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The New America in Beat Literature:  
Spontaneous, Far Out, and All That Jazz

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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## Thesis Abstract

This thesis establishes the Beat Generation as part of the American literary canon despite its rejection of the literary establishment and academic criticism of its day. The portrayal of the American postwar zeitgeist in Beat literature is examined through the innovative literary techniques proposed by Jack Kerouac based on jazz characteristics. The revitalization of poetic and narrative form are identified in Allen Ginsberg's earliest published poetry, notably "Howl; for Carl Solomon" (*Howl and Other Poems*, 1956), Kerouac's novels *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* and his long poem *Mexico City Blues*, respectively. The emergence and peak of the initially marginal Beat literary movement that gave rise to the affiliated beatnik subculture illustrates the tradition of avant-garde art becoming incorporated into establishment culture.

The first chapter outlines the political and cultural hegemony of the conservative fifties in America with focus on cultural and historical aspects relevant and parallel to the surfacing and development of the Beat/beatnik counterculture, i.e. Cold War policies, McCarthyism, poetic movements, the emergence of bebop and its innovations. The second chapter provides an in-depth analysis of Beat writing in reference to jazz as subject-matter and as influence on both narrative structure and poetic form. Themes of "new America" are explored in Ginsberg's poetry and Kerouac's spontaneous bop prosody is applied to his experimental novels and *Mexico City Blues*. Additionally, the nature of performance in regards to poetry readings of Beat literature is examined. The third part presents the contemporary critical reception of the Beat movement at its peak in the mid- to late fifties along with the warped perception and portrayal of the Beat counterculture by mass media.

By providing an overview of both contemporaneous literary criticism of the Beats and media reception, the thesis reevaluates the position of the Beat Generation in the American

literary canon, situating it in the sociological context of the bohemian beatnik subculture that emerged in the late fifties due to medially sensationalized coverage of the literary movement. The in-depth analysis of spontaneous poetics in Beat literature serves to contrast the concurrent reactionary literary criticism of the American academy. The contemporaneous formative power of mass media is illustrated on the dissemination of the beatnik subculture that has impacted popular and critical discourse on the Beats.

## Abstrakt práce

Tato bakalářská práce etabloje Beat generaci jako součást amerického literárního kánonu i přes její odmítavý postoj k tehdejšímu literárnímu establishmentu a akademické kritice. Je to právě inovativní literární technika Jacka Kerouaca založená na vlastnostech jazzu, která vykresluje americký poválečný duch doby v Beat literatuře. Oživení básnické i narativní formy lze zkoumat v rané publikované poezii Allena Ginsberga, zejména v básni “Howl; for Carl Solomon” (“Kvílení,” *Howl and Other Poems*, 1956), v románech Kerouaca *On the Road* (Na cestě) a *Visions of Cody* (Vize Codyho) a jeho básni *Mexico City Blues*. Zrod a vrcholné období zpočátku přehlíženého literárního hnutí Beat, které dalo vzniku přidružené beatnické subkultury, dokládá opakující se tradici postupného začlenění avantgardního umění do masové kultury.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na politickou a kulturní hegemonii konzervativních padesátých let v Americe a předkládá relevantní kulturní a historický přehled jako pozadí ke vzniku a vývoji Beat/beatnické alternativní kultury, především politiku studené války, Mccarthismus, souběžná básnická hnutí, a inovace moderního jazzu. Druhá kapitola se zabývá podrobnou analýzou Beat literatury v souvislosti s jazzem jako námětem i jeho vlivem na narativní strukturu a básnickou formu. Motivy „nové Ameriky“ se objevují v Ginsbergově poezii a Kerouacova spontánní prozodie je zkoumána v jeho experimentálních románech a *Mexico City Blues*. Charakter básnického přednesu Beat literatury je též představen. Třetí část se zaměřuje na tehdejší kritický ohlas ke hnutí Beat během jeho vrcholu v druhé polovině padesátých let a též se zabývá mylným vykreslením Beat alternativní kultury masovými médii.

Cílem přehledu tehdejšího literárního a mediálního přijetí Beat literatury je zhodnotit pozici Beat generace v americkém literárním kánonu vsazením do sociologického kontextu bohémské beatnické subkultury, která vznikla v pozdních padesátých letech následkem

senzačního rázu zpravodajství a mediálního vykreslení tohoto literárního hnutí. Hlubková analýza spontánní poetiky v Beat literatuře slouží jako protiklad k reakcionářskému ohlasu literárních kritiků americké akademické obce. Šíření beatnické subkultury, která poznamenala všeobecný i kritický diskurs o Beat generaci, demonstruje tehdejší formativní sílu masových médií.



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## Introduction

“...rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation...”<sup>1</sup>

In his novel *Desolation Angels* (1965), Jack Kerouac notes that “everything is going to the beat—It’s the beat generation, its *béat*, it’s the beat to keep, it’s the beat of the heart, it’s being beat and down in the world and like oldtime lowdown.”<sup>2</sup> This generation he describes emerged in the wake of the Second World War as an underground literary movement, striving to escape the cultural confines of New Criticism, the cultural politics of containment, and the commercializing tendencies of contemporary mass culture. Initially, it was a small group of American writers with a common ideology reacting against Cold War policies of the day and the related standardized societal norms and homogeneity promulgated by the establishment and aimed at the white middle class.<sup>3</sup> Beat writers, themselves marginalized through their self-positioning against American family values and the literary establishment, sympathized with those on the fringe of suburban America—all those urban “secret heroes”<sup>4</sup> who were beat down by the system. The hipsters, the boppers, those “who wept at the romance of the streets,”<sup>5</sup> those “mad to live,”<sup>6</sup> all inspired the Beats and found their way into Beat literature as the apostrophized “best minds” of a new America.

The Beat Generation strived to liberate literary expression from the confines of New Critical assessment and the established literary tradition of formalism that continued to dominate the academy in the fifties. In their attempt to accurately and authentically voice the American mid-century zeitgeist, Beat writers experimented with form and addressed the nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000) 48.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (London: Granada Publishing, 1979) 140.

<sup>3</sup> Jennie Skerl, *Reconstructing the Beats* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 20.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” *Collected Poems 1947–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 128.

<sup>5</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 129.

<sup>6</sup> Kerouac 7.

everyday life of their contemporaries. The generation of young, postwar Bohemians embodied the new America that Beat writers were mythicizing to an unknowingly influential degree in their body of work. The Beats achieved an innovative portrayal of America through the reinvention of (poetic) expression; a rejection of verse and meter, the revitalization of poetic form through incorporated speech rhythms, and the adopting of jazz traits into literary structure.

Bebop, which emerged in the late 1940s, molded the poetic expression of the Beats—specifically Kerouac, who “took the jazz aesthetic as a model”<sup>7</sup> and drew on the spontaneity of modern jazz to establish his poetics of spontaneous bop prosody. More generally, the Beats shared the anti-conformist stance of bebop musicians in regards to commercial, mainstream art and its rejection of established artistic conventions. Just as bebop reacted against swing big bands, so did the Beats against formalist New Criticism. The same way that modern jazz was regarded as a “form of dissent,”<sup>8</sup> so was the Beat movement with their shared culturally subversive nature. Jazz, a form of music traditionally rooted in black culture, offered a platform for African Americans and Beats alike to artistically explore their own marginalized condition in regards to “the segregationist structures of mainstream society.”<sup>9</sup> The Beats proudly accepted the outsider status of bop musicians and their struggle against the creative stagnancy of mainstream culture. Largely due to the reactionary nature of contemporaneous literary criticism of Beat literature, the in-depth interpretation of innovative Beat literary techniques is predominantly a matter of recent scholarly pursuits. Since jazz had such a formative impact on the creative output of Beat writers, especially Kerouac, its influence on subject-matter and structure will be examined in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

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<sup>7</sup> Skerl 4.

<sup>8</sup> Skerl 4.

<sup>9</sup> Skerl 4.

After stepping into the national spotlight in the mid-fifties, the literary movement gave rise to the growth and media publicization of the Beat counterculture that comprised a resurgence of bohemianism. As Jennie Skerl notes,

the Beats were a loosely affiliated arts community—one that encompassed two or three generations of writers, artists, activists, and nonconformists who sought to create a new alternative culture that served as a bohemian retreat from the dominant culture, as a critique of mainstream values and social structures, as a force for social change, and as a crucible for art.<sup>10</sup>

The dissemination of this Beat—or rather beatnik—subculture in the second half of the fifties served both to promote the originating literary movement and to discredit its reputation. Following the increase in public awareness of the Beats and subsequent incorporation into mass culture, the Beat avant-garde authors rejecting the prevailing conformism and alienation in American society and culture suffered the same fate as the aesthetic modernism of the 1920s which had been “consecrated as the established position and no longer constituted a radical alternative.”<sup>11</sup> The initially marginalized literary movement became incorporated into the very mainstream cultural agenda it was rebelling against. Whether this integration into the American cultural canon proved to be the impetus for the gradual disintegration of the Beat movement is debatable. However, there is a noticeable correlation of the absorption of the Beat phenomenon into mass culture during the high tide of Beat literary excellence, notably Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) and Jack Kerouac’s formally experimental novels of the late 1950s and his jazz-influenced poetry. Because of these coinciding factors, this paper will limit its attention to the emergence and peak of the Beat literary movement and counterculture in the late 1940s to the late 1950s, respectively. This time restriction will allow for a focused overview of the various political and cultural factors that shaped the existence and character of the Beat movement in its

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<sup>10</sup> Skerl 2.

<sup>11</sup> Skerl 13.

early and climactic stages (Chapters 1 and 3) while providing for an in-depth analysis of the thematic and structural influence of modern jazz on Beat literature (Chapter 2). Just like the influence of Buddhism should be taken into account in regards to later Beat literary works, for Beat literature of the second half of the 1950s—the peak of the Beat movement—bebop is central to the interpretation and understanding of these works and merits a detailed examination.

While present-day criticism of the Beat Generation tends to distinguish between the literary Beats and the beatnik counterculture that emerged in reaction to the increased medial profile of the former group, some critics stipulate “a historical and social context that embeds Kerouac, Ginsberg, and [William S.] Burroughs within a community that made the Beats a movement, rather than a coterie.”<sup>12</sup> The medially sensationalized coverage of the Beats following the 1957 obscenity trial over Ginsberg’s collection *Howl and Other Poems* attracted those dissatisfied with the stagnant cultural status quo and contributed to the formation of “a counterculture that enabled transgression of mainstream norms as a form of dissent.”<sup>13</sup> The iconization of Beat writers ushered in the “beatnik” persona that appealed to the young public and affected literary criticism of the 1950s. Skerl notes that “the Beats sought and reached an audience for their art outside established mainstream cultural institutions and thus recruited more members of their community, perpetuating a multigenerational movement—perhaps the only modern avant-garde movement to do so.”<sup>14</sup> The Beats carried on the recurring tradition of avant-garde art becoming diffused through the absorption into popular culture. Despite the influence and interaction of the Beats in bohemian artistic circles of their day, the avant-garde movement soon underwent the assimilation into the mainstream during the late fifties, and the newly

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<sup>12</sup> Skerl 5.

<sup>13</sup> Skerl 3.

<sup>14</sup> Skerl 2.

attributed iconicity impacted public perception, literary criticism, and even the writers' creative output.

In the face of the changing critical perspective of the Beat Generation— a clique, a movement, a subculture—this literary group merits a reevaluation of its position in the American literary canon. This thesis will present a case study of the Beats, proposing the social context of the movement's emergence and acceptance in public awareness, tracing the synchronicity of bebop and Kerouac's experimental literary methods (later adapted to a certain degree by Ginsberg), and surveying contemporary critical reception of Beat literature that fed into the sensationalism of the literary group. The literary innovations of Beat authors that were largely ignored and/or criticized by the literary establishment of the fifties have ultimately been recognized—or at the very least, addressed and discussed—by present-day academic critics and scholars, paradoxically securing the Beat Generation a place in the very same American literary tradition its representatives rebelled against.

## **Chapter 1 – The Political and Cultural Background of the 1950s in America**

The Beat literary movement surfaced during a time when the United States of America was—in the twentieth century to date—at its most conservative. As a consequence of the global political power play that followed the end of the Second World War, the 1950s came to be written down in history as an era of Cold War propaganda and the canonization of the materialistic American Dream complete with all-American family values—simply put, an age of conservatism and conformity. However, despite the conservative cultural and political hegemony overshadowing the turn of the mid-century, a distinct form of culture began to brew amid standardized, establishment-approved culture, perhaps precisely because of this oppressiveness towards deviation from the norm. This non-conformist movement encompassing a distinct bohemian lifestyle, art, and insurgent attitude towards the government was so unlike the officially approved opinion that it came to be labeled as culturally subversive by the establishment of the 1950s.

Passing on the baton to the next generation of American underground culture, the hipster of the 1940s made way for the Beat. Or, as far as media was concerned, the beatnik. The connecting factor between these two cultural icons turned out to be jazz. It was specifically bebop that had a significant influence on Beat writing in the late 1940s and 1950s and that provided a platform for literary experimentation and the exploration of poetry in connection to music. While modern jazz thus influenced a new mode of writing, it also embodied a cultural attitude of individualism and creative freedom that reacted against commercialization and conformity. The ideology of this underground culture focused inward (spiritually) rather than outward (materialistically), instead of conforming to predetermined, seemingly wholesome values prescribed by the juggernaut of conservative mid-century America.

## 1.1. Political Context

As the Soviet Union ended the U.S. monopoly on the atomic bomb in September 1949,<sup>1</sup> it spurred the development of a far more lethal hydrogen bomb, the U.S. achieving this goal in 1952 with the Soviet Union catching up three years later. The philosophy behind this gargantuan competition was that of nuclear deterrence, asserting this catch-22, also called mutual assured destruction, which posited that “any preemptive attack would result in an overwhelming and catastrophic retaliatory strike.”<sup>2</sup> The passive aggressive strategy that both global powers implemented brought with it the imminence of annihilation on a global scale. The mute but ever-present nuclear threat tarnished the zeitgeist of the fifties in America, becoming incorporated into the everyday life of American citizens.

Due to the hysteria surrounding the external nuclear threat of Soviet Russia, civil defense became an integral, pervading part of the American culture of the 1950s. Through a gradually numbing cultural indoctrination, the issue of the constantly imminent Cold War lost its immediacy. Public announcements and educational films such as the notorious *Duck and Cover* (1950) featuring Bert the Turtle<sup>3</sup> and *The House in the Middle* (1954) downplayed reality and trivialized the actual global destruction that atomic warfare would cause. Civil defense became integrated into the musical sphere through the *Stars for Defense* albums created under the auspices of the Federal Civil Defense Administration featured in radio broadcasts from the mid-fifties to 1967. The content of the fifteen minute programs comprised of public service announcements on how to best be prepared for an enemy attack by keeping cars in high maintenance, being vigilant of one’s surroundings, and being aware of alert signals. Interestingly enough, keeping with the spirit of individualism and self-reliance proponed by the American way

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer C. Tucker, et al, eds. *Cold War: A Student Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008) 1522.

<sup>2</sup> Tucker 1522.

<sup>3</sup> Tucker 587.



of life, civil defense procedures on the federal level were implemented principally on an educational basis with no national plan for the creation of fallout shelters, the construction being left to citizens themselves.<sup>4</sup> The civil defense measures and anti-communist propaganda that were being ingrained into the minds of American citizens did nothing but aggravate the tension that permeated American society.

