

**BEATS THEN AND NOW:  
THE RECEPTION OF BEAT GENERATION LITERATURE**

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Cold War 1950s America experienced a radical shift of gears after the WWII of the 1940s and the economic crisis of the 1930s; the sudden boom of prosperity began the long-sought call towards normalcy. However, not everyone was content with the current state of affairs and out of this discontent came the group of authors that became known as the Beat Generation. Their work was lauded by some for its new aesthetics and its defiance of taboos such as drug use and homosexuality, yet it was criticized for the same reasons by even more people. While many commentators considered the Beat Generation to be a short-lived fad, the opposite is true: new editions of their texts are being constantly released, university courses on the Beats are being offered; in short, the Beats have made their way into the canon that they once so opposed. This thesis documents the reception of the Beat Generation literature in two different time periods, 1950s/1960s and 1990s/2000s, respectively. Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities" and Stuart Hall's reception theory are employed in order to examine the different views of the Beat generation within and between the two chosen time periods. The research concludes that the majority of the responses to the Beats—both popular and academic—are extremely politicized in the first examined period. These criticisms focus on the political and social undertones of the texts, often reflecting the reviewer's stance toward what is deemed appropriate and what is not. Critiquing the Beats for their moral failures is for many a valid way of responding to the text. This approach was further emphasized by the overblown image of the Beats that was spread by the popular media

and the concern of some of the critics about the contemporary youth; campaigning against the Beats then became a struggle to save the “American way.” On the contrary, the vast majority of current reviews laud the Beats as important writers of the twentieth century and as the necessary precursors to the civil rights movements of the sixties.

## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to the loving memory of my grandparents.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE BEAT GENERATION

More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth. (Holmes 10)

The above is from John Clellon Holmes's 1952 article "This Is the Beat Generation" published in *The New York Times Magazine*. Holmes, described by the editors as a "26-year-old author of the novel *Go*, and therefore one of the generation which he describes" (10), was possibly the first person associated with what would become to be known as the Beat Generation to publicly state that there might exist a rift between the current and older generations, a rift stemming from different life expectations each of the two generation had. Even though he warns against the possible problems of labeling an entire generation with one term, Holmes argues that the generation that experienced the Second World War, whether directly or indirectly, has something in common. The eighteen-year-old girl caught by her mother smoking marijuana, the graduating and disillusioned ex-GI who succumbs to the corporate machine, or the secretary pondering whether to sleep with her boyfriend now or wait; these and many others, Holmes argues, are the faces of a Beat Generation whose only complaint seems to be "Why don't people leave us alone?" a complaint that is dangerous when opposed by "an enormous effort of righteousness" on society's part (10). Bruce

Cook further confirms the sense of a generational change, regarding the Beats as his generation because of “the same keen sense of identification with them that thousands of others my age did” (3). Simply put, the Beat Generation was not only a cultural phenomenon but more importantly a generational one as well.

Yet the term Beat Generation can also be limited to a group of writers who knew each other, resided in the same city, and published their first texts at roughly the same time. Barry Miles explains that the Beat Generation in the stricter sense was a small circle of friends who first met in New York in 1944 and that for a brief period shared an apartment in the Upper West Side; however, it took them several years before they managed to get anything published and it was only in the late 1950s, after the publication of Kerouac’s *On the Road*, that they actually became to be labeled as the Beat Generation (*El Hombre* 2). Apart from Kerouac, the other two original founders of the group were Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs and their seminal works—*On the Road*, *Howl*, and *Naked Lunch*, respectively—left a significant mark on American literature. Jack Kerouac explains that the term “beat,” although originally standing for “poor,” “down and out,” or “deadbeat,” was expanded to include people who have “a certain new gesture, or attitude, which I can only describe as a new *more*” (“Origins” 73). “Beatness,” therefore, was not merely a literary movement, but also an approach, an attitude, a set of certain ideas, feelings, and opinions. Nevertheless, Barry Miles explains that although the writings of the seminal Beats had “little in common with each other,” “what they did have in common was an adverse reaction to the ongoing carnage of World War II, the dropping of A-bombs on civilian targets, and the puritan small-



mindfulness that still characterized American life” (*El Hombre 2*). It was this approach and similar poetic sensibilities that they shared in common rather than their writing styles which could not be more different: Kerouac with his refusal to edit his work after it has been finished, an approach that was a part of his writing philosophy dubbed “spontaneous prose”; Burroughs with his disjointed narratives that resist a straightforward interpretation as exemplified by his “cut-up” method; and finally Ginsberg’s poetry that mixes protest and cries of social injustice with almost religious zeal, thus leading Ginsberg to categorize himself as a visionary poet in the tradition of William Blake or Antonin Artaud (Portugés 3). Miles claims that it was a “fraternity of spirit and attitude” that connected the Beats together (*El Hombre 2*) The label Beat Generation is due to its many possible connotations imprecise, yet it still, in the words of David Sterritt, “suggestively evokes a youth-centered ethos that felt the weight of conventional social norms as a burden at once punishing and exhausting—inflicting on individuals a sense of being both ‘beaten,’ or assailed and tormented, and ‘beat,’ or worn down and defeated” (2).

In literary terms, the early Beats could be considered similar to the Existentialists emerging in Western Europe at roughly the same time; as David Sterritt explains, both groups were driven by a combination of alienation, anxiety, idealism, and intellectualism, and both rejected conventional social norms, instead choosing to focus on the individuals’ ability to define themselves—and their realities—through their choices, decisions, and actions (2). Beats, Sterritt further argues, decided to form their arguments through a negative dialectic as a means of opposing conventionality,

materialism, repressiveness, regimentation, and corruption with the opposites of these qualities. In this regard, the Beats could be seen as the precursors to the civil rights movements of the sixties although with one important difference: the Beats criticized elitism and mass movements at the same time (Cook 4). Thus for example William S. Burroughs, when asked about the gay rights movement that gained momentum at the end of the sixties, answered that he has never been queer a single day in his life (*William S. Burroughs: A Man Within*).

Beat Generation authors, especially Kerouac, drew their inspiration from jazz and bebop, which can be seen in their use of hipster slang that evolved in the jazz and bop scene, their experimentation techniques such as the aforementioned spontaneous prose, and the stylistic similarities of many of the texts to jazz improvisations; some, such as Warren Tallman, even claim that jazz and bop can be directly “heard” in Kerouac’s prose, therefore explaining at the same time Kerouac’s writing style as well as the difference between him and other experimental authors such as Joyce or Eliot (220).<sup>1</sup> It was, however, not just the music, but also the rebellious attitude of many jazz musicians that served as an inspiration to the Beats. Douglas Malcolm further explains:

Almost as soon as jazz became popular in the early 1920s, young men who considered themselves outsiders identified with jazz musicians’ marginal social status in hegemonic white culture. While bop was more complex and the musicians more rebellious than their antecedents, the impulse of these young white men toward jazz had as much to do with ideology as it did with a particular style of music (104).

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay, Tallman suggests that one way of understanding Kerouac is seeing him as a jazz musician; while Kerouac certainly draws upon his knowledge of French narrative tradition, it is the bop sound, Tallman argues, that fuels his imagination (229).

The Beats searched, in Kerouac's words, for a "new more" which took various shapes. These new vistas of the new more were often geographical—many of the Beats, most notably Burroughs, spent years and even decades living abroad—as well as spiritual, the latter could be reached through sex, experimentation with drugs, or the above-mentioned jazz music.

Simply put, the Beats associated themselves with certain generally overlooked and even criticized elements of society, all of which certainly appealed to the younger generations, a fact seen at many poetry readings the Beats gave. Bruce Cook recalls that at one such event in early 1959 there were more than seven hundred people in attendance, not only exceeding in every way the expectations of the academic crowd that usually composes the majority audience at such events, but also forcing the event organizers to turn people away due to overcrowding (12). The audience, Cook continues, was both younger and older than the average college student and young teacher, therefore giving the audience "a distinctly nonacademic, almost proletarian appearance" (12-13). The general audience's reaction was unprecedented: not only did they applaud at the appropriate places, but they also applauded at inappropriate places and did a bit of cheering and stamping, thus resembling the openness and spontaneity of a jazz concert rather than poetry reading (14). Beats, therefore, differed from the established norm not only in their themes but also in their behavior and in the responses they aroused.

The year 1957 was certainly an important one for the Beats, as it was the year that saw Kerouac's rise to stardom due to Gilbert Millstein's very excited review of *On the Road* in *The New York Times Magazine* as well as the famous court ruling by Judge

Clayton W. Horn which declared that *Howl* is not obscene. As the contents of Jack Kerouac's letter to Neal Cassady written on 29th October 1957 detail, Kerouac was more than surprised by the general response to the novel and the buzz it produced; in a letter addressed to Cassady and dated 29 October 1957 he mentions that Warner Brothers offered \$110 000 for the rights to *On the Road* with the possibility of Marlon Brando playing the lead and that he was asked to write a three-act Broadway play for a "big shot producer." While nothing really came out of the deal Kerouac mentions, it shows the sudden publicity and attention that the Beats gained. Similarly, the court decision by Judge Horn—which was "hailed with applause and cheers from a packed audience that offered the most fantastic collection of beards, turtle-necked shirts and Italian hair-dos ever to grace the grimy precincts of the Hall of Justice," the *Chronicle* reported (qtd. in Ferlinghetti 135)—was a landmark case due to not only the exposure the Beats gained but also the fact that the ruling set a precedent that similar future cases ought to follow. That is not to say that there was not already enough attention; ever since the public unveiling of *Howl* in the famous 1955 reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco it was clear to the audience that "a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases" (Charters xxviii). Yet it was only in the late fifties that the Beats were given the utmost attention of the press, media, and general public, whether wanted or unwanted. It was the sudden attention that Kerouac had difficulties coping with, fueling his alcoholism which lead to his early death, the attention that Burroughs abhorred for most of his life only to gain fame

starting in the late seventies, and finally the attention that only Ginsberg, a former market researcher, was able to use for his benefit in such a way that some critics consider him the only modern poet that ever gained a status of a true celebrity (Bawer 1).

Naturally, the Beats were not without controversies, many of their texts causing heated debates, William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* being probably the best example. "It has been hailed as a work of genius, a masterpiece of experimental fiction," Meagan Wilson summarizes, but the novel was also "defamed as a piece of filth, an exercise in pornography" and regarded as "a book of yawns, a composition without merit" (98). Their frequent themes of homosexuality and drug abuse were simply too controversial in the fifties to be ignored, leading many reviewers and critics to comment on these issues rather than on the literary work itself. As Ronald Oakley explains, the writers of the Beat Generation were seen to idealize and even support "society's outcasts and misfits—blacks, drug addicts, prostitutes, bums, migrant farm workers, and petty criminals," and these themes were a direct threat to the safe, middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant lifestyle of the average American in the 1950s (398).

Norman Podhoretz is the author of one of the most famous texts critical of the Beat Generation, whose title—"The Know-Nothing Bohemians"—already suggests the scathing criticism contained within. He starts by discussing the bohemianism of the 1920s and 1930s as represented by such figures as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, or Pound, claiming that "[a]t its best, the radicalism of the 1930s was marked by deep intellectual seriousness and aimed at a state of society in which the fruit of civilization would be more widely available—and ultimately available to all" (307). The 1950s bohemianism

represented by the Beats, however, is according to Podhoretz “hostile to civilization” in its worship of primitivism, energy, or “irrationalist” philosophies while at the same time expressing contempt for “coherent, rational discourse which, being a product of the mind, is in their view a form of death” (307-308). The lifestyles of the Beat writers—and in effect their writings as well—celebrate criminality, violence, drug addiction, and madness. Podhoretz concludes his essay by explaining that the Beats and their supporters are against intelligence itself (318). Diana Trilling was another critic that was extremely critical of the Beats, as her article on the poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky proves with its chastising tone. Describing the audience of the reading as a “rabble”—and also expressing her surprise that the auditorium did not smell bad when a single look at the crowd made her certain it would (224)—Trilling’s critique seems to be based mostly on an understanding of what is allowed and what not that the Beats, to her dismay, did not respect: “Taste or style dictates that most intellectuals behave decorously, earn a regular living, disguise instead of flaunt whatever may be their private digressions from the conduct society considers desirable” (223). The Beats, put simply, were not “proper” enough not only in their writing but also in their behavior, tastes, or preferences. “The Only Rebellion Around,” written by Paul O’Neil for *Life* magazine, sets the record straight right at the beginning of the text:

If the U.S. today is really the biggest, sweetest and most succulent casaba ever produced by the melon patch of civilization, it would seem only reasonable to find its surface profaned—as indeed it is—by a few fruit flies. But reason would also anticipate contented fruit flies, blissful fruit flies—fruit flies raised by happy environment to the highest stages of fruit fly development. Such is not the case. The grandest casaba of all, in disconcerting fact, has incubated some of the hairiest, scrawniest and most discontented specimens of all time: the improbable rebels of the Beat

Generation, who not only refuse to sample the seeping juices of American plenty and American social advance but scrape their feelers in discordant scorn of any and all who do. (232)

O'Neil's introductory paragraph, with its comparison of Beats to dirty fruit flies, epitomizes a large portion of 1950s criticism of the Beat authors: they were seen as outsiders who did not share the society's values, aesthetics, or interests. The experiences of many of the Beats with sex and drugs were too scandalous and shocking not to be commented upon as O'Neil proves with his description of William S. Burroughs as "a pale, cadaverous and bespectacled being who has devoted most of his adult life to a lonely pursuit of drugs and debauchery" (240).

While the overall arguments of Podhoretz and O'Neil are slightly more complicated than it might seem from the above, they nevertheless show that the Beats were a phenomenon that was seen by many as a threat to the social order, ultimately undermining the American Dream itself. What is more, they were often treated as such: lumped together, they were considered to be identical to one another, even though the stylistics of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs differed significantly. In the popular image they were a threat to the mainstream, had no moral values, and were completely removed from the society, a stance that is documented by the manipulation of certain Kerouac's publicity photograph in which he originally wore a crucifix that was subsequently removed by many publications (Nash 58). There might also be a simpler answer to why numerous literary critics viewed the Beats so harshly. It has been suggested that the Beats could be seen as an effort to "free writing from the stringencies of stale academic form. Their distrust of form in writing reflects their equally profound

distrust of formal codes for human behavior” (Gaiser 271). The literary culture of the period was similar to its popular counterpart, as it was also static and conformist (Cook 10). Bruce Cook explains that two groups held the monopoly to literary criticism: the New Critics present at colleges and universities and the group of New York intellectuals known as “the Family” or the “*Partisan Review* crowd.” These two groups, Cook continues, “dominated the arena without themselves ever really falling into serious contentions. . . . A sort of polite trust prevailed between the two that was based on overlapping interests and mutual advantage. Outsiders—and there were many of them—spoke wryly of this coalition as the ‘*Kenyon Review—Partisan Review* axis’” (10-11). The Beats, this line of interpretation suggests, might have been then seen simply as a sudden threat to the monopoly of literature and its interpretation that the Kenyon/Partisan axis held firmly in its grasp. Bruce Cook proposes another alternative: the New York circle of intellectuals did not see the Beats as a threat but rather as writers of little intrinsic worth who were simply inferior to the senior group (17).

