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# The Source of Hip

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**the minnesota review**

*a journal of committed writing*

featuring a special section on  
*50s Culture*

Shelly Eversley

### The Source of Hip

In 1956 integration for Norman Mailer involved a contrast: "the Negro had his sexual supremacy and the white had his white supremacy" (286). Mailer's verbal pyrotechnics were the result of a bet with *Independent* editor Lyle Stuart. Stuart and Mailer argued over the question of freedom in the mass media and whether the popular press would publish articles concerned with the more controversial implications of desegregation. At the same time Mailer felt "I had burned out my talent" (286), and in order to recover, he would have "to say what I knew to say in a language so ugly it could not be ignored" (288). His incendiary statements won him the bet—no newspaper in the South was willing to print his comments. But, because of its association with "the Negro" and with sex, his now "ugly" language would render him Hip. His new approach earned him the attention of some of the nation's most prominent writers and critics' and it inspired his "trip into the psychic wild" that culminated in his "The White Negro" (1957); an essay he claims is "one of the best things I have done" (289). In it Mailer argues that within "the Negro" lies the "courage to be individual"—a spectacular contrast to the "collective failure of nerve" he attributes to whites. For him the sensual communion between "the Negro" and "the White," best characterized as interracial coitus, reflects possibility and meaning at the transitional cultural moment in which the symbols and the significance of moral responsibility seem pale, as it were, beside the graphic effects of concentration camps, the atomic bomb, and the Cold War.

Similarly, Jack Kerouac writes *The Subterraneans* (1958) after his affair with an African American woman, Alene Lee. While his autobiographical novel claims to describe his "Beat" subculture, it evolves quickly into the story of interracial sex—a story written in his now exemplary "spontaneous prose." Through sex *The Subterraneans* bears witness not to any kind of history, but to Kerouac's white Negro art and to his own metaphorical beatification. He completed the novel days after the end of the affair, after narrating the details of the relationship, he concludes, "And I go home having lost her love. And I write this book" (111). The remarkable haste in which he generated the manuscript suggests, for some, that he participated in the affair "primarily to get material" (Amburn 194).

With both Mailer and Kerouac, the circumstances that seem to ignite their projects are as significant as their results. Kerouac's "Beat" and Mailer's "Hip" depend on "the Negro." More than a question of racist and racial appropriation, "the Negro" figures as a crucial symbol in their respective sexualized rituals of psychic exploration and art. A religious metaphysics underwrites the novel and the essay's articulations of individual authenticity, and, in the Beat or Hip *beatification*, "the Negro" becomes canonized as Saint, a divine symbol of a new piety meant to establish a counterculture both authors understood as critical to individual integrity and freedom.

The status of "the Negro," especially during the 1950s when the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision promised to dismantle the persistent and visible distinction between "white" and "black," foregrounds a simultaneously racial and sexual panic—an intersection usually met with critical silence—as it details a crisis of normativity, of whiteness, and of heterosexuality. This crisis foregrounds black people's powerful presence and position within a universal American art and culture to such an extent that *The Subterraneans* and "The White Negro" cannot repress that acknowledgment. The question of integration—distinct from assimilation—not only characterizes the era, it also represents its fundamental challenge. Thus, this essay is not concerned with assimilation, generally understood as a movement of blackness into whiteness and white acceptance, but with acknowledgment, the inclusion of blackness as critically central to any "American" art. "What [Would] America Be Like Without Blacks?" Ralph Ellison asks, proleptically challenging critics interested in an emerging white studies to rethink the mode of inquiry that continues to relegate "the Negro" to the margins as spectacular indicators of the vital contrast and enunciation of whiteness. While the issue here initially appears to be the persistence of whiteness—a critical question Richard Dyer argues "seems not to be there as a subject at all" (141)—it quickly becomes a quarrel between the primacy of "the white" over "the black" that, in the mid-century transitional moment, reflects the ongoing crisis of "American" identity and art. Kerouac's and Mailer's texts offer an opportunity to discuss the fearful intersections between race, miscegenation, and sexuality as they rise to the surface of 1950s American consciousness. Their challenge is to resist the simplified solution that separates persons and to reconcile the theory and the practice of integration as a fundamental principle of democracy and art.

