitate to bring to the fore his own homosexual inclinations can be seen as an act of defiance towards established social norms. His open confessions are an audacious feat, considering the mainstream fear of homosexuality’s subversive potential.

Perceived neglects Mardou in order to experiment with his sexuality. Nonetheless, the narrator’s homosexual encounters are never described in much detail in the text. It is up to the reader to fill in the missing gaps, and a closer look at the text eventually reveals the employment of strategies that undermine assertions of homosexuality. When the narrator admits to his homosexual tendencies, he describes himself as being “ludicrously like a fag” (77). He avoids direct identification with a “fag”, opting instead for a milder comparison; “like” is inserted to alleviate the strong impact of a direct acknowledgement of homosexuality. Moreover, homosexual tendencies are here associated with absurdity, and give rise to ironic comments: to be a “fag” appears as a blemish to a subterranean’s reputation. The instances of overt homoeroticism now give way to the homophobia that Sedgwick takes to typically accompany homosocial desire (3). This ambiguous discourse

surrounding homosexuality bears witness to a double logic that permeates the text, as the narrative of *The Subterraneans* constantly foregrounds a tension between social stereotypes and the desire to break free from them. In *The Subterraneans* conservative morality is openly addressed, and although Kerouac does not always succeed in disentangling himself from 1950s conventions, the questioning of established social norms endows the novel with a liberal edge capable of raising much controversy in the context of 1950s traditionalism.

The radicalism of the text is contained, however, as when explicit suggestions of homosexuality are brought to the fore, the subterranean group undertakes the task of restoring the established heterosexual order. Perceived reports: “Ross Wallenstein had called me to my face a fag - ‘Man what are you, a fag? you talk you just like a fag’” (67), a forceful comment the narrator repeats later on: “Are you a fag you talk like a fag” (105). That the subterranean group should perpetuate homophobic attitudes is striking, considering that many among them are portrayed as homosexuals. The novel is not free from instances of the homoerotic, for example when there is a reference to the group’s “queer, cultured” discussions (120).

Homoeroticism comes replete with a decorum of corresponding images and language. A “fag” is said to display particular linguistic features: “talk just like a fag.” “Fag talk” seems to involve sophisticated language and “cultured tones” (67), associating intellectualism with homosexuality. Kimmel argues that in the 1950s a strong link was made between intellectualism and effeminacy (237). Seen in this light, the association of some subterraneans with homosexual practices should not come as a surprise. At any rate, several of the Beats (Burroughs and Ginsberg among them) openly embraced their homosexuality.

However, rather than displaying tolerance, other characters condemn homosexuality in *The Subterraneans*. The criticism of homosexuality amid such a liberal group demonstrates the degree to which 1950s social norms penetrated even countercultural attitudes. In these conditions, the accusation of homosexuality comes as an insult to the narrator, who considers

compensating for it by engaging in a most conventional display of masculinity: a fight. He soon abandons this idea though, dismissing it along the equally masculine lines of ostensible physical superiority: “me 170 pounds to his 130 or 120” (105). The narrator takes the opportunity to boast about his strength. Casting his interlocutor as physically weaker and also passive, practicing the “awful subterranean sort of non-violent Indian Mahatma Gandhi defense of some kind” (105), he tries to undermine Wallenstein’s authority, and thus save face. Similarly, when the “are-you-a-fag” idea is repeated (138), the narrator asserts his masculinity by verbally abusing Wallenstein. The incident with Lavalina is also condemned, as the narrator writes an apologetic letter to him the next day (74). Finally, the sequence “Frank’s leching after Adam, Adam’s leching after Yuri’ and Yuri’d thrown in “And I’m leching after you’” is preceded by the disclaimer that it is intended as a joke (91). Such instances ultimately question the legitimacy of homosexuality and reinstate the established order. The boldness of the overt references to homosexuality in *The Subterraneans* is thus undermined by the final subscription to 1950s conventional morality, as liberal ideas yield to the pressure of mainstream ideology. Gender construction is negotiated, but the discussion ultimately fails to subvert the existing order. The narrator finally affirms 1950s conventions. However, the authority of these conventions has been challenged; while not radical enough to campaign for their rejection, Kerouac has, nonetheless, exposed their vulnerability, thus challenging their validity.

Nevertheless, it ultimately transpires that in the text heterosexuality is the dominant mode and recurring displays of sexism outweigh instances of homosexuality, for example when a member of the group exclaims “Old Percepied’s got himself another amazing doll” (135). Homosexuality is a notable interlude, but eventually the conventional heterosexual order is reinstated. In this context, Mardou’s value as a partner is undermined. When she is not treated as a plaything, she is altogether discarded in favour of male sexuality. Rather than

a partner on equal terms, Mardou Fox becomes an image that serves as a reference point against which the narrator can measure his masculinity. However, Mardou's image is by no means the factor that conditions Percepiéd's sexuality; indeed, the narrator is especially interested in diversions from his point of reference. His relationship with Mardou is based upon very dubious premises, as Percepiéd's main concern seems to lie with an experimentation with gender roles.

A further challenge to Percepiéd's alleged status as "the sexual male" occurs when, after his separation from Mardou, it is his mother's image, rather than his lover's, that dominates. Nicholls reads this as a "fetishistic refiguration of the mother" and goes on to argue that "in *The Subterraneans*, Leo Percepiéd's frequent returns to his mother emphasize that he has not achieved autonomous male subjectivity" (541). The Freudian overtones of the "mother vision" further problematize the construction of his masculinity. The fetishization of the mother adds a pathological twist to the narrator's already complicated romantic dispositions. Such intense attachment to the mother makes it exceptionally difficult for the narrator to pursue substantial romantic relationships, whether of a heterosexual or a homosexual nature (at any rate his homosexuality is manifested only briefly, and there is no indication that the narrator wishes to engage in a steady relationship with a man).

Although the entire novel is built around his affair with Mardou, Mardou's persona is constantly belittled by Percepiéd. Copulation with a man is occasionally more significant than sex with Mardou; when the affair with Mardou is over, it is the mother image that prevails. These instances cast a different light on the narrator's masculinity, one that contradicts his projection of heterosexual prowess in his earlier assertion: "I would show her more sexuality" (50). Thus, Kerouac challenges his narrator's "lecherous and so on propensities" (5), and exposes the ironic overtones implied by "and so on".



The ambiguity of the narrator's sexual disposition further undermines the importance of his relationship with Mardou. Although the Cold War social taboo against homosexuality keeps the celebration of homosexual practices at bay, the uncertainty regarding the narrator's sexuality renders the possibility of a meaningful relationship problematic. The narrator seems to indulge in an exercise of gender performance, more concerned with sexual experimentation rather than emotional bonding with Mardou.<sup>45</sup> Mardou becomes the means through which the narrator can explore his sexuality, and his findings often place her at a disadvantage. Kerouac, however, does not champion Percepied's practices and exposes the problems they give rise to. Eburne points out that "*The Subterraneans* is charged with a traumatic awareness of its own failure, acting out and disinheriting a vast array of identity strategies, myths, and structures whose coerciveness and propensity for damage become glaringly apparent" (83). The plasticity of gender construction, homosexuality, and powerful maternal archetypes all exercise a destructive force upon the affair with Mardou. The narrator's experimentation comes with a high price, as he eventually loses Mardou. Her decision to end the relationship could be seen as the ultimate act of resistance to her simulated image; indications of this resistance are provided throughout the narrative of *The Subterraneans*.

### **Mardou's Resistance**

It would initially appear that Mardou easily complies with Percepied's pronouncements. In one of the rare instances that she is allowed speech, she expresses acute awareness of her subordinate status, denouncing her right to an opinion: "but I'm not supposed to" (54), and later expressing subservient humility with respect to Percepied's work

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<sup>45</sup> Such an exercise is not however unrestricted, as when dominant sexual behaviours are challenged, sanctioning measures are reintroduced.

(56). In most instances Mardou gives the impression that she is docilely acquiescent, catering to Percepied's whims and tolerating his caprices. The narrator eventually describes her as a prize: "my prize my own woman" (61), and later on: "men - love - not for sale - my prize - possession" (97).<sup>46</sup> Percepied's attitude validates the observation that "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). Predictably, then, Percepied's yearning for Mardou grows stronger after Yuri has expressed interest in her. Mardou is now treated as a trophy that the narrator refuses to sell. Thus, she is conceptualized as a saleable commodity that could even be prostituted. Nonetheless, if Mardou is to be perceived as a prize, then what exactly does her possession stand for? Possession of Mardou confirms the narrator's status as the dominant male, and hence his victory in the "war" with his "enemy", Yuri. Moreover, on a textual level, Mardou can be seen as a prize for literary achievement. Ambiguous as the idea may be, however, it still subscribes to a discourse that upholds the commodification of the female subject.

Although Mardou displays a seemingly submissive attitude, a closer look at the text reveals her expressions of resistance, for instance when she protests that men "rush off and have big wars and consider women as prizes instead of human beings, well man I may be in the middle of all this shit but I certainly don't want any part of it" (23). Mardou refuses to cast herself as a prize to be won. Not desiring to be viewed as a trophy, she articulates her resistance to the aspiring conqueror; she will not serve as a passive award. Kerouac has Mardou articulate her defiance of the established male order shortly before the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, perceptively foreshadowing the feminist protests that would ensue in its wake. Kerouac's negotiation of such concepts in *The Subterraneans* is revealing of an anxiety for (other- and self-) definition that goes beyond the superficiality of 1950s

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<sup>46</sup> The idea of woman as prize re-appears in *Tristessa*: "Ah, so she thinks of her body as some prize she shant give away" (88).

mainstream practices, and reflects the tension between the conservative forces of post-war America and the more radical social and philosophical debates that were emerging. This is a rare instance of Mardou's taking control over her gendered image and engaging in self-definition. Mardou criticizes masculine belligerence and considers it degrading for women.<sup>47</sup> Her defiance of Percepied's positions constitutes a radical questioning of 1950s dominant social practices, all the more forceful because articulated by the ethnic subject.

As I have already pointed out Mardou seldom speaks in the novel; she even more rarely talks back. Even when direct quotations are used there is confusion as to their actual source. However, rather than a sign of weakness, her silence could be interpreted as an artful way of expressing resistance. Boehmer notes that silence "sabotages signification, refuses to mean within the coloniser's language" (130). She sees "silence as negation", which ideally is a process of "self-articulation, reconstitution through speaking one's condition" (131). In an earlier section I demonstrated how the narrator has modelled Mardou's language upon the "hip" nuances of the time in order to fit the particular model of the "new bop generation", affirming "a larger practice within colonialist discourse, a practice in which the possibilities of subaltern speech are contained by the discourse of the oppressor" (Griffiths 238). The fact that Mardou's language is thus shaped emphasizes her status as the passive colonized female; however, there are only few instances when Mardou actually puts this particular linguistic style to use. Kerouac casts Mardou as a generally silent character, so as to either express indifference towards the image that Percepied has constructed of her, or, from a more radical point of view, to actively resist Percepied's fabrications. Thus, Mardou's meekness is not as inoffensive as the narrator portrays it to be.