Whether literary critics responded to the Beats in a knee-jerk fashion or not, the Beats certainly piqued the interest of the general public as is illustrated by the response of popular media. Hollywood and other movie manufacturers, described by Sterritt as “self-designated safekeepers of consensus, classicism, and common sense” (140), certainly saw it as an opportunity to produce movies in order to satisfy the public’s curiosity and at the same time create a certain image that would be in line with the general opinion of the Beats. The motion picture industry’s response is, as Sterritt continues, a valuable example of the motion-picture establishment’s mobilization and



subsequent containment of the new “ideological foe” through the way it dealt with elements associated with the Beats such as jazz, drugs, coffee houses, avant-garde art and poetry, or relaxation of sexual and racial taboos. The movies resulting from the sudden boom of interest in Beats generally tried to “defuse potential interest in Beat lifestyles by mocking, parodying, or misrepresenting them,” taking a stand against possible “alternatives to official thought, escape routes from socioeconomic conformity, and pathways toward the precarious pleasures of creative spontaneity rather than the engulfing security of repetition and routine” (141). There are several movies that more or less touch upon the Beats—the 1957 musical *Funny Face* featuring Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn or Roger Corman’s 1959 *A Bucket of Blood*—but there are at least two MGM-produced movies that had an explicit Beat focus: the 1959 movie *The Beat Generation* and *The Subterraneans*, an adaptation of Kerouac’s novel of the same name, made one year later. However, these were “beatnik” rather than “Beat” movies, exploitative pieces that tried to cash in on the popularity of Beat Generation movement, the term beatnik being a derisive appellation first used by the San Francisco columnist Herb Caen (Parkinson 276).<sup>2</sup> *The Beat Generation* movie starts with Louise Armstrong performing a song with clearly anti-Beat lyrics—“You don’t have much ambition / and are aimless and depressed / you think you’re really with it / but you’re missing all the best”—which serves as a reminder that the filmmakers aimed at reassuring and entertaining their audience rather than providing a thorough investigation of the

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<sup>2</sup> The tag lines of these movies are already evocative of the prejudiced and sensationalist approach to the Beats. The tagline for *The Beat Generation* is “Behind the weird ‘way-out’ world of the Beatniks!”; the one for *The Subterraneans* says “Love among the new Bohemians.” Incidentally, both movies were box office bombs.

phenomenon (Sterritt 146). And while it turns out that the Beat Generation is not the prime focus of the movie after all, the main villain of this conventional crime story is a beatnik, therefore emphasizing and reinforcing popular feelings of weirdness and dangerousness toward the Beats (147). Simply put, in order to cope with the phenomenon of the disillusionment and disenchantment that characterized the Beat Generation, the Beats had to be treated in a way that resulted in an unthreatening image to the social order, a move that led either to demonization or ridicule of the phenomenon. The latter is best symbolized by the character Maynard G. Krebs, the stereotypical and lovable beatnik sidekick to Dobie in the popular sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, who is to Beats what Stepin Fetchit is to African Americans (Womack 17).

In other words, media was rife with stereotypical portrayals of the Beats and usually focused on superficialities rather than giving a serious attention to their literary work or their ideologies. The general backlash was so strong that Lawrence Ferlinghetti mentions in a letter to Gregory Corso dated 27 September 1962 his efforts to avoid Beat language and especially the word “Beat” at all costs in all City Lights releases, including *Howl*. The word “Beat” was taken over and reinterpreted by critics and media in such a way that even Jack Kerouac stopped using the term in the middle of the 1960s. As he explains in a letter to Ramen K. Singh, he cannot be a spokesman for the “Beat idea” because the term has been adopted by everybody even though it was never properly defined; his 1958 definition was “invaded by so many disparate kinds of people, especially by communist sympathizers, anti-religionists, mere charlatans . . . that it

became confused, overpopulated, and one thing certain: a million miles from what I had meant.” His meaning of “Beat”—“a kind of beatitude based on religious beliefs, reverence for life, attention to the pleasure principle, material-simplicity values (the good life on little money), spontaneous inventiveness and the rest”—had been all lost and with it any hope of uniting the loosely-organized group of authors under one term without leading to generalizations, confusion, and irrelevant criticism.<sup>3</sup>

Bruce Cook claims that there is a saying in Chicago that goes, “Everybody is somebody’s nigger,” and that the Beats were the “niggers” of the society and especially of most of the intellectual community; nevertheless, they still managed to not only survive, but also prevail (17). Currently, the Beats seem to be enjoying more attention than ever—their texts are being released in countless new editions, collections of critical essays on their work are being published, courses on the Beat Generation are being taught; they have survived the test of time—something unimaginable by many 1950s and 1960s reviewers—and entered the canon. Enumerating all important events would take up a vast number of pages; limiting the overview to the last several years still gets the point across: *Howl* and *On the Road* have been turned into major motion pictures with well-known Hollywood actors such as James Franco, Kristen Steward, or Viggo Mortensen; Kerouac’s *On the Road* has been released in its famous original scroll version; numerous new editions of original Beat texts, collections of letters, and critical

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<sup>3</sup> The letter continues with the following: “Look at all the opposites that have popped up and called themselves ‘Beat’: dirty beatnik poems insulting Christ and the Virgin Mother (many of these), ‘sick’ prose and poetry which is life-hating, the debasement of pleasure in either violence or over-drugtaking [sic] or abstract intellectual negativism, new beliefs in elegance fads (‘the Playboy Philosophy’ for instance), and literature and general art that is not spontaneous or joyful but deliberately constipated or commercial (like Pop art etc.)” It is clear that at this point in his life his idea of “beatdom” vastly differed from the popular interpretation of the term.

collections have been published; the European Beat Studies Network has been founded. It is safe to say that Beat scholarship is thriving more than ever. However, the Beats left their dent on popular culture as well and that to such extent that they were featured in advertisement by major companies. For instance, Kerouac's image was used by Gap in order to "portray a particular set of ideas relevant to [its] target market," the slogan being simply "Kerouac wore khakis" (Nash 57).<sup>4</sup> To Gap, Nash continues, the Beats symbolize "freethinking individualism," rather than "a threat to American society" (58). Similarly, Burroughs was featured in a Nike advert, the difference being that he was still alive at the time the advert was being made. Burroughs in particular, whom an article in *The Guardian* on the centenary of his birth called "American literature's most notorious son," was extremely influential on many other artists in his late years, especially in the music scene. R.E.M., Patti Smith, Lou Reed—these and many others were influenced by Burroughs's work (*A Man Within*). During his stay in New York Burroughs lived close to the legendary CBGB, the music bar that was the center of the punk movement, and many musicians considered him to be the father of the punk scene (Miles, *El Hombre* 217). Miles further elaborates on Burroughs's popularity among musicians:

One of the earliest, and perhaps the most enduring, proofs of Burroughs' prestige in rock circles is his presence on the front sleeve of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* which shows the Beatles standing before life-size cut-out photographs of people that they personally liked and admired. Burroughs was chosen by Paul McCartney. (7)

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<sup>4</sup> The advert can be viewed online at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Images/jksm.gif>, accessed on 20 April 2014.

It is then no wonder that Nike chose Burroughs to promote their sneakers in what became a controversial commercial—Burroughs’s gaunt, erudite person was more than well known (Johnson 7).

If one accepts Kenneth Rexroth’s premise that against “the ruin of the world, there is only one defense—the creative act,” one observes that the Beats not only managed to stand the test of time, but perhaps in one way or another contributed in their own ways to stop the world’s ruin by being among the precursors to the civil rights movements of the sixties and by inspiring thousands to challenge conformity and the generally accepted social norms (325). Yet how exactly are the Beats viewed today? Have they retained their nonconformist aura or have they been accepted to the mainstream? Are their lives—with their histories of drug abuse or homosexuality—still the main reasons for their allure to many or is the focus directed solely at their writing? Simply put, what do we make of the Beats—or perhaps what do we make the Beats to be—in the 21st century? These and other questions are the focus of the thesis.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

The following research is based on Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities." Fish argues that an interpretation of a text does not reside in the text itself but rather in the reader, which subsequently explains the existence of several often conflicting interpretations of a work of art.<sup>5</sup> In other words, texts are not read for an inherent meaning but are rather being written by the reader. After analyzing in detail the criticism of several poems in his influential essay "Interpreting the 'Variorum,'" Fish explains that interpretative communities "are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions" (483). These strategies, Fish continues, exist prior to and outside of the act of reading, in turn determining the resulting interpretation, that is the way the text is being "written" by its readers. Importantly, a reader can belong to several interpretive communities: "This, then, is the explanation both of the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) and for the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities)" (484). Two important observations on these strategies employed by interpretive communities must be made: firstly, the stability of an interpretation is only temporary, therefore there is no timeless form of a text, which again explains the

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<sup>5</sup> For clarity's sake, this chapter will use the word "text" as a representation of any work of art, not only a literary text.

changes in interpretations over time; secondly, “interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but *learned*” (484). Simply put, meaning is not extracted but made by interpretive strategies that in turn help establish the forms of a text we perceive as inherently encoded within (485). Importantly, these strategies are shared among the members of a specific interpretive community. Therefore, different and even conflicting views of a single text are not the result of an improper, faulty reading on the part of one or more of the engaged parties, but rather different interpretive strategies employed by the interpretive community in engaging the text. There is no “right” or “wrong” reading of a text; on the contrary, Fish is interested in the process of interpretation formation that ultimately rests in the readers. Consequently, belonging to an interpretive community often provides more information about its members rather than about the interpreted text, as certain readings are influenced by beliefs, fears, or social norms.

While several other texts will be briefly mentioned later in the thesis, Stuart Hall’s “Encoding / Decoding” is also of importance for the understanding of the thesis. Although he focuses on mass media, namely television, rather than literature, his discussion not only provides more insight into the process of interpretation, but also further corroborates Fish’s notion of the meaning being negotiated and often revisited and reinvented by the text’s receivers rather than being firmly set in the text itself. In the essay, Hall explains that the process of interpretation is not a straightforward mediation between the author of the message—or text—and the reader; on the contrary, there is a significant middle ground where the majority of a given interpretation is negotiated. In other words, Hall continues in Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes’s interest in

semiotics by employing the structuralist concept of sign and signification to a system of higher order. It is not only a word, phrase, or sentence, but also the whole work of art that can be signified into various meanings; these meanings, importantly, rely on the intentions of the senders of the message and the knowledge of its receivers. It is therefore also the context of the message that plays an important role in how it is interpreted. When writing about the denotation—the literal meaning of a sign, or, as in Hall’s context, the intended meaning of a visual sign—Hall explains that it is fairly limited. However, its connotation—the possible interpretations—are more ambiguous:

Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested. This question of the ‘structure of discourses in dominance’ is a crucial point. The different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organized into *dominant* or *preferred meanings*. (134)

In other words, there exist dominant readings—readings preferred by the given group—which supports Fish’s concept of interpretive communities. These readings then are not necessarily “better” or “worse” but only more common in the given context. If the receivers of a message have failed to take the meaning the broadcasters intended, what actually happened was that the receivers did not operate within the dominant or preferred meaning (135); or, in Fish’s terminology, they belong to a different interpretive community. Ultimately, Hall identifies three hypothetical positions that serve as a starting point for decoding a televisual discourse. In *dominant-hegemonic position* the receiver of the message interprets the connoted meaning as was intended by the message’s senders; the viewer is then operating inside the dominant code (136).



*Negotiated code* or *position* is a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements in which the hegemonic position is accepted, yet at a more restricted, situational level the receiver operates with exceptions to the rules (137). Finally, *oppositional code* or *position* is a situation in which the receiver perfectly understands the literal and the connotative meaning given to the discourse but still decides to decode the message in a globally contrary way by detotalizing the message in the preferred code and subsequently retotalizing it within an alternative framework of reference (137-38). Similarly to Fish's interpretive communities, it is up to the receiver of a message to interpret it in his or her own way. There is no inherent, pre-existing reading that has to be "excavated" by the receivers; there is only an intended interpretation and the sender of the message must hope that the receiver operates in the same code and belongs to the same interpretive community.

I have chosen two time periods to be analyzed, the 1950s and 1960s being the first time period and the 1990s and 2000s being the second. The thesis will conduct an overview of both popular and critical reception in the given time period, classifying it into one of several possible interpretive communities, which should illuminate the ways Beat reception changed between the two time periods. However, the thesis should not only document the history of Beat criticism, but also provide a brief commentary on the changes in American culture, touch upon the ability of readers to provide their own individual reading, and suggest avenues for future research. The concepts of "interpretive communities" and "encoding / decoding" are then the methodological bases for the thesis. These concepts serve as a starting point, a general framework that informs

the discussion of the analyzed texts. The thesis argues that the initial reception of Beat literature, that is its interpretive communities, was extremely divided and politicized; the Beats were viewed mostly as social phenomena by their supporters and detractors alike, their work often taking the back seat. The reception of their writing was often based on the social and political views of the readers, or, in terms of Fish and Hall, on the reader's allegiance to a specific interpretive community and his or her choice of code. In contrast, today's reception seems to be significantly unified: the Beats have successfully entered the academia and pop culture, most of the popular as well as critical responses being that they deserve it. They are generally seen as voicing the concerns of a generation and standing for human rights and social change; nevertheless, this interpretation of the Beats shows how the stabilities of interpretations and the dominance of the hegemonic code are only temporary, soon to be displaced by other, more recent readings as even the most conservative interpretive communities adopt the oppositional codes that were once limited to a fairly small number of interpretive communities.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE FIFTIES—INTRODUCTION TO THE PERIOD

You're standing on the outside looking in... There's a barrier and you don't know how to begin breaking it down. You image [other people] keep watching the way you look, the way you act. They think you're different. So you head for home. What else? But still you can't forget you're alone. An outsider. (*Shy Guy*)

The above is a quote from a 1947 educational short movie aimed at “shy guys” who have difficulties making friends in unknown settings. The movie details the struggles of Phil, a new high school student, who is trying to merge with the school crowd, eventually succeeding by inviting his schoolmates over to his home to listen to his hand-made record player. While the need for making the movie is quite understandable, the final product is also emblematic of post-WWII America. If one were to characterize the decade following the war, “return to normalcy” would be a good contender for such characterization.<sup>6</sup> The Depression and the war were over and the nation sighed with relief as it could after two trying decades finally live freely and enjoy the sudden economic boom that the United States—unlike the countries ravaged by war—enjoyed in the post-war years. Importantly, the booming economy was not the only cause for the high spirits that many felt during that period; as David Sterritt enumerates, other contributing factors to the general sense of ease were the recent American successes in the battlefield, the emerging political dominance of the United

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<sup>6</sup> The original “return to normalcy” took place in 1920, when Warren G. Harding used it as a slogan and idea to win the presidential election, thus representing the beginning of twelve years of Republican presidents in America after World War I. Similar return was then wished for after World War II. I would like to thank Dr. David Chroust for this insight.

