



*posteriores con la poderosa emergencia de las voces étnicas y el veloz desarrollo de un entramado teórico en el campo de los estudios postcoloniales.*

*Palabras clave:* Jack Kerouac; *The Subterraneans*; postcolonial; raza; género; hibridismo

## 1. Introduction

The national and international relevance of Jack Kerouac's work is attested to by the numerous events and prolific critical attention he continues to inspire up to the present day.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing upon new theoretical tools provided by cultural studies and literary theory over the past fifty years, critics such as R.J. Ellis (1999) and Robert Holton (1999) have advanced novel and stimulating readings of the author's work. Pointing towards the ways in which Kerouac's novels appeal to a contemporary sensibility, Tim Hunt has issued a call for an exploration of "a postmodern Kerouac? A postcolonial Kerouac?" (1996: xxvi), and in their work María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2002) and Manuel Luis Martínez (1998) have taken steps in this direction. The present essay aims to contribute to this new focus for discussion and is concerned with representations of race and gender in Kerouac's prose. Addressing negotiations of the exotic other in Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*, it examines the complex issues that arise from the ways in which Kerouac engenders the racial other.

*The Subterraneans* was written in 1953, shortly after the end of Kerouac's affair with Alene Lee, a "young petite mixed-race woman" (Sandison 1999: 96). The novel is a fictional representation of this interracial romance, set against the backdrop of San Francisco's countercultural scene, with Leo Percepied and Mardou Fox as its main characters.<sup>2</sup> The novel's publication was not without problems. Don Allen wanted to publish it in the second issue of the *Evergreen Review* after heavily editing it, but Kerouac raged over what he considered to be a "horrible castration job" (qtd. in Charters 1999: 12). Kerouac's 'October in Railroad Earth' (1957) was eventually published in its place. For the actual publication of the novel, Kerouac spent "five exhausting nights correcting the galleys of THE SUBTERRANEANS restoring the original freeflowing prose according to the original manuscript" (qtd. in Charters 1999: 94-95; capitals in original). The novel was finally published by Grove Press in February 1958, but was met with generally negative reviews, and was even briefly banned in Italy.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The 2007 Kerouac Conference held by the University of Massachusetts Lowell and the 2008 "Jack Kerouac, Kerouac's *On the Road*, the Beats and the Post-Beats" conference organized by the University of Birmingham were both scheduled to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *On the Road* in North America and the UK respectively. Moreover, Kerouac's recently published play, *The Beat Generation*, was staged in Germany in 2007. The Beat appeal reaches as far as Chengdu in China, where the "Beat Meets East" conference was organized in 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Allen Ginsberg appropriated the term *subterraneans* to describe the Bohemian types who congregated in Fugazzi bar in Greenwich Village (Miles 1998: 187). Individual names and locales were changed in Kerouac's novel in order to avoid libel suits.

<sup>3</sup> Charters (1999: 137, 139, 172) provides accounts of negative reviews in Kerouac's *Selected Letters 1957-1969*. Sandison (1999: 124-25) and Nicosia (1983: 567-68) also refer to several reviews of the time.

The controversial aspects of Kerouac's projections of race and gender in *The Subterraneans* were immediately noticed. In her review of the novel, Esta Seaton exposes the narrator's tendency to stereotype the racial other, noting that "Mardou as an individual is swallowed up in the clichéd mystique of the Negro as possessor of the truly basic and vital life-forces, a mystique which, after all, is only a fancy version of the stereotype of the Negro woman as the ultimate in sexuality" (1966: 343). Similarly, Jon Panish argues that the Beats modelled racial others upon "Noble Savage" images (1994: 108). Such readings problematize negotiations of the image of the racial other in *The Subterraneans* and foreground the novel's racial tensions. My article investigates these tensions, exploring narrative constructions of race and gender whilst considering the social contexts that give rise to such representations.

## 2. "Eden's in Africa": Mardou's racial heritage

The portrayal of Mardou Fox as an offspring of a "Negro mother dead for birth of her - unknown Cherokee-halfbreed father a hobo" (Kerouac 1966: 22) illuminates the intricate race dynamics that operate in the novel. It is soon rendered apparent that Mardou's racial hybridity, rather than being dealt with on its own terms, becomes the medium through which the narrator's biases about the racial other are expressed. Mardou is described as having "eyes of Indian watchfulness" (1966: 24), and is subsequently cast as the embodiment of this 'Indianness': "And I also see the earth in your eyes that's what I think of you, you have a certain kind of beauty, not that I'm hung up on the earth and Indians and all that" (1966: 94-95).

This latter statement is self-contradictory, however, because as soon as the narrator associates Mardou with the earth, and thus ascribes to her a primordial quality, he goes on to assert that he is not particularly concerned with the connotations his proclamation bears. Yet his observation suggests that through his association with Mardou the narrator wants to come closer to an 'original' quality. Trinh Minh-ha argues that "the search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted, or Westernized" (2002: 415). Kerouac's narrator is modelled upon such preconceptions. In order to conform to Percepied's notions of 'authentic' existence, Mardou must be purged of associations with the contemporary Western world, and her bond with primordial elements must be emphasized. Her image is constructed upon the narrator's presumption that Native Americans partake of a primitive quality that renders them more 'authentic'.