Nevertheless, there are a few rare passages in *The Subterraneans* in which Mardou articulates direct disapproval at her portrayal. She particularly disagrees with Percepied's

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<sup>47</sup> Not surprisingly, Mardou's character does not display such complexity in the film, where she is brought to declare that "Men have to fight women and women have to fight men. That's love, that's what it's about!"

proclamation that “she is the only girl I’ve ever known who could really understand bop and sing it” (92), and also with his pronouncement that she is “the child of Bop”, and his suggestion that disavowal of bop would equal disavowal of her roots (135-6). Perceived here once more reproduces stereotypical images associated with race and origins and expects Mardou to subscribe to these notions. Exasperated with such stereotyping, Mardou defiantly asserts: “I don’t like bop, I really don’t, it’s like junk to me, too many junkies are bop men and I hear the junk in it” (135-6). Mardou’s decision to distance herself from associations with jazz forcefully challenges the narrator’s simulated fabrications on the level of textual dynamics as well.

In my introduction to this chapter I pointed to the association of Kerouac’s “freeflowing prose” (*Selected Letters 1957-69* 94-5) with jazz. Weinreich argues that there is a structure to Kerouac’s jazz-influenced prose composition (120). In an article purporting to identify jazz structures in the prose of *The Subterraneans*, Rupert makes a case for the transmission of meaning “through the more vertical development constituted by jazz structure” (5). Eversley also comments on the function of jazz, which she believes in the novel is associated with sexual climax (261), drawing attention to “the jazz description of their sex” in the novel (265). Panish, for his part, agrees with critics that “jazz (or, more specifically, bebop), then, is at once the backdrop and one of the organizing principles of *The Subterraneans*” (111), but expresses doubts as to whether “Kerouac’s performance is similar to the performance of a jazz musician” (115-117). Similarly, Van Elteren argues that “for Kerouac, jazz was the model for complete spontaneity [...] However, Kerouac’s perception about the spontaneity of the successful jazz performance was not the informed one of a musician” (77). Given the importance of jazz for plot and composition, the wider implications of Mardou’s refusal to subscribe to the bop rituals that Perceived constructs around her are of particular significance. Not only does she tarnish the stereotypical image

that Percepied has associated with her, but her questioning of the relevance of jazz problematizes the novel's stylistics as well. The associations of Percepied's improvisatory bebop structures with Mardou's African-American heritage are severely challenged as Mardou not only disavows this association, but is outrightly contemptuous of bop, dismissing it as "junk". Thus, by implication, Percepied's narrative model is criticized while Mardou rises above stereotypes to articulate her individual tastes and disengages herself from Percepied's expectations.

*The Subterraneans* evinces yet another instance whereby Mardou straightforwardly questions Percepied's classifications. Protesting to his overarching idealizations, she proclaims: "don't call me Eve" (149). This is a compelling declaration on Mardou's part; she decides to denounce her simulated image, and proffers her disapproval of the role that Percepied has assigned to her. Eversley argues that "Fox's refusal to allow Percepied to refer to her as Eve suggests her unwillingness to allow his vision to determine her subjectivity" (269). Mardou now renounces the symbolic paraphernalia that the narrator has inflicted on her. Contesting her simulated role, she openly challenges the strong association with the concept of origins that Percepied has imposed on her and invalidates her role as "Eve", the "primordial" woman. Thus, Mardou inscribes her resistance, which gives rise to considerable tension in the text. Mardou's sharp response casts new light over the power dynamics of their relationship; exposing the simulated nature of Percepied's constructions, it challenges his narrative practices. Percepied's attempt to transmute her "from lover to allegory" (Eburne 81) is frustrated by her disavowal of his Biblical allusion. Percepied's hegemonic position as the dominant male is undermined, and doubts are generated as to whether his colonization of Mardou is indeed successful. Such tensions demonstrate the dubious premises upon which the Percepied-Fox affair is grounded and ultimately parody Percepied's domineering impulses.

Mardou's resistance is so influential that it creates more generalized disturbance on a linguistic level in *The Subterraneans*. This becomes explicit when she expresses her desire to end the affair: "but we should really break up" (145).<sup>48</sup> Typically, Percepiéd underestimates Mardou's more complex aspects and expects her to repeat herself, self-confident in his (mis)belief that he can manipulate her: "that kind of argument that I can, as of yore and again, break, by saying, 'But let's, look, I have, wait -' for always the man can make the little woman bend, she was made to bend, the little woman was -" (147). The narrator here employs forceful verbs that albeit disjointed convey a sense of authority and influence.<sup>49</sup> However, their disarrayed juxtaposition betrays the narrator's difficulty to negotiate Mardou's decision. The narrator cannot produce convincing arguments with which to substantiate his point, and the reader is left suspended and ultimately uncertain as to the validity of Percepiéd's utterance. The narrator's conviction that the male can invariably manipulate the female is undermined by the abrupt disruption of his sentence. Moreover, Percepiéd's belittling of Mardou ("the little woman") is suggestive of his anxiety about self-assertion.

Adding to the narrator's uncertainty, Mardou further destabilizes his self-confidence by providing him with information about her encounter with Yuri. However, by not telling him what he expects to hear, she unsettles his premeditated answer. Interestingly, Mardou reports the news of her adultery in disjointed speech: "For a place to sleep, he was drunk, he rushed in - and - well - [...] Well baby we made it together, -" (148). The use of dashes suggests fragmentation; it seems that the gravity of such an act cannot be conveyed through

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<sup>48</sup> Another example of female resistance to the established male order appears in *And the Hippos Were Boiled in their Tanks*, where a female character protests: "Do you guys think you can walk out on us like this and expect us to wait on our asses? Do you think women are suckers?" (38).

<sup>49</sup> A similar display of colonial arrogance occurs in *Tristessa* when the narrator declares: "I don't care about money, I am the King of the world, I will lead your little revolutions myself" (72). However, he ends up being robbed; despite his pronouncements to the contrary, his impoverishment points to the illusory nature of his proclaimed authority.

linear speech, and its narration becomes “incoherent” (148). Rather than taking these linguistic gestures as a sign of weakness, however, we might consider how they can shed light on another aspect of Mardou’s character. Mardou is capable of adjusting her language according to the exigencies of a particular situation, veering through a variety of linguistic strategies that enable her to convey her point more fittingly. Rather than an example of poor communication skills, disjointed language here points to Mardou’s ability to choose a register that is most appropriate to the circumstances. Mardou’s resistance forcefully influences the syntactical structures of the novel, reflecting a greater textual disorder. When the subject decides to renounce her simulated image, the text becomes a battleground where grammar and syntax are disturbed by the turmoil this defiance causes. Mardou’s protest upsets the narrator’s thoughts and utterances. Language not only becomes fragmented, reflecting the confusion generated, but there is also one instance when the narrator feels compelled to perform a language switch. After he has realized that he can no longer keep Mardou, Percepiéd muses: “I love her but this song is...broken - but in French now...in French I can sing her on and on...” (69-70).

The narrator now resorts to his native French language. The use of English here would be problematic: the pauses within the sentences are suggestive of his reluctance to use English, considering it inadequate to express the intensity of his feelings. This is one of the rare instances that the narrator’s racial hybridity (he is an American with French roots) is exposed. Although his name is suggestive of French origins,<sup>50</sup> and there is also an explicit reference to his ethnic background, “You Canucks” (76), the narrator’s ethnic difference is largely underplayed in the novel. Even when his native language is called to his aid, however,

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<sup>50</sup> Critics have offered various interpretations as to the significance of the narrator’s name. Miles translates it from the French as “pierced foot” and sees an Oedipal connection (189). Ellis offers another version, suggesting that “Kerouac’s Percepiéd takes his name not only from the myths underlying the legend of Achilles (a character, like Percepiéd, possessing a fatal weakness), but also from the name of a minor character in Proust’s *A la recherche*, Doctor Percepiéd” (*Liar! Liar!* 154). Dittman mentions further associations of “pierced foot” with a Christ image and also Saint Sebastian (56).

the promise to go on with the narrative is not fulfilled. There is no song sung in French in the end.<sup>51</sup> The narrator's attempt to find a linguistic origin potent enough to sustain his narrative remains inconclusive.

Mardou articulates her ultimate act of defiance most emphatically in the final lines of the novel:

“Baby it’s up to you [...] about how many times you wanta see me and all that  
- but I want to be independent like I say.”

And I go home having lost her love.

And write this book (152).

This last pronouncement is open to multiple interpretations. Eversley suggests that the final separation “undermines an unequivocal reading of *The Subterraneans* as an imperialist text” (268-9). She argues for “a fictionalized history of the affair that, when read closely, not only demonstrates her independent choice and her intellectual prowess, but also his attempt to erase her power as well as his impotence” (269). The fact that Mardou is finally lost to another man seems to downplay the narrator's colonial attitude, as it undermines his power and authority. However, her defiance is based on her adultery, that is, her association with another man. Consequently, it can be argued that she is perpetuating her submission to the masculine order. Incapable of completely severing links with the narrator, Mardou allows him a considerable degree of choice, and thus does not altogether collapse the established male hierarchy. By opening up possibilities and space for resistance, however, Kerouac parodies his narrator's attempts to advance a narrative of white masculine assertion. Homi Bhabha points to the natives' potential to disrupt the authority of colonial discourse (“Of

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<sup>51</sup> In *Tristessa* it is not only a matter of finding the appropriate tools of expression, but a question of whether the narrator is capable of expressing himself artistically at all: “O I wish I could write! - Only a beautiful poem could do it!” (86).



Mimicry and Man” 129). Applying Bhabha’s argument to a reading of *The Subterraneans*, we see the deficiencies of Perceped’s strategies of colonization, and witness Mardou’s refusal to comply with her simulated image. Mardou’s declaration of independence is a defiant re-definition of her personal space. Revolting against her previous association with the private sphere of domesticity, Mardou breaks these boundaries and decides to make a forceful entrance into the public sphere usually associated with men, to be “independent”. The degree of her “independence” notwithstanding, her decision constitutes a step towards emancipation from Perceped’s control.

### “Construct - For Nothing”

The conflicting aspects of Mardou’s persona point to the complexities that arise from the negotiation of her image. Responding to the narrator’s emphatic affirmations that “work was my dominant thought, not love” (25), and “my work’s more important than Mardou” (88), Steve Wilson contends that that “by betraying his relationships, he is then able to recreate them as literature” (310).<sup>52</sup> Once articulated in prose, the relationship is lessened; narrating the affair becomes a form of betrayal, and the narrator admits not only to the vacuity of his romantic escapades but also to the pointlessness of the prioritization of his writerly endeavours: “still I have to rush off and construct construct - for nothing” (23). The repetition of “construct” has a hollow ring to it, so as to emphasize the vacuity of Perceped’s writerly attempts.<sup>53</sup> The self-parody of the narrator’s writerly ventures is forcefully

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<sup>52</sup> This idea is also expressed in the film version of *The Subterraneans* where Roxanne declares that she hates writers because: “They watch themselves live with a cold, deadly, analytical eye”, an idea repeated later by Mardou: “You don’t live, you write it down! Somebody else has to do the living!” The real-life inspiration for Mardou’s character, Alene Lee, was infuriated at Kerouac’s account of the affair. When Kerouac brought her the manuscript, she felt as if a “decapitated rat” were being offered as a present to her (Gifford and Lee 176). The relationship with Alene Lee is not the only one that has suffered from fictionalization; disruptions in the Kerouac-Cassady relationship also occurred after the publication of *On the Road*.