Kerouac's and Mailer's investment in "the Negro" is at once an act of admiration and piracy that speaks to their pressing need for meaning within their ritualistic declarations of consciousness, of individuality, and of art. Unfortunately, neither admit to having read their contemporaries on the other side of the color-line. The very question of integration that inspires Mailer's essay obviously preoccupied a great many Black American intellectuals in the 1940s and 50s. Many of these intellectuals understood the lie of American "democracy" as a problem of personal integrity and faith that must be addressed by a nascent art. Black intellectuals writing in the postwar era anticipate such Beat manifestoes as John Clellon Holmes's 1952 *New York Times Magazine* essay "This is the Beat Generation." In a 1945 essay for the *New Republic*, for example, Ellison writes "Oh, we beat that boy," arguing that beneath the Negro's "folksy surface there lies—like a booby trap in a music box of folk tunes—a disillusionment" (95). Later in 1952, his subterranean hero in *Invisible Man* declares, "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you are a part of all the sound and anguish" (4). Holmes defines his alleged neologism, "beat," as "a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness" (10). His act of verbal branding

recalls Ellison's earlier use of the term. And Ellison's *Invisible Man* shares with Holmes's "Beat Generation," "the strings of a quest" (Holmes 19). Likewise, the title of Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) obviously resonates with the marginal, *beat* individual, and this promise is borne out by its subject: an existential, psychological and spiritual journey for self definition as in Kerouac's *On The Road* (1955). Mailer's 1957 proclamation "the source of Hip is the Negro" (291) and Wright's declaration the same year that "the Negro is America's metaphor" (74) mark a cultural moment in which the prominence of "the Negro" is conjoined with that of phenomenology, a philosophy of experience that amounts to a reconciliation of the intellectual and the psychological with the material facts of the body. In short, the Negro is Beat.

Distinguishing between sexual supremacy and white supremacy, Mailer argues that the object of segregation is to repress the victory of the dark beast over the white hero. His fear that he had "burned out his talent" resulted in his striking self-characterization as "a noisy pushy middling ape who had been tolerated too long by his literary betters" (286, 289). Given the metaphorical blackening he applies to himself, it is no wonder that within the logic that opens his preliminary essay, "the Negro" has meaning (sexual), and the white has nothing—the whiteness and the purity of his supremacy is nullified, or soiled, by its lack of distinction. The comparison of sexual supremacy and white supremacy suggests an idle whiteness in stark contrast to the salient "Negro." It realizes unequivocally Ellison's declaration in 1945 that "it is practically impossible for the white American to think of sex, of economics, his children or womenfolk, or of sweeping socio-political changes, without summoning into consciousness fear-flecked images of black men" (97). Mailer's own fear-flecked characterization aggrandizes what critics have recently described as the processes through which blackness, often sexualized, haunts the white imagination.<sup>2</sup> The shadow of the Negro "beast" lends definition to "white" intellect; for Mailer such "definition" would lend him an important victory. But the shock value of his essay as well as of Kerouac's novel lies in the graphic literal and metaphorical articulations of the simultaneous pleasures and dangers of miscegenation. Sex, and more significantly, interracial orgasm, becomes the liberatory symbol and the solution to their American crisis of feeling. Both foreground the infrequently addressed issue of how we inhabit our bodies, translating Robert F. Reid-Pharr's question concerning interracial sex—"how we fuck, or rather what we think when we fuck" (76)—into the realm of art and the conditions that produce it.<sup>3</sup> Mailer's and Kerouac's invocation of negrophilia, the white desire for "blackness" and black flesh, demands a simultaneous engagement with thinking and doing, theory and practice. It produces interracial sex as the sublime transcendence of status and the status quo at moments in their writing when aesthetics, and its failure, are concerned. Since no one can "fuck" the sublime, enter the canonized Negro.

As if in confession Kerouac writes, "Mardou Fox, whose face when I first saw it . . . made me think, 'By God, I've got to get involved with that

little woman . . . and maybe too because she was a Negro" (2). Embodied contradiction inspires Kerouac's "outsider" art; his sensual and dangerous intimacy with the "the Negro" brings to life the dynamic "madness" of Beat. Similarly, Mailer writes, "Incompatibilities have come to bed" (295), and from that tension emerges a "new nervous system" (298). This emerging passion to feel and thus avoid social conformity stimulates also the orgasmic intensity that characterizes Kerouac's spontaneous prose piece. As the "true" poet who claims the natural ability to discern the sublime, his fictional self, Leo Percepied, purports to perceive "the Negro" as the sacred object of his subterranean quest. He desires sexual possession, "to immerse my lonely being . . . in the warm bath and salvation of her thighs" (6).