To further emphasize Mardou's association with origins, the narrator of *The Subterraneans* summons the (archetypal) father image to his aid. Lacking factual data about Mardou's father, Percepied imagines "that Cherokee-halfbreed hobo father of hers lying bellydown on a flatcar with the wind furling back his rags and black hat, his brown sad face facing all that land and desolation. - At other moments I imagined him instead working as a picker around Indio [...] I saw the vision of her father, he's standing straight up [...] nobody knows his name, nobody cares -" (Kerouac 1966: 27).

Mardou's father is denied an identity; that he is unknown and nameless facilitates the construction of his image at will: an array of stereotypes is employed to describe him. The first one is an image of train-hopping, typically associated with hobos. Downplaying any positive implications that such a lifestyle might bear, the narrator emphasizes the sadness in it, thus initiating a process of victimization of Mardou's father that later expands to include Native Americans in general. The subsequent image of Mardou's father as a manual labourer highlights his status as a victim of white expansion. This victimization is not exhausted on the individual level; the image of Mardou's father triggers off an array of associations, as Percepied sees him as a symbol of the Native American nation. Inspired by the image of Mardou's father, the narrator muses on "the ground filled with the bones of old Indians and Original Americans" (1966: 28). However, he fails to provide adequate clarification as to what constitutes an Original American. The term *original American* is itself problematic, for it is almost impossible to provide its exact definition in the hybrid context of American society, itself an amalgam of various races and cultures.

Emphasizing the bleakness of the Native American situation, the narrator evokes the "wraiths of humanity treading lightly the surface of the ground so deeply suppurated with the stock of their suffering you only have to dig a foot down to find a baby's hand" (1966: 29). Native American identity is here closely connected with suffering and debasement. The victimization of Native Americans, articulated mainly through the simulated image of Mardou's father, is now invested with a historical background. Even if the narrator makes an effort to acknowledge the injustice by bringing it to the fore, his tendency to construct ethnic simulacra ultimately transpires. In the end, it is the image of the victimized Native American that prevails, and such representations of ethnicity only serve to affirm white supremacy.

This is no longer a case of images of individuals, but of a nation; the narrator takes the simulated image of the Native American individual and projects it as representative of the entire Native American nation. Thus, we can no longer talk of a nation but rather of a fabricated image of such, based as it is upon a collection of replicas of Mardou's father. Constructing the nation upon simulated images, the narrator, in effect, fictionalizes it. As soon as Percepied begins narrating the Native American nation, he transforms it into a plastic entity that can be shaped according to the exigencies of the narrative. In her work, Boehmer discusses "the nation as fiction", and notes a gender-based "fictionalization of the community" (2005: 35). Similar nation-construction is at work in *The Subterraneans*, where Percepied shapes the nation according to his own white male perspective, thus reflecting the perpetuation of mainstream practices even in bohemian contexts. Viewed in this light, the narrator's subsequent comment regarding "the overtones of 'new generation' and other historical concerns in which she [Mardou] was now swirled just like all of us" (Kerouac 1966: 27) fails to convince. Mardou has already been burdened with such a heavy legacy that the narrator's attempt to cast her as an equal member of the subterraneans group is feeble at best - in fact, the narrator has emphasized Mardou's racial alterity so strongly that any claim of inclusiveness now seems ironic.

Not surprisingly, it is not only the Native American nation that is subjected to Percepied's processes of fictionalization, but the African-American as well, as Mardou is

represented as the offspring of an African-American mother. Prompted by what he sees as “that Indian warmth”, the narrator asserts:

“Honey what I see in your eyes is a lifetime of affection not only from the Indian in you but because as part Negro somehow you are the first, the essential woman, and therefore the most, most originally most fully affectionate and maternal” - there now is the chargin too, some lost American addition and mood with it - “Eden’s in Africa”. (Kerouac 1966: 129)

Steve Wilson argues that Mardou “contains authenticity” and that “Leo’s love affair with Mardou, then, gives him what must have been remarkable access to a way of life most Americans in the 50s had never seen” (1999: 312, emphasis in original). The novelty of such an affair notwithstanding, the remark about Mardou’s authenticity is severely challenged, as Mardou’s African-American descent is called upon to establish a connection with an American quality that has been lost, and the narrator sees Mardou as the link that will help him rediscover (t)his lost Americanness. Mardou’s racial identity here initiates a multitude of new associations: it becomes a signifier for the primal woman, for lost American values, and finally it takes on Biblical allusions as well, as Africa now becomes synonymous with the blissful Garden of Eden. There is apparent confusion in this quote, and this pell-mell proliferation of linkages further affirms the constructedness of Mardou’s persona, which is modelled upon Kerouac’s “inability to leave the ethnic myth alone” (Harney 1991: 379). Mardou is not treated as an individual character, but rather as an object of cultural observation, associated either with the Native American or the African-American nation.

