

“BIG EMPTY NEGROES” AND “GAY, EXCITING” MEXICANS: RECONTEXTUALIZING FELLAHEEN IDENTITIES IN JACK KEROUAC’S *ON THE ROAD*

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Introduction

Upon its first publication in 1957, *On the Road* marked Jack Kerouac’s rise to fame, and the novel continues to bear significant aesthetic and cultural resonances today. The story 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 around *On the Road* has it that the novel was written in three weeks, specifically “between April 2 and April 22 [1951]” (D. Brinkley 2004: xxiii).¹ However, it is in fact the outcome of experiences that had been building up for years. The fact that Kerouac shifted through various narrators and a host of characters and titles before deciding upon which he would use in the text published in 1957 is indicative of his numerous experimentations with narrative technique.²

The multiple changes in character names and draft titles are suggestive of the fluidity of the process of composition. The distinct typescripts of *On the Road* reflect different stages in Kerouac’s compositional technique. 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” (2008: 112). According to Theado it was the second typescript that Kerouac marketed to “Harcourt, Brace, and thus to the professional publishing industry” (2009: 23). Kerouac subsequently wrote the third typescript in late 1953 and 1954 and added to it in the late fall of 1955 and 1956”. The third typescript included emendations that would safeguard the text from legal issues (Gewirtz 2008: 122).

A study of the typescripts of *On the Road* confirms that the text published in 1957 is far from being the “authoritative” version of the novel. The three typescripts demonstrate that *On the Road* is the result of a continuous process of revision and rewriting that refutes claims to one “authentic” text. *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 a lack of stability amidst rapid transformations in the cultural milieu of Cold War America.

Although the composition of *On the Road* admittedly bears the cultural influences of the late forties,³ the 1957 text also reflects in many ways 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 2001: 71). Moreover, of exceptional importance is 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 moments 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. Those years were also marked by a large-scale hysteria about communism, most vehemently articulated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. This discourse against possible contamination from an ‘alien’, infectious body spread widely and led to a frantic nuclear arms race focused on fear of a nuclear attack. Ligairi notes that the image of the atomic bomb became an object of mass consumption (2009: 140), nurturing a simulated Cold War *threat*, when the probability of a disastrous war breaking out was in fact minimal. Artistic representations followed in the same vein, with the production of a multitude of horror and science fiction films which sustained this fear of contamination and impending doom, ultimately assisting social and political practices that “constructed and came to believe in an image of a world that did not exist” (A. Brinkley 2001: 72). My article aims to explore the ways in which Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are influenced by such practices, and to examine the extent to which,

through their construction of simulated images, they reproduce the dominant discourses of the society that spawned them.

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 television, *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”, he 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.⁴ 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 (1983: 11).⁵

Baudrillard, in other words, believes that the process of simulation perpetuates itself 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” (1983: 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 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” (1983: 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” (1983: 146). Thus, contemporary society is a series of reproductions, not unlike the empty simulations that Kerouac’s characters construct in *On the Road*. My article will look at formations of identity and conceptions of race and gender in this context. I will question what often seems to be an articulation of racial and gendered discourse, and I will investigate the subtle ways in which Kerouac’s narrative technique introduces a criticism of racially biased and chauvinist attitudes of the fifties. My discussion will focus on the representation of Fellaheen identities in *On the Road*, addressing the numerous thematic, ideological and narrative complexities they give rise to in the context of the changing yet still considerably conservative Cold War America.

The Fellaheen

The term Fellaheen occurs repeatedly in *On the Road*.⁶ It is the plural form of “fella”, which denotes “a peasant or agricultural laborer in an Arab country (as Egypt)” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). 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.⁷ Whilst the Beats saw the Spenglerian conceptualization of the downfall of the West as comparable to the spiritual decline of consumerist, materialistic America at the time, Spengler’s predictions of downfall and subsequent rebirth also fuelled their optimism about the possibility of change. However, the Spenglerian notion of the Fellaheen differs significantly from Sal Paradise’s interpretation of the term in *On the Road*:

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. (2000: 255-6)

