

**“SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE I KNEW THERE’D BE GIRLS, VISIONS, EVERYTHING”:  
ON *THE ROAD* AS BOOK OF THE BEAT**

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Rereading Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) some 55 years later poses a challenge. On the one hand, this iconic narrative of the (white) American (male) Fifties counterculture is one of the best-known literary works of the Beat movement. It is also part of the quintessential American “road” tradition, from Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the counterculture road movie *par excellence*, Dennis Hopper’s *Easy Rider* (1969).<sup>1</sup> The very fact that Walter Salles, who directed *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), the excellent road movie/biopic about *the* revolutionary icon of the 1960s, Che Guevara, has just wrapped up an adaptation of *OR*<sup>2</sup> is, in itself, a statement of *OR*’s enduring aura. On the other hand, almost everything else about *OR* is in dispute: its literary merit; its naivety; its ideological blind spots concerning gender, race, and class. Harold Bloom actually introduced a 2004 collection of articles in his *Modern Interpretations* series with the devastating assessment “I can locate no literary value whatsoever in *OR*” and with a lethal comparison between the Beats and their poetic model, Walt Whitman, “whose poems may *look* easy, but actually are superbly difficult,” whereas, Bloom claims, “*OR* and *Howl* look easy, and *are* easy, self-indulgent evasions of the American quest for identity” (Bloom 2). As the devil advocate’s for *OR*, I shall analyze how beyond its status as “document of the counterculture” of the late fifties, it is a literary “book of the beat” that searches for a spontaneous, authentic language and style, a “jazz” or “bop” aesthetic to transcribe its own quest for the elusive “IT” of ecstasy. I shall try to argue that rather than an “evasion of the quest for American identity” *OR* is an attempt to redefine American identity, even if it is through evasion (*tuning in, dropping out*, and driving off and away) and even if it *is* evasively. Ultimately, the analysis will focus on the ideological and psychological blind spots of the narrative, its idealizations and denials, which from a post-seventies perspective, ironically make it “pre-countercultural” where its discourse on gender and “race” are concerned.

**The book’s genre and its reception:**

*OR* consists of a series of trips across the USA the first-person narrator (Sal) takes as a disciple of, and then as a side-kick to, a young “outlaw” figure named Dean Moriarty (trips taken between 1947 and 1950). It can be read as a *Bildungsroman* and an “alternate lifestyle” manifesto, as a quest for America and for identity, as an unfolding spiritual and sensual “trip,” in the multiple, countercultural, meanings of the term: *sex, drugs, and... bop*. This aspect mesmerized reviewers when the book came out, some six years after Kerouac had first typed it

<sup>1</sup> One can read a great many contemporary road movies as a rewriting, homage or critique of these countercultural works—Ridley Scott’s road movie *Thelma & Louise* (1991) as a deliberate shifting of focus to women’s quest for liberation, or Sean Penn’s *Into The Wild* (2007) as an exploration of a radical quest for nature rather than the road (an introverted, rather than extroverted version of the road as quest for identity, too).

<sup>2</sup> To be released in 2012.

over a single period of three weeks in 1951, high on caffeine and Benzedrine, on a single teletype roll of paper, in just one uninterrupted (paragraph-less) “go.”<sup>3</sup> According to which aspect of the trips one highlights, the genre of the narrative changes, but it was obviously intended among other things as a *roman à clef* on Sal Paradise’s (a.k.a. Jack Kerouac’s) trips across the USA with Dean Moriarty (a.k.a. Neal Cassady), and of their “wild” experiences on the road, in a rejection of the Fifties conventionality. This early form of white male counterculture that Kerouac called “Beat,” Norman Mailer, in his 1957 essay “The White Negro,”<sup>4</sup> called “hipster” or “White Negro” because of the centrality of African-American music and jazz in particular (Coltrane, not Armstrong) in hipster and Beat culture. Within this reading of *OR* as a manifesto of sorts, Dean/Neal is an allegorical figure for the counterculture itself: he is its prophet, and Sal/Jack, his disciple: “Dean is the novel. Sal could spend his entire life traveling across the country, but without Dean, this travel could not be a transcendence. [...] Dean literally is the spirit of the text, just as Neal Cassady is the spirit of the counterculture” (Swartz 174).

From the start, Kerouac puts the emphasis on a select circle of Bohemian friends, an intellectual *milieu* scattered and reuniting from NYC to Denver and San Francisco, (and sometimes, New Orleans or Detroit), often listing names in a form of name-dropping (38). For insiders/readers of the counterculture (then or now) the feeling of being part of the community of Beats hinged on the *roman à clef* aspect of recognizing Carlo Marx as Allen Ginsberg, Old Bull Lee as William Burroughs, (etc). Despite the phrase “a new beat generation that I was slowly joining” (54)—Kerouac/Sal is defining not so much an *entire* generation, as the artists and visionaries of his generation, as Ginsberg had done in his landmark poem “Howl” (first performed in October 1955), which famously began with the lines:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving  
hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry  
fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the  
starry dynamo in the machinery of night [...]

While *OR* may seem more happily Dionysian and less apocalyptic at first, it too makes it clear that the sublime aspect of *beatness* (“angelheaded hipsters”) lies precisely in the Beats’ “abjection” from mainstream white middle-class America; hence the expression “sordid hipsters” (54) used in a laudatory way.

### **The multiple meanings of “beat”**

Indeed, Sal admires Dean’s transgressive lifestyle even in its most sordid aspects, just as he romanticizes the *junkie* body: “[Old Bull Lee’s] woesome arm with the thousand holes” (148).