The African-American situation in 1950s America further undermines the narrator’s associations of Mardou’s character with images of placidity and bliss. In *The Subterraneans*, Mardou’s stance eloquently complements this picture: “she would not have me hold her arm for fear people of the street there would think her a hustler” (1966: 93). Percepied fails to understand Mardou’s concerns and devalues her fear: “‘In fact baby I’ll be a famous man and you’ll be the dignified wife of a famous man so don’t worry’ but she said ‘You don’t understand’ but her little girl-like fear so cute, so edible, I let it go” (1966: 94). The narrator’s lack of social sensitivity has been strongly criticized by Miles, who calls attention to the fact that at the time “ten million Black people were living under segregation in the South, denied the vote, denied decent education and medical care, forced to ride in the back of buses” (1998: 193). To this, one could add that Percepied fails to acknowledge Mardou as an independent character, as he is measuring her value against his own accomplishments: “the wife of a famous man” (1966: 94). Being female, Mardou is fated to be defined by her partner, who puts forth a model of masculine authority in order to counteract “the implication that conformity is emasculating and that modern mass society is feminizing” in the 1950s (Gilbert 2005: 63). In an attempt to safeguard male hierarchical structures, it was therefore suggested that “the remedy for contemporary cultural ills lay in the assertion of vigor, criticism, energy, authority, and a whole range of attributes associated with traditional male individualism” (Gilbert 2005: 66). As mainstream everyday life was becoming over-refined, emasculation seemed an imminent threat, and the need to project an alternative male image arose with urgency. Within this cultural context, it comes as no

surprise that Kerouac's characters are to a large extent modelled upon patterns of assertive masculinity. Such representations become exceptionally poignant when the focus shifts to the white male's interactions with the ethnic female subject, who is meant to suffer doubly both because of her gender and on account of her race. Percepiéd's reproduction of particularly forceful stereotypes reflects the racially biased attitudes of the 1950s: "every time I see a Mexican gal or Negress I say to myself, 'hustlers'" (1966: 129).<sup>4</sup> The obstinate repetition of Mardou's social exclusion betrays the narrator's insistence upon such notions, and could be suggestive of an acceptance of such practices. That Mardou's discrimination on account of her race should be so openly asserted would appear to encourage the perpetuation of racial prejudices and hinder an appreciation of Mardou's own merits as an individual character. It is true that at this stage Kerouac does not actively question his narrator's stance, leaving the text seemingly vulnerable to criticism. However, Kerouac does not fail to indicate his skepticism towards his narrator's views by emphasizing the arrogance of Percepiéd's assumed salvational mission, and ultimately showing his incapacity to rise to such a task. Percepiéd's final subjection to ridicule by the ethnic woman highlights his inadequacies. The opening page of the novel declares that the story is narrated by "an unself-confident man, at the same time [...] an egomaniac" (1966: 1). Kerouac has from the start warned that he will employ an unreliable, inconsistent narrator, suggesting that his utterances should not be taken at face value. By foregrounding the unreliability of his narrator, Kerouac undermines the validity of his pronouncements. This is a powerful disclaimer on the part of the author, and it invites more complex readings of the text that ultimately challenge overtly negative criticisms. The manner in which he explores the dynamics of an interracial affair suggests that rather than reproducing the chauvinistic discourses of his time, Kerouac employs conventional stereotypes as a platform from which he can communicate his own critique of American society.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 "Pernicious and pizen juices": Fetishizing Mardou's dark body

The complications arising from Mardou's portrayal as the exotic other persist in the narrative, and are further exposed when the narrator moves on to trace Mardou's racial alterity directly upon her body. The insistence on colour is striking; images of darkness regularly accompany Mardou's descriptions. From early on, she is set apart from the others as "the dark one" (Kerouac 1966: 6). Later, there are references to "her Negroness", her "little brown body" and "her brown breasts" (1966: 43, 57, 99). Even her 'madness' is indirectly associated with her race, when she is described as a "naked brown girl, frightened" (1966: 36); moreover, Mardou attracts Percepiéd's interest "maybe too because she was Negro" (1966: 3). In *The Subterraneans* the interrelation of nation and gender is emphatically brought to the fore, and Mardou's African-American identity actively conditions the construction of her body through Percepiéd's narration. Even in his sexual fantasies, the image of darkness is predominant: "her dark feet ...

<sup>4</sup> In *On the Road*, Mexican Terry is similarly described as "a common little hustler" (Kerouac 2000: 75).

<sup>5</sup> There is an instance in *The Subterraneans* when even Percepiéd expresses sharp awareness of the African-American predicament: "damn the lynchers, the not-likings" (1966: 83).

dark eyes, little soft brown face ... a little thin brown woman disposed to wearing dark clothes" (1966: 15). Darkness is at this point invested with fetishistic dimensions. Having made the association of Mardou with Africa as 'original motherland', the narrator projects these images directly upon her body, which is perceived as the site upon which his desire to reach the origin can be granted.<sup>6</sup> Percepiéd's interest now focuses on the act of intercourse, and particular emphasis is placed on the description of Mardou's reproductive organs, which are invested with a threatening quality. The narrator of *The Subterraneans* offers a fixated view of Mardou's genitalia; they are not only exotic, but also actively frightening: "I thought I saw some kind of black thing I've never seen before, hanging, like it *scared* me" (1966: 63; emphasis in original).