Kerouac's and Mailer's aesthetics suggest a metaphorical possibility that cannot be achieved simply by thinking. Their projects privilege instinct, now the source of Beat and its "hipocracy." Their transgressive theories of art become most vivid precisely at the moment of interracial sex. Both admired Wilhelm Reich whose *The Function of the Orgasm* (1946) explains their commitment to the eschatological potential of a cross-racial union of bodies. In his discussion of "Hip," Mailer cites Reich as an intellectual antecedent to his cohorts' sexualized attraction "to what the Negro had to offer" (293). And, as Kerouac's Percepied describes his affair with Fox, he declares Reich "a glad and wondrous discovery" (46). Reich contends that Sigmund Freud's principle of libido energy, its satisfactory development, and the satisfaction of its urges, constitutes the most important factor in human development. He developed the theory that authoritarian personalities are derived from socially-induced distortions of psychosexual energy and he believed a fully realized orgasm produced a healing energy, an "orgone," that could counter social neuroses and, among other things, inspire art. Reich's marginal relationship to the medical and governmental establishment only added to his allure for Beats and Hipsters who celebrated his research. For Kerouac and Mailer, the energy associated with Reich's description of orgasmic powers came to signify the literal and the symbolic transgression both meant to reproduce. Mailer himself built what Reich called an "orgone box" in which he could treat and enclose himself, and he theorized that "Hip is based on a mysticism of the flesh" (Rollyson 100, 110). Similarly, Kerouac's theory—"orgasm—the reflexes of the orgasm—you can't be healthy without normal sex love and orgasm" (46-47)—also became his practice. His "sex list," in which he recorded the frequency of his sexual encounters, demonstrates his commitment to sex as an aesthetic and everyday practice. In exploring the transformative potential of orgasm, Kerouac with Alene Lee, and Mailer with Adele Morales, they extend *The Function of the Orgasm* to imagine a tangible resolution to the neuroses of postwar conformist culture achieved through interracial sex, a kind of counter "integration" in which whiteness can disappear, at least metaphorically, into blackness and become something else.

That something else is jazz. "Jazz is orgasm," Mailer announces in "The White Negro." He contends that as art, jazz represents the "existentialist

synopses of the Negro" and offers, for some, the potential to divorce the vacuous whiteness of white supremacy, from meaninglessness, and to penetrate the "apocalyptic orgasm" he says is "as remote as the Holy Grail" (300). More than an idiom, jazz represents for Mailer a sacred objective which, like the remoteness of interracial orgasm, calls attention to the risk as well as the beatific mission which Kerouac details in his history of the subterraneans. Kerouac claims his "spontaneous prose" is jazz, and, like Mailer, his writing style posits an impalpable essence (e.g., orgasm, God, aura): "the direct word from the vibration" so that his writing comes not from thought (theory) but from sex (practice). In his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (1957), Kerouac encourages a writing method "in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich's 'bedouling of consciousness,' 'Come from within, out—to relaxed and said' (58). His opaque advice suggests an alternative kind of perception keyed to the improvisational structure and the feeling he associates with sexual climax. The activity, he writes, "is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image" (57). Jazz thus encryps both writers' representations within a secret code so that in their cult of artistic genius, the divine essence requires more than mimesis. For them, their writing does not merely "represent" something, it "is" something. And, rather than subscribe consciously to racial and cultural fetichisms, they attempt a project of idolatry—orgasm, jazz and "the Negro" become fused into a single, sacred icon. Moreover, they understand that if they achieve an apocalyptic climax with the divine, their progeny—their art—will stand apart, literally and metaphorically, as extraordinary.

