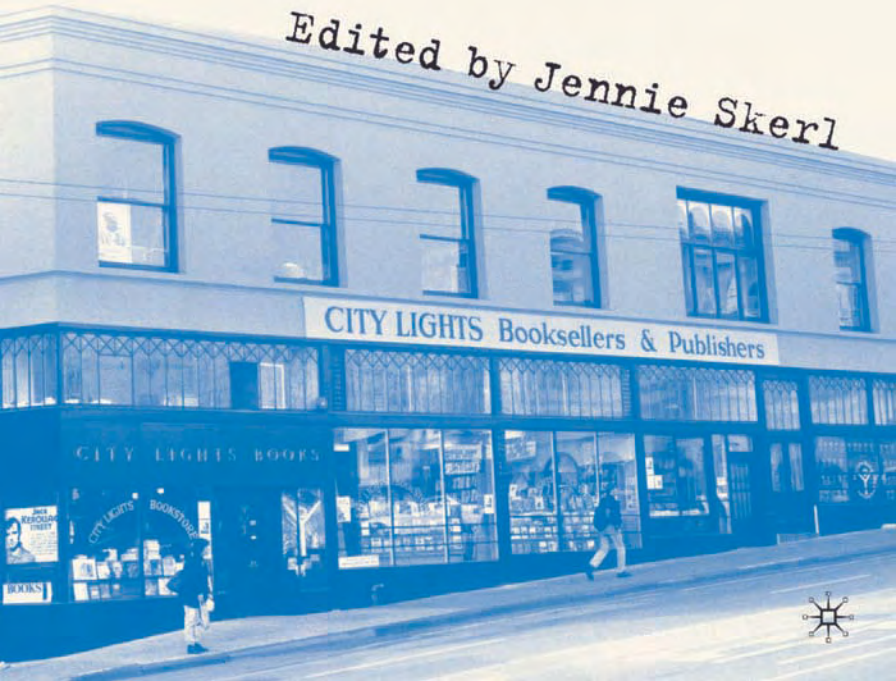
# Reconstructing the Beats

Edited by Jennie Skerl



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# Contents

# Introduction

*Jennie Skerl*

The Beats were an avant-garde arts movement and bohemian subculture that led an underground existence in the 1940s and early 1950s, gaining public recognition in the late 1950s with the publication of *Howl* (Allen Ginsberg 1956), *On the Road* (Jack Kerouac 1957), *Naked Lunch* (William S. Burroughs 1959), and *The New American Poetry* (Donald Allen ed. 1960). Publication was also accompanied by the notoriety of censorship trials for *Howl* (San Francisco, 1956) and *Naked Lunch* (Boston, 1962), and later for Lenore Kandel's *The Love Book* (San Francisco, 1966) and Michael McClure's *The Beard* (Berkeley, 1967), as well as police raids on Beat cafes and bars in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York City. Although influential in many artistic circles and bohemian enclaves and celebrated in the burgeoning youth culture, these writers and many other less famous Beats were condemned and ridiculed by mass media journalists, the then-reigning public intellectuals, and by academic critics. Thus, very little serious criticism appeared in the 1960s and '70s, and the Beats were largely excluded from academic discourse.

The celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *On the Road* in 1982 marked the beginning of a Beat revival and an outpouring of biographies, memoirs, films, recordings, exhibitions, celebrations, and websites. For the past twenty years, the Beats have also been the subject of many scholarly journal articles, which suggests a new appreciation for their role in American literature and culture of the mid-twentieth century. Beat writers are now also being taught in hundreds of college courses—not only American literature surveys and courses devoted to the Beats, but also American studies, history, religion, and sociology courses. Yet, despite the plethora of publications about the Beats, scholarly reassessments are still in short supply. Most publications have been of primary materials: anthologies, single-author readers or collected works, interviews, photographs, memoirs, letters, journals, documentary films, recordings, CD-ROMs. These meet not only classroom needs, but the seemingly endless demand of enthusiastic fans who will buy books or other materials related to the Beats. Books by scholars consist mostly of biographies and single-author studies. Most publications focus on Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs and, to a lesser extent, on Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso. The dozens of other

writers and artists associated with the Beat Generation have received little attention. This publication history serves to reify a restricted (white male) canon that glamorizes a few legendary figures and perpetuates an academic dismissal of popular culture icons. The recent scholarly articles have not had the effect of revising persistent stereotypes established in the 1950s and early 1960s.

*Reconstructing the Beats* aims to provide a scholarly reassessment that will chart new directions for criticism and teaching at the beginning of the twenty-first century. 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.

The essays in this volume support the thesis that the Beats were a loosely affiliated arts community—one that encompassed two or three generations of writers, artists, activists, and nonconformists who sought to create a new alternative culture that served as a bohemian retreat from the dominant culture, as a critique of mainstream values and social structures, as a force for social change, and as a crucible for art. (See Johnson and Grace for a three-generation thesis about the Beats.) Like the dadas and surrealists before them, the Beats sought to erase the boundaries between art and life, to create art that, in Peter Bürger's words, could "organize a new life praxis from a basis in art" (49). Like their American precursors, the Transcendentalists, they fashioned a role as poet–prophets who sought a spiritual alternative to the relentless materialist drive of industrial capitalism.

The Beat counterculture had its geography of bohemian neighborhoods in urban centers (not only in New York and San Francisco, but across the country and beyond the United States); its public social gathering and performance spaces (cafes, clubs, theaters, galleries, bookstores, city streets, and parks); its little magazines, alternative newspapers, and publishers; its alternative religious thought; its unconventional sexual mores and families; and an ideology of dissent that redefined the political and resisted censorship, police crackdowns, and media attacks with a collective response. Through the creation of a subculture and their own public performance spaces, the Beats sought and reached an audience for their art outside established mainstream cultural institutions and thus recruited more members of their community, perpetuating a multigenerational movement—perhaps the only modern avant-garde movement to do so. The Beats also interacted creatively with the mass media, so that, in spite of the media's negative caricatures, their message achieved mass circulation, which also resulted in new adherents, particularly the youth of the 1960s who acted out the first mass bohemian movement in history.

This collection is organized around three modes of reconstruction that attempt to revise, broaden, and complicate our understanding of Beat writers

and Beat history. The three essays by Holton, Belgrad, and Starr are historical reassessments of the Beats in mid-century social, political, and artistic contexts. Robert Holton's essay opens this collection with an analysis of the early formation of the Beats as an attempt to create a subculture as a "habitable space" within a repressive postwar society that enforced increasing social homogenization. According to Holton, early Beats constructed a community from the "folds of heterogeneity" that enabled self-fashioning, not merely self-expression. Similarly, Daniel Belgrad also classifies the Beats as a "cultural formation" that parallels the Magic Realists in Mexico. Ultimately, Belgrad sees the Beats and the Magic Realists as a transnational counterculture organized against the corporate capitalist postwar order. Both Holton and Belgrad historicize the Beats as a non-Marxist oppositional response to a mid-century modernity that sought to increase social and political conformity. The final essay in this section, by Clinton R. Starr, again defines the Beats as a counterculture that enabled transgression of mainstream norms as a form of dissent. Starr challenges the distinction between Beat and beatnik, artist and hanger-on, leader and follower, arguing that the Beat movement consisted of more than a few "true" artists. He documents that the Beats, who were labeled apolitical, often engaged in organized political action, and he argues that Beat communities facilitated individual resistance and collective action, particularly challenging racial segregation, homophobia, and attacks on civil liberties.

The essays devoted to Beat writers and works are also focused on re-historicizing—whether by recovering marginalized figures, who, upon examination, prove to be significant contributors to their social and artistic milieu or by recontextualizing more well-known writers. Nancy M. Grace's essay on ruth weiss, for example, reveals the fascinating history of a West Coast female jazz performance poet and multimedia artist whose innovations preceded the more famous New York Beats's entry into the San Francisco poetry scene. Grace's analysis of weiss's *DESERT JOURNAL* recovers a little-known major poem and also illustrates the multiple artistic influences and intersections that mark much Beat writing. Like many other less well-known writers affiliated with the Beat movement, her work is performance and multimedia based. Historically, experimental artists who work in this mode are frequently forgotten or relegated to the footnotes of literary history because critical discourses focus on conventional genres, craft, and bodies of work. Amy L. Friedman's essay on Joanne Kyger places her in the center of the San Francisco and Marin County literary scene of the 1950s and beyond, her poetry communities and career showing the interaction of the Beats with other writers and movements, as well as the difficulties of a woman poet in a competitive male environment. Friedman's overview of Kyger's career to date usefully shows the lasting influence upon her work of Beat poetics and relationships with Beat poets, and also the lifetime achievement of a writer and activist who has been marginalized as a woman, as a poet ultimately not representative of any particular school, and as a Buddhist. Ronna C. Johnson

takes a feminist approach to the work of Lenore Kandel, whose *Love Book* has often been dismissed as beneath critical notice and who has been largely forgotten, partly because her literary career ended in 1970. Johnson shows that Kandel's life and work in the context of the North Beach and Haight-Ashbury bohemias is a paradigm of the cultural transition from Beat to hippie, and of the proto-feminist evolution of women in these cultures. She re-inserts Kandel into the historic battle against censorship that took place in the postwar decades, and reminds us that women were also in the forefront of challenging sexual and literary taboos. In all three of the essays devoted to women writers, attention is given to biographical and historical context—a necessary intervention for marginalized figures. It is striking that the historical record shows a prominence in their poetry and countercultural communities, as well as formal innovations, that challenge the omission of women from the standard Beat narratives. It is apparent also that the West Coast environment was more welcoming to women than that of New York. As Johnson notes, in spite of the largely unchallenged sexism of the period, the San Francisco bohemian subcultures did make a place for women to pursue liberating rebellious social and literary agendas, and its poetry communities provided a space for female subjectivity to claim literary authority.

African Americans and their art were also an important part of the Beat subculture, which admired jazz, took the jazz aesthetic as a model for other art forms, incorporated jazz into multimedia and performance works (especially the famous jazz poetry readings), and lionized its musicians as hipsters, visionaries, and artistic innovators. African Americans were residents in the postwar bohemian enclaves—in contrast to the segregationist structures of mainstream society, and black writers and artists were participants in the Beat milieu. Again, the reified canon of white male authors obscures the African American and other ethnic presences in Beat history. Similarly, criticism of Kerouac's or Norman Mailer's romantic primitivism or their glossing over of harsh social conditions tends to obscure the fact of a black presence and artistic interchange between black and white artists. Indeed, both Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans were seen as central figures in their respective West Coast and East Coast bohemias of the 1950s. Joans has been called the "quintessential hipster" of the Village (Miller), and Kaufman was seen as the "guiding spirit" of North Beach (Winans), yet it is only in recent years that they are receiving the kind of critical attention that will begin a sustained dialogue. Like many other twentieth-century African American writers, Kaufman and Joans have a higher reputation in France than in the United States—not only because of race, but also because their surrealist-inspired poetry, bohemian personae, and *épater le bourgois* stance resonate with the French avant-garde tradition. The essays by Amor Kohli and A. Robert Lee recuperate two poets whose African American perspective complicates and enriches the Beat/jazz nexus. Kohli contributes a rare detailed reading of poems by Kaufman that define jazz as a form of dissent and reminds us that jazz is or can be performance art as protest. Lee's essay attests to the continuing thread of Beat

sensibility in Joans's poetry and also articulates in detail his Afro-surreal, Afro-Beat aesthetic. As with some of the women Beats, earlier critical neglect of Joans and Kaufman is partly due to their practice of performance art in different media, as well as Joans's expatriation and Kaufman's period of silence.

The final group of essays turns to the three Beat writers who have been the focus of the most literary criticism and attack, legend-making and debunking, fascination and repulsion—the originators of the term Beat for an alternative consciousness and aesthetic. The preceding essays establish a historical and social context that embeds Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs within a community that made the Beats a movement, rather than a coterie. This final group of essays also re-historicize, re-contextualize, and reinterpret.

It is well known that the Beat movement is contemporary with abstract expressionism and modern jazz from Charlie Parker to John Coltrane, yet critics have difficulty crossing generic and professional boundaries to interpret the artwork and art worlds of boundary-crossing artists. Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity* is an important contribution to studying this mid-century aesthetic, and this volume's essays by Terence Diggory and Richard Quinn are models of the interdisciplinary perspectives that can alter our understanding of the Beats. Diggory's essay on the Beat film, *Pull My Daisy*, challenges the usual interpretation of the work as a slice of Beat life, or raw realism. Diggory sees the film as an artwork influenced by action painting's concept of abstraction, and an example of the Beats's friendships and collaborations with the New York art world. He also points out the political meaning of abstraction, for both the painters and the writers, as a form of dissent and nonconformity that responds to twentieth-century totalitarianism and the repressive postwar pressures to conform. Similarly, Quinn's comparison of improvisational technique in Parker's and Kerouac's work challenges misconceptions about improvisational art forms as lacking in intellectual content or technical discipline. His essay clarifies the nature of improvisation in two media and two artists and the active intellectual engagement of the listener and reader required by improvisational art, as well as showing what Kerouac learned from Parker and the cross-cultural talents of both artists. Quinn points out the oppositional meaning of bebop as a form of counter-hegemonic critique that rejects postwar pressures toward passive consumerism and identity stereotyping and thus the spiritual meaning attributed to jazz by both African Americans and Beat bohemians.

Deshae E. Lott and Tony Trigilio explore the commitment to Buddhism by Kerouac and Ginsberg, respectively, and its presence in their writing—a subject that has not been adequately addressed by scholars. There has been a dismissive attitude toward the depth and pervasiveness of Buddhism in Kerouac's thought: Either Kerouac has been considered a superficial student of Buddhism or a failed Buddhist unable to overcome his training in Catholicism. Lott convincingly argues for Kerouac's commitment to his syncretic form of Buddhism as typically American and shows how Kerouac's

nature writing is Buddhist in its sensibility and philosophy, in contrast to traditional American nature writing, which usually combines Western scientific and Romantic perspectives. According to Lott, an ethic of compassion stemming from spiritual insight is the key to Kerouac's Buddhist/Catholic religious experience, and also in accord with Kerouac's definition of jazz and jazz-loving hipsters—hence his portrait of Charlie Parker as a Buddha (as noted by Quinn). Trigilio's essay discusses Ginsberg's later poetry from "Wichita Vortex Sutra" on—work very much influenced by his practice of Tibetan Mahayanan Buddhism during the last thirty years of his life, and by his concept of the mantra as both an embodied and transcendent expression of visionary experience. There has been little critical discussion of Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics even though it is central to his later work. Trigilio's explication of several later poems is illuminating, as is his analysis of Ginberg's poetics as a "middle way" in relation to the post-structuralism of the Language poets and the humanism of the New Formalists. Ignorance of Ginsberg's Buddhism is an obstacle to critical understanding and appreciation of his mature work, and the Buddhism of many other Beat writers and artists is a contributing factor to their exclusion from mainstream literary history because most Westerners are ignorant of the philosophy, vocabulary, and imagery. On the other hand, Buddhism has an ever-increasing number of contemporary American adherents, many of whom are aware that the Beats were instrumental in the growth of Buddhism in America in the last fifty years. (See Fields as well as Prothero.) Furthermore, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, founded by Ginsberg and Anne Waldman at the Buddhist Naropa Institute in 1974 and dedicated to Beat poetics and Buddhist meditation practices, has created yet another Beat-affiliated, multigenerational poetry community that perpetuates the Beat/Buddhist aesthetic.

This volume concludes with Oliver Harris's analysis of the problematic of Beat legend, specifically how Kerouac's creation of a legend about Burroughs shaped the reception and production of Burroughs's work. Harris proposes that Burroughs's analysis of the power of image is a reaction against the practice of other Beat writers, especially Kerouac. In fact, the power of legend is problematic for all students of the Beats—the legend fascinates, and its mass media simulacra promote endless reiteration and proliferation. As I have argued in my earlier work on Burroughs and Jane Bowles, the antidote to legend is to historicize and contextualize, and to read the legend as a collaborative artwork that requires critical intervention.

This book is a result of many years of dialogue about the Beats with friends and colleagues, especially the students in my 1995 seminar, whose enthusiasm and creativity inspired a special issue of *College Literature* on the Beats ("Teaching Beat Literature," 27.1, 2000) and this volume, which includes many of the same contributors. Thanks also to the contributors for widening the circle of my scholarly community and revising my conception of the

Beats. Special thanks go to Ronna C. Johnson, whose conversation and commitment to Beat scholarship has supported me throughout this project. The privilege I received of reading Johnson and Nancy M. Grace's groundbreaking *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* before publication provided me with timely justification and moral support for this reconstruction project. West Chester colleagues Karen Fitts and Merry Perry have my gratitude for assistance in the final editing process. Deans David H. Buchanan and Charles Hurt have encouraged my continued scholarship as a full-time administrator, and Ms. Barbara Findora has given generously of her skills and good cheer in preparing the manuscript. Most of all, thanks to John L. Hynes for taking the Beat journey with me and reminding me at crucial moments that the Beats deserve to be honored because they changed literature and they changed our lives.

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# Re-historicizing

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# Chapter 1

# "The Sordid Hipsters of America": Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity

*Robert Holton*

## I

Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky.
Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes all the same.

—Malvina Reynolds, "*Little Boxes*"

At mid-century, the cultural fabric of America appeared to be undergoing a profound process of modernization and homogenization and the symptoms—some ominous, some banal—seemed to be manifested everywhere. The reasons seemed complex and broad, involving Cold War politics and post-Taylorist labor practices, altered family structures and housing patterns, religious beliefs and media technologies, the demographics of urbanization and developments in psychology. One result, for a significant minority of Americans, was that the increasing affluence and security of the postwar period was disturbed by—even displaced by—a sense that the range of cultural and personal possibilities had been unacceptably reduced. Perhaps the most recognized reaction, both lauded and condemned, involved the Beat Generation, a small bohemian group that came together in the 1940s and was vaulted from anonymity into the public eye in the 1950s following the highly publicized appearance of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, works that appeared just as a vigorous public debate about conformism was reaching its peak. One reason for this was the attempt by the Beats to explore, adapt, and establish collective heterogeneous spaces

based on the examples of marginalized groups whose exclusion seemed to guarantee their immunity from the privileges and perils of mainstream modernity.

These homogenizing tendencies were evident in many spheres of public life. In 1950, the McCarran Internal Security Act and the Subversive Activities Control Act were passed, legislation severely curtailing dissent in America, as Senator McCarthy prepared for more inquisitorial House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings aimed at persecuting those who did not agree with a narrow definition of political reality. Other politicians pondered the creation of a new system of highways that would soon rationalize and standardize the American road and the experiences of its travelers. When it finally became law in 1952, The Federal-Aid Highways Act began a process that resulted in a streamlined, controlled-access grid bearing little resemblance to the vagaries of the idiosyncratic roads that Whitman impressed on the American imagination. The July 13, 1950 cover of *Time* carried a photograph of entrepreneur William Levitt, the man behind Levittown, the Long Island subdivision that defined postwar suburbia and inspired Malvina Reynolds to write "Little Boxes," one of the era's most distinctive pieces of musical social commentary. Other glossy magazines were replete with images of prosperous families enjoying the consumer revolution then in full swing as the modern supermarket and shopping mall were coming into being. In the mid-1950s, Southdale Center, the first enclosed, climate-controlled mall, was opened. Soon Muzak was added too, as marketers and psychologists discovered that the shopping habits, as well as the work habits, of middle America could be manipulated through this new medium. One great publishing success in 1950 was David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, an influential Yale University study of contemporary conformism arguing that the American character—indeed the human character—was entering a new inevitable stage of social evolution marked by a diminution of individuality and difference. Modernity and homogeneity seemed clearly linked.

That same year, by contrast, Kerouac and Neal Cassady were exploring the "fellahin" peasants and teenage prostitutes of Mexico and staying with William S. Burroughs, who was exploring cheap junk (heroin) and researching a "super-drug" reputed to turn people into insects. A couple of years later, Burroughs fatally shot his common-law wife Joan. Cassady, himself a bisexual, became a bigamist in 1950 by marrying his pregnant girlfriend only to leave her a few months later to return to his other wife, while Kerouac was married briefly to a woman whose lover, a friend of Kerouac's, had recently been killed while climbing through the window of a moving New York City subway car. Allen Ginsberg was released from a psychiatric hospital after his involvement with drug addicts and thieves led to his arrest following an accident in a stolen car and the discovery of stolen goods in his apartment. He was about to meet another poet, Gregory Corso, who was completing a three-year term at Clinton State Prison. Even from these few details, it is clear that the contrast between the centripetal social pressure toward control,

conformity, and homogenization in the mainstream and the centrifugal, apparently willful eccentricity of the Beats could hardly be more complete. Surveying the era generally, Fredric Jameson has observed "that no society has ever been so standardized as this one, and . . . the stream of human, social, and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously." Noting the difficulty of locating a "vantage point or fantasy subject position outside the system" from which its homogeneity might be considered, Jameson queries where the non-homogeneous can continue to exist in the modern world (17). One traditional location involves the transformative power of spirituality: "Historically," he points out, "the adventures of homogeneous and heterogeneous space have most often been told in terms of the quotient of the sacred and of the folds in which it is unevenly invested" (22). The explorations of the folds of heterogeneity, of realms of experience outside the sanctioned mainstream, carried out by the Beats included the realm of the sacred of course, but ranged well beyond into a variety of secular cultural spaces that generally remained off limits to conventional citizens.

Following World War II, critiques of white middle-class America tended to be channeled away from explicitly political ends as discussion of conformism and alienation dominated the cultural agenda. Because the political and artistic ground had shifted so radically, the alternative positions of the 1920s and '30s—particularly the leftist politics and modernist aesthetics that had provided vantage points outside the system—were no longer available. The political left had been effectively routed in America while, conversely, aesthetic modernism had been consecrated as the established position and no longer constituted a radical alternative. Furthermore, while the Civil Rights Movement was gathering force in this decade, few white artists and intellectuals could foresee early in the 1950s the crucial impact it was soon to have. The consequences of women's liberation, the other great social movement of the postwar era, were as yet undreamed of. Despite its historical prominence in Marxist sociology, alienation was articulated primarily not as an economic consequence of capitalism but as a cultural position, a consequence of the homogeneity of modernity. According to Marx, alienation is the inevitable consequence of the capitalist mode of production: Because workers control neither the means of production nor the product of their labor, they cannot find a sense of fulfillment or identity in their work. The only way to rectify this, according to Marx, is through class struggle. While Marxism was not a dominant American ideology in the pre-war period, it—along with a variety of left-wing positions—provided a critical model for the focussing of dissent during the economic upheaval of the Great Depression. As Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyerman observe however, World War II marked a major shift in the spectrum of American social thought: The mobilization of resources, intellectual as well as industrial, for the war effort "had all but eliminated the critical intellectual, drawing even the most disenchanted free floater into supporting the struggle against fascism. Those contexts that had sustained social criticism . . . either disappeared or were transformed into organs of the

war effort" (5). National crises such as war tend to dampen the spirit of active debate and the fact that World War II seemed to segue so seamlessly into the Cold War left little room for the development of critical positions.

With the exception of marginal socialist groups, the focus of remaining postwar dissent shifted away from traditional political channels. With so many ideals exhausted by the Depression, eroded by the horrors of the war and the ugly politics of McCarthyism, glutted by the new profusion of consumer goods and lost in the explosion of mass marketing techniques, no cohesive political movement emerged to direct alienation toward positive social goals. Because alienation came to be viewed as an inevitable consequence of modernity itself rather than as the legacy of the contradictions of capitalism, solutions were not readily available. Unlike in the 1930s and in keeping with the Cold War climate, there arose an apolitical dissent based on alienation as a personal or psychological condition rather than as an economic or political category. Political and economic solutions may exist for political and economic problems but if the problem is inherent in the epoch itself, transcending national boundaries and ideological systems, then dissent must—perhaps with a sense of its own futility—seek another route. Lew Welch's "Chicago Poem" poses the problem this way:

> You can't fix it. You can't make it go away.
> I don't know what you're going to do about it,
> But I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm just
> going to walk away from it. Maybe
> A small part of it will die if I'm not around
>
> feeding it anymore.
>
> (*Ring of Bone* 11)

Two related questions arise with some urgency here: What exactly is the "it" from which one must walk away? And where can one walk to? What folds of heterogeneity can provide an alternative habitable space for those who feel impelled by a centrifugal force to walk away?

In the absence of an alternative space structured by some alternative set of conventions, language, and so on, alienation can only lead to an uninhabitable void. From J. D. Salinger's 1951 *The Catcher in the Rye* to John Updike's 1960 *Rabbit, Run*, many novels, constituting almost a sub-genre, explored the alienated outposts of what Alan Nadel has termed America's "containment culture" and looked at the fate of young men—typically this was a young man's genre—who tried to walk away. In both of these novels, the centrifugal movement leads to a non-space as unavoidable as it is uninhabitable: Holden Caulfield's lonely flight leads to a nervous breakdown, and his fantasy of escaping down the road to some pastoral alternative never approaches realization. Ten years later, Updike sent Rabbit Angstrom out on the road, but, with nowhere to go, Rabbit turns back, then runs again, hopelessly and without destination. Narratives such as these proliferated at a stunning rate throughout the period. In the ironically titled *Revolutionary Road* (1961),

Richard Yates's suburbanites encounter madness and death in the uninhabitable middle class, while in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Ken Kesey's irrepressible McMurphy ends up lobotomized and dead at the hands of a mental hospital system that is clearly a metaphor for modern society as a whole. *Catch 22*, the title of Joseph Heller's 1961 novel, has entered the vocabulary as a term for an impossible double bind, and Yossarian, his hero, devotes much of the novel to his escape. A few years later, Heller's *Something Happened* (1974) portrayed an even bleaker middle-American way of life. As early as 1944, Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* provided an image of immobility, and, more than two decades later, John Barth's Jacob Horner reached a similar impasse in the appropriately titled *The End of the Road*.

For these young men and countless more like them, both literary and real, no fold—sacred or otherwise—could be located in which to find shelter; no habitable space existed outside what Paul Goodman, in *Growing Up Absurd*, referred to as the "closed room" of American culture (160). Such images of enclosure recur frequently not only in the literature but also in studies of social psychology. Psychiatrist Robert Lindner, author of *Rebel Without a Cause* (the study of psychopathology from which the James Dean movie took its title) and *Must You Conform?*, argued that the centripetal cultural logic of postwar America was ubiquitous from childhood on: "You must adjust. . . . This is the legend imprinted in every schoolbook, the invisible message on every blackboard" (1956, 56). A fierce opponent of this trend, he urged Americans "to break out of the cage whose outer limits men have worn smooth and deeply grooved with their endless pacing" (1952, 196). Not all observers noted the "endless pacing" at the enclosure's edge however. In *One-Dimensional Man*, for example, Herbert Marcuse expressed dismay at the degree to which Americans had accepted the status quo, even querying the continued relevance of the concept of alienation, a concept which "seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them" (11). The result of this identification is not the loss of alienation though, he decides, but actually "constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation" (11) characterized by a loss of the ability to imagine alternatives. This is the condition, a more complex but no less terminal form of Goodman's closed room, whose limits Marcuse interrogates in his influential study. "Thus emerges," he maintains, "a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe" (12).

It seemed impossible "to walk away from it"—to leave the room or the cage—without also walking toward something else, without finding some heterogeneous dimension or space in which to exist, and that space was not readily available. This non-space of hopelessness is evident in a remarkable passage from Kerouac's *On the Road*, but in this classic of Beat sensibility the problem of alienation and cultural space is negotiated quite differently. Sal Paradise, whose name is itself a reference to a space of possibility and hope,

finds himself in a darkened skidrow movie theater watching second-run B movies. "The people who were in that all-night movie were the end," Sal observes (243), employing a colloquial phrase connoting cultural terminality:

> There were Beat Negroes who'd come up from Alabama to work in car factories on a rumor; old white bums; young longhaired hipsters who'd reached the end of the road and were drinking wine; whores, ordinary couples, and housewives with nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to believe in. If you sifted all Detroit in a wire basket the beater solid core of dregs couldn't be better gathered. (243–44)

The movie experience, the classic American space of entertainment and escape, here has turned into its opposite, a dead-end non-space of emptiness and abjection. As Sal dozes through the movies, his sense of self utterly collapsing, he imagines a fall into a surreal fold in the cultural fabric that few Americans had visited:

> six attendants of the theater converged with their night's total of swept-up rubbish and created a huge dusty pile that reached to my nose as I snored head down—till they almost swept me away too. . . . All the cigarette butts, the bottles, the matchbooks, the come and the gone were swept up in this pile. Had they taken me with it, Dean would never have seen me again. He would have had to roam the entire United States and look in every garbage pail from coast to coast before he found me embryonically convoluted among the rubbishes of my life, his life, and the life of everybody concerned and not concerned. What would I have said to him from my rubbish womb? "Don't bother me, man, I'm happy where I am. . . . What right have you to come and disturb my reverie in this pukish can?" (244–45)

The Beat fascination—even identification—with the social "dregs" is radically extended here; indeed Sal identifies not with the modern consumer culture but with its garbage. While his identity seems lost in the show business hallucinations and the filth of the nation itself, this dead-end abjection is transformed by images of birth, womb and embryo. The glimmer of possibility that emerges at this end of the road should not be exaggerated; however, it must be noted that Kerouac recognizes possibility in this heterogeneous space far from the homogeneous surfaces of mainstream America. Caught between the "little boxes made of ticky tacky" and the garbage pail, Sal—unlike Holden or Rabbit—opts for the garbage pail on the understanding that there may be some way through to the other side, whereas the "little boxes all the same" do not allow this hope.