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John Lardas argues that the depiction of the Fellaheen in the novel serves to project the “search for authenticity onto a racial other” (2001: 185). Such a claim is not without complications, however, as in spite of Sal’s conception of the Fellaheen in terms of race in *On the Road*, there is a poignant failure to acknowledge the distinct qualities of each race and individual, and the term “Fellahin Indians” is used indiscriminately to refer to people of different ethnic groups whether Asian, African, South-American or other. Tearing them away from their historical and social context, Sal places his Fellaheen “in the desert of ‘history’” (256). They seem to be in a perpetual primitive present and are endowed with a primordial quality, reaching back to “where Adam was suckled” (256). The Fellaheen are thus associated with the concept of origins, and they are portrayed as the source of human life, reaching back to the primal man, Adam. 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 permanence that is suggested by the Fellaheen image is intended to compensate for Sal’s destitution, something 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. Sal’s difficulty in attaining an *estia*⁸ brings out the complications inherent in his perception of “the origin”, and problematizes his association of the Fellaheen with this concept, illustrating the tension between the alleged “authenticity” of the Fellaheen and the empty simulacra Sal constructs.

“Wishing I Were a Negro”

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Phrases like “the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (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 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. At the time *On the Road* was published, African-American writers were protesting strongly 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. Richardson 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’” (2001: 225). However, rather than hastily subscribing to such a reading, a closer look at the text soon 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.

58 The apparent problems inherent in 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" (Kerouac 2000: 87). Sal speaks from a privileged point of view that allows him to appropriate history at will. 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. Lisle 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" (1999: 10). Historical considerations notwithstanding, Sal's tendency to romanticize becomes all the more forceful through the particular register employed to describe the African-American couple. The Fellaheen seem to be highly problematic nostalgic simulations of an earlier era producing an image that is historically inaccurate; it does not correspond to an actual situation of the past, and it 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 as he romanticizes an era of slavery. The African-Americans are not viewed objectively as poor, oppressed and exploited people. Rather, they are modelled upon a misconceived image of a past situation and are invested with an unlikely meekness and placidity.

The constructedness of Sal's African-American Fellaheen image has given rise to much critical discussion; Hebdige, for instance, has noted that Kerouac "carried the idealization of Negro culture to almost ludicrous extremes" (1979: 48), and Holton has similarly discussed Sal's "romantic pastoralism" (1999: 62). Divesting the African-Americans of their actual historical and social contexts, Sal portrays them as one-dimensional, not fully developed characters. He subsequently goes on to contextualize them anew in the African-American image that was largely shaped by minstrel shows and mid-century Hollywood films and their (mostly derogatory) portrayal of African-Americans. Having his narrator reproduce such cultural trends, Kerouac thus exposes the racially biased ideas that were shared even by members of the counterculture; Sal constructs his Fellaheen so as to fit into simulated images which conform to a dominant white ideology that wants the racial other subordinated and controlled.

The credibility of the simulation here is so weak however that Kerouac redresses the negative impact of Sal's comments and soon has him praying for a better future for these people (2000: 87). Thus, although Sal gladly participates in the

act of cotton-picking despite the fact that his fingertips bleed because of it, and shortly after muses “I thought I had found my life’s work”, 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 Swartz’s argument that such descriptions of African-Americans constitute a symbolic slap in the face of traditional America and represent a form of ‘resistance’ (1999: 86-87). Kerouac undercuts Sal’s romanticized perceptions with a sharp edge of irony, laying bare Sal’s confusion, and it transpires that Sal’s ethnic simulacra are finally only vacuous images.