Hip happens as whiteness processes into blackness, at the moment when a cross-racial union of bodies suggests movement beyond rigid categories of identity, and ideally, toward the revelatory potential of integration. Hip suggests also the theoretical innocence of interracial sex, in which desire is transparent; it foregrounds the dishonesty of color-blindness that makes readers and critics unaware or unwilling to engage seriously the color-consciousness that, for example, drives Leo Percepied's desire for Mardou Fox. Percepied sees the Negro woman and he wants to enter, literally, her body. But in the stark light of the morning after, his desire wears a different color:

in the morning I wake from the scream of beermares and see beside me the Negro woman with parted lips sleeping, and with little bits of white pillow stuffing in her black hair, feel almost revulsion, realize what a beast I am for feeling anything near it (17)

Always aware of difference, Kerouac's protagonist sees its material manifestations emerge the morning after sex. Fox's "Negro" lips and hair contrast concretely with Percepied's implicit understanding of his own whiteness to make the "I" that is his gender and his race feel. Fox's subjectivity—her race and her gender—is not more real than Percepied's, yet his narration fixes it as visible and tactile. The "little bits of white" that appear "in her black

hair" remind this white man of their sex, and it repulses him. Like Mailer's "hairy ape," Kerouac's protagonist now sees himself tainted and rather than submit to becoming "a beast," Perceived rebuilds the boundaries that would otherwise position his own body in a powerfully liminal space by its uncomfortably close proximity to her "race." After sex, Perceived explains, "I feel like leaving at once to get back to my work" the chimera of the not chimera but the orderly advancing sense of work and duty" (17). Upon his departure he resorts to a "white Negro" fantasy of order that distinguishes his unspoken white intellect from her spectacular and monstrous black body.

But of course Perceived wants more. He returns to the Negro woman's bed, risking a move beyond identity. In the most optimistic reading of *The Subterraneans*, Perceived, like Kerouac, wants to love—to dissolve the separation between self and Other. Such an abdication to an integrated interracial union, to feeling, or to "the beast" that primitivizes Mardou's black body as well as his own body ("what a beast I am") promises the contradictory freedom critical to the Beat ideal. I offer this reading of Kerouac's hipster not to dismiss racism and the racial fetishism essential to Beat aesthetics or, more generally, to the construction of white masculinity. The character of Mardou Fox is based on a real person, and her story bears witness to the violence and objectification on which this country and its literature was built. Rather, my point is to finally engage the negrophilic sex economy that in the sacred and secular rituals of beatification have rendered writers like Kerouac and Mailer heroes of postwar American counterculture. Were Kerouac's protagonist to embrace fully his black sex partner, then he would realize the promise of integration. The pure "whiteness" of his white supremacy would die and "the Negro" would no longer exist as a symbol of alienation and struggle but as a partner in critical thinking and practices concerning aesthetics, culture, and politics. Such a union has the potential to destroy the very logic that organizes the value of human experience as well as the dysfunctional, but canonized, hierarchy of "knowledge." Like Mailer's "mystic," Kerouac's artist and sage who is "waiting for God to show his face" (Nicosia 560) depends on a negrophilia that could perform, in theory, the death of white supremacy.

The fictional Perceived, then, is on a suicide mission. Each time he copulates with the black woman, he runs the risk of losing his whiteness; the risk affords Kerouac what Mailer calls a "primal surrender in the face of civilization" (307). For Perceived, sex with Fox, "our fattered holy Negro Joan of Arc" (31), threatens to destroy the most tangible aspects of his racial and sexual self-awareness:

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 man for sacrificial rituals later when they'll be roasted and rolled . . . Mardou becoming the big buck nigger Turkish bath attendant, and I the little fag who's broken to bits in the love affair . . . —so she'd thieve my soul and eat it—(49)