The absence of “red-baiting”<sup>5</sup> during the 1949 presidential elections foreshadowed the unmerciful communist witch hunts that would hang over the first half of the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> The Alger Hiss trial in 1950 sowed the seeds of suspicion in the American public regarding the presence of Communists and Soviet spies in the American government. This internal subversion escalated with McCarthyism that lasted until 1954, when Republican Senator Joseph R. McCarthy was finally discredited. The fear of internal subversion was dealt with by a number of organizations devoted to keeping the commies at bay as the government implemented precautions against the Communist infiltration of American politics. The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) gained its infamy in 1947 when the Hollywood industry came under scrutiny. Playwright Arthur Miller was also involved in the hearings, and although he was not directly affiliated with the Communist Party, he believed it should be allowed legal status in the U.S. and refused to testify against fellow artists.<sup>7</sup> His 1953 Salem witch trial play *The Crucible* reflects the McCarthy witch hunts of the day.<sup>8</sup> The HUAC put the “Hollywood Ten” on trial, a group of film-makers and screenwriters who were sentenced to prison because they refused to give names of colleagues who had affiliations (whether substantiated or not) to the Communist Party.<sup>9</sup> They

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<sup>4</sup> Tucker 710.

<sup>5</sup> David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York, Open Road Integrated Media, 2012) 7.

<sup>6</sup> Halberstam 10.

<sup>7</sup> Tucker 1218.

<sup>8</sup> Tucker 1218.

<sup>9</sup> Tucker 916.

were subsequently blacklisted by the film industry. The execution of the Rosenbergs in 1953 carried over into literature in the form of the first sentence of Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), "It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York."

McCarthyism had a long-lasting, detrimental impact on the American mindset, extending far beyond its four-year reign of psychological terror. As Halberstam notes, these witch hunts "crystallized and politicized the anxieties of a nation living in a new dangerous era,"<sup>10</sup> and no matter how ill-conceived and half-baked the accusations were, the mere fact that they managed to go relatively unquestioned for so long speaks for a paranoia deeply taking root in the minds of Americans regarding the security and integrity of their country that transcends political implications. The Red Scare that had previously been externalized through the Iron Curtain and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was now suddenly a realistic domestic threat. It took nearly four years for the press to begin discrediting McCarthy for his absurd, unjustified claims. Just as the press exploited the story, so did McCarthy the passivity of the media,<sup>11</sup> and this two-faced opportunistic 'don't ask-don't tell' endeavor served to promote mass public anti-communistic hysteria amongst American citizens. The word of the decade was subversion, and whether it was political or cultural, its impact on the integrity of American democratic values, the foundations of the country, was regarded as dangerous.

## **1.2. The Anti-Mainstream Tendencies of Cold War Culture**

The economical expansion that followed World War II presented ideal circumstances that could give rise to a prosperous, capitalist spin on the American Dream. The 1950s proved to be an age

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<sup>10</sup> Halberstam 65.

<sup>11</sup> Halberstam 67.

of mass suburbanization of the middle class. The economical prosperity and exceptional excess found in mid-century America undoubtedly influenced the American way of life and the American Dream, embellishing it with its typical materialistic tinge that has come to be associated with 1950s' America. Mainstream culture was subjected to unprecedented nationwide exposure owing massively to the expansion of television. To fully detail the extent of the mass culture that manifested in this time would not be relevant to the argument at hand, nevertheless, suffice it to say that the mainstream culture of the mid-century provided a comparative backdrop against which the Beat emerged as an underground, anti-conformist literary (and countercultural) movement.

Rock 'n' roll came to embody the youth rebellion of the decade with the iconic figure of Elvis Presley. The 1950s indeed were an era of icons, with figures such as Marilyn Monroe and James Dean dominating the pop culture of white middle class America. In the wake of the atom bomb and espionage, the age witnessed the emergence of the spy thriller genre and the rise of science fiction, heralding the space race that began with the Soviet launching of the artificial satellite Sputnik in October 1957. The sci-fi genre often painted a dystopian picture of the near future devastated by the destructive power of the atom bomb, "the golem through which the suicidal impulses of humanity would find expression."<sup>12</sup> Fifties' culture came with inevitable politicization and the "silent" generation of white, middle class suburbia seemed to accept the siphoned, quarantined culture without much of a fuss. Cultural artifacts were not evaluated on the basis of their merit, but often in regards to the political leanings of the creators, and government intervention in the affairs of the arts were a commonplace thing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Tucker 1220.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Bigsby, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 262.

The post-war years gave rise to a number of significant literary movements, some with postmodernist experimental tendencies. The literary scene of the fifties ushered in the Beats, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Mountain School, Confessional poetry, the Black Arts movement, and the New York School. These movements shared the common features of opposing the constraints of formal verse and instead choosing to experiment with metatextuality, the “I” subject, subjective and autobiographical material, an intimate tone and perspective, and stream-of-consciousness.<sup>14</sup> These qualities challenged the reading techniques of New Criticism which endeavored to focus solely on the text itself “as an autonomous form that yields its meaning independent of the circumstances of its genesis.”<sup>15</sup> New Critics propped a “closely focused, highly technical form of literary analysis”<sup>16</sup> that disregarded the authorial background, intent, and literary and historical context in the interpretation of meaning.

New Criticism, with its formalist approach, dominated the literary criticism of the academic establishment of the fifties. Christopher MacGowan explains that the “formal, crafted style endorsed by the New Criticism” influenced the writing of several prominent poets of the established poetry scene such as Allen Tate, Richard Wilbur, James Merrill, and the early works of Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Adrienne Rich—however, the style soon began to be regarded as too restrictive for genuine expression.<sup>17</sup> In the 1950s this dissent against New Criticism manifested in the emergence of several literary movements with often overlapping characteristics. On the one side there were the New Critics poets writing in the academically approved formal verse, on the other were Confessional poets, the Black Mountain School, and

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<sup>14</sup> John Cusatis, ed. *Research Guide to American Literature: Postwar Literature 1945–1970* (York: Maple Press, 2010) 6.

<sup>15</sup> Cusatis 19.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Connor, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 62.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher MacGowan, *Blackwell Guides to Literature: Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004) 22.

the Beat Generation experimenting with innovative form, style, and subject-matter. While the “poetic mainstream” drew inspiration from T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden’s poetry,<sup>18</sup> their contemporaries looked to figures representing experimental poetry such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and H.D., whose work clashed with the New Critical approach to interpretation.<sup>19</sup> These new avant-garde poets championed a direct, Whitman-esque personal poetic voice with an “emphasis upon process rather than craft” that the new poetic movements regarded as “more American, more democratic, more contemporary, and less academic.”<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, these poets “set themselves against the prevailing political conservatism of the United States in the 1950s, arguing overtly or implicitly for a different set of values to those associated with the suburban, materialistic lifestyle produced by America’s post-war wealth.”<sup>21</sup> In Confessional poetry, this could be seen in the candid exploration of the self through personal subject-matter and “the testimonial nature of these confessions.”<sup>22</sup> Confessional poets also reacted to the insecurity of the atomic age. They explored the theme of alienation in adapting a personal tone and including autobiographical elements in the poetry,<sup>23</sup> the intention being for the reader to connect with the “commonality of human privacy.”<sup>24</sup> The voice of the “I” came to represent “an explicit expression of personal experience”<sup>25</sup> and spoke of intimate observations on

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 189.

<sup>19</sup> MacGowan 23.

<sup>20</sup> MacGowan 23.

<sup>21</sup> MacGowan 23.

<sup>22</sup> Burt Kimmelman, ed. *The Facts on File Companion to 20th-Century American Poetry* (New York: Facts on File, 2005) 98.

<sup>23</sup> Cusatis 45.

<sup>24</sup> Cusatis 44.

<sup>25</sup> Kimmelman 98.

sexuality, mental illness, physical maladies, domestic issues, and taboos. It was this “lack of inhibition regarding subject and style”<sup>26</sup> that they shared with the Beats.

The Beats then were not the only ones to radically react to traditional formalist verse in the fifties. The seeds of the Beat movement were sown in New York City by the dynamic friendship of Allen Ginsberg, Lucien Carr, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, later moving its focus of activity to San Francisco, where it shared affinity with San Francisco poets Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, and Philip Whalen, among others. The Beats were the most articulate in denouncing the hypocrisy of 1950s’ America, criticizing the spiritual vapidness, conformity, and willful complacency that characterized the Cold War decade. They rejected the establishment and its dominating academic style of traditional poetic form, instead opting for a more experimental approach to both poetic form and content, pioneering free verse, the long line, vernacular vocabulary and the juxtaposition of contrasting, vivid images as well as exploring spirituality through Zen philosophies and the underground counterculture of jazz and drugs.<sup>27</sup> The writing style of the Beats focused on simple form, intuition and spontaneity, a common feature of the postmodernist poetry movements of the fifties,<sup>28</sup> and strove to drive modern poetry out of its ossified academic setting and into the streets.

The beginnings of bebop, or modern jazz, can be traced to the early years of the Second World War to Kansas City,<sup>29</sup> coming into prominence in the 1940s. The leading boppers of the day, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Kenny Clarke, Bud Powell, Charlie Christian, all contributed to an evolution in jazz that broke down the limitations of creativity

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<sup>26</sup> Cusatis 18.

<sup>27</sup> Cusatis 6.

<sup>28</sup> Cusatis 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 204.

imposed by swing big band ensembles and enlivened the stagnant, commercialized environment that had dominated the jazz scene until the Second World War. The New York scene especially helped bebop gain renown, as towards the end of the war, 52<sup>nd</sup> Street became the hub of this new jazz style, being home to a number of small jazz clubs that catered to the new serious audience of bebop.<sup>30</sup> The availability of bebop recordings before the end of the war was rather limited, but record companies such as Guild and Savoy soon began to capitalize upon this new jazz form,<sup>31</sup> which had the positive effect of promoting the music to a wider audience. The Second World War drafting caused many big bands to disintegrate, losing its players. Due to a post-war law that increased the tax on venues for big bands, many of them were forced to either split or commercialize themselves. Additionally, the 1950s brought on the age of suburbia, complete with mass culture mediated by the massive expansion of television, and suddenly there was a lesser need to frequent dancehalls.<sup>32</sup> As Ted Gioia notes, “[t]he contemporary jazz scene of the 1950s was abandoned to the outsiders, the bohemians and beatniks, and the young [...] For this crowd, the big band was most often viewed as a dinosaur, the retrograde sound of a generation whose time had already passed.”<sup>33</sup> The attitudes of Beat writers echoed this regressive tendency in contemporary literature as well. The modern jazz scene itself influenced the molding of the Beat counterculture as the writers frequented these smaller venues that housed the hipsters and later the beatniks.

There are several sources of inspiration that could have influenced the etymology of bebop, but one of the most probably ones is onomatopoeic origin.<sup>34</sup> Many bebop phrases often

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<sup>30</sup> Gioia 215.

<sup>31</sup> Gioia 216.

<sup>32</sup> Gioia 257.

<sup>33</sup> Gioia 257.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Hrebaniak, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006) 184.

ended in a high and low note, sound-wise represented as ‘be’ and ‘bop.’ When consulting before sessions, bebop musicians would indicate the tune by sounding it out, ending with the characteristic ‘be-bop.’ The expression caught on with the listening public, although bebop musicians did not care for the terminology much, feeling it denigrated the music to a throwaway form, while the style they were playing actually represented complex, modern jazz that required superior knowledge of harmony.

Reacting largely to the preceding Swing Era, bebop embodied a jazz form that emphasized improvisation and instrumental prowess. Bebop pioneers strove to counter the mainstream swing predominance of the 1930s by creating a musical style that switched its focus from a dancing audience to a listening audience. With the aim of bringing the music closer to a serious audience came the issue of an arcane sentiment—the musicians played to exclusive listeners while establishing their playing as exclusive amongst themselves as well. This new form of jazz now focused on a serious listening audience rather than providing the mere background music for dance. To appreciate modern jazz, the listener was required to acknowledge the technical virtuosity behind the playing. Bebop was played by musicians for musicians, not intended for the general public. As Ted Gioia remarks,

the leading jazz modernists of the 1940s developed their own unique style, brash and unapologetic, in backrooms and afterhours clubs, at jam sessions and on the road with traveling bands. This music was not for commercial consumption [...] Its comings and goings were not announced in the newspaper of record. Its early stars were, at best, cult figures from beyond the fringe, not household names. [...] modern jazz was an underground movement, setting the pattern for all the future underground movements of the jazz world, initiating the bunker mentality that survives to this day in the world of progressive jazz.<sup>35</sup>

Just as bebop musicians deviated from the mainstream and pioneered innovative techniques in jazz, so did the Beats in American literature, proposing a new artistic freedom unrestricted by

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<sup>35</sup> Gioia 200.



limiting rules. In reaction to the commercialization of swing, bebop sought a way back to pure musical expression, to a “more streamlined, more insistent style,”<sup>36</sup> rejecting musical conventions of the day and emphasizing spontaneity, improvisation and creative freedom—values that would later mark the underground Beat counterculture as well. Bebop gave musicians a chance to express themselves more spontaneously, the limitations of creating intricate melodies quite non-existent. As Peter Townsend remarks, “[b]ebop, as the presumed counterpart to Beat literary culture, is naturally represented as intellectually weighty, spontaneous and subversive beyond all comparison with earlier forms of jazz.”<sup>37</sup> Bebop elevated the status of jazz from mere entertainment into a higher art form. Modern jazz musicians wanted to be taken seriously, and they had the “chops” to prove it.

Bebop then stood on technical virtuosity and a knack for improvisation. Syncopation was a common feature in bebop, stressing the weak beats. Unlike in swing, where the first and third beats of the composition were emphasized, bebop stressed the second and fourth beat, with the phrases often beginning and ending at these syncopated beats, creating a feeling of detachment of the off-beat solos from the song structure (rather than being incorporated into it) as well as providing momentum.<sup>38</sup> This new irregular, jagged phrasing used to create variety “gave the music a querulous, incisive tone, imparting a slightly off-balance quality to each phrase,”<sup>39</sup> often making it difficult to follow the rhythm or the melody itself, as flighty as it sounded. And while melodic intricacy dominated bebop, the complexity lay in the harmonic structure and scale alterations, not in the arrangements. Modern jazz ensembles favored monophony, and even if two instruments—typically the saxophone and trumpet—were playing at the same time, they would

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<sup>36</sup> Gioia 200.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Townsend, *Jazz in American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) 149.

<sup>38</sup> Gioia 201.

<sup>39</sup> Gioia 201.

play the melody in unison.<sup>40</sup> It was up to the individual players to showcase their virtuosity on their own, not in arrangements.

Another trademark of bebop was its frantic tempo. Musicians would often play double-time, nearing 380 beats per minute—in comparison, swing music was played at 100 to 200 BPM. This jittery, swift pace reflected not only the restlessness and unease of the WW2 era, but also the desire of the boppers to avoid a dancing audience and attract connoisseur listeners instead. This was the first style of jazz specifically not intended for dancing, and the musicians attempted to be as unaccommodating to dancers as possible. This was achieved by playing in a tempo that was impossible to dance to, but also by playing non-repetitive melodies that were hard to follow and remember. A general consensus of “staying true to the ethos of speed at all costs”<sup>41</sup> prevailed, and this seemed to go hand in hand with the modern jazz musicians’ desire to flaunt their talent, primarily through soloing, which makes up a much more significant part of the composition than it does in swing.

Solos provided an ideal platform for experimenting with complex harmonic structures—dissonance, patterns, unnatural chord progressions—and showing the audience that the musician had an excellent knowledge of harmony. Bop performances would frequently be unpolished and unrehearsed, which did not mean that they were musically/technically unsound. Improvisation comprised the chief part of the playing, and it was often based on borrowed chord progressions of already existing popular songs—take, for example, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker’s treatment of George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm” (1930), Parker’s use of the harmonic progression from Ray Noble’s “Cherokee” (1938) in his own piece “Ko-Ko” (1945), or another contrafact of his, “Bird of Paradise,” whose new melody was based on the chords of the jazz

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<sup>40</sup> Gioia 202.