Nicholls explains that "a Freudian reading ... would suggest that it is the disavowed ('some kind of black thing') phallus" and further elaborates that "the confession that hinges more on insinuation than on revelation functions in a very similar way to the formation of the fetish" (2003: 539). The (fetishistic) emphasis on colour is striking. The fact that Mardou's genitalia should be described as *a thing* indicates the narrator's refusal to provide a more precise definition, and thus signals his unwillingness to further analyze his fetish. Moreover, this black mass is *hanging*, suggesting a sense of doom that plagues the narrator. Percepiéd declares that Mardou's genitalia are a novel sight to him. Attractive as novelty might be, however, it is often accompanied by fear of the unknown; this is the case with the narrator, who italicizes the word *scared* to convey his emotional state more emphatically (Kerouac 1966: 63).

As the racial other, Mardou is mysterious and primitive. That her bodily deformation should be located in her genitalia is not without precedent; the prejudiced associations of primitivism and sexual promiscuity that Percepiéd draws on have a long tradition. Low reports that "the black woman became a symbol of regressive sexuality and sexual promiscuity in the nineteenth century" (1996: 23) and that "the black woman's 'primitive sexual appetite' was bodily manifested in the possession of 'primitive' genitalia" (1996: 23-24). Thus, when Percepiéd elaborates on the anatomy of Mardou's genitalia, he is perpetuating long-standing associations of sexuality and race:

fearing secretly the few times I had come into contact with the rough stubble-like quality of the pubic, which was Negroid and therefore a little rougher, tho not enough to make any difference, and the insides itself I should say the best, the richest, most fecund moist warm and full of hidden soft slidy mountains. (Kerouac 1966: 104)

Percepiéd attributes Mardou's particular anatomy to her African heritage. Dark Mardou's 'Negroid' genitalia are different from a white woman's, and this difference ultimately renders Mardou more desirable. Having already endowed Mardou with a variety of racial markers, the narrator now moves on to project his fantasy upon her actual anatomical features. Eversley argues that "Fox's subjectivity – her race and her gender – is not more real than Percepiéd's, yet his narration fixes it as visible and tactile" (2002: 261), transforming the fantasy into tangible imagery. Thus, his desire is magnified; the words chosen to depict the inside of Mardou's body abound with

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<sup>6</sup> Early on the narrator states that he sees "women as wells" (1966: 12).

suggestions of warmth and fertility: “richest, most fecund moist warm” (Kerouac 1966: 104). Union with Mardou is vital now as the narrator constructs her anatomical features as welcoming loci that will help him compensate for his own distance from and craving for the origin. The narrator finds Mardou’s association with primitive sexuality intriguing; having already made a case for her exotic nature, he now further emphasizes her difference on a sexual level.

That the narrator grants Mardou’s sexuality such a centre-stage position seems a daring gesture considering the mainstream conservatism of the 1950s. Viewed in this light, Percepied’s sexual involvement with Mardou acquires strong political dimensions, as it constitutes a statement of resistance to dominant cultural practices of the time. Union with the racial other takes one further into the fringes of society and demarcates one’s clear differentiation from the norm. The mere theme of interracial romance poses a challenge to 1950s mainstream America’s morality. By (partially, or at least erotically) reaching out towards Mardou’s outsider status, Percepied attempts a considerable rupture not only with the racially biased attitudes of his time, but more expansively with the wider ideological and cultural conventions of the 1950s. However, despite its liberal overtones, *The Subterraneans* remains limited as it ultimately fails to subvert the established order; when faced with the dilemma, the narrator is ready to sacrifice Mardou to his fantasy of raising a family in the South (1966: 62).<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it still remains the case that Kerouac’s narrative manages to openly bring to the fore the subversive power of interracial romance. Actively challenging middle-class patterns of social exclusion and openly defying the *status quo* of 1950s America, Kerouac makes a case for the acceptance of the racial other. Rejecting the conventional practices of the time, Kerouac does not shy away from explicit references to intercourse and orgasm, articulating a forceful statement against conservatism. The tension created by Percepied’s prejudiced statements notwithstanding, the boldness of Kerouac’s liberal treatment of interracial romance continues to be of considerable significance. In fact, the text seems to be torn between the desire to integrate the ethnic woman on the one hand, and the chauvinistic discourse advanced by its narrator on the other.