<sup>53</sup> Joy Walsh sees religious overtones in the prioritization of intellect over corporeality, associating Kerouac’s Roman Catholicism with a desire “to be free of his own flesh” (69). Consequently, when questioning

articulated in *The Subterraneans*: “still making no impression on my eager impressionable ready-to-create construct destroy and die brain - as will be seen in the great construction of jealousy which I later from a dream and for reasons of self-laceration recreated” (62). His awareness of the “create construct destroy die” continuum bears strong ironic overtones. The narrator acknowledges that by reconstructing the affair through verbose prose, he eventually destroys it. Moreover, he confesses that his feelings of jealousy are merely a textual construct. The affair with Mardou is contingent upon its description through language.

Elsewhere Percepiéd comments on “the asexuality of the WORK” (57). That the narrator should place so much emphasis on his writing now appears ironic, considering his earlier “crudely malely sexual” disposition. Amidst such narrative confusion, words become incoherent and it is linguistic disorganization that prevails:

Damajehe eleout ekeke dhdkdk dldoud,---d, ekeoou dhhdhkehgyt - better not a more than lther ehe the macmurphy out of that dgardent that which strangely he doth mdodudltk dip - baseeaatra - poor examples because of mechanical needs of typing, of the flow of river sounds, words, dark, leading to the future and attesting to the madness, hollowness, ring and roar of my mind” (57-8).

Syntax fails the narrator, and the limitations of language are exposed. Ellis notes that “his outburst also manifests the attendant risk run by all communication when breaking down into a completely private language: becoming non(e)sense” (*Liar! Liar!* 158). The narrator coins together letters in random clusters, so as to show the inefficiency of conventional verbal constructions. He opts for the visual representation of sounds, exposing the inability of language to convey substantial meaning. Language has become incoherent, broken down to

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the significance of his writing, the narrator is implicitly brought to dispute the legitimacy of post-war America’s established religious practices. Writing now becomes a substitute for physical pleasure, albeit an admittedly poor one.

the level of mutilated sounds, which provide “poor examples”. These are followed by a disjointed array of words. Dissecting language to its most basic units, the narrator undermines its meaning-bearing function, parodying his insistence on “verbal constructions”.<sup>54</sup> The narrator is unable to bring his colonial narrative to a closure that would grant him romantic, or at least artistic, fulfillment. As Mardou refuses to subscribe to her simulated image and the importance of literary achievement is parodied in the novel, *The Subterraneans* finally emerges as a tale of artistic conceit and love lost. Trapped in the pitfalls of artistic arrogance and colonial assertion, Percepiéd is ultimately met with the female subject’s resistance. This resistance poignantly reveals the instability of the premises upon which the narrator’s quest for romantic fulfillment was initially based, and subsequently lays bare its vacuous nature.

The ultimate loss of the ethnic woman is a recurring pattern in Kerouac’s prose. In *Maggie Cassidy* this is expressed in the narrator’s laconic realization: “Maggie lost” (151). However, the final breakdown of the affair should not come as a surprise to the cautious reader, as the narrator has already hinted at the “adult love torn in barely grown-up ribs” (97). The introduction of “adult love” upsets previous connotations of innocence, creating a tension that culminates in Maggie’s dissociation from such concepts and the (failed) attempt to have intercourse. However, the vacuous nature of the narrator’s romantic escapades is foregrounded most forcibly in *Tristessa*. The final lines of *Tristessa* follow a strikingly similar pattern to those of *The Subterraneans*; after losing *Tristessa*, the narrator resolves to “write long sad tales about the people in the legend of my life” (96). Of the three texts, it is *Tristessa* that seems to be most dependent on performance. That she is cast as a “junkey” at an advanced stage of drug addiction makes her by default “unlovable” (80), and emphatically

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<sup>54</sup> However, at the same time it could be argued that the resort to a primordial level of language opens up new possibilities for expression. Ellis references Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language* as a useful tool for analysis (*Liar! Liar!* 166). Poetic language can indeed infuse a text with a new kind of linguistic power. However, I feel that in this particular passage the emphasis is on the limitations of language (as is strongly suggested by the use of “poor examples”).

illustrates the problems that involvement with such a character gives rise to. Thus, the narrator's quest for romantic fulfilment remains inconclusive in all three novels.

The narrator constructs a simulated image of the ethnic woman, modelling it upon patterns of white assertion. However, as in the case of *On the Road*, the ethnic subjects resist their fabricated image and ultimately parody the narrator's assertions of authority. The textual tensions of *The Subterraneans* expose and simultaneously subvert Cold War America's stereotypical negotiations of the exotic other. Parodying his narrator's textual constructions, Kerouac exposes the vacuous nature of his romances with ethnic females, and through a questioning of the dominant ideologies of the 1950s, his writing anticipates the more systematic deconstruction of racial and gender stereotypes that would be witnessed in later decades.

## CHAPTER IV

### ETHNICITY, IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE: *SATORI IN PARIS*

In the works studied so far, the quest for authentic experience has proven illusory, and spiritual and romantic ventures have remained similarly inconclusive; in *Satori in Paris*, bereft of substantial external bearings, Kerouac's narrator embarks on perhaps the most fundamental quest, that of identity. In an attempt to establish firm points of reference against which to define himself, the narrator engages with the dynamics of identity construction, as vividly exemplified in the search for ethnic origins narrated in *Satori in Paris*, a novel composed about four years before Kerouac died (1965). McNally notes that the novel "was printed in successive issues of *Evergreen* [Review] that spring [1966]" (322). It was subsequently published in its entirety by Grove Press in the same year. In *Satori in Paris* Kerouac provides a fictional version of a ten-day trip undertaken for the purpose of establishing a rapport with his ancestry in France. The story in the novel is about the French-Canadian narrator's journey from America to France in order to track down his family line, which he believes to be of noble blood. He desires to investigate his past and thus embarks on a search for ethnic origins and identity: "my quest" (52, 92). However, the quest proves problematic, for the idea of origins is repeatedly questioned. The narration is accordingly structured around discontinuous episodes that reflect the fragmentation of the narrator's quest. An intense preoccupation with identity construction is also evident in Kerouac's later novels such as *Big Sur* (written in 1961 and published 1962 by Coward-McCann), *Desolation Angels* (written in 1956/1961 and published in 1965 by the same) and *Vanity of Duluo*, (written in 1967 and

published in 1968 also by Coward-McCann).<sup>1</sup> Although these novels engage with the problematization of the concept of identity, which acquires particular force at the later stages of Kerouac's work, it is in *Satori in Paris* that the urgency to establish a stable identity becomes more vividly communicated, as the novel's main focus is on the narrator's search for origins.

Critical reaction to *Satori* has been largely unsympathetic. Tytell, for example, believes it is "more an anecdotal sketch than a developed fiction" (208), and McNally reads it as "a sad borscht-circuit comic telling the same joke for the seventeenth year" (319). French goes so far as to declare that this work "makes no pretense of being a novel" (113) and describes it as "an embarrassing example of the kind of moral fable [...] that cannot stand up to the weighty burden that has been imposed upon it" (114). Miles feels that "it is a lamentably poor piece of writing" (281). Similarly, Dittman remarks that "the book feels slightly sad, vaguely misogynistic, and highly self-indulgent" (113), and Ellis likewise describes it as "a half-achieved, messy and at times over-indulgent text" (244). Gifford and Lee refer to the trip narrated in *Satori* as "a lonely, abortive sojourn that resulted in little of value" (300); in a similar vein, Clark argues that "the trip had gone by in a blur, and that word is the best description of *Satori in Paris*, a disturbing, unintentional 'confession' of how badly Jack had deteriorated" (203). Jones likewise calls the trip a "fiasco" (8), and Theado states that Kerouac "failed to achieve his purported goal of reaching his family heritage" (*Understanding* 176). Indeed, the narrator's inability to trace his origins lends validity to such comments. However, it should not be overlooked that the narrator's quest for origins is part of a more fundamental attempt to establish an (initially ethnic) identity. The wider implications arising from reflections upon the concept of identity in *Satori*

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<sup>1</sup> I am here following Sandison's chronology.

*in Paris* have rarely been substantially addressed by critics. My analysis aims to explore such considerations; disengaging *Satori in Paris* from several more conventionally autobiographical approaches that have been pursued in the past, I will explore the dynamics of the processes of identity formation that shape the novel.

### **“An Illumination of Some Kind”**

The title’s reference to *satori* illumination is not without complications. In the second chapter I discussed Kerouac’s negotiation of the term.<sup>2</sup> Definitions of *satori* are also explored in *Satori in Paris*, when the narrator professes to have experienced a *satori* on his trip to France, which he describes as a “sudden illumination” and a “sudden awakening” (7), a transformation that has changed him. However, the narrator is unable to further define or clarify his alleged *satori* experience:

it seems the *satori* was handed to me by a taxi driver named Raymond Baillet, other times I think it might’ve been my paranoiac fear in the foggy streets of Brest Brittany at 3 A.M., other times I think it was Monsieur Casteljaloux and his dazzlingly beautiful secretary [...] or the waiter [...] or the performance of Mozart’s Requiem [...] or [...] the straight tree lanes of Tuileries Gardens? Or the roaring sway of the bridge over the booming holiday Seine. (7-8)

As the above list suggests, it is impossible to distinguish between the various possibilities, and the narrator’s confused viewpoints eventually undermine his claims

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<sup>2</sup> A definition of *satori* illumination has been provided in the second chapter (see p.135). *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines “Satori” as a “sudden enlightenment and a state of consciousness attained by intuitive illumination representing the spiritual goal of Zen Buddhism.”

to “sudden illumination”. Moreover, that he should be using a Buddhist term to describe his experience gives rise to further complications, because the narrator tries to make a forceful case for his Catholicism in *Satori in Paris* and even denounces Buddhism (69). The use of Buddhist terms such as *satori* and *Bodhidharma* (108) in this context suggests that Kerouac empties Buddhist terms of their initial signification to create a parodic effect, perpetuating a practice already present in *The Dharma Bums*. The intrusion of Buddhist terminology in a text otherwise laden with Catholic imagery intensifies textual destabilization, heavily problematizing the narrator’s alleged *satori* experiences and their subsequent impact upon the formation of his identity.