States, therefore replacing Europe as the imperialist power, new developments in science and technology, or the relative improvement of middle-class lives (20). These developments in turn led to a heightened sense for conservation of these achievements, a process that led to the general understanding of the 1950s as a decade of conformity and consensus. The critic James Guimond describes the portrayal of Americans in popular photography as “parts of a huge network of entities, institutions, and communities that nurtured and encouraged them to become healthy, normal citizens” (217). Conformity was served to the public through images of consumerism and cheerful corporate employees, “I Like Ike” buttons worn by voters, or flag-salute montages shown at the end of the day on television channels; these and other images, often perpetrated by picture magazines such as *Life* or *Look*, had one goal in common: it was right to conform and right to be an American (213-14). Conformity is also the word that best describes the emergence of suburbia and Levittowns, the latter being described by the historian Lewis Mumford as the following:

[A] multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. (486)

The unity of the nation became indistinguishable from sameness and vice versa. To be a good citizen is to accept the conformist lifestyle that is encouraged not only through ideologies such as religion or the belief in capitalism but also through seemingly unrelated aspects of American life such as housing development or the increasing use of

cars in everyday life that in effect further promoted a unity in lifestyles to the point of sameness. Tellingly, the choice to conform is the first solution offered to the “shy guy” Phil as a way to gain new friends: when he complains to his father that everyone in his school wears sweaters rather than a regular suit like he does, his knowing father answers simply: “Wear a sweater then!”

The fifties were marked by the fear of the Other, which was ultimately represented by the communist Soviet Union. In August 1949 the Soviets created their first atomic bomb, thus starting a vicious arms race that represented to many Americans the possibility of a nuclear war. The Red Scare of the McCarthy era that in effect heightened fear and suspicion of otherness was omnipresent in the American culture, making its way into school textbooks such as Bragdon and McCutcheon’s *History of a Free People* (1954). The description of the omnipresent “communist menace” used in the textbook is the following: “Unquestioning party members are found everywhere. Everywhere they are willing to engage in spying, sabotage and the promotion of unrest on orders from Moscow” (qtd. in Whitfield 33). A significant segment of the public approved of many policies that targeted not only communists but also another group deemed dangerous for the country’s security—homosexuals. For example, Billy Graham, the Christian Protestant evangelist, praised in a 1953 public broadcast FBI agents “who, in the face of public denouncement and ridicule, go loyally on in their work of exposing pinks, the lavenders, and the reds who have sought refuge beneath the wings of the American eagle” (qtd. in Whitfield 45). Furthermore, sexual prudery was rampant, thus making any meaningful discussion of gender roles impossible, and

production of consumer goods was seen as the “ultimate purpose” by the President’s Council of Economic Advisors (Sterritt 21). It is important to point out that although the 1950s were a time of sexual prudery, sex was still something that people longed for; however, sexual intercourse was generally conceived as limited to marriage only, and a study of more than four thousand adults showed that the majority of the study’s participants thought of people who did not marry as sick, immoral, selfish, or neurotic (May 166).

Most of cultural production during 1940s and 1950s was more than content with the state of things; in fact, many cultural producers such as Hollywood cinema generally served as de facto guardians of traditional values and status quo (Sterritt 6). Importantly, culture was the battleground where “the enemy” was faced in hopes of preserving the right values, which led to the criticism of such authors as William Faulkner or John Steinbeck for bringing negative attention coming from the outside to the ideas of American life (22). Importantly, some authors could not be published in the USA, a fact that led to smuggling becoming the only way to obtain the works by James Joyce or Henry Miller (Guimond 96). The 1950s were then a complicated period: on the one hand, most of the adult population was trapped in an elaborate maze of social conformity built of fear, hostility, and a wish to enjoy the peace after decades of struggling; on the other hand, many adults experienced personal prosperity and affluence for the first time in their lives after working hard during the trying years of the Depression era (Cook 10). As Bruce Cook continues, many were not only ready to embrace the middle-class life

with all the symbols and values, but also defend it with the all fervor of religious converts.

Yet seeing the 1950s as solely conformist and peaceful to the point of dullness would be a huge error. As David Halberstam explains, what happened in the sixties started in the fifties (*The Fifties: The Fear & the Dream*). The civil rights movement gained momentum which resulted in protests, sit-ins, eventually leading to Freedom Rides in the early sixties. The generation gap began to widen as was evident not only in politics but also when it came to such things as music preferences; the rise of rock and roll music symbolizing the young generation's willingness to simply stop listening to their parents' music and finding something just for themselves (*The Fifties: The Beat*). Dissenting voices suddenly emerged and voiced their dissatisfaction with the current cultural climate, one such voice being the literary critic Maxwell Geismar who in 1958 criticized *Time* and *Life* for "laying down a program for a new slap-happy optimism mingled with a proper respect for whatever exists and a species of domestic drama that will avoid all bad language and all serious human issues" (14). Geismar denounces conformity in literature that tries "to persuade millions of people that they are completely different from all the other people whom they are exactly like. 'Peace, Prosperity, and Propaganda' will be the grand theme of the new literature, and all deviants from the norm, whether biological or aesthetic or ethnic, will be tolerated so long as they do what they are told" (37). Suddenly, the values and lifestyle held dear by the generation of parents was seen as something to be resisted and even outright refused

by the new generation. The poet Kenneth Rexroth summarized the sudden turmoil of the young generation in the 1950s as the following:

The youngest generation is in a state of revolt so absolute that its elders cannot even recognize it. The disaffiliation, alienation, and rejection of the young has, as far as their elders are concerned, moved out of the visible spectrum altogether. Critically invisible, modern revolt, like X-rays and radioactivity, is perceived only by its effects at more materialistic social levels, where it is called delinquency. (324)

Here Rexroth touches upon an important aspect of the average middle-class person towards the young generation: the young were often seen as nothing than primitive and barbaric delinquents without proper values or faith, an image especially pertinent to the reception of the group of young authors who became to be known as the Beat Generation. While they did enjoy a certain amount of success, their work was controversial and often deemed inappropriate or even immoral, as is evidenced by the fact that two of the major Beat Generation texts, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, were tried for obscenity charges. Bruce Cook sees the Beat Generation as exemplary of "the pull of opposites" that he believes is one of the facts of American life. The evidence of various opposites and the fissures they cause are, according to Cook, seen everywhere: the generation gap, the differences between the individual states and even sections of the country, the splits between different ethnicities and lifestyles; Americans are destined to experience abrupt and traumatic challenges (21). Following Cook's argument, it can be concluded that there are—and always were—two Americas, Beats being the representatives of the "Other America," the America of dissent and protest. Kerouac, it seems, would agree. As he writes in his essay "The Origins of the Beat Generation," the term "beat" goes further back than 1948 when



he discussed the Lost Generation and Existentialism and commented that “this is really a beat generation,” to which John Clellon Holmes reacted with an enthusiastic, “That’s it, that’s right!” (70). Connecting “beatness” with everything from his grandfather’s defiant challenge to thunderstorms—“Go ahead, go, if you’re more powerful than I am strike me” (70)—to “the inky ditties of old cartoons,” it in Kerouac’s mind embodies “wild selfbelieving individuality” that was always a part of America only to slowly disappear around the end of the Second World War (71-72). “Beatness,” then, is in this view a manifestation of something universally present in American culture, something that was given a specific shape and voice due to the cultural and social context of the era, yet also something that embodies the very Americanness it often challenges.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES RESPONSES

The discussion of interpretive communities of the fifties and sixties is separated into three categories according to the individual communities. Firstly, the thesis will deal with negative responses to the Beats based on the writing—literary craftsmanship—rather than its possible implications. The second interpretive community is the one whose members responded positively to the art of the Beats. Both these communities have in common: most reviewers and critics, although they focused mostly on the writing itself, still decided at one point or another to discuss their more political reading of the Beats. “Political” is here used in a more general sense; rather than implying the process of preparing and negotiating various policies, the term is here used in a rather liberal fashion meaning “showing the political leanings of the critic” or “having larger social implications.” Political is also the third and largest interpretive community of the period.

Naturally one might propose to separate the criticism into more than three interpretive communities; “positive political response” or “negative political response” could be, for example, two separate categories rather than one. Nevertheless, even a considerably larger amount of interpretive communities would lead to the same conclusion and therefore the idea of separating the responses to the Beats into more detailed categories was abandoned in favor of a more streamlined and informative approach. In addition, the list of reviews and essays is not exhaustive, nor does it try to

be. Even so, the list provides a detailed cross section of the responses, including famous essays by university professors as well as short reviews in regional journals. In other words, the discussion below should be more than representative of the criticism of the era.

### **Negative Responses**

The first interpretive community of the Beat Generation to be analyzed is the one that gathers negative criticism based on the perceived faults of the writing itself rather than the context of the text. It might be argued that stylistics is not neutral or more objective for the purposes of literary criticism, and rightly so. Although Roman Jakobson was the first to point out that the study of stylistics deals with the problem of verbal structure and is an internal part of linguistics, it is rather naïve to imagine all the critics below undergoing the same meticulous analysis that Jakobson does in his groundbreaking essay “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics” (350). In addition, it might be claimed that declining a literary work due to its stylistics is no less political than the more obvious politically-based criticism because of the text’s advocacy of a certain lifestyle; although one can try to perform the most unbiased analysis possible, the analysis will be based on a certain understanding of literature and literary theory and as Michel Foucault pointed out in his interview with Gilles Deleuze, theory *is* practice and therefore political (75). Nevertheless, the effort is what counts and although dismissing a text because of its choice of vocabulary or the way the narrative is developed may ultimately hinge on a personal “like / do not like” axis, it shows the willingness of the

reviewer to understand the critiqued text in a more depoliticized way. Tellingly, the number of reviewers criticizing the Beats for the level of their writings in this period is rather low.

For instance, an anonymous review of Kerouac's *Vanity of Dulooz* published in the 23 February 1968 *Time* issue starts with the following lament: "How in the name of all the past and present editors of the *Partisan Review* did Jack Kerouac, cult leader of post-World War II intellectual vagrants, ever attain standing as a member (let alone chieftain) of the avant-garde?" ("Sanity of Kerouac" 96). The reviewer claims that Kerouac is a "far less talented man" than Norman Mailer and that he "lacks the verbal talent to match his passionate commitment to the truth in himself." In addition, the review complains about Kerouac's signature stylistic features—long sentences, the use of dashes instead of periods, the improvisational nature of the writing—by arguing that anyone "can see that there are far too many scientists, navigators and Great Names in this sentence and far too few punctuation marks." Simply put, it is Kerouac's style and not the content that is the most troubling to the reviewer.

The critic Paul O'Neil clearly does not enjoy the majority of Beat literature, yet still his essay "The Only Rebellion Around" tries to offer an insightful look into the Beat phenomenon without relegating Beats to bums and addicts as many other reviewers do. While he is among the few critics who understand the politicization of Beat criticism, he also offers his opinion on Beat stylistics. He argues that "the general level of Beat writing is appalling" and uses Philip Lamantia as a stand in for the "gibberish" that is often produced; on the other hand, O'Neil defends other Beats such as Ginsberg or

Ferlinghetti (242, 240). Adding to the discussion of Beat stylistic choices, James F. Scott denounces Kerouac for his advice to remove “literary, grammatical, and syntactical inhibitions,” an advice that only results in undisciplined writing without focus (qtd. in Scott 157). Scott, discussing the Beats mostly in the growth of teen culture occurring during the fifties, claims that “the Beats persistently ignore the fact that the creative process presumes not only the interplay of powerful unconscious drives but also the imposition of exceptional psychic controls, capable of balancing, integrating and rendering socially intelligible a highly unstable compound of essentially private images” (157). The Beats have, Scott continues, produced texts that result either into “unregulated proliferation of incident or unintelligible subjective ecstasy.” The literary techniques embodied by Kerouac’s spontaneous prose are again the crux of the issue because they, Scott argues, result in poor writing.

Kerouac’s *On the Road* is the subject of an extremely interesting internal review written by the editorial department of the Alfred A. Knopf publishing house.<sup>7</sup> The reviewer, writing in 1954 and therefore reviewing an early version of *On the Road* which was at the time dubbed *The Beat Generation*, celebrates the “gargantuan” vitality of the novel and “the very real insight into a minute cross-section of the post-war generation,” yet he also considers the novel to be an example of “a badly misdirected talent” which would result in small sales as well as “sardonic” and “indignant” reviews (Fox). The reviewer finds faults in the novel’s treatment of plot development, describing the events in the novel as “all meaningless activity for its own meaningless sake” without any goal

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<sup>7</sup> The review is a part of a large collection of the house’s rejection sheets in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

for its protagonist and no conclusive end for its readers. Ultimately, Kerouac has “gone way off base . . . in the things that count for a novelist,” that is “what he is trying to say and the technical organization of how he says it,” leading to a “reject” verdict. Once more it is Kerouac’s writing, this time his method of developing the text’s plot, rather than the content of the novel that is the focus of the critique.

Nevertheless, negative reviews that focus mostly on the stylistic features of the text rather than the content are rather few and far between and are mostly limited to Kerouac, the only Beat writer who got published before the word “Beat” became known to the public.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, while G. Davenport’s review of Kerouac’s *Big Sur*—“[one has] to wonder if one of the more puzzling hallucinations of *Beatnikism* isn’t the assumption that its private lives and private language are a matter of general interest and universal concern” (325)—might be seen as another critique of stylistic choices and literary techniques, it emphasizes the approach to the Beats employed by most reviewers critical of the authors: the Beat Generation writings deviate too much from generally accepted standards of behavior, opinion, or attitude. This attitude leads John Ciardi, an early supporter of the Beats, to complain that they do not stand for a true intellectual uprising but rather for “kicks,” thus not only being juvenile but also representing juvenile delinquency (“Epitaph” 257). To Ciardi, the Beats have become famous mainly due to their personal eccentricities rather than writing, the only exception being

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<sup>8</sup> While Kerouac’s later texts got naturally published when media interest in the Beat Generation was at its peak, they were not reviewed through the lens of the popular Beat Generation imagery as often as the works of Ginsberg or Burroughs. Ginsberg reviews are often full of various “Ginsberg anecdotes” (Ginsberg casually undressing at a poetry reading, etc.), while Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* that became available in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early sixties was nearly universally received in a rather sensationalist way. For more on Burroughs, see Meagan Wilson, “Your Reputation Precedes You: A Reception Study of *Naked Lunch*.”

Burroughs (263).<sup>9</sup> The Beat Generation then, in the words of many of its critics, has almost no literary merit, relying on shock value for and controversial themes for publicity. Although there are reviewers focusing mostly on the craftsmanship of Beat writing, they are overwhelmed by those who decide to comment on the lifestyles or personal experiences of the Beats.