<sup>41</sup> Gioia 201.

standard “All the Things You Are” (1939). The improvisation would either borrow lines taken from original melodies, musical quotations, or in spontaneous improvisation, the playing corresponded with a set harmonic pattern rather than these altered melodic figures. Bebop did not always adhere to classic jazz performance form, with the theme stated at the beginning and end of the piece, the majority of the composition comprising of improvisation. Instead, it focused mainly on technically perfectly executed solos with the melody statement often being held off until the very end of the composition, sometimes being stated only very briefly. If introductions or codas were incorporated into the tune, they usually did not exceed four bars. A bopper would also sometimes outline a harmonic progression in his solo before it had made an appearance in the song itself, leading to temporary dissonance.

In conclusion, bebop is an innovative style of jazz that championed creative freedom and musical integrity following a period of musical commercialization and stagnancy. Bebop basically emerged out of a jazz musician’s need for more creative leeway that swing big bands simply could not provide. Instead of trying to popularize the genre, jazz players of bebop aimed to acquire a level of artistry that would place their style of music above mere entertainment. Rather than catering to the masses, they played to the select few, to musical intellectuals who could follow the theory behind bebop and thus appreciate it for what it was—an elitist, distinctive form of improvisation that demonstrated musical virtuosity. The emergence of bebop in the 1940s definitively influenced not only the Beat lifestyle—or what the media made of it—but also Beat writing itself. As Gioia notes, “Parker and his colleagues had permanently changed jazz into a counterculture movement, suspicious of mass market acclaim, protective of its ‘outsider’ status. A wide audience was now a sign of having ‘sold out.’”<sup>42</sup> Because the Beat movement was bound so tightly with the bebop scene and the coffeehouse culture it produced, the writers

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<sup>42</sup> Gioia 256.

inherited the underground status of “hep cats,” or hipsters, and adapted features of bebop to their writing as well, both as subject matter and structurally. Just as bebop embodied “the spirit of rebellion par excellence within the world of jazz,”<sup>43</sup> so did the Beats within the world of literature. As Townsend proposes, “Kerouac and bebop are components of the postwar gestalt of speed... [and] participants in a ‘culture of spontaneity’ that defines the arts in postwar America.”<sup>44</sup> Both modern jazz and its literary counterpart strode to the beat of a new postwar American tune, striving to capture the zeitgeist of a rapidly commercializing culture.

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<sup>43</sup> Gioia 233.

<sup>44</sup> Townsend 148.

## Chapter 2–Literary Innovation in Beat Writing

The need to rebel against the constraints that stifled creative expression was a bop trait the Beats adapted into their ideology. The “refusal of generic conformity” of bebop proved to be an inspiration to Jack Kerouac for establishing a modern writing technique based on jazz attributes “registering the prose rhythms of excited American life.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the outsider status and experimental innovations of modern jazz coincided with the authentic artistic expression of immediacy the Beats sought in their writing. While Allen Ginsberg mainly portrayed jazz as subject-matter in his poetry, Kerouac really tapped into the literary possibilities of artistic expression that modern jazz offered, including jazz both as theme and structural technique in his works. It was only after Kerouac’s embodiment of jazz influence in the formulation of the “spontaneous prose” literary technique in the early fifties that Ginsberg adapted the attribute of bebop spontaneity to his poetics.<sup>2</sup> Kerouac championed a non-linear narrative, while a strategy he shared with Ginsberg is utilizing antithetic vivid imagery to evoke the natural, unrestricted spirit of the “new” American heroes. Ginsberg’s poetry also reacts to the Cold War threat and conservatism so prevalent in postwar America through criticism of institutionalization and hypocrisy. The efforts of Kerouac’s spontaneous technique culminate in his poem *Mexico City Blues* (1959). While bebop strove to embody the jittery impulse of the age, Beat literature strove to embody the spontaneity of everyday street-talk through techniques inspired by the innovations of bebop that served as the driving force of a pure, true-to-life writing style that in their view accurately captured the distinct mid-century American reality of the Beat Generation.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hrebniak, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac’s Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006) 184.

<sup>2</sup> Preston Whaley, *Blows Like a Horn: Beat Writing, Jazz Style, and Markets in the Transformation of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 83.

## 2.1. The Theme of 'New' America in Beat Literature

The rejection of existing and emerging American domestic and foreign policies of the time spurred the Beat rebellion against established literary conventions and cultural and political conservatism. The disillusionment the Beat Generation felt regarding the current state of affairs in America explains their need to create a new literary technique of uninhibited, pure expression to adequately portray this new non-conformist counterculture sentiment—an embodiment of the *élan vital* of the postwar generation in a time of repression, a new American spirit of jazz. The rationalizing tendency on behalf of the establishment in regards to its ideal of culture promoted the “creative social dissent” of Beat writers who “heard the sound of dissent and liberation in bebop, which exploded out of the context of a commercial music industry that [...] stifled artistic ambition.”<sup>3</sup> It was this self-imposed parallelization of the Beat writers’ literary aims to the effects of jazz that rendered the musical genre “a stereotypical component of a larger myth”<sup>4</sup>—in this case, a myth of spontaneity. As Douglas Malcolm claims, “[t]he chief ideological characteristic of jazz for Kerouac, the music’s apparent “madness,” derives not so much from bop itself as from white cultural assumptions about the music [and] jazz’s restless energy... comes to symbolize for him the America of his generation.”<sup>5</sup> Kerouac’s romanticized conceptualization of jazz notwithstanding, it is apparent in his works and proposed innovative methodology of writing that he regarded jazz as “something deeply American, or definitively modern [...] a way of renewing or nativizing art forms which lack its grounding in a twentieth-

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<sup>3</sup> Whaley 36.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Townsend, *Jazz in American Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) 117.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Malcolm, “‘Jazz America’: Jazz and African American Culture in Jack Kerouac’s ‘On the Road,’” *Contemporary Literature* 40.1 (Spring 1999): 96-97.

century vernacular culture.”<sup>6</sup> The cultural dissidents of this age called for a modern voice to express their outlook, and they just so happened to coincide it with jazz.

Gregory Stephenson portrays Beat writers as the “heirs to and bearers of the essential American traditions of advancing the boundaries of the frontier and of sustaining the ongoing process of revolt and renewal.”<sup>7</sup> This expansion of boundaries comprised of two levels for the Beat Generation—one, their hitchhiking across the states and their often drug-fueled psychonautics intended to relocate a lost feeling of bliss in atomic America, and two, the rejuvenation of language in the quest for a pure American idiom. In the first five lines of Ginsberg’s “Howl; for Carl Solomon,” this search is designated by the postwar outsiders “looking for an angry fix... burning for the ancient heavenly connection... contemplating jazz, / who bared their brains to Heaven...”<sup>8</sup> These initial statements relay the “intensity of the quest”<sup>9</sup> which is then enumerated in a “Rimbaudian ‘derangement of the senses’”<sup>10</sup> that serves to purge the inner self of any societal restraints in order to discover “Absolute reality.”<sup>11</sup> Because these “angelheaded hipsters”<sup>12</sup> transgress social norms—and this argument can be extended to the level of composition in regards to literary constraints as well—they are “suicided (as Artaud says) by society, driven into exile, despised, incarcerated, institutionalized.”<sup>13</sup>

Ginsberg’s personal experience with mental health facilities, whether his own eight-month stint in the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute (where he met Carl Solomon, the

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<sup>6</sup> Townsend 140.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory Stephenson, *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990) 15.

<sup>8</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” *Collected Poems 1947–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) 126. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

<sup>9</sup> Stephenson 52.

<sup>10</sup> Stephenson 52.

<sup>11</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 129.

<sup>12</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 126.

<sup>13</sup> Stephenson 52.

dedicatee of “Howl”)<sup>14</sup> at age twenty-three or his mother’s psychosis, offered him an insight into the inner workings of the institution and undoubtedly influenced his critique of institutionalization in the United States. In “Howl,” the duplicity of madness—both as beatitude and as a symptom of the paranoia governing the age, is established in the very first line: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...”<sup>15</sup> While madness is a means through which the new American hero seeks to achieve the state of beatitude, or blessedness, in the poem it also stands for the devastating effects of liquidating people with non-conformist mindsets. So while the line can be read as a generation succumbing to debauchery (through which they are stripped of their ego, achieving blessedness), it may also symbolize the indirect destruction society can inflict through its enforcement of conformity and denigration of those who fail to commit. The institutionalized ostracism that society deems appropriate for deviants is depicted in “Howl” through the dual notion of beat–beatitude which alternates in the shifting scenes of the young generation’s actions abnormal in light of the established American way of life. These characters,

who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left alone with their insanity... [...] demanding instantaneous lobotomy,  
and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity  
hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia,  
who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table, resting briefly in  
catatonia,<sup>16</sup>

are destroyed by “Mental Moloch [...] Moloch whose name is the Mind” as well as in the “invincible madhouses” where “fifty more shocks”—the “starry-spangled shock of mercy”—“...will never return [the] soul to its body again.”<sup>17</sup> The poem then elevates madness imposed by

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<sup>14</sup> James Campbell, *This Is the Beat Generation* (London: Vintage, 2000) 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 126.

<sup>16</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 130.

<sup>17</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 131, 132, 133.



one's self as a means of exploring identity, while the madness imposed by societal conventions is a destructive force. The speaker also attacks the emotionless institution of the army (the "armed madhouse") portrayed as the "machinery of other skeletons"<sup>18</sup> and the unmerciful Moloch who begets "[b]oys sobbing in armies."<sup>19</sup> Stephenson describes the "macrocosmic and microcosmic" nature of the "armed madhouse" image depicted as both the "ego personality [and] the social self" and as the American nation itself.<sup>20</sup>

The threat of nuclear annihilation in the poem is conveyed by "listening to the Terror through the wall" and "listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,"<sup>21</sup> as well as through the personification of Moloch as "a cloud of sexless hydrogen."<sup>22</sup> The subject matter of the atom bomb and the atmosphere it had managed to create in the United States is dealt with more explicitly in the poem "America" where the speaker propositions America to "[g]o fuck yourself with your atom bomb."<sup>23</sup> This suggestion not only expresses the potential for self-annihilation through warfare, but also implies the debilitating impact of Cold War propaganda that promoted a cultural lockdown. In "America," the speaker expresses disillusionment with "the insipid systematization of life in the United States"<sup>24</sup> and effectively "against the general tenor of literary convention controlled by and for the benefit of academics, critics, and editors."<sup>25</sup> The fight against the academic establishment is portrayed more prominently in "Howl" in the rebellion of those "who were expelled from the academies for crazy" against the "scholars of war" occupying the ossified "faculties of the skull" personified by "Moloch whose buildings are

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<sup>18</sup> Ginsberg, "Howl," 127.

<sup>19</sup> Ginsberg, "Howl," 131.

<sup>20</sup> Stephenson 56.

<sup>21</sup> Ginsberg, "Howl," 126.

<sup>22</sup> Ginsberg, "Howl," 131.

<sup>23</sup> Ginsberg, "America," 146.

<sup>24</sup> Stephenson 175.

<sup>25</sup> Hrebeniak 18.

judgment.”<sup>26</sup> The rigid academic institution is devoid of substance, unwilling to accept innovative ideas of the young generation. The “angelheaded hipsters” strove to express their “natural ecstasy”<sup>27</sup> unhindered by inhibitions, whether imposed by themselves or society, and transcribed onto the literary level, demanded a revitalization of writing. As Stephenson notes, the effort of this new generation was to

resacralize a desacralized age, to remythicize and revitalize consciousness and perception, to redeem from the repressive structures and destructive powers that constrain and constrict its free expression, to reestablish the primacy of the intuitive intelligence, and to reawaken the vital, life-affirming impulses of the senses and the psyche.<sup>28</sup>

In “Howl,” this intuition is communicated through strong imagery that paints an antithetical scenery of “falling and rising, destruction and regeneration... darkness and illumination,” effectively intertwining visions of heaven and hell to illustrate the movement of the poem from “alienation to communion.”<sup>29</sup> This is achieved through the so-called “eyeball kick” effect of contrasting imagery that stems from the spontaneity of the human mind to capture the natural, unrestricted spirit of the new American heroes. The speaker in “Howl” juxtaposes “an imagery of confinement and constriction, of inertia and immobility”<sup>30</sup> of the establishment with vivid imagery of boundless energy that the postwar rebelling youth embodied to portray the tension and discrepancy between the two. The often surrealistic dream-like and nightmarish images exalt unrestrained imagination as a means of fighting “impercipience with vision.”<sup>31</sup> The vividness of the painted scenery encourages the reader to tap into his own unconscious intuition to connect to the meaning behind the presented creations of the mind process, in effect “[throwing] potato

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<sup>26</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 126, 132, 131.

<sup>27</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 126, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Stephenson 18.

<sup>29</sup> Stephenson 51-52.

<sup>30</sup> Stephenson 11.

<sup>31</sup> Stephenson 185.

salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism.”<sup>32</sup> The celebrated spontaneity and attempt to get in touch with the inner self can be exemplified through “a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet”<sup>33</sup> that recurs in Ginsberg’s poem “America,” where the speaker “sit[s] in [his] house for days on end and stare[s] at the roses in the closet.”<sup>34</sup> The clichéd metaphor of the rose representing beauty acquires another level of interpretation as the confinement and repression of pure, uninhibited expression, something shunned and shamed into being hidden away. In “Howl,” the depicted rose is not even a real rose, but merely an artificial imitation of it—the ideal expression is unfulfilled—the Platonic shadow of (Absolute) reality reincarnate.

In the preface to his *Collected Poems*, Ginsberg establishes his poetics of intuition: “‘First thought, best thought.’ Spontaneous insight—the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind—was always motif and method of these compositions.”<sup>35</sup> This can be seen in the syntactical discrepancies of the verse in “Howl” (e.g., “who created great suicidal dramas... under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be crowned in oblivion,”<sup>36</sup> “who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten...”<sup>37</sup> and “where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly”<sup>38</sup>) which emulate the incoherence of actual speech. Additionally, as Preston Whaley notes, “Ginsberg made connections with the vernacular streets he hyped... [and] unfurled a collage of vernacular, if spiritualized action.”<sup>39</sup>

Ginsberg was thus inspired by “the street” both structurally and thematically. In “Howl,” he also utilizes the “breath measure” line proposed by Kerouac in his “Essentials of Spontaneous

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<sup>32</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 130.

<sup>33</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 130.

<sup>34</sup> Ginsberg, “America,” 146.

<sup>35</sup> Ginsberg, “Author’s Preface,” xx.

<sup>36</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 128.

<sup>37</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 129.

<sup>38</sup> Ginsberg, “Howl,” 133.

<sup>39</sup> Whaley 156.

Prose” to emulate speech. The open form of the poem is organized into individual breath units which provide a natural flowing rhythm. The first section of “Howl” is built upon the reiteration of the base word ‘who’ which sustains the relatively steady measure of the poem and allow for the statements to take on the shape of “oral prophecy.”<sup>40</sup> It allows for the short, strong image-based forays, always bringing the reader back to the refrain. This syntactical device is equivalent to a jazz motive based on “the recurrence of a few notes throughout a musical piece,”<sup>41</sup> as it also lays the groundwork for maintaining the measure which theoretically should not extend the length of a single breath (needed to ‘blow a phrase’). The run-on sentence comprising Part I of “Howl” is basically a build-up of choruses, each embodying “a big scatological pile-up of words,”<sup>42</sup> that frequently evoke the “eyeball kick” effect achieved through vivid imagery. Part II contrasts the preceding section due to its striking, staccato rhythm punctuated by the fixed base Moloch, while the third part takes on a more subdued tone and rhythm to stress the speaker’s empathy towards Carl Solomon, achieved also by the refrain repetition of “I’m with you in Rockland” alternating with lines. The poem ends on a note of acceptance, reconciliation, and harmony, emphasized by the repetition of the liberating “Holy!” mantra.<sup>43</sup>

## 2.2. Jazz in Kerouac’s Prose

The jitteriness and franticness of modern jazz was an adequate parallel to the theme of constant movement and “hyberbolic momentum”<sup>44</sup> perpetuated in Kerouac’s narratives,<sup>45</sup> meant to portray the restlessness of the postwar Beat Generation which reciprocally embodied the

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<sup>40</sup> Whaley 180.