Attempting to clarify *satori* as it functions in the novel, critics have offered several interpretations of Kerouac’s use of the term. Turner wonders whether the *satori* is connected with a return to Catholicism (196-7). Theado, for his part, appeals to the narrator’s own view that “no matter how you travel, or how ‘successful’ your tour, or fore-shortened, you always learn something and learn to change your thoughts” (43), projecting the narrator’s experience in France as a possible reason for *satori*. However, Theado, as Warren French before him (115), is skeptical about the narrator’s claims (176), and instead suggests that the novel’s *satori* consists in his having found “a different kind of family heritage.” Theado reads it as an “attempt to convey the ideal of the brotherhood of man” (*Understanding* 177), echoing Nicosia’s view that the narrator “ends up learning that he belongs to the brotherhood of man” (661), an idea also shared by French (115). Nonetheless, French eventually states that “he [the narrator] rushes past this remark [...] without apparently recognizing its application to his own overbearing behavior” (115). Clark, in turn, remarks that “none of the details of his *satori* were clear, even to Jack” (203). Gifford and Lee, on the



other hand, maintain that the illumination was provided by the taxi driver, Raymond Baillet, but this “proved to be as elusive as the point of the trip” (300); however, they attribute the elusiveness of the *satori* to a mere oversight on the narrator’s part. The narrator has indeed pinpointed Baillet as one cause of his *satori* (*Satori* 7, 118), but Gifford and Lee fail to clarify why they have selected this particular explanation over the others the narrator provides. In her discussion of the novel, Pinette also draws on possible instances of *satori* illumination in the text; she concentrates the *satori* around the “homecoming” idea and then examines three possible instances of *satori* with regard to language, religion and culture. Her selection of possible sources of *satori* seems rather arbitrary, however, and she also points to the narrator’s skepticism towards them (40-1), eventually agreeing with Gifford and Lee that the *satori* is induced by Raymond Baillet: “It’s only upon leaving France that he finally receives his *satori*. It’s the driver that takes him to the airport that is the source” (41).<sup>3</sup> However, she adds that the narrator “realizes the important role of the driver only at the end of the story [...] it is only by putting his experiences in writing that he succeeds in understanding the source of *satori*” (41).<sup>4</sup> Concentrating on “the act of creation”, (“it is only in the act of creation that the narrator manages to understand himself” [41]),<sup>5</sup> Pinette suggests that it is through the narration of the experience that the *satori* illumination is comprehended.

Whereas critics have generally taken the narrator’s claims to *satori* at face value and have tried to trace its possible sources, the ambiguity of the narrator’s

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<sup>3</sup> All subsequent quotations from Pinette’s article are in my own translation from the original French. The original reads: “Ce n’est qu’en partant de la France qu’il reçoit enfin son *satori*. C’est le conducteur qui l’emmène à l’aéroport qui en est la source.”

<sup>4</sup> The original reads: “il se rend compte du rôle important du conducteur seulement à la fin de l’histoire [...] Ce n’est qu’en mettant ses expériences par écrit qu’il arrive à comprendre la source du *satori*.”

<sup>5</sup> The original reads: “Ce n’est que dans l’acte créateur que le narrateur arrive à se comprendre.”

suggested *satori* illuminations (“I don’t know how I got that *satori*” [10]) undermines the usefulness of such attempts. Although Pinette does not break with the established critical tradition, her focus on the act of writing shifts attention to the performativity of the text. Given the spiritual significance of *satori* illumination, its very conditionality upon textual performance is suggestive of the irony of the narrator’s claims to *satori*. The striking discord between signifiers (in this case, the possible reasons for *satori*) and signified (the *satori* itself), indicates “the failure to reach any sort of *satori* or sudden illumination” (Ellis, *Liar! Liar!* 244). The variety of suggested causes of *satori* points to its elusiveness and invites serious reflection as to the nature of the narrator’s quest.

### **Autobiographical Fictions**

The fact that *Satori in Paris* has been inspired by Kerouac’s trip to France can to an extent account for the critical tendency to analyse the novel with close reference to the actual events in the author’s life. A first view of *Satori* would seem to justify this; it can be said that Kerouac himself is partly responsible, having stated that he has decided to use his real name, “because this story is about my search for this name in France” (8).<sup>6</sup> A preliminary exploration of the concept of autobiography is particularly useful here in order to illuminate the author’s claim to identification with the narrator.

Rimmon-Kenan argues that autobiography is “in some sense no less fictional than what is conventionally classified as such” (3). In a work that bears his name as its title, Roland Barthes points to the impossibility of autobiography becoming an

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<sup>6</sup> The other works in which the narrator is named “Kerouac” are *Lonesome Traveler* and *Book of Dreams*.

accurate transcription of reality: “I had no other solution other than to *rewrite* myself-at a distance - a great distance, here and now” (142). Burke maintains that in this, “*Roland Barthes* would seem to be breaking the timehonoured autobiographical contract - that the self writing and the self written on should be one and the same self” (54). In fact, the temporal distance between the actual taking place of events and their narration forbids the identification of the two. Subjectivity is yet another significant factor; individuals have different ways of perceiving events and then preserving them in their memory: “Autobiography expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness” (Eakin, *Fictions* 5). A variety of factors can intervene to reshape one’s perception. Memory is selective, and certain events are recalled more vividly than others; furthermore, representation serves to further complicate the equation. Nonetheless, an autobiographical narration should not be taken as an absolutely artificial construct, completely severed from its author. To deny that Kerouac had indeed travelled to France would be foolish; however, the distinction between that and the work delivered, the product of the mind which gives birth to the fictional character, should be kept in mind.

The identity formation processes that are in operation in autobiographical accounts have preoccupied Susan Pinette, who calls attention to the complications that arise from the use of the proper name in the novel:

in spite of the narrator’s proclamations, the difference between the name of the author (Jack Kerouac) and that of the narrator (Jean-Louis Lebris de K  rouac) is immediately evident. It is possible to maintain that the name of the author is merely the anglicized name of the

narrator. The text, however, shows this interpretation to be false. The story is built upon the failure of the narrator who cannot succeed in proving that the two names are the same. (37-8)<sup>7</sup>

In order to foreground this tension, Pinette cites two examples from the novel (38). The first is with reference to the narrator's visit to the National Library, when he describes the employees' surprise:

when they saw my name Kerouac but with a "Jack" in front of it, as tho I were a Johann Maria Philipp Frimont von Palota suddenly traveling from Staten Island to the Vienna library and signing my name on the call-cards Johnny Pelota and asking for Hergotts' *Genealogia augustae gentis Habsburgicae* (incomplete title) and my name not spelled "Palota," as it should, just as my real name should be spelled "Kerouack". (*Satori* 34)

Later, when he is in Ulysse Lebris' house, the narrator shows him his passport "which says: 'John Louis Kerouac' because you cant go around America and join the Merchant Marine and be called 'Jean'" (*Satori* 95).

Pinette perceptively notes that considerations of identity are dominant in the novel and that they form the driving force of the narrator's quest. There is a clear tension between the two identities she describes and her choice to differentiate

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<sup>7</sup>The original reads: "Malgré les proclamations du narrateur, le décalage entre le nom de l'auteur (Jack Kerouac) et celui du narrateur (Jean-Louis Lebris de Kérouac) est tout de suite évident. Il est possible de soutenir que le nom de l'auteur n'est que le nom anglicisé du narrateur. Le texte, cependant, dément cette interprétation. Le récit se construit sur l'échec du narrateur qui ne parvient pas à prouver que les deux noms sont les memes."

between the two names is convincing. Her argument, however, is flawed in that she chooses to attribute one identity to the author and the other to the narrator. In place of this double focus, analysis will concentrate on the narrator's identity, given that "autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction" (Eakin, *Touching the World* 25). It is, therefore, the textual construction of identity in *Satori* that I am mainly concerned with; interestingly, after the initial differentiation Pinette makes, she henceforth fails to distinguish between author and narrator and to clarify the author's role in this tension between the two identities.

Nevertheless, Pinette's preoccupation with identity formation in the novel leads her to the assumption that "*Satori in Paris* does not affirm Franco-American identity, but criticizes it as itself being insufficient in the search of oneself" (37).<sup>8</sup> She wants to show that "*Satori in Paris* criticizes this identity and rejects it, offering in its place an identity which only uses established definitions of ethnicity as a guide/medium that produces writing" (37).<sup>9</sup> The novel indeed problematizes Franco-American identity; however, this is not because this identity is "insufficient" and thereby rejected, as Pinette claims, but merely because the narrator cannot altogether achieve an understanding of it.

In his initial attempt to foreground an ethnic identity, the narrator sets out to track down his ancestry, which he believes to be of aristocratic origin: he mentions "nobles, of which I am a descendant (Princes of Brittany)" (*Satori* 16). He takes great care to stress that he comes "from Medieval French Quebec - via - Brittany stock"

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<sup>8</sup>The original reads: "*Satori in Paris* n'affirme pas l'identité franco-américaine, mais la critique comme insuffisante en elle-même dans la recherche de soi."

<sup>9</sup>The original reads: "*Satori in Paris* critique cette identité et la rejette, offrant à la place une identité qui ne se sert des définitions établies de l'ethnie que comme guide/médium producteur de l'écriture."

(45) and emphatically projects the noblesse of his family line, declaring that his “ancestor was an officer of the Crown” (51). Indeed, he traces his heritage “back to Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland and maybe Scotland afore that [...] then down over to the St. Lawrence River city in Canada where I’m told there was a Seigneurie (a Lordship)” (73).<sup>10</sup> The family heritage Kerouac has bestowed on his narrator constitutes the propulsive force behind the trip to France. Asserting his noble background, the narrator sets the scene for what appears to be for him a most dignified cause and a quest of ultimate importance; he feels that by tracking down his ancestry he is fulfilling a family dream (*Satori* 74). For the narrator of *Satori in Paris* the attempt to align himself with the heritage of the aristocracy of Brittany is the ultimate quest for identity. However, the projection of a multiplicity of geographical loci as “the origin” is from the start suggestive of the complications that occur in the narrator’s attempt to establish an ethnic identity.

Despite the narrator’s intentions, a number of predicaments blight his project. At the Mazarine Library of Paris he is informed that the records that he was looking for had been destroyed by Nazi bombings (22/52-3), then at the National Library he is not provided with the material he wants because the employees there mistrust him: “they all smelled the liquor on me and thought I was a nut” (33); he cannot find anything at the National Archives either: “there were only *manuscripts* in the National Archives and a lot of them had been burned in the Nazi bombing and besides

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<sup>10</sup> In *Vanity of Duluoç* the narrator also refers to his ethnic background in phrases like: “going back beyond the potatoes and Canada, to yes, Scotland and Ireland and Cornwall and Wales and Isle of Man and Brittany” (204) and “my ancestors were Breton barons” (232). Similar references persist in the text, for example on pages 111, 112, 123, 155, 180, 186, 212. In *Desolation Angels* the narrator again declares: “I’m only a Celtic Cornishman” (287). The preoccupation with origins is also evident in *Big Sur* (although perhaps not as forcefully). There is one instance when the narrator exclaims “*I am a Breton!*” (26), and further on affirms that his name is Breton (116). Moreover, in the introduction to *Lonesome Traveler* Kerouac provides an extensive description of his ethnic background (9). A similar preoccupation with ethnicity can be detected in *Dr. Sax* (106). Barry Miles offers various versions of the etymology of the name (1-5), and Nicosia also provides an account of Kerouac’s genealogy (21-22). At the beginning of his *Definitive Biography* of Kerouac Maher provides yet another account that spans several pages long.

they had no records there of ‘*les affaires Coloniales*’ (Colonial matters)” (51).<sup>11</sup> He subsequently misses his plane to Brittany and therefore has to travel by train (57-9).

