

On the road: a journey through the evolving us landscapes

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Having been amongst the first and most profound post-war, counterculture novels written, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, provides an interesting insight into the changing landscapes in the United States, and the extent to which America was undergoing a new paradigm. Kerouac's novel outlines the anti-establishment lifestyle through the lense of the two primary characters, Dean and Sal, who are seen traveling around the country on their various escapades. However, the novel takes careful measure to display the extent to which America was becoming a capitalist and corporate nation, as reaping the benefits of such a massive war jump started the economy. The marginalization and racially-divided society that existed is a major theme throughout the novel, however, not in the traditional manner. In doing so, Kerouac tends to adopt a romantic appeal to the low-income and oppressed communities, without grasping the understanding of the privileged position he is in. In analyzing the extent to which Kerouac depicts a romanticized view of underprivileged and oppressed communities, it is apparent that he provides insight into the inherent issues of white privilege, subconscious suppression, and cultural appropriation that continues to plague American society in the modern day.

Perhaps the foremost notion of white privilege that may not be inordinately explicit is the fact that Kerouac's characters are enabled to do what they want, when they want. Not to say that they are not confined by the same social structures that others in society are as well, but rather, to provide the notion that their ability to uptake other ventures or ideas is more open to them, than it is for the racial minorities they are constantly in contact with. One specific instance of this can be seen in the cotton-picking times that Sal

went through, when he realized that his money was running low and needed to undertake work in order to survive, although only temporarily. Sal's privilege reigns evident in the perception he holds towards cotton-picking, the people that worked around him, as well as his understanding of hard labor as a whole. This idea is summed up in Sal's statement while working, in that, " there was an old negro couple in the field with us. They picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfathers had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama; they moved right along their rows, bent and blue, and their bags increased. My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth." (Kerouac,) This romanticization of cotton-picking provides the racial prejudice and white privilege that was, and continues to be, overlooked. Given their ideals of living a subculture and anti-society lifestyle, Kerouac's main characters see cotton-picking as beautiful and rich given the historical significance, and the fact that it is off-beat from mainstream society. However, this is only an indication into their apparent privileges as white individuals in America, in that they do not understand the inherent racial divide that has suppressed minorities into this position, and the reality that it is not such a dream that Sal and Dean seem to perceive. Rather, the circumstances of the black citizens in America at the time was not of their own accord, as Kerouac attempts to portray, but out of sheer necessity and survival. This is another aspect of the privilege that is shown in the novel, in that the white characters remain unaware of the fact that cotton-picking is a life or death situation for the minorities, whereas it is merely a game for Sal. The entire time Sal is working, he attempts to make comments of extremity, claiming that he will starve to death if he is not able

to provide himself a means of subsistence. Despite the fact that this is an outright fabrication, Sal constructs a false narrative in his mind in order to romanticize the work he does, and pursues it only to the point where he is no longer having fun in his own imagination. This is apparent upon the scenes where Sal is actually working, as he is conducting it in a manner of amusement and identity exploration as opposed to realizing that those around him do not have the same luxury. His nonchalant mentality to the work, constantly taking breaks, and thinking of it as a means of expression is a clear example of his privileged position, and his perception of the black workers as enjoying their labor is misunderstood in that he is putting himself in their position. In reality, Sal is never in any real danger of starvation or impoverishment, in that his privilege affords him the luxury of making a few phone calls, and getting money from his family upon request. Thus, this ties in significantly to the overall idea of white privilege in society at the time, as well as in the modern day. In the same way that the laborers shown in Kerouac's novel were essentially forced into these menial positions, those who struggle similarly in the modern day are victims of the continued oppression that existed previously. In doing so, while minorities suffer to find employment, pay their bills, be approved for housing, and other institutional necessities, white citizens are not often faced with the same hardships that minorities are. Given the same extent of effort, jobs, housing, social welfare, and other such social constructs are generally more likely to approve white applicants, thus providing this safety net subconsciously. Kerouac's characters, constantly in search of the beat culture ideal that was fueled by

this sense of anti-establishment, never truly grasp an understanding of the inherent difficulties and hardships brought on by racial oppression.

In further understanding this romanticized view of marginalization and privilege, it is crucial to examine the extent to which Sal and Dean disregard economic and social realities, as it is overshadowed by their misunderstanding of impoverished reality. Again, coupled with the fact that they are never truly struggling to survive, they are able to visit a variety of underprivileged areas in search of the counterculture identity they so desired. Yet, in doing so, they attempt to internalize the cultures and identities of marginalized individuals, romanticizing it as the exact type of living they are looking for. However, not being able to experience this in its depth provides insight into the recurring white privilege not only in Kerouac's novel, but in American society. Kerouac's misunderstanding of racial divide is so significant that he believes working amongst a minority group gives him the justification to take on their identity. In doing so, "the greatest extent of Kerouac's racial confusion and inappropriate identification as a Mexican laborer was when he made the mistake of specifically referring to himself as Mexican. Kerouac specifically writes, "they thought I was a Mexican, of course; and I am' (Kerouac, *Scroll* 198). He incorrectly assumes that by mimicking the lifestyle and customs of the Mexican community he has installed himself in, he can claim a Mexican identity." (Collopy, *BohemianLives*) This false implementation into the Mexican culture is not only incorrect, but it portrays the extent of privilege that Kerouac and like-minded individuals held. Rather than relating with the culture on a deeper

level, they were unable to see society in the lens of the minorities, but only through the eyes of their own privilege.

In analyzing this adoption of another culture or identity for means of personal growth is seen in the concept of cultural appropriation. Specifically, cultural appropriation refers to the, “ taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else’s culture without permission. This can include unauthorized use of another culture’s dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine...It’s most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed and exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive.” (AboutNews) In recent decades, this concept has become a major issue in regards to marginalization of racial groups, as the stripping of cultural identity and accrediting it to white ideals not only gives false praise, but ensures that the group being exploited remains subjugated. Kerouac’s novel provides a proper example of the privilege which leads to appropriation, as the main characters are constantly seen internalizing and, essentially, demeaning minority hardships. Despite the fact that their privilege is seemingly subconscious to themselves, they desire this life of being casted out by the rest of society, and being able to live your life as a human. However, as Kerouac’s characters believe that this is what life truly is about, they also seem to credit their culture for the ideal living that it has given to minorities. Sal and Dean see Charlie Parker, the African-American jazz artist, as an iconic and near-prophetic epitome of the beat counterculture. This fascination with jazz musicians and ideals, although not

depicted in a negative way, provides detrimental connotations and the inherent problem with cultural appropriation. It is true that they idolize the artists, but in a manner which states that, if not for the oppression faced by white majorities, minorities would never be in such a position. In doing so, “ He attributes the talent of these bop musicians to the hardships that his position of dominance has forced on them, only to rob them of their culture and take it as his own.” (Collopy, *BohemianLives*) Rather than realizing the painful places where this music is derived from, and attributing it to the struggles of African-Americans, Kerouac replaces this mentality with that of the dominance of white people, and that such art has been derived by oppression set on by the white population. This cultural appropriation provides insight into many issues that remain today, in that the misunderstanding of oppression, and inability to truly internalize another racial group’s position can never rightfully be done.