### **Positive Responses**

The Beats have been understood in numerous different ways; some, such as John Ciardi above, claimed that most of the Beats were literary hacks , others held them in high regard for opening new avenues and for challenging the status quo, thus echoing the disillusionment of various underprivileged groups—African-Americans, homosexuals, women—in the 1950s. Importantly, the number of their supporters was relatively substantial. As Barry Miles in “*The Naked Lunch in My Life*” recalls, the original Olympia edition had “uncompromisingly modern, yet somehow sinister cover” in the age of bland book jacket designs; the book’s “coolness” was further enhanced by the notice inside the back flap: “Not to be sold in the USA or UK” (114-15). Ownership of such books then became a status symbol: “[I]t represented an attitude, a state of mind, the detachment of the cool hipster from the mundane crowd. It was a shorthand way of saying you were cool” (116). It was not merely writing, but an attitude, a lifestyle that the Beats symbolized for many of their readers. What repulsed some attracted others,

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<sup>9</sup> Described by Ciardi as a “writer of careful horrors,” Burroughs would have written, Ciardi argues, exactly as he did had there never been a Beat Generation (“Epitaph” 263).

thus representing the impossibility of a unified reading of a literary text, therefore being a prime example of Fish's interpretive communities in action.

Yet long before the Beat Generation became openly known, there was some positive response to the works of the future Beats without references to their political or social positions. This can be best seen in the reviews of Kerouac's first novel *The Town and the City* which was published in 1950, that is two years before John Clellon Holmes popularized the term Beat Generation in his essay "This is the Beat Generation." For example, Charles Poore's review of Kerouac's debut for *The New York Times* refers to the author as "Mr. Kerouac," something that would become extremely rare in the reviews of the late fifties, and describes him as "a brilliantly promising young novelist of 28" (25).<sup>10</sup> Unlike later reviewers, Poore is clearly focused on the writing itself rather than what it might represent: "[Kerouac] has almost no faults of spiritless omission, many faults of exuberant commission, and a magnificent grasp of the disorderly splendor and squalor of existence." A similarly excited review of *The Town and the City* is the one by Kenneth Rockwell, titled "First Novel Pictures Great, Tragic America." Rockwell considers Kerouac "the answer to a book reviewer's prayer, especially if the reviewer is over-tired of the psychopathic element that seems to be dominant in American fiction" (8). While praising the novel for its style, a certain set of values that Rockwell represents and that he, perhaps unconsciously, defends, can be felt from the review. First of all, the reviewer praises the novel for its sermon-like qualities and the

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<sup>10</sup> Of interest is also the fact that the review features a photo of Kerouac in a suit and tie. While it was most probably a part of the publisher's promotion, the treatment of the photography is in a sharp contrast with the one of Kerouac wearing a cross that most publications decided to edit out (Nash 58). This only shows the bias and politicization of the media regarding the Beat Generation.



way it indirectly “preaches against the evil,” namely city life which Rockwell finds to be portrayed as “the final rottenness of our culture” and “a contemporary Inferno” (8, 9). Secondly, Rockwell adds the following with an easy-to-trace air of satisfaction: “There is nothing in [the novel] that is *nasty*—no detailed bedroom scenes to *titillate the bestial*” (9, emphasis mine). For Rockwell, Kerouac’s first novel represents a criticism of the contemporary society, yet it is a criticism that is still within the bounds of the rules set by the said society; Kerouac is *with* the society and not *against* it, therefore he is easier to accept and identify with.

Possibly the most famous review of a Beat text is Gilbert Millstein’s *On the Road* review that started the media craze which lasted for several years. Calling the novel’s publication “a notable occasion” and the novel itself “a major novel,” Millstein’s enthusiastic embrace of the text is important not only for the sudden exposure that Kerouac and other Beats as well gained, but also for its honest effort to define what the Beat Generation is and what the critical response to the text might be (27). Millstein predicts both condescension on the part of academia and of “official” avant-garde critics as well as a superficial approach to the novel that describes it as merely “absorbing” or “intriguing.” “But the fact is,” Millstein continues, “that *On the Road* is the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as ‘beat,’ and whose principal avatar he is.” Another aspect of the review that sets it apart from others is the fact that Millstein tries to define and contextualize for readers what the Beat Generation might stand for without a judgmental tone. “The Beat Generation,” Millstein explains, “was born

disillusioned; it takes for granted the imminence of war, the barrenness of politics and the hostility of the rest of society.” The Beat Generation is further defined by “the frenzied pursuit of every possible sensory impression,” yet “these excesses are made to serve a spiritual purpose, the purpose of an affirmation still unfocused, still to be defined, unsystematic.” Importantly, Millstein’s mention of both academic and popular responses hints at the political reading that makes up the majority of Beat criticism, both positive and negative. In other words, it seems that most reviewers simply could not avoid thinking about the Beats as a social rather than a literary phenomenon.

The above being said, there naturally were other critics who praised the Beats for their craftsmanship, that is their stylistic choices and use of words; however, just like their more critical counterparts, they were a rather rare breed, most of the critics focusing on moral or spiritual reading of Beat texts. For instance, the inner search for and the constant redefinition of the self is what leads Warren Tallman to consider Kerouac’s writing style being closer to the “American grain” than that of any other writer since Fitzgerald, a quality that redeems the limits of Kerouac’s art (229). Similarly, Henry Miller in the preface to *The Subterraneans* hails Kerouac for doing “something to our immaculate prose from which it may never recover. A passionate lover of language, he knows how to use it” (230). Nevertheless, even Miller does not forget to establish Kerouac as important for the possible social impact the novel might have: “We say that the poet, or genius, is always ahead of his time. True, but only because he’s so thoroughly *of* his time.” The same is true for Harriet Frye’s review of *The Dharma Bums*; on the one hand, the novel is “highly readable because it is vigorous

and exuberant”; on the other hand, “[t]hose of us settled in our houses with white kitchens and TV read it and say ‘So that is what the restless young people are experiencing today’” (12).

As the examples above show, the writing of the Beat Generation was only rarely read without contextualizing it in terms of the younger generation or social revolt. It seems that, as the fifties progressed, the context was simply too urgent or too present in the everyday lives of ordinary people to be ignored. Although Kerouac became the de facto spokesman for the Beat Generation, he was naturally not the only one to garner support and positive reviews. For example, a 1959 letter to a *New Directions* editor from James Laughlin, the founder of the publishing house, describes Gregory Corso’s poems as “extremely original and moving.” Laughlin continues: “I can see, of course, a great many faults which could be found in them by the esteemed critics of the quarterly reviews, but what strikes me is that here is a real genuine honest-to-goodness personality trying to be himself, and not busy aping Professor Wilbur.” Nevertheless, even many supporters of the Beats relied on appeals to morality or social issues; when Lawrence Ferlinghetti discusses the reception of Ginsberg’s *Howl*, he mentions that the “critical support for *Howl* (or the protest against censorship on principle) was enormous,” thus hinting at the types of reading that were performed by the poem’s critics (127). The Beats had to be understood and one way of achieving that was to make their texts into a challenge of censorship practices; naturally, the Beats opposed censorship, yet this way they could be supported by anyone from open-minded liberals to college professors who would otherwise find their works unappealing. The following is found among the

reviews supporting *Howl* during its trial and it further hints on the politicization of the poem's reception: "[*Howl*] is a work of the legitimacy and validity contemplated by existing American law, as we know it in the statement of Justice Woolsey in the classic *Ulysses* case, and as we have seen it reaffirmed just recently by the Supreme Court in the Butler case" (qtd. in Ferlinghetti 128). In other words, it is not necessarily a good poem; it is, however, a poem according to the law and should be treated as such, no matter its qualities. To provide one more example, John Ciardi describes Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* as the "writing of an order that may be clearly defended not only as a masterpiece of its own genre, but as a monumentally moral descent into the hell of narcotic addiction" ("Book Burners" 30). He continues, "the writing does, to be sure, contain a number of four-letter words, but the simple fact is that such obscenities—if obscenities they are—are inseparable from the total fabric and effect of the *moral message*" (emphasis mine). It is the moral message of the text that redeems the obscenities of *Naked Lunch*; its humor and satire ignored, the novel is then made to be what the reviewer wishes it to be. It is molded into numerous shapes, one of them suiting Ciardi while others suit the novel's detractors. Importantly, it seemed impossible for the Beat Generation critics to respond solely to the writing itself, instead preferring to voice their opinions on the Beats as a movement, a group of people symbolizing new, emerging trends in the society.

## Political Criticism

The Beats have been thought of not only as writers of literature, but more importantly as writers representing a certain set of values and attitudes which were often the very opposite of the generally accepted social norms. This understanding then shaped the responses to their texts, whether positive or negative. Ginsberg's famous public unveiling of *Howl* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco helped create, as the Ginsberg biographer Jonah Raskin claims, the conditions that eventually led to both the San Francisco protests against the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1960 and the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1964 (7). The event, Raskin continues, was an affirmation of artistic power that defied and eventually won out over McCarthyism, therefore making the reading the most important public poetry reading in twentieth-century America. After the reading the Beats were gaining traction that would result in an unprecedented explosion of media attention with the publication of *On the Road*. The general interest subsequently led to many controversies that would last for several years, an explosion that would lead to vociferous debates with some supporting the Beats for trying to create something new and exciting and others berating them for virtually the same reason; this would eventually lead to significant changes in the social and political lives of Americans. Catherine Nash points out that the Beats have been understood to represent various things: a literary movement, media creation, and exploitative and exploitable marketing strategy (54). Yet as Nash further discusses, several things are clear: firstly, a great deal of attention was paid to them during the fifties; secondly, although they pointed out the importance of individualism, the Beats were regarded by

the media as an organized social group; lastly, the focus on individualism of many of the authors was considered a “very real threat” to the accepted postwar social norms best exemplified by middle-class suburbia. Therefore, the majority of responses to Beat texts is along the “political/social” axis. Ultimately, the Beats were understood—and also *made* by the media to be understood—as a social phenomenon, an understanding that in turn shaped their reception, criticism, and their overall image.

For example, Bruce Cook aligns the Beats with the positive understanding of the act of protesting, pointing out that the fundamental meaning of the word “protest” is to “witness for” something or to make an affirmation of an idea or a cause (22). For Cook, the Beats test one’s strength against the community and provide the message of America that could be, which are in Cook’s reading very American acts (23). Similarly, Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg read the Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men as “the new barbarians” who are cut off from the values that spread the image of satisfying lifestyle, who refuse to live like slaves to illusions they know to be untrue (9-10). They then continue by defining both the Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men as “social phenomena which have found increasing literary expression.” In other words, the Beats are social phenomena first, their works being in the second place. The response to them naturally varied; while Kenneth Rexroth called Ginsberg “a poet of revolt, if there ever was one,” mainstream media found the questions the Beats asked and their attitudes too dangerous, thus “Beat” quickly became “Beatnik,” a mostly laughable and unthreatening parody of the term (Rexroth 337, Nash 54).

The understanding that the majority of the responses to the Beats was made in terms of social norms rather than quality of writing helps in explaining reviews such as Victor R. Yanitelli's review of Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*. Written in 1965, the review claims that the novel "seems to make it clear that the Beat Generation is passé"

(90). The text further continues as a social commentary rather than a review of literature:

Newer, more violent voices are making themselves heard, shouting them down. Younger elbows seem to be prodding them aside just as they, the beat ones, ruthlessly elbowed out their predecessors. There is a sad historical irony verified in the beat generation's experience, namely, that as the brash splendor of their loudness begins to fade, they find themselves pasted with the same labels they once scornfully used for the discards they were supplanting.

For Yanitelli the Beats were important only for their role in relation to the society as a whole, not for their work. Reading *Desolation Angels* through the lens of social events and importance, the novel for Yanitelli becomes "a testament to the dying, if not the already dead," the dead being again the Beats as a social movement (91). A similar attitude is echoed in Robert Mazzocco's review of the same novel. Dubbed by the reviewer as "the first, and certainly the best, of our visionary L'il Abners," Kerouac was the first "to set down the sound of a particular generation, and the first to 'put down' the institutional values of the fifties, the fringe benefits and the swimming pool in the backyard" (8). These sentiments were the main point, if not the only point, of many reviews in magazines and newspapers.

While Kerouac was the most prolific of the Beats in this period and probably the most discussed one, he at least had the benefit of publishing for some time before the media and social craze regarding the Beats became unbearable. Others, like William S.

Burroughs, were not so lucky. As Meagan Wilson points out, John Ciardi's certainly well-meant defense of *Naked Lunch* as a moral book greatly shaped the reception of the novel (101). She further continues:

First, it was the first evaluation of Burroughs's work, introducing the figure of Burroughs to American readers. Second, . . . the censorship of his text immediately molded readers' ideas of Burroughs, associating him as the author who writes dirty books about taboo subjects such as drugs. And third, Ciardi, a Harvard literature professor and recent translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, elevated *Naked Lunch* as a "masterpiece"—a well-respected literary authority had given *Naked Lunch* credibility.

In other words, the reception of *Naked Lunch* was to a large extent already cemented in the minds of the general population before it was already published.<sup>11</sup> For some these facts established the "coolness" of the novel as the already quoted words of Barry Miles—"it represents an attitude, a state of mind, the detachment of the cool hipster from the mundane crowd. It was a shorthand way of saying you were cool" ("*Naked Lunch*" 116)—show. This reaction was certainly expected and encouraged by the Grove Press, the American publisher that made the book available to the United States in the early sixties. Grove, having a reputation for publishing literary avant-garde materials, especially focusing on European avant-garde, was explicitly political in its publishing policies (Wilson 107). Barney Rosset, the owner of the publishing house, was a staunch opponent of literary censorship, having published several works that were challenged in the courts such as D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Upon its release in 1963, several states took legal action against the novel, resulting in Boston courts declaring the book obscene in 1965, its presiding judge calling

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<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Ciardi was reacting to the excerpts published in the literary journal *Big Table* and not the whole novel.



*Naked Lunch* “obscene, indecent, and impure . . . [and] taken as a whole is predominantly prurient, hard-core pornography, and utterly without redeeming social importance” (qtd. in Wilson 111). Nevertheless, upon appeal the Massachusetts Supreme Court one year later declared the novel not obscene; however, reviews for the book were available before the court decision and they either applauded the novel or condemned it, thus further showing the polarizing nature of the book in the popular press (112). The first responses emphasize the novel’s reputation as an immoral and subversive text, which can be seen for example in Charles Poore’s review in the *New York Times*. As Wilson points out, one of the subheadings of the review is “Its Content Already Known,” suggesting that writing the review is a mere formality (112). In the review itself, Poore explains that in the novel “the insufferable prig and the insufferable sinner will find a forlorn meeting ground” (31). Although he does comment on the writing style for a moment, a critical analysis of the novel, according to Poore, should focus on “two outstanding elements it displays. One is the tragic dilemma of the narcotics addict and the manifest failure of society to deal with it effectively. . . . The other is the glaringly gaudy way Mr. Burroughs has chosen to represent his case—using shocking words by the shovelful and concentrating on perverted degeneracy to a flagrant degree.” The review then ends with, “I advise avoiding the book.” A similar and even harsher review was published in the *Time* magazine. Renaming the Beats as “the Young American Disaffiliates,” most of the review is again concerned with Burroughs as a person rather than the novel itself:

The Burroughs gambit was, until recently, almost unanswerable, because it was almost impossible to track this author down, physically or in print.