Interestingly, the chronology of these events is not linear. The narrator mentions that after his visit to the National Library, he moves on to the Mazarine Library, where “old sweet Madame Oury the head librarian explains to me that the Nazis done bombed and burned all their French papers in 1944, something which I’d forgotten in my zeal” (22). Later, he narrates that after a fruitless visit to the National Archives, he went “on somebody’s tip, to the Bibliothèque Mazarine near Quai St. Michel and nothing happened there either except the old lady librarian winked at me, gave me her name (Madame Oury), and told me to write her anytime” (52-53). Drawing upon Genette’s work, Rimmon-Kenan notes the “*repetitive*” aspect of a narration that is “telling *n* times what ‘happened’ once” (58). The reader is here inclined to assume that the narrator could not have taken the trip to the Mazarine Library twice, since his visit did not produce the desired results; therefore both instances of narration refer to the same incident. The same episode is narrated from two different angles, unsettling textual linearity and calling into question the legitimacy of the narrator’s accounts, the problematic aspects of which become more poignant as we find that the same incident is located in two chronologically distinct points of time. One occurs after the narrator’s visit to the National Library and the other after his visit to the National Archives (these being two separate buildings, as it is made clear that they are situated on different streets). This disturbance in the temporal sequence of events upsets the narrator’s efforts to trace his ethnic origins.

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<sup>11</sup> We have already witnessed the Kerouacian narrator’s indulgence in colonial practices in his interactions with the gendered racial other. In *Desolation Angels* there is also an instance when narrator straightforwardly wishes: “By God, if I were Sultan!” (143). However, in *Satori* the narrator’s ethnic identity is the product of colonizing forces, as he is the offspring of European settlers in America; such a situation subverts the power dynamics established elsewhere in Kerouac’s work, and casts the narrator as the colonized subject, causing him to experience “real rage” over this state of affairs (51).

The repetition of the same incident is suggestive of the intensity of the narrator's desire to articulate a coherent ethnic identity, while at the same time emphasizing the vacuity of his endeavour. Brooks has theorized the pivotal role of time in a narrative, arguing that "narratives [...] are temporal syllogisms, concerning the connective processes of time" (21), and that "narrative has something to do with time-boundedness" (22). Bennett and Royle similarly highlight the narrative's dependence upon temporal frameworks, defining a narrative "as a series of events in a specific order" (55). Consequently, the disruption of temporal frameworks forcefully intrudes upon the smooth progression of the narrator's quest. The shattered temporal sequences and the distortion of the bounds of reality now charge the search for origins and identity with considerable uncertainty. Conceptions of "reality", already problematized at other stages of Kerouac's work, are here again questioned. Although at this stage the focus is not so much upon the tensions between "reality" and simulation, the "real" is now challenged by temporal disruptions that complicate the distinction between fiction and "reality". The temporal structures of the novel thus mirror the problems implicated in the Kerouacian narrator's attempts to arrive at a clear definition of his ethnic identity.

A similar temporal loop occurs with the narrator's trip to the National Library, which is initially mentioned in passing (22) in an example of narrative "summary", where "the pace is accelerated through a textual 'condensation' or 'compression' of a given story-period into a relatively short statement of its main features" (Rimmon-Kenan 53). Various events intervene before the narrator re-focuses on this same visit again, ten pages later. In an instance of what Genette has termed narrative "analepsis", "a narration of a story-event at a point in the text after later events have been told" (qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 46), a second, much more detailed description is provided



(32-35). The same visit is narrated twice from different perspectives; the narrator briefly mentions the visit, only to focus on it in more detail later. The multiplicity of temporal angles complicates the narrator's quest, indicating that there is no linear succession of events leading to a satisfactory closure. The passing mention of the incident is insufficient for the narrator, who decides to return to it in order to further explore its part in his identity construction. However, neither temporal condensation nor temporal expansion can point towards a successful conclusion. The narrator's arbitrary movement through shifting temporal frames is indicative of the elusiveness of his venture to establish an ethnic identity, and the novel's discontinuous temporality reflects the meandering patterns in which the narrator's quest exhausts itself.

Rather than following settled temporal patterns, the narrative is more concerned with the referential abilities of unstable time frames. Explicit temporal markers, such as "Gettin on 3 A.M." (70), enable the subversion of the story's temporal sequence in order to suit the exigencies of the narrative. Eakin argues that "no autobiography is merely chronological, for pure chronology is inevitably the symbol not only of order but of dissolution as well, the sheer unredeemed successiveness of ticking time that destroys life and meaning" (*Touching the World* 193). The artificiality of temporal signposts further disrupts narrative linearity; although "3 A.M." denotes a specific point in time, the concentration of the narrative upon this precise moment in effect initiates a temporality of dissolution that singles out this particular time-frame from the rest of the narrative. The repeated disturbance of the linearity of the temporal sequence of the narration reflects a fragmentation of meaning. Unable to contain meaning within clearly defined boundaries, Kerouac

upsets rules of causality, so as to communicate the deconstruction of the narrator's ethnic identity.

Eventually, the narrator comes to realize that he cannot attain the desired results "because Johnny Magee around the corner as anybody knows can, with any luck, find in Ireland that he's the descendant of the Morholt's King and so what?" (52). Later, he bitterly wonders: "who ever thought that in my quest for ancestors I'd end up in a bookie joint in Brest" (92), openly acknowledging the vacuous nature of his pursuit. The fact that his search takes him to a bookie joint parodies the narrator's initial purpose of tracing his aristocratic lineage. Finally, he openly admits: "my dreams of being an actual descendant of the Princes of Brittany are shattered" (112). In this light, proclamations like "the Little Prince" (54) and "the Prince of Brittany" (114) strike an ironic chord. The narrator has been looking for a solid marker of ethnic origin that would help him trace his genealogy; eventually he comes to realize that this is perpetually deferred. The narrator's insistence on tracing his lineage is particularly striking, considering that America has traditionally welcomed ethnic diversity, promoting the importance of individual effort over ethnic background. That Kerouac's narrative is driven by a desire to establish his ethnic origins therefore constitutes an ironic comment upon Cold War America's lingering preoccupation with race, already foregrounded in Kerouac's projections of otherness in previous chapters. The narrator of *Satori* seeks an ethnic identity outside America; he has to be dislocated in order to be able to safeguard his effective re-entry into the country. The hybridized nature of his identity gives rise to a number of complications, and the inconclusiveness of his search for origins reveals his marginal experience of ethnicity. In this context, the fact that he brings back to his mother a trivial Breton butter bucket as a souvenir (82) can be interpreted as an ironic gesture, and his quest now becomes

“adrift in the increasingly meaningless sea of ethnic signs and symbols” (Harney 377).

*Satori in Paris* abounds with records of the narrator’s temporal and spatial disorientation, another example being the hallucination that he hears somebody mention his name (109). Associating this with “a land of Druids and Witchcraft and Warlocks and Féeries” (109), the narrator introduces the uncanny into the narrative. The narrator’s ability to envelop himself in improvised fictions further points to the fabricated nature of his identity. Abandoning rigorous reasoning, he resorts to supernatural explanations, his aberrant thoughts exploding spatial and temporal coherence. Sequential time is interrupted again when the narrator remembers his father in a flashback: “I’ve seen that expression on my father’s face [...] but [...] when I walked out of that bar [...] that expression came over my own face” (70). Jones notes that in *Satori in Paris* there is an attempt “to understand the present in terms of the past”, even if this means having to conjure up the ghost of the father (254). In fact, the narrator explicitly refers to “an apparent elderly printer hurrying home from work or cardgame, maybe my father’s ghost” (*Satori* 74). The past metaphysically intrudes upon the present once more, anticipating Eakin’s argument that in autobiography “the past as past is never over and done with but is always in the process of being redefined by a constantly revisiting present” (*Touching the World* 209). The present re-assesses the past, and consequently re-shapes it by narrating it. This dynamic past-present interaction instigates a new unsettling temporality that complicates the narrator’s already problematic search for origins, as erratic and eccentric streams of consciousness deliver a mood of disintegration and disconnectedness.

The disruptive power of the father figure appears yet again as the narrator now focuses on literary, rather than biological, fathers. When a stream of consciousness passage leads up to references to Céline and Chateaubriand (66), we witness the narrator's attempt to establish connections with literary origins. His interest in such links is evocative of the Bloomian notion that "what impels poets to write is not so much the desire to reflect on the world as the desire to respond to and to challenge the voices of the dead" (Bennett and Royle 77). Given the narrator's inebriated state and general disorientation, however, the attempt can only be unsatisfactory, and his efforts to determine a literary identity through the association with the great writers of the past read more like a parody.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, the influence of the father figure upon the formation of the narrator's identity is powerful; the urgency to come closer to the image of the father (whether biological, literary, or more broadly conceived of in terms of "fatherland"), is suggestive of the narrator's craving for "the origin". Such an endeavour, however, ultimately leaves the narrator perplexed amidst collapsing temporal boundaries.

Not only is the narrator's quest destabilized by the inability to reach an origin, but it also becomes difficult to define the exact nature of the identity he wishes to trace. The French and American elements that the narrator identifies as major components of his ethnic identity are in constant tension, and he is unsure whether he should think of himself as predominantly American or Breton.<sup>13</sup> He initially takes pains to establish his Breton ancestry, and distinguishes himself from other Americans in Paris, reflecting on the dismal state of an American he sees in a restaurant, and

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<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Nicosia's suggestion that *Satori* is "the twentieth-century equivalent of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a great Middle English chivalric poem that Kerouac had read a year earlier" (660) strikes me as ironic. The only connection I see between the two is with reference to *Satori*'s mock-heroic tone.

<sup>13</sup> Similar confusion is expressed in *Desolation Angels* when the narrator, in an obscure and ambiguous statement, declares "I went off by myself, with my big rucksack, towards America, my home, my own bleak France" (354).

exposing the comic effect of two American sisters' efforts to buy oranges (38-40). However, despite this attempt to dissociate himself from his American background, the narrator also emphatically represents himself as an American, and furthermore, a tourist: "So how can an American tourist who doesn't speak French get around at all? Let alone me?" (31). Later he describes himself "as a New Yorker" (37), whereas earlier he had stated that he lives in Florida (11). Thus, even with regard to his American identity there is no fixed point of reference. The narrator's American persona is further outlined in phrases like: "looking like any decent American Boy in trouble" (69), "am a tourist" (76) and "it's not my fault, or that of any American tourist or even patriot, that the French refuse the responsibility of their explanations -" (85). Such images do not only conflict with his projections of French identity, but also bear witness to forceful tensions inherent in its American representations, themselves already complicated by the hybridized nature of American identity. Aware of the versatility of his American identity, the narrator further experiments with its linguistic potential: "Suffice it to say, when I got back to New York I had more fun talking in Brooklyn accents'n I ever had in me life and especially when I got back down South, whoosh, what a miracle are different languages" (46). American identity now becomes dependent on linguistic performance, and its shifting nature is again exposed.

The tension is further intensified as the synthesis of the narrator's various identities proves problematic; he interchangeably moves from one to the other, unable to decide which of these (already ambiguous) identities suits him most. This oscillation is further highlighted in the alternate use of French and English throughout the narration, for example when a large paragraph in French is followed by its lengthy English counterpart in a passage that spans almost two pages in length (63-4).