As these examples show, the coexistence (or as Jameson puts it, the "adventures") of heterogeneous and homogeneous space can be disturbing. As Ginsberg later commented, "we were in the middle of an identity crisis prefiguring nervous breakdown for the whole United States" (Introduction to *Junky*, 1977 vii). This sense of the imminent end of a way of life and of the

shared assumptions making that collective way of life possible was articulated as well by Chandler Brossard, who speaks of his Beat-related novel *Who Walk In Darkness* (1952) as a study of how people live "when their sustaining sociological context collapses" (1987, 22). Such a vertiginous moment of self-doubt, of crisis, is the moment when artists and intellectuals can be most influential in exploring and re-establishing a sense of collective identity: Pierre Bourdieu writes of "the labor of symbolic production that poets performed, particularly in crisis situations, when the meaning of the world is no longer clear" (236). In those situations, according to Bourdieu, the task of the poet has been no less than to rename the world. Given the sense of cultural dead end felt by so many, the task of finding a voice was a daunting one. Michael McClure, recollecting the first public reading of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," also connects the sense of crisis and the centrality of poetry in the process of renewal: "The world we tremblingly stepped out into in that decade was a bitter gray one," he recalls. "In all of our memories no one had been so outspoken in poetry before—we had gone beyond a point of no return. . . . None of us wanted to go back to the . . . silence, to the intellective void—to the land without poetry. . . . We wanted voice and we wanted vision" (1982, 12–13).

The Beat sensibility articulated by Ginsberg seemed to offer the means to break out of the cultural enclosure, out of the "closed room" described by Goodman and into a dimension unrecognized in Marcuse's analysis. It is easy to underestimate, decades later, the difficulty of this and the desperation that propelled it. Brossard puts it this way: "Their task—experienced, really, as an aesthetic/moral obligation—was to create a new sensibility and a new language . . . with which to illuminate the existential crisis of the postwar American in conflict with his society's 'values' which, at best, seemed hypocritical and useless, and, at worst, positively demented" (1987, 8). The emphasis on language is a recurring one, an indication of the need to redefine the world in order to bring about the eventual renewal that Kerouac's garbage pail images point toward. The sources of this new language were not likely to be found in middle America, but in the various wrinkles and folds of the postwar cultural fabric not yet smoothed out by the homogenizing power of modernity.

Anatole Broyard, in a 1948 article on the hipster phenomenon, argued that because he was "opposed in race or feeling to those who owned the machinery of recognition" and thus defined legitimate space, "the hipster was really *nowhere*. . . . [but] longed, from the very beginning, to be *somewhere*." Anticipating Kerouac's "rubbish womb," Broyard writes that this alienated desire for a habitable space somewhere resulted in "the birth of a philosophy . . . of *somewhereness* called *jive*" (721). The search for a new and authentic space is closely related to the recurring American impulse to found an identity on the bedrock of the naked self, free of compromising cultural and historical accretions, an Adamic desire for an experience of freedom, integrity, and authenticity generally unavailable within conventional culture. This desire,

attested to frequently not only in Beat writing but throughout American literature, is nonetheless inevitably mediated by the social taxonomies and cultural codes that have structured the prior experience of the questing subject. Because culture and history cannot really be swept away, the ideal of free habitable space must to some degree include—albeit in negative—traces of the unfree and uninhabitable space to be left behind. And the establishment of a social space, at least temporarily habitable, requires the presence of social structures of some form—language, conventions, rituals, a mythology and so on—alternative structures Rabbit and Holden are not able to locate.

In contrast to the quests of such solitary figures, the somewhere sought by the Beats was predicated on a subcultural rather than an individual walking away. Even early on, these explorers of hip had a sense of a larger social movement transcending individual alienation and bringing about a new collective space: One of the first published essays on the Beats, John Clellon Holmes's 1952 "This Is the Beat Generation," begins with a teenage dope smoker claiming to be "part of a whole new culture" (10). A few years later, the sense of collective experience was still emerging: Diane di Prima recalls the situation before and after the publication of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl":

> As far as we knew, there was only a small handful of us—perhaps forty or fifty in the city—who knew what we knew: who raced about in Levis and work shirts, made art, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardization of the black argot. We surmised that there might be another fifty living in San Francisco, and perhaps a hundred more scattered throughout the country . . . but our isolation was total and impenetrable, and we did not try to communicate with even this small handful of our confreres. (1988, 126)

This passage provides a clear description of the heterogeneous folds these small groups had come to inhabit, including references to a number of the cultural markers of distinction establishing their distance from the homogeneous middle. On one level, these criteria—wearing jeans, listening to jazz, and cultivating a distinctive language—seem trivial given the claims made for the cultural importance of the Beats. In fact, Marcuse dismissed them entirely, claiming that instead of generating "images of another way of life" they produced "freaks" (59) whose net effect was affirmation rather than negation of the status quo.

According to Bourdieu however, struggles over social identity, carried out through visible emblems or stigmata of distinction such as clothing or aesthetic taste are "struggles . . . to make people see and believe . . . to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definitions of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*" (221). What is at stake here—the making of a subculture—has less to do with any particular or arbitrary surface markers such as Levis than with the establishment of a heterogeneous space by means of a "social act of *diacrisis* which introduces . . . a decisive discontinuity in the natural continuity" of humanity. In the conformist 1950s, the Levis and work shirts, the art, the jazz, and the dope

acted as diacritical markers accenting a separation from middle class identity and the cultural compromises it was believed to entail. The adoption of Beat slang, a hip language marking a very clear subcultural boundary, laid claim to aspects of African American difference—an important claim given the barrier that separated African America from the mainstream in pre-Civil Rights America. From the perspective of the center, the symptoms of Beat identity di Prima lists constitute an inventory of inverse symbolic capital: the appropriation of African American and working class emblems and stigmata associated with lower social ranks, and artistic positions which seemed calculated to fly in the face of common sense. Nonetheless, these were the means employed in the construction of a heterogeneous space outside the one-dimensionality Marcuse deplored.

Di Prima's first attendance at a reading of "Howl" functioned as a ritual of congregation, and she understood immediately the implications of this seminal work for the forging of a collective heterogeneous identity. On an evening of wine and beef stew with a group of friends, she was handed a new book by an unknown poet and she began to read. Ginsberg, she realized immediately, "had broken ground for all of us" (1988, 127). There can hardly be a clearer indication of heterogeneous, even heretical discourse than censorship, and, as its immediate seizure by the police indicates, the ground broken by Ginsberg was indeed a radical departure. This repression only kindled the imaginations of countless young people, of course, whose desire for a space outside caused them to be drawn irresistibly to this siren song of alienation. The appearance of "Howl"—both at the Six Gallery reading where it was first introduced and in its subsequent publication—marked the point at which the diverse subcultural folds began to merge into a much larger whole as countless readers imagined themselves "starving, hysterical naked," lost on "the negro streets at dawn," but among the "best minds of [their] generation." For di Prima and many others, it was a moment of recognition: "[I]f there was one Allen there must be more," she continues, "other people besides my few buddies . . . hiding out here and there as we were—and now, suddenly, about to speak out. For I sensed that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing. . . . I was about to meet my brothers and sisters" (1988, 127). For McClure, the effect was similar: The finding of a voice and a language constituted an attempt to move outside the postwar cultural enclosure. "[We knew] that a barrier had been broken, 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" (1982, 15). And as it turned out, all this did point to a new phenomenon, the establishment of heterogeneous space with a remarkable power whose apotheosis would not be reached for another fifteen years.

Given the turbulence of their personal lives, it would be unreasonable to argue that the Beats were particularly successful in locating secure and habitable heterogeneous spaces for themselves, but there is no doubt that their

trajectory went beyond those of Holden and Rabbit. Nor is there any doubt about the significance of their collective walking away for American culture in subsequent decades as the momentum of dissent and protest gathered, challenging the conventions of both public and private life. While Kerouac alludes to a sense of possibility born from the garbage and dregs of the nation, di Prima confirms the birth of a national subculture rising from the depths of Ginsberg's epic of American alienation. The particular strategies employed in the construction of these heterogeneous folds, however, can only be understood in terms of the problems they were to solve.

## II

Works such as C. Wright Mills's *White Collar*, William Whyte's *The Organization Man*, Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and, most importantly, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* provided the most influential descriptions of the problem of postwar conformism. While the discussions of this new homogeneity were generally presented in terms of the "modern human condition," they nonetheless focused largely on the behavior patterns of a very particular group: middle-class white American men. The class aspect was guaranteed by the discourse's concentration on new bureaucratic conditions of white collar labor. And the new conformists tended to live in suburbs, more or less uniform housing developments erected for the white middle classes that were springing up around all the urban areas. Whiteness was guaranteed simply by the systemic racism of the era: For the vast majority of African Americans, for example, middle-class conformism was neither a threat nor an option. Finally, the individual agency thought to be in jeopardy had not usually been ascribed to women in any case since, as Barbara Ehrenreich has argued, they were considered by nature to be both dependent on men and more responsive to others (33–34).

For the most part, like the problem of modern conformism itself, rebellion was deemed to be "man's work" in this pre-feminist era and so, as Joyce Johnson writes, "we fell in love with men who were rebels. . . . We did not expect to be rebels all by ourselves. . . . Once we had found our male counterparts, we had too much blind faith to challenge the old male/female rules" (*Minor Characters*, xv). Traditional "woman's work" remained more or less uncompromised by modern conditions of white collar labor, argues the usually more insightful Goodman, and so women would continue to find fulfillment in child rearing as they always had. The problem would continue to plague men though because there was no longer enough traditional "man's work" to go around (17). In this discourse, the situation of women remained very much a secondary issue. Although the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was imminent, it was still possible simply to elide evidence of women's alienation or to blame it on modernity's erosion of traditional masculinity.

The male orientation of the Beats has often been commented on and in part this reflects the discourses in which it was formed. Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* deserves special attention as one of the catalysts of this discourse. While many aspects of his analysis seem questionable with the benefit of fifty years' hindsight, the book is remarkably insightful not just in its description of the new conformist character, but also in its enumeration of the heterogeneous social spaces remaining relatively unaffected by this new subjectivity. The exceptions comprised social groups who were, for a variety of reasons, outside the reach of the trend and, as a result, maintained what Raymond Williams might have called residual attitudes toward masculinity. Working class men, for example, were less affected: Riesman mentions "miners, lumberjacks, ranch hands, and some urban factory workers" whose "feeling of manly contempt for smooth or soft city ways" (34) is articulated in "their own cocky legends" of masculine heroes. Riesman notes that African Americans and Native peoples seem not yet to have evolved the traits produced by modern life and generally tend to preserve their "older character type" (33). Neither does the model extend to "southern rural groups, Negro and poor white" (32), to many "immigrants to America," or to "minority groups whose facial type or coloring is not approved of for managerial or professional positions" (32). However these exclusions from middle-class modernity were experienced by those who were marginalized by them, this non-synchronicity (to borrow a phrase from Ernst Bloch) opened spaces of possibility in the imaginations of those seeking alternatives.

It is not surprising that these residual spaces offered precisely the heterogeneous cultural folds that the disaffected Beats sought. Anatole Broyard, an African American who "passed" as white, noted the racial element in the hipster persona as did a number of others, most notoriously Norman Mailer, whose peculiar, but widely read analysis of the hipster, "The White Negro," provides a very clear example. Identifying the source of hip as African American, Mailer challenged America's white males to join a heterogeneous racial space of "white negroes." "One is Hip or one is Square," Mailer declares, "one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of the American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society" (313). American mythology once pointed to the western frontier wilderness but, as historian Fredrick Jackson Turner saw decades before—the sense of possibility that once resided there had long since vanished. Turner had defined the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (3) and Mailer relocates this boundary to the major American cities themselves, to the wilderness that, in the eyes of suburban whites, now existed at the urban center. Its natives were the African Americans who came to provide role models for displaced and alienated whites.

While Mailer portrays African American men as brutal psychopaths, not all white imagery manifested this particular form of stereotyping. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise, like Mailer, finds himself "wishing I were a Negro, feeling

that the best the white world had offered was not enough. . . . I wished I were . . . anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned." He blames his sense of emptiness on "white ambitions" and wishes he "could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (180). Kerouac's image of African America is as naive as Mailer's is malevolent, and both positions have been dismissed as ignorant of the actual living conditions of African Americans, if not outright racist. Many white readers however, reacting less to the portraits' accuracy than to the sense of possibility they evoked, responded positively to such images of heterogeneity. Notable instances of the adoption of African American culture by the Beats include not only the appropriation of language—which Mailer discusses at length—but also the valorization of jazz, especially bebop, which had been generally inaccessible to white audiences.

African American music had long provided white audiences with images of a zone of pleasure and excitement, risk and emotion, somewhat distanced from their own range of experience. As novelist Nelson Algren put it, "in Negro music, we heard the voices of men and women whose connection with life was still real" (Meltzer 241). By mid-century however, with the enormous popularity of swing and big band styles, white musicians and audiences had domesticated most jazz, narrowing its ability to establish that distance. The emergence of bebop in the 1940s marked a new departure in jazz: With its difficult harmonies, undanceable rhythms, complex solos and eccentric personalities, bebop seemed deliberately to refuse to charm mainstream audiences and consciously to resist popularization. While bebop was gradually assimilated into acceptability, in its early days it flaunted its divergence from the fundamental conventions of popular music and consequently attracted much smaller audiences, very few of whom were white. As Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) has pointed out, this inaccessibility was itself an important factor in attracting an alienated white audience. "The white beboppers of the forties were as removed from the society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice. The . . . whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice. [M]erely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist" (*Blues People* 188).

Jazz, with all the complex issues of race that inevitably shaped it, became a central and frequently discussed element in the emerging white nonconformist identity. Early in *On the Road*, for example, during a moment of loneliness and isolation, Kerouac's Sal Paradise makes clear the function of this music in binding together the subculture: "[A]s I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard" (14). The sense of imaginary bop community not only dispels his loneliness, it transforms the midnight urban "jungle" into a space of familiarity, transforms the vast continent into a backyard filled with friends, transforms dispersal and alienation into a unified

mental and emotional space. Sometimes cited as the first Beat novel, John Clellon Holmes's *Go* relates this directly to the larger issues of identity: "In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them," he writes. "It was more than a music; it became an attitude toward life . . . a language and a costume" (161). The effect was the establishment of the "somewhere" that Broyard saw as the goal of the whole hip movement: Listening to the music of avant-garde African America, Holmes notes, these alienated young people "who had never belonged anywhere before, now felt somewhere at last" (161). While it is certainly true that, as jazz musician Anthony Braxton has stated, "bebop had to do with understanding the realness of black people's actual position in America" (Heble 39), the uses to which bebop was put extended beyond this to include a major and perhaps unintended contribution to the self-fashioning processes of alienated whites, whose knowledge of the actual position of African Americans was often quite limited.

If residual positions based on racial and class exclusions provided one set of heterogeneous spaces, a further category of exception essential to Beat self-fashioning is related to what Riesman, borrowing from Emile Durkheim, called the anomic: that is, the diversity of maladjusted individuals existing beyond—or perhaps beneath—the reach of conformity. "[R]anging from overt outlaws to 'catatonic' types who lack even the spark for living let alone for rebellion," writes Riesman, anomics "constitute a sizable number in America" (290). This category included a variety of eccentrics: drug addicts and transient carnies, homosexuals and fringe artists, criminals and visionaries, misfits of all kinds, and precisely the sort who influenced the formation of the Beat group once Allen Ginsberg, Lucien Carr and Jack Kerouac encountered William Burroughs and Herbert Huncke. Embodiments of Riesman's worst nightmare of anomia, inhabitants of subcultural folds already structured with the crucial elements of language and social conventions, these ambassadors from the marginal social spaces of homosexuality, drug addiction and petty crime presented the possibility of a clear exit from Goodman's "closed room." If African Americans provided a valuable model because the system refused them, anomics were valuable because the system was incapable of assimilating and using them. As Jameson puts it, "To be unique or grotesque, a cartoon figure, an obsessive, is also . . . not to be usable in efficient or instrumental ways" (101). Strategies of unusability potentially open the door of Goodman's closed room to a freer space, to another social dimension unacknowledged by Marcuse, to "a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature" (99).

It is important to emphasize the sense that these anomic spaces were valuable not solely as spaces of individual eccentricity, but more importantly as sites of reconstructed community. Few figures define anomia as clearly as Herbert Huncke, the man who introduced Burroughs to hard drugs and gave Kerouac the word "Beat." Huncke began at an early age "to drift away from

what would have been termed my so-called normal background, my friends in the neighborhood, the nice bourgeois fellows and girls I'd gone to school with" (24–25). And he drifted until arriving in New York, at the subcultural shelter of a social fold populated by Times Square hustlers, prostitutes, addicts, thieves and "perverts." Taking up that seedy lifestyle himself, he comments, "It was the first place I'd found where I felt secure. . . . I felt as though I blended in" (41). This new sense of community, albeit a community of the social "dregs," to use Kerouac's term, was nonetheless a structured space, a specific fold in the cultural fabric that Huncke slotted into very comfortably. Although his narrative upsets the normal structures of middle class security and lumpenproletarian alienation, Huncke was hardly alone in this inversion.

Burroughs himself, whose trajectory from well-to-do respectable St. Louis to the sordid criminal underworld of Times Square is an exemplary anticonformist narrative, has described in *Junky* his own youthful struggle with conventional life: "I saw that there was no compromise possible with the group" he writes, "and I found myself a good deal alone" (xiii). Burroughs managed to locate some heterogeneous folds before long however: After an aimless and alienated adolescence, he encountered a group of "rich homosexuals" and began to develop a new orientation. It is significant that the experience Burroughs describes has less to do with sexual passion or freedom than with the discovery of community. The people themselves he describes as "jerks for the most part," but what he, like Huncke, discovered was more important: a subcultural alternative to the growing homogeneity of the American mainstream: "I saw a way of life, a vocabulary, references, a whole symbol system, as the sociologists say" (xiii). Similarly, for Burroughs and countless others since, the demimonde of drug addiction offered another structured space, anomic and alienated, but internally coherent and habitable: "Junk is not a kick," writes Burroughs, "It is a way of life" (xvi). As a way of life, junky culture provided a social space structured with rituals, vocabulary, legendary heroes, and so on. As one hip 1963 observer commented, junkies are "the most securely self-assured in-group . . . with the possible exception of homosexuals" (Jones, *Blues People* 201).

Both of Jones's examples—homosexuality and drug addiction—raise the issue of vocabulary and language as an essential component of heterogeneous collective space, a point also made by Broyard and di Prima, Brossard and Bourdieu. Not coincidentally, then, this centrifugal flight entailed, as a basic aspect of the self-fashioning process, an absorption of the vocabularies of marginalized cultures and subcultures that had developed distinctive dialects both as a way of speaking their own truth and of distinguishing those within community boundaries from those outside. Exiles from the center without visible markers of distinction such as skin color, for example, could rely on coded subcultural language to attest to their outsider position. Of the hipster slang he absorbed from Huncke and others, Kerouac writes: "It was a new language, actually spade (Negro) jargon, but you soon learned it" ("Origins" 60).

In fact, language is of concern in one of the earliest analyses of bohemianism: Henri Murger, describing mid–nineteenth-century Paris, observed that "[B]ohemians speak amongst themselves a special language . . . a slang intelligent, though unintelligible to those who have not its key" (xliii). This exclusive language was an aspect of Beat culture as well, just as it had been of other bohemian cultures, and in this case the "key" came from some of the lowest social groups these white males could choose to emulate.

Absorbing the coordinates of a different language can entail much more than a superficial use of jargon: "We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories," writes M. M. Bakhtin, "but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view" (271). This new hybrid and centrifugal language provided an avenue not simply for self-expression, then, but also for self-fashioning. Hettie Jones recalls that the Beats were attempting "to burst wide open . . . the image of what could (rightly) be said" (46) and in doing so, they were both challenging existing ideologies and attempting to bring new, more exploratory ways of thinking into being. As Broyard put it, the function of this language was "to re-edit the world with new definitions . . . jive definitions" (721), a point confirmed by legendary hipster and jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, who abandoned white culture in order to live as African American. "Jive," Mezzrow observed, "is not only a strange linguistic mixture of dream and deed; it's a whole new attitude towards life" (220). A number of books included passages written in the hip style, and some—including Mezzrow's autobiographical *Really the Blues*, William Burroughs's *Junky* and Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians*—even provide a glossary explaining the vocabulary for square readers. The presence of these translations serves a double function: While the glossary renders more accessible the language of the alienated subculture, it also—conversely—stresses the distance from the dominant language and the difficulty of crossing that divide.

Americans alienated from the mainstream and seeking to fashion spaces of possibility outside conformism's closed room looked, naturally enough, to those "alien" groups who—for reasons of race or class for instance—had never gained entry to the system. With Riesman's catalogue of exceptions—the racial, the economic, and the anomic—we begin to see mapped out the constellation of marginalized groups that would provide models for this fold in the cultural fabric. Bohemian collectivity was not created *ex nihilo*, but, like the heterogeneous languages with which it re-edited the world, was put together as a bricolage of elements of those alien, excluded, even despised communities existing outside the white middle-class mainstream. Herbert Gold, whose 1956 novel *The Man Who Was Not With It*, is written in a hip style, describes the language as a combination of "the street lingo of various lower depths" (viii–ix). If this is the raw material of the language, it is no less so the raw material of Beat identity in general: African American, Asian and Native cultures, "perverts," drug addicts, carnie workers, and hoboes provided aspects of language, style, and culture allowing alienated Americans to fashion a heterogeneous space distanced from the center.

The effect of this move was to create a new, albeit unstable, sense of community. Beyond this, as Dick Hebdige points out in *Subculture*, such resistance may challenge the inevitability of the dominant culture (89), and this movement did pressure the commonsense underwriting the growing homogeneity. In the postwar period, the Beat movement became one focal point for the exploration of a complex set of cultural constraints, resistances, and desires as a claustrophobic conformity, frequently described in the literature and social commentary of the period, led to an unusual willingness to investigate various folds of heterogeneity that persisted in the increasingly uniform fabric of American modernity. While this essay has focused on the early moments in this trajectory, and thus on the residual and anomic social elements, a number of other areas of heterogeneous experience became important as the movement grew. The influence of Gary Snyder, for instance, brought to the fore alternative religious and environmental perspectives whose long-term effect on American culture is still vital. And the convergence of Beat sensibilities with the emerging political awareness of the New Left led to the unique forms of radicalism and dissent that characterized the later 1960s and early 1970s. It is important to remember, however, the centrifugal force underlying the moment of insight into the folds of American heterogeneity that Kerouac articulated prior to this when, in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise announces, "rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation" (54).

Chapter 2

# The Transnational Counterculture: Beat-Mexican Intersections

*Daniel Belgrad*

In the two decades after the outbreak of World War II, avant-garde artists in many media, including poetry, painting, music, and dance, creatively challenged the psychological and metaphysical bases of America's corporate-liberal social order (Belgrad 5–6). The Beats came to authorship in New York City during the war. In the jazz clubs and coffee houses, and even at Columbia University, they absorbed the ways of thinking and creating associated with this avant-garde agenda. In their own work, they popularized its psychological and metaphysical critique of American society, creating a literature that shaped the dissent of the coming decade. Thus, the Beats are key figures in the cultural politics of this century: Their work bridged the modernist practices of the postwar avant-garde with the youth counterculture of the 1960s.

For the Beats as a "cultural formation" (a term that Raymond Williams used to describe a group engaged in a common cultural endeavor and sharing common cultural practices, [1981, 66]), travel and residence in Mexico was an important rite of passage and was influential in their evolving aesthetic. Of course, the Beats were not so much an organized cultural movement as a loose coherence of like-minded writers and artists, and the attitudes of individuals changed and developed over time. To describe the Beats as a cultural formation therefore entails making generalizations and truncations, by which some of the diversity of their particular trajectories is sacrificed in order to be able to characterize Mexico's importance to the movement as a whole. With this caveat, however, this essay analyzes the experiences and writings of three major Beat figures—William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg—in order to explain why Mexico figured so prominently in the Beat imagination and lifestyle.

## The Beats in Mexico

William Burroughs was the first in this Beat triumvirate to travel south to Mexico. He was interested in Maya archeology, as were many members of the postwar American avant-garde (Belgrad 89). He moved to Mexico City in October of 1949 and stayed for just over three years. There he took classes in Maya language and archeology at Mexico City College, although his intellectual energies at the time were mainly devoted to writing his first two novels, *Junky* and *Queer* (Ted Morgan, 173).

Jack Kerouac visited Mexico several times, often for two or three months at a stretch, as if on an elliptical orbit past his home in the United States. He crossed the border for the first time in the summer of 1950, intent on visiting Burroughs in Mexico City. His drive south with Neal Cassady on this first trip provided the material for what would become the Mexico episode in *On the Road*. In the spring of 1952, he returned for a longer stay, a two-month sojourn in which he finished writing his novel, *Dr. Sax*. His bus trip across the border provided the basis for the sketch entitled "Mexico Fellaheen." He lived in Mexico City for another two months in the summer of 1955, when he began the novel *Tristessa* and wrote the poem cycle *Mexico City Blues*. The following year he returned for a fourth time, to finish *Tristessa* and to write another poem cycle, "Orizaba 210 Blues." After that, five years elapsed before his final visit in the summer of 1961, when he wrote "Cerrada Medellin Blues" and the second half of *Desolation Angels*.

Allen Ginsberg's first trip to Mexico was also meant as a visit to Burroughs, a brief stopover in August of 1951. Ginsberg's one extended stay, however, was made in the winter and spring of 1953–1954. For nearly six months he immersed himself in the rainforest and the Maya ruins of Chiapas and the Yucatán peninsula (Miles 156). During this trip, he made an important advance in his development as a poet. By extending and connecting the short images that had characterized his earlier poetry (what he called "seed poems"), he began to create longer sequences, "synthesized in such a manner that the casual fragments . . . are now linked together in a natural train of thought, or images, some very strong and powerful" (*As Ever* 182). This was the path that would eventually lead him to write the landmark "Howl" in 1955. The first milestone on this road was the eight-page poem, "Siesta in Xbalba," which he considered the "major accomplishment of [his Mexico] trip" (*As Ever* 182).

Clearly Mexico was an important literary influence as well as a significant life event in the development of the Beat subculture. Yet why did the Beats go to Mexico, and what was it that they found there?

## "Cultural Imperialism" versus "Cross-Cultural Dialogue"

Understanding the role that Mexico played in the Beat subculture and vice versa requires a broader analysis of the power relations that structure cultural

interaction between the United States and Mexico. Much of this cultural interaction over the past two centuries lies under the shadow of American imperialism. Manuel Martinez, in his chapter "With Imperious Eye," interpreted the Beats' visit as an instance of this imperialism. Martinez argued that while in Latin America, Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg thought and behaved like colonial despots (Martinez 34). It is the thesis of this essay, however, that the significance of the Beats to Mexican cultural politics cannot be comprehended by this anti-imperialist analysis.

To be sure, evidence from the Beats' biographies and writings seems to corroborate Martinez's critique. Unable to speak more than rudimentary Spanish, the Beats indulged in primitivist and colonialist fantasies. They praised Mexico for its low cost of living and reveled in the ready availability of teenage prostitutes and illegal drugs (heroin and marijuana), a phenomenon inseparable from Mexico's political and economic "underdevelopment" in comparison to the United States.

The disadvantage of the "cultural imperialist" paradigm, however, is that it reduces all acts of cross-cultural inquiry to one-dimensional caricatures in which a monolithic imperial power, acting through its individual emissaries, exploits a passive, colonized society. In place of this oversimplification, I propose that we analyze how the Beats' literary and cultural project intersected with the major currents of Mexican cultural and intellectual life. Such a model of "cross-cultural dialogue" recognizes the dynamics of social power in a way that connotes give and take from both sides (Belgrad 46). Viewed in this context, the Beats' cultural agenda can be seen to have converged significantly with that of a "Magic Realist" strand in Mexican art and literature. The actual cultural power dynamics must therefore be mapped across national boundaries, pitting the Beats and the Magic Realists, as a transnational counterculture, against the emerging corporate–capitalist postwar order in both the United States and Mexico.

## Octavio Paz and Magic Realism

The Beats and the Magic Realists shared a vision of Mexico as a locus of opposition to the corporate-liberal culture that had developed in the United States in the 1920s and was spreading in the postwar era to other parts of the world. In the 1940s, when the Beats first began to cross the border into Mexico, they were following in the footsteps of other avant-garde writers and artists like the Surrealist André Breton and the abstract expressionist artist Robert Motherwell. At the same time, Mexican writers and artists were also crossing the border into the United States. Octavio Paz, the best-known literary representative of the Mexican Magic Realists, came to the United States in 1943 with a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation. He stayed for two years, visiting San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York. He later wrote that this experience of the United States clarified for him, by way of contrast, the meaning and the potentiality of Mexican identity.

The Latin American cultural formation known as "Magic Realism" or "Marvelous Realism," like the postwar avant-garde in the United States, encompassed painters as well as writers. Also similarly, it took some inspiration from the cultural radicalism of French Surrealism and existentialism. Paz hailed Surrealism as "one of the very few centers of opposition to the hegemonic propaganda [of the U.S. and Soviet blocs]" (Jason Wilson 1986, 39). Like their northern neighbors, the Magic Realists distanced themselves from European Surrealism during the 1940s in order to create a uniquely American modernism. The Chilean painter Matta Echaurren, intent on creating a version of Surrealism oriented toward the Americas, challenged Breton's authority to define Surrealism on the American continent (Belgrad 35). With Motherwell and Wolfgang Paalen, who published *Dyn* magazine from the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán, Matta emphasized a two-fold artistic process: "automatism," or creativity inspired directly by the unconscious, and the integration or confrontation of that vision with everyday reality (Belgrad 36–37).