Like many other instances in the novel, Perceived imagines the theft of his essence, his "white man heart" and his white masculinity, as a fragile subjectivity that could be consumed by sex with this "Negro" woman who quickly becomes the cannibalistic<sup>4</sup> "big buck nigger." Rather than the movement of "Blackness into whiteness," here his idle, simultaneously feminine and homosexual whiteness may disappear into her "blackness," her sexuality. Their sex makes his "meaning" possible. The "sacrificial ritual" Perceived describes tampers with the logic of assimilation so that now the white can become masculine, heterosexual, and virile. Sexual panic becomes essential to his racial "transgression": Perceived's sex with Fox manifests his and Kerouac's homosexuality.<sup>5</sup> The "big buck nigger Turkish bath attendant" and "the little fag" invoke gay sex, a desire Kerouac and his fictional self mask with their heterosexual affairs. Unlike Eric Lott's discussion of an "imaginary black interlocutor" ("White" 480), a black man who helps negotiate whiteness and white masculinity, actual sex with a black woman exceeds Kerouac and Perceived's control since their imaginations cannot manage the black woman's actual response. The description constructs the affair as sacrifice, a submission essential to beatification. With the shadow of Mailer's "dark beast" Perceived believes he can become new and avoid false consciousness. The fiction and fact of Perceived's and Kerouac's interracial heterosex offers the mainstream "white" imagination what Susan Gubar argues is "an escape route from the boredom of family romance, the pieties and properties of customary roles" (175). Like Mailer's "trip into the psychic wild," Kerouac believes his hero actually lives the dream of 'going native' and extends—by literalizing—the longstanding fantasy of travel into a heart of darkness. In the novel Perceived and his "African princess" have consummated their union; that the author builds his narrative on real life experience not only authenticates his status as "countercultural hero,"<sup>6</sup> but it also demonstrates the racial and sexual stakes that condition the cultural moment.

Jonathan Paul Epurne contends that Kerouac's commodification of otherness as "a radical complication of the notions of the process of identity refiguration" (55), while underdiscussed, is central to the Beats. He draws on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to argue that Kerouac's description of his protagonist's lack, his fragile white maleness, seeks to disrupt systems of order and identity. The abject would become central to a new reality of consciousness that extends Lionel Trilling's postwar notion of the transcendental potential to resist conformity. For Epurne, Trilling's concept of the individual's ability to internalize contradiction is a metaphor, and thus can never "be identifiable as an actual material thing" (67). In its abstraction it becomes sublime, an alternate kind of neurosis, that confronts and propels "genius." But Perceived's color-consciousness refuses clear abstraction by insisting on the physical as well as the social and psychological manifestations of that "genius." The body does matter. Its significance recalls the question of "what we think when we fuck" as it relates to the Beat canonization of "the Negro." As Saint, "the Negro" metaphor can destroy "the

white" and render it what Beats and Hipsters call "holy." When applied to Kerouac's and Mailer's narratives of interracial heterosex, the "we" in Reid-Phar's question becomes especially problematic. In *The Subterraneans*, only Fox possesses a body. Her "hair" and her "hips" counterpart Percepied's "heart" and "soul" so completely that their sexual "coming together" seems impossible. The "incompatibles [that] have come to bed" in Mailer's "The White Negro" are "the inner life and the violent life, the orgy and the dream of love" (295) and seem to indicate that there are only metaphors in his description of a union between "the Negro" and "the White." In other words, there is no "we" there—a problem that jeopardizes the transgression both authors literalize in their art.

Defiance, not the dangerous and radical implications of integration, is thus critical to negrophilia and to its ritual function. As ritual Kerouac's and Mailer's projects promote a dangerous idiom, one that flaunts their white privilege, their practical position outside the realm of racial fear. They are Hip. Unlike "the Negro" who, like Emmett Till in 1955, could and did die for even the hint of such transgressions, they had nothing to lose. Consequently the Beat or Hip flirtation with the color-line at its most controversial juncture only purports to voice the courage that combats the social "collective failure of nerve" since it apes the charismatic power Kerouac and Mailer associate with Black Americans. If "the source of Hip is the Negro," then their "white Negro" defiance merely professes the ability—through the acquisition of a Weberian charisma—to set an example for a better, alternative way of American life and art. Weber defines charisma as "a certain quality of individual personality by which [the individual] is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least exceptional qualities" (329). Weber's notion of charismatic authority exceeds Beat countercultural interests, but it is significantly rooted in an attempt to engage the very essence of existence, of cosmic, cultural, and social order, and to contact what is understood as sacred and fundamental.<sup>7</sup> As self-styled outsiders who claim to have left behind the whiteness of white supremacy and have become "Negro," white Negroes believe they possess the spirit and the intellect capable of leading the emotionally impoverished masses out of the segregationist desert that for them defines the postwar moment. Kerouac's repeated question, "Why do we always say angel?" elevates his sense of Beat distinction to the level of mythology. "Angels," like Percepied's Mardou Fox and like Mailer's "psychopathic" "White Negro," stand apart as "holy" precisely because of their racial distinction. They represent alternatives to the Beat or Hip sense of mediocrity. As Other, or as Kerouac's "fellahbeen," "the Negro" is romanticized as "primitive, instinctual, cunning and in tune with the cosmos" (Bush 130-131). Features of an insight now understood as exceptional and therefore charismatic. As symbols their example inspires action, art, and behavior for the Beats. Like Ginsberg's "numinous" Muse (Lipton 160), "the Negro" is divine.