Alternation between French and English occurs again in the text when a French phrase is followed by its English translation in parentheses: “*Ey, weyondonc, pourquoi t’a peur que j’m’dégrise avec une ’tite biere?*’ (Hey, come on, how come you’re scared of me sobering up with a little beer?)” (80). At one instance the narrator even refuses to translate from the French for the English-speaking reader, in another effort to emphasize his French background: “I said something to him in French which is published in heaven, which I insist to print here only in French” (85). Such linguistic instability is suggestive of a more general tension in perceptions of ethnicity, which is further intensified by the narrator’s attempt to emphasize his Breton, as opposed to French, background. Breaking language down to the level of phonemes, he professes that Standard French language:

*has* really been changed by the influx of Germans, Jews and Arabs [...] and I also remind him [...] that in those days you said not “toi” or “moi” but like “twé” or “mwé” (as we still do in Quebec and in two days I heard it in Brittany) [...] François’ name *was* pronounced François and not Françwé for the simple reason that he spelled it Françoy, like the King is spelled Roy, and this has nothing to do with “oi” and if the King had ever heard it pronounced rouwé (rwé) he would not have invited you to the Versailles dance but given you a *roué* with a hood over his head to deal with your impertinent *cou*, or coup, and couped it right off and recouped you nothing but loss. (45-6)

Pitting Standard French against what he takes to be “generic” Breton, the narrator draws attention to a series of linguistic developments that undermine the

coherence of Standard French linguistic identity. Against the admittedly hybridized French language the narrator positions the allegedly pure Breton one. However, it is only a simulacrum of purity that he is projecting, and the clarity of the meaning of “Breton” is called into question when, after having been overwhelmed with information, he exclaims: “what the hell [...] everybody’s suddenly a Breton!” (93). The narrator momentarily expresses a belief in the “originary” nature of Breton identity, only to realize that he was, in fact, constructing an ethnic simulacrum which heavily problematizes any claims to “originality”. A brief history of the Brittany region in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* is revealing of substantial racial blending that casts doubt over the notion of a “pure” Breton identity:

The Celts are the first historically identifiable inhabitants of Brittany, but they probably intermingled with the earlier peoples [...] Conquered by Julius Caesar in 56 BC, the region became part of the Roman Empire as Armonica [...] After the Romans withdrew, Celts from Britain moved into the region to seek refuge from the Anglo-Saxon invaders of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries [...] Brittany became part of France when Anne, heir of Brittany, married two successive kings of France. (534)

Naturally, Breton language and ethnicity could not have remained unaffected by these historical transformations, which expose their hybrid nature.<sup>14</sup> The validity of the ethnic (and in particular, the Breton) simulacrum the narrator projects is heavily challenged, and the vacuity of his search for a coherent ethnic identity is exposed. An

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<sup>14</sup> *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* provides an account of the multitude of influences upon the Breton language (504).

integral ethnic identity cannot be attained, because it is constantly subjected to the Derridean notion of “supplementarity”. Derrida argues that “one cannot determine the center and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the center, which supplements it, taking the center’s place in its absence - this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always more” (“Structure” 99). Both Breton and Standard French are infused with a variety of new linguistic elements that are intended to compensate for the lack of an “original” centre. In this context coherence cannot be achieved, either due to an overabundance of linguistic traces or because these traces are never sufficient. In either case, the influx of novelty is never exhaustive; further supplementarity occurs and language remains perpetually unstable. It is a similar instability that characterizes the narrator’s national identity, which is always in need of completion, as a variety of, often conflicting, ethnic fragments is repeatedly called upon to make up for the *a priori* lack of a generic and pure national origin, itself an ideological construct.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the narrator’s initial claim that “this old name of mine [...] is just about three thousand years old and was never changed in all that time and who would change a name that simply means House (Ker), In the Field (Ouac)” (72), is subsequently contradicted by a reference to an alternative spelling: “why did the pilot pick old Keroach? (Keroac’h, early spelling hassle among my uncles)” (95).<sup>15</sup> These different versions also point to the instability of identity, which seems to be as susceptible to change as the various spellings of the narrator’s name. In an attempt to trace his origins, the narrator provides a detailed exposition of numerous variations on his name, evoking family and place names, and

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<sup>15</sup> In *Vanity of Duluoz*, there are further variations on the spelling of “Kerouac”, for example “Ker Roach” (187). Moreover, an alternative translation of “Kerouac” is offered; here it is explained as “Language of the House” (128, 257).



an assortment of “fatherlands” (73). In this context the importance of the etymology of the proper name is undermined, exposing the ironic overtones implied in the decision to name the narrator “Kerouac”. A poignant comment on notions of identity, the versatility of the proper name challenges the idea that a unified and stable ethnic identity can be achieved, and also questions the common critical assumption that the author Kerouac and his narrator’s persona can be taken as identical.

The proper name cannot be associated with a fixed signification, and its various linguistic substitutions forcefully introduce into the narrative:

the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre of origin, everything became discourse [...] that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida, “Structure” 91)

The variations on the name invalidate conceptions of “Kerouac” as a generic, original and independent identity; “Kerouac” only makes sense when defined against “Kernuak [...] Kériaval [...] Kermario, Kérlescant and Kérdouadec [...] Kéroual” (73), and “Keroach? (Keroac’h)” (95). Identity now can only be understood within a system of significations, which are also subject to variation. This constitutes a major point of rupture with the notion of a coherent ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is dispersed in an infinite play of signification, which, according to Derrida, came into force “at the moment when European culture [...] had been *dislocated*, driven from its

locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference” (“Structure” 93). If one were to seek such a moment in *Satori*, one would be tempted to position it in the narrator’s ancestors’ departure from France, speculating that the dislocation to which the “Kerouacs” have been subjected, both spatially and linguistically, has dissociated them from firm points of reference. However, such reasoning would be problematic in line with Derridean thought. I have already pointed out that the Breton/French languages, as individual expressions of European culture, are not free from external influences that have unsettled their referential authority. Therefore, it is more appropriate here to talk about a continuous, origin-less process, whereby the proper name, also conventionally a signifier of ethnic identity, is deprived of a fixed corresponding signified. This leaves us with a “structure of infinite referral in which there are only traces - traces prior to any entity of which they might be the trace” (Culler 99). In this context, the notion of identity is further destabilized, and the traditional function of the proper name is openly challenged. Culler argues that “effects of signature, traces of the proper name/signature in the text, produce a disappropriation while they appropriate” (192). The limitations of the narrator’s effort to use the proper name as license to appropriate a national identity, however, soon transpire. Bereft of even the illusion of a simulacrum of unity, “Kerouac” is left pending in an infinite play of substitutions of the proper name, and, consequently, of ethnic identity.

Although the narrator’s influences are largely American, he nonetheless still carries elements of the French-Canadian tradition he has been exposed to by his family. The narrator is both Jack Kerouac, the implied American author who goes to France, and Jean-Louis Lebris de K  rouac, the descendant of French immigrants; these already problematic identities are in constant tension, prohibiting the formation

of a coherent Franco-American identity. The hybridization of language reflects the more general hybridization of identity to the point where no pure elements can be singled out. In *Satori in Paris* the narrator is unable to reach a unified identity, because it is ultimately impossible to define its constituent parts; what ensues is “the disillusioned realization that the ethnîe he wanted to return to was gone. It existed mostly as rhetoric, his own rhetoric” (Harney 378). The collapse of the ethnic simulacrum emphasizes the vacuous nature of the search for an ethnic identity in *Satori*, and introduces a series of associations that problematize the concept of identity beyond ethnic considerations.

The constructedness of identity and its subsequent potential to be modified is further exposed when the narrator assumes the persona of “Duluoaz”, “a variation I invented just for fun in my writerly youth (to use as my name in my novels)” (101).<sup>16</sup> The elusiveness of identity becomes more striking as the narrator steps in and out of personas in free association:

THIS COWARDLY BRETON (ME) [...] this Kerouac who would be  
laughed at in Prince of Wales Land [...] this boastful, this prune, this  
rage and rake [...] “this trunk of humours” [...] this fear-of-death

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<sup>16</sup> In *Vanity of Duluoaz* it is the “Duluoaz” persona that seems to be taking over the narration (19, 28, 69, 156); although the narrator is known by the name “John”, he is at one point addressed as “Baron Jean Louis Duluoaz” (60), and he then assumes another fictional name: “Bob” (109). Moreover, on occasion “Kerouac” and “Duluoaz” are used almost interchangeably (12, 13, 139), and as one “Kerouac’h (‘Duluoaz’)” (186). To further complicate matters, “Duluoaz” is subject to different spellings (as “Kerouac” before it), and appears as “Dulouse”, “DuLouse” or “Du Louse” (43, 46, 94, 165, 184, 188, 196), “Duluoach” (145) and even “The Louse” (221). Moreover, the narrator is also nicknamed after the village drunkard, assuming the identity of “Zagg” (64, 100). On one occasion, he even arbitrarily calls himself “Little Pete” (169). Such conflation leads up to the narrator’s acknowledgement that “again I’ve failed in explaining myself” (167), echoing a similar inability expressed in *Desolation Angels*: “even I cant understand how to explain myself” (257). In *Big Sur* too the proper name is subject to variations, and shifts from “Duluoaz” (48) to “Ti Jean the Child” (24, 94), even blending into the persona of “Duluoaz and Pomeray, Duluomeray” (110). Moreover, in *Dr. Sax* the narrator alternates between his authorial persona and the character of “Jackie Duluoaz” (10), while he later refers to himself as “Jack Lewis” (83). The complications arising from such narrative practices are extensively discussed in the course of this chapter.

tumor [...] this runaway slave of football fields, this strikeouts artist and base thief [...] This, in short, scared and humbled [...] descendant of man. (77-78)<sup>17</sup>

Any claims to solid identity are further exploded, as an array of identities is laid in a paratactic order that suggests their interchangeability. This disorderly pastiche of identities is expressive of fragmentation. Despite the negativity implied in the narrator's realization that his identity has become a composite of fragments, he nonetheless does not hesitate to experiment with projections of identity for the purpose of stylistic exercises, and playfully describes himself as being "crazy as that raccoon in Big Sur Woods, or the sandpiper thereof, or any Olsky-Polsky Sky Bum, or Route Sixty Six Silly Elephant Eggplant Sycophant and with more to come" (75).

The playful tone of this utterance notwithstanding, the incoherence of these caricaturesque identities ultimately parodies the narrator's (admittedly illusory) quest

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<sup>17</sup> This quote is a far cry from Duluoz's aspirations in *Maggie Cassidy*, where he envisages himself as Maggie's "brother, husband, lover, raper [...] sleeper-with, feeler" (62). However, even here the sinister connotations of "raper" cannot be ignored. Further identity transformations appear in 1954: "I poor French Canadian Ti Jean become a big sophisticated hipster esthete in the homosexual arts, I, mutterer to myself in childhood French, I, Indian-head, I Mogloo, I the wild one, the 'wild boy,' I Claudius Brutus McGonigle Mckarroquack, hopper of freights, Skid Row habituee, railroad Buddhist, New England Modernist, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Storywriter, Crum, Krap, dope, divorcee, hype, type" (*Book of Sketches* 398). Another quotation in *Desolation Angels* revises this reasoning and anticipates *Satori*: the narrator instructs the reader to think of him as "a lecher, a ship-jumper, a loafer, a conner of older women, even of queers, an idiot, nay a drunken baby Indian when drinking - Got socked everywhere and never socked back (except when young tough football player) - In fact I dont even know *what* I was [...] In any case, a wondrous mess of contradictions [...] but more fit for Holy Russia of 19<sup>th</sup> Century than for this modern America" (258). Identity performance reaches new peaks in *Vanity of Duluoz*, when the narrator admits to being "a principal character now in the general drama of that summer" (206). Moreover, in *Big Sur* the performativity of identity is particularly striking when the narrator refers to "the image of myself as a writer" (43). His authorial claims are directly questioned when he places "author" in inverted commas (151), and his authorial identity is further undermined when he admits "I've been playing like a happy child with words words words in a big serious tragedy" (153). Kerouac problematizes the concept of identity early on, when in 1941 he states: "I'm Jack Kerouac the poet, the/ seaman, the scholar, the/ laborer, the newspaperman,/ the lover, the athlete,/ the flyer, the Lowellian?" (*Atop an Underwood* 163). The question mark at the end of the quotation is indicative of Kerouac's questioning of the validity of the various identities his narrator assumes, paving the way for his later and more complex negotiations of the notion of identity.

for identity. As the novel progresses identity construction becomes increasingly dependent on stylistic considerations, and at one instance the narrator and Ulysse Lebris start “a routine of talking like two overblown mayors or archbishops” (103), the narration of which is aimed at providing the reader with “a stylish reproduction of how we talked” (104). The narrator even refers to the Innkeeper of the Victor Hugo Inn as “Neal Cassady” in this blending of boundaries (83).<sup>18</sup> Identity thus becomes discontinuous and loses its power of referentiality.<sup>19</sup> In *Satori in Paris* it is not only

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<sup>18</sup> In one of many phrases pregnant with intertextuality in *Big Sur*, the narrator lists a number of fictional identities that he has attributed to Neal Cassady: “the fabled ‘Dean Moriarty’ - The name I give Cody in ‘On the Road’” (55).