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<sup>3</sup> For more background information, consult this NPR link on Kerouac’s overnight rise from obscurity to fame, excerpts from reviews, from *OR*, a photo of the original scroll, photos of Kerouac and Cassady, etc:

<http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/ontheroad/>

Fans will also enjoy this site: <http://www.dharmabeat.com/kerouac.html>

<sup>4</sup> For the full text, please consult: <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/online.php?id=26>

Although “beat,” as we shall see, *also* means rhythm, bop, jazz, the beat of the pulse and of desire, it continues to mean “worn-down,” “beaten-up,” throughout the narrative. When Sal says that in the all-night movie house he goes to on Skid Row, Detroit—one of the many places he calls “the end of the road”—that “the beater solid core of dregs [of America] could not better be gathered” (244), the equivalency of “beater” and “better” is implicit despite the nightmarish vision of their being cleaned out in the morning like so much trash.<sup>5</sup> This side of “beatness” is embodied by the hobo, a figure idealized by Sal, who thinks of himself as a contemporary Huck Finn.<sup>6</sup> Sal is not interested in making the hobo a *political* figure;<sup>7</sup> he turns him into the literary canvas upon which he can project a “mystic” romanticization of beatness, denying extreme poverty and marginalization rather than analyzing it—for instance, he describes one such destitute drifter, Mississippi Gene, who has undoubtedly never heard of Buddhism, as being in a “Buddhistic trance” (30), in an Orientalist and mystical “rewriting” of his actual condition and identity.

This is part of a wider issue: Sal’s romanticizing of the status of non-whites, in a form of neo-colonial primitivism and rather striking denial of the real patterns of racial discrimination prevalent in the segregated fifties. Bemoaning the white man’s status (180) goes hand in hand with the naïve, stereotyped and paternalistic depiction of Blacks and Mexicans alike (97). This *mise en abyme* of a dubious exoticism fulfills two functions: derealization of the actual *beatness* in the sense of forced marginality or poverty: in Mexico, Sal projects his fantasies of Egyptians, and of “Arabian Dreams” onto the destitute Mexicans (284, 289) and only belatedly notes “Mexicans are poor” (290). This is part literary fantasy—the Arabian Nights imagery calls up the idea of the never-ending tale, just as the Road is ending for Sal—but these exotic figures are also often freaks: a Mexican midget (273) brings up images of the carnival (217). Not the ordinary circus which Sal sees as a fraud (23), but a mystical alliance with the “freak” as saintly. Dean always identifies the “abnormal” as saintly—in an episode where he and Sal meet a boy with a crippled hand, Dean calls him “sweet” (164). The narrative calls upon us to wonder what Dean *is*: a holy fool, a prophet, an embodiment of freedom itself, or a traumatized, wounded character who indirectly recognizes his mirror-images in all of broken, deformed, impoverished forms of humanity?

This is due to “beat” *simultaneously* meaning “beatific,” in a symbiosis of a Westernized form of Buddhism and a Catholic ideas of saintliness and references to Christ (from Part Two onwards): Dean is defined, in emphatic block letters, mimicking revelation, as “BEAT—the root, the soul of Beatific” (195). This etymology, which “roots” *beat* within *beatific*, is part of the broader canvas of both trip and narrative as mystic quest, for Dean (but also, for Sal): “ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being.” The two meanings—“ragged” or beatific, “sordid” or “sublime,” sensual or spiritual—are thus absolutely intertwined. Sal insists that the road is not merely about adventure, but about holy transgression—outlawed behavior as a quest for a higher plane of spirituality: Dean is perceived, in an epiphany, as being the “HOLY GOOF”

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<sup>5</sup> For those who have not read the novel, this link will allow you to read this moment: [http://www.cosmic-kitchen.com/c-books.php?id=Kerouac\\_Jack\\_1957\\_On\\_The\\_Road&chap=chap\\_39](http://www.cosmic-kitchen.com/c-books.php?id=Kerouac_Jack_1957_On_The_Road&chap=chap_39)

<sup>6</sup> This ethic reemerges ironically in the use of the word “schedule” in reference to Dean’s wild life (42, 45). In just as deliberate a counterpoint to the dominant narrative of the period, there is a parody of conventional discourse when Remi Boncœur, yet another hipster, quotes President Truman on the cost of living (70).

<sup>7</sup> Not even one of infra-proletarian consciousness, the way Barthes analyzes Charlie Chaplin’s embodiments of the hobo in his essay “The Poor and the Proletariat,” in *Mythologies*, coincidentally published in 1957.

(193), the typography reflecting Sal's reverence and his awe. There is no opposition between Dean as hipster and as visionary: "Dean Moriarty received the world in the raw" (82), reflects both Dean's sexual adventures, and his soul. Sal Paradise himself, as the onomastics highlight ("Sal" for "Salvatore" as well as for "Salt of the earth"), is a "holy" traveler, one whose soul is "whooping" (16), and who travels the "holy road" (138) towards "mystic" San Francisco (16) or towards Denver as "Promised Land" (16). The idea that he is following a "magic line on the road" (116), but that he is on a "road to heaven" (180), the allusions to the visions of prophets (53, 180), as well as his drug-taking; the religious pun on Des Moines (17), or the underlining of the onomastics of Testament and Solomon (137), all saturate the text with a form of pagan Christianity, in a Blake-like form of visionary transgression, a *marriage of Heaven and Hell* one can in fact read into Sal Paradise's full name. Indeed, if one takes into account the fact that French was Kerouac's mother tongue, it is quite possible that "Sal" is a pun—"sale paradis" could in fact define the beat concept of paradise as a heaven to be found through the enduring of hell; a paradise of the down-and-out beyond having, where "being" is all.

"Beat" also becomes synonymous with *beaten-up* in the story, with Sal falling sick or being betrayed at the end of each trip, Dean's girlfriend Mary Lou being beaten up black and blue (by Dean) (133); the car, too, "gets her beating" (134), and Dean's own body is portrayed as collapsing (184). But all the while, Sal's use of *beat* in the musical sense increases, in the reflexive repetition of certain words ("spastic," 220), and in his underlining repetition and circularity as rhetorical strategies of his own, while revealing what is ultimately beyond Dean's, and his own, search for Beatness. This is exemplified by his criticizing the notion of the ultimate truth that Dean is trying to reach and calls "IT" (49, 206, 266, 269), while obviously trying to communicate "IT" through his own mystical prose to the readers, suggesting that he, not Dean, is the true "recipient" of illumination during their quest. Originally, Sal looks up to Dean as a role-model and hero-figure, introducing him as a "western kinsman of the sun" (10). He accepts as mystical revelations Dean's pronouncements such as "the road is life" (44, 57, 80, 211); he speaks of Dean as having disciples (123) and in the first half of his narrative, he is one of them. Yet as both the trip and the narrative unwind, Sal becomes increasingly ambivalent, speaking of Dean as a prophet dethroned (229), his ambivalence stemming from Dean's caring about "everything and nothing" (188), which makes him both a "God" (287) and, in a reversal of the term, a *dog* (Dean is increasingly portrayed scratching himself, giggling meaninglessly, rubbing his belly, etc, in forms of hysterical regression).