The essay "On American Marvelous Realism" ("De lo real maravilloso americano"), written by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier and published in Mexico in 1949, is widely considered to be Magic Realism's aesthetic manifesto. Carpentier, like the Beats, was deeply influenced by Oswald Spengler's comparative history, *The Decline of the West* (Gonzalez Echevarria and Pupo-Walker 410). Written around the time of World War I, Spengler's history proclaimed the decadence of Western civilization and foretold an imminent return to the primitive way of life as a preliminary to the emergence of a new cultural order. Carpentier and other Magic Realists saw Latin America, with its *mestizaje* pastiche of modern and ancient cultures, as the potential birthplace of this future civilization.

This vision of a synthesis of primitive and modern worldviews proved inspiring to artists and writers on both sides of the border who opposed the technological emphasis of postwar modernization and who hoped to articulate an alternative (Menton 9–14). When Paz visited California, the poets of the San Francisco poetry renaissance (for whom Ginsberg's "Howl" was still twelve years in the future) quickly identified him as a writer who shared their countercultural sensibility. It was they who undertook the first translations of Paz's poems into English.[1] As part of a transnational counterculture that inherited the mantle of the postwar avant-garde, the Beats in Mexico should be understood as cultural allies of the Mexican Magic Realists, rather than as agents of American imperialism.

## Corporate Liberalism, the Old Left, and the Counterculture

In the mid-twentieth century, the question of modernization—what it meant to be modern, and how the institutions of modernity would shape the lives

and freedoms of individuals—defined key cultural struggles in both the United States and Mexico. Beat writers and Mexican Magic Realists together challenged the hegemony of a postwar "corporate-liberal" model of modernization.[2] In the process of self-definition through which their politics emerged, this counterculture not only had to oppose the triumphant corporate-liberal capitalist mainstream, but also to differentiate itself from the older opposition defined by the Marxist left, which the counterculture considered compromised and obsolete.

To recount this history briefly: In both countries, the 1930s had been a time of democratic revisionism in politics and society. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration stripped big business of some of its social power in the United States, and, as a result, for a time gained the allegiance of American Marxists and their umbrella organization, the Popular Front against Fascism. The New Deal had its Mexican counterpart in the presidency of Lazaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). Cárdenas's leftist policies, including land redistribution and public education, attempted to fulfill the socialist promise of the Mexican revolution of 1910. The outbreak of World War II, however, began a new political era, in which conservative business interests in both countries reasserted their social dominance (Belgrad 3).

In the United States, the corporate-liberal power structure ushered in by the war effort was defined by a partnership of bureaucratic government and big business. Hopes for an Allied victory placed a cultural premium on the value of "efficiency," which was to be achieved through economies of scale (big business crowding out small enterprise), the increased regimentation of time and space, the "scientific management" of psychological attitudes, and the creation of pyramidal hierarchies that supplanted more democratic forms of political and business organization (Edwards 130; Mills 1963, 27). After the war's end, this corporate-liberal power structure remained in place, but with mass consumption—"a higher standard of living"—replacing wartime urgency as its primary justification.

In Mexico, the presidential administrations of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–1946) and Miguel Alemán (1946–1952) encouraged the absorption of Mexico into a "Pan-American" corporate-liberal culture. Backed by conservatives within Mexico and by corporate liberals (notably Nelson Rockefeller) in the United States, these presidents reversed the socialist momentum of the Cárdenas administration. In 1941, Henry Luce's declaration of an "American Century" in the pages of his *Life* magazine predicted the spread of corporate liberalism throughout the postwar world. Luce urged Americans to grasp "our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world . . . to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit . . . [through] a sharing with all peoples of our . . . magnificent industrial products [and] our technical skills" (Luce 23, 32–33).

Contrary to Luce's vision, the Beats and the Mexican Magic Realists thought of Mexico as the potential site of an alternative modernity, one that

preserved a quality of human interaction that had been progressively eliminated from life in the United States. They shared a belief that the rational control that corporate liberals proclaimed to be the essence of modernity could only lead in the end to less human freedom and to more world wars. In predicting the collapse of modernity, Spengler had associated Western civilization with a mindset that he called "Faustian man," after the legendary figure who sold his soul in return for scientific knowledge. As Paz wrote, "The search for [Mexico's] own mode of modernization is a theme that is directly tied to another. Today we know that modernity, in both its capitalist and pseudosocialist versions as totalitarian bureaucracy, is mortally wounded at its very core: the idea of continuous and unlimited progress" (*Tiempo Nublado* 156). Re-imagining progress as something other than a consumerist utopia rooted in increased technological sophistication became an important objective of the counterculture.

The cultural power of the corporate-liberal state apparatus in the United States as it emerged from the World War II explains the Beats' admiration for Mexico as a place where bureaucratic centralization was still imperfect and vulnerable to resistance. "The Welfare State is on the way to [becoming a] . . . bureaucratic police state," wrote William Burroughs in 1950. In contrast, he asserted, Mexico was still "a fine, free country" (*Letters* 65–67). Its codes of conduct were interpersonal, rather than the abstract regulations of bureaucratic management: "[A]ll codes of conduct that have any validity are based on the relations between individuals" (*Letters* 79).

In opposing the bureaucratic political center, the Beat and Magic Realist countercultures emphasized the vitality of the social margins, seeing these margins as the source from which a new culture would emerge. Allen Ginsberg asserted that "the simple political and social awareness that centralization is a failure, is a loss, a loser. And that decentralized energy forms, and decentralized cultural forms are . . . the richest" (*Composed* 98). In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz followed a similar logic, writing that Mexico's marginal status in the global power structure had been transformed from a liability into an asset: "We are *all* living on the margin because there is no longer any center. . . . Europe, once a storehouse for ready-to-use ideas, now lives as we do, from day to day" (170–71).

The value that the counterculture placed on social marginality was informed by Oswald Spengler's concept of the "fellaheen." For Spengler, the fellaheen were the common people who lived at the margins of a civilization and thus survived its downfall. The Beats saw the Mexican Indian underclass as fellaheen, and they identified with them on that basis. This is the sensibility, for instance, that is at the heart of Kerouac's novel *Tristessa*. In a parallel move in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz identified his own lot with that of the Mexican-American "*pachucos*": the marginalized teenage hipsters who were descended from Mexican immigrants to the United States. In the summer of 1943, while Paz was living in Los Angeles, the *pachuco* subculture made international headlines because of the "Zoot suit riots" in which American

enlisted men hunted down *pachucos*, beat them, and tore off their "un-American" clothes. Paz wrote that the *pachucos* were quintessentially Mexican in that they were alienated from their Indian and Spanish heritages and yet were determined not to be "Americanized." For this resistance to conformity, they were literally beat(en). Yet Paz believed, as Kerouac did of the Mexican fellaheen, that this very marginality would become the basis of their salvation (17).

This logic of the counterculture championed the underclass in a very different way than socialist intellectuals had in the past. Indeed, the current Marxist critique of countercultural attitudes as "imperialist" and "primitivist" does nothing more than reiterate a longstanding discursive battle between the countercultural and the "scientific socialist" points of view. Whereas the socialists advocated rational bureaucracy in the name of the proletariat, the counterculture grounded their vision of liberation in the "magical" worldview of the non-Western world, which the socialists considered superstitious, ignorant, and harmful. Thus, although the corporate liberal culture with its centralizing authority was the main antagonist of the Magic Realist and Beat countercultures, Paz and the Beats also found it necessary to situate themselves against the socialist left.

Allen Ginsberg, for example, had been raised in leftist political circles. His mother was a secretary of the Communist party, his father a socialist, and he had originally enrolled at Columbia University with a CIO scholarship and the ambition of becoming a labor organizer (Schumacher 23). By the 1950s, however, he had come to feel that socialism did not offer an adequate oppositional stance to corporate liberalism. As he recalled, "At the time there was a large attack by the left against the idea of revolution of consciousness . . . the tendency among the Marxists [was] to deplore our bohemianism as some sort of petit bourgeois angelism" (*Composed* 75).

Octavio Paz went through a parallel intellectual development, in which he ultimately rejected the "institutionalized revolution" of Mexico's official "socialist" culture. As a leftist, Paz had visited republican Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and during the Cárdenas administration had gone to the Yucatán to teach in a public school. After the signing of the Hitler–Stalin Pact in 1940, however, he became disillusioned with Communism, like many American leftists who later joined the avant-garde (Belgrad 18). In the 1950s, Paz argued that socialism and economic progress were false answers to the problem of human freedom: "We are facing new obstacles that will not be economic but spiritual," he wrote, "in the industrial society that we are beginning to glimpse" (Jason Wilson 4).

In his writings about Mexican art, Paz confirmed his split from the institutionalized left by championing the work of the Magic Realist painter Rufino Tamayo over that of the well-known socialist muralist Diego Rivera. Paz wrote that, while Rivera's art merely rehearsed an ideology of material progress, Tamayo's promised to "insert the [Mexican] nation within the modern world" by "invent[ing] . . . a new vision of man" (*Tamayo* 23). Tamayo's

paintings used vibrant colors and simplified forms alluding to Precolombian art to evoke a mythical consciousness.

The Beat/Magic-Realist counterculture thus constituted a "third force" in the hemispheric cultural politics of the 1940s: neither corporate-capitalist nor state-socialist, but with strong ties to indigenist ways of thinking and being. Burroughs, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Paz articulated this shared cultural politics through a common set of themes linked by a countercultural logic. Common elements in their writings include, besides the use of Precolombian myths and symbols, a nonlinear approach to time; "open" or "dialogical" forms; a faith in drug-induced insight; a turn to Eastern religions; and, finally, an imagery of nakedness and communion. The remainder of this essay is devoted to establishing and explicating this shared cultural terrain.

## Precolombian Myths and Symbols

The psychological ideas of Carl Jung had significant impact both on the Magic Realists of Latin America and on the avant-garde in the United States (Menton 13; Belgrad 44). Writing in the period between the world wars, Jung, a Swiss psychoanalyst, had theorized the existence of suprapersonal, "collective" patterns of unconscious thought that he called "archetypes." These archetypes performed a crucial role in restructuring the collective psyche in times of crisis. Suppressed by Western rationality, they were nonetheless available to modern people through dreams and visions and through the arts of pre-modern or non-Western civilizations, in which they appeared as religious or mythical symbols. Recovering such archetypes, Jung asserted, was integral to solving the cultural malaise into which the West had drifted, trapped between rapid technological progress and devastating world war. "[Their] contents issue from a psyche more complete than consciousness," Jung wrote concerning the archetypes of the collective unconscious; "They often contain a superior analysis or insight or knowledge which consciousness has not been able to produce" (Belgrad 58).

In his writings, Paz followed Jung in calling for a new humanistic vision that would emerge from a poetic exploration of the Precolombian "psychological subsoil" (Jason Wilson 1986, 63). His important poem "Hymn Among the Ruins," of 1948, referred to the Precolombian pyramids at Teotihuacán as "living ruins in a world of the dead living" ("ruinas vivas en un mundo de muertos en vida"), implying that the Precolombian heritage offered a source of renewal to a moribund modern culture (*Selected Poems* 122).[3] In many other works, Paz used archetypal symbols deriving from the Aztec culture, sometimes mixed with Christian symbolism as in his poem "The Virgin" from 1944:

> She struggles,
> defeats the serpent and defeats the eagle
> and over the horn of the moon she ascends. . . .
> (*Selected Poems* 105)

Kerouac, like Paz, used Aztec and Christian symbols in the hope of generating archetypes of contemporary relevance. He wrote in a letter from Mexico in the summer of 1950 that he wanted "to work in revelations, not just spin silly tales for money. I want to fish as deep as possible into my own subconscious in the belief that once that far down, everyone will understand because they are the same that far down" (Nicosia 1983, 324). Kerouac subtitled the novel *Dr. Sax* "Faust, part 3," a reference to the Spenglerian "Faustian man." He conceived it as the final episode of the saga (following Goethe's parts 1 and 2), in which Faust returned to his rightful place in the cycle of creation, synthesizing the mythical and the contemporary (Nicosia 1983, 392). The Aztec symbols of the eagle and the snake are central to the mythical dimension of the novel (*Dr. Sax* 31, 50, 234), which builds toward their confrontation and its hidden equilibrium. The equilibrium is "hidden" merely because to Faustian man only the Snake seems "real." "Seeing the Eagle," Kerouac wrote, "was like suddenly realizing that the world was upside down and the bottom of the world was gold" (196).

## Non-linear Time

In the countercultural worldview, archetypal symbolism was linked to ideas about death and time. According to Jung, individual identity was like a wave on the sea of the collective unconscious. Like a wave, it was prone to breaking. Instead of a single vector of progress pointing onward and upward, life was a cycle of progress and regression, entailing the destruction of the individual ego and its rebirth from the collective unconscious through the archetypes. This cyclical motion suggested an alternative to the notion of progress that underlay the corporate-liberal ethos, for which time was a perpetual march forward, and death an embarrassment and a contradiction. Paz wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: "The North American wants to use reality rather than to know it. In some matters—death, for example, he not only has no desire to understand it, he obviously avoids the very idea" (22).

Paz accused the North American culture of hypocrisy, which he defined as a will to deny the "irrational" aspects of reality. It was the virtue of Mexican culture, by contrast, that it was willing to accept these unsettling aspects "familiarly"—literally as part of the family. Paz wrote,

> The North Americans are credulous and we are believers; they love fairy tales and detective stories and we love myths and legends . . . They believe in hygiene, health, work and contentment, but perhaps they have never experienced true joy, which is an intoxication, a whirlwind. In the hubbub of a fiesta night our voices explode into brilliant lights, and life and death mingle together, while their vitality becomes a fixed smile that denies old age and death but that changes life to motionless stone. (23–24)

This ostensible contrast of the cultures of Mexico and the United States is more properly understood as a contrast between the corporate-liberal and Magic Realist worldviews.

For Paz, the linear conception of time, most useful for industrial work schedules, was repressive and dehumanizing and linked to a reductive scientific rationality. Opposed to it was Magic Realist poetry, the "witness of ecstasy" (Jason Wilson 1986, 28), which freed time from its inflexible march by subjectively extending or collapsing moments. This sense of time is expressed in Paz's poem "In Uxmal," which is set in the Maya ruin at Uxmal and is a record of his inspired experience there of "time empty of minutes,/ [as] a bird stopped short in air" (*Selected Poems* 61).

Nonlinear time was also an important theme of Beat writing. Kerouac wrote, paralleling Paz's contrast of Mexico with the United States, that the Mexican fellaheen "understand death" (*Lonesome Traveler* 35). He and Ginsberg found a subjective sense of time in the rhythms of bebop jazz, which Kerouac interpreted as the expression of the "misplaced" fellaheen of "America's inevitable Africa" ("Beginning of Bop" 33–34). In *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac wrote of the intersubjective sense of time as he experienced it while traveling in Mexico with Neal Cassady in 1950: "I suddenly looked from myself to this strange angel from the other side (this is all like bop, we're getting to it indirectly and too late . . .) of Time" (295–96).

## Open Form

The desire to communicate the experience of reality characterized by nonlinear time and by the intersection of the mythical with the modern led the Beats and the Magic Realists to experiment with "open" form in their writings. *Dr. Sax*, for example, is a nonlinear narrative with a structure that Kerouac called "wild form" (Nicosia 1984, 391). Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* layers multiple improvisations into a collage (Skerl 1985, 43–44). Along the same lines, Ginsberg called his poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966) a "collage of the simultaneous data of the actual sensory situation" (*Composed* 26). Such a collage, he insisted, was the closest possible approximation to truth or reality: "I don't see it as romantic expressionistic at all—I see it as absolutely logical scientific notation of . . . what was going on in the head" (55–56).

Open form also functions to dispel the liberal myth of the individual author as a unified or univocal subject. Ginsberg's poem "America" and Paz's "Hymn among the Ruins" are both dialogical poems, in which the conventional unity of the authorial perspective is replaced by two contending voices (Belgrad 43). Max Ernst once described the goal of Surrealist art as the "fortuitous encounter upon a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities" (Belgrad 135). Echoing this Surrealist dictum, Ginsberg explained his poetic method as the "spontaneous irrational juxtaposition of sublimely related fact" (Allen 1973, 324). This trope of a fusion of opposites, or a dreamlike play of images uniting dualisms, was a common device structuring the open forms of Beat and Magic Realist works.

## Drug-induced Insight

The counterculture's adaptation of the Surrealist method of "psychological automatism" or writing from the unconscious (extended by Kerouac in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose") used writing to reveal the visions, "ludicrous" associations and ideological contradictions normally hidden from consciousness. Toward this end, the Beats made use of mind-altering drugs that decentered the intellect's discriminating authority (Belgrad 202–06). Octavio Paz also defended this practice, writing that modern poetry explored "hidden, invisible realities" and that drugs—especially the peyote (mescaline) and hallucinogenic mushrooms (psilocybin) of Precolombian ritual—aided the poet's quest for a vision "equidistant from sanity and insanity" (*Alternating Current* 82). Such drugs, Paz wrote, "arouse the powers of analogy, set objects in motion, make the world a vast poem shaped by rhymes and rhythms . . . drugs take us to the very heart of another reality; the world has not changed, but it is now seen to be governed by a secret harmony" (76).

Mind-altering drugs offered access to a state of mind or way of experiencing in which the individual's identity came unfixed, as did language and other conceptual structures. This was particularly significant in reference to moral constructions, in which drug-induced insight seemed to Paz to confirm the emptiness of the corporate-liberal vision:

> [Drugs] radically overturn all our ideas about good and evil, what is just and what is unjust, what is permitted and what is forbidden. Their action is a mockery of our morality based on reward and punishment. I am both delighted and terrified by the realization that drugs introduce another brand of justice . . . [in which] the "merits" and the "faults" [of our acts] are different, and the balance in which they are weighed is different . . . . The words *merit, reward, advantage, honor, profit, interest*, and others like them are mortally wounded . . . [while] true virtues . . . go by the name of *abandon, indifference, trust, surrender, nakedness*. . . . In this constellation, the central word is perhaps *innocence*: the "pureness of heart" of the early Christians, the "piece of unpolished wood" of the Taoists. (86, 89)

## Eastern Religions

As this reference to Taoism indicates, Paz associated such insights with the teachings of Eastern religions. He himself visited India and Japan in 1952, and in 1954, on returning to Mexico, he began to study Buddhism and its variants, including Zen and Tantric Buddhism. In 1957, he translated the haiku of Basho into Spanish (Jason Wilson 1986, 70). In 1962, he began a six-year post as Mexico's ambassador to India. Demonstrating the chronological parallel of the Beat and Magic Realist cultural formations, Jack Kerouac also

embraced Buddhism beginning in 1953. Allen Ginsberg began studying Zen Buddhism that year, and traveled to India in 1962 to study Tantric Buddhist meditation (Miles 153, 309).

One aspect of Buddhist thought that Paz embraced was the unity of seeming opposites, like sacredness and profanity, creation and destruction. In his poetry, he expressed this fusion through juxtapositions such as "pray pee meditate" and "semen blood lava" (Kushigian 61; *Selected Poems* 119). Such phrases are reminiscent of the radical juxtapositions of Ginsberg's poetry, as in the final line of "Kaddish" from 1959: "Caw Caw Caw Lord Lord Lord" (*Collected Poems* 227).

An important Buddhist idea that Kerouac shared with Paz was that of transcending time and death by perceiving change as the manifestation of an eternal motion, like river water that is always flowing although the river stays the same (Kushigian 60; *Tristessa* 33). In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac associated the related Taoist tenet of "wu wei," or nonintervention, with the Mexican way of life (245). The principle of "wu wei" suggests that the impulse to "do something" often originates in egoism, and that the best course of action in such cases is to allow the forces already in motion to play themselves out. In keeping with this principle, in *Dr. Sax* the plot is resolved in such a way that all Faustian efforts to master and destroy the Snake are pointless as well as ineffectual; for in the end the Eagle, unanticipated, swoops down upon the Snake and carries it away. Thus, concluded Kerouac, the "Universe . . . disposes of its own evil" (50, 240, 245).

## Nakedness and Communion

In keeping with these religious ideas that undercut liberal notions of progress, the counterculture assigned ultimate value not to "getting ahead" but to a sense of communion with others or with the cosmos. The prerequisite to this communion they described as "nakedness," which was meant as a metaphor for the dropping of all defenses. Paz's idea of the *pachuco* was of a person psychologically as well as literally stripped naked: "The *pachuco* has lost his whole inheritance: . . . he is left . . . defenseless against the stares of everyone" (*Labyrinth of Solitude* 15). For Ginsberg, who sometimes stripped naked to recite his poetry, nakedness also connoted a necessary self-confrontation. The willingness to be naked was a testament to the poet's courage and integrity (Miles 215). Only such openness, Paz wrote, could allow the experience of communion (*Alternating Current* 82).

For both the Beats and Paz, sex was a natural symbol for the communion that nakedness made possible. Paz's poetry is often erotic, and he wrote of a feeling of connectedness to "a transhuman eroticism . . . an infinitely sensual universe . . . .Not the 'triumph of matter' or that of the flesh, but the vision of the reverse side of the spirit" (*Alternating Current* 82). In his novel *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac also equated sex with communion, writing of

"the intimacies of younglovers in a bed, high, facing eye to eye, breast to breast naked . . . exchanging existential and loveracts for a crack at making it" (9). Ginsberg similarly wrote of his "faith in sexual intercourse and intimacy" as "an ultimate exchange of soul" (*Composed* 84).

The final image of Ginsberg's poem "Siesta in Xbalba" invokes Mexican street life as another symbol of communion—one notably absent in the United States (*Collected Poems* 110). This was also a common motif of Paz and other Beat writers. Ginsberg characterized the corporate-liberal United States as a culture with "no one in the streets . . . deserted ghost streets and sad quiet aircooled diners," contrasting this to the Mexican reality of "noisy, dirty streetfulls of wild boys all night" (*Journals: Early Fifites* 72). Kerouac wrote in the same vein of Mexico City: "My God I've seen men wrestle playfully in the middle of the road blocking traffic, screaming with laughter, as people walked by smiling" (*Lonesome Traveler* 22). Paz's poem "The Street" observes the same contrast from the Mexican Magic Realist point of view, describing the American city as a place in which everyone is isolated, "where nobody awaits me or follows me" ("donde nadie me espera ni me sigue" *Selected Poems* 86).

## Conclusion

These overlapping moments in the lives and works of Octavio Paz and the major Beat writers cannot be dismissed either as coincidences or as discrete but unrelated points of intersection. Rather, they are the fundamentals of a shared cultural vision, linked by a logic that makes sense of a great range of countercultural practices.

The common interest in archetypal myths and Eastern religions bespeaks a vision of human experience that was at odds with the liberal ideology of the individual. Instead of utilitarian notions equating progress with economic development, this vision defined social good in terms of the individual's relation to larger unconscious or cosmic structures. Incipiently radical, this vision could also become (as in Jack Kerouac's case) deeply conservative.

The emphasis that the counterculture placed on this ideal of communion underlies the insistence of these writers on a different sense of time. Instead of time as it is constructed in corporate-liberal modernity—a linear property to be measured, sold, and managed by the clock—Paz and the Beats understood time as an intersubjective phenomenon (Belgrad 191–92), or even as a cyclical cosmic course as the Aztecs and Maya imagined it. Such notions of time problematize the liberal construction of progress, which imagines individuals and societies as improving in step with time, aided by the tools of Enlightenment science. Alternative conceptions of time require alternative formulations of the social good.

Although it is easy to detect elements of colonialism in the attitudes of Octavio Paz toward India and Mexico, as well as in the attitudes of the major

Beat writers toward these societies, such an analysis fundamentally misrepresents the cultural politics of their work. The discourse of "cultural imperialism," with its binary model pitting the colonizing power against the colonized, must give way to a recognition of the multiplicity of subject positions created by the power dynamics of imperialist hegemony. The international nature of these power dynamics demands a recovery of the interactions among cultural formations on both sides of the border.

In this transnational perspective, the common cultural agenda of the Beats and the Mexican Magic Realists clearly represents an oppositional response to the hemispheric dominance of corporate liberalism after 1940. Discarding the oppositional stance previously defined by the Marxist left, the transnational counterculture constructed Mexico—with its rich heritage of religious symbolism, indigenous life ways, and interpersonal (rather than bureaucratic) social relations—as a site of opposition to the corporate-liberal version of modernity. As Paz wrote in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, "Some people claim that the only differences between the North American and ourselves are economic . . . [but] I refuse to believe that as soon as we have heavy industry and are free of all economic imperialism, the differences will vanish. (In fact I look for the *opposite* to happen, and I consider this possibility one of the greatest virtues of the Revolution of 1910" 21). Paz's formulation of this possibility—that the Mexican revolution of 1910 was in effect not a "socialist" revolution but a "Magic Realist" one—encapsulates the attraction of Mexico for the Beat subculture as well.

## Notes

1. See Muriel Rukeyser, "Foreword" to Octavio Paz, *Early Poems, 1935–1955* (New York: New Directions, 1973). On the links between Black Mountain, San Francisco, and Beat poets, see Belgrad 199–204.
2. For a discussion of the theory of hegemony and counterhegemony, see T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 90.3 (June 1985): 568–72.
3. This poem exhibits significant parallels to Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers" of 1949, both in its archeological project and in its use of the dialogical voice. Both poems were undoubtedly influenced by Pablo Neruda's "The Heights of Machu Picchu" (1945). On "The Kingfishers" see Belgrad 71–78.

Chapter 3

# "I Want to Be with My Own Kind": Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture

*Clinton R. Starr*

In 1959 journalist Paul O'Neil proclaimed that the Beat Generation consisted mostly of "talkers, loafers, passive little con men," a "bohemian cadre" of "writers who cannot write, painters who cannot paint" (119). Reporter Allen Brown agreed, concluding that the "week-end Bohemians" who came to North Beach looking for a "real, live poet" would be disappointed, because the "serious poets and authors of the Beat Generation are too busy creating to mingle often with the Beatniks" (40–41). Academic observers echoed this distinction between serious artists versus silly beatniks. Sociologist Ned Polsky noted that, of the Beats in Greenwich Village, "at best a sixth are habituated to reading" and "far fewer are concerned with writing" (175). Amidst a mass media frenzy over the Beat Generation, these were the typical sentiments. Most commentators assumed that the true Beats, like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, made literary creativity a focal point of their lives, while the people who flocked to bohemian coffeehouses and jazz clubs in cities throughout America were insignificant. Today scholars, including historians, largely accept these assumptions: They understand the Beat Generation in terms of a literary avant-garde and evaluate its historical significance accordingly.

Within the analytical framework of literary history and criticism, it is possible to highlight the aesthetic achievements of Beat celebrities and denigrate the beatniks "who cannot write." Yet, from the perspective of social and cultural history, it is necessary to recognize that both groups consciously transgressed pervasive norms and practices. The beatniks and "week-end Bohemians" who frequented coffeehouses and jazz clubs outnumbered the

literary icons by a very wide margin. Fully understanding the history of the Beat Generation requires accounting for their presence.

Writing beatniks into the history of the Beat Generation necessitates reconceptualizing the terms "Beat Generation" and "Beat." The Beat Generation was a "counterculture," defined here as a rebellion against pervasive norms and practices that is expressed through individual resistance and collective action. "Beat" and "beatnik" here designate an individual who was attracted to bohemian enclaves as sites in which widespread attitudes and habits, such as Cold War politics, racial segregation, heterosexuality, and the valorization of commodity consumption, could be transgressed. The Beat Generation as a counterculture included not only writers and artists but, equally important, the many beatniks and "week-end Bohemians" who found the Beat celebrities' rebellion so appealing. The publications of Beat authors such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Lawrence Lipton often catalyzed this appeal, as readers developed an awareness that other people shared their own dissatisfaction with social norms and that many such people resided in bohemian enclaves. The mass media also brought the oppositional values of Beat writers to a larger audience, as mass circulation magazines, radio programs, television shows, and films publicized the Beat Generation.[1] Scholars typically emphasize the extent to which such media representations distorted the "serious" and "genuine" ideals of the Beat avant-garde.[2] Yet such media images, along with the writings of Beat authors, disseminated bohemian attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs to a broader audience.[3]

This essay argues that the Beat Generation was a vibrant counterculture that facilitated individual resistance and collective political activism. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the growing popularity of Beat authors and the media frenzy over the Beat Generation led to the rapid growth of urban bohemian enclaves. Places such as Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side in New York City, the North Beach area of San Francisco, and Venice West in Los Angeles experienced an influx of both permanent residents and frequent visitors. The Beat counterculture was based in urban bohemian communities such as these, and the utilization of public space in these enclaves was one of this counterculture's most important characteristics. Coffeehouses, public parks, jazz clubs, bars, and restaurants in urban bohemias formed key institutions through which beatniks attained a sense of community and of shared values and assumptions. This community affinity stimulated the development of countercultural politics, daily forms of resistance against pervasive social norms, particularly heterosexuality and racial segregation. Further, these community institutions were the focal point of attempts to repress the Beat counterculture, and of beatniks' collective political action: When civic groups, law enforcement officials, and municipal governments sought to restrict Beats' access to public space, beatniks collectively organized to defend their position in the urban landscape.

This analysis of the Beat counterculture begins with a critical discussion of the historiography of the Beat Generation, followed by an overview of Beat

public spaces, and then examines male homosexuality and racial intermixing among Beats as well as the organized political activism of beatniks.

## I

Social historians assume that the Beat Generation was a small group of cultural rebels who anticipated the youth culture and hippie movement of the 1960s but were largely irrelevant in the 1950s. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin conclude that the Beats' interest in "sexual adventure," drugs, and their "outlaw spirit" constituted "seeds that would sprout, quite luxuriantly, during the 1960s" (150). Terry H. Anderson concedes symbolic significance for the Beats, who "dented the chrome 1950s" (36). William L. O'Neill believes that Beats such as Ginsberg and Kerouac were "true cultural subversives," but categorically rebukes beatniks, who "strove to be 'cool' and 'hip' in the approved manner" (O'Neill 242–43). Similarly, Allen Matusow acknowledges that a "fully developed Beat subculture had emerged" by the late 1950s, but concludes that "Beats, like hula hoops, were a fad" (287). In assuming that the "true" Beats were essentially a small group of cultural radicals, social historians ignore the broader parameters of the Beat Generation.