<sup>19</sup> The problematization of identity is forcefully projected in *Vanity of Duluoz*, for example in the phrase: “You are not Jack Kerouac. There is no Jack Kerouac. His books were not even written” (12). “Kerouac” and “Duluoz” are used interchangeably in this passage (13); therefore, the negation of one identity signals the simultaneous questioning of the other. The narrator displays an awareness of the 1950s and 1960s interplay between “reality” and simulation, and comments on simulation practices that permit the assumption that “my family’s birth records and recorded origins [...] are not real at all [...] but inventions of my waking imagination, that I am not ‘I am’ but just a spy in somebody’s body” (14). The narrator of *Vanity of Duluoz* is particularly alert to his simulated surroundings, at a time when “people [...] pick out hallucinated images of their own contortion” (106), which they project “against the wall of what they call reality” (101). The narrator Kerouac chooses to employ at this late stage in his writing is in a position to question the reality of his “future ‘life’”, purposefully putting “life” in inverted commas (199). Similarly, the inverted commas in the narrator’s statement “I’ll go see what ‘reality’ really has in store for ‘me’ -” in *Desolation Angels* (140), further problematize such concepts as “reality” and “identity”. In *Big Sur* the narrator’s identity is cancelled out when he is told: “I’m not going to ask you if you’re Jack Duluoz because I know he wears a beard, can you tell me where I can find him, I want a real beatnik” (2). Later, the narrator directly acknowledges that “there has to be no reality anyway” (124). The impact of the media upon 1950s and 1960s America has been forceful, and proliferating simulations further undermine any stable sense of self the Kerouacian narrators might have entertained. Although at one instance in *Big Sur* the narrator pictures himself as “an automaton” (128), the passage to a more sophisticated stage of simulation is rapidly enacted. Hollywood’s pervasive power to construct simulated images is again brought to the fore when, while hopelessly trying to hitch a ride, the narrator speculates that drivers take him for “the Hollywood hitch hiker with the hidden gun” (38). The extent of the influence that media projections exercise is revealed when the narrator muses “I’m supposed to be the King of the Beatniks according to the newspapers” (88). In *Big Sur* the suggestion that one is expected to conform to one’s simulated image is further foregrounded when several characters visit the narrator on the assumption that he is “25 years old according to a mistake on a book jacket” (88). “The image of what the journalists want to say” (48) leads to conclusions that are based solely on appearances: “Because a lot of us don’t LOOK like writers” (100). Indeed, the narrator’s life seems to be fabricated by the media, as is revealed by an exchange between the narrator and his friend: “‘I heard you were eloping with Billie’ - ‘Who told you that?’ - ‘It was in the paper today’” (140). The extent to which simulation had affected Kerouac himself is revealed by his statement: “I can’t stand to meet anybody anymore. They talk to me like I wasn’t me” (qtd. in Dittman x).

“the referential basis of autobiography”, but identity itself that is “inherently unstable, an illusion produced by the rhetorical structure of language” (Eakin, *Fictions* 186).

Identity now depends on language and form, and identity construction is conditioned by textual performance.

### **“The Tale that’s Told”**

*Satori in Paris* engages with the tensions involved in identity formation and its dependence upon fictionality. From early on we learn that what will follow is “a tale” (10), foregrounding the performativity of the narration. Rimmon-Kenan maintains that “language can only imitate language” (109), and thus is an insufficient medium for the imitation of action. She explains the difference between the Platonic sense of diegesis, in which a narrator undertakes to tell a story, and mimesis, whereby the “poet tries to create the illusion that it is not he who speaks” (107), in an attempt to disguise his interference in the narration of events. However, language by default involves a modification of events, and representation unavoidably entails difference. Hence “all that a narrative can do is create an illusion, an effect, a semblance of mimesis, but it does so through diegesis (in the Platonic sense). The crucial distinction, therefore, is not between telling and showing, but between different degrees and kinds of telling” (Rimmon-Kenan 109). Therefore, proclamations such as: “this book’ll say” (*Satori* 11), “yet this book is to prove” (43) “how easy to joke about it as I scribble this 4,500 miles away safe at home in old Florida” (75), suggest that what is narrated is a fictional account. In *Satori* the narrator’s point of view indicates that only one subjective perspective on the story can be supplied, which, furthermore, itself repeatedly undermines its own coherence.

Brooks argues that “the desire to tell” acts as “the motor of *narration*” (53). It is the author’s propulsive urge to communicate that leads to the creation of a literary work. Brooks goes on to elaborate on “the desire to be heard, recognized, understood, which, never wholly satisfied or indeed satisfiable, continues to generate the desire to tell, the effort to enunciate a significant version of the life story in order to captivate a possible listener” (54). This is the case in *Satori in Paris*, where a succession of direct questions and comments invites the reader’s active participation in the narration. Early on, the narrator addresses his reader by asking “compris?” (9) and then pleads: “and dont get mad at me for writing at all” (11), appealing to the reader’s sympathy.<sup>20</sup> The reader, whose allegiance becomes particularly valuable, is addressed throughout the novel: “I’m telling you” (108), “Let me just brief you” (109), “what do you expect” (114). There is even one instance when, in an effort to communicate his divergence from the image of a typical tourist, the narrator wonders: “why on earth would you, or did you, expect me to go see the Eiffel Tower made of Bucky Buckmaster’s steel ribs and ozone?”(15). In doing so, however, he contradicts the American tourist stereotype that he elsewhere subscribes to, further destabilizing notions of identity.

The self-contradictory nature of the narrator’s reference to the Eiffel Tower points to the problems implicated in the “desire to tell”. Brooks maintains that this desire can never be wholly granted, inhibited as it is by the time lapse between the

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<sup>20</sup> *Vanity of Duluo* similarly abounds with references to the reader, and the entire novel is addressed to the narrator’s “wifey”: “Wifey [...] after I’ve given you a recitation of the troubles” (7). Direct addresses to his “wifey” persist in the text, for example in pages: 12, 23, 26, 44, 48, 53, 55, 62, 74, 86, 90, 186, 279, 280. Moreover, in page 206 he specifically appeals to his “dear wifey and dear reader”. Furthermore, the narrator of *Desolation Angels* (a text that, like *Vanity*, is also rich in self-referentiality) often pleads with his reader, in phrases like: “right? right, readers?” (199); similar appeals are also found in other parts of the text (see, for instance, pages 256, 257, 260, 263, 329). *Big Sur* likewise abounds with self-reflexive comments and instances in which the narrator turns to the reader in phrases like: “you’ll see” (34), “by seeing for yourself” (40), “yet you see I’ve already explained” (117). Here too the reader’s active agency is urgently sought: “you must admit” (29, 94) and “Help!” (71).

occurrence of events and their narration, and also by the application of readers' individual insights on the text. Thus, the communication of the narrator's perspective is deferred, and it would be perilous to maintain that the narrator's "desire to tell" can produce a series of uniform readings of the text. Brooks suggests that:

the performance of the narrative act is in itself transformatory, predicating the material of the life story in a changed context - subordinating all its verbs to the verb "I tell"- and thus most importantly soliciting the entry of a listener into relation with the story. The narrative act discovers, and makes use of, the intersubjective nature of language itself, medium for the exchange of narrative understandings. (60)

Foregrounding the close connection between text and reader, Rimmon-Kenan similarly argues that "just as the reader participates in the production of the text's meaning so the text shapes the reader" (118). Therefore, although *Satori in Paris* is based on an actual trip to France, the moment its narration is undertaken, it becomes "the tale that's told for no other reason but companionship" (10). The story now becomes contingent upon the narrator's subjective perceptions, and also the reader's equally subjective reception of them. Lacking self-sufficiency and anxiously depending upon the reader, the narrator is struggling to find points of reference against which his quest can be defined. The urgency of the appeal to the reader in *Satori* suggests that the narrator's search for identity cannot stand on its own. It can only be understood within a system of signification; its dependence upon multiple interpretative possibilities is indicative of the differential, and always deferred, nature



of the act of “telling”. Iser suggests that “it is precisely during our reading that the transitory nature of the illusion is revealed to the full” (198); the variety of interpretations the text lends itself to ultimately cancels out any claims to a single authoritative viewpoint.

One particular appeal to the reader is of special interest: “and let me ask you but one more question, reader: - Where else but in a book can you go back and catch what you missed, and not only that but savor it and keep it and shove it?” (98). Now the reader’s attention is directed to the book as a physical object containing the story that is being narrated. The reader is encouraged to move back and forth in the book and construct his/her own sequence of events. Iser points out that “while the reader is seeking a consistent pattern of the text, he is also uncovering other impulses which cannot be immediately integrated or will even resist final integration” (197). Called upon to position his/herself *vis-à-vis* the narrator’s pronouncements, the reader is, in effect, asked to actively participate in the novel’s discourse of identity construction. The narrator seeks the reader’s help in his search for identity, but the reader, aware of various other hidden meanings that linger on, cannot assemble the fragments so as to construct a coherent identity for the narrator, revealing the “inherently dynamic character” (Iser 189) of the novel.

Linearity is heavily disrupted when the reader is urged to move back and forth in the story at will, free to form his own interpretations and temporal associations. Eakin sees “memory as a palimpsest. When we think of a palimpsest, we envision a text whose content has been subject to different temporal accretions, to deliberate erasures and emendations, to overwritings and inadvertent survivals” (*Touching the World* 67). The reading experience of *Satori* becomes thus more challenging by the unrestricted temporal shifts that appear throughout, often fuelled by the narrator’s

excessive drinking: “I was getting real stoned drunk” (18), “getting drunk” (23), “I hit up on cognac neat again” (44), “high, drunk, wild” (62). As the story unfolds his drinking habit takes over, culminating in an eight-hour binge (107). The narrator’s thoughts are often erratic and disjointed, further foregrounding his lack of direction, and suggesting that even in its performative capacity the concept of identity is ambiguous, and conditional as it is upon endless temporal and logical disruptions, it is forever subject to *différance*. The elusiveness of identity is best communicated by the fragmented structure of the small episodic chapters.