### **The Search for Ecstasy: from Drive to Overdrive**

Ultimately, then, what he is an inspiration to Sal for is not life, but *art*. This is the meaning of the celebrated line with which Sal sets off on the road the first time—"somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything" (11)—which plays on the many meanings of "line": the time-line of events, the line in the middle of the road, and of course, the unfolding scroll of the text. The fact that the manuscript was typed on a "roll," to prevent revision, and to promote automatic writing, mirrors its very theme: rolling down the road in symbolic "free-fall," and the "rolling stone" philosophy of the young white male characters who embrace movement and transgression against the death of the soul. Indeed, speed is the driving factor of the whole narrative; like other forms of excess, it is part of "going all the way" (276) in a multiple pun on a

quest that is geographical, sexual, and spiritual.<sup>8</sup> Sal and Dean do not merely *drive*—they are constantly in *overdrive*, as even a sampling of verbs can show: “we wheeled,” “zoomed,” “gunned [the engine]” (156-157); “shot up the car;” “bounced over,” “roared out” (163)... Movement is ecstasy: “the greatest ride in my life” (24); “I felt like an arrow that could shoot out all the way” (27); “it was the fastest, whoopingest ride of my life” (101); “the car went straight as an arrow” (116); “we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*” (133). When Carlo Marx questions the meaning of taking to the road again in Part II, Sal shrugs this off—“there was nothing to talk about any more. The one thing to do was go” (119)—in an assertion of movement *as* meaning. Destinations hardly matter although each time, Sal enthuses about them in superlatives, even late in the story, when they make the ill-fated trip to Mexico: “I couldn’t imagine this trip. It was the most fabulous of all. It was no longer east-west, but magic *south*” (265). Gradually, it becomes clear that the road itself is the quest; Dean claims “the road must eventually lead to the whole world” (230). Sal does have moments of recognition that Dean’s frenzy may be defeating very purpose of “discovery”: “with frantic Dean I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it” (205); counterbalanced by: “But no matter, the road is life” (211). The image of Dean as a “mad Ahab at the wheel” (234) finally confirms the revelation brought by Sal’s dream-visions of “spirits” or other avatars of the “Shrouded Traveler”—that the search for ecstasy embodied by Dean is indistinguishable from the death-drive:<sup>9</sup>

Something, someone, some spirit was pursuing all of us across the desert of life and was bound to catch us before we reached heaven. Naturally, now that I look back on it, this is only death: death will overtake us before heaven. The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nausea of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (thought we hate to admit it) in death. But who wants to die? in the rush of events I kept thinking about this in the back of my mind. I told it to Dean and he instantly recognized it as the mere simple longing for pure death; and because we're all of us never in life again, he, rightly, would have nothing to do with it, and I agreed with him then (124).

And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels... (172)

The oxymorons “sweet nauseas” and “pure death” (124) encapsulate the sustained ambiguity of the quest, between pure and sordid, revelation and nightmare, ecstasy and death, the pleasure principle and the fantasized return to a deadly womb. Indeed, the road leads to a form of apocalyptic revelation: the leitmotif “everything was collapsing” (77, 99, 125) stresses a general collapse beyond Dean’s madness whose speech is, at times, almost unintelligible (114, 161). Throughout the last third of the narrative, Sal shifts in his appreciation of Dean from prophet-like, to “crack-brained sonafobitch” (228), to apocalyptic whirlwind (259). In a combination of

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<sup>8</sup> As an instance of these puns, a “real gone girl” (158) for instance, implies “over the top,” “literally crazy,” “traveling girl,” and “sexually available.”

<sup>9</sup> The name *Moriarty* seems as a *memento mori* in itself.

the seraphic and demonic, Dean becomes a “burning shuddering frightful Angel” (259), an “Angel seraphically drunk” (263), an “Angel of Terror” (233), who drives like a “fiend” (279); and Sal seems to be the “savior” to his one-time idol, now: “poor, poor Dean—the devil himself had never fallen farther” (188), “holy-eyed moaning foaming lost soul” (221). Meanwhile, the road becomes the “senseless nightmare road” (254). While Part II started with the figurative “bug” (itch, or frenzy) that compelled Sal to take to the road a second time—“The bug was on me again, and the bug’s name was Dean Moriarty and I was off on another spurt around the road” (115)—Part IV ends on real bugs in Mexico, as Sal catches a fever and dysentery he almost dies from (294).

This foregrounds the idea of circularity, the road going nowhere: “anywhere road for anybody anyhow” (251) with Dean as a “flaming tyro” (267) (which seems a pun on *tyre/tire* and *tyrant* more than a reference to the mythological Tyro). What was initially said of one of Dean’s disciples, Eddie—“he had no direction” (123)—is now true of Dean himself. The road ends up being a “rush” making spiritual discovery impossible, as Sal cuts across the USA like a traveling salesman (245). As he evokes this image, Sal speaks of having a “bag of tricks” that no one is buying: but one might object that that bag of tricks turns out to be *OR* itself. Indeed, the failure of the trip—“and here again I was criss-crossing the old map again” (271)—becomes a successful *narrative*: is not *OR* the quilt-like (“criss-cross”) creation made from bits and pieces of ragged real life, like Sal’s aunt’s woven rug (107)? Dean can thus be read as a *muse*, in all his frenzy; he is the inspiration for a form of writing that breaks with the half-finished manuscript Sal had started before the narrative begins and which he finds on the return from the first trip on the road. Sal tells us he had to hurry to write the chapter he was writing before he left, because Dean was waiting for him (6) and that because of that very speed, it turned out to be his best writing so far. This comment is immediately followed by Dean’s vision of the perfect aesthetic, one Kerouac himself called “spontaneous prose” (7). The metatextual image for *beat* as wild rhythm is one Sal finds in music: specifically, in bop and jazz.