Socially and politically marginal, yet central to the U.S. cultural imagination, "the Negro" is a paradox. In other words, Black Americans are at

once universal and particular, a status that some view as positioned advantageously to perceive the multiple and discordant valences of social life. As a crucial symbol in Beat rituals of individual authenticity, "the Negro" offers a language and a logic to what Rollo May describes as a "capacity for self-consciousness." That symbolic capacity, he argues, is one "made necessary by the distinction between subject and object," and it lends coherence between "outer existence (the world) and inner meaning" (22). Ritual performance, such as Kerouac's and Mailer's quest for the "apocalyptic orgasm," often occurs in areas of life where practical control is lacking. If "is the sacramentalizing and socializing of the crises of life . . . through rituals, helped the individual to meet these crises . . . ritual gave meaning, beauty and dignity to every critical event of life" (Lipton 163). Conceived as epistemophilia, Kerouac's and Mailer's negrophilic ritual seeks to identify a consciousness that reconciles distinctions, such as differences between public and private, traditionally conceived as discrete. Kerouac's spontaneous prose, for example, is "Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog" (59) and it insists on a continuity between interiority and exteriority. Formally *The Subterraneans* seeks to make concrete the intangibles of individual experience by celebrating feeling as not only critical to the body, but also essential to knowledge. Spontaneity, jazz, and interracial orgasm, in other words, can change the world.

In *The Subterraneans*, Percepied casts himself and his black lover as Adam and Eve, an emblematic image meant to distinguish definitively gender and to elevate his story and his desire to the level of the supernatural and the ordinary. Their orgasm becomes the critical symbol in his ritual of psycho-social transcendence:

The time we had a shuddering come together and she said "I was lost suddenly" and she was lost with me tho not coming herself but frantic in my frankness (Reich's beclouding of the senses) and how she loved it. . . . we work, we wail, we bop— . . . she comes padding to me across the Garden of Eden. (72)

The jazz description of their sex invokes the self-beatification that facilitates Kerouac's writing: "I am now in the heat of my frenzy forgetting but I must tell all, but angels know all and record it in books" (73). Here, the theoretical sanctification is complete: the writer becomes an "angel" and his manuscript becomes the record performance of a meaningful and disalienated identity that has transcended death. The scene details his vision of interracial sexual climax as the critical path to enlightenment. And, notably, he presents the novel itself as Reichian orgone, the spontaneous and transformative "beclouding of the senses" he also associates with jazz.

But more importantly, the scene also reveals, inadvertently, the impotence of Kerouac's literal and metaphorical prowess.<sup>8</sup> Fox does not come, in his own terms, her orgasm does not exist. Their ritualistic union is incomplete and unrealized, his words "we work, we wail, we bop" are untrue since it is only his "franticness"—his singular (if only theoretical) orgasm—that participates in the "we" of the "holy" communion. Furthermore, there is no



"Garden of Eden" in which Fox participates: she says to Percepted, "[D]on't call me Eve" (109), and she calls attention to her refusal to participate either in his negrophilia or in his insistence on a classic gender divide. In life Lee ends the affair with Kerouac. One biographer notes that Lee had never taken Kerouac seriously as a lover and that she found him to be "helpless" (Amburn 191-93). Her agency is critical. It forces Kerouac to acknowledge the failure of his subterranean ideal—the notion of a revolutionary aesthetic that emerges from interracial orgasm—and to admit his inability to control her and the "history" his fiction claims to embody.<sup>2</sup> In the end there is no "salvation of her thighs" since the black woman is absent from the sexual climax. Even as Kerouac celebrates the pleasure and the danger he associates with his interracial affair, the novel, as novel, inadvertently betrays it. If there is no mutual orgasm, the transgression—the birth of the "white Negro" consciousness—cannot take place. Consequently, *The Subterraneans* demonstrates a practical and aesthetic impotence by insisting on covering up the absence of mutual pleasure.