The simulated nature of Sal’s conceptualizations of race is further exemplified in his professed ability to move 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 “original” quality 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” (2007: 83). In thus doing, however, Sal merely provides an image of what he thinks an African-American should be like, and then tries to cast himself in the same, conveniently happy and exciting simulacrum. Hill exposes the limitations of the narrator’s adopted practice of blackface: “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” (2005: 146); Sal can only stretch his identification to the occasional performance of negritude: “*like an old African-American cotton-picker*” (Kerouac 2000: 88; my italics) or *the expression of the desire* to reach towards African-American identity. Obviously, Sal cannot resemble an old African-American worker; the simulation implied in his conception of the African-American image, his more privileged social condition, and, on a physical level, the mere colour of his skin, act as firmly constraining barriers. Although the narrator expresses a yearning for identification with the African-American Fellaheen, he tries to construct them according to his social training in the ways of the western world, and his subsequent performance of African-American identity is similarly enacted within the framework of dominant white discourse. Sal constantly misses the fact that what he wants to identify with is simulated images, which are, moreover, based upon white culture’s more hegemonic nuances. It is this tension that he 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 efforts to identify with the 'original' quality of the Fellaheen, as his identity dissolves amidst layers of simulation. Through the reproduction of the mainstream ideology of Cold War America, Kerouac lays 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. A similar narrative pattern can be detected when the focus shifts to the other major ethnic group in the novel, as the Mexican Fellaheen image is shaped by the same social discourses that condition the representation of African-Americans.

"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 Mexican Fellaheen lifestyle, but it is not before long that the particularity of his perceptions is exposed. The narrator's idealization of the Mexican Fellaheen is vividly manifested in his remarkable disregard for their actual way of life. 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. Sal 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. *Mañana* translates as "tomorrow", "future" and "morning", but there is no indication in the novel that the Fellaheen future will improve; therefore, the positive connotations of *mañana* only hold for Sal himself. It is this idealized image that Sal Paradise wishes to believe in, sanctioning the simulacrum of a 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" (1989: 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. His erroneous translation 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 a more 'original' Fellaheen mode of existence 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 made possible 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” (1998: 81). The narrator unwittingly reproduces Cold War mentality: with the same ease that language was manipulated in Kerouac’s times to suit a policy of containment, Sal displaces the actual meaning of *mañana* to stand for “Heaven”. In order to create his ideal “Paradise”, Sal Paradise twists language and transfers meanings, in the same way that Kerouac’s contemporaries did.

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). However, Sal Paradise is not a Mexican; hence, he cannot possibly offer an exact reproduction of this dialect, and merely manages a simulation. Interestingly, the Fellaheen dialect deviates from Standard English grammatically and lexically. Whereas this divergence from white language can be taken as an affirmation of the power of the Fellaheen to adjust the use of 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. 1989: 7). Cleverly, Kerouac does not allow Sal a ‘white’ rendition of Fellaheen language; rather, Sal attempts to reproduce the dialect as he perceives it. Filtering it through his own conception of what it should be like, Sal wants to appropriate, and then master, Fellaheen speech. Language thus becomes another tool for the textual construction of simulacra, which not only behave according to Sal’s standardized image of them, but now speak in the same manner as well. When Sal encounters the Fellaheen in their own land, he realizes: “It was hard to come around without a 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; simulation becomes overwhelming and causes complications that expose Sal and Dean’s inadequacy to live up to their simulated constructions.

The problems associated with Sal and Dean’s Fellaheen are further revealed 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 exoticism of the Fellaheen that his perception is affected. Such utterances ultimately bring up the problematic nature of Sal’s identification with the Mexican Fellaheen in his bold assertion: “we Mexicans” (88), and serve 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. Whilst he emphasizes his conception of himself as a Mexican: “they thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am” (88),⁹ and also refers to Terry’s child as his “baby boy” (85), the assumption of this role of surrogate father to the Fellaheen child is only passing. Before long Sal has no qualms about abandoning his adopted son, thus exposing the uneven terms on which the identification is made. 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. After his flirtations with the African-American image, he now goes on to cast himself in a Mexican image, turning himself into a simulacrum that fits into the racialized projections that Cold War culture has established. There is a significant degree of manipulation involved in Sal’s approach to the Fellaheen, which further underscores the problems implicit in his desire to reach towards an ‘original’ quality through the assumption of a Mexican identity.