### **Bop writing: “bop was going like mad all over America” (14)**

Bop and black music throughout *OR* exemplify the ultimate desire of both Dean as “ecstatic” hipster and Sal as writer: to move beyond language and to be able to express “IT,” *i.e.*, total experience or being, without the use of metaphor, or other literary “artifice”—to move beyond the division between experience and literature. Hence the constant use of onomatopoeia in the attempts at transcribing movement, bop music, and ecstasy; of it all, Sal can say: “it never ends” (241). Sexual metaphors connect the three: “everyone in San Francisco blew” (177); of a black musician, Sal exclaims “he doesn’t move a bone and just balls that jack” (200); while the black musician says “life’s too sad to be ballin’ all the time” (199). The orgasmic approach to music, evidenced by the scenes where Dean sweats profusely while trying to describe the “IT” that is manifested in the jazz musician’s improvisations, and the ecstasy it brings, is paralleled in Sal’s approach to writing. Sal frees himself from the anxiety of influence thanks to the new, non-literary—at least, where *white* writing is concerned<sup>10</sup>—metatextual image of *bop*. Sal also

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Black writing has by 1957 made “bop” a fundamental theme and metatextual image, if only in Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951).

connects jazz, writing and sex in his Doctor Sax dream (171), which seems a pun on Sal, Sex, music, and dream-vision looking for the right art form.

While dream-vision connects Kerouac to visionaries like Blake,<sup>11</sup> his vernacular is indebted to Twain, Hemingway, and to Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. The question of the *anxiety of influence* thus appears doubly: in relation to established literary models, and in relation to other Beat writers Kerouac is jockeying with for first place in the literary pantheon of the future.<sup>12</sup> Within the recognized literary tradition, Sal mocks fellow author Roland Major for his imitations of Hemingway, pointing out that he is a copycat in both life and art (40-41), as opposed to Sal himself, who quotes Steinbeck but dissociates from his ideological perspective in romanticizing cotton-picking (97). Sal deliberately creates other intertexts with Melville, in the image of Dean as a "mad Ahab at the wheel" (234), and in his hailing San Francisco with a "there she blows" (169), reminiscent of whale-spotting in *Moby Dick*. When Sal speaks of "the ghost of the San Francisco of Jack London" (72), he sets up another genealogy with the adventurer/writer of the Great North, simultaneously evoking and "ghosting" him. Jack London functions as a double for Jack Kerouac, not merely because of their names: *OR* bemoans that the Old West that still captured the imagination in Jack London's day has disappeared, but emphasizes that Sal/Jack is writing the *New West*. This shift is "performed" within the text, which contrasts a conventional, "backward-looking" "Wild West Day" (33), and the transgressive conquest of "new frontiers": Dean, Marylou and Sal wildly driving into Texas naked at the wheel. Sal also sets up his writing against his rivals within the Beat Movement, particularly Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee; while he is obviously fascinated by them, he ridicules their rhetoric as hyper-intellectual, boring, or artificial. Carlo Marx's moralistic, self-willed prophetic pronouncements, for which he takes the "Voice of the Rock" is used as a foil to Sal's own "voice of the road" (130).<sup>13</sup>

### **"Whoeee" or the Spontaneous Poetics of *On The Road***

The predominance of such rhetorical figures as exclamation and onomatopoeia, the constant use of colloquialisms and slang, the loose structure and absence of "plot" can be construed as reflecting the search for spontaneity, as Regina Weinreich argues: "Kerouac's writing is an attempt to discover form, not to imitate it, and to discover experience in the act of writing about it" (Weinreich 4). She deftly analyzes what Ginsberg called Kerouac's "spontaneous bop prosody" (4); pointing out that "the road becomes a structural option based on temporal progression as well as a metaphor for the conventional quest myth" (35). While she sees *OR* as pertaining to the "elegiac romance," with Dean as knight and Sal as squire (36) she also points out that "Sal—Kerouac's surrogate—is the observer who views Dean as a catalyst for the only action he knows—writing." (37). She makes a case for reading the text both in terms of "trance" and of transmediality (with jazz):

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<sup>11</sup> He also makes references—logically enough, if one takes the Beat concept of the road seriously—with the most famous authors of utopias, like Rabelais ("Gargantua," 259), or of quests, like Homer ("Odyssean logs," 103), "Americanizing" them as he goes by incorporating them to his hybrid high-culture, low-culture text.

<sup>12</sup> Making jazz a metatextual image also allows Kerouac not to feel he is less American (French was his mother tongue, as a French Canadian); in an interesting *mise en abyme*, Sal says that Remi Bonceur, because of his bilingual status, speaks "jazz American" (61).

<sup>13</sup> Sal is often obviously impressed, however; when he mentions Carlo Marx's poetry in Denver, and Carlo's image of the Rockies as "papier-mâché" mountains, he seems to ridicule this image, but then absorbs it, at the end of that chapter, within his own prose.

A discussion of Kerouac's language will reveal (1) how linearity or seeming temporal progression is broken down into smaller structures or phrases which can be analyzed as tropes of collapsing and building, and (2) how the texture of *OR* is controlled by a musical metaphor whose seeming onflow contains rhythms and cadences, interior sound systems, in the manner of prose poetry—though the full resources of Kerouac's spontaneous bop prosody have yet to be achieved (Weinreich 40).

Weinreich of course highlights that this form echoes the content: the “up-and-down movement of Kerouac's myth about America” (48) and Sal's recurring images of being expelled from paradise (49) create swings from ecstasy to sadness (55)—the quest being for moments of “meaning-excitement” called “IT” (52).<sup>14</sup>

Robert Hipkiss also analyzes the spontaneous poetics that Kerouac was lambasted for by critics as different as Norman Podhoretz in his 1958 *Partisan* review entitled “The Know-Nothing Bohemians” and Truman Capote, who famously quipped of Kerouac's non-stop unedited writing: “that isn't writing at all, that's typing.” While this might seem harsh, Hipkiss points out that Kerouac's essay “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” while it cites jazz<sup>15</sup> as its model, emphasizes the need to write “excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing cramps,” in accordance with what he called the “laws of orgasm” (Hipkiss 81). Alex Albright stresses the other side of nonstop spontaneous writing (which Kerouac claimed to be inventing), the history of which can be traced back to Eastern forms of mysticism (Buddha, Lao-Tse), thus concurring with Weinreich on Kerouac's having found inspiration in the Zen notion of “artless art” (41). Albright (117-119) also connects Kerouac to the Gospels (he quotes Mark 13:11), to William Blake, Whitman and Emerson, as well as to the Surrealists and their search for *écriture automatique*. That Kerouac was promoting his own legend seems obvious: Tim Hunt, who devotes a full-length study to *OR* shows that Kerouac did revise and edit his work and had accumulated notes for years before typing his manuscript. The search for spontaneity is all the more necessary because the notes for *OR* were indeed taken *on* the road but that the book was written after the fact...