### “Clickety Clack”

In his discussion of autobiographical accounts, Paul De Man comments on the illusory nature of reference and wonders whether, rather than seeking clear referents, we should approach the process of referencing as “something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?” (920-21). *Satori* is deeply concerned with the dynamics of referentiality and fiction. Although the text to an extent refers back to the events that took place during Kerouac’s visit to France, Kerouac is keen to emphasize its status as fiction, and to consequently expose the constructedness of the identity the narrator is seeking.

Thus, the onomatopoeic, almost childish, phrase “Clickety clack” (66) at the end of chapter 21 readily takes its place amidst a series of self-reflexive comments that expose the artificiality of the narrative and, consequently, of the identity formations conveyed through it. The appearance of postscripts in the text: “p.s.” (53)

and “P.S.” (104) further emphasizes the fictionality of the narration.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, “a dash of thought: - or hyphen: -” (103) is often preferred to a full stop, and sentences are abruptly broken off by the insertion of thoughts that comment on Franco-American identity. An amalgam of various elements that fail to form a coherent whole, this identity appears to always be left pending on a dash. Unity is denied the subject that depends on a hyphen; his identity is elusive, fragmented, marginal and postscripted.

Textual disruptions persist throughout *Satori*, and soon the narrator declares: “The fact of the matter is, (again that cliché, but we need signposts), me and M. Lebris talked a blue streak” (102). The narrator is aware that the very banality of the phrase he purposefully employs to uphold the narration in effect proleptizes its status as an effective signpost. He knows that this trite phrase cannot, ultimately, be used as a signpost for any creative endeavours; hence, the narration of the quest is structured around cyclical patterns. The Brittany events constitute a re-enactment of the narrator’s drunken ways in Paris, only heightened; instead of progression there is cyclical repetition and the novel ends in the manner it started, with a reference to Raymond Baillet. Eakin points out that “Repetition of the past is necessarily a supplement to it and never merely a mirror to it” (*Touching the World* 46). Past events are repeated in *Satori*, but with a difference: the events in Brittany supplement the Parisian ones, providing additional layers to the narrator’s search for identity. Their narration is thus the repetition of a repetition, and the quest for identity is now entangled in a series of narrative substitutions operating upon “Kerouac’s” circular memories.<sup>22</sup> Contrary to Pinette’s conviction that the narrator’s visit to Lebris is a

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<sup>21</sup> Postscripts can also be found in *Desolation Angels* (249, 272). In *Big Sur* there is even a footnote (26), and other explicatory markers are common as well: “i.e.” (94, 116, 170).

<sup>22</sup> Although *Big Sur* seems to rely more on “signposts” (31, 32, 34, 54), these are of a rather sinister quality, and similarly circular patterns are also discernible here: the second group visit to Big

climatic point (38),<sup>23</sup> I see here only circularity. Ironically, the visit is suggested and arranged by a bookie joint owner rather than the narrator himself (91-93), and, when the two men first meet, they “cant even get a word in edgewise” (99). Although they share the same name, there are no actual revelations concerning links between their genealogies, and no significant rapport is established. There seems to be no epiphany in the narrator’s visit to Ulysse Lebris, as Lebris is bed-ridden and unable to offer any substantial insight with regard to the narrator’s ancestry. The encounter results in an anti-climax, as, while enquiring about his French origins, the narrator is reminded of his American identity when Lebris’ daughter asks him for his autograph (101). Thus, even while on his visit, which is presumably the closest he can come to his French kin, his efforts to trace his ethnic origins remain inconclusive. Authorial intrusions and self-reflexive comments provide a structural background against which the quest for identity cannot progress smoothly; constantly interrupted, it becomes nebulously repetitious. Identity-become-performance validates the novel’s motto that “it aint watcha do/It’s the way atcha do it!” (54). The notion of identity is now further destabilized as identity construction becomes prey to the formal properties of a text where “anything you want to say” (19) is acceptable.

In *Satori in Paris* the quest for an ethnic identity does not yield the desired results, as “locked out of a fading ethnoculture, ridiculed by his own filiopietistic search, Kerouac experiences a rupture in ethnicity” (Harney 375). Perhaps more importantly, however, the concept of identity is itself problematized, as conventional notions of autobiography give way to a recognition of its performative nature.

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Sur seems to be a re-enactment of the first, the difference here being in the intensity of the narrator’s alcoholic suffering.

<sup>23</sup>Pinette’s original reads: “Le narrateur rencontre pour la première fois quelqu’un de sa parenté et la réunion est le point culminant du texte”.

Consequently, the initial claim that “as in an earlier autobiographical book, I’ll use my real name here” (8) bears no special weight, save that of irony. This is further emphasized by the realization that ultimately there is no point of origin to be traced, as “to reenter the house of origins would require the death of memory” (Eakin, *Touching the World* 229). Reconstruction of the past through the memories of the present is an unreliable procedure that tears one further away from any intention of reaching “the origin”, already an illusion amidst hybridization and blurred boundaries. In this context, the proper name loses its significance, allowing for further play upon the unstable notion of identity, as American, Breton, literary and fictionalized identities fuse and inconclusively wrestle.

The ambiguity as to the narrator’s ethnic origins leads to a more general crisis in identity construction. Fragmented form is employed to sustain the disintegration of the narrator’s quest within a system of disjointed memories, streams of consciousness and dishevelled thoughts. Language cannot bear claims to stability and purity, urgently communicating the dispersal of the notion of identity. In *Satori in Paris* the notion of identity is scrutinized, dissected and broken down. Foregrounding its performative nature, Kerouac exposes the vacuity of his narrator’s initial attempt to establish an ethnic identity.

In this context, the intense irony of the narrator’s claims to *satori* illumination becomes clear. The narrator of *Desolation Angels* anticipates this development when he defines his experience of “a complete turningabout” (perhaps another kind of *satori*) as “a complete nausea concerning experience in the world at large, a *revulsion*” (330). In *Big Sur* identity construction is also problematized, and the narrator is once more left swaying in the uncertainty of “empty space” (90). *Big Sur*’s initial anticipation of hope that “something good will come out of all things yet” (178)

is outright parodied by the feeling of emptiness the narrator experiences in *Vanity of Duluo* (214), and his subsequent acknowledgement that finally “nothing ever came of it” (279). It is in *Vanity of Duluo*, Kerouac’s ultimate novel,<sup>24</sup> that the experience of vacuity and lack of meaning are most forcibly expressed. Thus, the concluding lines of the novel “‘Here’s the chalice,’ and be sure there’s wine in it” (280) strike a strong ironic chord, which aptly concludes Kerouac’s negotiations of race, gender, spirituality, ethnicity and identity in an American post-war context of cultural acceleration.

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<sup>24</sup> I have deliberately excluded *Pic* here; although published later than *Vanity of Duluo*, it is mainly a reworking of previous material, and displays considerably different concerns.

## CONCLUSION

### KEROUAC AT THE WAKE OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This thesis has largely avoided an autobiographical approach to Kerouac's prose, adhering to my introductory assertion that the focus would lie on textual representation. Prompted by Tim Hunt's call for an exploration of "a postmodern Kerouac? A postcolonial Kerouac? [...] the Kerouac who intuited aspects of the postmodern and developed fictional strategies and projects that both express and engage our contemporary moment" (*Kerouac's Crooked Road* xxvi), I have advanced a deconstructive reading to investigate Kerouac's treatment of race, gender, speed, spirituality, ethnicity and identity, shedding light on aspects of Kerouac's prose that have hitherto not been adequately examined.

My thesis has engaged with the textual conflicts and tensions that arise from Kerouac's projections of identity and otherness. I have been particularly concerned with Kerouac's approach to the concept of simulation, his position towards Western representations of Eastern spirituality, his negotiation of the exotic other, and his narrative constructions of ethnicity and identity. The four chapters of the thesis are informed by an awareness of the historical and socio-political conditions of Kerouac's time, and address Kerouac's strategies of resistance to the established norms of Cold War America.

In my analysis I have argued that Kerouac's work displays perceptive insights into his times' literary and cultural processes, and is alert to the conflicted standpoints of his era. Although Kerouac has often been accused of lack of sensitivity, as for example has been the case with his portrayal of the ethnic other, such criticisms have failed to see the complexities of Kerouac's prose and the strategies of textual resistance he ultimately advances. Whether engaging with the overly political, as when he foregrounds the implications of speed in *On*

*the Road*, or whether focusing on more distinctly stylistic matters, as when he revises the traditional Zen *koan* form in *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's work criticizes his contemporaries' *faux pas* and advances alternative approaches to the established literary and cultural practices of his times.

Kerouac's problematization of the concept of "authenticity", and his discussion of the significance of acceleration at a time when the expansion of the media facilitated the proliferation of simulated images are especially relevant in our age, where responses to the televisation of wars and the acceleration of technology have ranged from Baudrillard's controversial treatise *The Gulf War did not Take Place* to Virilio's less radical, but equally interesting position that "The Kosovo War Took Place in Orbital Space." Moreover, Kerouac's spiritual explorations seem particularly appealing to New-Age concerns with spirituality. The constructions of the gendered racial other in Kerouac's prose expose the racial and gender stereotypes of mainstream post-war American culture while simultaneously subverting them, often anticipating the transition to the Civil Rights movement, echoes of which still linger to the present day. Finally, Kerouac's approach to ethnicity and identity is of specific interest in a contemporary context of flux and uncertainty where traditional modes of representation are questioned and conventional definitions of identity are severely challenged. The texts studied in this thesis often defy closure; moreover, Kerouac's extensive use of narrative strategies such as irony and parody points to the performative nature of identity and the constructedness of the concept of otherness. The narrator's realization that there is no final *satori* to be reached in the search for origins in *Satori in Paris*, although perhaps expressed with greater intensity at the final stages of Kerouac's writing, encapsulates a logic which generally underlies Kerouac's prose and bears familiar resonances upon our present moment.



Hrebeniak sees Kerouac's writing as a vigorous alternative to "media commodifications of the arts and of business appropriations of the word 'creative' to legitimize internalized consumerism" (259). Perhaps this can to an extent account for the plethora of Kerouac and Beat-related events, which have been inspired by and in turn further encourage new approaches to Kerouac. This thesis has undertaken such an approach, exploring Kerouac's engagement with the postmodern sensibility. Although in my study I have tried to include more recent publications alongside the better-known corpus of Kerouac's work, and have concentrated on a selection of texts that I feel best exemplifies his proto-deconstructionist takes on literature, my work by no means claims to be exhaustive, and other prose texts, as well as Kerouac's poetry and drama, merit further analysis. Similarly, the Kerouac manuscripts housed at the Berg Collection in New York Public Library offer scope for new discoveries. As recent scholarship on these archives has indicated, the recourse to this, previously unavailable wealth of material leads to novel evaluations of Kerouac's writing, and the more sustained literary comparisons it allows for open the way for a more informed positioning of Kerouac's work within the American literary tradition. At the same time, the manuscripts provide the opportunity for further deconstructive readings, as recent textual scholarship on the Scroll manuscript of *On the Road* and its numerous drafts indicates. It is this ability to converse with contemporary literary and cultural developments and to stimulate popular and critical interest for over half a century that best illustrates the quality of Kerouac's writing.

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