Kerouac's fictional self admits, "I can't look at Mardou straight in the eye" (91) and forces the reader to distrust his willingness to relinquish the whiteness of his white supremacy as well as his self-proclaimed ability ever to see the face of God. After sex, the question Fox asks Percepted, "Are you sincere?" (92), meets with no response, a telling lack of engagement that challenges the radical claim of an interracial "we" the novel as aesthetic theory and literal practice seemingly advocates. Percepted's silence refuses the danger necessary to the meaningful confrontation with difference both Kerouac and Mailer view as fundamental to their quest for the numinous. Indeed, both exemplify what James Baldwin calls the "Suzuki rhythm boys," men who mistake technology for spontaneity and risk. Neither Kerouac nor Mailer demonstrates the ability to forfeit structure and to resist conformity. Their narrative defences reject the spontaneity both understand as crucial to jazz, orgasm, and the charisma they associate with "the Negro." Baldwin identifies their practical failure as a lack of courage: "It seemed very clear to me that their glorification of the orgasm was but a way of avoiding all of the terrors of life and love" (228-29). Rather than risk the freedom implied by the "we" of a white Negro climax, both authors technically construct a text built on an imitation of its form. "The White Negro" is not a dangerous celebration of the communion between the Negro and the White; it is evidence of the Mailer's "fear-flecked" attempt to establish himself as a premier intellectual. Similarly, Kerouac's novel does not make the pleasures of interracial sex vivid. Its spontaneity—its "franticness"—is artificial since it does not come from orgasm but from benzedrine.<sup>10</sup>

*The Subterraneans* and "The White Negro" get fabulously close to the edge of integration's potential. Both present a radical idea, one that pretends dedication to a revised perception of the social order, art, and most importantly, meaning. They acknowledge color-consciousness when, with integration, "color-blindness" is the lie of postwar American democracy. They claim to understand that an articulate engagement with the meaningful processes in

which difference informs subjectivity and power can alter the dynamics that separate "us" from "them." As self-styled outsiders, however, Kerouac and Mailer participate consciously in a cultural economy that marginalizes individuals. Their solipsistic interest in the interracial depends on an oppositional logic so that their sanctification of "the Negro" becomes not a symbol but a technology, a failure not only of faith in the "truth" of transcendence, but in the very promise of "knowledge." By fixing the line that separates "the Negro" and "the white," they insure that there is no communion. They exemplify their own critique, a "failure of nerve" and relinquish the opportunity to come, finally, to cross the most sacrosanct boundaries of postwar U.S. culture.

#### Notes

I would like to thank my colleagues Jennifer Bean, Jessica Burstein, Phillip Brian Harper, Dianah Jackson, Jennifer Morgan, and Priscilla Wald. Their insights and advice were a tremendous help.

<sup>1</sup> Stuart sent Mailer's comments to William Faulkner whose brief response, "I have heard this idea expressed several times during the last twenty years, though not before by a man. The others were ladies, northern or middle western ladies, usually around 40 or 45 years of age. I don't know what a psychiatrist would find in this," prompted Mailer to "take the showboat" (287) and reply. Stuart sent copies of their exchange to a number of people, which prompted comments from W. E. B. DuBois, Eleanor Roosevelt and others. In March 1957, the *Independent* published Mailer's statement along with details of the controversy it created. The story behind "The White Negro," as well as the details of Mailer and Stuart's bet, appear in the preface to the essay in Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*.

<sup>2</sup> See among others, Shelley Fisher Fishkin's "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness,'" Mike Hill's *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*; Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* and "White Like Me"; Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*; and Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*.