This explains Sal's need to saturate his text with the language of the wild, and of the *Wild West* he has left behind, and why he needs Dean—who was actually *born* on the road—to legitimate his narrative: as early as page 7, Dean exclaims as he reads some of Sal's spontaneous prose: “Yes! That's right! Wow! Man!” and then proceeds to expound a theory of writing that describes Kerouac's techniques. *OR* thus opens on the idea that not to edit one's language is to reach the mystical realities beyond language: to go from the raw to the ineffable, in a continuum between the “dirty”, damned, or apocalyptic, and the heavenly, mystic, and seraphic. The West represents the “promised land” for Sal (“whoeee! the promised land!” 90), as the embodiment of freedom; as the “symbolic West” of Sal's *narrative* “roughing it.” Sal uses onomatopoeia to emphasize the physicality of language, for dramatic effect, in a comics mode sometimes —“wham!” or “bang!” (114)—to describe how effortlessly Dean slides into a parking place (with a sexual pun on “bang”, of course). Sal's idealization of cowboy figures points to the intoxicating

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<sup>14</sup> Ben Giampo rephrases this into: “The oscillation between ecstasy and suffering—elation and dejection—appears to be the maxim of the novel” (184), and, more playfully: “For every IT, one takes a HIT, and so on.” (184).

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Malcolm points out that Kerouac did not know jazz well enough, technically, for this metatextual image to be justified.



combination of lawlessness, raw living, and spontaneous language they embody: when he hears his first cowboy and writes: “I said to myself, Wham, listen to that man laugh”, and transcribes the spontaneous laugh as “Hyaw hyaw hyaw hyaw” (21)—the uncensored laugh and the spontaneous prose (“wham”) mirror each other completely. If this is transgressive in terms of literary idiom, it is also mystical. Sal says “my soul whoopeeing” (16), to express this opening up to the spirit of the road and of nature (“spirit of the mountain,” 55), in a form of Beat *glossolalia*; it is the speech equivalent of the gaze described by the phrase “my innocent road-eyes” (106).

### **Mystic or Vapid poetics?**

Kerouac’s daring mystical vocabulary (“child of the rainbow,” “mystic kinsman of the sun,” so on), heralds the *hippie* vocabulary (*flower child*, *summer of love*) of the end of the next decade. It sometimes seems that Sal does not control this as a literary move, and that “the language drives him,” to paraphrase what Dean says of the road (279). When Sal is happy with a metaphor he repeats it, such as that of the car kissing the line in the road. For most of the book, Sal uses the same rhetorical devices, and vocabulary (“IT”) as Dean: both constantly resort to superlatives, strong verbs or adjectives such as “love” or “pure” in contexts where they seem excessive (Sal in fact ironically analyzes Dean’s frenzied use of the word “pure” as wishful thinking, at one point, 120-121). There are some facile generalizations about America (92, 103), and a notorious absence of any form of political or economical analysis of anything Sal sees or experiences (a point to which we shall return when we discuss the text’s blind spots). Sometimes, vague speech borders on vacuity; for instance, when Sal expresses his desire to go see “what everybody was doing all over the country” (67). The “know-nothing” aspect of this form of travel can be summarized in Sal’s tautology “life is life, and kind is kind” (129). Norman Mailer’s putdown<sup>16</sup> that, despite “great talent,” Jack Kerouac “lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty, and a sense of the novel” seems justified, except if one answers, like Carole Vopat:

*OR* is more than a “crazy wild frantic” embrace of beat life; implicit in Kerouac’s portrayal of the beat generation is his criticism of it, a criticism that anticipates the charges of his most hostile critics. For example, Norman Podhoretz’ assertion (“The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” *Doings and Undoings* [New York: Noonday Press, 1964] 143-58) that “the Beat Generation’s worship of primitivism and spontaneity ... arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling” (156), parallels Kerouac’s own insights in *OR* (Vopat 3).

If the spontaneous poetics often seem artificial, this is also in part due to Sal’s having to invent a new language for his sexual adventures, and yet not seem obscene. Euphemisms such as “a twinge of hard joy” (15) for sexual arousal or “wild complexities” (85) and “three children of the earth” (132) for three-way sex or for a “love triangle” are part Sal’s attempt to recover prelapsarian “Edenic” purity in speaking of sex (this is probably what Mailer thought of as Kerouac’s being “sentimental as a lollipop”). When Dean imagines that they could all have a “goof-bang” (159) with a “motorcycle kid and his girl,” the neologism makes this something “new”, pure in its transgressions. It takes willing reader reception to accept all of the aspects of the “tripping” as a mystic quest and not just as wild ride—but this is true from the start of the

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<sup>16</sup> To see this, and Mailer’s other jabs at fellow writers in his *Advertisements for Myself*: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C07E6DF1F3FF93AA25752C1A9609C8B63&pagewanted=all>

narrative. When Sal gushes “[Dean] and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there” (138), one can either feel the hypnotic pull of the repetition, or feel that it is an obvious strategy to avoid saying what exactly that “pearl” is. Sal’s initial prophecy—“Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me” (11)—does seem to have been reduced to Dean’s gurgling “gurls gurls gurls” (232) by the end of the book. But then, Sal’s love story is perhaps with the American landscape... and with Dean himself.