Literary and intellectual historians distinguish sharply between Beat writers and nonliterary and therefore insignificant beatniks. John Arthur Maynard persuasively argues that writers in Venice were an important part of the Beat Generation, but he focuses on a small group of people and largely ignores the broader counterculture that those writers helped create. Warren French is the most adamant in distancing Beats from beatniks, asserting that "the beatniks were the worst thing that happened to the beats" (1991, xix). He believes that the "antics of the transient beatniks" and similar "camp followers" were responsible for accusations of the "mindless conformity" of the Beat Generation. In order to accord Beat writers their proper place in the literary pantheon, French insists that "a distinction needs to be made" between beatniks versus "the work of those 'serious and ambitious' artists who were championed by genuinely concerned avant-garde" intellectuals (xix–xx). Such pronouncements assume that people strongly affected by Beat literature, who sought to enact Beat writers' oppositional values and assumptions in their daily lives, are not worthy of scholarly attention.

Recently, scholars have recognized that iconic figures such as Kerouac and Ginsberg were part of a broader bohemian subculture, but they continue to interpret the Beats through the prism of avant-garde literature. For example, sociologist Mel van Elteren proposes that the Beat Generation can be studied as a subculture with its own "enclaves and scenes" (64). Yet his analysis of the "sociological characteristics" of the Beat Generation often prioritizes "cultural practices which had to do with art," particularly poetry and fiction (64, 83). Moreover, van Elteren relies heavily on the published writing of Beats such as Ginsberg and Kerouac and on the work of other sociologists.

Van Elteren correctly recognizes that the Beats can be understood as a bohemian subculture, but he focuses on a small group of literary celebrities and fails to examine the Beat Generation from the perspective of people who were not artists, writers, or academics.

Scholars concerned with interracial cultural exchange contribute some of the most innovative recent work on the Beats. In his provocative study of how white and black writers formed different understandings of jazz music, Jon Panish examines racial interactions among Greenwich Village bohemians. Panish emphasizes that whites owned nearly all of the music venues, coffeehouses, newspapers, and magazines in Greenwich Village, and argues that "African Americans' participation in these institutions depended, as it did elsewhere in the United States, on the goodwill of white people" (27). Further, he concludes that most white writers saw black culture as a means to distinguish themselves from the rest of society, and thus failed to appreciate jazz "as a specifically African American expressive form" (40). Panish persuasively documents the existence of racial inequalities in the bohemian subculture of the Village, but he neglects to interrogate thoroughly why whites understood black culture as they did or how they enacted their affinity for it.

The sociologist Wini Breines provides a more suggestive framework for understanding whites' interest in black culture. Breines recognizes that white middle-class youth's attraction to black culture frequently perpetuated racism. Nonetheless, as she persuasively demonstrates, that attraction was genuine and very significant. White teenage girls often expressed their dissatisfaction with middle-class norms through a strong interest in African American culture, including jazz music, as well as in social groups and cultural forms that were coded "black" or off-limits by the white middle class, such as ethnic, working-class young men, rock and roll music, and the Beats ("Postwar White Girls" 65–66, 70–72). Breines recalls that as a teenager she was simultaneously a cheerleader, an enthusiastic consumer of cosmetics, and a weekend visitor to Greenwich Village (*Young, White, and Miserable* 165–66). White teenage girls like Breines used the Village's Beat subculture to explore alternative understandings of sexuality, race relations, and gender identity, an exploration made possible by their attraction to the African American, ethnic, and bohemian cultures from which many parents hoped to restrict their children ("Postwar White Girls" 65–66, 70–72).[4] By illuminating the extreme dissatisfaction with white middle-class values that motivated white teenage girls' interest in black cultural forms, Breines expands our understanding of why such attraction was so pervasive and how it was enacted. Moreover, as both Panish and Breines suggest, the Beat Generation was intricately intertwined, discursively but also materially, with sexuality, race relations, and gender roles in the postwar decades.

In sum, many historians conceptualize the Beat Generation through an implicit core-periphery model, in which "serious" Beat writers occupy the center while "transient" beatniks are at the margins. Yet this model needs to be dismantled: From the vantage point of the many people who crowded into

bohemian enclaves, icons like Ginsberg and Kerouac were simply two members, admittedly among the most influential, of a much broader social and cultural phenomenon. This is not to deny the importance of Beat literature nor the brilliant achievements of Beat writers, but rather to emphasize that a key component of the Beat Generation has been ignored, or worse, openly denigrated. The point is that in the late 1950s and early 1960s, beatnik "camp followers" and "week-end Bohemians" made up the overwhelming majority of the Beat Generation: They were far more plentiful in Greenwich Village, North Beach, Venice West, and other bohemian enclaves than the "genuinely concerned avant-garde" artists and writers. Taking the Beat Generation seriously as a counterculture requires placing these long ignored individuals at the center, not the periphery, of analysis.

## II

The focal points of social life in the Beat counterculture were coffeehouses, bars, restaurants, jazz clubs, and parks in urban bohemian enclaves. Beats often congregated in these areas and valued such public spaces very highly. Many Beats frequented these places because they were sites where positive, meaningful interaction with others was possible. Lionel Rolfe found one coffee shop in Los Angeles, the Xanadu, populated with "refugees from the 'air-conditioned nightmare' they considered American culture to be in the '50s." The owner of the Xanadu appreciated "people with wit and grace who could contribute to the conversation."[5]

Interaction in these public spaces was not limited to conversations among a few people, poetry readings, or musical performances, but also included organized group discussions. At The Place, a bar in North Beach, every Monday featured Blabbermouth Night, during which individuals perched on a balcony overlooking the audience and talked about any subject they chose. One observer noted that audience response could be "serious and silent" or "noisy and insulting," depending on the subject matter. On one night topics ranged from "The Philosophy of the Inner Psyche" and "Was Macbeth Beat?" to "The Iraq Rebellion" and "American Imperialism" (Hyams 34). These varied subjects suggest the wide range of interests among the beatniks who frequented The Place.

These community institutions also functioned as sources of information and ways to maintain valued relationships. Rolfe recalled that the importance of someone's favorite hangout "was not confined to its narrow walls—often one would merely go to the coffeehouse to learn where the parties were, for they all drew from that wellspring" (*In Search of* 18). Bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and public parks served as links to other members of the Beat counterculture and enabled individuals to preserve contact with friends and associates. Moreover, these public spaces formed the sites wherein beatniks engaged in a quotidian politics of resistance.

## III

One key form of Beat countercultural politics centered on male homosexuality. In Los Angeles, the Police Commission held hearings concerning the moral climate of the Gas House, a jazz club in Venice. A reporter paraphrased the chief of the vice squad, who testified that he witnessed "sex perverts" in the club ("Beatnik Hearing" 5). (The phrase is the reporter's, not the vice squad chief's.) In the 1950s, many people used "sex pervert" to refer to a homosexual (D'Emilio 59). Regardless of the exact words the vice squad chief used to designate sexual deviance, it is clear that Beats in this particular jazz club challenged the assumptions of law enforcement officials regarding acceptable sexual norms and behavior.

A more substantial number of gay and bisexual Beat men lived in or frequented Greenwich Village. A sociologist from the era wrote that at Washington Square Park on Sundays there were often "tight-trousered Village homosexuals walking their dogs and cruising each other" (Polsky 177). Other Beat men, he continued, worked for two or three nights as prostitutes in uptown gay bars and earned enough money to "stay straight" in the Village for the rest of the week (Polsky 156).[6] Alternatively, Village resident Dan Wakefield remembered that gay rights were "part of the unspoken, understood freedom of the Village; that was one of the reasons I loved it" (156). Sociologist Ned Polsky concluded that a very large proportion of Beat men in the Village, both whites and African Americans, were bisexual and accepted homosexual experiences "almost as casually" as heterosexual experiences. He also found that bisexual Beats tolerated "deviant sex roles" and sex-role ambiguity but rarely felt a need to define themselves as homosexual or to create a distinctive Beat presence among gay people (164–5).

North Beach also had a large number of gay Beats. One observer reported that a restaurant with "dozens of young men" seemed to be just like any other Beat hangout, until he realized that "this is the hard core of a Beat Generation group that practices its own peculiar protest against the conforming American ideal of home and family: Homosexuality" (Brown 40). Psychiatrist Francis Rigney and psychologist L. Douglas Smith, in their study of North Beach, found that of the thirty-three male Beats they interviewed, twelve had had sex with both women and men (48). One North Beach beatnik said he received oral sex from another man because he wanted to "try the experiment."

Homosexual Beats frequently visited North Beach. One man admitted that he could not risk being seen in a gay bar because "I have a good job and I don't want to lose it. . . . So all week long, I'm straight. I talk baseball and I take girls out for dinner and maybe even dancing. But by the week end [*sic*] the masquerade gets to be too much. I want to be with my own kind. So I pull on an old sweater and come into the Beach and have dinner in one of the gay little restaurants and just look around and realize that I'm not alone" (Brown 50). As this example demonstrates, frequent visitors to bohemian

enclaves were not simply "camp followers" who sought out the latest fad: their attraction to the Beat counterculture was complex, intensely personal, and rooted in an inability or unwillingness to adhere entirely to pervasive codes of behavior. The community institutions of the Beat counterculture validated male homosexuality and enabled gay men to transgress sexual and gender norms to which they conformed in other parts of the urban landscape. These public spaces stood in stark contrast to the rapidly expanding suburbs and their compulsory heterosexuality.

Racial inter-mixing was another key component of Beat countercultural politics. Throughout the late 1950s, there were a substantial number of African Americans living in or frequenting bohemian enclaves. Sociologist Ned Polsky noted that between 1957 and 1960, African Americans in Greenwich Village went from an isolated and small group to a relatively large segment of the population, of which many attended area bars, coffeehouses, and restaurants along with whites. Polsky concluded that this was "the biggest change in the composition of the Village Beat scene, and in Village life generally" (156). The same racial realignment occurred in the bohemias of San Francisco and Los Angeles. Many African Americans moved to or frequented North Beach in 1958, prompting a San Francisco police officer to deplore the invasion of a "white neighborhood by this Fillmore element" (Rigney and Smith 163). In Venice, a white resident wanted police to close a beatnik jazz club because, he said, "[h]alf of the men there are colored and white beats are walking around with them arm in arm" (Wirin).

Racial intermixing was characteristic of Beat life . White and black beatniks often intermixed in bars, restaurants, coffee shops, art galleries, and private residences. In 1956, African American Beat Ted Joans opened his Galerie Fantastique in an old storefront in the East Village, which he used as both an apartment and an art gallery. Joans was well known among Village Beats for his parties, including the "Beatnik Birthday Party" in 1959. Artists and writers who frequented his gallery included Kerouac, Ginsberg, Robert Frank, Larry Poons, and LeRoi Jones, among others (Bill Morgan 130). Another African American writer, George Nelson Preston, ran the Artist's Studio, a center for the performance of jazz and poetry in the East Village. Poets who read their work at the Artist's Studio included Kerouac, Ray Bremser, LeRoi Jones, Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima, Ginsberg, Ted Joans, Frank O'Hara, and Peter Orlovsky (Bill Morgan 114). In the early 1960s, di Prima and Jones began editing and publishing *The Floating Bear*, a mimeograph newsletter for experimental poets. Contributors included Burroughs, Corso, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, Ginsberg, Michael McClure, O'Hara, Charles Olson, Lew Welch, Philip Whalen, and many others (Bill Morgan 117, 119–20). African Americans such as Jones, Preston, and Joans played a crucial role in the Beat counterculture: They enabled black and white writers to publish their work and created venues in which such work could be presented to a broader audience. While suburban areas became zones of exclusion for African Americans, bohemian

enclaves were sites wherein black writers and artists affiliated with the Beat counterculture often lived, worked, and socialized with whites.

Racial intermixing attracted white as well as black Beats to particular bohemian enclaves. White beatniks in North Beach believed that their community was more integrated than most bohemias and frequently commented on its relaxed racial atmosphere. One white Beat observed that "[y]ou don't see" racial intermixing "at all in New Orleans. But it's big in North Beach" (Brown 42). Another white beatnik said he left the "Beat scene" in New Orleans because of "the race thing. Everyone was all hung up with it" (Brown 48–49). He came to North Beach because "everyone said things were different here" racially (Brown 49). As these comments indicate, many white Beats found certain enclaves appealing precisely because of the area's heterogeneous racial climate. While neither of the above beatniks identified themselves as civil rights activists, their conscious decision to live in racially diverse enclaves represented a rebellion, at the level of quotidian experience, against the segregationist racial norms that pervaded American society.

Yet the Beat counterculture was by no means immune to white racism, especially regarding interracial sex. Polsky believed that interracial sex was "particularly frequent" in Greenwich Village (164), and Rigney and Smith, in their study of North Beach, concluded that such relationships were predominantly between African American men and white women (50). Racism among white male Beats often pivoted on this issue. When white male beatniks in the Village discussed this subject, they frequently referred to black men who had sex with white women as being "too hung up on balling white chicks" (Polsky 183). Rigney and Smith observed that most white male Beats accepted or at least tolerated interracial sex, but they recognized that "some definitely do not" (51). Significantly, one young white woman in North Beach said race was not a factor in her decision to have sex with a black man: "It wasn't race . . . it wasn't sex . . . he [the Negro] was kind and gentle . . . something I wanted" (50, ellipses and brackets in original). This woman's decision to engage in interracial sex was based on her desire to be treated in a manner that was "kind and gentle." This example indicates that some white Beat women had very different attitudes toward interracial sex than white male Beats: Whereas white Beat men often believed black male Beats were preoccupied with obtaining white sex partners, some white Beat women may have found African American men attractive based on how such men treated them. However, if some white Beats disliked the idea of interracial sex, white police officers and the nonbohemian neighbors of beatniks often hated the mere presence of African Americans.

## IV

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, civic groups, law enforcement officials, and municipal government agencies mounted campaigns of

intimidation and harassment against the Beat counterculture. In 1960, Italian Americans in Greenwich Village, angered by the growing number of African Americans there, asked their District representative in Tammany Hall to take action, after which the fire department began inspecting non-Italian bars, restaurants, and coffee shops in the Village for fire code violations. The fire department soon closed two beatnik coffeehouses (Polsky 157–58). One observer concluded that the fire department inspected Village coffee shops because of complaints from residents that such businesses were "crowded with undesirable persons" ("City Hall Pickets" 42).

San Francisco police officers openly admitted that racial integration in North Beach motivated their increased intervention in the area. In the summer of 1958, a police officer told the owner of the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, "You have never cooperated with us; you guys are trying to turn this place into a little Fillmore, but we're going to stop it before it goes too far." Another police officer asked a North Beach restaurant owner, "Why do you allow so many Commies and jigs to patronize this place? After all, if you give 'em an inch, they'll take a mile" (Rigney and Smith 163). Throughout much of 1958 and 1959, the San Francisco police department increased the number of officers it stationed in North Beach (160–61).

In Los Angeles, the Board of Supervisors passed a measure early in 1959 requiring coffee houses to obtain entertainment permits in order to operate legally ("All-Night Coffee Houses"). This essentially enabled the Board of Police Commissioners, which issued the permits, to monitor the morality of applicants. That summer the Gas House, a Beat jazz club in Venice, sought a permit. At hearings before a representative of the Police Commission, Venice residents and landlords, spearheaded by the Venice Civic Union, conducted a smear campaign against the Beats. The Civic Union's president declared, "We've got to get on our feet and scream and get these people out of here" ("Venice Landlords"). Several hundred Venice residents came to the hearings to testify regarding the various offensive activities at the Gas House, including drug use, consumption of alcohol, as well as the morally degenerate behavior of beatniks ("Gas House Defended"). Writer Lawrence Lipton, appearing on behalf of Venice Beats, testified that "There are those who have criticized [the] Gas House openly on the street and on our premises for permitting black and white people to associate together" (Wirin). After Lipton's testimony, the hearing examiner accused Lipton of "trying to pit race against race" (Wirin).

In sharp contrast to widely held stereotypes of apolitical, nihilistic, and apathetic beatniks, members of the Beat counterculture did not let this repression and harassment go unanswered. In Venice, beatniks allied with the American Civil Liberties Union and waged a legal battle against civic groups to keep the Gas House open. Attorney A. L. Wirin, chief legal counsel for the Southern California branch of the ACLU, represented the Gas House ("Al Wirin Story" 3). Although the Board of Police Commissioners eventually denied the request for an entertainment permit, the Gas House continued to

operate, albeit sporadically, for several years (Minutes of the Board; "Famed Beatnik Landmark" 1; Peck). When the Gas House held an open house to rally supporters in 1959, two thousand people attended, but police turned most participants away, claiming that without an entertainment permit the club could only hold private meetings, not public events ("California" 36).

Beats in other cities responded to repression and harassment even more aggressively. In June 1960, the New York City Fire Department closed the Gaslight, a coffee shop in Greenwich Village. Coffee shop owners and beatniks, suspicious of corruption among local Tammany Hall leaders and angered by what they regarded as harassment by fire inspectors, organized protests and demonstrations. John Mitchell, the owner of the Gaslight, led a protest march of one hundred beatniks and was arrested for disorderly conduct. The assistant fire chief said he would delay closing two more coffeehouses until the following day, because he feared that "a riot is brewing" (" 'Village' Beatniks" 23). After fire inspectors closed the Café Bizarre, its owner, Rick Allmen, and Mitchell led over eighty beatniks in another rally, for which Allmen received a summons for parading without a permit. That night nine Village coffeehouse owners met to coordinate their response to the closures and gain community support ("80 Beatniks Protest" 32). The following day Mitchell and Allmen led over 130 Beats in a demonstration outside City Hall ("City Hall Pickets" 42). When fire inspectors closed the Gaslight again in early 1961, more than thirty beatniks held an overnight sit-in on the premises, after which fire inspectors permitted it to re-open (Clark, "Café Gift Charge" 20).

These collective political activities included a wide variety of business owners, writers, activists, and performers. One participant of the City Hall protest in New York City was 25-year-old Varda Karni, a children's book editor, who sang folk songs nightly at the Café Bizarre. During the demonstration she led singing and chanting among protesters ("City Hall Pickets" 42). Karni exemplifies the eclectic mix of people affiliated with the Beat counterculture. She did not identify herself as a member of the Beat Generation, yet her desire to continue singing in coffeehouses motivated her to become politically active and help defend Beats' community institutions.

In addition to public protests, Village coffeehouse owners launched a legal challenge to harassment by city officials. They formed the Coffeehouse Trade and Civic Association and secured legal counsel. In 1961, Mitchell appeared before the New York State Investigation Commission and testified that, for over a year, local police officers demanded payments ranging from two hundred and fifty to three hundred dollars. He further alleged that since he stopped making the payments in late 1960, police officers and various city inspectors repeatedly checked his coffee shop for violations, and often harassed and threatened him (Clark, "Café Gift Charge" 20). Rod MacDonald, another coffeehouse owner, testified that police who patrolled the Village demanded payments of five dollars per week, and that the precinct sergeant demanded fifty dollars per month (Clark, "Police Open Inquiry" 19). Beats

and coffee shop owners also worked with local leaders, including Reverend Dr. Howard G. Moody of the Judson Memorial Baptist Church. Moody chaired a committee of local leaders and activists that sought an official investigation into allegations of police harassment in the Village (Benjamin 36). These efforts proved successful. Three separate investigations, conducted by the New York State Investigation Commission, the Police Commission, and the New York City Investigation Commission, led to the suspension of one police officer and the transfer of two officers to other precincts (Clark, "Police Open Inquiry" 19; "Café Bribes Laid" 1, 34).

Police harassment also catalyzed Beat activism in North Beach. In February 1959, a group of Beats formed the North Beach Citizens' Committee. This organization sought to decrease police harassment, help arrested Beats attain bail money, and educate beatniks regarding civil rights. As one member flatly stated, "[o]ur job will be to protect our group from the police" (Rigney and Smith 165–66). The Citizens' Committee mimeographed two pamphlets for distribution to local beatniks: "What To Do When Arrested" and a "Report Sheet" for use by witnesses of police harassment (166). In many cases beatniks who witnessed the arrest of another Beat in public places such as parks or restaurants immediately collected donations for bail money (175).

In January 1960, over three hundred Beats held a rally in North Beach's Washington Square to protest police conduct during recent marijuana raids. One speaker charged that, when police found Communist texts in a beatnik's apartment, they immediately tore the material to pieces, called the residents "filthy communists," and ripped paintings from the walls ("Big Beatnik Rally" 5). Speakers at the rally also accused police of intimidating interracial couples during the raids, and African American Beat poet Bob Kaufman alleged that an undercover narcotics officer entered his home under false pretenses. Kaufman declared, "I spent World War II fighting for democracy, and I get about 2 per cent of it" ("Big Beatnik Rally" 5).

Some Beats at the rally encouraged other beatniks to become more politically active. Chester Anderson, editor of the literary magazines *Beatitude* and *Underhound*, told the crowd: "We have no civil rights because we haven't exercised them. We can't change the fact that we are beat—the only thing we can do is make it an honorable word, like bohemian used to be." Anderson advised Beats that "If you are falsely arrested, say so, and sue. If you are roughed up by the police, say so, and sue. Don't cover up. Fight back in every legal way" ("Big Beatnik Rally" 5). Jerry Kamstra, owner of a North Beach art and book shop, told the crowd that "I feel my duty goes beyond mere speaking. One must finally and in the end *do* something" (Rigney and Smith 165, italics in original).

Kamstra took his own advice. In May 1960, five thousand people gathered at the San Francisco City Hall to protest a session of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Kamstra attended the rally and tried to enter City Hall, even though police closed the building to the public. When Kamstra

crossed the barrier to a restricted area, six police officers tackled him, cuffed his hands and ankles, and arrested him for inciting a riot, disturbing the peace, and resisting arrest ("5000 Gather" 1, 4–5).

Other Beats participated in left wing politics and campaigns for civil rights. John Haag, who bought the Venice West Café in 1962, founded the Venice chapter of the ACLU and served as publicity chairman for the Venice/Santa Monica chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. His work with the Ad Hoc Committee to End Police Malpractice and similar organizations led to the loss of his job in the aerospace industry (Maynard 1991, 161–63). Throughout the mid-1960s, Haag also worked with the W. E. B. Du Bois Clubs, a youth organization affiliated with the Communist Party (Klehr and Haynes 172; Haag).[7] Haag demonstrates the extent to which some members of the Beat counterculture mediated between quotidian acts of resistance and more organized forms of social protest and leftist politics. Further, his career suggests the fluidity of the boundaries between these two forms of politics. As owner of the Venice West Café, Haag helped to maintain one of the key community institutions of his countercultural enclave, and as a member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and of the W. E. B. Du Bois Clubs, Haag worked within an overtly political framework to effect social change. Individuals such as Haag were both Beats and radical political activists.

## V

The desire of many Beats to distance themselves from mass media stereotypes of the Beat Generation is one reason for the historical invisibility of the Beat counterculture. In the wake of media depictions of a nihilistic, apathetic, and even silly Beat Generation, many members of the Beat counterculture renounced the labels "Beat" and "beatnik" and denied any affiliation with the Beats. At the North Beach rally in 1960, Douglas Casement claimed "there are no beatniks" and called the Beat Generation a "Gestalt image" manufactured by the media ("Big Beatnik Rally" 5). Ed Freeman, one of the Village Beats who demonstrated at City Hall, felt the term "beatnik" was "just a status definition" and called himself a "working poet" ("City Hall Pickets" 42). Varda Karni, who led singing and chanting during the same rally, was simultaneously an editor, folk singer, and activist. While she did not identify herself as Beat, her nightly performances at the Café Bizarre and her participation in the rally demonstrate the importance of the Village bohemian community in her life and her willingness to engage in public protests in order to defend her access to community institutions and public space. All of these individuals rejected, implicitly or explicitly, mass media representations of the Beat Generation: Casement's critique of using manufactured images to represent the range of human diversity, Freeman's insistence that writing poetry was a form of labor, and Karni's active presence at a public demonstration by the supposedly apathetic Beats. The point is that Beats did not necessarily

conform to media stereotypes of the Beat Generation. Indeed, in their daily lives many Beats challenged such stereotypes. The time has come for scholars, especially historians, to do the same.

The Beat Generation was much more than a literary avant-garde. It was a counterculture, based in urban bohemian enclaves and centered in public spaces such as coffeehouses, parks, restaurants, and nightclubs. These public spaces formed the key community institutions of the Beat counterculture. Beats utilized public space to challenge racial segregation and homophobia, and the Beat counterculture achieved a substantial degree of integration for both African Americans and male homosexuals. Further, when police and municipal government officials threatened beatniks' access to public space, Beats organized public rallies and forged alliances with community leaders and civil liberties groups to defend their position within the urban landscape. Finally, some beatniks engaged in radical politics, working in leftist political organizations and publicly protesting the anti-Communist hysteria of the Cold War. In sum, Beats created a vibrant counterculture which facilitated individual liberation and collective political action.

## Notes

1. Television programs that featured Beat characters or themes include *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis, Route 66,* and *77 Sunset Strip*, among others, and the radio program *The Romance of Helen Trent* added a Beat character in the late 1950s. Movies about Beats include *The Beat Generation, The Subterraneans*, and *A Bucket of Blood*, among others, and movies such as *High School Confidential* included Beat characters. Additionally, mass circulation magazines such as *Life, Look, Time*, and *Newsweek* often covered the Beats in the late 1950s.
2. For a scathing example, see French 1991, 40–43.
3. Except when analyzing the work of other scholars, whose interpretations are framed within the usual definitions, I hereafter use "Beat Generation" to refer to a counterculture that included literary celebrities, unknown or forgotten writers and artists, and many other people who did not identify as writers but who shared or found appealing the celebrities' rejection of pervasive social norms. Additionally, I use "Beat Generation," "Beatnik counterculture," and "Beat counterculture" interchangeably. Finally, I use "Beat" and "beatnik" interchangeably to refer to any member of the Beat counterculture.
4. See also Breines, "The 'Other' Fifties: Beats and Bad Girls." In *Not June Cleaver: Woman and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960.* Ed. Joanne Meyerowitz. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994. 382–408.
5. Quoted in Rolfe, "Great Coffee Houses," 25, 24. Lionel Rolfe recalled that in 1960 there were approximately 50 coffee shops in Los Angeles, all of which were "less and less in the beatnik tradition" yet remained in a "modified beatnik mode" (1979, 21; 1991, 13). Most of these coffeehouses were not in Venice, reflecting the proliferation of the Beat counterculture, at least in Los Angeles, beyond bohemian enclaves and into the surrounding urban landscape. The Xanadu was located near the Los Angeles City College, indicating that areas near universities were often important sites of Beat countercultural activity.

6. Polsky does not clarify whether men who decided to "stay straight" were closeted for most of the week or bisexual.
7. Maynard briefly catalogs Haag's organizational activities, but does not acknowledge any significant relationship between Beats and political radicalism (1991, 162–63).

# Recovering

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Chapter 4

# ruth weiss's *DESERT JOURNAL*: A Modern-Beat-Pomo Performance

*Nancy M. Grace*

Few poets—male or female—can be said to embody Beat to the extent of the San Francisco jazz performance poet ruth weiss.[1] And few embody in that Beat such a sweep of twentieth-century aesthetic philosophies and practices. weiss, a contemporary of the first generation of Beat male writers and a self-identified Beat writer, is an artist whose poetic influences reside firmly in pre- and proto-Beat aesthetics that bridge and embrace the postmodern. Over her more than fifty years of artistic production, weiss has written plays, directed films, painted, acted, and published ten volumes of poetry—the first being *Steps* (1958), the longest and most complex *DESERT JOURNAL* (1977), and the newest *A New View of Matter* (1999), an anthology of her life's work. Despite this proliferation, much of her work is now out of print, available only in libraries or by direct purchase from weiss herself. Although continuing to write and perform, weiss remains relatively unknown outside circles of Beat fans and Beat scholars. As such, she stands on the margins of literary history, a living testament to the persistence of Beat to appropriate, innovate, agitate, and survive.

Born in Berlin in 1928, weiss began writing poetry when she was five years old. "I didn't even read but I did write at the age of five," she claims, "and I always knew I was a poet."[2] Along with her mother and father, she escaped Nazi terrorism in 1939, immigrating to the United States where the family settled in New York City before moving on to Chicago. Schooled on Johann Goethe, Johann Schiller, and Rainer Maria Rilke, weiss charted a course of female transgression in her late teens, moving into a $7-a-week room at Chicago's Art Circle in 1949, hitchhiking to New Orleans' French Quarter, dying her hair green as a statement of peace,[3] and living hand-to-mouth to support her poetry. When necessary she'd pose nude for art classes or hock her typewriter (*Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* [*CAAS*] 333).

Her memories of this period construct the world as awash in her own words: "i go to the bars, not to talk. to write. . . . i write on park-benches, at night. under the one light. . . . i write on the 'L.' it shudders through the city. some lines hard to read later. a 24-hour cafe. i write" (*CAAS* 328).

In 1952, weiss hitchhiked to San Francisco, where her ride dropped her off at Broadway and Columbus in North Beach, telling her, "this is where you belong" (*CAAS* 331). From then on, she lost no time establishing herself as a regular on the local poetry scene. During that time, she met both Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac, becoming Kerouac's haiku-writing partner when she lived at San Francisco's Hotel Wentley in the early 1950s. Known as a relentless promoter of her work,[4] weiss read in small coffee houses, on street corners, and at street fairs, contributing to *Beatitude, Semina, Outburst*, and other literary publications.[5] In 1956, she innovated poetry reading with jazz performance at The Cellar in North Beach (*CAAS* 340).