The radicalism of the text remains contained, however, and the racially biased overtones of the novel emerge with particular emphasis. Mardou’s anatomical description is suggestive of a colonizing attitude towards the ethnic female. Boehmer explains that:

From the point of view of the colonizer specifically, fears and curiosities, sublimated fascinations with the strange or the “primitive”, are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. The seductive and/or repulsive qualities of the wild or other, as well as its punishment and expulsion from the community, are figured on the body, and as

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the narrator’s own ethnic difference (he is an American with French roots) is largely downplayed in the novel, and although his name is suggestive of French origins, and there is also an explicit reference to his ethnic background, “You Canucks” (1966: 76), by virtue of his gender he is welcomed into the brotherhood of the subterraneans on equal terms. Similarly, Yuri, a Yugoslavian subterranean character, is ultimately forgiven for his involvement with Mardou, for the sake of the bonds of male camaraderie. It appears that the need to safeguard the image of the authoritative male, which seemed threatened by rapid changes in the social scene of the 1950s, rises above ethnic considerations in the novel.

(fleshy, corporeal, often speechless) body. To rehearse some of the well-known binary tropes of postcolonial discourse, as opposed to the colonizer (white man, centre of intellection, of control), the other is cast as carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloguing, possession, penetration. Images of the body of the other are conventionally conflated with those of the land, unexplored land too being seen as amorphous, wild, seductive, dark, open to possession. (2005: 129)

In *The Subterraneans* the repulsive outweighs the seductive, as Mardou's sex is not only exotic but also considerably menacing. However, the fear that her genitalia inspire makes her colonization even more challenging. The narrator projects the racial stereotypes Boehmer enumerates directly upon Mardou's genitalia. There is even an implicit admission of doing so, as his description of her vagina is preceded by the disclaimer *I thought*, warning that what follows is likely to be the depiction of a fantasy rather than an actual sight. When specific anatomical characteristics are described, suggestions of a fetishistic tendency are again present ("fearing secretly" [1966: 104]). Thus, the passages on Mardou's genitalia are heavily influenced by the narrator's personal visions and expectations. It is imperative for the narrator that Mardou should be invested with primitive and raw qualities, so that he can enact his colonizing role.

Mardou's sexual power has to be subdued not only because it is disturbing to the narrator, but also because it poses an active threat to the male species. It is reported that while having intercourse with Mardou, the narrator's friend Adam "experienced piercing insupportable screaming sudden pain, so he had to go to the doctor and have himself bandaged"; the narrator concludes: "I now wonder and suspect if our little chick didn't really intend to bust us in half" (1966: 104). Mardou's vagina thus poses a threat of emasculation. A menace to the phallus and masculinity, Mardou finally becomes hazardous also to the narrator's existence, as she is eventually defined by her emasculating *vagina dentata*.<sup>8</sup> There is one instance in *The Subterraneans* where the narrator is concerned that "she was really a thief of some sort and therefore was out to steal my heart, my white man heart, a Negress sneaking in the world sneaking the holy white men for sacrificial rituals later when they'll be roasted and roiled" (1966: 67). Perceped concludes: "she'd thief my soul and eat it" (1966: 68). Now Mardou is endowed with cannibalistic tendencies. In her capacity as *vagina dentata*-become-cannibalistic mouth, Mardou is perceived as a destructive man-consuming vortex. Thus, she is turned into a *miasma* from which it is necessary to seek protection. However, in his attempt to escape the threat that Mardou poses, the narrator fails to stay alert to another danger: that of being eventually consumed by his art. Indeed, he seems to find it difficult to maintain the balance between his association with Mardou and his obsession with artistic creation. Kerouac produces a text seething with tensions that expose the problems implicated in interracial relations in the 1950s; these difficulties are aestheticized through the use of vivid and often unfamiliar imagery.

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<sup>8</sup> Unsurprisingly, Perceped's (often gendered) narrative perpetuates a long history of demonization of the female organ which can be traced back to ancient folktales. A sinister tool of emasculation, Mardou's vagina now becomes horrific, and the urgency to control her overwhelming.

Grace notes the grotesque quality that can be traced in Mardou Fox, making a point for their “membership in the ‘low’ culture of the grotesque” (2000: 51). Discussing Mardou’s body, she argues that it is “the badge of membership”. It is “black and small, wrecked by drug and alcohol use, psychic breakdown, male violence, and sexual excess” (2000: 51). To this should be added the attribution of grotesque anatomical features that ultimately recreate the image of the *vagina dentata*. Eburne argues that “Percepied’s fear of being used up by Mardou – of being chewed up and devoured by the *vagina dentata* – represents the flip side of the romance of blackness which seems most actively at work in Kerouac’s acceptance of its promise of rebirth and self-evacuation in the first place” (1997: 80). Of course, this initial promise is from the outset problematic, as it is based on simulation. Percepied’s vacuous search for origins, when in fact “there is no return to any origin which is not already a construction and therefore a kind of writing” (Chow 2003: 333), is not a risk-free endeavour; it can potentially be destructive. Death has to precede rebirth, and conquest comes at a high price indeed. Mardou’s exoticism is not only seductive but menacing as well, and the *vagina dentata* image further undermines any possibility of successful union with this exotic woman.<sup>9</sup>