<sup>41</sup> Whaley 192.

<sup>42</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues*,” Naropa Poetics Audio Archives (1 July 1988), recorded lecture, 25 Apr. 2014 <[http://archive.org/details/Ginsber\\_Mexico\\_City\\_Blues\\_July\\_1988\\_88P044](http://archive.org/details/Ginsber_Mexico_City_Blues_July_1988_88P044)> 0:16:00-0:17:00.

<sup>43</sup> Whaley 192.

<sup>44</sup> Regina Weinreich, *Kerouac’s Spontaneous Poetics: A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002) 35.

<sup>45</sup> Weinreich 25.

“anarchic force”<sup>46</sup> of bebop. As Gregory Stephenson notes, “[m]ovement, both outward and inward, physical and metaphysical, was the guiding principle of the Beats and “go!” their imperative.”<sup>47</sup> A sense of urgency permeates the cross-country adventures depicted in Kerouac’s prose, and this “wanderlust” demanded a medium for accurate portrayal, one that would capture the “one and noble function of the time, *move*.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the seeming aimlessness of the momentum that guides the protagonists in Kerouac’s second published novel *On the Road* (1957)—no specific goal is stated—there is still resolution and purpose in the motion itself which sets the Beat movement apart from existentialist resignation. It is arguably the journey itself that is the aim, along with finding and capturing “IT”—an ephemeral “epiphany”, a “heightened moment”<sup>49</sup> that is analogical with jazz soloing when the musician’s creative output aligns with the spontaneity of authentic, pure expression.

Kerouac regarded modern jazz as the most appropriate correlation to a new writing style he desired to perfect in order to achieve pure creative expression. Additionally, the frantic drive of bebop proved to be a kindred force to the Beat *élan vital*. In accordance with the lust for life of the Beat hero, this “essential optimism”<sup>50</sup> of the postwar generation depicted in Kerouac’s prose is projected onto his conceptualization of jazz. As Douglas Malcolm notes, Kerouac’s “primitivist view of black culture, one that shapes his use of jazz in *On the Road*, often misrepresents, exaggerates, and suppresses important elements of the music and the culture in which it originated.”<sup>51</sup> This romanticization of the African American can be found in the following passages:

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<sup>46</sup> Townsend 126.

<sup>47</sup> Stephenson 12.

<sup>48</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000) 121. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

<sup>49</sup> Weinreich 54.

<sup>50</sup> Stephenson 12.

<sup>51</sup> Malcolm 94.

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... (Kerouac, 87)

[...]

I walked... wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. [...] I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned. [...] wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America. (Kerouac, 163-164)

The idealization disregards the fact that "the spirit of jazz with which [Kerouac] identifies derives in good measure from the African American history of slavery and racial prejudice."<sup>52</sup>

This romanticized appropriation gives rise to a selective (white) perspective of jazz in *On the Road*, celebrating the musical aspect without regard to its origins, marking an ignorance (whether willful or not) of African American historical plight and suppression in America. While David Hopkins argues that the narrator merely desires to have the ability of spontaneous expression that he perceives in these people, the "romantic racism"<sup>53</sup> is present nevertheless.

Another figure of jazz that starred as subject-matter in Beat writing was the jazz soloist. The role of "the jazzman as transcendent American hero"<sup>54</sup> falls upon the new Beat protagonist exemplified by the character of Dean Moriarty (inspired by Neal Cassady) in *On the Road*. Dean embodies the fervor of jazz via his innumerable escapades and uncontrollable energy. The identification of Beat members with the jazz musician's outsider social status<sup>55</sup> (even more prominent with bebop proponents) reflects the mutual dissent in regards to artistic restrictions. In connection to the idealized perception of jazz, "Kerouac similarly assigns a function to the

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<sup>52</sup> Malcolm 98.

<sup>53</sup> David Hopkins, "To Be or Not to Bop: Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" and the Culture of Bebop and Rhythm 'n' Blues," *Popular Music* 24.2 (May 2005): 283. 24 Oct. 2013 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3877650>>.

<sup>54</sup> Townsend 117.

<sup>55</sup> Malcolm 97.

improviser that is purely instinctive rather than cultural-historical.”<sup>56</sup> Instances of this can be found in *On the Road* in descriptions of the numerous jazz sessions the protagonists are witness to which frequently celebrate and empathize with the jazzman’s grasp of “IT,” a state of mind (and moment) that the characters strive to capture in their lives as well. A parallel can be drawn between Kerouac’s focalized perception of the saxophonist as the foreground of the bebop ensemble in regards to his writing technique in his essay “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” and the narrative of *On the Road*. In the novel, the primary focus is placed on Dean Moriarty, the “Holy Goof”<sup>57</sup> and “soloist” of the Beat gang. Sal Paradise, an equally important member of the group, hangs in the background and allows Dean to take all the solo parts, providing the rhythm and maintaining the beat that allows for Dean’s digressions.

Despite the evident emphasis Kerouac placed upon jazz as an accurate medium for artistic expression that he attempted to include in his writing, the novel *On the Road* does not yet reveal the full extent of jazz impact on structure, as, for example, *Visions of Cody* (1972). Even so, there are instances in the novel that show marks of jazz influence in the composition. Townsend argues that “in jazz, a repeated statement of the original theme conventionally brings a performance to a close.”<sup>58</sup> This is exemplified in Sal Paradise’s introductory and closing words on the hero of *On the Road*. The character of Dean personifies the spontaneity in the novel which is depicted through his incessant ramblings and energy. The very first sentence of the book, “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up,”<sup>59</sup> anticipates the “individual variations on

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<sup>56</sup> Hrebeniak 186.

<sup>57</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 176.

<sup>58</sup> Townsend 141.

<sup>59</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 3.

this theme”<sup>60</sup> throughout the narrative, which is rounded off by the narrator’s closing statement on the main character:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it [...] and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty. (Kerouac, 281)

Dean as the protagonist of the story is established as the “soloist” while the narrator Sal Paradise fulfils the role of “accompanist to Dean’s sustained solo performance [and] provides a superstructure of order that others, mainly Dean, can riff against”<sup>61</sup> via his frantic blabber that depicts the spontaneous impetus Kerouac so strived to capture in writing. However, it can also be argued that on a structural level, the narrator provides instances of jazz composition as well.

Take, for example, the following passage:

We wheeled through the sultry old light of Algiers, back on the ferry, back toward the mud-splashed, crabbed old ships across the river, back on Canal, and out; on a two-lane highway to Baton Rouge in purple darkness; swung west there, crossed the Mississippi at a place called Port Allen. Port Allen – where the river’s all rain and roses in a misty pinpoint darkness and where we swung around a circular drive in yellow foglight and suddenly saw the great black body below a bridge and crossed eternity again. What is the Mississippi River? – a washed clod in the rainy night, a soft plopping from drooping Missouri banks, a dissolving, a riding of the tide down the eternal waterbed, a contribution to brown foams, a voyaging past endless vales and trees and levees, down along, down along, by Memphis, Greenville, Eudora, Vicksburg, Natchez, Port Allen, and Port Orleans and Port of the Deltas, by Potash, Venice, and the Night’s Great Gulf, and out. (Kerouac, 141-142)

As Hrebieniak notes, in the first sentence of the extract, “the reiteration of “back” creates a momentum analogous to a soloist’s rhetorical evocation of tension prior to slowing down into a

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<sup>60</sup> Townsend 144.

<sup>61</sup> Hopkins 282.



cadence,”<sup>62</sup> the statement ending in the slack phrase “...crossed eternity again.” The build-up of the tension prior to these concluding words is underscored by the “percussive” repetition of “Port Allen” which draws attention to the “dominant pulse”<sup>63</sup> of the rhythmic flow, and culminates in the rapid-fire phrasing of the alliterative prelude of the Mississippi River. This rhythmic device that continues in the following descriptive passage with the reiterated word “down” propels the initially lilting tempo which picks up speed with the closing, staccato enumeration of cities to help create an effect of celerity of the river rushing past, as “definition of the powerful river at once echoes and reveals his admiration for its spontaneous flow.”<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, *On the Road* has a relatively conventional structure<sup>65</sup>—its foundations of the bop aesthetic come to fruition in later novels, of which *Visions of Cody* will be examined, and ultimately the poem *Mexico City Blues*.

In 1953, Kerouac wrote “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,”<sup>66</sup> where he championed a new mode of spontaneous writing, one that is unrestricted by literary conventions (punctuation, narrative chronology), vocabulary, reflection, and most importantly, revision. The treatise propones unfiltered, unhalted expression of the individual self, “the song of yourself,” at the moment of writing with focus on the “jewel center of interest in subject of image.” This type of “honest... spontaneous, “confessional”” discourse comprises the “best writing” because it is “not ‘crafted’”—the first thoughts are the best thoughts.<sup>67</sup> The elimination of concurrent and retrospective editing draws a parallel to bebop soloing that is founded on improvisation. When performing a solo, it is obviously impossible to go back and “redo” the moment. The solo then

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<sup>62</sup> Hrebieniak 215.

<sup>63</sup> Hrebieniak 215.

<sup>64</sup> Weinreich 46.

<sup>65</sup> Weinreich 35.

<sup>66</sup> Whaley 83.

<sup>67</sup> Jack Kerouac, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” in Ann Charters, ed., *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Viking, 1992) 57-58.

constitutes an intense instance of complete concentration in harmony with one's creativity and technical prowess, utilized to convey the musician's expression, unrestricted by revision, forcing the artist to be completely in the moment.<sup>68</sup>

The "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" postulate that there is "a parallel texture of experience... between improvised writing and improvised music. The experience supersedes craft... [and] form takes care of itself..."<sup>69</sup> Kerouac pioneers the use of the "vigorous space dash" instead of "false colons and timid usually needless commas," "rhythms of rhetorical exhalation," and "free deviation (association) of mind." The essay also proposes "no revisions" and an avoidance of "afterthinking" for ideal literary expression. The concept of the "jewel center of interest" regarding the "subject of image" emphasizes the significance of writing in the moment—spontaneous creation unhindered by "preconceived ideas." Spontaneous prose then should not be restricted by literary conventions, instead focusing on "allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited... "modern" language what conscious art would censor."

While the manuscript of *On the Road* was written in the spirit of this methodology, it is in *Visions of Cody* that the technique of "bop prosody" really shines through. Weinreich suggests that "[t]he construction of the entire Duluoz legend is built on a series of repetitions, the repeated events of Kerouac's life. Each novel goes over material already expressed, restated at a different level of consciousness or perception, restructured again and again for greater personal as well as aesthetic clarity."<sup>70</sup> *Visions of Cody* is really a restatement of the events that transpired in *On the Road*, except through a more prominently jazz-tinted compositional method. The following example illustrates some of these techniques:

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<sup>68</sup> Malcolm 89.

<sup>69</sup> Whaley 34.

<sup>70</sup> Weinreich 20.

I went to Hector's, the glorious cafeteria of Cody's first New York vision when he arrived in late 1946 all excited with his first wife; it made me sad to realize. A glittering counter [...] – But general effect is of *shiny food* on counter – ... sections of ceiling-length mirrors, and mirror pillars, give spacious strange feeling – [...] – But ah the counter! as brilliant as B-way outside! Great rows of it – one vast L-shaped counter – great rows of diced mint jellos in glasses; diced strawberry jellos gleaming red, jellos mixed with peaches and cherries, cherry jellos top't with whipcream, vanilla custards top't with cream; great strawberry shortcakes already sliced in twelve sections, illuminating the center of the L – [...] armies of éclairs, of enormously dark chocolate cake (gleaming scatological brown) – of deepdish strudel, of time and the river – of freshly baked powdered cookies – of glazed strawberry-banana desserts – wild glazed orange cakes – pyramiding glazed desserts... – Then the serious business, the wild steaming fragrant hot-plate counter – Roast lamb, roast loin of pork, roast sirloin of beef... things to make the poor penniless mouth water – [...] But most of all it's that shining glazed sweet counter – showering like heaven – an all-out promise of joy in the great city of kicks.

But I haven't even mentioned the best of all – the cold cuts and sandwich and salad counter – [...] – cold ham – Swiss cheese – the whole counter gleaming with icy joy which is salty and nourishing – [...] – (Poor Cody, in front of this in his scuffled-up beat Denver shoes, his literary 'imitation' suit he had wanted to wear to be acceptable in New York cafeterias which he thought would be brown and plain like Denver cafeterias, with ordinary food) –<sup>71</sup>

This passage exemplifies Kerouac's abundant use of the dash—"interior little releases, as if a saxophonist drawing breath"<sup>72</sup>—for juxtaposing images and phrases in quick succession to create an effect of simultaneity through "the effect of the long breath (synchronicity)... the effect of the intertwining tropes (syncopation), and... the effect of the long bombardment of images (synaesthesia)."<sup>73</sup> The impressionistic technique depicting the clash of vivid images of a "virtually cubist effect"<sup>74</sup> also illustrates the "visual American form" of the "bookmovie" formulated in Kerouac's tract "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose." The depiction of Hector's

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<sup>71</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995) 25-26. All subsequent citations are from this edition.

<sup>72</sup> Hrebeniak 136.

<sup>73</sup> Weinreich 64.

<sup>74</sup> Weinreich 70.

cafeteria also embodies the dual antithetical beat-beatific concept. The last phrase describing Cody in his “scuffled-up beat Denver shoes” sets the tantalizing exposition that makes “the poor penniless mouth water” into direct contrast. Due to the “all-inclusiveness” of the imagery achieved through the free prose writing, “[s]imultaneity is thus created as the beatific and beat are instantaneously contained in a single (really double) movement.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the “shining glaze sweet counter” transcends the literal level to depict the unachievable ideal of the American Dream, “an all-out promise of joy” which is devoid of deeper substance (“general effect is of *shiny food* on counter”) and unattainable for the down-and-out outsider that Cody represents.

While the preceding example illustrates the texture of prose inspired by jazz spontaneity, another passage in *Visions of Cody* displays a sense of asymmetrical pacing<sup>76</sup> derived from bebop:

... it was Lester [Young] started it all, the gloomy saintly serious goof who is behind the history of modern jazz... his drape, his drooping melancholy disposition in the sidewalk, in the door, his porkpie hat... what doorstanding influence has Cody gained from this cultural master of his generation? what mysteries as well as masteries? what styles, sorrows, collars, the removal of collars, the removal of lapels, the crepesole shoes, the beauty goof, the – [...] Lester is just like the river, the river starts in near Butte, Montana in frozen snow caps (Three Forks) and meanders on down across the states and entire territorial areas of dun bleak land with hawthorn crackling in the sleet, picks up rivers at Bismark, Omaha and St Louis just north, another at Kay-ro, another in Arkansas, Tennessee, comes deluging on New Orleans with muddy news from the land and a roar of subterranean excitement that is like the vibration of the entire land sucked of its gut in mad midnight, fevered, hot, the big mudhole rand clawpole old frogular pawed-soul titanic Mississippi from the North, full of wires, cold wood and horn. (Kerouac, 455-456)

As Townsend puts it, “Kerouac... sees himself elaborating on particular images, descriptively or associatively, in the way that jazz musicians decorate or improvise on specific chords.”<sup>77</sup> Here,

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<sup>75</sup> Weinreich 67.

<sup>76</sup> Hrebeniak 194.

one can see the “blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image” on a dual level—the narrator describes a jazz solo in language that attempts to emulate the changing tempo of jazz playing to honestly express the spontaneity that defines it. An acceleration of pace can be found in the part comparing Young’s playing to that of a river (as Kerouac seems to have found an apt analogy between the natural element and unrestrained improvisation). The concluding adjectival staccato statement denotes “the pursuit of intuitions [in improvisation] that in their implications dissolve rational dualities of bad note and good note, bad thought and good thought.”<sup>78</sup> The crescendo comes to a climax with the snappy—and rhymed—evocation of the river, fading out into a decelerated, legato finish.