As this last achievement attests, poetry for weiss is a genre cut loose from the written word, experimental and experiential in nature and superbly compatible with music, painting, drama, and film—all media with which she has worked routinely over the last fifty years. "I'm constantly exploding into any media," she has said, "if someone comes up with this or that idea. But it's always poetry." weiss's poetry, whether freestanding or conjoined with other plastic arts, defines language as a free-flowing force moving outward from the unconscious toward self and other, a phenomenon grounded in her belief that "language is sacred, therefore dangerous. To be used with care." Her poems are marked by word play, the twisting and weaving of language accentuating its lyric roots in both melopia and phanopia, music and image.

weiss notes that she is often called a visual poet, a label that she does not find surprising since she has long been immersed in the visual arts. She counts many painters among her friends, including Sutter Marin, Ernest Nadalini, Madeline Gleason, and Wallace Berman, the latter two associated with the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat scenes. As she recognizes, "one medium informs the other." This is the case as well with film, another visual medium that weiss considers poetic by nature and central to her development as a poet. She spent much of the 1950s and '60s in San Francisco's avant-garde movie theaters, a young and penniless poet sneaking into The Vogue theatre to watch hour after hour of films by Michelangelo Antonioni, Frederico Fellini, François Truffaut, and Ingmar Bergman. weiss also associates the highly imagistic nature of her poetry to her fondness for haiku. This ancient Japanese form connecting nature to human nature operates through concision, perception, and awareness. When manipulated most skillfully, haiku may be, as philosopher Alan Watts maintained, "wordless" poems in that they are highly focused on the juxtaposition of only a few signifiers to simulate visual cognitive experience (van den Heuvel xv). All three media—haiku, painting, and film—are revealed in weiss's affinity for flat, concise descriptors; short, compact lines; and fast line breaks that splice images as might a film editor, painter, or haiku poet.

Reading weiss's poetry is akin to viewing still-life fragments of her life. Consistent throughout is the thread of her autobiography constructed as a collage of idiosyncratic artifacts marking the terrain of her narrative as an archetypal experience. But unlike Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg or Diane di Prima, weiss is staunchly uninterested in using poetry to express private angst or polemics. While weiss repeats touchstone sensory impressions, including images of her mother, the train her family took to flee Nazi persecution, and her Catholic high school in Chicago, these images are almost always swift and decontextualized imprints floating free from defining historical bedrock. Her work reflects a temperament more faithful to Charles Olson's call for the poet to free herself from the "lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and [her] soul" (24). The result is a poetics that alludes to weiss's own history but insists on evading herself as a point of poetic meditation. The voice that dominates her poetry confesses its presence to the reader but without attending to the psychoanalytic nature of private confusion or sorrow.

The hallmark of weiss's poetics is a spontaneous method of free association linked to Yeatsian automatism and Tzarian dadaism, and also reflecting Beat jazz and performance practices drawn from Romantic and Buddhist belief in "first thought is best thought." "One idea starts another idea and then it is a fragment and I just leave it," she has said. "It's perfect the way it is. I do not rewrite. To be spontaneous, I don't even think." This method links at least three philosophical and aesthetic worlds that informed not only modernism, but also Beat and other post–World War II avant-garde literary movements. The one most evident is depth psychology—the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as employed by artists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, André Breton, and Joan Miro—all of whom weiss considers seminal to the development of her poetic practice. Of equal importance is abstract expressionism, and weiss's method owes much to the radical practice of painters such as Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Robert Motherwell who turned toward the subconscious as the source of external inspiration. Her spontaneous method, reflecting the abstract expressionist dictum to accept as real only that which one is in the process of creating, assumes both art and the artist to be dynamic and open-ended. This posture, adopted by many Beat writers, is consistent with, and also deeply indebted to, the art of Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and Thelonius Monk, all three of whom weiss cites as inspirational to her poetry and all inheritors of the American jazz folk tradition that foregrounds unmediated improvisation conjoined with technical expertise.

In keeping with the jazz and Beat bardic tradition of getting "off the page," weiss's spontaneous method is frequently collaborative, conjoining words with music in public performance to create a dialogue, or choral voice, with musicians and the audience. As she explains, for the poem to work, "the meaning and the reverberation of the sound have to hit at the same point." The lines of her poems draw upon the phrasing and rhythms of her own darting thoughts, husky voice, and soft breath synchronized with the beat

and melody of the horn, bass, piano player, or other musicians with whom she may be working.[6] The result is a poetics of Foucauldian theatre, a rejection of the poem as preshaped but rather as a play of surfaces or phantasms "freed from the constraints of similitude" (Foucault 177). A careful reading of her poetry then exposes the modernist turn away from art as the citation of a pre-existing object referent toward art as a performative reality. In this respect, weiss is progenitor and mirror of the interdisciplinary and mixed-media constructions, discourses, and epistemologies that have emerged as standards of modernism, Beat, and postmodernism.

weiss's aesthetics are best represented by *DESERT JOURNAL*, a cryptic and polyphonic poem cycle that maps the consequential valences of writing on the cusp of modernism and postmodernism: As an extended work, it resists critical penetration and must instead be ranged over, skimmed, and surveyed much as one would a geographical plain. The collection of forty poems, written from 1961 to 1968 and published almost ten years later by Good Gay Poets in Boston, recounts an internal journey toward self-discovery, one that by the presence of the titular "forty" evokes such central Biblical stories as those of Jesus' forty days and nights in the desert and Moses' forty years seeking the promised land. weiss's desert shares elemental structure with these vatic narratives, emerging as an alien environment of revelation, "esthetically abstract, historically inimical …," a place to which prophets and hermits go (Shepard, 43–44). As such, her desert is positioned as a landscape only vaguely recognizable on a human scale, its character as psychic inscape resisting verisimilitude and referentiality.

Immersed in this imaginative space, weiss succeeded in conveying elements of personal and cultural history in a poem cycle that rejects tribalism, confession, and identity politics for the allure of prophetic and transcendental artistic individualism, a hallmark of Beat literary production. It is this definition of the artist that propelled Allen Ginsberg to imagine his rebirth from out of the sea in the conclusion of *Howl*; that guided Diane di Prima to recreate herself in the mythic Loba, and that Jack Kerouac sought as he sang about art, jazz, and the Buddha in *Mexico City Blues*, always returning to the beatific chronicle of Jesus Christ that infused his Duluoz Legend. In this Beat context, *DESERT JOURNAL* represents Beat's inheritance of modernism's neo-romanticism, to which the poem cycle alludes as it echoes T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in its symbolic, dream-like, and at times nightmarish representation of the poet's relationship to the somatic world. The inscape of the desert, which weiss says she had never seen prior to composing the poem, is populated by birds, lepers, cats, pyramids, spiders, coyotes, old women, young girls, stars, moths, rocks, lizards, and houses all swirling over an ageless terrain, which the poem calls "the pure-point where all gathers" (SIXTH DAY).[7] The text, illustrated with delicate line drawings of birds, clouds, and canyons by weiss's partner Paul Blake, creates the surreality of a place where tables fall from the sky into

gaping mouths, birds prophesy doom, and the speaker seeks salvation and resurrection. In toto, the poem projects a mythic foundation upon which resides the poet's personal and collective experience.

The poem cycle, however, eschews the modernist fondness for *overt* mythic scaffolding, as well as the Beat tendency to rely on historical and literary events, settings, and actors, adhering instead to both a modernist and Beat proclivity to use language to replicate the movement of human thought. In this latter respect, the poem cycle foregrounds images and sounds driven up into consciousness through plastic automatism, which weiss practiced assiduously during the seven years that she worked on *DESERT JOURNAL*. Each time she sat down to write, she would select five pages of paper, limiting each of the forty days of the poem to these five pages only. Within this circumscribed discipline, she created the days through the free improvisation of shapes, stepping back to see what meanings emerged, allowing the ambiguous nature of spontaneity to guide her into choice and vision. Although there is no evidence that weiss adopted this process from Kerouac, it is uncannily like his method of writing poetry, especially *Mexico City Blues*, within the field of his tiny pocket notebook page, sometimes restricting himself to one line per hour (Nicosia 1983, 460). As a result, *DESERT JOURNAL*, like *Mexico City Blues*, stands as an impressive artifact of the process of human consciousness.

On completion, however, *DESERT JOURNAL* looked little like many of its Modernist, Beat, or San Francisco Renaissance counterparts—certainly not the longer experimental works of Guillaume Apollinare, Stephan Mallarme, Charles Olson, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Michael McClure, or Joanne Kyger. Granted, the cycle, like much of weiss's poetry, frequently incorporates words in all upper case, an exuberant boldness that the reader immediately encounters in the title of the cycle and in the title of each of the forty days. But while a few of her early poems flirted with both left and right margins, *DESERT JOURNAL* reflects the fact that weiss is a flush-left poet with a fondness for compact lines doggedly scrolling down the page. The poem contains no calligrams, very little play with the white-space-as-field of the page, and minimal variation in line length. Instead, weiss's experimental field for *DESERT JOURNAL* is the arena in which she reads the poem, in other words, the performative space of the stage. At every reading of the poem, she asks members of the audience to call out a number from one to forty. Whatever number she first hears, she reads the corresponding day of the poem. The performance reconfigures the text at the spontaneous suggestion of random and anonymous scriptors, a task encoded in the poem's prologue:

you are entering a certain desert
like stones or bones
marking sand
flame & cloud
things with wings
call your number
read your day

see if it talks to you alone
like stone or bone
in sand

other days
other ways - - -

This method, much like Tristan Tzara's and William S. Burrough's cut-ups that rely upon chance and randomness to guide textual creation, redirects authority for the construction of the poem away from weiss, using the performative quality of language to empower audience members, now artistic collaborators with weiss, to call the poem into being.

In its preeminent engagement with processes of human thought and collaboration, *DESERT JOURNAL* resists the linearity—and certitude—of its mythic focus. weiss describes the poem as "more of a circle than a line," and the poem itself speaks to the relationship between these forms: "the line as in devil / as the circle is to god / the circle is a line / returning / without a line / there would be no circle" (TWENTY-FIFTH DAY). As this passage declares, neither geometrical form can exist without the other; each by definition is grounded in "otherness." The circular dominance of the poem, as weiss sees it, is thus dependent upon a fundamental linearity, that, like the devil, must be disempowered by faith in God. *DESERT JOURNAL* acts out this philosophy: in both form and content the poem cycle establishes and sustains the illusions of the "line," that is, its reference to and teleological development within mythic narrative, while it simultaneously engages in the "circle," or the negation of its own linearity, through self-referential and energetic performance.[8] What emerges is the symbiotic compilation of a linear and progressive narrative repeatedly undermined with textual fragments that cohere like free-floating pieces of a kaleidoscope. The poem cycle, through a series of stops and starts, repetitions and differences occurring within and between each of the days, works to shift the trained reader-impulse away from anticipation of linearity, theme, and finality. The poem redirects that same impulse toward a process of *religio*: the (re)linking of textual elements in a multitude of compatible yet distinct readings—that is, small linearities—depending on the way in which the author/reader arranges the text. To be engaged in *religio* then dramatizes both the ways in which the poem plays, or riffs, itself into seemingly endless configurations and the very processes by which readers construct meaning.

The mechanism engineering this performance is a de-personalized, de-sexualized, de-gendered, and de-historicized voice operating much like a mechanical recording device. It is a great big stir of language: bits of contemporary slang, German mixed with English, neologisms, echoes of ancient tongues, and domestic detritus, such as a recipe for a Kahlua drink, marking the undulating dessert terrain. Occasionally, the speaker reflects on its own bodily presence in the scene, but for the most part, the vortex of subterranean matter conceals human material form, and the melange of texts

suggests that the poem may be seeking to evade, escape, or transform the poet's female subjectivity, pulled toward a disembodied transgendered, or transhuman, reality through the presence of *multiple* speakers. The wanderer is sometimes referred to as "she," sometimes "he" or "we" or "you," sometimes "poet bill," the narrator alternating from ambiguous first person to third person omniscient, from human to animal to bird. But the poem provides little evaluative discourse to establish relationships and significances amongst its discursive materials, and the reader is left to piece together meaning from the discrete fragments at hand. The unpredictable shift of voices confounds a reader's desire for a stable, unified identity. In fact, the FIRST DAY signals as much, the voice of a "fable-bird" crying "i'm a kangaroo-bird / carry my own pouch / either sex / or both / what is the hermaphroditic fact?" Here, the bird describes itself as a hybrid—half bird/half mammal; male/female—in defiance of human observation and classification. Based on this passage, one interpretation of the speakers in the poem is that the mutable "you," "I," "he," "she," or "it" may refer to the same being and thus to the existence of multiplicity, that is, hermaphrodism, within all creatures. The poem may also be arguing that there is little distinction between the "I" that is conventionally identified with the implied author and the "you" or "I" that becomes the reader. In resisting clear articulation of its lyric voice, *DESERT JOURNAL* posits the ambiguous nature of lyric presentation, the speaker and reader sliding in and out of multiple roles. In recognition of this mercurial relationship, I will from now on refer to the dominant voice of the poem as the speaker(s) to represent the notions of plurality within singularity and singularity within plurality.

The speaker(s) of the poem cycle, in their paradoxical dynamic of singular stability and multipartite motion, also evoke the idea of the material landscape, which, like the speaker(s), exists as a constellation of interrelated parts always moving in relationship to one another. In so doing, the poem identifies as landscape both the desert terrain (the metaphoric setting in which the speaker[s] wander) and the human body (the material setting in which the speaker[s]' voices reside). As landscapes, the poem's setting and speaker(s) gesture toward the fundamental organicism of the life of the world and the life of a human, something akin to a double helix existing as movement and growth. The speaker(s), as a composite of life forms, defy gendered hierarchies and hegemony, effectively repudiating the anthropocentric, reductivist belief in the female body as analogous to a passive and irrational nature. In the process, they establish the syncretic nature of human thought and the material world as mediated through another landscape: poetic language.

This vision, however, emerges as problematic for the speaker(s) of the poem: *DESERT JOURNAL* makes it clear that for weiss language is the vehicle for individual escape from that very materiality. The poem suggests that to escape the materiality of the human body and the desert, the poet must acknowledge language as both the enemy of escape and the tool of escape: in

other words, the poet uses language to confront the way in which language itself is manipulated to build human bulwarks of material determinacy and certitude. As the speaker(s) in the TWENTY-FIFTH DAY say:

> insanity
> definition:
> the script thrown away
> without a plot!
>
> outside the story
> the gory details gone
> without a plot
> to piss in
> . . . . . .
> without a plot
> the story has a chance
> to make it
> on its own

In this passage, the speaker(s) obliquely claim that linguistic constructions such as narrative plots are artificial human devices that mislead, directing one away from the source of generation. Claiming a characteristic neo-romantic Beat theme, weiss's speaker(s) declare "insanity," or deviance, to be the source of truth: Only the "insane" would defy authority and throw away a script-act on intuition and improvise. But the poem gleefully posits that it is in just such an individual and often anti-social move that the true or mythic story standing beyond human artifice can emerge through one's unmediated thoughts. To this end, the poem cycle takes full advantage of the mutative nature of language as the boundary of knowledge, gesturing toward the grammatical indeterminacy characterizing the postmodern ethos of the LANGUAGE poets. More directly, the poem reaches back and pays homage to the radical modernism of Gertrude Stein, whose transformational play with language effectively shakes the everyday belief that reality is hard-edged and fixed (Grahn 19).

weiss, apparently without anxiety or ambivalence, acknowledges that her poetry is deeply indebted to her reading of Stein. *DESERT JOURNAL* carries the mark of this literary mother–daughter relationship: The SEVENTH DAY contains the couplet "what is the question? / she said & died," the death-bed signature of weiss's maternal muse embedded in the most magic of days. In Stein's innovative practice, weiss encountered what she called a "musical realism [that] made the heart break"—and an ability to manipulate the many dimensions of that reality, particularly a slanted and subtly evasive poetics characteristic of first-wave feminism and Stein herself. *DESERT JOURNAL* suggests that in Stein weiss found a compatriot who shared her distrust of language and narrative form and a model for using language to assault linguistic convention. Steinian innovations, in combination with weiss's deep conviction in the

powers of spontaneous composition and the flow of human thought, provided weiss with potent processes to tap the harmonic, universal, and mythic.[9]

Many stylistic features of DESERT JOURNAL reflect weiss's appropriation of Stein, one of the most prevalent being a maverick manipulation of language to explore and question the experience and codification of time and space as absolutes. For this endeavor, weiss, like Stein in works such as *Lifting Belly*, "Yet Dish," *Pink Melon Joy*, and *Tender Buttons*, relies on doggerel, a term for derivative or trivial poetry, characterized by formulaic or continued rhymes, clumsy meter, cheap sentiment, and cliché (Damon 209, 212, 227). Doggerel pervades *DESERT JOURNAL*. Lines such as "RED ROVER / RED ROVER / come over!"; "and on the seventh day / a clown turned mute / to play his flute"; "the myths are true / as are you"; "through a red sea / through a bloody eye / live or die / but one must try!" (days 1, 7, 8, and 38, respectively) are scattered throughout the poem to such an extent that first-time readers of the cycle may well question weiss's technical virtuosity. As a tool of epistemological excavation, however, doggerel in *DESERT JOURNAL* functions as a transitional genre between poetry and the rhythms of everyday oral life, exploiting rhyme and meter to resolve a temporal problem, fixing the human speaker and her audience in a time/space relationship through memory of sound. Doggerel privileges the poet's use of rhyme over the creation of linear meaning, thereby highlighting the signifier, which, as Maria Damon notes in her study of Stein, draws attention to the self-referential aspect of language (212, 227).

In the process, the poem cycle moves back and forth from semantic to sonic form, ideas driving the production of words that in turn lose their semantic content to become sound driving sound. As early as the THIRD DAY, the speaker(s) engage in this transformative play:

> from so deep within
> that even the word SOURCE
> is lost to its cause
> thus to cause the source
>
> SOUR SAUCE
> SOUR SAUCE
> MARINATE THIS LIFE
> WITHOUT SEEMING CAUSE
>
> VICE HAS LOST ITS SHARP
> SHARP HAS LOST ITS SPICE
> VICE HAS LOST ITS SHARP
> HARP HAS LOST ITS STRING
> STRING HAS LOST ITS WING
> HARP HAS LOST ITS SPRING
> SPRING HAS LOST ITS SING
> WING HAS LOST ITS BIRD
> BIRD HAS LOST ITS TURD
> VICE HAS LOST ITS SPICE

In this passage, the speaker reveals that language itself ceases to function and, in the cessation of functionality (i.e., idea formation/linguistic scripting), generates its own source (i.e., sound/musicality). This process is performed by the initial four lines of philosophical discourse, which state that the word "source," a signifier for the concept of genesis, has lost its ability to function as signifier. Consequently, and paradoxically, the word becomes its own signified: the source of language itself—sound. This move is illustrated in the subsequent nonsense rhyme, which immediately transforms "source" into "sauce" and "sour," words that have no logical connection except as units of sound. The remainder of the passage contains a semantic thread—things such as harps, strings, birds, and turds have lost their "thingness," in other words, the speaker(s) have effected an escape from materiality. This idea then becomes, and rightly so, virtually indiscernible in relationship to the chant-like rhyme and repetition of "lost," the combination of which privileges sound and beat, overwhelming the linguistic presentation of the material world. As part of *DESERT JOURNAL*'s landscape, then, the use of doggerel suggests that in even in the realm of myth, the human voice paradoxically seeks solidity in its fabrication of a stable reality: [O]ne can survive in the desert because one has sonic human connections. But the poem also posits that such sonic material, by its very orality, is ephemeral, speaks to and of itself, and is a knowledge that destroys the human bond one seeks—that is, it is "lost." However, such a loss must be experienced—and embraced—if one is to achieve transcendence.

weiss's use of Steinian word inversions and repetition throughout the cycle reinforces this message. Passages such as "no name to touch / to touch has no name" and "to *underline* what one already knows / now *undermine* the how" (FIRST DAY, emphasis mine) are chiasmic reminders that linguistic meaning constantly shifts beneath an author and reader's belief in intentionality and determinacy. The words themselves are visual signifiers of this instability. In fact, the speaker(s) of *DESERT JOURNAL* present divergent views on the nature of visual knowledge. On many occasions, they speak to the ephemerality of the precept that what one sees is real and stable and thus an appropriate premise for a claim about reality. In weiss's desert, the visual referent upon which such claims are made shifts unpredictably, an effect achieved through repetition swathed in rhyme, as this excerpt from the SIXTEENTH DAY illustrates:

is it stone?
is it bone?
is it a throne for bird or beast?
. . . .
once upon
a nun on words
went wings
. . . .
once upon

a nun on words
crossed convent border
. . . .
once upon
one could be so close
after all the dark spells

These lines move like the conscious eye, trying to fix perception in meaning and meaning in perception, each segment a continuous present seeking to stabilize itself, to find its *gestalt.*[10] On this day, the speaker(s) are left frustrated; no stable form is found for that which could be stone, bone, or throne, and the nun on words (a surreal image of the bride of Christ riding human language) to which one seems so close vanishes into the sun, compelling the speaker(s) to cry "what is this? / another game? / i would like / to make a call / to no-place!—" The "nun on words"—a possible metaphor for divine knowledge (bride of Christ) through language (on words)—is, after all, all play, and there's nowhere ("no place") to turn for an answer.

Or is there? The poem suggests that such visual shifts can at times produce knowledge. Using repetition and addition, *DESERT JOURNAL* acts much like a camera lens pulling back from its subject, revealing more of the scene with each frame. The TWENTY-SECOND DAY exemplifies this process with haiku-like brevity:

pain is the first step
into the desert

absence of pain
is the desert

not to have
is the desert

not to have where
is the desert

not to have where to dance
is the desert

the desert becomes dance

As the speaker(s) methodically layer words one at a time onto the base phrase "not to have," the image of the desert is expanded until it stands in full form, the barren and painful first step transformed through the process of negative definition into dance, a human act of celebration. In this case, linguistic repetition and addition, rather than distorting the image, clarify and enlarge it, guiding the reader sequentially toward the indicative mood, a statement of fact as the speaker(s) see it.

There is, however, a persistent impish quality marking the voices of *DESERT JOURNAL*, a child-like, comic voice not unlike what often emerges

in some of Kerouac's and di Prima's poetry, cautioning readers neither to rely upon nor to take too seriously either the permanency or plasticity of language. As the poet declares in the THIRTY-SIXTH DAY, "no season or reason / or watch what you say / it may trounce you but good / oh lady be good / are you good, lady? / are you a - - - good lady? / ARE YOU GOOD! LADY! / are you - - - a lady? / ARE YOU GOOD???" Words are acknowledged as dangerous to the creator (they "trounce you" but good), so the speaker(s) advise care in crafting them. But, weiss's use of punning permutations, her witty attention to the semantic mutability of "good" and "lady," at least partially disempowers the apparent force of a single word—the moral connotations of "lady"—as the sentence itself is sliced and reconfigured with punctuation and capitalization to denote pauses and intonation. The stanza encourages a reader to dance with language instead of running frustrated from it, while always bearing in mind the power of language to surprise and to attack.

One can say, then, that *DESERT JOURNAL*'s emphatic thrust is to break rules and baffle expectations, to turn upside down the dominant belief in prescriptive standards, particularly those related to language itself: "never / but why not / end with a preposition!" the speaker declares in the THIRTY-SEVENTH DAY. In keeping with such antinomian behavior, weiss persists in her Steinian experimentation with grammar, making evident the deep structure of human language that produces a variety of surface level forms. On the third day, for instance, the speaker(s) state, "ONLY SOME BIRD / *STILL* HAS THE TURD / TO / only one who will *still* scream / NOT *STILL* THE SCREAM" (emphasis mine). Here "still" is displayed as an adverb and verb, depending on its position adjacent to a verb or noun. "Still" holds within its stable signifier a multiplicity of meanings; it is rule-bound, yet free within those very constraints.

This play with grammar is an underlying structure unifying the diverse speaker(s) of the poem. The most consistent feature of unification is weiss's fondness for semi-grammatical passages, such as "riled it turns threat / weave wordless leaves" and "line & dot / to set the heart / where it's at upon" (days 13 and 16, respectively). These couplets, which characterize the language in all forty of the days, resemble the conventions of standard syntax but twist them sufficiently through nonstandard use of nouns, verbs, prepositional combinations, and other grammatical miscues to distort coherent meaning. Consequently, reader attention is drawn to the words themselves, to their dependence as effective signifiers on long-held prescriptions for placement and appropriateness. In the second stanza from the journal's SECOND DAY, the final sentence, one of four sentences arranged as an eleven-line stanza, is left incomplete: "there is a point / where the last rescue / of love is possible / there is that point of lasting / the tall love calls / a cat shadow / on a wall / and is it a or the / or is it singularly plural? / who are you to say / how s should be placed / if?" "If" what? The speaker(s) never answer, jumping inexplicably to a new topic, the poem following the movement of thought rather than forcing thought into poetic form.

The process, a kind of Steinian take on the Beat belief in "first thought best thought," repudiates the surety of knowledge progressing logically and linearly through language crafted for public consumption in accordance with standardized rules. This is a semiotic consciousness to which the speaker(s) of the above passage have already drawn explicit attention by referencing the thingness of the indefinite and definite articles ("is it *a* or *the* / or is it singularly plural?"—emphasis mine). Human words are characterized as just as ephemeral as the objects that populate the desert. External realities believed real mutate into letters of the alphabet ("how *s* should be placed"—emphasis mine) presented as arbitrary signs whose permeable boundaries open them to change and otherness. In this regard, the process of linguistic mutation identifies the dreamscape of the poem as a place where rules of time and space do not apply. Instead, the SECOND DAY, dangling its preposition, defers meaning, makes visible its own fissures, and, as a part mirroring the whole of the poem, promises completion while resisting that very desire. It is this very act of remaining open through semi-grammaticality that characterizes all the voices of the poem cycle, rendering a formalist cast to what otherwise resists solidarity.

More important, weiss's grammatical distortions underscore the poem's fundamental argument that all finite, rule-based, human sign systems outside the dreamscape are unreliable, additionally directing the poem's critique toward systems of scientific certainty. For instance, chromatic motifs, specifically chemical and physical, are questioned: The TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY indirectly asks what is red? what is blue? what is white? The speaker of the day finds that blue is color and sound, cold and soft; red is color and sound, fixed in space; and, in defiance of scientific law, white is all color, subsuming red and blue. It is mathematics, however, the foundational language of science, that bears the brunt of the attack. Beginning with the FIRST DAY, the poem conflates words and numbers: "one plus one is two / two plus two is four / four is no more / (singular of mores) / than now." The collapse of words into numbers into the present moment defies the spatial and temporal equation that grounds both verbal and numerical linearity, offering a vision of ontological freedom. But the speaker(s) resist this notion, clinging stubbornly to the desire for geometric certitude, imposing upon the desert the X's and Y's of graphs and axes, seeing the horizon as a line of finitude that cannot be defied (TWENTY-FIFTH DAY). One is bound to fail, though, as the THIRD DAY has warned: "it was here ten years ago that— / or ten million / a way of saying time / which always resists the saying of it." In other words, the effort to know time through language, be it numbers or words, will always resist that very articulation of itself. The message is repeated and extended into the realm of mathematics on the TWENTY-THIRD DAY: "this is the land / that gobbled all the elements / first spaced by man / in his original division / of the universe / that first knowledge of four / extending vision / into space plus one." Here, the desert gobbles, or negates, systematic human representations of original knowledge, that is, humans' efforts to divide,

quantify, and thereby know the universe. In other words, mathematical creation of space is humans' "first," and most woefully inadequate, attempt to name the primal source, a symbolic land that devours all who attempt to use it to project knowledge beyond the internal world itself.

The knowledge that emerges by the FORTIETH DAY is that there are no hard or fine lines, neither in mathematical nor linguistic equations. To survive in the desert of one's own psyche, one must come to know and overcome that which is "the worst in the desert," that which the THIRTY-EIGHTH DAY reveals as "the illusion of substance." This definition is amplified in the THIRTY-NINTH DAY to include the past itself, that is, history or the linear conception of time, which the speaker(s) imagine throughout the poem as locked doors, windowless rooms, and the human body. These three tropes effectively disavow the material world, envisioning both human form and human construction as prison cells. There is, only and all, the speaker(s) maintain, the fusion of line and circle, particle and wave, self and other, represented in the poem as the mystery of light that originates from a pure source and propels all into life.

As *DESERT JOURNAL* concludes, it activates the paradox of its own construction. While refusing linearity through spontaneous composition, cut-up performance, semi-grammaticality, and surrealism—aesthetic practices that direct the poem cycle backward into modernism and forward into Beat and the postmodern, the poem claims a conventional ending of salvation and redemption characterizing plot-driven myth. For instance, the poem's tendency to favor the multi-voiced transgendered and transhuman speaker collapses just at the point where one might expect that gender and the solitary poetic voice, as constructs of a gendered literary history, should be overcome. But they are not. On the FORTIETH DAY, the wanderer is identified as a human female, who, in a striking feminist moment, hears her own voice, "strong as longing," cut across the void. But, as quickly as she has emerged, the feminist self, attuned to the power of her own voice and thus cognizant of her own strength to survive, vanishes. She is replaced by a more passive female depicted as a hard, blurred shape transfixed against a seascape. The FORTIETH DAY asks "how does one start / what one has to finish?" Its oracular answer is that the female will be rescued by a male two-horned bird: "she touched one horn / it was of the sea / she touched the other / it was of the land / and twin-spirals propelled her / lighter than light." The desire for myth—and the gender hierarchy that it represents—to resolve the human dilemma out of which it is constructed defies the poem's fundamental performance mode that seeks to actuate the concept of indeterminacy, to destroy the illusion of substance, similitude, and surety represented by myth. While the static juxtaposition of antithetical images such as land/sea and male/female present the capture and destruction of time as the unifying paradigm of history, it is the mythic and absolute escape from the confines of materiality that concludes the journey in visionary, light-filled triumph—a legacy of modernist poetic praxis.