### **“Off to see America”:<sup>17</sup> The American Landscape in *OR***

When, at the opening of his narrative, Sal says: “I’d often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off”, this first seems “the archetypal American tale: he flees the constrictions of the East hoping to find freedom and regeneration in the West” (Hunt, “American education,” 32). Hunt points out that the first, failed trip, in which he does not hook up with Dean, is a “parody” of Dean’s own trips and a “pastiche” of Huck Finn; but that the subsequent trips show Sal’s embarking on the real quest. Indeed, in Part One, the West is obviously the land of the Frontier, and of wilderness, everything that Sal can oppose to his stifling life in New Jersey, living with his aunt. His fascination with Dean prompts the trip to Denver; it stems from knowing that Dean was in jail for “joy rides” (and the pun is central); he says of this mild form of criminality: “it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains” (10), combining freedom, transgression, the West, and poetry in the same sentence. But Sal’s first attempt to go West is doomed like Huck’s attempt to go North: when he decides to follow the (red) line that cuts from East to West on any map, this leaves him stranded in the mountains in the East, in upstate NY, in the rain. Sal takes this as a sign that it was inherently against the spirit of his project to try to charter his trip—his penalty, by no coincidence, is to find himself going back where he started in a chartered bus. The wilderness of the North-Eastern mountains he describes as vertical (“dismal wilderness rising to the skies”), as opposed to the boundless horizon that will open up to him on the road going either West or South (“top of the world,” 167; “blue distances opened up in the sky,” 161). The West “opens up” for Sal not merely in the form of vast spaces, but also, in the rhetoric of the sublime: superlatives express both objective immensity and his own fascination, as the adjective “magnificent” recurs: “magnificent Rockies” (47), “immense vistas” (27), “magnificent firmament” (32). Sal discovers new ways of mapping the territory: enumerating the places he goes through (generally, through nominal sentences like road-signs), but also through hoboes: the hobo has a name that places his origin, while he himself travels the US (Montana Slim, Mississippi Gene). Sal’s love for the roving hobo mirrors his love for trains. These trains that map the space of the USA—he sings their names, page 41—and howl their way through—“the Denver and Rio Grande locomotive howling off to the mountains. I wanted to pursue my star further” (57); “trains howl their way away across the valley” (80)—are of course reflexive images for his own search for freedom, and artistic freedom.

This freedom is often playful: by calling the Mississippi a “big hump-backed river” (141) he remakes it in the image of the buffalo (and of the West), avoiding the obvious “snake” imagery generally associated with it; with youthful humor, he puns on names: “the great hairy Bear Mountains” (12); the “mistral-winds of old Tex-Ass” (271). Personification is frequent

<sup>17</sup> The chorus of the Simon & Garfunkel song “America” (released 1968).

("the evil old Sabine River," 158). But Sal also writes of the landscape as "living manuscript": "storied Denver streets" (58) implies the stories are already there, "inky night" implies that the night is already writing itself (64, 102, 104). These metaphors are made explicitly metatextual when Sal writes that he couldn't read this "manuscript of night" (158); or that the "plains unfold like a roll of paper" (233) and when he speaks of the landscape as an "endless poem" (255) or notes "but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along. Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing" (102). Tim Hunt goes so far as to speak of "that all-American book, the landscape which Sal reads with descriptive fervor" (Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, 27-28). Throughout *OR*, Sal's sheds his highbrow intertextual writing of the landscape ("the Grand Odyssean logs of our continental dream," 103), to mediate the landscape only through his own projection of a poetry inherent to movement, for instance by making a biker a "Texas poet of the night" (159). Images of the "wheel" can also be read in their many meanings (the driver's wheel, the wheel of fortune): stars "wheel the night" (222), and at the close of the novel Sal gazes on America: "all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going" (309) in a combination of land, road and desire, of "scroll" and "roll," in a refusal of closure.

Kerouac changes the tradition of landscape depiction by becoming the most famous representative of the "road movie" in text form<sup>18</sup> but he also redefines American identity itself. When Sal reaches Denver, he celebrates being on the Great Divide and the "top" of the world: "we were on the roof of America and all we could do is yell, I guess" (57). When he celebrates his and his friends' Beat identity against this Western backdrop—"mad drunken Americans in the mighty land" (55)—they seem *part* of America, un-ironically hailed as "mighty land," rather than rebels against it. Although there may be irony in Sal's brief fantasy that he could live "in Middle America, a patriarch" (179), it jars with the earlier allegory (when Sal wakes up in Des Moines, Iowa): "I was half-way across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future" (17), which emphasized movement and change, not sedentary living and patriarchal codes. But conversely, too, when Sal connects the "Beat" madness to America itself, in such sentences as "our sad drama in the American night" (148), when describing life at Old Bull Lee's, it raises the question whether Sal is defining the Beats as marginal and doomed within America, or if he is subverting the definition of "America" through his inscription of the Beat identity in the "American night", the way his fellow Beat Allen Ginsberg, in his celebrated last line to the angry love poem "America" (1956)—"America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel"—includes his queer identity within the American identity, while playing on the pun "to queer the wheel" and reasserting his desire that America change its historical course.<sup>19</sup> One thing does stand out, in Sal's search for "tumbledown holy America" (159)—that he and Dean are "lost boys" in search of a lost father.

#### **"Looking for the father we never found"**

The entire book is a search for the father, whose ghostly presence Dean's name reflects (like his father, he is called Dean Moriarty). This lost father always seems a little farther down

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<sup>18</sup> *OR*'s fame is perhaps also due to the spectacular development of highways and interstates just at the time the book was published, allowing readers to "experience" such highway travel themselves. The 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act (often referred to as the Interstate Highway Act) was the key piece of legislation.

<sup>19</sup> To read "America": <http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/america.html>

the road, *father-along*,<sup>20</sup> or, as Sal puts it: “Well, lackaddaddy, I was on the road again” (101). The connection between the *lack of a daddy*, and being on the road, as hobo or as Beat traveler is echoed through Rémi Boncœur’s story (70), the allusion to Laodiceans and the address to the reader, which all take up the theme of the abandoned child: “Isn’t it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father’s roof?” (105). Some hoboes are explicitly described as such “sweet children” in exile: “poor forlorn man, poor lost sometime boy” (104)<sup>21</sup>; the ultimate hobo being Old Dean Moriarty, Dean’s father, whom Sal obsesses over: “the sad and fabled tinsmith of my mind” (180). Strikingly, every mention of Dean’s craving for “IT” (49, 127, 207) is followed by a mention of Old Dean Moriarty; in this scene, when Sal listens to Dean having sex with Mary Lou, the father figure evokes death:

I could hear Dean, blissful and blabbering and frantically rocking. Only a guy who’s spent five years in jail can go to such maniacal helpless extremes; beseeching at the portals of the soft source, mad with a completely physical realization of the origins of life-bliss; blindly seeking to return the way he came. [...] Dean had never seen his mother’s face. Every new girl, every new wife, every new child was an addition to his bleak impoverishment. Where was his father?—old bum Dean Moriarty the Tinsmith, riding freights, working as a scullion in railroad cookshacks, stumbling, down-crashing in wino alley nights, expiring on coal piles, dropping his yellowed teeth one by one in the gutters of the West. Dean had every right to die the sweet deaths of complete love of his Marylou—I didn’t want to interfere, I just wanted to follow.