### 2.3. Spontaneity in Kerouac’s Poetry

At the time of writing *Mexico City Blues* in the summer of 1955, Kerouac had already formulated his theory of spontaneous writing, the impact of which can be seen in this poem as well as in Ginsberg’s final version of “Howl” which the poet was coincidentally working on at the same time.<sup>79</sup> As James T. Jones notes, “*Mexico City Blues* is the fulfillment of Kerouac’s spontaneous poetics... the medium of poetry liberated Kerouac’s artistic intuition from the severest restrictions of narrative sequence.”<sup>80</sup> Through this intuitive form, he sought to convey the immediacy of the mind process through the immediacy of colloquial speech, drawing inspiration from the spontaneity in jazz. Additionally, there is prominent emphasis on the musicality of language, a concentration on sound as meaning rather than lexical meaning—“words

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<sup>77</sup> Townsend 147.

<sup>78</sup> Whaley 35.

<sup>79</sup> James T. Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010) 29, 145.

<sup>80</sup> Jones 12.

‘blown’ for their musical values.”<sup>81</sup> The influence of Buddhism, which Kerouac was concerned with at the time of writing the poem and can be located thematically in the work as well, also shaped the creative process, establishing that “the ego is only the illusion of continuity: the ‘I’ that was yesterday is the ‘I’ that will be tomorrow. But in spontaneous method, only the ‘I’ at the moment of writing exists, and though that ‘I’ is written, it sounds like a spoken ‘I’...”<sup>82</sup> This doctrine correlates to Kerouac’s use of spontaneity to “collapse the interval between inspiration and creation, to produce an immediate—not a mediated—version of reality...”<sup>83</sup> *Mexico City Blues* then attempts to portray the authenticity of the mind process through a number of techniques modeled on spontaneity.

In regards to the “no revision” ethos that Kerouac championed, the acknowledgement of “the value of chance in creativity”<sup>84</sup> can be noted in his poetry. The spontaneity of unhindered expression confirms the authenticity of the writing, as in the 97<sup>th</sup> Chorus of *Mexico City Blues* where the lapse of memory and free associations underscore the “resistance to craft.”<sup>85</sup>

Then all’s wet underneath, to Eclipse  
(Ivan the Heaven Sea-Ice King, Euclid,  
Bloody Be Jupiter, Nucleus,  
Nuclid, What’s-His-Name – the sea  
The sea-drang Scholar with mermaids,  
Bloody blasted dadflap thorn it  
– Neppy Tune –)  
All’s wet clear to Neptune’s Seat.<sup>86</sup>

This associative digression attempts to record the internal workings of the mind as the speaker finally arrives at the word he was intending to use. The impression of genuine expression created

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<sup>81</sup> Malcolm 86.

<sup>82</sup> Jones 152.

<sup>83</sup> Jones 142-143.

<sup>84</sup> Hrebeniak 181.

<sup>85</sup> Jones 141.

<sup>86</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1959) 105. E-book edition.

here adheres to the Freudian notion that “mistakes in the act of composition may very well be more revealing than successful articulation.”<sup>87</sup> By removing retrospective self-censorship, the speaker communicates as authentically as he can the incoherence and imperfection of the mind process.<sup>88</sup> It embodies the idea of “not worrying what the mind is saying, but examining the texture of mind itself.”<sup>89</sup>

The composition of the poem also draws influence from Dadaism and Surrealism in the form of “an antiliterary spontaneity based on chance, accident, or arbitrariness.”<sup>90</sup> While creation is not limited by literary conventions, revision or craft, it allows “the power of circumstance” to impose upon the writing in the form of real-life interruptions (slamming doors, struck-up conversations by a second party) and the restriction of a single notebook page for one chorus each, thus enabling the poem to convey “the qualities of randomness, coincidence, and inevitability that are commonly attributed to experience in life.”<sup>91</sup> Limiting the length of each chorus spatially allowed for the arbitrariness of the closing statement. On the other hand, in the *Book of Blues*, Kerouac compares the limitation to “the form of a set number of bars in a jazz blues chorus, and so sometimes the word-meaning can carry from one chorus into another, or not, just like the phrase-meaning can carry harmonically from one chorus to another, or not...”<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the incidental nature of the composition fuelled by the interaction with the “outside” (the conversations with William Maynard Garver that make their way into the poem) is

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<sup>87</sup> Jones 154.

<sup>88</sup> Jones 148.

<sup>89</sup> Allen Ginsberg, “Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues*,” Naropa Poetics Audio Archives (1 July 1988), recorded lecture, 25 Apr. 2014 <[http://archive.org/details/Ginsber\\_Mexico\\_City\\_Blues\\_July\\_1988\\_88P044](http://archive.org/details/Ginsber_Mexico_City_Blues_July_1988_88P044)>.

<sup>90</sup> Jones 141.

<sup>91</sup> Jones 141.

<sup>92</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Book of Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) 1.

what “lends [the poem] its distinctly oral character.”<sup>93</sup> This interlocution is recorded in the 80<sup>th</sup>-85<sup>th</sup> Choruses, detailing a musical variation on the original conversation:

GOOFING AT THE TABLE

“You just don’t know.”

“What dont I know?”

“How good this ham n eggs  
is

“If you had any idea  
whatsoever

How good this is

Then you would stop  
writing poetry

And dig in.” [...]

Ah boy but them bacon

And them egg – [...]

SINGING:– “You’ll never know  
just how much I love you.”<sup>94</sup>

The 80<sup>th</sup> Chorus above concludes on a note of external interruption in the form of the other interlocutor singing a song in associative reaction to their first exchange—which puts the end to the conversation. The meta-reference to composition in progress once again emphasizes the immediacy of it. The following two choruses render a musical variation upon the “bacon & eggs” theme:

Dem eggs & dem dem  
Dere bacons, baby,  
If you only lay that  
down on a trumpet,  
‘Lay that down  
solid brother  
‘Bout all dem  
bacon & eggs  
Ya gotta be able  
to lay it down

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<sup>93</sup> Jones 153.

<sup>94</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 88.



solid –  
 All that luney  
 & fruney<sup>95</sup>  
 [...]

Fracons, aeons, & beggs,  
 Lay, it, all that  
 be bobby  
 be buddy  
 I didn't took  
 I could think  
 So  
 bebo  
 beboppy  
 Luney & Juney [...]

Looney & Boony  
 Juner and Mooner  
 Moon, Spoon and June<sup>96</sup>

As becomes apparent in these extracts, “Kerouac’s awareness of the insubstantiality of form caused him to value highly... the sounds of words.”<sup>97</sup> The choruses convey an instinctive communication of meaning through sounds rather than content, and “oral autonomy breaches intellectual rule to define shape and integrity.”<sup>98</sup> There is an apparent sound-based playfulness in the torrent of words that create the impression of euphonic musical improvising rather than any semantically meaningful statement—sonic association eclipses lexical association. As Jones notes,

The motifs embodied by speech sounds are the primary means of organizing *Mexico City Blues*. When themes and imagery become disjointed in the poem, continuity usually subsists in sound... Kerouac’s intention [was] to produce a poem in which meaning is not only modulated by sound... but one in which sound also becomes the foremost vehicle of meaning.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 90.

<sup>97</sup> Jones 167.

<sup>98</sup> Hrebeniak 145.

<sup>99</sup> Jones 167-168.

The sonic improvisation (“Looney” resulting in “Moon” via its “luna” root-word etymology)<sup>100</sup> leads to the words “Moon” and “June”—“the staple of the American romantic serenade... [that] Kerouac sets about deconstructing.”<sup>101</sup> The “jam” is interrupted by the 83<sup>rd</sup> Chorus which brings the conversation back into the poem: “Dont they call them / cat men / That lay it down / with the trumpet / [...] I call em / them cat things...”<sup>102</sup> The next chorus makes it clear that the object of ridicule is the Tin Pan Alley song “By the Light of the Silvery Moon” (1909):

By the light  
 Of the silvery moon  
 We'll Oh that's the  
 part I dont remember  
 ho ney moon –  
 Croon –  
 Love –  
 June –  
 O I dont know  
 You can get it out of a book  
 If the right words are  
 important<sup>103</sup>

The memory lapse here partially salvaged by remembering and isolating the few key words of the ditty (while retaining the rhythm) serves to illustrate the irrelevance of the song's clichéd starry-eyed message. This is confirmed by the speaker's suggestion that the correct words do not matter but that it is rather the effect of the music itself that is significant. The focus on sound over lexical meaning is emphasized in the 85<sup>th</sup> Chorus where the speaker proposes “An asinine form / which will end / all asininity / from now on”<sup>104</sup>—a new poetic form based on sound as a conveyor of meaning.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Jones 95.

<sup>101</sup> Jones 95.

<sup>102</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 91.

<sup>103</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 92.

<sup>104</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 93.

<sup>105</sup> Jones 95.

The conversations with Garver in this sequence of choruses also show the colloquial nature of speech, a motif of spontaneity that permeates the poem. For instance, in the 146<sup>th</sup> Chorus, the speaker recreates an “Okie” dialect:

The blazing chickaball  
Whap-by  
Extry special Super  
High Job  
Ole 169 be  
floundering  
Down to Kill Roy<sup>106</sup>

The utilized “conductor slang” describing a train on the Southern Pacific Railroad on its way to Gilroy, California, is an attempt to capture the authentic voice of the American idiom, because actual vernacular speech is rarely well-structured and refined.<sup>107</sup> This focus on speech as a means of authentic expression transcribes into poetic structure as well. As Jones notes, “the disjunction between beginning and end [of the chorus] enacts the discontinuity of thought” as well as “the abrupt shifts of topics, tones, and forms.”<sup>108</sup> Instead of explaining or expanding on presented themes, the speaker often goes off in a different direction, exemplifying the natural, associative thought process marked by spontaneity. On the other hand, the choruses themselves are connected by jazz-like transitions via “the subtle variation of the last line of the chorus in the first line of a following chorus [that] are very much like jazz variations on a melody.”<sup>109</sup> This can also be seen in the 64<sup>th</sup> and 104<sup>th</sup> Chorus whose first lines (“I’d rather die than be famous” and “I’d rather be thin than famous”<sup>110</sup>) play upon the same technique. The frantic tempo, syncopation and variable rhythmic patterns of bebop can be said to emulate actual speech

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<sup>106</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 154.

<sup>107</sup> Ginsberg, “Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues*,” recorded lecture, 0:48:00.

<sup>108</sup> Jones 158, 161.

<sup>109</sup> Jones 172.

<sup>110</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 72, 113.

rhythms that the musicians were inspired to recreate in music.<sup>111</sup> Kerouac's poetic structure is then inspired by the musical rendition of speech rhythms, evident in the adaptation of "fluctuating tempos and placement of micro-accents and hiatuses."<sup>112</sup>

Spontaneous expression extracts from the individual self, minimizing conscious influence of established literary conventions and social constraints and focusing on the elevation of the unconscious. Kerouac achieves this instinctual communication through "linguistic play," euphonic experimentation, and the emulation of speech rhythms in *Mexico City Blues*, embodied in the last 242<sup>nd</sup> Chorus:

The sound in your mind  
is the first sound  
that you could sing  
If you were singing  
at a cash register  
with nothing on yr mind –<sup>113</sup>

This notion of unconscious mindlessness shifts the medium of creative expression from the semantic to the phonic. It entails "following the sound and trusting the mind to deliver the sense" because the "mind is shapely, therefore art will be shapely."<sup>114</sup> Kerouac's poetics rely on "intuitive spoken transmission"<sup>115</sup> to authentically convey the pure "song of yourself."<sup>116</sup>

## 2.4. The Performance of Beat Poetry

Because the vocal aspect is so important in Beat poetry, it stands to reason that the nature of Beat poetry as reading performance should be examined in order to fully appreciate the effect of

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<sup>111</sup> Ginsberg, "Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*," recorded lecture, 0:31:00.

<sup>112</sup> Hrebniak 189.

<sup>113</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 252.

<sup>114</sup> Ginsberg, "Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*," recorded lecture, 0:44:00.

<sup>115</sup> Hrebniak 130.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," in Ann Charters, ed., *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Viking, 1992) 57-58.

spontaneous, sound-based poetics. Three official albums of Kerouac’s poetry readings are available to date: *Poetry for the Beat Generation* (1959), *Blues and Haikus* (1959), and *Readings by Jack Kerouac on the Beat Generation* (1960). These recorded performances offer an opportunity to examine the speech rhythms paradoxically adapted from jazz emulations, the musicality of language, and euphony that Kerouac incorporated into his writing. In the foreword to *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac notes that his desire was “to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday... [where] ideas vary and sometimes roll from chorus to chorus or from halfway through a chorus to halfway into the next.”<sup>117</sup> This idea becomes clear in his reading of the sequential passage of the 80<sup>th</sup> to 83<sup>rd</sup> Choruses (already examined earlier) in *Poetry for the Beat Generation*, where the sense is carried over in linguistic variations on the theme, the playful tone emphasizing the colloquial aspects of the Choruses as well. As Robert Creeley remarks in the introduction to the *Book of Blues*, Kerouac championed the notion that “[t]here didn’t have to be a rhetorical ‘heightening’”<sup>118</sup> present in the language of poetry and elevated street-talk as an accurate mode of authentic expression. The last three paragraphs of *On the Road* are included on the recording as well, and Kerouac’s animated rendition really allows the listener to “gauge the grain of Kerouac’s voice... [his] strong New England accent... [and] sense of his rhythm and intonation and a feel for his tempo.”<sup>119</sup>

[So there he goes] Dean [Moriarty] ragged in a motheaten overcoat he brought specially for the freezing temperatures of the East | walking off alone | and the last I saw of him | he rounded the corner of Seventh Avenue | eyes on the street ahead | and bent-to-it-again. [...]

So | in America | when the sun goes down | and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long long skies over New Jersey | and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, | and all that road going, | all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, | and in Iowa I know

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<sup>117</sup> Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 9.

<sup>118</sup> Kerouac, *Book of Blues*, x.

<sup>119</sup> Jones 19.

by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, |  
and tonight the stars'll be out, | and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? | The  
evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, |  
which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, | darkens  
all rivers, | *cups* the peaks | and folds the final shore in, and *nobody*, nobody  
knows what's going to happen to anybody | besides the forlorn *rags* of growing  
old, | I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of *Old* Dean Moriarty, the father we  
never found, | I think of Dean Moriarty, | I think of *Dean* Mo-ri-ar-ty.<sup>120</sup> (*On the  
Road*, 280-281)

The conversational tone really shows in Kerouac's reading of "October in the Railroad Earth,"  
"intended to clack along all the way like a steam engine pulling a one-hundred-car freight with a  
talky caboose at the end."<sup>121</sup> As Hrebeniak notes, "Kerouac trades on devices of onomatopoeia,  
his characteristic sound based in protracted vowels... and snapping consonants"<sup>122</sup> to diversify  
the rhythm by emulating the variability of speech rhythmic patterns. The staccato interruptions of  
usually monosyllabic words serve to "jettison the monotonous sense of foot associated with the  
iambic pentameter... and advocate a choppy, refractive bebop measure"<sup>123</sup> instead, as can be  
seen (and heard) in this excerpt:

in homes of the railroad earth | when high in the sky the magic stars ride above the  
following 'hot'shot 'freight 'trains. [...] It was the fantastic *drowse* and *drum hum*  
of *lum mum* afternoon *nathin'* to do...<sup>124</sup>

The rapid-fire delivery of the phrase "hotshot freight trains" disrupts the previous lolling rhythm  
and assonance ("high," "sky," "ride"). In contrast, the other featured sentence illustrates the

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<sup>120</sup> Jack Kerouac, "Readings from 'On the Road' and 'Visions of Cody,'" *The Jack Kerouac Collection*, Rhino, 1990. Disc 1, track 15. The stressed words in italics and rhythmic segmentation are mine. The excerpt can be listened to on the YouTube website: "Jack Kerouac on The Steve Allen Show," <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIlvezqDEU>>

<sup>121</sup> Ted Berrigan, "Jack Kerouac, The Art of Fiction No. 41," *Paris Review* 43 (Summer 1968), 5 May 2014 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4260/the-art-of-fiction-no-41-jack-kerouac>>.