In its paradoxical genesis, then, *DESERT JOURNAL*, each time ruth weiss and her readers perform it, reifies Beat's pivotal role as a space in which a broad expanse of twentieth-century aesthetic practices meet in textual camaraderie. The poem cycle, reflecting Beat as an heir of modernism and a progenitor of postmodernism, probes processes of both human thought and formal literary practice, combining highly conscious manipulations of poetic structures with spontaneous composition. As such, the poem cycle enacts weiss's literary heritage, not in Beat angst, ennui, or cultural condemnation, but in Beat's recognition of the sanctity of the human mind and spirit and imagination.

## Notes

1. ruth weiss, in an interview conducted by Nancy Grace on July 8 and 9, 1999, explained that she spells her name in all lower case letters to protest the German convention of capitalizing the first letter of certain nouns.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all weiss attributions are from an interview with weiss conducted by Nancy Grace via telephone on July 8 and 9, 1999. weiss was at her home in Albion, California.
3. weiss has written that she was inspired to do this by the film *The Boy with Green Hair* (RKO Pictures, 1948), in which Dean Stockwell has his first role; ruth weiss, two-page poetic statement and biography, p. 1, undated.
4. Nancy Grace's personal conversations with Warren French. In *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance 1955–1960*, French briefly mentions weiss as "one of the most active and dynamic members" of the North Beach community (65).
5. See, for example, *Beatitude* 2–8, 11, 1959; *Semina* 5, 1959; *Beatitude Anthology*, 1960; *Outburst* 2, 1962; *Matrix* 1–2, 1970, 1971.
6. weiss has recorded many of her readings on video and audio tape. The audiotape set, based on Brenda Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation*, is available from Audio Literature. Others, including *Poetry and All That Jazz* (audio and video) and *The Brink* (weiss's film of San Francisco in the 1960s), can be purchased from weiss herself.
7. *DESERT JOURNAL* is unpaginated. References throughout the essay are made to the individual days presented in the poem cycle.
8. For this insight, I am indebted to Laurie Edson's discussion of Rimbaud in *Reading Relationally*, 197.
9. I am not claiming that Stein was interested in finding the mythic or the universal. Her interest was more in using language to show how the mind moves. Her linguistic experiments, unlike weiss's, were assaults on the conventions of story in *any* form.
10. For this argument, I am indebted to Marianne Dekoven's analysis of Stein's use of repetition; see *A Different Language*, 41–53, in particular.

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Chapter 5

# Joanne Kyger, Beat Generation Poet: "a porcupine traveling at the speed of light"

*Amy L. Friedman*

You know when you write poetry you find
the architecture of your lineage your teachers
like Robert Duncan for me gave me some glue for the heart
Beats which gave confidence
and competition
to the Images of Perfection
. . . or as dinner approaches I become hasty
do I mean PERFECTION?

—Joanne Kyger, "September 17, 1986," *Just Space*

Beat Generation writer, San Francisco Renaissance poet, Bolinas activist, and student of Zen, Joanne Kyger stands as an important link between several major axes of American poetry and writing in the twentieth century. Now the author of fourteen published poetry and prose collections, Kyger first read and published her work during the early period of the Beat scene in San Francisco, and a look at her development as a poet takes one to the heart of West Coast literary bohemia. Kyger combines the encounter with myth that Robert Duncan emphasized, the Buddhist consciousness explored by Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, and a vernacular chattiness that echoes, yet feminizes, what has variously been called the personism, or situational focus, of the New York School poets. As this essay will explore, she is pivotal in illustrating the bonds among a number of vibrant centers of creativity dating from the 1950s and '60s.

Kyger emerged as part of the North Beach, California scene in the late 1950s and participated in the circle of influential older West Coast poets such as Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan. As a student of Zen Buddhism she shared the communal East-West House in North Beach in 1957–58 with, among others, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, and, for a brief period, Jack Kerouac. Kyger's sustained friendships have included Beat writers Ginsberg, Whalen, and John Weiners, and from 1960 to 1964 she was married to Gary Snyder. Kyger remains one of the less studied among her contemporaries, and it hasn't helped that she was not included in Donald Allen's seminal anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, the collection that helped to define a new generation of poets (Allen did, however, include Weiners, Whalen, Snyder, and Ginsberg). In the late 1960s Kyger was part of a wave of artists and writers who settled in Bolinas, north of San Francisco, and there she became known as a social activist. Her study of and adherence to Zen Buddhism dates from the late 1950s and has been a continued influence on her writing. Jonathan Skinner has commented that her work could be considered "one steadfast application and deepening" of Buddhist practice (Skinner 2). Anne Waldman, writing an introduction to a new edition of Kyger's *Japan and India Journals*, alludes to a more conflicted, even ironic, relationship between Kyger and Zen practice: "[O]ne of the poet's selves struggles with the axiomatic truths of Buddhism and her own difficulty to sit still" (1).

Kyger has herself documented how this range of influences came into her life. In the spring of 1957 she had just arrived in San Francisco, a 22-year-old seeking adventure. "The Beat Generation, the San Francisco Renaissance, is dramatically in the air," she wrote, "most especially in North Beach, which I visit every night" to hear poetry and jazz at The Cellar and The Place (*Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* [*CAAS*] 187). The obscenity trial over Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" was in full foment. Kyger visited Lawrence Ferlighetti's City Lights bookstore, bought and read Ginsberg's controversial poem, and read *On The Road* while on a road trip herself up the California coast. She was fascinated with the unfolding literary scene, and fell "in love with the writing, the tone, the truth" (*CAAS* 187). The heady atmosphere of North Beach alone is enough to capture the attention of a young writer searching for influences and inspirations. Bill Berkson has described the West Coast bohemian artists' and writers' world of the late 1950s and early 1960s as "a charged mixture of excitement, fun, pills, alcohol, highly principled criticism, megalomania, insularity, and sophistication" (326).

Her evening forays brought her into contact with the poets grouped around Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer. Largely former students of the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which had closed the year before, they had moved en masse to San Francisco. (Many were to be published in Allen's anthology.) Kyger attended their readings, and began to work on the poems that would comprise her first collection, *The Tapestry and The Web*, the work she later explains established her poetic "voice" (*CAAS* 203).

In a later collection, *Desecheo Notebook* (1971), an account of four weeks spent with a group of mostly male writers and artists on a small island off the west coast of Puerto Rico, Kyger delightedly hails herself as "a writer and a talker." Her satisfaction with her conversational input is significant. Beat writing developed as a creative movement, it is generally acknowledged, in the torrid crucible of conversation: Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Herbert Huncke meeting on street corners in New York; East Coast Beats in Greenwich Village coffee shops and in the crumbling bohemian "pads" poet Diane di Prima describes in *Memoirs of a Beatnik*; West Coast Beats at Vesuvio's bar across the street from City Lights bookstore in San Francisco; Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady's "tea"-fueled all-night philosophy sessions in the San Jose house Cassady shared with his wife, Carolyn. It was a celebration of spoken ideas as much as a democratizing movement that celebrated, in countless poetry readings, the spoken word. Adding to the mythology of the Beat movement has been the veneration of the spontaneous intimacy of the central coterie of Beat writers—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, and later Cassady, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso. For a long time, female Beat Generation writers were considered to be peripheral to the development of Beat ideas, and likewise marginal in their artistic contributions. Recent critical work has documented how the women writers of the Beat Generation, while inscribing their presence in artistic work, were also actively shaping a political consciousness, embarking on visionary declarations, and rewriting the rules of literary bohemian life.[1]

The timing and the location of Kyger's emergence as a significant poetic voice place her within the context of the San Francisco Renaissance, and the shared contents of the Beat Generation writers.[2] She was also immersed in its conflicts, and has described negotiating the influences that were actively shaping the counterculture. While the Beat writers brought undeniable energy to the emerging scene, the Black Mountain writers who had recently arrived in San Francisco were "closer to [Kyger] as contemporaries than the Beat generation, who'd developed romantic kinds of political ideals that Spicer couldn't stand, the whole sense of self-propagation, self-advertising . . ." (Russo interview 9). As the epigraph at the beginning of this essay conveys, the Beat influence for Kyger was one of both reassurances and divergences. Kyger shares with other Beat writers her contemplation of Eastern religions, the elevation of quotidian reflections in her art, the repeated mention of other Beat writers that creates a sense of familiar artistic community, and a suggested patina of spontaneity in the generation of her writing. Like a number of West Coast Beat writers—Lew Welch, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen (with whom Kyger shares some particular similarities)—Kyger's poetry employs the Beat focus on the simultaneous journey of outward travel and inward states.

From this moment
and hence backwards
a visitation
echoes thru the apparent opening

to the tomb
the narrow passage is the mind's reasoning
in clarity
as she moves like a shadow
having lived her life before
(*Places to Go* 93)

She is comfortably counter-culture, a chatty hipster refuting formalities ("It is not the best way / to start the day, lingering, until four o'clock" [28]). Life, in Kyger's poetry, is a tentative search, the experience of extreme spiritual states ("When you think you know what you expect / you still want more" [54]), and just as unpredictably, a casual destination ("I borrowed a boat from a friend, at least I think that was the arrangement" [52]). As consistently as her *Japan and India Journals* chronicle the daily exploits of Snyder, Ginsberg, and Orlovsky, her later poetry records her interactions with the Beat and San Francisco Renaissance writers in her life; Philip Whalen, Ted Berrigan, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Ebbe Borregaard, Lew Welch, and Michael McClure all make regular appearances. Kyger makes poetry, and the comings and goings of fellow writers, appear to constitute a calm and routine center to her existence: "Friends, land, time, inspiration /. . . / What is going on / is very important at this moment" (107).

The Beat moment, though, was mainly focused on men. Along with female poets Diane di Prima and Lenore Kandel, memoirists Hettie Jones and Bonnie Bremser, and novelist Joyce Johnson, Kyger can be located as part of the creation of this significant chapter of literary bohemia, but like them she struggled toward inclusion despite being female, and toward an equal meeting of respect. "Joanne Kyger could play on the team," Robert Duncan wrote, casting his poetry circle as a sort of virile all-star sports line-up, "but she was a girl."[3] In the midst of artistic bohemia, the women were always being reminded of their sex's limitations or domestic duties. Diane di Prima has circumscribed the situation aptly: "and you, interrupting me in the middle of a thousand poems / did I call the insurance people?" ("Poem in Praise of My Husband"). What Michael Davidson has called the characteristic "dailiness" of Kyger's work—the recording of day-to-day life in fine detail in poems often titled by date as if entries in a journal—serves also to record the routine nature of the slights she suffers as a female artist (1989, 188). From *The Japan and India Journals*, April 11, 1962:

> We met the Dalai Lama last week right after he had been talking with the King of Sikkim. . . . I was trying very hard to say witty things to him through the interpreter, but Allen Ginsberg kept hogging the conversation by describing his experiments on drugs and asking the Dalai Lama if he would like to take some magic mushroom pills. . . . Don Allen took all my poems for his next anthology, then later on asked *Gary* to ask me to send him a short biography, and absolutely no word to me. [Kyger's italics]

Her journals note other professional and personal rebuffs, as well as the challenges of being expected to keep house in difficult circumstances with

Snyder, joined by Ginsberg and Orlovsky. "Reading *Kim* all day between bouts of laundry," Kyger writes in her entry for March 4, 1962, going on to describe hauling buckets of water from communal pumps several times for each round of soaking and rinsing. "Sleeping bag liners, shawl, Gary's parka," she lists. Sometimes, in her body of work, she does manage to undermine through irony the connection between the feminine and the domestic.

> I don't believe in any
> of your gods or powers
> It's all Bullshit
>
> I don't even believe
> in My powers or gods
>
> Her dying words were
> Keep the house clean
> (*Going On* 49)

Jonathan Skinner has focused on the repeatedly ignored presence of Kyger, both literary and physical. He notes that "Kyger is an invisible companion in the experiences informing poems in [Gary] Snyder's *The Back Country* and *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, as well as in Ginsberg's *Planet News*" and that Kyger's *Japan and India Journals*, which covers the period of her marriage to Snyder, can be read "largely as a kind of captivity narrative, the controlled maintenance and development of a relentlessly invisible/isolated self" (2). Indeed, Skinner has asserted that Kyger's prose account provides "the crucial countertext to Ginsberg and Snyder's own India journals" (2).

Skinner has also commented on Kyger's efforts to counter "the Beat mythologizing of woman-as-muse"(2). It's a characteristic Beat narrative thrust surely epitomized by the homosexual Ginsberg's relegation of "girls," in his epic "Howl," to the "innumerable lays" that energized the male Beat spirit. Relegated herself often to mundane tasks, Kyger muses in *The Japan and India Journals* on her assigned role:

> Gary says women are always associated with water, and holes are mystic entrances. The well is essentially a woman's thing. And the well as KNOWLEDGE. Well I don't know. Well I do know. Contemplation & awareness. Are you Well. Well, well, how nice to see you today. Bringing up, drawing up the water. Drawing and painting. Snail moves circularly in the upper damp areas of the well. I pulled a beetle up in the wooden bucket I had seen him floating on the surface, also before the surface was disturbed my face I saw way down reflected. (*Japan* 34–35)

In a later poetry collection, Kyger writes:

> No one was watching the tortillas.
>
> You were.
>
> That's my new name. No One.
>
> That's my new name. No One.
> (*Going On*, 41)

A more pointed consideration of the differing perceptions of male and female Beat writers occurs in Kyger's "October 29, Wednesday." Kyger sits meditating, a spectator to "a quick demonstration march" led by Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg, who are soon followed by an obsequious throng. Kyger dryly notes the seriousness of these "leaders" and the adoration of the "followers":

> Mr. Ginsberg
> and Mr. Snyder frown, not so much? As they are on their busy way, as groups of people pour their respect and devotion towards them. Pour, pour—they're busy drinking it up all day in teacups. Do you think we've sent these young ladies and gentlemen in the right direction?

While the men are worshipped, the poet completes her meditation with an effortless, unobserved levitation a foot off the ground.

> With my back against a stone wall
> in a courtyard, I am closing my eyes and—Now if you will
> just observe me, I will move up off the ground.

In her poem, Kyger, as a mature student of Buddhism, elevates effortlessly. Her labors have borne fruit. Throughout her extremely productive career, Kyger's development as a poet has always been on the less ego-centered trajectory. She has emphasized: "Trust the words; words have their own strength, so it's not a matter of personality to carry [them]" ("Three Versions" 66).

As mentioned above, Kyger's early identity as a poet was forged in the specific milieu of poetry workshops, poetry readings, and local poetry circles. Because so few women writers emerged at the time from this sort of writing environment, it is worth examining Kyger's experience and the attention she generated. Starting in the autumn of 1957, Kyger attended the poetry workshop grouped around San Francisco Renaissance poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, and she worked to develop her own style in that particular hothouse atmosphere of literary gurus and devout followers. Scholars such as Michael Davidson have explored the tensions and rifts among West Coast writers at this time: Gender hostilities sometimes split the largely homosexual group that followed Duncan, while the influential Black Mountain faculty had mostly drifted East, leaving divided affiliations and resentments in its wake.

The other women writers who, with varied degrees of success, joined in or interacted with the Duncan-Spicer circle included Helen Adams, Madeline Gleason, ruth weiss, Lenore Kandel, Denise Levertov, and Josephine Miles. Levertov's visit to the group in 1957 prompted Jack Spicer's notorious reading of his singularly misogynistic poem, "For Joe," from his "Admonitions" series.[5] Kyger has commented in an almost off-hand manner just how tough being part of a group could be. Initially, Kyger shared poems informally after work at one of the North Beach, San Francisco-area poetry bars, The Place. After an introduction by poet John Weiners to the more established West Coast poets, Duncan and Spicer, Kyger ventured into their gathering.

> Duncan and Spicer more or less ran the meetings with a heavy hand. They were our seniors. If you wanted the Word, those were the two guys. They ran the meetings so that they didn't disintegrate into the babblings of 23-year-olds. They would read what they had written, and everybody else would read what *they* had written. And you would be severely criticized. A lot of people would be so heavily criticized that they wouldn't come back. So there was a definite sense of the kind of poem that was wanted. (Berkson 325)

It took perseverance and confidence for Kyger to stay her course, but she had both apparent talent and the dedication to improving her craft. In his book, *As Testimony: The Poem & The Scene* (1964), Duncan recorded the debut reading of Kyger's poem, "The Maze," at one of the group's Sunday gatherings, this one at the apartment of poet John Weiners. In its own way, it became a literary event, convincing both Kyger and the other poets of her abilities.

It was February 23, 1958. Duncan describes Kyger in her habitual stance of kneeling and holding her text before her, and he pauses to note how this devotional image reminds him of Edith Sitwell's comment on becoming a Catholic: "I had to kneel to something." He praises Kyger's dedication to her craft: "Intellect then, if it does not kneel to us, can kneel to the poem" (14). Kyger, intensely focused on her words, reads to the mostly male assemblage her poem about a women driven mad by expectations of passive fidelity. The response, as described by Duncan, is "a furor." The effect of her words was immediate, Duncan writes: "Joanne Kyger's poem began 'I saw'; the sound of awe lingerd [*sic*] as a base tone" (18).

"The Maze" became part of Kyger's first poetry collection, *The Tapestry and The Web* (1965), in which Kyger revisits and revises Homeric epic myth, adding layers of personal, reflective imagery and references. Kyger creates a dynamic Penelope, more fueled by Eros than the nobly stoic spouse of Homer's epic, who guards her wifely virtue and nightly unweaves her daily tapestry work:

> She
> tortures
> the curtains of the window
> shreds them
> like some
> insane insect
> creates a
> demented web
> from the thin folds
> her possessed fingers
> clawing she
> thrusts them away with
> sharp jabs of long pins
> to the walls.
> (*Tapestry* 5)

Kyger re-evaluates the passivity of Penelope's patience for Odysseus, asking in the poem "Pan as the Son of Penelope," "Just HOW / solitary was her wait?" (*Tapestry* 31). Kyger's Penelope is wily and in control: "She knew what she was doing." Kyger's heroine dallies, gets distracted, and indulges:

> I notice Someone got to her that
>
> barrel chested he-goat prancing
> around with his reed pipes
>
> is no fantasy of small talk.
> More the result of BIG talk
> and the absence of her husband.
> (*Tapestry* 31)

Throughout *The Tapestry and The Web*, Kyger essays new versions of Penelope's long wait for the return of her husband, imagining more and more daring accounts: Penelope as a cheating wife; Penelope giving birth to a son fathered by all the suitors; Penelope slowly going mad: "singing high / melodies / from the center of a / cobweb shawl." Through the central metaphor of dreaming and weaving, Kyger explores burgeoning female creativity: "They are constructing a craft/. . . / The women pull by hand long strings"; "I watch the weaving, the woman who sits at her loom / What was her name? the goddess I mean"; "Falling into her weaving / creating herself as a fold in her tapestry" (*Going On* 5, 4; *Tapestry* 31). The poems of *The Tapestry and The Web* grow from the centering mythic narratives, which, in Kyger's chatty, colloquial, Beat-influenced idiom, are grounded in personal concerns and a sense of immediacy:

> after while maybe I'll have
> the chokidar bring up some tea and a plum
> and a whole bunch of candy and stuff
> and you'd just better stay down there
> and get all crummy and muddy
> ("Caption for a Miniature" *Going On* 7)

For Michael Davidson, Kyger, in this particular act of reading, became Penelope:

> The thematics of transformation, the imagery of weaving, the interplay of pronouns all pertain specifically to the woman writer in a largely male enclave. Kyger *is* Penelope surrounded by suitors (male writers) whom she transforms or enchants through her poem. That Kyger had to render this history in mythic terms may very well relate to certain modernist practices favored within the Spicer-Duncan circle, but it also points to an attempt to subvert the authority of that male fraternity in which she, like Helen Adam, worked. (1989, 190)

Often unmentioned in accounts of artistic movements is how one can be subsequently marked by the turmoil and rupture which a group can create. The mature poet, whom fellow poet Ted Berrigan salutes in some birthday

lines written for her thirty-seventh birthday, is the still-prickly survivor of such a milieu:

> JOANNE, *a fragment*
>
> Joanne is not always amused by poetry readings
> not always amused by poems, not even (not always)
> by poets.
> Like all terrific people, she *is* easily amused: but
> since she is so much a poet, poems, poetry & poetry
> readings (by poets) often seem to make her walk around
> in little circles, muttering, or, look down under the chair
> constantly, if she is sitting down. (Berrigan 19)

Davidson has noted that Kyger effectively sidesteps the practices of modernism favored by Duncan's group and, instead of utilizing reference to myth to shore up a sense of cultural survival and endurance, Kyger stamps Penelope's story with a personal narrative of female artistic power and perspective. This transformative arc of personal development also lends itself to the arc of Kyger's development as a poet through her association with various sources of influence.

Although ultimately it is the personal narrative in Kyger's work, an impulsive and exhilarating voice, that bridges her navigation of these various literary and formal influences, it is nonetheless useful to register these influences. As mentioned above, Robert Duncan, Bay Area experimentalist, Black Mountain College participant, latent romantic, and forceful proponent of a poetics of highly charged, immediate responses, was indeed an influence. Another major influence was Kyger's husband from 1960 to 1964, the West Coast Beat poet, Gary Snyder, author of the poetry collection *Riprap*, student of Zen Buddhism, and cohort and mentor to Jack Kerouac. Critic Sherman Paul has identified the essence of the formal friction between these two influential writers, and perhaps Duncan and Snyder function as warp and weft in the cloth of Kyger's early work. Paul explains that "Duncan's figure for his art is weaving, loomcraft—think of spiders and spinsters" while Gary Snyder attempts to assimilate "the hard work of 'roughs' . . . [in]to a poetic practice" that somehow bears the muscular imprint of physical effort (158). Both strains are apparent in Kyger's early work. But Kyger's achievement in *The Tapestry and The Web* is the creation of a book-length, cohesive work that is autobiographical, laconic, colloquial, grounded in classical mythology, and yet personal.

Kyger's relationship with poet Philip Whalen is more one of creative interaction than of influence. Kyger and Whalen share a close friendship of decades; Anne Waldman, the East Coast poet who came of age at the tail end of the Beat Generation, calls them "bosom pals." Both share the experience of the Duncan-Spicer circle, living in the East-West house, sojourns in Japan, and the study of Zen (Whalen was ordained a Buddhist monk in 1973). Their work shares some similarities, as does their eschewal of the pursuit of

poetry as an academic career. Whalen's work has been described as being observational, a log of daily events, a record of travels, and influenced by Kerouac's efforts at spontaneous notation (Clark 1999). Where Kyger demonstrates irony and wit, Whalen is more of a disarmingly comic clown: "I tetter I dangle I jingle / Fidget with my fingers ears and nose / Make little repairs—tape or glue / And the floor is filthy again" (Whalen, "Composition," *Selected Poems* 95). Tom Devaney's description of Whalen's work can also illuminate Kyger: Each poem, Devaney explains, has its own internal logic and its own descriptive power, whether relating observed events or states of consciousness. Whalen, though, is perhaps several degrees more true to the Zen tradition of mindful examination of everyday events: "I destroy myself, the universe (an egg) / And time—to get an answer" ("Sourdough Mountain Lookout," *Selected Poems* 18). Kyger seems content within an idiom that is somewhat quirkier, less focused on the idea of documentation, equally personal, and at times more elusive. She accepts her efforts, imperfect or otherwise:

> I like to sit
> with the birds in the morning back door sun and
> if no other thoughts impede
> that's ok too, even what
> you're *supposed* to do
> in the grand tradition
> of empty content from mind
> "On reading Enough Said, for Joanne (as Per Usual)
> For Philip Whalen (as Per . . .)"
> (*Just Space* 42)

The breakthrough point for Kyger, her transcending of influence, came when she realized the means to incorporate into her work spontaneity, and her own burgeoning sense of confidence. Kyger has commented: "It took me until I was about 30 before poetry became an identity I was within. Before that, it was my own longings for it" (Berkson 327). By her 1970 collection, *Places to Go*, Kyger had forged a new voice. Still working often with mythic sources, she offers a heady and fresh perspective. It was at this point that critic and poet Alicia Ostriker praised Kyger's new work in *Partisan Review*:

> Risking folly, let us propose that Joanna [*sic*] Kyger is a genius, though a weird one.
>
> The places to go in *Places to Go* are various head trips. . . . All the work in *Places to Go* is experimental. Handling it is like handling a porcupine traveling at the speed of light, because in addition to her technical leaping about from one kind of form to another, (and favoring forms with long lines distinguishable from prose only by sheer condensation and subtlety of rhythmic play), Kyger typically writes in 3-D stream of consciousness, letting myths, memories, wild imagined scenarios and shrewd observations all surface together. . . . Kyger is not "disciplined," but she is a radically original combination of symbolist and comedienne. (273–75)

In *Places to Go*, Kyger's autobiographical and colloquial imprint on classical sources takes on a new confidence and brio, and her sense of idiom takes root in both poetic language and poetic line. Kyger's development of the poetic line deserves some attention, as, coupled with her energetic, often giddy, conveyance of immediate events, the appearance and structure of her poems can overwhelm. Ostriker refers above to Kyger's predilection for "long lines" in her poems. Davidson additionally comments "she wants her line to be gestural" (188). Duncan observed the use of long vowels and a structural methodology he referred to as "base tone." Bill Berkson has noted her achievement of a specific fluidity: "a new limber gesture. The lines bounce and zing" (326). Theorist Kathleen Fraser has alluded to the painterly quality Kyger manages to bring to the distribution of individual printed words on the page. She has suggested that it would be fruitful to apply her observations about poet Susan Howe to the work of Joanne Kyger:

> Howe takes a whole page as a canvas . . . and positions words as in a field—a minefield or mind field—in which the line does not present itself as continuous flow but pinpoints, frames, or locates one vulnerable word at a time for its own resonance, time value, visual texture, and meaning, apart from its connection to what precedes and follows it. She insists in slowing down both her perception and the reader's. She leads us into paying attention to both the fragility and the strength of each word she has recovered and unclothed of its assumed historic habits. She asks what is gloss and what is babble; what does it mean for women poets to go beyond traditional ideas of "serious" and "well-crafted" verse? How are we undone, slighted by traditional constraints and what is left in the ensuing silence? (161–62)

The evolution of line in Kyger's work reflects, simply, her confidence in her own poetic instincts. She elaborated in a 1974 panel discussion that she had moved on from what she called "the linear line":

> At this point the kind of space that interests me is the kind of space that vibrates its meaning. It's the one-liner or the sampler on the wall. . . . It just stays there for a long time. You can go back into that one line and it will keep giving off its overtones, so it doesn't have to sit there and be connected. It's connected but it's a different kind of space. (Berkson 328)

Kyger's collection of poems from 1979 to 1989 is titled, tellingly, *Just Space*.[6] Brenda Knight has referred to the "snapshot" quality of Kyger's mature work, powerful ideas packed into "precise imagery" (199). In Kyger's much-lauded "The Pigs for Circe in May," hunger pangs prompt mythic visions and considerations of female empowerment. As in much of Kyger's work, the diurnal/domestic vies with the epic/mythic.

> I almost ruined the stew and Where
> is my peanut butter sandwich I tore through the back of the car
> I could not believe
> there was One slice of my favorite brown bread and my stomach and

I jammed the tin foil and bread wrappers into the stew
and no cheese and I simply could not believe
and you Never
TALK when my friends are over.
This is known as camping in Yosemite.
Already I wish there was something done.
Odysseus found a stag on his way to the ship
I think of people *sighing* over poetry, *using* it,
don't know what it's for. Well,
Hermes forewarned him
. . . . . .
'Circe says its ok to stay'
. . . . . .
I mean, I admire her
. . . . . .
with a voice like a woman
from the sun and the ocean
She is busy at the center, planning out great
stories to amuse herself, and a lot of pets,
a neat household, gracious
honey and wine
She offers.

(*Places to Go* 9–10)

Kyger's mature work is spontaneous and lyrical, and both facets were noted when Kyger's *Going On, Selected Poems 1958–80* was selected by Robert Creeley as one of the winners of the National Poetry Series competition in 1983. Transcending influence, Kyger has fashioned her highly personal body of work. She has continued to challenge conventions regarding poetic line, sometimes presenting a notion of a natural, breathed line, one less arduous than Ginsberg's characteristic long exhalations. Composing a tribute to the recently deceased Ginsberg, Kyger resisted the lure that enticed other poets to imitate Ginsberg's line. She begins: "Belonged to everyone who read his poems, listened / to his long breath tones . . ." before asserting her own snappy pace: "And there's a rapid banging at the door on a dark and / lonely / night 9:30PM—'Don't you want to save / the Headwater's Forest? / . . . / I resent door solicitations' " (Kyger 1998). In the face of loss, one takes a breath, and life continues. Kyger's collection *The Wonderful Focus of You* (1980) concludes with a poem called "And with March a Decade in Bolinas," which addresses her notion of line:

The back door bangs
So we've made a place to live
here in the greened out 70's
Trying to talk in the tremulous
morality of the present
Great Breath. I give you, Great Breath!