<sup>3</sup> Reid-Pharr's essay specifically speaks to persons involved with interracial gay sex and asks queer theorists for more careful consideration of cross-racial desire and its critical implications. His position emphasizes the primacy of the body, color-consciousness, and the social and historical constructions and implications of various kinds of desire. It challenges queer theorists to develop analyses of sex and sexuality that also consider questions of race and racial politics.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Morgan's "Some Could Stuckle Over Their Shoulder" details the long-standing construction of black women as "monsters" whose sex and sexuality not only consumes men, especially white men, but also plays an integral part of the history of the Americas. She writes, "Vespucchi made manifest the latent sexualized danger embedded by the manslaying woman in a letter in which he wrote of women biting off the penises of their sexual partners, thus linking cannibalism—an absolute indicator of savagery and distance of European norm—to female sexual instability" (173). Aldon Lynn Nielson's "In Place of an Introduction" argues that cannibalistic images have been a critical part of literary discourse since as early as the sixteenth century, and that it continues into the contemporary moment. As a trope for



primitivism and exotic African difference it has been deployed also in reverse by some as a "poetics of indigestion in American literary history" by "secretly and shamefully swallowing up blackness as a vital component of American verse." It emphasizes a simultaneous negrophilia and negrophobia—the "apparently endless desire of white poets, performers and politicians to mime Africanness, to speak in the voice of blackness, the voice of the cannibal of their dreams" (13-14).

<sup>5</sup> Even as he participated in assaults on gay men, Kerouac enjoyed homosexual encounters with several men including Neal Cassidy (Amburn 143) and Gore Vidal whom he describes in *The Subterraneans* as "Aral Lavalina." Vidal describes Kerouac performing fellatio on him as well as their anal sex: "I finally flipped him over on his stomach . . . Jack raised his head from the pillow to look at me over his left shoulder . . . then he sighed as his dropped back onto the pillow." In addition to the shocking contradiction of Kerouac as simultaneously gay and a gay-basher, he liked to refer to himself as "rough trade," a designation he preferred since he believed as "rough trade" a man could "have sex with other men and still think of [himself] as straight" (Amburn 193-94). Kerouac's refusal to acknowledge his homosexuality coincides with his refusal to acknowledge his color-consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> Kerouac's status as an "outsider" coupled with his celebration of spontaneous prose as a more direct means to represent consciousness has led to the canonization of his oeuvre. Ann Douglas, for example, argues that his jazz-inspired aesthetic "first thought, best thought" had the potential to "produce great art and save a nation drowning in hypocrisy, deception and falsehood" and to "declassify human experience." Her position recalls bell hooks's claim that "the impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, and loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance" (27).

<sup>7</sup> A significant amount of Weber's scholarship was translated into English immediately after the Second World War, and in this way, his interest in the problem of individual freedom and creativity resonates saliently with Beat interests. While Weber suggests that charisma may lead to excesses of deviance, including bureaucratic excess, he also argues that charismatic personalities may be the bearers of tremendous cultural, social, religious and economic innovations. See also, Clifford Geertz's "Centers, Kings and Charisma."

<sup>8</sup> Curiously, hypocrisy frames the entire question of Kerouac's sexuality as well as his celebration of heterosexual orgasm. During the time he knew Lee, Kerouac suffered from chronic alcoholic impotence: "Drinking made him feel virile, gave him strength to manage his life a little more boldly than he otherwise could have, and he refused to admit that the booze was interfering with something as essential as his sex life" (Nicosa 561). According to Nicosa, he was unable to establish a penile erection without fellatio or masturbation.

<sup>9</sup> Fox's agency and her ability to refuse the imposition of Perceptie's racial fantasy stands in contrast to Eric Lot's important discussion of Kerouac's *On the Road* as a post-World War II text of racial cross-dressing that exercises a white, masculinist, imperial domination. While Perceptie's perception and Kerouac's writing indeed indicate a sexist arrogance often associated with white supremacy and imperialism, Lee's decision to leave Kerouac and take another lover undermines an unequivocal

reading of *The Subterraneans* as an imperialist text. Fox's refusal to allow Perceptie to refer to her as Eve suggests her unwillingness to allow his vision to determine her subjectivity. Upon the completion of his manuscript, Kerouac showed it to Lee and offered to destroy it if she disliked it. She disapproved but knew that he preserved additional copies. Before the novel's publication, Kerouac changed its setting and its characters names in order to avoid legal action (Amburn 194). Lee's choice ultimately relegates Kerouac to a reactive position—he writes a fictionalized history of their affair that, when read closely, not only demonstrates her independent choice and her intellectual prowess, but also his attempt to erase her power as well as his impotence.

<sup>10</sup> Immediately after the end of his affair with Lee, Kerouac returned to his mother's house in Queens, "loaded up on Benzedrine" and wrote the novel in three days (Amburn 194).

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