<sup>122</sup> Hrebeniak 133.

<sup>123</sup> Hrebeniak 220.

<sup>124</sup> Jack Kerouac, "The Railroad Earth," *Lonesome Traveler* (New York, Grove Press, 1988) 38. The stressed syllables in italics and rhythmic segmentation are mine, marked on the basis of the recording "October in the Railroad Earth," *The Jack Kerouac Collection*, Rhino, 1990. Disc 1, track 1. The excerpt can be listened to on the YouTube website: "Kerouac - October in the Railroad Earth," <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hjPZpaXNsw>>



conservatism of the jazz,”<sup>126</sup> the concise, yet more pertinent saxophone forays of Zoot Sims and Al Cohn reacting empathically to Kerouac’s haikus seem to show more of an integration of the music into the performance. The music played during a poetry reading should ideally form a symbiosis with the poetry itself and not figure merely as a background, as in the case of *Poetry for the Beat Generation*. The interaction, or interlocution, of the two media, complementing one another to emphasize certain aspects of each art, is what creates the overall effect of euphonic harmony. The saxophone riffs in *Blues and Haikus* form a “counterpoint”<sup>127</sup> to the spoken word, “the inflections of three-lined poems traded in call and response style with considerable verve.”<sup>128</sup> A point of interest is that Kerouac did not create his haikus following his spontaneous writing method in accordance to the economy of language and craft necessary to assemble the picturesque poems.<sup>129</sup> The polished, contrived nature of the haiku—something that Kerouac’s poetics would normally oppose—then contrasts greatly to the immediate, spontaneous musical response of the saxophone. Even so, this conversation between the two media works, despite premeditated control over creation being out of balance—once again emulating speech to achieve the authenticity of expression. This particular fusion of poetry and jazz correlates to Kerouac’s own parallelization of his writing to “a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement’s been made.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Hrebniak 140.

<sup>127</sup> Jones 19.

<sup>128</sup> Hrebniak 140.

<sup>129</sup> Ted Berrigan, “Jack Kerouac, The Art of Fiction No. 41,” *Paris Review* 43 (Summer 1968), 5 May 2014 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4260/the-art-of-fiction-no-41-jack-kerouac>>.

<sup>130</sup> Ted Berrigan, “Jack Kerouac, The Art of Fiction No. 41,” *Paris Review* 43 (Summer 1968), 5 May 2014 <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4260/the-art-of-fiction-no-41-jack-kerouac>>.



The earliest recording of “Howl” dates back to February 1956 when Ginsberg read Part I (and the very beginning of Part II) of the poem at Reed College in Portland, Oregon<sup>131</sup>—just several months before City Lights Books published *Howl and Other Poems*.<sup>132</sup> The monotonous, forced rendition of “Howl” found on this recording that uses a repetitive falling intonation to convey each “breath-line” contrasts later, livelier performances that conveyed the momentum and jazz cadence so desired by Ginsberg and so lacking in this version. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ginsberg decided to stop reading the poem shortly after beginning Part II (“I sort of... I haven’t got any kind of steam.”<sup>133</sup>). The later recordings of Ginsberg’s readings of “Howl” showcase a more playful, bouncy melody of voice that emphasizes certain key words with a sudden rising intonation, continuously jolting the listener out of the relative monotony of the long lines to achieve the “eyeball kick” not only through imagery, but through vocality. For example, in the 1975 recording at Naropa University,<sup>134</sup> the jazz cadences of the poem really shine through in the fluctuating voice. The variable phrasing is highlighted by the unnaturalness of the change in pitch and irregular placement of stresses that break the expectancy of the measure and create a sense of urgency and elevation. In Part I, Ginsberg stresses individual words by implementing either an abrupt, unnatural rise in intonation or an affected rising-falling intonation:

↘   ↗  
I saw the best minds of my generation... looking for an angry fix,

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<sup>131</sup> “Earliest-Known Recording of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” Found in Reed College Archives,” *Reed College News Center*, 11 Feb 2008, 25 Apr 2014 <[http://www.reed.edu/news\\_center/press\\_releases/2007-2008/021208AllenGinsberg.html](http://www.reed.edu/news_center/press_releases/2007-2008/021208AllenGinsberg.html)>.

<sup>132</sup> The first edition was published on 1 November, 1956.

<sup>133</sup> “Howl Part I (edited),” *Reed College News Center*, 25 Apr. 2014 <[http://www.reed.edu/news\\_center/multimedia/2007-08/ginsbergreadings1.28.08.html](http://www.reed.edu/news_center/multimedia/2007-08/ginsbergreadings1.28.08.html)>. 0:34:09.

<sup>134</sup> “Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg reading, including Howl (August 9, 1975),” *Naropa University Archive Project*, 25 Apr. 2014 <[https://archive.org/details/naropa\\_anne\\_waldman\\_and\\_allen\\_ginsberg](https://archive.org/details/naropa_anne_waldman_and_allen_ginsberg)>.



## Chapter 3–Critical Perception and Media Portrayal of the Beats

### 3.1. The Course and Impact of the Six Gallery Reading

By reinstituting emphasis on the spoken word, both in relation to the poetic form as well as actual performance, the Beats reclaimed the platform of poetry readings to diminish the gap between poetry and audience. This coincided with jazz, so integral to the ideology, in the popularization of the coffeehouse venue. Because bebop thrived outside the mainstream, the small ensembles of bop musicians performed in small venues, opposed to the popular swing big bands that sold out ballrooms. The bars, clubs, and cafés frequented by the Beats in their pursuit of and fascination with “it” in bebop served as the breeding ground for cultural dissent. Or, at least, so it was perceived by the media, which began to notice the “rebellion” in the mid-fifties. It was really with the Six Gallery reading on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1955, that the Beat Generation gained momentum in the public eye through the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> The evening consisted of Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder reading their poetry, and notably “Howl” was finally introduced to the public.<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Ferlinghetti sent a telegram to Ginsberg the next day greeting him “at the beginning of a great literary career,” echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s letter to Walt Whitman in 1855.<sup>3</sup> *Howl and Other Poems* was published by Ferlinghetti’s press City Lights Books on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1956, and the obscenity trial that followed the customs seizure of copies of the collection sent from the London imprint in March and Ferlinghetti’s arrest in June 1957 really threw the Beat movement into the spotlight of the media and led to the dissemination of the Beat(nik) image.

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<sup>1</sup> Raskin 16.

<sup>2</sup> Campbell 178.

<sup>3</sup> Raskin 19.

In 1955, the Cold War fear had somewhat abated with the Korean War over and McCarthyism having run its course. The Civil Rights movement was hatching as racial segregation in public schools was deemed unconstitutional in 1954 following the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case and the murder of student Emmett Till in 1955 served as a wake-up call for America. In culture, reactions against the “corporate culture” and the rigidity of contemporary American values appeared in works such as Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955).<sup>4</sup> The poetry scene in mid-century San Francisco worked against the mainstream of New Criticism, “rejecting the unsyncopated New York quarterlies for their devotion to Eliot,”<sup>5</sup> instead focusing on the connection between poet and perceiver. At the time, the tradition of poetry readings was kept alive by figures such as poet Jack Spicer in Berkeley, a co-founder of the Six Gallery who rejected academic criticism of poetry and focused on the value of public performance,<sup>6</sup> and the key figure of the Frisco scene Kenneth Rexroth, championing public performance of poetry accompanied by jazz, upholding “the bardic tradition of American poetry.”<sup>7</sup> The stress on open form, “an American line generated by American speech”<sup>8</sup> and the debate on breath as foundation for the rhythm of poetry would have inevitably influenced young Ginsberg who arrived in San Francisco in the early fifties, coming into his own style where the liberated poetic form allowed for pure, uninhibited expression.

After tuning in on the Pacific wave of the bohemian avant-garde, Ginsberg found himself organizing a poetry reading in 1955 after being asked to by Wally Hedricks, a painter associated with the Six Gallery. Unsuccessful in enticing Kerouac to take part in the reading, Ginsberg got the young West Coast-based poets to agree on performing at the “6 Poets at 6 Gallery” event on

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<sup>4</sup> Raskin 11.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell 159.

<sup>6</sup> Raskin 12.

<sup>7</sup> Campbell 159.

<sup>8</sup> Campbell 160.

October 7<sup>th</sup>. Kenneth Rexroth hosted the evening of the “remarkable collection of angels on one stage reading their poetry,”<sup>9</sup> as Ginsberg advertised on the 100 postcards he sent out as invitations. The poet’s vocational background in marketing and advertising provided him with the know-how on how to promote and publicize the reading in San Francisco. The event was uniquely progressive and forward-looking in showcasing the younger generation of contemporary, unrenowned “outsider” poets, excluding established local poets like Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser.<sup>10</sup>

Retrospectively, in collaboration with Gregory Corso, Ginsberg wrote about the reading as an attempt “to defy the system of academic poetry, official reviews, New York publishing machinery, national sobriety and generally accepted standards to good taste,”<sup>11</sup> and accordingly, the event was decidedly far from academic in atmosphere and course. The underground venue of “a run down second rate experimental art gallery in the Negro section of San Francisco”<sup>12</sup> added to the outsider status of the happening. Apparently, by eight o’clock when the reading was scheduled to begin, the place was already packed with “North Beach bohemians and San Francisco State English teachers”<sup>13</sup> as well as members of the emerging Beat Generation and as Kerouac describes the night in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), he was the one

who got things jumping by going around collecting dimes and quarters from the rather stiff audience standing around in the gallery and coming back with three huge gallon jugs of California Burgundy... by eleven o’clock when Alvah Goldbrook [Allen Ginsberg] was reading his, wailing his poem “Wail” [“Howl”] drunk with arms outspread everybody was yelling “Go! Go! Go!” (like a jam session) and old Rheinhold Cacoethes [Kenneth Rexroth] the father of the Frisco poetry scene was wiping his tears in gladness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Campbell 178.

<sup>10</sup> Raskin 14.

<sup>11</sup> Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg, “The Literary Revolution in America,” *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 239.

<sup>12</sup> Corso and Ginsberg, 239.

<sup>13</sup> Raskin 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 13-14.

The unique atmosphere the Six Gallery reading created must have been felt by most of the spectators, as in the words of Jack Goodman, during Ginsberg's reading, this "Carrowac person sat on the floor downstage right, slugging a gallon of burgundy and repeating lines and singing snatches of scat in between the lines; he kept a kind of chanted revival-meeting rhythm going."<sup>15</sup> This jam session vibe must have added to the momentum of the event that Gary Snyder described as a "subterranean celebration,"<sup>16</sup> that Michael McClure depicted as a "hot bop scene" in regards to Ginsberg's performance and that Goodman wrote about as an "orgiastic occasion" that rendered the audience "psychologically had."<sup>17</sup>

Rexroth introduced the event by portraying San Francisco as "an oasis of cultural freedom in a country of conformity,"<sup>18</sup> and the connecting factor of the performing poets was precisely this rejection of poetic formalism and the material-oriented, vapid values of the day. As Hrebeniak notes, "the Six Gallery reading alone brought together every poetic style associated with the period, from vatic confessionism and imagist precision to satirical self-projection, surrealism, and personalist meditation."<sup>19</sup> These "spiritual seekers" were willing to indulge in literary (and lifestyle) experimentation in order to reinvent the standards of poetic expression. The Six Gallery reading provided the momentum for this endeavor, inciting an increase in poetry readings in the Bay Area and "a general reclamation of oral culture in America, reversing the dominance of visual stress."<sup>20</sup> In regards to Ginsberg's performance of "Howl," Jonah Raskin aptly notes that "[t]he poem created the poet. The audience was transformed too—indifferent

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<sup>15</sup> Campbell 179-180.

<sup>16</sup> Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl And the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) 9.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell 182.

<sup>18</sup> Raskin 15.

<sup>19</sup> Hrebeniak 13.

<sup>20</sup> Hrebeniak 130.

spectators becoming energetic participants.”<sup>21</sup> This claim coincides with the impact of jazz performances on Beat poetry readings where the poets “tapped into this... insubordinate... sense of jazz” and the innovative “artistic counter-punch to commercial pressures”<sup>22</sup> of bebop. The Beats’ focus on open form and free verse went hand in hand with the speech rhythms emulated by bebop, and what better way to showcase this emphasis on the vernacular than to have it read out loud. Interestingly enough, the final draft of “Howl” was influenced by the public readings of its progressive versions. At the Six Gallery reading, Ginsberg read only Part I of the poem, adding onto it in response to the audience’s positive reception of it. The repetitive, striking refrains of Part II and Part III (“Moloch!” and “I’m with you in Rockland”) along with the “verbal pyrotechnics, rhetorical flourishes, and dramatic phrases”<sup>23</sup> found in the poem embody the characteristics of a performance piece.

As Ginsberg was assured by Kerouac, Rexroth and, most importantly, Ferlinghetti, “Howl” launched his poetic career. The Six Gallery reading was the impulse for getting his first collection published by City Lights Books in 1956 and the first public reaction to a newly emerging literary movement. More public readings of “Howl” subsequently followed at the San Francisco Poetry Center, Berkeley’s Town Hall Theater, and in a year after the Six Gallery reading at a private house in Hollywood where Ginsberg actually performed completely naked.<sup>24</sup> Anaïs Nin, who had attended this event, identified the connection between Ginsberg’s poetry and French surrealism and the collage technique, noting his resemblance to Antonin Artaud. Another audience member, the Californian literary critic and poet Mel Weisburd, wrote Ginsberg off as

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<sup>21</sup> Raskin 18.

<sup>22</sup> Whaley 27-28.

<sup>23</sup> Raskin 172.

<sup>24</sup> Raskin 172-173.

“a vulgar salesman for himself and his own crude brand of poetry.”<sup>25</sup> The reality of Ginsberg’s self-promotion—and the promotion of fellow Beat writers—clashed with their attitude towards the literary establishment. While rejecting academic criticism, they nevertheless strove to gain recognition. The incentive behind the sensationalism that Ginsberg infused into this particular reading was certainly an attempt to draw the attention not only of young bohemian minds, but also, by “courting the very mass media he scorned,”<sup>26</sup> the interest of established critics. Poets Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams, who both supported Ginsberg, also united in rejecting his efforts to promote his work. Ginsberg took on the role of literary agent for himself, “behaving unpoetically”<sup>27</sup> and perhaps hypocritically in criticizing the commercial industry in his literary work but taking advantage of its distributional power as well. However, Ginsberg believed “there was a world of difference between his own efforts to advertise himself and the Madison Avenue advertising industry”<sup>28</sup> that dominated the mass culture of the 1950s.

Before *Howl and Other Poems* was published, Ginsberg utilized the mimeograph revolution to distribute copies of the collection to friends and former teachers. The dedication he wrote for the book mentions Kerouac, Burroughs, and Cassady (Lucien Carr asked for his name to be removed), serving not only as a nod to the influence of his co-conspirators, but also as promotion of the mostly unpublished Beat writers.<sup>29</sup> He sent out the published collection to renowned American poets like W. H. Auden and Louis Zukofsky.<sup>30</sup> Richard Eberhart’s positive review of “Howl”—the *New York Times* critic having attended the reading in Berkeley—that came out in September, 1956, greatly aided the promotion of the collection that was to come out two

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<sup>25</sup> Raskin 175.