He was the greyest of grey eminences, a wraith who flickered into occasional visibility in Mexico, Paris or Tangier. . . . [H]e was the legendary “Bull Lee” of *On the Road*; he spent 15 years on junk; he wrote an unprintable book called *Naked Lunch*, which no one had read but which everyone said hit the veins like a jolt of heroin. (“King of the YADS” 98)

The reviewer then tries to unveil the “mystery” of Burroughs and to provide some additional information about the writer: “[Burroughs] is not only an ex-junkie, but an ex-con and, by accident, a killer. In Mexico, having acquired a wife, he shot her between the eyes playing William Tell with a revolver”; information about the novel, apart from a brief summary of the narrative, are sparse. The reviewer ends with, “the value of [Burroughs’s] book is mostly confessional, not literary.” Of course, there were also some positive reviews, yet one thing is clear: reviewers of *Naked Lunch* had, and arguably still have, problems with evaluating the text separately from its history and marketing, both of which identify and further promote the novel as controversially obscene and prohibited (Wilson 115).<sup>12</sup>

The situation was not much different in academic circles. Norman Podhoretz’s essay “The Know-Nothing Bohemians” is one of the most widely known criticisms of the Beat Generation. He begins the piece by discussing the Beats—“a new group of rebels and Bohemians”—in a rather sensationalist manner that already shows his contempt for the writers (305). Among other things, he comments that the photo of Kerouac featured in Millstein’s *On the Road* review shows the writer “unshaven, of course” and is further “topped by an unruly crop of rich black hair falling over his forehead.” Claiming that the Beats are unlike the radical Bohemians of the 1920s and

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<sup>12</sup> For an insightful analysis of Grove Press’ advertising campaign, see Wilson 117-122.

1930s, Podhoretz further claims that the Beats represent primitivism and anti-civilization attitudes. Among other things that he comments on is the issue of sex in Beat writings; while sexual behavior unrestricted by conventional moral standards was according to Podhoretz one of the defining characteristics of the old Bohemians—“the ‘meaning’ of Bohemian sex . . . was at once social and personal, a crucial element in the Bohemian’s ideal of civilization”—its role is sharply different in Beat texts, in a way replicating the dynamics of consumerism the Beats seem to criticize (309). Interestingly, Podhoretz’s analysis seems to contradict itself under a careful scrutiny. He starts his argument by showing that although homosexual sex does represent freedom from social restrictions and conventions, heterosexual sex is often connected with forming permanent relationships as can be seen in Kerouac’s novels with their frequent marriages occurring during the narrative. Interestingly, while he comes to the conclusion that Kerouac’s persona in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise, seems to be afraid of sex and sexual performance, he also points out the sexual prowess of the womanizer Dean Moriarty (309-310). It does not cross his mind that it might be an intentional contradiction of the text; for Podhoretz, both are manifestations of the primitivism and spontaneity, in effect the “beatness” of the writing which in his reading results in shallowness and “an anti-intellectualism so bitter that it makes the ordinary American’s hatred of eggheads seem positively benign” (313). Although Podhoretz occasionally does have ideas which might have been developed into a more unbiased criticism of Kerouac’s writing—for example when he discusses the difference between spontaneous feeling and writing or Kerouac’s reliance on real-life events when they seem to be unnecessary for the novel’s narrative—the

review eventually turns into a diatribe against the Beat Generation and all that they might or might not be connected to. Insisting on an autobiographical reading of Kerouac's novels, Podhoretz argues the following: "The hipsters and hipster-lovers of the Beat Generation are rebels, all right, but not against anything so sociological and historical as the middle class or capitalism or even respectability. This is the revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul" (316). In the end, Podhoretz becomes agitatedly personal, claiming that the Beat Generation represents the same "spirit" which inspires "the young savages in leather jackets," even adding several pathetic (in both senses of the word) stories such as the one about a nine-year-old boy stoned to death (318). The anti-intellectualism that the Beats in Podhoretz's reading symbolize eventually leads one to "[k]ill the intellectuals who can talk coherently, kill the people who can sit still for five minutes at a time, kill those incomprehensible characters who are capable of getting seriously involved with a woman, a job, a cause" (318). The Beats, the critic argues, then represent a serious threat not only to society's norms but also to society itself. Podhoretz's reading—which is importantly based on a very limited number of texts—results in an extremely divisive rhetoric and the essay clearly shows on which side one should stand; clearly, the reader should choose the critic's side, since anyone supporting the Beats is clearly "against intelligence itself" (318).

Diana Trilling's "The Other Night at Columbia: A Report from the Academy" follows a similar vein to that of Podhoretz. Trilling was one of the "three wives from the English department" that attended the poetry reading featuring Allen Ginsberg and

Gregory Corso and a “wifely” attitude one might see in the lines above is present throughout the text (214). Trilling makes clear that certain norms should be followed without being questioned: “[W]hy should I not also defend the expectation that a student at Columbia, even a poet, would do his work, submit it to his teachers through the normal channels of classroom communication, stay out of jail, and then, if things went right, graduate, start publishing, be reviewed, and see what developed, whether he was a success or failure?” (215). The student at Columbia is Ginsberg, who studied under Diana Trilling’s husband, Lionel Trilling; nevertheless, it was also Ginsberg who deviated “from respectable standards of behavior” and who should therefore be scorned by the readers. Simply put, Trilling has a certain set of norms that she expects everyone to adhere to. The rather subjective tone of the essay is further emphasized by Trilling’s discussion of her personal relation to Ginsberg and her view of the attendees at the reading. She describes Ginsberg as a “case”: “a gifted and sad case, a guilt-provoking and nuisance case but, above all, a case”; regarding the audience, Trilling expresses surprise that they were clean and did not smell, also commenting that only few of the women in attendance were pretty and few of the men masculine (218, 224). As the essay progresses, her patronizing tone is getting more apparent: “[T]hese *were* children, miserable children trying desperately to manage, asking desperately to be taken out of it all; there was nothing one could imagine except to bundle them home and feed them warm milk, promise them they need no longer call for mama and papa” (226). Although Trilling uses the personal “I” throughout the text, she claims “there was nothing *one* could imagine except to bundle them home,” the general “one” hinting at her assumption

that the reader will agree with her from the outset; simply put, she represents the “moral majority” of the fifties. Trilling expects Ginsberg and other Beats to follow the same norms and rules that she does; however, they do not, therefore they are in opposition to what Trilling stands for. In addition, the critic clearly represents academia and (what she perceives as) good manners. The first can be witnessed in Trilling’s claim that Fred Dupee, who held an introductory speech before the reading itself, was “speaking for the Academy, claiming for it its place in life, and the performers were inevitably captive to his dignity and self-assurance” (226). The capitalization in the word “Academy” is especially telling, since Trilling constantly refers to the Beats as “beats,” quotation marks and lowercase “b” included. The second, Trilling’s cry for good manners, is evident even more than her staunch defense of the academia. Suggesting that the Beats should be ignored “as merely another inevitable, if tasteless,” expression of the era’s *zeitgeist*, she does not wish to “rule out taste, or style, as a valid criterion of moral judgment”; later she also explains that she considers “Lion in the Room,” a Ginsberg poem dedicated to her husband, a “decent” poem because it contained no obscenities (222, 228). The way Trilling effectively equates taste with style is truly telling. The critic, representing the academia and common decency, makes literary criticism based on “moral judgment” of literature and its authors. Naturally, she expects that everyone will agree with her and follow the same norms, Ginsberg and other Beats included. However, they do not follow them, therefore they are defective; associated with the young rather than the respectable academics, the Beats are considered inferior from the very outset. No criticism is then needed and everything is clear before an actual discussion started.

Not every critic, however, was representing such a one-sided position as Trilling did. John P. Sisk, for example, is one of the earliest critics to examine the Beat Generation as a social phenomenon that reveals something about the society and its attitudes and norms. Although he might not be partial to the Beats—he weighs the idea that “Beat literature may turn out to be an ephemeral oddity that fifty years from now exists only for desperate Ph.D. candidates” (194)—Sisk emphasizes that critiquing the Beats in the way Trilling does is not a very useful approach. Instead, he explores the phenomenon of the Beat Generation as a social phenomenon that is actually a part of the subversive tradition in American literature; he claims that it is “subversive” because of its critique of the middle class that is viewed as destructive by the members of the class. As he puts it, “the important and easily-overlooked fact is that it is in the American grain, and that however we react to it we are reacting to part of ourselves.” According to Sisk, the subversive tradition started with Emerson and Thoreau and moves past such figures as Whitman or Twain to twentieth century authors like Hemingway or Vidal (195). In Sisk’s reading, the Beats are a movement that says more about the society they are coming from rather than about themselves.

Sisk further argues that the writer, a critic of the society by nature, is locked up in a dialectic with the society he writes about (195-196). However, in twentieth century America, this dialectic “has been carried on in hyperbolic terms: the extreme positions that society takes have been countered by the writer’s extreme positions” (196). Importantly, although the writers within the subversive tradition criticize the society, they are still its members; often the corruption that is present in the society is located

within the writers as well, thus further heightening their critique of the society and its norms (197). Ultimately, the often vicious response to artists—or people in general—similar to the Beats leads to a harsh critique of middle-class values on one hand and perhaps even harsher critique of the criticizing element on the other. There is no middle ground which further contributes to escalate the situation beyond point of no return:

This fear of dissension helps to explain the dearth of popular satire . . . , but it also helps to explain the extreme attitudes of subversive writers like the Beatniks, who are in a sense forced to bear more than their fair share of the dialectic burden. Society, possibly because of its uneasy conscience, fails to engage itself effectively with such opposition; perhaps it is best to say that it dares not for fear of coming face to face with its deviation from the American Dream. (198)

Eventually, it does not matter to Sisk whether the literature produced by the Beats is good or bad; focusing on a reading that classifies Beats as belonging to a certain tradition of American writing and as being an inherent product of American culture, he uses the Beats to discuss what they are able to say about the society in an increasingly complex world (200). Sisk's criticism is therefore a prime example of the political interpretive community.

Paul O'Neil has a stance towards the Beats similar to Sisk's. Again, that is not to say that he is particularly fond of the Beats; his phrasing and choice of words, for example he rather mockingly calls Ginsberg "the lion of the poetry-reading circuit," and his preference for communicating various biographical information of the Beats in a rather shocking manner reveals him as someone who most probably does not enjoy the Beat-produced literature. Nevertheless, calling the Beats "the most curious men of influence the twentieth century has yet produced," O'Neil defends them by deriding their



critics for using biographical data in order to judge their literature (235, 242). As he puts it himself, “[I]t is too easy to forget that Poe was a drunk, Coleridge an opium eater and Vincent van Gogh a madman, and that a great deal of the world’s art has a disconcerting way of getting produced by very odd types” (242). While to the critic only few of the Beats have real talent, their primary importance lies in their decision to raise voices against “virtually every aspect of current American society” (232). The Beats are “the voice of nonconformity” and, together with their embodiment of “nonpolitical radicalism,” it is in the United States of the fifties “the only rebellion in town” (242-43). As O’Neil further continues, although it is an unplanned and unorganized rebellion, similar trends can be found in many areas of the world, from Paris to Prague, and some of the Beat philosophy seems to have crept into the minds of nearly every college student (243). That is not to say that O’Neil is supportive of the Beats. For example, when he complains that the Beats are always arguing with police officers or that their weapons against the world are mostly talking and exhibitionism, O’Neil seems to be ambivalent at best towards the Beat Generation. Nevertheless, as he summarizes at the end of his essay, while the Beats are not the only ones who question the values of the fifties America, only they “have actually been moved to reject contemporary society in voicing their quarrel” with the society’s materialism or conformity (246). Agreeing with Sisk, O’Neil sees the Beats as a necessary product of the society, something that should be discussed and understood in relation to the zeitgeist of the fifties rather than immediately dismissed as naïve or even threatening.

Simply put, while there are some academics, namely Trilling and Podhoretz, who see the Beats as a threat to academia and to intelligence, others argue they need to be viewed in terms of a literary tradition and a social phenomenon. The scholar James F. Scott also agrees with Sisk's and O'Neil's argument that the Beats are inherently influenced by the society and it is therefore the society rather than the Beats which should be questioned: "[S]ociety's strident outbursts against them often leave the impression of a harassed magician trying desperately to exorcise a demon without admitting, even privately, that his own magic has accidentally called it forth. This self-deception probably accounts for the irrelevance of much criticism of Beat literature" (150). However, while he does consider the approach of several of his colleagues ineffective, he takes Sisk's and O'Neil's argument a step further by arguing that the Beats are only another proof of the general rise of teenage culture in the United States:

Unfortunately, however, the self-conscious cultivation of juvenility is not restricted to the isolated cadres of Beatdom. In fact, the emergence of an American teen cult is one of the most disturbing events of our generation. Undergirded by popular psychology, exploited by commercial advertising, and dramatized by the public arts, the sentimental enshrinement of adolescent values has come to touch nearly all areas of American life. Not only is the adolescent patronized in the permissive home and the "progressive" school; his attitudes and beliefs now threaten to become normative for the whole adult population. (151-152)

What is happening, Scott claims, is a general dumbing down of the society by lowering the generally-accepted standards regarding values or entertainment to the level of teenagers; the Beats are then simply one of the many manifestations of the emerging teen culture, the opposition of which is necessary to prevent the impending overtaking of the country by the less intelligent and mature generation. Interestingly, Scott is not the

only Beat critic to do so. For instance, Robert Mazzocco in a *Desolation Angels* review contains the following: “In certain circles, the roaring lambs of Kerouac Country and the paper tigers of Mailer’s recent fiction . . . are acclaimed as struggling, emblematic types, holding to the last heroic elements left in our culture. I’ve no quarrel with that, assuming that what is meant is ‘teen culture’” (9). One of Podhoretz’s argument is that the Beats published their most impactful work in an “Age of Sociology,” therefore their work speaks for the young generation and is merely a representative of a certain attitude or historical epoch; he also claims that the possible insight into a lifestyle of a certain group is not a signal of literary quality (305). Adding to the discussion, Ciardi complains of “juvenile delinquency” in the novels that leads to the blood and violence of street gangs while O’Neil complains of the passivity and “childish rage” of the Beats (“Epitaph” 257; 246). Scott further explains his stance by claiming that in the fifties many American adults willingly surrendered many of their once powerful authority symbols in order to relish in entertainment suited to the mentality of the late adolescent rather than a fully grown person (153). Connecting Scott’s argument with that of Podhoretz, the Beats represent a threat not only to intelligence but to adulthood as well. Embracing the Beats and their writing would lead society one step closer to a collapse of its norms and thoughtfulness; this line of argument effectively establishes the threat of the Beats on several levels—they are against intelligence, inspire juvenile delinquency, represent the trend of the society’s loss of maturity, etc.—that further vilifies the Beats and makes the derisive tone when referring to them more justifiable.