Sal’s affinities with the Fellaheen are not exhausted in his attempts to identify with Mexicans and African-Americans, 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” (163-164). 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” (2002: 96). The use of inverted commas around ‘white man’ validates her viewpoint, as it acts as a marker of the author’s awareness of the constructedness of ‘white male’ identity. It is white social structures that dictate the fabrication of Fellaheen images, and although the narrator expresses the desire to discard his white persona in favor 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. 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. Although Sal light-heartedly unites all his Fellaheen under the rubric of racial otherness, and is particularly concerned with safeguarding his status as a member of the dominant white masculine order, one should not overlook the poignant differences between such diverse ethnicities. Sal's tendency to construct ethnic simulacra perpetuates throughout the novel, and further complications arise when the focus shifts to the gendered manifestations of the racial other.

“Teresa, or Terry”

The narrator'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 alone serves to unsettle the narrator's idealizations of the Fellaheen. Although Sal admits that his suspicions were “paranoiac” and “a 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 1983: 63). The novelty in the romantic affair with Terry is that she is a Mexican woman, and hence qualifies as the exotic other. 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” (1994: 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 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” (76). Such imagery suggests that she is perceived more as an accommodating doll than a fully developed character.

When Sal is cotton-picking, Terry takes her son and goes to help him (87), and later she offers to support him, while he would “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. Wishing to leave no space for disappointment, Sal constructs Terry’s image in a way that satisfies his urge to dominate.

Even when he decides to abandon her, Terry seems passively resigned to the situation (91). In a cruel gesture that refuses to grant any complexity to her already flat portrayal, Sal guiltlessly departs: “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). Sal refuses to introduce the Fellaheen into the mainstream as he is highly aware of the challenge that this would pose to his society, and unable to keep his white identity on hold for longer, he resorts to his middle-class background for assistance. 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” (2001: 13). It is exactly this perception of exoticism that may 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. Sal needs to keep contained the potential threat that the margins pose to his “white ambitions”, and therefore chooses to abandon “a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley” (164), not managing to finally fully transgress the established social constraints of his times.¹⁰ The Fellaheen woman ceases to be interesting to the white male once she has been conquered. The affair with Terry was only an escapade for the narrator, who admits that he was merely “adventuring in the crazy American night” (91) ; his masculinity affirmed in his knowledge that he has colonized Terry, he is subsequently anxious “to get home” (94), back to his old life.

“For She Was the Queen”

Colonization operates on a twofold axis for 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. 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” (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”.¹¹ 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 the use of the Spanish language here also 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 woman (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 an exercise 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 2002: 99). Sal chooses to “buy señorita” because he cannot risk having his masculinity placed under threat in the unknown land. In this exotic setting, one woman cannot provide enough confirmation for Sal, and the narrator goes to the place where the threat of rejection is minimized: the brothel. The strange Fellaheen land, lacking the security that his familiar America offers him, is the one place where 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.¹²

The white men see the Fellaheen women in the brothel as largely interchangeable: “Dean and Stan switched the girls they’d had before” (264). The only girl that the narrator specifically mentions is referred to as “Venezuela” (265). This woman is denied 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” (2001: 27). The Fellaheen prostitutes are deemed to be a collective entity existing to give satisfaction to Sal and his friends; 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.¹³ 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 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” (in Huggan 2001: 88). Bhabha’s statement sheds light on the prostitutes’ practice of turning over glasses so as to make the whites pay more for drinks (Kerouac 2000: 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 indulges in images of exoticism, sensuality and licentiousness. However, the ethnic subjects fight back, and put on a simulated performance of their own; although seemingly accommodating and fitting into the images projected upon them, they are, in fact, opposed to them. 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.

There are multiple layers operating in the simulation that is the brothel scene, of which the novel’s main characters remain largely unaware. Sal and Dean force their colonial gaze upon ethnic women, taking no heed of the fact that they are reproducing simulated images dictated by the social exigencies of white masculine

assertion. Nevertheless, the female subjects resist, as they do not conform to their assigned images. In this context of controlled sensuality, any prospect of substantial romance strikes an ironic chord; the possibility of a fulfilling relationship with the Fellaheen woman is negated, as Sal’s interaction with the Fellaheen is considerably biased and shaped according to mainstream Cold War America’s expectations.