(*Going On* 85)

The content of her work has always reflected immediate concerns in the poet's life. Andrew Schelling has described Kyger as "the pre-eminent living poet of the journal," lauding her patient attention to daily details as part of "an old nearly underground tradition" he traces back to classic diarists of Japan such as Sei Shonagon. Kyger has also continued the project of her earlier Asian diaries and used her work to document her immediate artistic community. In 1969 Kyger moved with her second husband, painter Jack Boyce, to the coastal village of Bolinas, in Marin County, north of San Francisco. Since the 1960s, the area has attracted artists, writers, and environmentalists, and it has evolved into a notable bohemia.[7] Kyger continues to live there, remaining immersed in relationships with fellow writers and sharing concerns for a stable, environmentally aware community. Bill Berkson, who shared a communal house with Kyger at one point in downtown Bolinas, has described her as a "tireless social presence" campaigning for community causes and cohesion (327). Her life as a poet in a community of poets continues to seep into her writing:

The Poets of Bolinas?
Hurled against unresisting walls
into the neighbors' lives, therefore living
in the same house, need these words to fly
past the sink, into the casual flower
arrangement of the eternal surfaces
for breathing in life, My life,
which still wonders at the relentless role
of being born human, once again.
("My how the days fly by in
Life Time" *Just Space* 18)

A major thematic thread in Kyger's work describes conflicting impulses toward stability and rootlessness, which circle recurrently around her desire to write. (It is the same tension Anne Waldman refers to in her above-mentioned introduction to Kyger's *Journals*: the poet's desire for quietude versus her inability to sit still.) Kyger frequently identifies these as essential creative urges and repeatedly allows herself to devise a temporary symbolic dwelling, or a sense of domestic comforts, in her poetry.

I know I do not suffer more than anyone
in the whole world
But this morning I had to have first thing
2 cigarettes, half a joint,
a poached egg and corned beef hash, 1 piece toast,
2 cups tea
Jung, Williams, shells, stones,
2 slugs rum, depression, rest of joint,
cigarette, 7 up, and it's only 10 o'clock
Because I wanted to write a poem

Because I want something to come out of me
. . . . . .
A home, a house. I talked with Jack Kerouac
last night. We were sitting under
A rack of clothes, as if it were a clothes
closet
. . . . . .
The more I slow down the harder it is
to all of a sudden move again.
Smaller & smaller until the
speck inside dwindles so small
("Sunday" *Desecheo Notebook* n.p.)

Her dialogue with Beat influences and Beat writers continues to infuse her work, including the more recent collections, *Phenomenological* (1989) and *Just Space* (1991). Linda Russo, introducing an edition of the online magazine, *Jacket*, devoted to Kyger, notes in her work the attention to Beat voices, balanced with a continued focus on "the new" and the evolution of the individual. She describes it as "the graceful persistence of a continually evolving poetic, one that lets the self go through listening to what's there" (4). One can cast this as a statement covering the major influences in Kyger's work: a quietude drawn from her Zen background; her immersion in, and separation from, various dynamics of the group; the absorption of Beat poetics in her rejection of poetry as an academic undertaking; Kyger's own resilient and transcendent wit and irony. Although it is problematic to identify Kyger wholly and completely as a Beat poet, she reflects Beat influences, and a Beat context certainly helps in reading and appreciating her work. She acknowledges that she was a part of what was going on in San Francisco: "There is a life you can make as a writer that doesn't have to do with the academic tradition which was prevalent then. So it was the beginning of a kind of dropping out" (Russo interview 6). And Kyger, true to the individualism of her poetic voice, also avows her own singularity:

> Making up a literary history is the phenomenon of looking back and trying to make a picture of a puzzle. So trying to ask someone now "what did you feel like then"—I didn't think about it in that way, I thought about it as a practice of my own writing that I was interested in, and certainly a lot of the ideas that came through the "Beat Generation." . . . No doubting that it was a great cultural stirring that was going on, the phenomena of painting and writing and jazz. (6–7)

The Beat Generation arguably grants context to the emergence of Kyger as an important American poet.

I have remarked elsewhere that the breakthrough of the women writers of the Beat Generation was to reap from their bohemian milieu the strength to counter self-suppression (1998). I've noted here Kyger's quest to find her

"voice," both in terms of poetic identity and independence from a group politic, although Kyger never dissociates from her sense of community. In his pictorial history of literary San Francisco, Lawrence Ferlinghetti includes a 1979 photo of the Woman's Group in Bolinas, some five dozen women including Kyger standing in front of the sprawling Smiley's Schooner Saloon. Ferlinghetti notes that "the individuals of this power group," which included painters as well as journalists and poets, "inspired many a male writer (as well as themselves)" (*Literary San Francisco* 224). The women writers of the Beat Generation have moved beyond existing as a subset within Beat Generation studies. Kyger has been hailed variously as a pioneer, a heroine, and a modern free-spirit who found herself as an artist in the Californian atmosphere of noncompliance and independence that a generation before had shaped Isadora Duncan. Her *India and Japan Journals* have recently been republished, and 2002 has seen the publication of a new selected poems.[8] Her reputation can only grow, whether as a part of the continued interest in Beat Generation writers, or perhaps purely for the sake of her own successful, if unintentional, "career." The next phase to be studied and assessed is the role of Kyger and her peers as influences themselves, as models, guides, mentors, and leaders in the direction of new poetic voices and expressions. It is the yet-to-be-told story of Kyger's Penelope confidently fulfilling her promise, enacting her craft, inspiring her suitors: "She knew what she was doing."

## Notes

1. For discussions of the specific contributions and achievements of women writers of the Beat Generation, see Friedman and Knight.
2. Kyger catalogued the sometimes contradictory influences that collided in her own life and work in her interview with Linda Russo (2000), listing Gary Snyder's interest in "Pacific Rim ideas," Ginsberg's focus on expanding consciousness, Buddhism as devotion and a way to evaluate "what your mind does," drugs, and dropping out (6).
3. Robert Duncan's unpublished manuscript, "The Underside," Rare Book Collection, State University of New York, Buffalo, quoted in Davidson, 1989, 176.
4. "No one was watching the tortillas" and "October 29, Wednesday" were originally published in Kyger's collection, *All This Every Day* (*Big Sky* 1975). The latter poem has also been published with the title, "October 29, 1963, Wednesday."
5. See Davidson, 1989, 172–74 for a description of Spicer's reading and Levertov's response.
6. This is arguably a post-Beat work. A number of surviving Beat writers including Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder had stated in articles, interviews, and speeches from the mid-1970s on that the Beat Generation had ceased to function as a conscious movement. As Ann Charters has noted, though, the connections and friendships between many of the Beat and San Francisco Renaissance writers have endured (1993, 590). Kyger, for example, has taught at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, which is based at the Buddhist Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and was established by Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg.

7. Anne Waldman includes Bolinas in "A Literary Guide to Beat Places" in *The Beat Book* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996). She notes that Joanne Kyger, still residing in Bolinas, is "a compendium of the lore, magic, and literary history of the place" (358).
8. Journals republished as *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals 1960–1964* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2000). Joanne Kyger, *As Ever*: *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2002).

Chapter 6

# Lenore Kandel's *The Love Book*: Psychedelic Poetics, Cosmic Erotica, and Sexual Politics in the Mid-sixties Counterculture

*Ronna C. Johnson*

## Introduction

The Beat and San Francisco Renaissance literary movements emerged simultaneously at the legendary 1955 Six Gallery poetry reading in San Francisco. Allen Ginsberg, who read for the first time the new, as yet unpublished *Howl*, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, and Kenneth Rexroth, the elder statesman of the San Francisco bohemian scene, made "six poets at Six Gallery" (Maynard 55) the avant-garde literary premier of the era. A year later in another landmark event, San Francisco police seized *Howl and Other Poems* at City Lights Books on charges of obscenity, rallying writers on both coasts to defend artistic freedom and publicizing the literary category Beat. Well into the mid-1960s, celebrated seizures and arrests for obscenity involving works by William S. Burroughs, Lenore Kandel, and Michael McClure marked Beat and San Francisco Renaissance literature as transgressive writing that departed from or rejected conventional standards for literary art—and writing whose words, ideas, and subjects offended Cold War establishment culture. This familiar narrative of Beat and San Francisco Renaissance literary emergence, of noisy avant-garde literature and its censorship, normalizes the idea of male artists as the sole poetic progenitors.[1] However, as the poet Lenore Kandel saliently attests, women writers were radical exponents of Beat and San Francisco Renaissance poetics; at times also flouting censorship codes, they advanced the cultural reforms and oppositions the movements engaged. Moreover, challenging

conventions about female passivity, sexual equality, and subjectivity, women's avant-garde literary departures established the proto-feminist dimensions of Beat.

Bringing avant-garde impulses of 1950s Beat poetics into the radical counterculture of the '60s, Kandel elucidated the incipient feminism linking Beat to hippie ethics and aesthetics. A prophetic, incantatory poet in the tradition of Ginsberg, she developed a psychedelicized aesthetics and cosmic discourse from her Beat origins, expanding Beat's artistic and cultural reach and shaping '60s literary utterance. Her 1966 collection *The Love Book*, a graphic paean to heterosexual love grounded in Beat poetics and Eastern mysticism, was confiscated by San Francisco police for obscenity, repeating a decade later the seminal Beat event of the *Howl* seizure. Yet, while also sexually descriptive and brandishing common sex words, *The Love Book* crucially diverges from Beat aesthetics as defined by *Howl*, announcing the ascendancy of female sexual subjectivity that, although anticipated in Beat bohemia, came to fruition only in the sixties. Kandel's unabashed lyrics and defiant, uninhibited vernacular diction accord with the hippie emergence, heralding sexually liberated women and taboo words in the literature of the new counterculture. *The Love Book*'s origins in female sexuality and sexual emancipation, its publicized seizure and obscenity trial, its female author's controversial use of profane sex words in poetry—these illuminate Kandel's Beatness and her role in the transmutation of Beat Generation ethics into the rebel freedoms of the '60s counterculture.

*The Love Book*'s confiscation and trial in 1966 transpired in a context of censorship proceedings against literature from two generations of Beat movement writers. In 1962 charges were brought against Grove Press and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* in Boston and Los Angeles (Skerl 1985), and in 1965 police suppressions of poet Michael McClure's play *The Beard* occurred in San Francisco and Berkeley. *The Beard* was defended at trial by the American Civil Liberties Union, but was closed by police in a 1967 Los Angeles run (McClure, *Lighting* 294). McClure regarded the obscenity prosecutions of Beat writing as the liberation of the dramatic and literary arts: "*The Beard* cases were to the theater what *Howl* was to poetry and *Naked Lunch* was to the novel" (295). His exclusion of *The Love Book* from this survey typifies hegemonic assumptions about gender and literary production and distorts postwar literary innovation. Kandel was a female Beat who published poetry sufficiently transgressive to earn legal harassment, like Ginsberg, Burroughs, and McClure. In this, *The Love Book* case was for (hetero)sexual female agency and for the hippie counterculture that descended from the Beat Generation what *Howl* was for male Beat (homo)sexual freedom and what *The Beard* was for (hetero)sexual Beat masculinity. While McClure brought heterosexual male energy into Beat discourse, Kandel enunciated female bohemian experience and sensibility, and reincarnated the 1950's hipster as a '60s peace-and-love hippie.

## From Beat North Beach to Hippie Haight-Ashbury: The Age of Anxiety Meets the Age of Aquarius

The legendary San Francisco Human Be-In happened on Saturday, January 14, 1967, in Golden Gate Park's Polo Fields. The Be-In, or Gathering of the Tribes, in which about fifteen thousand people spent the afternoon listening to rock music and celebrating a union between Berkeley radicals and Haight-Ashbury peace-and-love hippies, was a prelude to the Summer of Love, the zenith of San Francisco's countercultural emergence, during which Timothy Leary, in his first Bay Area appearance, offered his gospel: "Turn on, tune in, drop out" (Cohen 90; "They Came" 3). The Be-In was planned to effect what Hunter S. Thompson called the big move "to relocate San Francisco's new Bohemia . . . figuratively or literally, from Berkeley to the Haight-Ashbury, from pragmatism to mysticism, from politics to dope, from the hang-ups of protest to the peaceful disengagement of love, nature and spontaneity" (392). Among the officiating politicos and activists, mystics and acid gurus, were well-known Beat poets Ginsberg, Snyder, and McClure—in whose ranks was mustered Lenore Kandel, the only woman to speak from the historic stage. Kandel's erotic, mystical poetry was made famous when it was seized by police the previous November for being in violation of state obscenity codes. Now she defiantly read from *The Love Book* and proclaimed that the god of the new age was Love (Perry 126). The San Francisco *Chronicle* published a picture of Kandel at the Be-In with the caption "Love Poetess Addresses Crowd at Polo Field: Love and Activism Devotees Listen To Writer Lenore Kandel," inscribing the poet and her free-love poetry as exemplars ("They Came" 3). But although she came to voice in the mid-1960s hippie advent, Kandel was launched in Beat scenes and aesthetics, perspectives and poetics, which she brought to the Haight-Ashbury counterculture and distilled in *The Love Book*.

Kandel is among a group of writers born in the 1930s who constitute a second generation of Beat writing, also including Diane di Prima, Hettie Jones, Bonnie Bremser, McClure, and Snyder. Chronologically and artistically succeeding the first generation Beat writers Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs, the writers of the second generation developed within the Beat literary milieu after the movement had coalesced.[2] Kandel was born in New York City in 1932 and spent her adolescence in Los Angeles. She returned to New York City in the 1950s to study at the New School for Social Research, and then came back to California late in the decade, moving to San Francisco in 1960, where she has resided since. She lived in two bohemian artistic centers in San Francisco during the 1960s: North Beach and Haight-Ashbury. She was part of the North Beach Beat scene through her residence in East-West House, her relationship with Beat poet Lew Welch, and her connection through him to Kerouac, who made her a character (Ramona Schwarz) in his 1962 novel *Big Sur*.

Kandel's poems of her North Beach period, first published in mimeographed broadsides, are distinctively Beat/New York hipster in mood and

texture. Donna Nance notes that "running through most of [Kandel's early] poems [is] a sense of fragile hope combined with anticipated loss—a definition, perhaps, of Beat sensibility" (271). Beat Generation doubt is felt in elegies such as "First They Slaughtered the Angels" or "Junk/Angel" or "Blues for Sister Sally," which bear the hip street smarts and incantatory rhythms, the contempt of conformity and anti-authority contentiousness of Ginsberg, and the nihilism of Welch. Through perspectives rooted in female sexuality and women's lives, Kandel's treatment of iconic Beat subjects, forms, and dictions, with particular reference to Ginsberg, revises and transforms Beat aesthetics. Annexing Beat Generation topics—fornication, masturbation, addiction, marriage—and its male images and contexts to represent female hipsters—sisters in her proto-feminist lexicon—Kandel's early work makes subjects of the usually unseen female Beats, conceiving them as nihilistic casualties and sororal candidates for hipster canonization.

Kandel's performance of hipster rites in "Junk/Angel" is a visionary confession on a quintessential Beat Generation subject, the vampiric junkie whose addiction is ennobling and mythic: "I have seen the junkie angel winging his devious path over cities / his greenblack pinions parting the air with the sound of fog / I have seen him plummet to earth . . . pausing to share the orisons of some ecstatic acolyte" (*Word Alchemy* 60). Amplifying tropes of early '50s Beat writing, the poem's Ginsbergian vision and illumination fuse with Kerouacian spiritual supplication, reconceiving the Burroughsian junkie adept as "angel." "Blues for Sister Sally" depicts the female subject with the familiar hipster discourses that had been applied almost exclusively to men, and deploys the repetition and spiritual invocation that distinguishes the third section of *Howl*: "she bears the stigma (holy holy) of the raving christ / (holy holy) / holy needle / holy powder / holy vein" (*Word Alchemy* 61). Although Kandel radically shortens the line and uses the parenthetical insert, the alternation and rhythm of "holy" refer inescapably to Ginsberg, as in, from "Footnote to Howl": "The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!" (*Collected Poems* 21). But Kandel centers the Beat Generation compassion and idealization of *Howl* on the connection between the female poet and the poem's female subject, who would be installed in a pantheon: "how shall we canonize our sister who is not quite dead / who fornicates with strangers / who masturbates with needles / who is afraid of the dark and wears her long hair soft and black / against her bloodless face" (*Word Alchemy* 62). This black-haired, pale-faced junkie girl is the image of Beat "cool" that Kerouac identified but also marginalized in *The Subterraneans*,[3] while in Kandel, this figure becomes heroic, a "sister" in ecstasy and suffering. Recasting well-known Beat literary discourses, Kandel's focus on women and gender augments, revitalizes, and reinvents the Beat Generation subject.

Similarly, the prose poem "Morning Song" iterates the Beat Generation's antipathy to bourgeois culture in a meditation on marriage and the "wife" through typography, punctuation, and syntax as well as in mocking images of

feminine and domestic culture:

> Eyes shut as an unborn bird he lay unmoving and examined the presence of his wife. wife. WIFE. WiFe.
> wife. She smelled of moderate talcum powder and pale perfume. Saturday movie theaters. Shoe sweat and popcorn. Undertones of good toast and a rhyme of bacon.
> She existed.
> Somewhere directly beside him, adjoining his right flank and chest and outflung arm lay a woman. his. wife.
> (*Word Alchemy* 63)

Beat writing rejects domesticity, especially the gendered binary of husband/wife; in literature by male Beat writers the "wife" is a figure of imprisonment and conformity. Kandel's bivalent treatment of this trope installs the male Beat Generation version by taking the husband's perspective, but then subverts it by implying that the male forges his own chains, invents his own oppressive "wife," a zombie throwback to Adam's rib ("right flank / and chest") with the obedient conventionality of a Stepford wife. The repetition of the signifier "wife" in its several typographic forms contends female negation and emphasizes the constructedness of gender's categories. Poetic play on the highlighted signifier rejects bourgeois marriage as demeaning to women, a usage mediating and revising male Beat misogyny with proto-feminist rebuttal.

By the early 1960s in San Francisco, the North Beach Beat scene had attenuated and Kandel moved to the Haight-Ashbury district, the mecca of the countercultural hippie/Digger community, a collective formed to subvert capitalist ownership by collecting and distributing for free necessities such as food, clothing, household goods, tools, and repair parts. Reflecting the cultural shift in which the 1950s Beat bohemia gave way to the new hippie culture of the '60s, she married Billy Fritsch (Sweet William), poet, longshoreman, and member of the Hell's Angels, the notorious motorcycle gang that had cachet in the hippie counterculture. At this time, Kandel wrote *The Love Book* in which, signifying a cultural transition focused through aesthetics, the tough, nihilistic disdain of the '50s hipster gave way to the '60s Love Generation by means of an Eastern mysticism-inflected, LSD-influenced, psychedelicized poetics of Dionysian sex and love. *The Love Book* was published privately by a small Haight-Ashbury press, Jeff Berner's Stolen Paper Review, in November 1966, just months before the January 1967 Human Be-In and the epoch-making Summer of Love ("San Francisco" 27). The volume was hand-printed and sold for a dollar; it had nearly translucent dry-paper pages, and its cover featured a wood-blocked image in a typical style of the day: a dreamy, Eastern-inspired likeness of Krishna embracing from behind a naked woman. The design and look of the book—tripped-out, hand-wrought, love-saturated—attest to its origins in the psychedelic hippie counterculture that superseded Beat North Beach as a locus for avant-garde

arts and writing in San Francisco. The book was seized as "hard-core pornography" (Bess, 17 Nov. 1966, 18) both at City Lights Books and at The Psychedelic Shop ("San Francisco" 27), a seizure that linked the two countercultures of the poetry's aesthetic and cultural citizenships. The arrest of three clerks[4] charged with pandering provoked defiant local response and made Kandel a Haight-Ashbury *cause célèbre* who illuminated hippie mores of sexual revolution, mystical conjugal rapture, and free speech.

A testament to its mid-'60s era, *The Love Book* merges hippie romanticism and women's orgasmic pleasure with four-letter words, spinning these in a mystical, psychedelic sex chant. The legal controversy focused on the book's subject matter—heterosexual intercourse—and diction, which made free use of the verb "fuck" as well as slang for genitalia such as "cock" and "cunt." For Kandel, "fuck" was "a word with a beautiful meaning," "a love word" not a "put-down word" (May 6); whereas she found words of war to be "dirty": "Bomb and hate are two of the worst. The war in Vietnam is an obscenity, my poetry isn't" (Gilbert 1966, 26). Male Beat writers had used the verb-signifier "fuck" with more graphic and transgressive intentions. Ginsberg and Burroughs published work whose objectionable language and images were enlisted to depict homosexual desire and intercourse. And McClure, who, like Kandel, had disputed "being censored over an artwork about eros and the divine [*The Beard*] when there is bombing of fishing villagers with napalm in Southeast Asia" (*Lighting* 290), anticipated her breakthrough use of forbidden sex words to depict the ostensibly non-literary acts of heterosexual intercourse. But McClure used the taboo words in ways that glorify male dominance and retain the '50s endorsement of phallic power.

It is this that makes McClure's poetry Beat, as in his 1959 paean to heterosexual congress, the long poem *Dark Brown*, his second poetry book. McClure recounts that because of its sexuality and profanity *Dark Brown* "was nearly impossible to publish in 1959, though it was called one of the great American poems by Jack Kerouac, who tried to get a publisher for it. It was a visionary and sexual poem, and when it was finally published [in 1961 by The Auerhahn Press] it had to be sold under-the-counter to those interested in poetry" (*Lighting* 295). The work's "visionary" stanzas conclude with the "sexual" poems "Fuck Ode" and "A Garland," which use explicit sex language and depict intercourse. *Dark Brown*'s difference from *The Love Book* is its hegemonic of male phallic power. The imperatives of "Fuck Ode" render the female partner invisible, a sensory orifice, a slave to the master's narcissistic command:

> Open your mouth to me You/I. Let me lay the huge
> head of my cock
> on your tongue again in blackness. Swell till it comes white spurts
> in blackness . . . Spread your legs. The shape
> you make them/I/for me. I feel the hair with my tongue my
> Cock as I enter. Oh past, past. There is one tense. There is one.
> I/HUGE FIGURE FUCKING IN BLACKNESS . . .
>
> (McClure, *Three* 229)

The inequitable binary identifying and segregating the sexual agent and receptacle, as male and female, respectively, clarifies the heterosexual finish of the poem; the sexual experience depicted is, like that in writings of D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, based on the conventional patriarchal sexual politics that silence and subordinate women. "Fuck Ode" literalizes what Julia Kristeva has termed the " 'phallic' position" that obtains to those in a "culture where the speaking subjects are conceived of as masters of their speech" (165); the poem unironically depicts the penis acting like a phallus in a demonstration of the poetic subject's mastery of his desire. The nihilism and visual abstractness of the climactic line "I/HUGE FIGURE FUCKING IN BLACKNESS" give the poem Beat tenor.

Seven years later in *The Love Book*, Kandel pursues and wields a hippie-inflected love diction and erotic outlook, offering Beat sex, drugs, and mysticism not as palliatives for the losses and risks of Cold War life but as a blissful panacea for modern society. Kandel deepened her counterculture ethic of free love and poetic liberation by interpellating the Vietnam war as the context of '60s pleasures. The poet installs pleasure and love over "the national pastime of death":

> . . . the choices of the young are deep and hard. At eighteen the young men must decide whether they will enter into the national pastime of death. A great many of the young are choosing to manifest a different way of life, one motivated toward pleasure, toward enlightenment, and toward mutual concern, instead of accepting the world of war and personal despair which has been offered them by the majority of their elders. (*Word Alchemy* viii)

Decrying war-mongering "elders," Kandel cites the generation gap, the defining moral and demographic conflict of the '60s and its Rubicon, the Vietnam war, and valorizes an alternative of pleasure and enlightenment. In a passage from "God/Love Poem" that compares to McClure's "Fuck Ode," the female poet extols an eros not nihilistically isolating and sexually domineering, but welcoming and ecstatic:

> there are no ways of love but / beautiful/
> I love you all of them
> I love you / your cock in my hand
> stirs like a bird
> in my fingers
> as you swell and grow hard in my hand
> forcing my fingers open
> with your rigid strength
> you are beautiful/you are beautiful
> . . . . . .
> your cock rises and throbs in my hands
> a revelation / as Aphrodite knew it
> . . . . . .
> your body moves to me
> flesh to flesh

skin sliding over golden skin
as mine to your
my mouth my tongue my hands
my belly and my legs
against your mouth your love
sliding . . . Sliding . . .
our bodies move and join unbearably.
(*Love Book* 1–2)

Intercourse here issues not from frantic imperatives but from fantasies of sexual caress; it is not seated in Beat "blackness," as in McClure, but in the incandescent hippie "beautiful." Referencing a classical Golden Age, the poem describes a new age of Love, a destination of perfection, and a religion for two found in heterosexual intercourse: "We were the temple and the god entire" (*Love Book* 1). The Kristevan " 'phallic' position" of the speaking subject is not reproduced by the female poet; rather, this ideology is playfully subverted as the speaker describes her literal possession of the "cock," signifier of the phallus: she writes about holding in her hand in ecstatic foreplay the virtual stylus-signifier of literary subjectivity. This turn on phallic seriousness fits with Kristeva's hope that, in the hands of revolutionary women, textual language will, rather than reify, "question the very posture of this mastery" (165). This radical literary/sexual female dominion is possible in the postwar era only in the counterculture from which Kandel writes and by which in *The Love Book* she tropes Ginsberg, re-genders McClure, and brings Beat culture into the Aquarian Age.

As *The Love Book* poet, Kandel was commodified in establishment and counterculture media discourses with epithets that emphasized sex and women's roles, such as "the oracle of love" (Cohen 83), the hippie "love poetess" ("They Came" 5), and "the most controversial poetess since Sappho" (May 5). Straining to fix Kandel in stereotypic categories of the feminine, newspapers depicted her as a young San Francisco housewife "who had written a book that excites lewd thought" (Bess, 17 Nov. 1966, 1); but also, ironically, as a poet promoting gender doctrine from the postwar 1950s with the goal to help married couples communicate better (May 8). Another story depicted her as a demure "wife," a diffident deviant from gender norms: "Miss Kandel is 34 and married, 'but I don't go by my husband's name and please don't use his name' " (Gilbert 1966, 26). Kandel's marginalization and dismissal as both "love poetess" and "housewife" reflect gender inequities and stereotypes, but also the sexual repression and conservative social mores that had tyrannized the Silent Generation. Kandel's lyrics exemplify the hippie rebellion against the postwar establishment culture. Hedonistic, unrepentant, bending religious diction to fit orgasmic congress, the poet challenges the Age of Anxiety with the sexual ecstasy of the Age of Aquarius.

In 1967, Grove Press published Kandel's second and last book of poetry to date, *Word Alchemy*. This text is a conventional book, without the fragile papers

and homespun, ornamental design of *The Love Book*, as if to suggest or effect Kandel's integration into more mainstream poetry worlds. Indeed, at the time of *The Love Book* trial Kandel disavowed "any identification with the beat thing" (Wolf 25; Cook 211); yet, her introduction to *Word Alchemy* addresses *The Love Book* controversy from a clearly Beat Generation perspective. Kandel pronounces, "Poetry is never compromise. It is the manifestation/translation of a vision, an illumination, an experience," a claim for prophetic Beat aesthetics that combines visionary insight with uncompromised honesty (*Word Alchemy* v). Placing primacy on the poet, on a personal topography of signifiers, and valorizing the Olsonian openness of the poetic/linguistic field, Kandel's admonitions for linguistic integrity and poetic prerogative reiterate a 1959 statement of poetics made by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in his Beat period. In "How You Sound??" Jones urgently defends the poet's freedom of composition, his critical vernacular modeling the desired linguistic emancipation:

> I can make poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of the garbage of our lives. . . . ALL are a poetry . . . There cannot be closet poetry. . . . There cannot be anything I must *fit* the poem into. Everything must be made to fit into the poem. There must not be any preconceived notion or *design* for what the poem *ought* to be. (424)

Kandel brings this opened-out Beat poetic Jones articulates into the permissive mid-1960s; for her,

> [w]hatever is language is poetic language and if the word required by the poet does not exist in his known language then it is up to him to discover it. The only proviso can be that the word be the correct word as demanded by the poem and only the poet can be ultimate judge of that. (*Word Alchemy* vi)

Like Kerouac in his controversial decree "Craft *is* craft!" ("Essentials" 70) which disavows compromises that literary praxis may impose on language flow and links craft with dishonesty, Kandel also rejects craft, but for its tendency to self-referentiality: "when it becomes enamored of itself it [craft] produces word masturbation" (*Word Alchemy* v). Kandel affirmed Kerouac's demand for absolute linguistic freedom, but, although Kerouac was embroiled in controversies over his books, he avoided publishing work that might have elicited obscenity charges, whereas Kandel's poetry invited the resistance of censorship. Affirming the final agency and authority of the poet alone in the creative process, her work taunted the censorious restrictions of the dominant culture. The love poems' vernacular diction and descriptions of ecstatic heterosexual intercourse blatantly risked censorship, as if, *pace* Jones, outrage would affirm the poems' authenticity as unmediated, uncloseted Poetry.

Kandel did not achieve mainstream or academic literary recognition, if for no other reason than her mysterious withdrawal from literary publication and artistic venues, eerily foretold in the introduction to the 1967 *Word*

*Alchemy*. Alluding to the legal and social controversies sustained by *The Love Book*, Kandel asserts that "[t]o compromise poetry through fear is to atrophy the psyche. To compromise poetry through expedience is the soft, small murder of the soul" (v, viii): That is, in her last formal, published words on free poetic diction and praxis as existential imperatives, Kandel presciently suggests a death or disappearance of the poet by means of forces outside poetry, such as censorship or compromise. In 1970 Kandel suffered a serious motorcycle accident with her then-husband Billy Fritsch. During her long recovery, she withdrew from public literary activity. Recently, she declined to have her remarks from a 1996 panel on women Beat writers printed (Charters, *Beat down to your Soul* 615), although she did participate in the panel and allowed her work to be published in both the Knight and Peabody anthologies. Kandel's disappearance from literary scenes and publications leaves her poetry, which survives her absence, in a state of disembodied poetics. Although apparently circumstantial, her retreat pushes Kandel further into the postmodern which the sexual and gender-conscious lyrics of *The Love Book* intimated and introduced.