Naturally, there were also critics and academics that to a smaller or larger extent supported the Beats in terms of their political or social ambitions. For example, Thomas Parkinson, who sees the Beats in terms of social refusal rather than a revolt, criticizes the way the general media refers to the Beats, mostly focusing on their lives and thus making the Beats into a larger-than-life spectacle (277, 286). He also discusses several aspects of Beat poetry such as its non-conventionality, that is its importance of pitch or loudness, or the way the Beats challenge the intimacy in writing or life performance which explains, among other things, the irrelevance of grammar or syntax in a great number of Beat texts. To provide another example, Ginsberg is seen by Bruce Cook as a teacher of the young, thus again stressing the generational aspect of the Beats that many of the already mentioned critics pointed out (8). Cook also commends Gary Snyder, a “prophet of the essential in human life,” for his concern with ecology and the environment as well as his introduction of Eastern religion and culture to many of the Beats, a move that greatly influenced their work (28-29). The social importance of Beat literature was also the focus of Judge Clayton Horn’s verdict on *Howl*. He states the following:

I do not believe that *Howl* is without even “the slightest redeeming social importance.” The first part of *Howl* presents a picture of a nightmare world; the second part is an indictment of those elements of modern society destructive of the best qualities of human nature; such elements are predominantly identified as materialism, conformity, and mechanization leading toward war. The third part presents a picture of an individual who is a specific representation of what the author conceives as a general condition. (qtd. in Ferlinghetti 134)

In other words, what one saw as detrimental, others viewed in a more positive light. The political and social readings varied in such a way that a general agreement on the Beats

could not be reached. Naturally, a great deal of the responses owes its nature to the climate of the fifties and sixties. In addition, the Beats, with their frequent themes of drug use or homosexuality, were certainly controversial, therefore contributing further to the split in the reception of their work. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: the main focus of Beat criticism of the fifties and sixties was not the value of the literature produced by the Beats, but rather their personal lives and their relation to the society. Much of the criticism then revolves around the critic's personal taste or discussion of the society at large while the Beat texts take a back seat. Ultimately, these reviews reveal more about the reviewer rather than the reviewed.

## CHAPTER V

### CURRENT RECEPTION

Currently, the political and social climate is vastly different from the fifties; the Cold War is over, the Berlin Wall was torn down decades ago, and the Internet allows an unprecedented proliferation of information hardly regulated by world governments. The plight of civil rights movements—the fight for the rights of women, homosexuals, or minorities—has greatly affected the mindset of the following generations and is understood as one of the cornerstones of modern democracies.

Unlike in the first examined time period, the acceptance of the Beats is nearly unanimous. The Beats are acknowledged by both popular and academic audiences as surviving the test of time, therefore belonging to other literature in what is known under the often vaguely interpreted and criticized term “the Western canon.” Due to the overwhelming support of the Beats, the interpretive communities in this chapter do not follow the categories of the previous one, as the same categorization would be rather meaningless. Therefore, the interpretive communities of this chapter are separated into two categories—popular and academic reception. This way the nearly unified acceptance of the Beats as well as the small differences within the two communities are highlighted at the same time, thus even further pointing out the differences in the two chosen time periods.

## **Popular Reception**

Over fifty years after the major Beat publications of the fifties, the general consensus on the Beats has changed significantly. Previously seen by many as controversial figures whose literary output did not have any literary value, the Beats are now viewed as greatly influencing American literature and American culture as a whole. Writing in 1999, Allan H. Kurtzman, who donated a significant collection of Beat literature to University of California, Los Angeles, notes the following:

Eleven years ago, when I offered my collection of Beat material to the UCLA University Library, I received several polite notes of thanks. I also seemed to perceive some embarrassment at the thought of including such a collection in a "serious" library. Yet today, influential observers everywhere recognize the unique contributions of the Beat Generation to late 20th Century culture and particularly the creative spontaneity of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in helping to define those contributions.

Thinking fifty years ago that one might eventually be able to donate a Beat collection to a university library, in the age when Norman Podhoretz and other critics waged an all-out war against the Beats, one would be probably faced with righteous scorn if not hysterical laughter.

On the contrary, the popular narrative of today describes the Beats as fighters for social reformation who challenged the society of normativity, thus greatly contributing to the current development in as well as outside the arts. Writing for an online San Francisco travel guide about the presence of the Beat Generation in the city, Ocean Malandra describes the Beats as “America’s first counter-cultural movement [that] lead directly to the hippies, punks, and all other American subcultures yet to come.” Although he acknowledges their experimentation with literary forms, Malandra claims

that it was their organized rejection of middle-class society and their influence on other cultures “that gave the Beat movement its underlying power and made it a long-lasting and far-reaching movement.” The sentiment above is repeated by Josh Rahn’s article on the Beats for the online portal *The Literature Network*.<sup>13</sup> Rahn describes the Beats as “a new cultural and literary movement [which] staked its claim on the nation’s consciousness.” Although their numbers were not large, Rahn argues, their visibility and influence were unprecedented, challenging conformity, capitalism, and consumer culture. Ultimately, the impact of the Beat Generation on the structure of modern American society was immense: censorship was brought to an end, a discussion of ecology and environmentalism began, Eastern philosophies permeated the American consciousness, and the “stuffy” formalism of the Modernist poetry was subverted in favor of new, relaxed structure. Naturally, the above are not by any means the most authoritative sources on the Beat Generation; for example, Malandra uses the terms “Beat” and “beatnik” interchangeably. Nevertheless, it is not the reliability of these sources but the embrace of a certain opinion of the Beats that is ultimately important. Whether one accepts the notion that the Beats fit the descriptions above or not does not matter; as Stanley Fish explains, interpretive communities can change because canons of acceptability can also change (“Acceptable” 349). The sources above then replicate the acceptance of the Beats that has been influenced by other sources, thus further increasing

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<sup>13</sup> Malandra and Larn’s article were chosen due to their prominent placing when using Google to search for the term “the Beat Generation.” Both articles are in the first fifteen links offered by the search engine, accessed on 20 April 2014.



the current interpretive community in which Beats are seen as an important milestone in twentieth century America.

A valuable insight into the current reception of the Beats is provided by Ginsberg's and Burroughs's obituaries; both writers died only months apart in 1997 and the sentiment of the obituaries is markedly different from the texts written in the fifties and sixties. Describing Ginsberg as the "master poet of the Beat Generation" in the headline, Wilborn Hampton depicts *Howl* as "a manifesto for the sexual revolution and a *cause célèbre* for free speech" and Ginsberg himself as ubiquitously present during the various love-ins and be-ins of the sixties. The poet is seen as a rebellious protestor who shocked Eisenhower's America with his celebration of homosexuality and drugs and who was heavily involved in various protests throughout the second half of the century; later it is claimed that Ginsberg was "known around the world as a master of the outrageous." Most of the article describes the poet's life until the publication of *Howl*, Ginsberg's later life being mostly described through his travelling experiences. Hampton makes an important point by emphasizing that Ginsberg's *Collected Poems* anthology published by Harper & Row in 1985 "firmly established the poet in the mainstream of American literature." Ginsberg has therefore become "respectable"—a term Ginsberg himself used in the interviews cited by Hampton—and a vital part of the establishment.

The role of Ginsberg as a historical figure is also the basis for James Campbell's obituary. Describing the poet as "the exemplary avant-garde figure of the post-war world," the article could be separated into two parts: the first part concerns Ginsberg's early life again ending with the publication of *Howl*, the poem through which Ginsberg

“achieved a nakedness in poetry that reflected his soul”; the second part deals with his life since the poem’s publication up to his death and although it does mention some of his poems, it is mostly a various collection of Ginsberg’s social struggles, stories of his outrageous behavior, and comments on the poet’s personality. Campbell’s and Hampton’s articles are thus quite similar in what they decide to highlight. Both begin by a brief characterization of Ginsberg as a person rather than a poet, then continue with a short biography—informing the readers about Ginsberg’s mother being kept in a mental institution, for example—roughly culminating in the publication of *Howl*, and finish by mentioning various events from Ginsberg’s life during the poet’s final decades.

Importantly, these tidbits seem to be mostly comprised of “Ginsberg anecdotes,” that is stories that further illustrate the poet’s eccentricity, in order to paint the man as an exceptional individual.<sup>14</sup> While it might be argued that in obituaries such treatment is expected, the glaring omission of most of his later work and the preferential treatment Ginsberg the man receives when compared to Ginsberg the poet is rather stunning.

William S. Burroughs receives a similar treatment in Richard Severo’s obituary, the bulk of the text being concerned with Burroughs’s life leading up to the publication of *Naked Lunch*. Severo describes Burroughs “as a renegade writer of the Beat Generation who stunned readers and inspired adoring cultists with his 1959 book *Naked Lunch*” and this image of Burroughs seems to be replicated in other obituaries and articles as well. While no Ginsberg article seems to be complete without at least one

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, Campbell writes the following about the FBI keeping a file on the poet: “Though profoundly indignant at the intrusion, Ginsberg delighted in taunting the organisation. When J. Edgar Hoover insidiously let it be known that the Bureau possessed photographs of Ginsberg in the nude with other men, perhaps scheming to blackmail him, Ginsberg asked for permission to use one of them on the cover of a book.”

humorous Ginsberg anecdote, Burroughs articles include accolades such as “the hard man of Hip,” “the godfather of punk,” or “the original junkie” (Campbell “Struggles,” Ciabattari, Self). Campbell in his Burroughs obituary describes the writer as an artistic revolutionary who “became an icon late in life,” also pointing out the cult status that he attained among rock stars such as David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Frank Zappa and Patti Smith. While the journalist does talk about some of Burroughs’s important writing features such as his “routines” or the cut-up technique, most of the text focuses on his early life and on his iconic status: “Less accessible than that of his Beat colleagues, the work of William Burroughs is likely to prove at least as enduring. He was modern man in extremis, an exemplar of alienation, constantly subverting his targets with satire.” Similarly, Ciabattari’s emphasis is also found in the controversies surrounding the Beat writer who “scandalised literature with books like *Naked Lunch*,” a novel that “shocked Eisenhower-era Americans” with “its graphic sex, drugs, violence and slashing satire of consumerism.” Ciabattari’s text also includes memories of the late writer by various Burroughs associates, from his biographer Barry Miles to Denis Low, former Kansas poet laureate. The selections again confirming Burroughs as an unconventional man, a “literary outlaw,” as Burroughs’s biographer Ted Morgan famously calls him in the biography of the same name.

Conversely, the J. G. Ballard, the author of the novels *Crash* or *Empire of the Sun*, offers a more insightful commentary into Burroughs’s life and work. A few weeks after the Beat’s death, Ballard writes that Burroughs was “very much aware of the way in which language could be manipulated to mean absolutely the opposite of what it

seems to mean” and that this knowledge can be traced in all his work. Burroughs’s work, Ballard argues, is the counterpoint to the bourgeois novel which to Ballard is “the greatest enemy of truth and honesty that was ever invented.” Burroughs did not care about moral judgment; on the contrary, he tried to simply tell the truth:

I think [Burroughs]’s a writer of enormous richness, but he had a kind of paranoid imagination. He saw the world as a dangerous conspiracy by huge media conglomerates, by the great political establishments of the day, by a corrupt medical science which he saw as very much a conspiracy. He saw most of the professions, law in particular but also law enforcement, as all part of a huge conspiracy to keep us under control, to keep us down. And his books are a kind of attempt to blow up this cozy conspiracy, to allow us to see what’s on the end of the fork.

Ballard tries to shy away from the popular image of Burroughs as a “renegade” or “literary outlaw” and instead offers a view of the author that is centered on his writing rather than his personal life. Will Self chooses a similar approach in his article published on the centenary of Burroughs’s birth. While Self uses the moniker “original junkie” throughout the text, he focuses on Burroughs’s first novel *Junky* instead of presenting yet another summary of the author’s life. Describing Burroughs’s quintessentially Midwestern libertarianism being at odds with his “personal inclinations,” he offers an insightful look into the author’s concept of drug addiction in the novel. Self warns against “the post hoc mythologizing of the writer and his life from the very grim reality of active drug addiction that constitutes the action of *Junky*” and offers a unique reading of the novel: “It is Burroughs’ own denial of the nature of his addiction that makes this book capable of being read as a fiendish parable of modern alienation.”

Simplification leading to the point of mythologizing is a trend best seen in the way filmmakers adapt the works and lives of the Beats to the silver screen. Jordan

Larson looks at the most recent additions to the Beat movies, *Kill Your Darlings* and *Big Sur*, both released in 2013.<sup>15</sup> Larson begins by explaining that although these two films—together with the previously released *Howl* and *On the Road*—portray the lifestyles of the Beats as rebellious, adolescent fun, what made Beats so influential in the first place “was that they were radical, free-thinking adults.” While he commends the sudden increase in the popularity of the Beats, he argues that this revival “arguably goes too far with its re-imagining of the Beat writers’ livelihoods as simple adolescent goofing around.” Larson continues by explaining that the Beats were “well into their grown-up years” when most of their notable texts were published. Larson then explains that the two most recent films diminish what was truly radical about the Beat Generation, that is their iconoclastic approach to life which continued well into the Beats’ old age. This simplification, Larson skillfully points out, is best seen in the fact that while Kerouac and Ginsberg have been the focus of two films each, Burroughs, whose life is significantly darker and more complicated than the lives of the two other Beats, has been the inspiration for only one movie, David Cronenberg’s “disturbing and gritty” *Naked Lunch*. Larson further continues:

One could argue that these films are only trying to honor the spirit of the Beat Generation, but can you separate the “essence” of a story or a movement from what its progenitors really said and did, and at what point in their lives? Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac were grown men who were also alcoholics, misogynists, and womanizers who killed themselves with substance abuse. Pretending Kerouac’s life was some sort of consequence-free dream not only does a disservice to viewers, but to the Beats, as well.

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<sup>15</sup> *Kill Your Darlings* portrays the murder occurring in the circle of pre-fame Beats and their friends at Columbia University, while *Big Sur* is based on Kerouac’s novel of the same name documenting Kerouac’s struggles with the newly gained fame after the publication of *On the Road*.

Ultimately, Larson argues that this refashioning and diluting of the Beats to make them more suitable for the mainstream is dangerous in its depoliticization. It was their rebelliousness, the author points out, that set the important corner stone for the counterculture of the sixties. Their lives were more than fun and sexy escapades—even though they at times may have looked as such—and should be celebrated accordingly so that the rebellious message is not lost.

In other words, the popular narrative often emphasizes the Beats as persons rather than focusing mostly on their writing. It is not their text but their unconventional lives and struggles in the setting of the socially conservative fifties that seem to be the main point of interest as can be seen from the obituaries or the film adaptations that Larson discusses above. This celebratory nature of the Beats in such reading then reaches the point of mythologizing; Ginsberg is the “visionary artist” and homosexual poet while Burroughs is the “original junkie” who shot his wife in a game of “William Tell.” Their lives stand in for more than just their lives; they represent an attitude, a stance towards society, and a path to be taken by the ultimate individuals seeking for that ever-elusive “something” that they might never catch yet still have to hope to be able to do so. In this vision of the Beats, their work is only secondary.

### **Academic Reception**

Similarly to the popular reception, the position of the Beats in academia has also changed drastically. The first major Beat Generation conference at the Naropa Institute in 1982 marked an important shift in the Beat’s acceptability in academia; while the

occasional journal article was published even before, it was only after the conference that the Beat scholarship became to grow substantially (Theado 1). Currently, many revised and critical editions of primary texts as well as book-length studies and collections of scholarly essays are being published on the Beats.<sup>16</sup> After taking several other events into account, such as the formation of the European Beat Studies Network in 2012, it is therefore safe to say that Beat scholarship is stronger than ever before.