Not only does Sal, in a D. H. Lawrence-like fantasy, imagine that, in sex, Dean is “blindly seeking to return the way he came,” towards his mother—but in a doubly “incestuous” connection shifts from Dean’s lovemaking to the decaying body of Dean’s father, in obvious images of castration and death (“downcrashing,” “expiring,” “dropping his yellowed teeth”)... Sal’s dream visions, such as that of the “Shrouded Traveler” (124) seem to equate father-figures with the threat of death—like the Mississippi, “great brown father of the waters” (141), they seem uncontrollable forces of movement and (self-)destruction. In an enactment of what Sal’s own white-haired prophet finally tells him in the last pages of his Mexican trip—“go moan for man”—Sal’s narrative ends on a *lament* of loss: “So in America when the sun goes down [...] and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.”

The poetic allegory tying *beatness* not to youth but to aging and even death (“the forlorn rags of being old”), and the reminder that the lost father was never found, amplify the “chain of abandonment” and the true lament, which is for Dean. The final rhythmic repetition “I think of Dean Moriarty”, like the pounding of the heart, makes the last sentence a poignant declaration of love and loss; what Sal says of Rémi—“There was no end to his loss” (70)—applies to Sal, as well.

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<sup>20</sup> This pun was coined by African-American author John Edgar Wideman and is the title of one of his books.

<sup>21</sup> Those around Dean look upon him as a “dearest and most errant child” (195) which plays on the double meaning of “errant” as in error or as in “rambling on the road.”

## The Buddy Story

Most critics today characterize the relation between Sal and Dean as one of love: George Dardess analyzes *OR* as “a love story” (20); Tim Hunt speaks of their linking up, when Camille, Dean’s girlfriend, kicks Dean out for his repeated infidelities in Part III, and Sal offers to take charge of him, as a “metaphorical marriage,” (46) and Carole Vopat points to this “metaphor” being deliberately sustained and reinforced:

[Sal] asks for Dean’s hand like a nervous fiancé, looking into his eyes and blushing, “for I’d never committed myself before with regard to his burdensome existence,” and waits for Dean’s answer “my eyes watering with embarrassment and tears.” But “something clicked in both of us;” standing “on top of a hill on a beautiful sunny day,” Dean accepts him; “he became extremely joyful and said everything was settled.” The two plight their troth (“we would stick together and be buddies till we died”), witness an actual wedding party, then go off on their honeymoon (“‘Well’, said Dean in a very shy and sweet voice, ‘shall we go?’”) [...] (Vopat 13).

In fact, as Vopat does not stress here, the choice of the words “shy and sweet” that feminize Dean, point to the obviously *queer* subtext to the Sal/Dean relationship. The fact that when Sal offers to take Dean with him, Dean gives him a long, “devilish look,” and that Sal blushes and feels his eyes watering, points to the ambiguity of the situation and Sal’s realizing (though he does not say so in so many words) that Dean may be thinking that Sal will ask for sex in exchange for keeping him. Sal’s speaking of his own thoughts as “my own impure psychologies” (213) only adds to the ambiguities of the text; for Dean is also described in terms such as “pretty” or “flirtatious” (164). If “love is a duel,” as Sal puts it (101), the main duel of the story is not between Sal and Teresa, but between Sal and Dean, in a narrative that begins with Sal’s first hearing of Dean, and ends with their break-up. From the very first pages, Sal’s worship for Dean as “young jailkid shrouded in mystery” (6), makes him a Jean Genêt-like construction of the outlaw—angel and demon, “long-lost brother” (10), alter ego, and lover. Sal reinforces queer readings, by including an incident in which he assaults a “queer” and admitting he does not understand why he pulled a gun on the man (73)—a scene best analyzed in terms of repressed desire (Holton 82). Holton and Gerald Nicosia connect this ambivalence, as well as Kerouac/Sal’s editing Neal/Dean’s bisexuality from the text, to Kerouac’s later anti-gay anger (Holton 91). Sal sets up “queerness” elsewhere, as a divide between virile figures like Dean and himself, who “go,” and the intellectuals that make up most of the Beat circle (hence between Sal’s calling NY “frosty fagtown NY” (134), in a critique of “tedious intellectualness,” 9). And although Sal’s aunt warns him from the outset, Sal goes off in search of Dean out of true love: “Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean’s eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds—what did it matter?” (10)

Just as *OR* does not quite acknowledge its queer subtext, it fails to make its sexual and “racial” politics as countercultural as they might be.

## Sexism and Orientalism in a Counter-Cultural Text?

The aspects of *OR* that are least countercultural seen from today are in fact its discourse on women, and on ethnic minorities. The fact that Sal and Dean both think of Mary Lou, among other girlfriends, as a whore, and use similar expressions for her (114, 116) is not merely a form of ambivalence towards women, but part of a constantly sexist ideological discourse—women are described as pretty but stupid numerous times (5, 84, 90, 93).<sup>22</sup> The Madonna/whore stereotype is best exemplified in Sal's relationship with Teresa, the young Mexican girl whom he meets on the bus. While it is "mutely and purely decided" between them that they shall be lovers, in the background, the city's "whorey smell" (82) announces Sal's later turning against Teresa and calling her a "dum[b] Mexican wench" and a "drinking little fool" (90), in a pendular swing from idealizations in which they are "two tired angels" (84) or "little lambs" (89) "mixing up [their] souls" (90). When he nicknames their couple "Terry and Sallie" (100) the sexual chiasmus between their names points to the queering at work, in what seem impossible relationships between men and women.