Thus threatened by Mardou’s emasculating powers, Percepied decides to take measures to safeguard his masculinity, and attempts to eradicate the danger Mardou poses through linguistic appropriation: the detailed description of Mardou’s genitalia in *The Subterraneans* resembles the discourse not of a lover so much as that of a scientist. The meticulousness with which the body is examined is striking: “We both of us childlike examined said body and looked closely and it wasn’t anything pernicious and pizen juices but just bluedark as in all kinds of women and I was really and truly assured to actually see and make the study with her” (Kerouac 1966: 63). Here the examination of *said body* is evocative of a medical dissection almost. The body is fragmented as the focus is now on the detailed description of the vagina, and the narrator is not reassured until he is able to establish a similarity between her and “all kinds of women” (1966: 63). It is only through this rigorous examination and meticulous familiarization that he can neutralize the threat of the *vagina dentata* and eliminate Mardou’s power. However, one remains perplexed as to the degree of reassurance a term as vague and abstract as *bluedark* can inspire. Nicholls reads fetishistic dimensions into this: “the body is another color which approximates blackness (‘blue dark’ - ‘BL(ued) A(r)K’), but which also displaces blackness” (2003: 540). The oscillation between the pragmatic examination of the body and the act of fetishization problematizes the nature of Percepied’s interest for Mardou, as he now seems to fluctuate between rationalizing Mardou’s otherness so as to domesticate it, and fetishizing it for his individual pleasure. Therefore, when he declares: “my love for Mardou has completely separated me from any previous phantasies valuable and otherwise” (Kerouac 1966: 63), the parodic resonances of his pronouncement are exposed. The narrator is ultimately unable to bring his narrative to a closure that would grant him romantic fulfillment; trapped in the pitfalls of colonial assertion, Percepied is ultimately met with the female subject’s resistance. This resistance poignantly reveals the

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<sup>9</sup> For a different take on the *vagina dentata* concept in *The Subterraneans* see Nicholls (2003: 541).

instability of the premises upon which the narrator's romantic ventures were initially based, and subsequently lays bare their vacuous nature.

#### 4. Mardou's resistance

An initial reading of *The Subterraneans* would suggest that Mardou is silently acquiescent and easily complies with Percepied's pronouncements. In one of the rare instances that she is allowed speech, she expresses acute awareness of her subordinate status, denouncing her right to an opinion: "but I'm not supposed to" (1966: 54), and later expressing subservient humility with respect to Percepied's work (1966: 56). In most instances, Mardou gives the impression that she docilely caters to Percepied's whims and tolerates his caprices. The narrator eventually describes her as a prize: "my prize my own woman", and later on: "men - love - not for sale - my prize - possession" (1966: 61, 97).<sup>10</sup> Percepied's attitude affirms that "in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (Sedgwick 1985: 21). Predictably, then, Percepied's yearning for Mardou grows stronger after Yuri has expressed interest in her. Mardou is now treated as a trophy that the narrator refuses to sell. Thus, she is conceptualized as a saleable commodity. Nonetheless, if Mardou is to be perceived as a prize, then what exactly does her possession stand for? Possession of Mardou confirms the narrator's status as the dominant male, and hence his victory in the 'war' with his 'enemy', Yuri. Moreover, on a textual level, Mardou can be seen as a prize for literary achievement. Ambiguous as the idea may be, however, it still subscribes to a discourse that upholds the commodification of the female subject.

Although Mardou displays a seemingly submissive attitude, a closer look at the text reveals her expressions of resistance, for instance when she protests that men "rush off and have big wars and consider women as prizes instead of human beings, well man I may be in the middle of all this shit but I certainly don't want any part of it" (1966: 23). Mardou refuses to cast herself as a prize to be won. Not desiring to be viewed as a trophy, she articulates her resistance to the aspiring conqueror; she will not serve as a passive award. Kerouac's negotiation of such concepts in *The Subterraneans* is revealing of an anxiety about (other- and self-) definition that goes beyond the superficiality of 1950s mainstream practices, and reflects the tension between the conservative forces of post-war America and the more radical social and philosophical debates that were surfacing. Kerouac has Mardou articulate her defiance of the established male order shortly before the emergence of the Civil Rights movement, perceptively foreshadowing the feminist protests that would ensue in its wake. This is a rare instance of Mardou's taking control over her gendered image and engaging in self-definition. Mardou criticizes masculine belligerence and considers it degrading for women. Her defiance of Percepied's positions constitutes a radical questioning of 1950s dominant social practices, all the more forceful because articulated by the ethnic subject.

<sup>10</sup> The idea of woman as prize re-appears in *Tristessa*, a story of interracial romance written between 1955 and 1956: "Ah, so she thinks of her body as some prize she shan't give away" (1992: 88).