Enumerating all the important scholarly publications would be a rather dull—and pointless—affair. Just to name a few, the collection of Kerouac essays *What's Your Road, Man?* edited by Hilary Holladay and Robert Holton, or the collections of Burroughs essays *Retaking the Universe: William S. Burroughs in the Age of Globalization* edited by Davis Schneiderman and Philip Walsh or the more recent *Naked Lunch@50: Anniversary Essays* edited by Oliver Harris and Ian MacFayden are worthy additions to the current Beat scholarship. This trend of increasing academic interest in Beat Generation authors is paralleled by a thriving industry in the release of previously unpublished works, especially Kerouac's (Dittman 122). As Dittman notes on the example of Kerouac, although the author fell out of favor by his death in the late sixties, Kerouac's work as well as numerous biographies and critical studies were back in print by the beginning of the 1990s, and his image also appeared in advertisements for clothing stores like the Gap and Internet bookstores like Alibris.com (125).

Nevertheless, a brief discussion of current academia should provide an insightful view into the changes in Beat scholarship. For instance, Dittman's treatment of

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<sup>16</sup> The most recent addition to Beat scholarship is probably the new Burroughs biography *Call Me Burroughs* by Barry Miles published earlier this year.

Kerouac's work sustains a critical tone throughout the text as can be seen in the biographer's discussion of the recently published *Some of the Dharma*:

It is nonnarrative and experimental, a type of writing for which an audience had just begun to develop. The book, like so much of Kerouac's work, is wildly uneven, and while there are moments of true clarity and beauty, there are also the old Kerouacian problems of self-indulgence (evident in the lengthy discussion of what he saw at this point as his youthful failings, and his discussions about his losing battle with the alcoholism that would eventually kill him) and misogyny. (122)

Simply put, there is a clear tendency to treat the Beats in a markedly less hostile way when compared to the criticism of the fifties. Naturally, some of the strategies used by current critics to discuss the Beats resemble those used by their predecessors in the first examined period. For instance, Jonah Raskin begins his Ginsberg biography by providing a short narrative about his own relationship to the Beats: "In 1957, at the age of fifteen, I bought for seventy-five cents a copy of the City Lights paperback edition of *Howl and Other Poems* with the trademark black-and-white cover. . . *Howl* was underground poetry, outlawed poetry. Ginsberg made it seem as though it was cool to be a teen and that teens, not adults, knew what was cool" (xi). It might be argued that such an approach is common to literary critics. Nevertheless, there often seems to be an unwritten rule in Beat criticism, both popular and academic, to include a short anecdote, often revealing the author's first contact with the Beats in order to further elevate the rebelliousness of the movement. In addition, when Raskin argues that in *Howl* Ginsberg "finally wrote a poem to match the immense persona that he had had in mind for himself for years—the persona of an *American prophet*," he uses the same strategies of mythologizing that can be seen in the more popular texts (230, emphasis mine).



Nevertheless, Raskin unknowingly hints at the most significant change that took place between the two examined periods, that is the politicization in the academia. Recalling Ginsberg's poetry reading at the College of Marin, Raskin talked with Ginsberg "about the Cold War and American culture, a subject with which he had been preoccupied ever since the mid-1940s—and a subject that had more than academic interest now that Ronald Reagan was president" (xii). The politicization of the academia that occurred in the sixties and seventies through disciplines such as post-colonialism or feminist theory also impacted the scholarly interest in the Beats. Pawlik notes that the increased interest in the Beats occurring recently is partly due to the influence of French theory as a hermeneutic for Beat texts; this influence of French theory replaced the biographical readings frequent in the 1980s and 1990s and resulted "in a significant re-framing of Beat writers' dialogues with Europe, away from their engagement with modernism, Surrealist or otherwise, and towards their intersections with French intellectual history" (140). As Pawlik further points out, it was Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's remarks about Beat writers in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* that inspired innovative readings of the Beats: for instance, Timothy S. Murphy reads William S. Burroughs through the lens of "invisible postmodernism," or "amodernism," that emerged from the same conditions as postmodernism, therefore not succeeding it but rather contesting it throughout the postwar period (23). The application of post-modern theory is then one of the current traits of Beat criticism.

To provide an example of a post-modern approach to the Beats, Sterritt describes Burroughs's "fondness for melding and welding his own prose with that of others"

through his cut-up method as having “a strong Foucauldian ring” in terms of Foucault’s perspective on social discipline and control through discourse (27). Interestingly, it is mostly Burroughs who is reviewed in the light of post-structuralist theory. Robin Lydenberg in her groundbreaking study *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction* argues that Burroughs’s notions about language and literary production are radical in their attack on the humanistic literary establishment that until then acknowledged Burroughs mostly for his unconventional life or “pornographic” language (ix). It is especially the cut-up technique that “makes explicit the coercive nature of *all* writing, of *all* symbol systems” (xi). Frederick Whiting takes a similar approach to the writer by reinterpreting the circumstances surrounding the trial of *Naked Lunch*; he argues that Burroughs’s advocates failed to grasp the novel’s radical challenge to signifying practices of the period—practices that produced psychopathological identities of normativity such as the homosexual, the addict, or the pedophile—by advocating the moral message of the book through a metaphorical reading which was precisely the process of linguistic abstraction that Burroughs was challenging” (147, 167). Due to his nonlinear or sometimes even nonexistent narrative, constantly changing narrative voices, or language experiments such as the cut-up method, Burroughs is a prime target for investigating in terms of discourse as power viewed in the tradition of Michel Foucault or Michel de Certeau.

It is naturally not only Burroughs that is the focus of the current Beat revival. Pawlik notes that some critics position the Beats precisely at the intersection between modernism and postmodernism (104). The change in the perception of the Beat

Generation is skillfully summarized by Matt Theado in *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, a critical introduction of Kerouac's life and work:

Until recently, most people seemed to know of [Kerouac] more as a pop-culture icon that represents youth movements, quests of the spirit, and satiation of the senses with fast cars, jazz, drugs, and the pursuit of kicks. [. . .] Still, with his resurgence in popularity, recently published work, and new academic momentum in support, Kerouac's work may seem paradoxically more ungainly than before. Now that he avoids the easy labels ("Beat Bard," "Daddy of the Hippies," "a literary James Dean") scholars, critics, and most of all new readers are continually reevaluating or discovering for the first time their takes on Kerouac. (1)

The easily-remembered monikers applied to the Beats are mostly a thing of the past, at least in academia; as more time is put between the first publications of the Beats and now, they are being reevaluated and reexamined from new angles. Theado, for example, points out that Kerouac's spontaneous prose is more than a simple act of blurting out the first thing that comes to mind. Kerouac's linguistic innovations, Theado argues, serve not only to tell the story but also to convey the appropriate atmosphere of the plot, which is achieved through the structures of Kerouac's sentences, the rhythms and the juxtaposition of images, and the many innovative phrases present in the text (5). The critic then analyzes Kerouac's stylistic techniques—e.g. use of contractions or repetitions—in great detail. Nevertheless, probably the best example of the current reevaluation of the Beats is the collection of critical essays *Reconstructing the Beats* edited by Jennie Skerl. In the introduction to the book—which is quite tellingly separated into three chapters, namely "Re-historicizing," "Recovering," and "Re-visioning"—Skerl writes the following:

This collection has several purposes: to re-vision the Beats from contemporary critical perspectives, to reassess their place in mid-century

American history and literature, to recontextualize Beat writers within the larger arts community of which they were a part, to recover marginalized figures and expand the restricted canon of three to six major figures established from 1956 to 1970, and to critique media stereotypes and popular clichés that influence both academic and popular discourse about the Beats. (2)

One of the main aims of the collection is then to insert female voice into the history of the Beat Generation movement and emphasize the importance of African-American and other minorities in the Beat Generation (3-4). Skerl points out that there were numerous female poets and artists associated with the New York and San Francisco bohemia, artists such as Ruth Weiss or Joanne Kyger, while African Americans Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans were household names of the West Coast and East Coast scenes. It might be said that *Reconstructing the Beats* then represents the new scholarly interest in the Beats that started in the eighties; nevertheless, it also represents the changes in academia in general, changes in the way we as scholars read and subsequently critique literature. Our understanding of history is changed and often reshaped into a new, more exciting mold, texts are being reinterpreted according to the latest research, and forgotten authors are being rediscovered as the established authors fall out of favor.

A more methodologically traditional approach to the Beat Generation is represented by *The Daybreak Boys*, edited by Gregory Stephenson and published in 1990. The work is a collection of essays written mostly in the eighties and it is Stephenson's introduction that grounds the collection in a more traditional literary criticism: "I have taken *The Daybreak Boys* as the title for this volume because I, too, found it apt and appropriate, suggestive of the essential qualities of the writings of the Beat Generation: their contraband, outlaw character, and their shared sense of a quest, of

a journey through darkness to light” (1). The Beats’ outlaw character, the questing quality of their writing, the light at the end of the tunnel—these are certainly not postmodern notions. Stephenson continues by repeating the arguments already made in the sixties: the Beats warn against the crisis of Western civilization, the spiritual poverty of the modern world, or excessive materialism, while promoting the energies of the body, instincts, or the unconscious as the answers to the problems of Western modernity (8). For Stephenson, the Beats set out on a journey through the “heart of darkness” of the self to expose one’s criminality, obscenity, or madness as a means of confronting the inner destructiveness and transforming it into creative energy; evoking Blake, another poet of the visionary tradition in which he places most of the Beats, Stephenson argues that the Beats try to effect a “marriage of heaven and hell” to reopen a dialectic between the unconscious and the superconscious as a means of evolving toward a true wholeness (9). Acknowledging the influence Beats had on the grass-roots activism that ultimately reshaped the landscape of American culture and literature, the critic argues that the “continuing appeal of the works of the Beat Generation is ascribable . . . to their quality of *authenticity*. We respond to the truth of their writings because we feel that they were created out of real pain and hope, out of absolute personal necessity” (14-15, emphasis mine). Put differently, the writing of the Beats is appealing because it is authentic: they all have been to the other side and survived to tell the tale, a tale that is true in its depiction of drug addiction or madness. They are, to take Stephenson’s account to its logical conclusion, mainly reporters rather than writers; it is *what* they write and not *how* that matters.

Even though there are not as many detractors of the Beat Generation as in the fifties, one can still hear the occasional voices of dissent that disagree with the current position of the Beats. One of the most loud critics is Harold Bloom, who in the introduction to the *Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, a part of his Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations series, starts with the following: "I have not reread *On the Road* during the near half-century since its first publication, and I am not happy at encountering it again" (1). The novel is, according to Bloom, a "Period Piece," a work of art that has little artistic merit outside of the context of its period. Bloom argues that the elements of social protest in the novel has now, in the age of "mediaversities" and "corporate robber barons" who rule the society, faded away; *On the Road*, then emerges most unfavorably when compared to "the masterpieces of Classic American fiction" such as the works of Steinbeck, Melville, or Twain. There is "no literary value whatsoever" in the novel, the critic further claims, the work lacks sorely the "delicate nuanced artistry of our father, Walt Whitman," and is a mere self-indulgent evasion of the American quest for identity (1-2). Quite ironically, in the very first essay of the collection Carole Gottlieb Vopat contradicts Bloom by arguing that even though Kerouac is not a great writer, he is still a good writer who has "provided an enduring portrait of the national psyche" as well as "defined America and delineated American life for his generation" (3).

While Bloom's disdain for Kerouac and the Beats seems rather superficial in its traditionalism, other critics provide a more in-depth critique of the Beats. For instance, Bruce Bawer looks at Allen Ginsberg and the criticism surrounding him and describes Ginsberg himself as a sort of phenomenon. Writing in 1985, the critic points out that the

recently published collection of Ginsberg's poems, *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, is a testament to the mainstream press's canonization (2). Stressing that many Ginsberg critics include one of the numerous "Ginsberg anecdotes" in their reviews or essays, Bawer argues that it is the character of Ginsberg rather than his poems that is behind his success as it is precisely Ginsberg's persona that is of any value to the critics (1-2). Bawer further points out Ginsberg's past as a marketing research consultant and considers the success of *Howl* a combination of shock tactics, Ginsberg's knowledge of his audience, and his ability to package and market the product in an appealing albeit unconventional manner; for Bawer, Ginsberg is relying on the same tactics ever since his first public reading of *Howl* in the Six Gallery (7). His subsequent poems are therefore only variations of the same messages and ideals relying on the same tropes and development. Bawer argues it is the persona of Ginsberg and not his poetry that truly allures the critics; using his past as a "former marketing research consultant," Ginsberg successfully developed a "personality cult" around him, its members considering him a "messianic poet" whose faults at poetry can be ignored precisely because of his messianic qualities of authenticity (12). While Bawer repeats some of the arguments about the Beat Generation made already in the fifties—they romanticize poverty and crime while they represent anti-intellectualism—his main argument is that those who are attracted to Ginsberg not as a poet but as a "polemical performance artist" live their own versions of liberalism (2, 13). Those cheering Ginsberg for honesty are not honest themselves, the critic further claims. Finally, Bawer ends his essay by arguing that Ginsberg has done "considerable damage to both American society and American

literary culture” by promoting drug abuse among the young and replacing the literary tradition of poetry relying on craftsmanship with pure amateurism that relies on “knee-jerk political dissent” instead of one’s inability to write in conventional forms (13-14).

Bauer’s critique of Ginsberg, whether one agrees with it or not, is a representation of a modernist approach to the Beats. A more postmodern and critical reading is offered by Manuel Luis Martâinez’s *Countering the Counterculture* which employs a Marxist critique to compare the experiences of the Beats with those of Mexican Americans. The critic observes that positioning of the self and the community is the cornerstone of the American ideal and even though Beats emphasized dissent through movement, they did so in the tradition of American individualism (4). Martâinez warns against simplification: the dissent after the Second World War is not clear cut and culture cannot be read in crude dichotomies, understanding the Beats as clearly being opposed to the establishment is then a crude simplification (5). In the critic’s reading the fifties are defined by several fears: a fear of conformity felt by the liberals, a fear of otherness—the red, black, and brown menace—affecting the conservatives, and a fear of castrating femininity threatening the masculinist imagination (15). These fears have one in common—they all represent submissive individualism that precludes communalism. For Martâinez, it is this individualism that Beats, even though otherwise being outsiders in the American culture, still represent: “The legacy that these writers actually reproduce closely resembles nineteenth-century concepts about individualism, American exceptionalism, and manifest destiny” (16). The critic continues with the following: “[Beats] popularized an entrenched commitment to an individualist ideology that was



not at all ‘countercultural,’ in the egalitarian sense, but rather was a rehashing of an American ‘rugged individualism’ that was ultimately hostile to a Rousseauian commitment to civic participation and radical egalitarian democracy.” In the end, the Beats reacted to women, African Americans, and Mexican Americans in the same way that the military-industrial complex did; in Martâinez’s reading, the Beats are complicit in the imperialist culture they criticize themselves (24-25).