<sup>26</sup> Raskin 175.

<sup>27</sup> Raskin 175.

<sup>28</sup> Raskin 176.

<sup>29</sup> Raskin 184.

<sup>30</sup> Raskin 179.



months later. It was unusual and “unheard of” for the *New York Times* to review unpublished writers, however, the news of the West Coast poetic revolt had crossed the country and was deemed important enough to report on.<sup>31</sup> Because the recently founded City Lights Books had no significant budget for marketing to speak of, Ginsberg himself set out to New York in the fall to act as a “one-man walking-talking advertisement,”<sup>32</sup> checking the availability of his book in bookstores and pressing the owners to stock *Howl*. Following its publication, the latest City Lights Pocket Poet Series volume apparently was nowhere to be found and none of Ginsberg’s acquaintances in Greenwich Village had come across it. He even (unsuccessfully) urged reviewers Harvey Breit (*New York Times*) and Louise Bogan (*New Yorker*) to critique *Howl*. As Jones notes, “Ginsberg was probably the first poet in America since Walt Whitman to create a full-blown media campaign on his own behalf,”<sup>33</sup> utilizing his training in media and market research. By the beginning of 1957, Ginsberg’s self-promotion endeavors and word-of-mouth had proved successful and increased the sales of *Howl*, and it would only take a couple of months before customs seized half of the 1,000 print shipment from the British printer Villiers on the grounds of obscenity.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2. Contemporary Literary Criticism

As Raskin remarks, Ginsberg was “prepared to chase the New Critics from the halls of academia,”<sup>35</sup> insisting on the importance of social context for the interpretation of poetry that New Criticism rejected. Contemporary academic and critical reaction to the poem was largely negative in regards to Beat literary innovations that defied conservative formalist views of poetry

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<sup>31</sup> Raskin 185-186.

<sup>32</sup> Raskin 187.

<sup>33</sup> Jones 25.

<sup>34</sup> Bill Morgan and Nancy Peters, *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2006) 56.

<sup>35</sup> Raskin 182.

and attempted to reinvent the American poetic expression. Raskin goes on to say that “*Howl* had triggered a culture war between academia and bohemia, New York and San Francisco.”<sup>36</sup> Ginsberg complained that critics and reviewers did not assess Beat writing professionally and did not take it seriously enough, and perhaps the sometimes ill-conceived and literarily uncritical reviews of the day may have been fuelled by this mutual antagonism of the Beats and academia, the Beat inciting “enormous antipathy... in the vested centers of literary power,”<sup>37</sup> as noted by Normal Mailer.

Contemporaneous criticism focused heavily on the oftentimes controversial, transgressive subject-matter of Beat literature and the radical and candid methods used in its depiction. These themes were frequently connected by reviewers to the stereotyped Beat lifestyle of the writers (whether grounded in reality or not) which spurred conclusions of the anti-intellectualist attitudes of the writers as proponents of violence and subversive behavior. The reduction of Beat literature to an immature and retrograde attempt at rebelling without a cause and a disregard for Beat form innovation was prevalent. While discussion of the subject-matter of literature and authorial background is defensible, the fact that these critics did not engage in closer reading of the texts to a higher critical degree arguably undermines and devaluates their conclusions. The trivialization of Beat writing by literary critics both endorsed and was endorsed by sensationalized mass media coverage, especially in regards to Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* which captured the nation’s attention during the 1957 obscenity trial. Rather than interpreting the potential literary merit of Beat literature, critics and media alike ignored authorial intention in the form of Beat manifestos on literary technique and instead contributed to the creation of a misconstrued myth. The belittled image of the beatnik was born, a warped offspring of the misperceived and disregarded

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<sup>36</sup> Raskin 201.

<sup>37</sup> Raskin 201.

Beat ideology, and the disparaging connotations this icon carried with it influenced ensuing literary criticism, public perception, and even the authors' subsequent creative output as well.

In 1957, Ginsberg was convinced that it was the "Columbia College English department that was responsible for the onslaught on the Beat Generation, the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, and the attacks on *Howl*"<sup>38</sup> through the figures of Lionel Trilling and his protégés John Hollander and Norman Podhoretz. Both wrote scathing reviews of Ginsberg's work—Hollander described *Howl* as a "dreadful little volume" despite admitting that there could be "a good poet lurking behind the modish façade of a frantic and *talentlos* avant-garde."<sup>39</sup> Podhoretz's essay "A Howl of Protest in San Francisco" (*New Republic*, September 1957) was an attack on the seemingly vapid Beat ideology, painting the picture of Beat writers "in rebellion against America simply for the sake of rebellion"<sup>40</sup> and dismissing the emerging West Coast poetry scene. Critic James Dickey regarded Ginsberg as a poseur whose "Attitude" with a capital 'A' overpowered his work that "really was not worth examining."<sup>41</sup> Arguably the strongest blow was dealt by Podhoretz, a lifelong basher of the Beat movement<sup>42</sup> with the publication of his article "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" in the 1958 spring issue of the *Partisan Review*. Probably the most vociferous literary critic of the Beats at the time, Podhoretz's review garnered national attention. Podhoretz, as described by Raskin, was "a polemicist with a flair for sweeping ethical statements and melodramatic innuendo"<sup>43</sup> who likely capitalized upon his critique of the Beats and became the editor of *Commentary* a year after the article came out.

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<sup>38</sup> Raskin 198.

<sup>39</sup> John Hollander, "Poetry Chronicle," *Partisan Review* 24.2 (Spring 1957): 296-8, as cited in Raskin, 199-200.

<sup>40</sup> Raskin 200.

<sup>41</sup> James Dickey, "From Babel to Byzantium," *Sewanee Review* 65 (Summer 1957): 509-510, as cited in Raskin, 200.

<sup>42</sup> See Norman Podhoretz's article "My War With Allen Ginsberg," *Commentary* 104.2 (August 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Raskin 202.

A “springboard for his all-embracing assault” on Bohemianism, racial conflicts, and the middle class, Podhoretz’s review that “verged on hysteria”<sup>44</sup> is caustic in nature, and even goes so far as to expose Ginsberg’s sexuality for the first time in print during a time when homosexuality was still illegal.<sup>45</sup> Podhoretz, however, is chiefly critically concerned with Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and *The Subterraneans* (1958) rather than Ginsberg’s poetry and after an initial remark that “everybody’s sanity has been spared by the inability of *Naked Lunch* to find a publisher”<sup>46</sup> delves into the portrayal of the Beats as anti-intellectuals with the potential to incite violent, subversive behavior in the youth of America. He correlates the spike of juvenile crime in America to “the same resentment against normal feeling and the attempt to cope with the world through intelligence that lies behind Kerouac and Ginsberg,” paralleling this aversion to the catch-phrase “Kill the intellectuals who can talk coherently.”<sup>47</sup> He aptly notes and criticizes Kerouac’s romanticized portrayal of the Negro in *On the Road*, but almost in the same breath dismissively states that Kerouac “manages to remain true to the spirit of hipster slang while making forays into enemy territory (i.e., the English language) by his simple inability to express anything in words.”<sup>48</sup> The sweeping, black-and-white conclusion is: “Being for or against what the Beat Generation stands for has to do [...] with being for or against intelligence itself.”<sup>49</sup> The antagonistic dialogue between Podhoretz and Ginsberg was to go on for decades. Ginsberg disparaged his former classmate’s claim about the Beats, remarking that Podhoretz was “out of touch with twentieth-century literature... writing for the eighteenth-century mind” and

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<sup>44</sup> Raskin 202, 203.

<sup>45</sup> Raskin 202.

<sup>46</sup> Norman Podhoretz, “The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” *Beat Down to Your Soul*, Ann Charters, ed. (Detroit, Penguin Books, 2001) 481.

<sup>47</sup> Podhoretz 493.

<sup>48</sup> Charters 489.

<sup>49</sup> Podhoretz 493.

that “there are ‘INTELLECTUALS’ and there are intellectuals.”<sup>50</sup> This debate over intellectualism and anti-intellectualism illustrates the battle between the Beats and the academic establishment. Another critic, Paul O’Neil, embodied Beat authors as “undisciplined and slovenly amateurs”<sup>51</sup> and John Ciardi wrote of them as having “seized upon obscenity as an expression of ‘total personality.’”<sup>52</sup> In regards to Podhoretz’s and others’ critique of primitivism in Beat literature, Whaley notes that

[their] views seem to be based, in part, on the media spectacle of beatnik public foolishness, in some cases Kerouac’s. As a result I think they superimpose a caricature of primitivism—the occasional, seemingly mindless behavior of crowds—onto a Beat aesthetic that does not jettison knowledge, but conforms itself to Eastern-derived notions of mental concentration and esteem for creativity in the moment.<sup>53</sup>

This long-lasting, media-influenced perception that infiltrated Beat literary criticism illustrates the persuasive and power of mass media in the 1950s. It shows that contemporary criticism during the active peak of the Beat movement—the mid-fifties to the early sixties—drew heavily on the image and lifestyle of the Beats rather than actual literary interpretation.

While the majority of reviews were mainly negative, there were several notable exceptions of contemporary proponents of the Beat Generation, namely William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg’s mentor, LeRoi Jones, and Norman Mailer, “one of the few to see their withdrawal from conformity as a positive rebellion.”<sup>54</sup> In his 1957 article “The White Negro,” Mailer compared the Beats to the African American original hipsters of the 1940s (usually jazz

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<sup>50</sup> Marc D. Schleifer, “Here to Save Us,” *The Voice* 3.51 (October 15, 1958), 12 Nov. 2013 <[http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2008/05/clip\\_job\\_allen.php](http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2008/05/clip_job_allen.php)>.

<sup>51</sup> Paul O’Neil, “The Only Rebellion Around,” *A Casebook on the Beat*, Thomas Parkinson, ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961) 241.

<sup>52</sup> John Ciardi, “Epitaph for the Dead Beats,” *A Casebook on the Beat*, Thomas Parkinson, ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1961) 262.

<sup>53</sup> Whaley 34.

<sup>54</sup> Diane Huddleston, “The Beat Generation: They Were Hipsters Not Beatniks,” (Western Oregon University: Digital Commons@WOU, 2012) 9, 20 May 2014 <<http://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his/4/>>

musicians) who faced persecution due to race and their bohemian spirit. The Beats emulated this lifestyle with the difference that they feared a “slow demise through conformity” or sudden extinction thanks to the atom bomb.<sup>55</sup> Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg’s anthology *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* (1958) did much to positively promote the Beat Generation, as did poet and critic Lawrence Lipton’s book *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), one of the earliest defenses of the Beats.<sup>56</sup> The inclusion in Donald Allen’s ground-breaking anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (1960) was to cement the Beat Generation’s place in the American literary canon, and the anthology “helped tremendously to bring the poetry revolution to campuses all across America”<sup>57</sup> in later years. The internal endorsement conducted primarily by Ginsberg contributed greatly to the dissemination of Beat literature. As Jones notes, “he served as unpaid agent for all three writers [Kerouac, Burroughs, Cassady] at one time or another, and he was directly responsible for the placement of Burroughs’s first novel, *Junky*.”<sup>58</sup> Ginsberg contributed to the development of Kerouac’s poetics of uninhibited, spontaneous discourse. As Jones further remarks, “Ginsberg’s honesty, a figurative and often literal nakedness, was taken up by the media, which used it to characterize, sensationalize, and victimize the Beats.”<sup>59</sup> Because contemporary criticism tended to conflate the lifestyles and authorial background of the Beats with their work, thus producing a skewed outlook of Beat writing backed by negative media portrayal, the Beats took it upon themselves to set the record straight.

Both Ginsberg and Kerouac reacted against Podhoretz’s “Know-Nothing” review. In response, Kerouac wrote the articles “About the Beat Generation,” “Lamb, No Lion,” and most

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<sup>55</sup> Huddleston 5.

<sup>56</sup> Raskin 201.

<sup>57</sup> Raskin 206.

<sup>58</sup> Jones 26.

<sup>59</sup> Jones 26.

importantly “Beatific: The Origins of the Beat Generation” (1959) in defense of the movement. The latter work depicts the Beats as “spiritually minded, not violence prone,”<sup>60</sup> with a frantic *élan vital*. Kerouac’s tracts “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” and his “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose” came out several years before media exposure of the Beats. Both document the writer’s creative methods and comprise an ideal primary source for literary critics then to have engaged with, yet it does not seem that many of the more prominent ones chose to do so.<sup>61</sup> Instead of taking into consideration the clarifications of the Beat representatives on their movement, critics allowed the empty beatnik stand-in with all its implications to take on a too significant role in their assessments. Critic Huddleston notes:

With commercialization, Kerouac was afraid the spiritual message he was trying to convey was being lost. Ginsberg was explicitly direct with those who misrepresented the Beats. He called them instruments of the devil, liars, war-creating Whores of Babylon...<sup>62</sup>

Apart from locking horns with Podhoretz, Ginsberg also reacted against Hollander’s review with an open letter that later served as a Beat manifesto and “a cultural call to arms” in Jane Kramer’s *Allen Ginsberg in America* (1969).<sup>63</sup> The letter attacks New Criticism, *Time* magazine, the *Partisan Review*, Lionel Trilling, the “whole horror of Columbia,” “Podhoretz & the rest of the whores,” and “America’s ignorant intelligentsia.”<sup>64</sup> Ginsberg notes that criticism of the Beats until then has been uninformed in the various schools of experimental poetic techniques. Mentioning Kerouac’s writing technique, Ginsberg points out the absence of criticism that would examine the spontaneous prose method in relation to Kerouac’s texts, instead assessing it on the basis of preconceived ideas about writing and literary tradition. He calls out Podhoretz on

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<sup>60</sup> Raskin 204.

<sup>61</sup> Bill Morgan, ed. *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008) 203.

<sup>62</sup> Huddleston 10-11.

<sup>63</sup> Raskin 205.

<sup>64</sup> Raskin 205.

confusing prosody and diction in his critique of Beat spontaneous bop prosody. He asks Hollander to “have the heart and decency to take people seriously and not depend only on your own university experience for arbitrary standard of value to judge others by.”<sup>65</sup> The nature of “Howl” is also examined in the letter, Ginsberg stating that it embodied experimentation with form, and this attempt to revitalize poetic expression was met with “traditionalists distrust[ing] its unconventionality.”<sup>66</sup>

Kerouac and Ginsberg alike had a desire to be considered and interpreted as serious writers with a sound, thought-out agenda. Contemporary critics skimmed over their ideological manifestos and the popular perception of the Beats was a twisting of the original literary concepts, if they were even taken into consideration. Beat writers strove to be recognized by the literary establishment while at the same time rejecting its authority. Ginsberg resented being “treated as a cultural clown”<sup>67</sup> but simultaneously capitalized upon the sensationalism his antics generated. Like Kerouac, Ginsberg feared that “Beat books, values, and ideas would find their way into the mainstream in some sort of watered-down form.”<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, this came true as the counterculture movement became commercialized through the beatnik icon and “[b]eat spirituality [was] brokered, packaged, and marketed.”<sup>69</sup> As Catherine Nash says, “[d]espite the fact that the Beats struggled to gain literary credence, their media image paradoxically continued to grow, with the two becoming increasingly divorced from each other.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Morgan, *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, 203.

<sup>66</sup> Raskin 206.

<sup>67</sup> Raskin 206.

<sup>68</sup> Raskin 207.

<sup>69</sup> Raskin 207.

<sup>70</sup> Catherine Nash, “An Ephemeral Oddity?: The Beat Generation and American Culture,” *Working With English: Medieval and Modern Language, Literature and Drama* 2.1 (2006): 56.