A generally quiet character in the novel, Mardou even more rarely talks back. Even when direct quotations are used, there is confusion as to their actual source.<sup>11</sup> However, rather than a sign of weakness, her silence is an artful way of expressing resistance. Thus, Mardou's silence constitutes an indication of her refusal to conform to the speech patterns that the narrator of *The Subterraneans* prescribes for her:

the cultured funny tones of part Beach, part I. Magnin model, part Berkeley, part Negro highclass, something, a mixture of *langue* and style of talking and use of words I'd never heard before except in certain rare girls of course *white* and so strange [...] but definitely the new bop generation way of speaking, you don't say *I*, you say "ahy" or "Oy" and long ways, like oft or erstwhile "effeminate" way of speaking [...] it's charming but much too strange. (1966: 10, emphasis in original)

Mardou's speech is presented as an amalgam of many influences, as the hip language of (North) Beach fuses with posh consumer accents and educated Berkeley nuances. Percepiéd is fixated upon Mardou's race as a conditioning factor; in this instance, language is associated with race to exemplify a fashionable way of speaking. The introduction of the term *langue* here invites a Saussureian reading. Both Mardou's *langue* (system of rules underlying a language) and *parole* (the way an individual uses language) strike the narrator as unusual mixtures. Thus, Mardou is hybridized not only on the level of race but on that of language as well, as the narrator associates her particular idiom with that of white women. In the attempt to emulate white speech, however, Mardou is said to produce 'strange' and exotic language. Particular emphasis is placed on phonetics, which deviate from Standard English pronunciation. Hence, after being cast as the *racial* and *gendered* other, Mardou now becomes the *linguistic* other as well. Modelling Mardou's language upon 'hip' nuances, the narrator again bestows a symbolic quality on Mardou, as she now becomes the representative of an entire generation of new 'others', namely *the bop generation*. In thus doing, Percepiéd perpetuates "a larger practice within colonialist discourse, a practice in which the possibilities of subaltern speech are contained by the discourse of the oppressor" (Griffiths 1995: 238). However, there are only few instances when Mardou actually puts the specific linguistic patterns assigned to her to use. Kerouac

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<sup>11</sup> On the rare instances when this occurs, it is highly debatable whether the language employed should be attributed to Mardou or to the narrator. Perhaps the most prominent example of the degree to which Percepiéd's narrative aspirations shape Mardou's utterances is to be located in the 'quoting' of a letter Mardou sends. The citation of Mardou's letter spans several pages (75-83). Rather than providing a coherent account of the letter, however, the narrator interposes long passages of his own commentary after each line. Even when claiming to quote Mardou, Percepiéd cannot refrain from providing his point of view, reconstructing Mardou's narrative and incorporating flashbacks and interpretations of his own; the result is a highly affected letter and its diction strengthens the suspicion that its authorship belongs to Percepiéd rather than Mardou. Similarly, the credibility of the narrative of Mardou's 'madness' is dubious, as the focalization is largely Percepiéd's. Although the text purports to offer an insight into Mardou's psyche, it soon transpires that Mardou in fact becomes the victim of Percepiéd's narrative exploits, which largely either deprive her of speech or model her speech upon the narrator's need for linguistic assertion. Thus, when he urges Mardou to "go on with your amazing story" (1966: 38), the irony of his utterance is strongly felt.

casts Mardou as a generally silent character, so as to either express indifference towards the image that Percepied has constructed of her, or, from a more radical point of view, to actively resist Percepied's fabrications. Thus, Mardou's meekness is not as inoffensive as the narrator portrays it to be.

Moreover, there are a few passages in *The Subterraneans* in which Mardou articulates direct disapproval at her portrayal. She particularly disagrees with Percepied's proclamation that "she is the only girl I've ever known who could really understand bop and sing it" (1966: 92), and also with his pronouncement that she is "the child of Bop", and his suggestion that disavowal of bop would equal disavowal of her roots (1966: 135-36). Percepied here once more reproduces stereotypical images associated with race and origins and expects Mardou to subscribe to these notions. Exasperated with such stereotyping, Mardou defiantly asserts: "I don't like bop, I really don't, it's like junk to me, too many junkies are bop men and I hear the junk in it" (1966: 135-36). Mardou's decision to distance herself from associations with jazz forcefully challenges the textual dynamics of the novel. Weinreich points to the "jazz environment" (1987: 132) of *The Subterraneans* and in their articles Eversley (2002: 265), Panish (1994: 115-17) and Van Elteren (1999: 77) comment on the influence of jazz music upon Kerouac's writing. Given the importance of jazz for the plot and composition of the novel, the wider implications of Mardou's refusal to subscribe to the bop rituals that Percepied constructs around her are of particular significance. Not only does she tarnish the stereotypical image that Percepied has associated with her, but her questioning of the relevance of jazz problematizes the novel's stylistics as well. The associations of Percepied's improvisatory bebop structures with Mardou's African-American heritage are severely challenged as Mardou not only disavows this association but is also contemptuous of bop, dismissing it outright as 'junk'. Thus, by implication, Percepied's narrative model is criticized while Mardou rises above stereotypes to articulate her individual tastes and disengages herself from Percepied's expectations.