Conclusion

Eventually Sal and his friends leave the brothel in the same way they entered it: like colonizers, using the power of money to dominate. As with Terry before, Sal again now departs 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 declares: “So much ahead of us, man, it won’t make any difference” (265). The Fellaheen land is projected as a locus of pleasure, and the images of the Fellaheen are formed in such a way as to accommodate a predominantly white male discourse that sees them, at best, as entertaining diversions.

Sal and Dean’s hegemonic attitude is also suggested by the transience of their journey. When they are satisfied that they have fathomed and subjugated the exotic, it is no longer interesting, and Sal and Dean eventually opt out. Having taken what they wanted, they ride their car and rapidly exit the Fellaheen landscape. However, the series of textual tensions, ironies and parodies that their attitude gives rise to serves to question the validity of their practices, illuminating heretofore neglected aspects of the novel. Baudrillard’s theory of simulation sheds new light on Kerouac’s negotiations of identity and race. Foregrounding the context of flux and uncertainty against which the characters’ travels take place, Kerouac demonstrates that authenticity is an elusive concept. The tensions that ensue expose the problematic nature of the prevalent racial and gender stereotypes that Kerouac’s characters reproduce, forming a forceful criticism on Cold War America’s racially biased and gendered discourses. The introduction of acts of resistance in the narrative calls for the need to reassess mainstream ideologies, exposing their absurdity. Positioning his narrative in the sociohistorical context of the rapidly changing mid-century America, Kerouac reveals the inadequacy and meaninglessness of established prejudices. Parodying the legitimacy of the mass media’s reproduction of racialized images and the subsequent misperceptions and (mal)formations of identity arising thereof, Kerouac ultimately exposes their vacuity.

Notes

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

². Both Cunnell (2007: 6) and Gewirtz (2008: 75) refer to the "*Ray Smith Novel of Fall 1948*", of which Ray Smith is the narrator-protagonist. In his notes dated 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 (D. Brinkley 2004: 409-410). Gewirtz (2008: 83-4, 90) and Cunnell (2007: 17) mention further additions and changes to the character list. The novel's title underwent a similar process, as Kerouac "considered almost one hundred titles for *On the Road*" (Gewirtz 2008: 100). Cunnell (2007: 10, 13, 18, 20, 27, 40, 43) and Gewirtz (2008: 94, 98, 99, 102) provide extensive lists.

³. 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" (2006: 102).

⁴. 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" (1983: 84).

⁵. 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" (2000: 16).

⁶. 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" (2000: 89, 255), in the Scroll version he opts for "Fellaheen" (2007: 199, 381), a spelling he prefers also in *Selected Letters 1940-1956* (1995: 347), and throughout the *Book of Sketches*. This spelling is also the one preferred in *Dr. Sax* (2001: 42, 63, 87).

⁷. In his work *The Decline of the West*, 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. 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" (1980: 2: 170-171). The Fellaheen are the life forms that survive the downfall of a Culture, and are conceived of as the leftovers of a Civilization.

⁸. The term *estia* is here used to denote "home", "house", "one's dwelling place".

⁹. This identification is stronger in the Scroll version, which reads: "They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and I am" (2007: 198).

¹⁰. Ehrenreich notes that even among white individuals there were 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" (1983: 55). The Beats soon articulated their defiance of what they perceived as emasculating conformity, "yet their adventure did not include women, except, perhaps as 'experiences' that men might have" (1983: 171). Kerouac's major characters are thus to a large extent modelled upon patterns of assertive masculinity; in this context, ethnic

women are liable to receive even worse treatment on account of their race.

¹¹. 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” (2001: 63)

and, although in their own land Sal and Dean are not wealthy, in the Fellaheen land they can flaunt their financial superiority.

¹². American politics during the Korean War also come to mind here.

¹³. Colonizing the prostitute who comes from Venezuela can be seen as a metaphor for colonizing Venezuela itself.

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Received: 4 December 2010

Revised version: 21 March 2011