### 3.3. Media Representation of the Beats—Creation of the Beatnik Subculture

It was mainly the censorship trial concerning Ginsberg's *Howl* that set the media into a frenzy over the new hip phenomenon of the 'beatnik' persona, one of the few negative outcomes of the publicized trial with long-lasting import. By sensationalizing the Beat movement through the controversy of obscenity present in poetry, the media warped Beat ideology, manifesting an unsubstantial portrayal of the original literary ideals, focusing on image over actual content. Mass media downplayed the literary aspect of the Beat movement in favor of the fallacious iconism of the romanticized, yet ridiculous figure of the beatnik. This caricature devoid of substance and rooted primarily in hollow performance overshadowed the actual literary merit of the Beat movement. It was *The San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen who originally coined the term 'beatnik' on 2 April, 1958,<sup>71</sup> an etymological conflation of 'Beat' with the recently launched Soviet sputnik, embedding the term with a pejorative connotation.

Catherine Nash proposes the multilayered interpretation of the Beats "as a literary movement, media creation and mutually exploitative marketing strategy"<sup>72</sup> that transpired largely through the sensationalized beatnik paradigm: "cool cats" donning a "black turtleneck, beret and goatee beard in accordance with their stereotyped media image... [who] engage guests with obligatory poetry readings and bongo-playing, guaranteed to enliven any otherwise "square" middle class party."<sup>73</sup> The ideology of the beatnik was reduced to this "too cool for anything" attitude. Nash acknowledges that "the Beat image became detached from the Beat aesthetic, and

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Clay Doyle and V. V. Kabakchi, "Of Sputniks, Beatniks, and Nogoodniks," *American Speech* 65.3 (Autumn 1990): 276, 12 Nov. 2013 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/455919>>

<sup>72</sup> Nash 54.

<sup>73</sup> Nash 56.

was appropriated by middle-America as a method of temporary escape from the boredom of suburbia, with ‘Rent-a-Beatnik’ services becoming increasingly popular for parties.”<sup>74</sup>

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1959, *Life* magazine ran an article titled “Squaresville U. S. A. vs. Beatsville” that constituted “an especially cynical and distorted portrayal of American life that invented a story in order to reinforce a false dichotomy”<sup>75</sup> of the beatnik stereotype and the contrasting dull “squares” of the Silent Generation. Public reaction to this piece was mixed; proponents of both sides voiced their concern over the misrepresentation. In the spirit of sensationalism, media coverage of the beatnik phenomenon in opposition to standardized American middle class family values distorted the presentation of both parties, exaggerated stereotypes and dismissed the spiritual interpretation of “Beat” by the members of the Beat Generation themselves. A month after its first piece on the beatnik fad came out, *Life* printed another called “The Only Rebellion Around” which featured a set-up photograph of a beatnik pad, complete with “all the essentials of uncomfortable living”<sup>76</sup> that included “naked lightbulb... bearded Beat wearing sandals, chinos and turtle-necked sweater and studying a record by the late saxophonist Charlie Parker... ill-tended plant... bare mattress... [and] Beat baby, who has gone to sleep on floor after playing with beer cans.”<sup>77</sup> The author of the article made out the trend as “a cultural protest transformed into a commodity.”<sup>78</sup> The news of the “Beatnik horror” crossed the ocean as well, as the British tabloid newspaper *The People* ran an article on the American subcultural scene in August 1960, purporting that “KEROUAC the hobo’s prophet... CORSO the crank poet... BURROUGHS the ex-drug addict... [and]

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<sup>74</sup> Nash 56.

<sup>75</sup> Whaley 47.

<sup>76</sup> Paul O’Neil, “The Only Rebellion Around,” *Life* 47.22 (30 Nov 1959): 114.

<sup>77</sup> O’Neil, “The Only Rebellion Around,” 114-115.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and Its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 20.1 (1997), 20 May 2014 <<http://pcasacas.org/SiPC/20.1/petrus.htm>>.

GINSBERG the hate merchant” were to blame because “their cult of despair is driving the teenagers to violence.”<sup>79</sup> As Stephen Petrus notes,

More important in understanding this segment of American society from 1957 to 1960 is the nature of the coverage by popular culture magazines and newspapers and the response of the public to what it understood to be the philosophy and values of the non-conformists [...] they co-opted much of the beatniks’ culture and thereby rendered the dissidence obsolete.<sup>80</sup>

The end of the 1950s witnessed the beatnik character infiltrate popular American culture and mostly face ridicule in the form of television shows (*The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, *77 Sunset Strip*, *Route 66*)—an episode of the TV show *Peter Gunn* (1958) introduces Wilbur the beatnik, an incredible embodiment of beatnik slang.<sup>81</sup> The beatnik fad also found its way into popular print (*Mad* magazine, *The Village Voice*, *Playboy*, *Life*, *Look*, *Time*, *Newsweek*),<sup>82</sup> radio programs, and movies.<sup>83</sup> *The Beat Generation* (1959) exploits the poetry reading scene with a female character prefacing her performance: “this is only for the cool cats... sterile creeps can crawl out now.”<sup>84</sup> *The Beatniks* (1960) promises “the pulsating story of today’s youth... living by their code of rebellion and mutiny—the beatniks! A moving story with insight and understanding of a craze that is sweeping the nation!”<sup>85</sup> The B movie *High School Confidential!* (1958) features a beatnik chick reciting her poetry in a coffeehouse, coolly drawling out that

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<sup>79</sup> “Blame these 4 men for the Beatnik horror,” *The People* (7 Aug 1960) as found in *The Archive: Sketches on Kerouac*, 20 May 2014 <<http://acrossanunderwood.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/blame-these-4-men-for-the-beatnik-horror.jpg>>.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and Its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 20.1 (1997), 20 May 2014 <<http://pcasacas.org/SiPC/20.1/petrus.htm>>.

<sup>81</sup> “Image of Sally,” *Peter Gunn*, Season One, dir. Boris Sagal, writ. Blake Edwards, prod. Peter Rodgers Organization, 1958, *YouTube*, 20 May 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8W4wZVGnu4>>.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and Its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960,” *Studies in Popular Culture* 20.1 (1997), 20 May 2014 <<http://pcasacas.org/SiPC/20.1/petrus.htm>>.

<sup>83</sup> Skerl 53.

<sup>84</sup> “Vampira Beat Poem (1959)” extract from *The Beat Generation*, dir. Charles Haas, writ. Richard Matheson and Lewis Meltzer, prod. Albert Zugsmith, 1959, 20 May 2014 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63\\_BMNxTces](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63_BMNxTces)>.

<sup>85</sup> “The Beatniks (1960) trailer,” *YouTube*, 20 May 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSLu0GT5ggg>>.

“tomorrow is a drag, pops, the future is a flake [...] tomorrow is dragsville, cats [...] turn your eyes inside and dig the vacuum...”<sup>86</sup>

Undeniably, the comical beatnik persona generated by mass media had a long-lasting, primarily negative impact on critical and popular reception of Beat literature. Clinton R. Starr, however, discusses the dichotomy between the Beat Generation and the beatniks in a broader sociological context, noting that nowadays, most critics strictly distinguish between the serious Beat writers and the beatnik sycophants that caused more detriment than benefit to the reputation of the Beats.<sup>87</sup> Of course, the image of the beatnik that contemporary media conveyed was in itself a parody of a fallacy—the bongo-wielding hip cat that represented the casual frequenter (“weekend beatnik”<sup>88</sup>) of liberal coffeehouses that in turn stood in for the bohemian Beat writer. However, it is useful to examine the beatnik subculture that germinated in the wake of Beat publicity not only through the skewed and exaggerated presentation of the media, but also through the actions of the community itself. The influx of individuals attracted to the beatnik “cause” showcases an “extreme dissatisfaction with white middle-class values”<sup>89</sup> that permeated the fifties. Starr suggests that “‘Beat’ and ‘beatnik’... designate an individual who was attracted to bohemian enclaves as sites in which widespread attitudes and habits, such as Cold War politics, racial segregation, heterosexuality, and the valorization of commodity consumption, could be transgressed.”<sup>90</sup>

The increase in police interventions in popular neighborhoods “infested” by beatniks during the late fifties (Greenwich Village in New York City, North Beach in San Francisco,

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<sup>86</sup> “I Feel Like Saying A Beatnik Poem 1950’s B Movie Style,” *YouTube*, 20 May 2014  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVOXxDV5BdI>>.

<sup>87</sup> Clinton R. Starr, “‘I Want to Be with My Own Kind’: Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture,” Jennie Skerl, ed. *Reconstructing the Beats* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 44.

<sup>88</sup> O’Neil 119.

<sup>89</sup> Skerl 44.

<sup>90</sup> Skerl 42.

Venice West in Los Angeles) shows the growing concern of citizens and authorities.<sup>91</sup> The liberal stances of the popular beatnik urban haunts in regards to sexuality, politics, and ethnicity attracted young free-thinkers who wished to escape “the rapidly expanding suburbs and their compulsory heterosexuality” exclusive to African Americans, and “their conscious decision to live in racially diverse enclaves represented a rebellion, at the level of quotidian experience, against the segregationist racial norms that pervaded American society.”<sup>92</sup> Not everyone was happy with this diversity, and measures were implemented to thwart the growing bohemian subculture. From early 1959, it was necessary for coffeehouses to obtain entertainment permits to be able to operate legally—this allowed the Board of Police Commissioners to shut down popular beatnik hangouts.<sup>93</sup> Fire inspections were another major cause of liquidated coffeehouses, spurring rallies and protest marches against the alleged targeted harassment.<sup>94</sup>

It is arguable that American national media had an underlying motive for depreciating the Beat Generation and accompanying beatnik subculture, if one considers the tense political situation in the U.S.A. in regards to the Red Scare, the McCarthy witch hunts, and the pervasive nuclear war threat. The politics of containment extended to American culture as well, and the Beats were perceived as a subversive threat to the integrity of American wholesome values. Beat anti-materialism, experimentation, their spiritual quest and especially their questioning of established traditions posed a cultural threat stemming from within the nation with the potential to undermine an intrinsically united America in the middle of a passive aggressive war with Soviet Russia when national integration was a political necessity. Mainstream media thus undermined the Beat vision in favor of the less dangerous and more entertaining beatnik

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<sup>91</sup> Skerl 42, 49.

<sup>92</sup> Skerl 47, 48.

<sup>93</sup> Skerl 49.

<sup>94</sup> Skerl 50.

caricature. This antithetical, sensationalized representation continued to discredit Beat writers in the 1950s and following decades. Critical reevaluation of the Beat literary movement only began to take precedence from the 1980s onward, an indication of the escalated, long-standing response of the literary establishment and media in the time of this counterculture's emergence and peak.

## Conclusion–The Marginal Becomes Mainstream

The transition from the 1950s to the 1960s in America was a turning point for the incorporation of the Beat avant-garde into the radical counterculture movement that in the succeeding decade manifested as the Love Generation.<sup>1 2</sup> From hipster to beatnik to hippie—the historical recurrence of cultural icons comes full circle. The Beats were even investigated by the FBI—the Bureau’s director J. Edgar Hoover stated at the 1960 Republican Convention that “‘beatniks’ [were] one of the three menaces to the United States... [t]he other two [being] communism and eggheads, i.e., intellectuals.”<sup>3</sup> The actual Beat ideology of individualism, non-conformity and free thinking did indeed pose a threat to the rigid mores of the Cold War-ridden decade. Nash remarks that “[i]n the postwar era... the Beats were regarded by the media as a cohesive social group, and their emphasis on individualism was viewed as a very real threat to the accepted postwar social order that was exemplified in middle class suburbia.”<sup>4</sup> The negative contemporary literary and social criticism can thus be attributed to the Cold War politics of containment and cultural conservatism that effectively attempted to suppress the Beat cultural subversion. In the last couple of decades, critics have focused more on in-depth analysis of Beat literature, engaging with the texts on a structural level in accordance to the literary techniques proposed in Beat manifestos, offering a retrospective, not retrograde, interpretation.

In the 1950s, literary critics of the Beats largely ignored the significance of the concurrently emerging bebop scene. Beat writers directly reacted to jazz that imbued their bohemian lifestyles, assuming its spontaneous creative expression and paying homage to jazz musicians in their work. Jazz thus forms an integral part of Beat literature, and both artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Skerl 26.

<sup>2</sup> Whaley 62.

<sup>3</sup> Huddleston 8.

<sup>4</sup> Nash 54.

movements are exceptional in their parallel postwar temporal placement. Due to the cultural hegemony of the fifties, the impact of modern jazz on the formation of Beat poetics came to the foreground of literary criticism only in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Critics such as Richard Quinn, James T. Jones and Michael Hrebeniak assess the incorporation of jazz patterns and the literary appropriation of musical spontaneity into Beat literature. The nature of improvisational art is discussed with regard to the active participation of the audience (whether listener or reader). Quinn draws a connection between the anti-consumerist tendencies of bebop that the Beats adapted,<sup>5</sup> but ultimately fell prey to. Critic Fiona Paton adopts an interdisciplinary approach in her critique, “emphasizing a student’s need for knowledge of fifties culture and jazz patterns”<sup>6</sup> in order to appropriately engage in the examination of critical and popular discourse on the Beat Generation—a critical approach that this thesis assumes in its literary and sociological analysis of the Beats.

With the entrance of the Beat Generation into popular culture came fame. However, for the most part in the 1950s, this celebrity status was not the product of literary recognition but stemmed from their popularity as subcultural icons. Ginsberg, who went on to become a proponent of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, struggled with the newfound “fiction of Allen Ginsberg” label that was bestowed upon him via the media publicity of the Beats and the correlative parasitic beatnik fad. He became attached to this “fixed identity” and entrenched in the myth of his own self. This egotistical self-consciousness influenced his subsequent work and even became an issue in later poems.<sup>7</sup> For Kerouac, the imposed celebrity status and medial

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<sup>5</sup> Skerl 5.

<sup>6</sup> Matt Theado, “Beat Generation Literary Criticism,” *Contemporary Literature* 45.4 (Winter 2004): 756, 13 Nov 2013 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3593550>>.

<sup>7</sup> Raskin 208.



skewering proved to be his downfall,<sup>8</sup> as he did not deal well with the attention of journalists or the young enthusiasts who flocking to meet the “King of the Beats,” expecting to hear universal truths, instead encountering a man already over the whole concept.<sup>9</sup> That fame impacted the creative output of Beat writers can be seen in Kerouac’s novel *Big Sur* (1962), detailing the deterioration of a disillusioned novelist in the face of fame and eager public expectation. Fame truly rendered Kerouac beat in the original sense of the term. At the turn of the decade, Kerouac was already a figure of a bygone age, the baton of cultural dissidence being passed on to a new generation of young, vital bohemians.

The contemporaneous infamy of the Beats, however, does have a flip side. Despite not being recognized by the literary establishment in the 1950s as worthy of in-depth critical interpretation, the Beat literary movement has achieved literary renown in recent decades, Ginsberg and Burroughs living to witness this academic change of heart and gradual embracement by scholars and critics. The mutual disregard and rejection of the Beats and the academic authorities in the 1950s is intriguing in the light of the inclusion in the present-day literary canon, especially given the sharp retaliation of Beat writers against the literary criticism of their day. Perhaps their reaction went above a need to clarify their literary innovations and demonstrated a desire to actually be recognized by the literary establishment while simultaneously condemning it. If this is so, the Beats have finally succeeded.

With the roots of influence dating back to the American literary traditions of individualism and open form experimentation, the Beats are part of their country’s literary genealogy despite defying other literary conventions. The Beat Generation can be regarded as a quintessentially American literary movement due to their incorporation of contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> Jones 26.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell 205.

American speech patterns and subject-matter relevant to the young postwar bohemians in their writing. The Beats sustain a dualistic, historically antagonistic position in the American literary canon—while rejecting the literary and critical authorities of the 1950s, they have become ingrained into the canon of the present-day literary establishment. They now retain a place in American literary history they so broiled against in their peak. The new America that Ginsberg and Kerouac innovatively captured in their writing is a thing of the past, yet endures in the reinterpretations and reexaminations by popular readership and scholars alike. The Beat goes on.

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