*The Subterraneans* evinces yet another instance whereby Mardou straightforwardly questions Percepied's classifications. Protesting his overarching idealizations, she proclaims: "don't call me Eve" (1966: 149). This is a compelling declaration on Mardou's part; she decides to denounce her simulated image, and proffers her disapproval of the role that Percepied has assigned to her. Mardou now renounces the symbolic paraphernalia that the narrator has inflicted on her persona. Contesting her simulated role, she openly challenges the associations with the concept of origins that Percepied has introduced and invalidates her role as 'Eve', the 'primordial' woman. Thus, Mardou inscribes her resistance, which gives rise to considerable tension in the text. Mardou's sharp response casts new light over the power dynamics of their relationship; exposing the simulated nature of Percepied's constructions, it undermines his hegemonic position as the dominant male and challenges his narrative practices. Such tensions demonstrate the dubious premises upon which the Percepied-Fox affair is grounded and ultimately parody Percepied's domineering impulses.

Mardou's resistance is so influential that it creates generalized disturbance on a linguistic level in *The Subterraneans*. This becomes explicit when she expresses her desire

to end the affair: “but we should really break up” (1966: 145).<sup>12</sup> Typically, Percepiéd underestimates Mardou’s more complex aspects and expects her to repeat herself, self-confident in his (mis)belief that he can manipulate her: “that kind of argument that I can, as of yore and again, break, by saying, ‘But let’s, look, I have, wait –’ for always the man can make the little woman bend, she was made to bend, the little woman was –” (1966: 147). The narrator here employs forceful verbs that albeit disjointed convey a sense of authority and influence. However, their disarrayed juxtaposition betrays the narrator’s difficulty in negotiating Mardou’s decision. The narrator cannot produce convincing arguments with which to substantiate his point, and the reader is left suspended and ultimately uncertain as to the validity of Percepiéd’s utterance. The narrator’s conviction that the male can invariably manipulate the female is undermined by the abrupt disruption of his sentence. Moreover, Percepiéd’s belittling of Mardou (*the little woman*) is suggestive of his anxiety about self-assertion.

Mardou further destabilizes the narrator’s self-confidence by providing him with information about her encounter with Yuri. However, by not telling him what he expects to hear, she unsettles his premeditated answer. Interestingly, Mardou reports the news of her adultery in disjointed speech: “For a place to sleep, he was drunk, he rushed in – and – well – ... Well baby we made it together, –” (1966: 148). The use of dashes suggests fragmentation; it seems that the gravity of such an act cannot be conveyed through linear speech, and its narration becomes “incoherent” (1966: 148). Rather than taking these linguistic gestures as a sign of weakness, however, we might consider how they can shed light on another aspect of Mardou’s character. Mardou is capable of adjusting her language according to the exigencies of a particular situation, veering through a variety of linguistic strategies that enable her to convey her point more fittingly. Rather than an example of poor communication skills, disjointed language here points to Mardou’s ability to choose a register that is most appropriate to the circumstances. Mardou’s resistance forcefully influences the syntactical structures of the novel, reflecting a greater textual disorder. When the subject decides to renounce her simulated image, the text becomes a battleground where grammar and syntax are disturbed by the turmoil this defiance causes. Mardou’s protest upsets the narrator’s thoughts and utterances; language becomes fragmented, reflecting the unsettling potential of Mardou’s refusal to subscribe to the narrator’s expectations.

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

“Baby it’s up to you ... about how many times you wanta see me and all that – but I want to be independent like I say”.  
And I go home having lost her love.  
And write this book. (1966: 152)

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<sup>12</sup> Another example of female resistance to the established male order appears in *And the Hippos Were Boiled in their Tanks*, where in a passage written by Kerouac a female character protests: “Do you guys think you can walk out on us like this and expect us to wait on our asses? Do you think women are suckers?” (Burroughs and Kerouac 2008: 38).

This last pronouncement is open to multiple interpretations. The fact that Mardou is finally lost to another man seems to downplay the narrator's colonial attitude, as it undermines his power and authority. However, her defiance is based on her adultery, that is, her association with another man. Consequently, it can be argued that she is thus perpetuating her submission to the masculine order. Incapable of completely severing links with the narrator, Mardou allows him a considerable degree of choice, and therefore does not altogether collapse the established male hierarchy. However, the defiant re-definition of her personal space opens up significant possibilities and space for resistance. Revolting against her previous association with the private sphere of domesticity, Mardou breaks these boundaries and decides to make a forceful entrance into the public sphere usually associated with men, to be 'independent'. The degree of her 'independence' notwithstanding, her decision constitutes a step towards emancipation from Percepiéd's control.

## 5. Conclusion

As Mardou refuses to subscribe to her simulated image, *The Subterraneans* finally emerges as a tale of artistic conceit and love lost. Kerouac exposes the problematic aspects of his narrator's approach to the ethnic woman and introduces into the narrative various strategies of resistance that ultimately undermine Percepiéd's assertions of authority. Mardou's resistance poignantly reveals the vacuity of the narrator's romantic escapades. The textual tensions of *The Subterraneans* lay bare and simultaneously challenge Cold War America's stereotypical conceptions of the exotic other. Foregrounding the complications arising from an interracial romance in the conservative context of 1950s America, Kerouac's narrative addresses considerations of ethnicity, authenticity and hybridity, unsettling established preconceptions whilst pointing to the need to redefine his contemporaries' approach to the gendered racial other.

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