Indeed, the fact that Dean continues to enter relationships (Camille, Mary Lou, Inez) and to conceive children with practically every woman who becomes his girlfriend—children he cannot provide for, as even Sal remarks—can be read today as the transgenerational repetition of trauma in abandoned (and probably abused) children. It provides an (involuntary) counterpoint to those who think of the narrative as one of sexual liberation, reminding us that for women, contraception and abortion were still illegal both in 1951 and in 1957.<sup>23</sup> Ben Giomo's sarcastic summary of the contradictions embodied by Dean highlight the clash between the countercultural reinvention of self and, on another level, the (real) repetition of the lost father's "loser patriarch" story: "On the one hand, Dean represents the perfervid Beat Generation chase for IT, which may be defined as the "ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being" (195) [...] On the other, [...] by the end of the novel, Dean has collected three wives, divorced two of them, spurted four kids, and forsaken the East Coast to live once again with his second wife on the West Coast" (Giomo 186). On this central ideological blind spot—how can these countercultural characters and their narrator be so sexist?—Holton quotes Ellen Friedman: "In her recent discussion of gender, postmodernism, and the "pervasive misogyny" of the beats, Ellen Friedman has recently argued that Kerouac and the Beats, alienated from modern culture, looked backward to earlier versions of master narratives rather than forward and beyond them" (Holton 89).

This is indeed the case where the depiction of minorities is concerned, and generally, *OR*'s sexism and its paternalistic racial discourse go hand in hand. Kerouac's portrayal of minorities as the "Fellahin" as he called minorities in a form of Orientalism bordering on self-parody, stems from a desire to identify with minorities' supposed freedom from WASP inhibitions: "[R]ather than working for the integration of marginalized peoples into the American mainstream, in their discourse and their behavior the Beats expressed a desire to join the excluded others on the margins—not on the barricades." (Bolton 79). Bolton quotes Bourdieu to deconstruct Kerouac's use of the pastoral—his romanticizing of African-American or Mexican farm workers, for instance, instead of denouncing their exploitation—reminding us that Bourdieu spoke of the

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<sup>22</sup> For instance: "sweet little girl" goes with "awfully dumb" (5).

<sup>23</sup> Contraception was legalized by the Supreme Court in 1965, and abortion in the *Roe v Wade* decision of 1973.

“sham inversion of dominant values” for such texts (90). He also quotes Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* against interpretations of the Beats as “subversive”:

Herbert Marcuse argued that “such modes of protest and transcendence” as the Beat movement “are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative” (14). In their loss of depth or dimensionality, such apolitical subversives “are no longer images of another way of live but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than a negation of the established order” (59) (Bolton 91).

This is what George Dardess also has in mind when he says that *OR* is “certainly not a call to arms” (20). Indeed, minorities in general are treated as “primitive” peoples within an “Orientalist” framework,<sup>24</sup> when Sal picks grapes alongside Teresa, and some of the farm workers assume he too is a Mexican, Sal asserts “and in a way I am” (97), which is on the one hand a form of “racial identification” that flies in the face of segregation, but on the other, a naïve denial of reality of racial and class oppression. All of Mark Richardson’s article “Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road*” takes up this contradiction, and concludes that *OR* is on this issue a “conservative novel” (217) because of the *minstrelsy* involved in Sal’s “playing” at being a peasant alongside the Mexican farm workers, without gaining any awareness of their poverty or struggle. Richardson sets his reading against Omar Swartz’s, insisting that even if Kerouac’s racism is “paternalistic,” this in itself is a problem:

The point is to trace out the continuities linking “paternalistic” attitudes to those larger patterns of White hegemony which contain Kerouac, as they contain so many of us; and which contain as well so much of our literature, *even when that literature is in certain respects radically countercultural*. I would add in passing that the strongest literary work done in American is often precisely the work which makes us feel its confining limits of its own ideological horizons; *Huckleberry Finn* is a case in point (Richardson 229).

Douglas Malcolm sees the same contradictions as work in Kerouac’s homage to/ appropriation of jazz:

While jazz does not formally hold up as a thoroughgoing structural model for the novel, it is important as an ideological, behavioral and semiotic source for Kerouac’s vision of America, even though his debt to African American culture is not acknowledged. [...] The Romantic ideology of primitivism through which Kerouac views jazz prevents him from recognizing the irony and self-reflection that is at the music’s core (Malcolm 112).

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<sup>24</sup> “Orientalism” a recurring trait: an American valley looks like the valley of the Nile (19), the suburb of New Orleans called Algiers (141), announces the image “moorish-red mounts of Mexico” (162); when Sal gazes upon a starry night he thinks of the “Prince of Dharma” (222), in a Buddhist reference (and so on). In Mexico, Sal thinks of “primitive peoples” as “fathers of humanity” and of Adam as having been suckled by them (281). He likewise fantasizes a creation scene in which the Rio Grande and the Mississippi mingle in the great Gulf (274).

It is thus hard to read this countercultural text today without seeing its contradictions. But then, Sal is constantly setting up these contradictions himself, from his suspenseful announcement “the whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then” (8), to his early heralding that the quest he has embarked on with Dean as mentor is doomed: “this madness would lead nowhere” (128); it is part of the very “madness” and ecstasy of the narrative to allow itself not to cohere. Thus *OR* is a “book of beat” in many ways. Because it charts the transgressive lifestyle of a circle of young white intellectuals, because it is a book of grotesques and hoboes and marginals, a book of mystical “beatific” quest, too, but especially because it becomes a quest for an art form, that can adequately reflect its object. This search for a spontaneous poetics, a rebel and ecstatic form of writing, turns the road into the “scroll” of the text. If the narrative seems to run out of steam, and if a form of entropy—from raw energy to excessive agitation to collapse—translates into the book’s very form, this movement also allows Sal/Jack to emerge as a writer/driver of the narrative, and as a sidekick/disciple no longer. Although *OR* is a quintessentially American narrative, through its intertextuality (in particular to Twain, Melville, or Whitman) and in its will to identify itself with the American landscape, it is both a radically countercultural one and one that fails to question some of its blind spots (on gender, queerness, “race”), in typical “(white) hipster” fashion. But it has made such an enduring mark that, like other countercultural texts, it has paradoxically become an American classic, and spawned its own homages and subversive countertexts<sup>25</sup> as children and grandchildren of its own.

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<sup>25</sup> To quote only one, Sarah Schulman’s lesbian novel, *Girls, Visions, and Everything* (1986).



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