One might clearly object to some of the current readings. For example, homosexuality is inconspicuously absent from Martâinez’s text; a cynical reader might claim it is simply because homosexuality does not fit the reading Martâinez himself chose as it would complicate the critic’s claim. Nevertheless, several conclusions can be made from this chapter. Firstly, the Beats truly have entered the canon and have been recognized by the mainstream culture as important writers of the twentieth century. Secondly, anecdotal criticism has mostly disappeared from the academia, yet it is still at large in the popular media. Lastly, mythologizing to the point of glorification is present in both popular and critical texts. In addition, the evolution of academia’s responses to the Beats also documents the overall change within academia that occurred between the two time periods. In Stanley Fish’s terms, the temporary readings of the interpretive communities of the fifties have been replaced by readings favoring rather than dismissing the Beats. The analysis of the Beats’ reception shows that it is the reader that matters when interpreting a text; the interpretive communities changed and so did the readings preferred by the communities. Possibly, in a decade or two the interpretive

communities will change again and the Beats will be considered as a part of the “dead white European males” category. Naturally, the future is yet to come.

## CHAPTER VI

### COMMENTARY

The discussion in the two previous chapters shows that a combination of synchronic and diachronic analysis of reader responses is a valid way of reviewing reception of literary works. Focusing on the readers of the texts rather than the text themselves reveals quite a few insights about the literature in question that would be otherwise ignored. The change in reception was expected; however, the different arguments made in the two different periods is something that would not be so easily noticed. For instance, the fact that several commentators saw the Beats as a generational—and therefore social—issue reflecting an emerging trend in the society of the fifties and analyzed them as such was rather surprising, although it does fit within the period of publications such as *The Lonely Crowd* or *Organization Man*, that is works aimed at identifying and examining the ails and problems of the society.

Although it was expected, the shift in the vocabulary regarding the Beats in the popular press was still rather radical; instead of “beatniks” and “know-nothing bohemians” they have become visionaries and prophets warning against consumerism and conformism, messages that resonate even today. Quite often the same arguments made against the Beats were later used as a means of supporting them, which is another proof that the society—and therefore the interpretive communities and the readers that compose them—have changed. In other words, a text gains its meaning from the readers rather from an inherent quality contained within; to paraphrase the famous words of

Roland Barthes, the author is dead, long live the reader. The texts have not changed, only the readers did. Ultimately, it is the reader who is the author of the text precisely as Stanley Fish argues. Similar research might be used in the future to evaluate different societies and cultures: instead of relying on accounts describing the given groups in a rather direct manner, it is possible to conduct a research that analyzes the groups' stance towards a particular issue and only afterwards describe the groups themselves. It is also quite surprising that mythologizing of the Beats is to a certain extent present in academia, though it is perhaps not as surprising as one might think. After all, disentangling one's admiration for a writer because of what he or she represents from the author's actual craftsmanship is quite the challenging task to undertake. Lastly, the contrast between the scholarly criticisms of the two periods clearly shows the differences in the ways literature is read in current academia. The application of post-modern theory leads to a radical reevaluation and redefinition of literary texts; this application produces readings that are vastly different from those of the New Critics in the fifties.

Apart from the more or less obvious statements above, the research has opened doors to the following questions that need to be verified in a separate study. Firstly, was the Beat Generation doomed to fail initially because of the overall *zeitgeist* of the period? There are at least two arguments in favor of the statement above: the media theatrics surrounding the Beats and the nature of the fifties. As the discussion in the preceding chapters show, the media treatment of the Beats was dishonest, to say the least. There seemed to be very little willingness to examine the Beat phenomenon in at least somewhat neutral light. Several factors probably contributed to such treatment: all

the Beats were relatively young, therefore considered inexperienced and possibly not mature enough to raise valid points critiquing the society; they were also different—drug addicts, homosexuals, travelers and hitchhikers—in the age of conformity and conventions, therefore again rising suspicion rather than sympathy; lastly, they ignored in their writing taboos on sexuality, language, or drug abuse. All the above is also related to the overall atmosphere of the fifties: even though in hindsight one might see the changes slowly creeping in, the society was still clearly patriarchal, promoting the ideal of monogamous married men with children as head of the household, that is fathers. The age aspect of patriarchy is often ignored in favor of the more simplified version of patriarchy which represents all men regardless of age, yet it is clear from the reactions to the Beats that it was precisely the age that played an important part in the writers' reception; as Trilling puts it, the audience at Ginsberg's and Corso's Columbia reading "*were* children, miserable children trying desperately to manage, asking desperately to be taken out of it all; there was nothing one could imagine except to bundle them home and feed them warm milk, promise them they need no longer call for mama and papa" (226). After all, the older generations have wealth, families, and investments. Therefore they have already invested too much to want any significant changes; the younger generations, on the contrary, are quite limited in terms of ownership, thus they are more likely to have different, often conflicting views than the parent generation. Naturally, the above is a crude generalization, yet still clearly presents the overall argument of the Beats being destined to fail. Some of the possible avenues open for research are the importance of the generation gap in the Beats' initial acceptance or the nature of

patriarchy in Beat writings; one might argue that one of the reasons Burroughs is considered different than the other Beats is because of the age difference, Burroughs being eight years older than Kerouac and fourteen years older than Ginsberg, which would only emphasize the importance of the perceived youth of the Beats in regards to their reception and not being taken seriously.

Secondly, it could be argued that the Beat Generation significantly changed criticism in academia or at least noticeably contributed to the change; they did so by inciting highly politicized criticism that focused on different aspects than the writing itself. The divide between the old academia represented by Podhoretz or Trilling and the new academia and intelligentsia that supports the Beats is too great to be explained by different aesthetics alone. Simply put, the Beats could be seen as a sort of announcers of the emergent literary criticism of the sixties and seventies, criticism that instead of close reading focused on political notions by emphasizing the marginalized figures not represented by “dead white European males” such as women, ethnic minorities, or homosexuals. A sharp response to a work of art is certainly nothing new, yet there are two factors that make this reading viable. First of all, the comments of Beat critics from the fifties and sixties overemphasize the threat to intelligence they see in the Beats; while Scott complains that the Beats are a part of a larger trend that makes adults surrender their “once powerful authority symbols” in exchange for adolescent entertainment, Podhoretz claims that the Beats and their supporters are “against intelligence itself” (153, 318). These and other critics from the academia might be seen as safeguarding the knowledge of their cultures against the corrupting influence of the

Beats, or at least they fashioned themselves to be seen in such way. Leslie A. Fiedler agrees with me about the privileged status of academia by describing his monumental study *Love and Death in the American Novel* as “a breakthrough in the last stronghold of WASP ‘good taste’” (“Second Thoughts” 11). Secondly, it is the overblown media attention that the Beats experienced that makes such reading possible. If it were not for the popular media, the Beats would arguably have a significantly smaller impact. It was the media that promoted the Beats as speaking for the entire generation and that politicized them by emphasizing their more rebellious aspects while suppressing the more conventional ones as is exemplified by the promotional photograph of Kerouac wearing a crucifix; the crucifix was edited out by most publications, presumably “in order to maintain the popular image of Beats as threatening to the mainstream, with no moral values and as entirely disengaged from society” (Nash 58). This treatment charged the Beats with even more radicalism than they possessed and it was this image of the Beats—the image of beatniks—that the critics responded to. In addition, it should not be ignored that most of the major Beats had a university background; for example, Ginsberg was a student of Lionel Trilling, the mentor to Norman Podhoretz. Yet even still they chose to rebel against the norms of literary tradition and this rebellion had to be struck down by the patriarchal—in the sense “father knows best”—keepers of knowledge: academia. The relative youth of the university-educated Beats, their disrespect for conventions both social and literary, the politicization of what were small groups of authors in New York and San Francisco into a movement speaking for the entire generation by the popular media; all these contributed to a rather “blitzkrieg”

retaliation of the patriarchal academia. Diana Trilling takes the stance of the many scholars known from the closing paragraph of her report on Ginsberg and Corso's poetry reading at Columbia:

There was a meeting going on at home of the pleasant professional sort which, like the comfortable living-room in which it usually takes place, at a certain point in a successful modern literary career confirms the writer in his sense of disciplined achievement and well-earned reward. I had found myself hurrying as if I were needed, but there was really no reason for my haste; my entrance was an interruption, even a disturbance of the attractive scene. Auden, alone of the eight men in the room not dressed in a proper suit but wearing his battered old brown leather jacket, was first to inquire about my experience. I told him I had been moved; he answered that he was ashamed of me. I said, "It's different when it's a sociological phenomenon and when it's human beings," and he of course knew and accepted what I said. (230)

For Trilling and others the Beats were merely "a sociological phenomenon" and nothing else. From their superior position of "knowledge-keepers," scholars refused to be even marginally interested in the Beats for various reasons, their unconventional lifestyles and disregard for taboos on sexuality being some of them. It is, therefore, a sort of patriarchal refusal in which fathers condemn their disobeying sons. While the most famous Beats were white males and therefore should be among the privileged in the conservative fifties, they were also often homosexuals, drug addicts, practitioners of Eastern philosophies, or simply individuals trying to find their own way in life; their dismissal by the "fathers"—the popular media, the academia in general—can be seen as a generational gap, but it is also a gap between a seemingly apolitical academia that preserves "good taste" and political academia that is interested in gender or ethnicity. The Beats through their apparent organization into a movement, an organization mostly made up by the popular media, forced critics to make readings of texts presenting a



lifestyle different from their own. They were seen as a coherent group and that required a different response than if it were an individual author acting on his or her own. In other words, the New Critics were forced to abandon their habits of close reading and respond in an explicitly more political way, thus indirectly predicting the future of literary criticism.

Finally, responses to sexuality in the works of the Beat Generation might be another area of research to be investigated. Put differently, two important Beat texts, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Ginsberg's *Howl*, faced obscenity charges due to passages deemed obscene, that is passages concerning depictions of sex. As Chester MacPhee, the customs officer responsible for confiscating *Howl*, comments, "The words and the sense of the writing is obscene . . . . You wouldn't want your children to come across it" (qtd. in Ferlinghetti 125). Granted, the description in *Naked Lunch* of a Mugwump, a rather alien creature, copulating with a hanged man who reached orgasm in the precise moment his neck snapped is certainly bizarre, yet it is important to point out that the United States—and the United Kingdom to a lesser extent—was the only country that censored the works of Beat writers. Goodman notes that smuggling was for some time the only way one could obtain works by D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, or Henry Miller in the United States (96). Grove Press, the publisher of *Naked Lunch* in America, also published the novels *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*, that is two works that featured explicit sexual material and also faced obscenity charges. Fiedler observes that in American literature there is a "predominance of the Gothic tradition, of terror and death and violence, in the works we loved best" ("Second

Thoughts” 9). He also points out the differences between European and American Gothic: “European Gothic identified blackness with the super-ego and was therefore revolutionary in its implications; the American gothic . . . identified evil with the id and was conservative at its deepest level of implications, whatever the intent of its authors” (*Love and Death* 149). American authors, he continues, are unable “to deal with adult heterosexual love and [their] consequent obsession with death, incest, and innocent homosexuality” (xi). The stance towards sexuality in the American novel is then one of the main differences from its European counterpart, a notion that is further supported by the Puritan background of the United States. In addition, Fiedler in his “The New Mutants,” a talk given as a part of a symposium on the future, discusses that radical sexuality is considered the principal threat in the current society, yet this sexuality leads to “the radical transformation (under the impact of advanced technology) of Homo sapiens into something else: the emergence—to use the language of Science Fiction itself—of ‘mutants’ among us” (382). Interestingly, he mentions Burroughs as the “chief prophet” of the emergent radical sexuality (392). A fear of sexuality is then something inherent in American fiction; the American novel is “pre-eminently a novel of terror” (Fiedler, *Love and Death* 6). In Fiedler’s psychoanalytic reading, sexuality is suppressed and manifests itself only through repression and terror. A cross-cultural reception of the Beat Generation could shed more light into the relationship between American literature and sexuality. Similar study could then be undertaken in the context of European reception of the Beats.

The above are merely theories based on the results of this thesis, yet theories that deserve to be answered in a separate study. Even though the statements in this chapter are unverified, I feel confident that the proposed researches are all viable prospects. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis has been fulfilled: it not only shows the changes in the reception of the Beat Generation in the United States, but also proposes follow-up research to be conducted.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

The successes of Ginsberg's *Howl* and Kerouac's *On the Road* led to a highly publicized—and also quite controversial at the time—phenomenon known as the Beat Generation. Even though John Clellon Holmes used the phrase several years before the two texts were published as a rather broad term describing the feelings of his generation, popular media greatly changed the scope of the phrase. Anyone with a mild interest in poetry or jazz could be “beat”; Kerouac's lament that “beat” stands for “beatitude” was ignored and the devout Catholic was pigeonholed by popular media into a category that was portrayed in such a stereotypical fashion that it soon led to the creation of a parodying term, the stereotypical beatnik. That is not to say that everyone despised the Beats, yet the pressure from both popular press and academia was such that it seems the Beats just did not have a chance to survive in such a hostile environment. The members of the Beat Generation caused outrage by their open homosexuality, history of drug use, or their disregard for conventions regarding taboos. Even though they were a part of a larger bohemian scene in San Francisco or New York, the Beats were often singled out from this context and put into the public spotlight and accused of causing the sudden rise of juvenile delinquency, advocating drug abuse, being against intelligence itself as Norman Podhoretz famously said, or just being “nasty fellows” in general. As Parkinson points out, this publicity had a negative impact that tarred all experimental writers with the moniker “Beat” and that seemed to suggest that the only valid experimental writers

were the Beats (280). Nevertheless, the Beats also had their supporters: individuals such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights or Barney Rosset of Grove significantly supported the writers through the publication and subsequent defense of their work. The support from these and other figures, people such as Gilbert Millstein whose raving review of *On the Road* arguably exposed the Beat Generation to the world, sharpened the divide between the generally-accepted culture and counterculture, thus paving the road for the civil rights movements of the sixties. The fifties and sixties were then significantly polarized in terms of interpretive communities. Conversely, the interpretive communities of today overlap when it comes to the acceptance of the Beat Generation, long gone is the extremely divided and politicized discussion of the fifties. Today the Beats are considered by the popular media as important figures who helped to achieve the values deemed important today by the Western world such as freedom of speech, civil rights of women and minorities, or crackdown on homophobia. This difference also goes hand in hand with a significant change occurring in academia. New Criticism was abandoned in favor of more politicized readings and this change in the overall atmosphere also greatly contributed to the current status of the Beat Generation. Undoubtedly, the rise of scholarly interest in the Beats encouraged new and revised editions of their text, which in turn further engraved their presence in the mind of the collective psyche, the several Beat movies that were released in the last few years only confirming their current position of not outsiders but canonized—at least to some extent—writers. The thesis documents the significant change the Beats have undergone between the two chosen

time periods, a change from literary outcasts to celebrated writers. It is, therefore, clear that the texts have not changed. We did.

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## **Research**

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