## *The Love Book*: Psychedelic Poetics and Cosmic Erotica

> Criticism always deals with the texts of pleasure, never the texts of bliss.
>
> —Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

Four poems constituted *The Love Book*: "God/Love Poem," twenty-two lines of which were restored in a later printing ("Mayor" 4); "To Fuck With Love, Phase I"; "To Fuck With Love, Phase II"; and "To Fuck With Love, Phase III." These poems have been dismissed without consideration of Kandel's poetic praxis, cultural moment, or the political implications of her inscriptions of women's sexuality. Rejecting Kandel's composition ethic, Donna Nance puns that the poetry is "compromise[d] . . . by a too insistent desire to be uncompromising" (273–74). Charles Perry writes that *The Love Book* poems are rather romantic and high-minded for all the four-letter words, as if Elizabeth Barrett Browning had taken acid and set about to describe the sex act as a cosmic event (107). Early Beat writing by Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs spoke without inhibition about sex, was explicit about the use of drugs such as heroin and marijuana, and explored Zen Buddhist thought. In the '60s counterculture from which *The Love Book* issued, sex underwent Edenic reinvention and acquired a veneer of innocence, drug use focused on consciousness-expansion with peyote or LSD, and Hindu cosmology and Tantric yoga practice augmented Buddhist devotions. Although Kandel reiterates Ginsberg's forms and echoes of Whitman, a new cultural moment is marked when the wrenching compassion of *Howl* yields to the ecstatic orgasmic congress of *The Love Book* and when Ginsberg's operatic "Holy the supernatural

extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!" ("Footnote to Howl," *Collected Poems* 134) gives way to Kandel's impudent "sacred the beautiful fuck" (*Love Book* 4). In "To Fuck With Love, Phase II," hallowed hippie sex and the body are hailed with a distinctively Ginsbergian or Whitmanian impulse, but also with a touch of '60s bacchanalia:

> sacred our acts and our actions
> sacred our parts and our persons
>
> sacred the sacred cunt!
> sacred the sacred cock!
>
> miracle! miracle! sacred the primal miracle!
> sacred the god-animal, twisting and wailing
> sacred the beautiful fuck.
>
> (*Love Book* 4)

Like other of Kandel's early works, this stanza bears clear resemblance to Ginsberg's "Footnote to Howl" with the anaphoric "sacred" serving as obvious exchange for "holy." Acknowledging her predecessor, Kandel identifies Ginsberg's influence not in his poetics, however, but in terms of the censorship wars: "Sure . . . I've gotten a lot from him. We all have. I think Allen Ginsberg has remarkable guts. That's what it took for him to stand up and let his asshole hang out in public. He gave a lot of people the courage to admit they had one, too" (Cook 209). This courage is nevertheless precisely a matter of poetics and language: As Barthes has it, the text that mines pleasure—a concept beyond but encompassing visceral gratification—"is (should be) that uninhibited person who shows his behind to the *Political Father*" (53); the text that elicits pleasure should defy hegemonic power, as in the metaphoric display of disdain Kandel attributes to Ginsberg. For Kandel as for Ginsberg, the text's autonomy and freedom have political implications: Its transgressive politics are conveyed by the language that defies not the primal but the juridical Father—the culture that would control or repress it.

Moving beyond Ginsberg and *Howl*, the distinctively '60s ambience of *The Love Book* poems is in their sexual candor and ardor, their focus on orgasm, their allusions to Hindu cosmology, and their LSD-inflected hallucinatory descriptions, or what may be called their psychedelic register. In the romanticism Perry lampoons, the hyperbolic poetic language of hallucinatory love and congress ravishes; but its power to subjugate readers authorizes the woman poet, for it authenticates her discursive hegemony, the autonomous, uncompromised power of her text. Consider this fragment from "To Fuck With Love, Phase II":

> fuck—the fuck of love-fuck—the yes entire—
> love out of ours—the cock in the cunt fuck—
> the fuck of pore into pore—the smell of fuck
> taste it—love dripping from skin to skin—
> tongue at the doorways—cock god in heaven—

love blooms entire universe—I/you
reflected in the golden mirror we are avatars of
Krishna and Radha
pure love-lust of godhead beauty unbearable
carnal incarnate.
(*Love Book* 4)

The influence of consciousness-altering drugs is apparent in the poems' mind-bending perspectives, visions as seen through a crystal haze in the multiple linguistic reflections of the "golden mirror." The psychedelic is felt in the prismatically overlapping frames of repeated words and images, the verb-signifier "fuck," as well as other signifiers repeated severally, which form trippy kaleidoscopic wholes that function visually, aurally, imaginatively, and in the patterns of words on the page to alter the consciousness of the reader, as might a hallucinogenic drug experience.[5] Kandel has written that "[t]here are no barriers to poetry or prophecy; by their nature they are barrier-breakers, bursts of perception, lines into infinity" (*Word Alchemy* vii). Just as the psychedelic drug experience is valued for its altered consciousness, the psychedelic language of *The Love Book* seeks not only to reproduce the familiar counterculture state of psychedelic plenitude but to alter physicality, to stimulate and arouse. In this, Kandel's verses embody psychedelic Eros, the '60s version of Love.

Kandel and *The Love Book* clarify the way pleasure is freed in the vibrant Jungian '60s from the confinement of the dour Freudian '50s in the transition from Beat North Beach to hippie Haight-Ashbury. The sex talk of *The Love Book* wallows in the body, the gross visceral fluids of intercourse; it is the sex talk of male fantasy spoken by a free-love mystic. Kandel noted that her use of "fuck" was not for "shock appeal" but a matter of finding diction proper to the occasion of the poem: "[T]o intercourse with love just doesn't sound right. Fornicate and copulate seem so medical" (May 6); for the sentiments of the free-sex era, new, even forbidden words must be commissioned. Kandel testified at trial that "there is no such thing as coarseness or vulgarity in poetry, not if it's poetry, true poetry, real poetry"; in her view, "Greeting-card verses are rather obscene" (Gilbert 1967, 4). Obscenity is relative and unstable, and more likely to be located in the repressive tendencies of establishment culture: For Kandel, "the obscenity is in their [the police's] minds—there's none in the book. . . . Love words have become curse words and that makes love more difficult. I'd like to free love from those words" (Bruce 2). As a second generation Beat poet, Kandel sees poetry as a liberatory act, an emancipation of pleasure for language, for culture. Her usage undertakes linguistic reform as her poems push the verb-signifier "fuck" on to new signifieds ever exchanging in themselves, abjuring the single terminal referent in favor of multiple referents in constant motion, spinning meaning in dynamic kinesis: In the above passage, "fuck" exchanges for "love-fuck," for "the yes entire," for "love out of ours," for "pore into pore," for "smell," "taste,"

"dripping from skin to skin." In his eponymous study, Barthes claims that "[t]hat is the pleasure of the text: value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier" (65); the signifier is conveyor and index of pleasure because, unmoored from cultural overdetermination, it claims what Jean Baudrillard has identified as the possibility for continual exchange, by this effect rescuing, refreshing, and reconstituting words constrained by conventional usage and mores. This linguistic experience, the regenerative transformation of language, is Kandel's Beat move in *The Love Book;* the linguistic refusal of literary and cultural hegemony is Beat, and it is second generation Beat—the Beat of the '60s—to refract this refusal through psychedelic consciousness and Love.

Through the hippie regalia, *The Love Book* poems address diachronic questions of pleasure. Just as the poems effect a psychedelic alteration of consciousness, their foregrounded vernacular sex words, such as "fuck" et al., and the imperative repetitions of those words, are not only poetic linguistic strategies, they are strategies for social-sexual rebellion, that is, for pleasure: They exhort and induce tumescence. Barthes sees a "physics of bliss" operating if the erotic word "is extravagantly repeated, or . . . if it is unexpected, succulent in its newness" (42). Kandel's iterative use of the unexpectedly scatological, the profane, in a poetic form propelled by repetition and high energy incantation is a literary act of renewal that achieves "continuous jubilation," a Barthian "moment when, by its very excess verbal pleasure chokes and reels into bliss" (8). For Barthes *jouissance* is action, the visceral pleasure given or evoked by the text; in Kandel bliss is mobilized by language that is transformed from receptacle of meaning to instigator of pleasure, a radical '60s metamorphosis born of Beat nihilism and sexual openness. Kandel's incantatory repetitions achieve a sexual trance that recalls Barthes's idea that while "repetition itself creates bliss . . . to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified" (4). This zone of pleasure puts an erotic '60s spin on Beat, for it figures a central Beat concept articulated by John Clellon Holmes: to be emptied out and exhausted. While Rexroth condemned "the utter nihilism of the emptied-out hipster" (193) as disengagement, *The Love Book* poems' zeroed-out, sexually gratified status achieved by means of the chanted signifier is animated by the unexpected fact of being issued by a woman, subverting the Beat Generation's double standard of female sexual inferiority and negating hipster disengagement. In her poetry, sited in women's and sexual liberation movements of 1960s countercultural politics, Kandel transforms Beat's beaten-down exhaustion to Love's post-coital exaltation; transfers feminine junkie malaise to the feminist sexual revolution.

Kandel and her poetry certainly generated and participated in alternative progressive discourses of the feminine. In contrast to the newspapers' domestic diction for and depictions of her, Kandel and *The Love Book*'s erotic lyrics gave voice to the Love Generation. The book and the radical freedom commandeered by the poet to depict heterosexual intercourse and to use explicit sex language in poetry adumbrated aspects of second-wave feminism,

exalting the sexual revolution from the position of the female lover in the cosmic act of love. But this love aesthetic also attests to women's fraught place in the period between 1960 and 1970, after the sexual revolution and before second-wave feminism. This conflicted status is evident in *The Love Book*'s lyrics, whose rebellion, like the epithets that trivialized Kandel as poet, also evoke and replicate the repressive constraints on women that they apparently reject. The poems oscillate between points of female sexual liberation and subordination, between erotic controversy and traditional patriarchal deifications of women. Even as it claims revolutionary intention with a poetics refracted through LSD and psychedelic, consciousness-expanding experience, as well as a sexual freedom rooted in Eastern mysticism, *The Love Book* nevertheless depicts women's continued sexual and social subordination, as in these images from "To Fuck With Love, Phase I." This poem about sex is a celebratory frenzy of conventional heterosexual intercourse, which, as envisioned here, is not revolutionary per se.

to fuck with love  to change the temper of the air
passing two strangers into one osmotic angel
. . . . . .
positions and pleasure of need my body
transforms into one enormous mouth
        between my legs
suckfucking oh that lovely cock
        big grand and terrible
the upthrust implement of love
I taste the mouthpores of my body
      cocksucker in heavenly
the tongue between my thighs spreading my legs to screams
and burst I burst I burst
      he moves from me and to me then
      plunging (big grand most terrible) into and all of me
can help but shriek
YES YES YES this is it this is what I wanted this
beautiful
he explodes volcano tipped inside me my veins drip sperm
      my GOD the worship that is to fuck!

(*Love Book* 3)

This worship of the phallus fits hegemonic patriarchal codes valorizing the masculine and the male physique; it also fits with Kandel's celebration of (heterosexual) love, her mission "to show men and women that sexual relations without true love have no meaning" (Bess, 18 Nov. 1966, 16). That is, if not divorced from love, sex is transformative, it "pass[es] two strangers into one osmotic angel." But here lie contradiction and paradox. On the one hand, in *The Love Book*'s sexual politics, the proto-feminist glorification of female subjectivity is simultaneously negated by the traditional gender roles that limit female sexual abandon. Conversely, the uninhibited sex language

achieves an outrageous sense of liberation ("suckfucking that lovely cock") that models the sexual freedom that *The Love Book* advocates. This doubleness, the surrender to male sexual perspectives and the celebration of self-gratifying desires, is *The Love Book*'s Barthian "attack on the canonical structures of language itself" (31), for it refuses the either-or binaries on which canons are built in favor of all-encompassing simultaneities; it insists that "Love is the essential factor" (Bess, 18 Nov. 1966, 18).

In this, *The Love Book* is a paradoxical liberation: a woman whose sex talk reproduces the phallic adoration of male fantasy; a self-assertion that is abjection; a subjectivity that does not deviate from the patterns and constructions meted out to women by centuries of patriarchal oppression. Yet, even as the poems' politics of desire affirm masculinist centrality, the poetic language also violates oppressive conventions of the feminine; conventional women, good girls, are not supposed to hear or speak those words. And, consonant with that status, even as she brandishes the forbidden words and enters them into poetic diction, Kandel unself-consciously asserts what can only be termed a male-defined femininity.[6] Thus, Kandel's retro femininity, her defense of sexist gender codes even in light of her contestatory erotic poetry, are contradictions that fit with her location in, and embodiment of, two masculinist countercultures. Marking the transition from Beat to hippie bohemias, Kandel also illuminates their likenesses with regard to gender, likenesses that are inconsistent with their putative radicalisms, which made new claims while remaining in some ways, particularly some ways about women, always-already the same.

## Conclusion

Representation of Lenore Kandel has been figured and constrained by imperatives of gender. By virtue of her sex she has been left out of male-centered Beat Generation and San Francisco Renaissance literary histories; her story of emergence and erasure is made comprehensible by seeing her as the second sex, a woman writer coming to voice in the American mid-twentieth century. Historians and critics of the era, most recently Alice Echols and Peter Coyote, who document women's second-class status in the Haight-Ashbury and Digger communities in which Kandel lived and wrote *The Love Book*, agree that the 1960s offered little real liberation for women in spite of second-wave feminism. That, in the end, the sexual revolution allowed more men to enjoy more guiltless and irresponsible sex with more female partners because the availability of birth control and abortion left women with little rationale for sexual reluctance—ironically, with no choice. Nevertheless, it is still possible to think of the transition from Beat to hippie, from North Beach to Haight-Ashbury, as a decline in the hegemony of male Beat poets and masculinist poetics and an ascent, however modest, of women writers and proto-feminist poetics and politics. *The Love Book* served revolutionary notice that the silent

Beat "chick" had evolved into the hippie adept of what Kandel called "holy erotica" (Knight 281). With the sexual freedom of the Love Generation and women's newly claimed sexual agency providing the crucial discursive context, *The Love Book* encompasses mainstream culture, Beat bohemia, and the '60s counterculture, reforming constraints on sexual expression and bridging Beat and hippie anti-establishment impulses. Not merely providing models for existential and social freedoms, the two bohemias, the Beat/San Francisco Renaissance and the Haight-Ashbury, did make a place for women to enact those freedoms, as *The Love Book* and Lenore Kandel's brief but significant celebrity attest.

## Notes

This chapter is indebted to the contributions of Sandra A. Zagarell, Eve Sandberg, Maria Damon, and Nancy M. Grace, and to the excellent research assistance of Mary Nienaber.

1. In *The San Francisco Renaissance* (1989), Davidson only mentions Kandel in his chapter on women poets. In *The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, 1955–1960* (1991), French narrowed his conception of the movement to a five-year period that excludes Kandel, although she is mentioned. Kandel is included in Knight's *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996) and Peabody's *A Different Beat* (1997), seminal biographical and literary anthologies that introduce women Beat writers, but neither shows how these writers are connected to each other or to the larger movements of which they are a part.
2. The three generations of Beat writing are identified and discussed in *Girls Who Wear Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* edited by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace.
3. In *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac offers Roxanne, "a woman of 25 prophesying the future style of America with short almost crewcut but with curls black snaky hair, snaky walk, pale pale junky anemic face . . . the cold pale booster face of the cold pale girl" (18), augmenting his account in "The Origins of the Beat Generation" of cool hipster girls who say nothing and wear black.
4. Jay Thelin and Allen Cohen, co-owner and clerk of The Psychedelic Shop, and Ronald Muszalaski, clerk at City Lights Bookshop, were arrested for pandering to obscenity and found guilty. But this verdict was later overturned (Nance 272).
5. This discussion of the psychedelic with regard to Kandel's lyrics is indebted to conversations with Eve Sandburg in June of 2000.
6. As Joan Didion observed in "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," her classic, albeit derogatory, report on the Haight-Ashbury in 1967, hippie women were often unconscious practitioners of anti-feminist politics they would strenuously resist on a conscious level.

Chapter 7

# Black Skins, Beat Masks: Bob Kaufman and the Blackness of Jazz*

*Amor Kohli*

Growing critical attention to Bob Kaufman in recent years has coincided with reevaluations of Beat writers that seek to include questions of race, gender, and sexuality. Much of the recuperative work about Kaufman rightly seeks to instantiate him in the jazz-poetry-Beat pantheon consisting of names such as Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Kenneth Rexroth, from which he has been excluded. However, in its zeal to present the multifaceted nature of the Kaufman corpus, this critical perspective often fails to underscore Kaufman's peculiar position as both black and Beat. Kaufman is part and not part of the Beat/bohemian postwar cultural movement that Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) retrospectively understood as replicating the middle-class structures it claimed to reject.[1] This subculture, while far from condoning the racial views of mainstream America, was still one in which traditional structures of race-based normativity were constantly being reinscribed. Jazz was Kaufman's vehicle for interrogating those structures of racial normativity embedded in a subculture dedicated to nonconformity.

Most readers of Kaufman would probably not dispute the thesis that jazz dominates his poetry. References to jazz crowd his poems, even when they are not explicitly about jazz or jazz personalities. It is my contention that Kaufman uses black music, particularly jazz,[2] to critique both mainstream America and the Beat subculture to which he belonged for their unwillingness to acknowledge their cultural debt to blackness. Jazz exposes the failure of America to live up to its initial promise of new democratic vistas. At the core of jazz, Kaufman locates a deep and abiding sense of the *sui generis* hopes, desires, aspirations, and rage of African Americans who persistently continue their drive toward self-determination even as it is continually thwarted. Jazz thus becomes for Kaufman a metaphor for the African

American experience: It is vitally and irrevocably African and American, yet not wholly one or the other. It is not African due to the diasporic ruptures of history; the violence of the slave trade was not only physical but also cultural and epistemic. Once in the New World, cross-cultural contact and enforced suppression ensured that African values could never be the same. It is not American because of the racialized construction of American society that cast blacks as permanent outsiders.

Jazz, however, is not *only* about America's default on its promise. Kaufman identifies an opportunity for American whites to hear the story of American blacks in jazz, and thus he recognizes the ultimate interrelatedness of black and white in America. He also underscores in his poetry the necessity of a white recognition of the ultimate *blackness of jazz* via an engagement with the history that led to that music and to the story that it tells. Kaufman emphasizes the community built by the sounds of jazz as well as the new promise created by that community. For Kaufman, jazz addresses in its modes the socio-political paradoxes of black life in America and the paradox of the relation of a black art to the white mainstream while leading the way to a new resolution.

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Kaufman deploys the jazz trope to depict the violent potential of jazz as cloaked and in order to present the power and meaning of jazz as misunderstood. This misunderstanding is both a curse and a blessing that allows jazz to offer itself as harmless entertainment while concealing a more potent essence. As a result, Kaufman imagines a jazz analogous to the African experience in America. Lorenzo Thomas argues that jazz in Kaufman's poetry, while suggesting "an intense and eerie sadness," nonetheless "encodes a more aggressive response to the racially motivated humiliations that frame the jazz artist's life—and the lives of all Black people. Kaufman's musicians squeeze out notes as if they are hurling spears" (1992, 294). Not content to simply document the musical collisions and conflicts that he hears in jazz, Kaufman presents his poetic mission as emanating from a similar dialectical impulse alternating between joy and anger. Kaufman may intend to subvert this binary of ecstasy and violence, but instead gets tangled up in another: black and white. Jon Panish offers, in *The Color of Jazz*, a bifurcation of the "construction of jazz as violent and aggressive *versus* a joyful and ecstatic expression," which he argues is "a significant contrast between the work of African and Euro-American writers" (74, emphasis mine). Panish's reading has merit, but Kaufman recognizes *both* elements as essential to jazz.

Kaufman is aware of the conflicting views of jazz held by whites and blacks and comments upon them in "San Francisco Beat," in which he assails the "imitation Negroes" who appropriate an imagined blackness at will, without also having to appropriate (or even acknowledge) the painful historical memory of Africans in America. These imitators are set upon by "jazz cops with ivory nightsticks," in a reversal of the story of the origin of bebop

offered by Langston Hughes's fictional everyman, Jess B. Semple (*Solitudes* 31). Semple tells Hughes's narrator that bop comes from the sound of a policeman's nightstick upon the heads of black people, "beaten right out of some Negro's head into those horns and saxophones and the piano keys that play it" (*Best of Simple* 118). In Kaufman's poem, it is the jazz cops who chastise and discipline the "imitators" with the "ivory nightsticks" of jazz music.

In "Why Write About" from 1967's *Golden Sardine*, Kaufman attacks the Beat/Bohemian "scene" as consisting of "swung out cats, hung / On Publicity" and "Sick Middle Class Chicks / Nympho, Caucosoids, Eating Symbols" (57). The gender politics here are significant, but for my purposes I'd like to focus on the distinction between the "Caucosoids" who eat the symbols and those who are eaten. This particular construction calls attention to an undeniably racialized dynamic that sets up symbols of whiteness that greedily appropriate symbols of blackness. Kaufman's use of "Cauco*soid*" to describe them is further intriguing. It caustically suggests that they are white-*like* through the ingestion of the symbols and that this is the root of their sickness.[3] Although the bohemian environment was certainly much more progressive in its views of race relations than was mainstream America, many in that atmosphere were still unable, unwilling, or simply unprepared to comprehend the stories of black people in America. Notwithstanding his quest to subvert binaries, Kaufman trips over the American color line.

At first glance, Kaufman seems to cast jazz alternately as a joyful and a destructive sound. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that the transcendence and destruction Kaufman identifies as inherent in jazz are actually the parts of a whole, resulting in a sound that Lorenzo Thomas and Aldon Nielsen both call "redemptive." Kaufman, cognizant of the symbolic and mythic depths lying below the surface of jazz, configures the "historical tears" ("Second April," *Solitudes* 73) and the "smothered rage" ("Walking Parker Home," *Solitudes* 5) of a people as constitutive elements of jazz; however, he also distinguishes jazz as "rivulets of trickling ecstasy" ("Jazz Chick," *Golden* 39) and as "love" and "life." The creative force of jazz relies upon its potential as destruction as Kaufman enlists an aggressive jazz as a means toward a utopian end.

"Battle Report," in *Solitudes* uses subterfuge in its depiction of an aggressive jazz with Kaufman casting a thousand saxophone cases as his Trojan Horse. They "infiltrate the city / Each with a man inside / Hidden in ordinary cases / Labeled FRAGILE" (8). Lorenzo Thomas argues that Kaufman here "devises an image of jazz instruments as weapons in a war against oppressive 'square' society" (Thomas 1992, 294), but while there is an attack on a "city," the "squareness" of that society is nowhere presented in this poem. The absence of any description of the audience leaves room for critique of both the "square" and the "hip" societies, many made up of "imitation Negroes" and "Caucosoids" that are attacked elsewhere in the poetry. Kaufman shows the same instruments that infiltrate the city being used by the "five generals" of the invading army as they gather, "blowing plans" for the attack. As the

weapons masquerade as "FRAGILE" saxophones, and men masquerade as the saxophones, so do the generals masquerade as performers and their battle "plans" as musical arrangements. None are revealed as the instruments of war that Kaufman purports them to be. What is further striking is that the plans are "blown" in front of the enemy, the audience that naively bops along. The generals and their instruments of destruction are aided in their guerilla war by the naïveté and miscomprehension of the audience, which does not recognize the signs and sounds of battle in an ultimately self-immolatory act.

The metaphor of guerrilla attack is based on the improvisatory nature of both jazz and guerrilla warfare. Would it not make the battle plans even more impressive if they had never been written and had been instead improvised on the battle stage? When Kaufman tells us that "A fleet of trumpets drops their hooks / Inside at the outside" he suggests that the hooks inhabit a privileged space in which detection is impossible. The presence of the here / not-here also implies the improvisation of the "hooks" which are part of the battle plans. John Corbett asks "The crucial, unanswerable question" about improvisation: "[c]an the improviser play something he or she does not already know?" (223). Improvisation is often misread as a type of musical free association in which the performer plays whatever comes to his or her mind at that moment, free of all discipline. The converse is usually the case. The nature of improvisation demands full mastery of the instrument so that the performer has at his or her disposal a vast vocabulary of musical phrases from which to draw at any given moment. It is, as Corbett notes, a process that is "particularly violent—it consists in making a decisive statement and at the same time giving oneself over to the situation" (225–26). The ability to adapt to any situation, to be "inside at the outside," is the improviser's gift, both in music and in war.

Instruments that seem so innocuous—"a fleet of trumpets," "ten waves of trombones," "the delicate rumble of pianos"—take their positions until the "secret code is flashed." The instruments are nothing new; there is no reason to suspect them. The attack is "the sound of jazz" under which "the city falls" without a fight. The city/audience has no time to react since the attack has come without a warning that the attacked can comprehend. They misread the battle plans as entertainment and are infiltrated from within. This misunderstanding is key: The "secret code" is "now is the time, now is the time" from the jazz standard. What the audience might recognize as a dance number simultaneously serves as the call for battle. Kaufman's poem is not only a poem, but also a "battle report" masquerading as a poem. The sounds that the generals make and the sound that the audience hears do not coincide. "Good-time" jazz functions here as a guerrilla call to battle that only some can discern.

Kaufman sought a counterapproach to the narrative of jazz offered by white Beat writers and their allegiance to Norman Mailer's (in)famous definition of jazz in "The White Negro" as "orgasm" and as an expression of hedonistic abandon. The ecstasy that Kaufman finds in jazz corresponds less with a libidinal energy than with a creative energy that is simultaneously

spiritual and material.[4] Rebirth, of one's soul and of one's society, is located within the jazz impulse that courses through Kaufman's poetry. Central to this impulse are the pains and the triumphs of African American history and culture. In an underappreciated anecdote, Kaufman tells Raymond Foye, "I love North Beach . . . when it's 2 a.m., and Bessie Smith is wailing in my closet, and Paul Robeson is singing the Soviet national anthem in my head" (Foye n.p.). The two strains of song function contrapuntally here, but not in dissonance; the two singers and their respective songs complement each other. What does it signify that Kaufman recognizes a similar impulse within the blues of Bessie Smith and the hopeful poignancy of Paul Robeson singing the Soviet National anthem? Kaufman does, after all, hear both simultaneously and each in the other. They share, if not a rhythmic pulse, then a moral and political impulse that pits them both against, while situating them within, a defiant expression of the history of injustice and exploitation that gestures toward a promise of freedom. Expressed in the relation between these singers/songs is, as Larry Neal once wrote about the blues, "the expression of the larger will to survive—to feel life in one's innermost being, even though it takes place in an oppressive political context" while being "basically defiant in their attitude to life" (109). This defiance, while coded in the language of the blues, goes far beyond the language of music and into the realm of real political action.

Kaufman suggests that there is an impulse residing in Robeson's performance that gives the lyrics a unique emotional resonance. What is *not said*, that is to say, what is *hidden*, lying beneath the surface and bound up in the structure of black music, or what is *silently said*, carries as much weight as what is explicitly expressed. In the poem "Blues Note," Ray Charles, "a dangerous man" who has "burst from Bessie's crushed black skull," sings, "Smiling into the camera, with an African symphony / Hidden in his throat" (*Solitudes* 20). Charles's smile for the camera produces an image of Ray Charles the entertainer, whose smile and blindness conceal the threat that Kaufman's poem insists Charles represents. Does Charles smile because of his joy at playing his music? Or, does he put on a smile for the camera, secure in the knowledge of the African symphony hidden in his throat? Kaufman's use of "hidden" and the juxtaposition of the smile against the "African symphony" suggest a conscious duplicity. The symphony is hidden in the shadows of the musician's smile. Kaufman specifies the throat as the hiding place for a sound and suggests that that a racialized memory resides in these shadows and sounds.[5] The same Bessie Smith about whom Baraka's Clay in *Dutchman* asserts, "wouldn't have needed that music" had she "killed some white people," is cast here in a gender reversal of the Athena myth that turns the patriarchal notion of musical tradition on its head (Jones 35). As Athena sprang from the head of Zeus, fully grown, dressed in armor and ready to fight, so too does Ray Charles spring from Smith's skull, "shouting, / And grows bluer from memory, glowing bluer, still" (*Solitudes* 20). "Bluer" can be read as an emotional response, that is, "growing sadder" through the journey into memory, but we may also read this as the growth of anger and defiance through memory. Kaufman delineates a black musical

tradition in this poem that emanates from the anger and frustrations of African Americans in a contemporary racist society that grows "bluer from memory" while carrying the cultural compass of classical mythology.

The music that springs out of memory has the same weight for Kaufman as the classics have had for Western culture. That music is the foundation for all that follows it. The resonances of memory and quotidian affronts ripple outward into anger and into music that Charles hurls as "chunks of raw soul" from his mouth (*Solitudes* 20). By charting a genealogy of black defiance through song that connects Robeson to Smith to Charles, Kaufman issues a warning of sorts by ending with the smiling, seemingly harmless Charles. This 1965 poem continues where Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* concludes: At the end of that novel, the narrator is underground, invisible to whites because they choose not to recognize him. Armed with this knowledge, he is able to assault white men with impunity because, as he recognizes, there is a sort of power in invisibility. He has chosen—albeit uneasily—to utilize the willful denial of his humanity by whites. If Kaufman understood black music as guerilla action, as the sonic equivalent of the strategy described by the Invisible Man's grandfather—"a spy in the enemy's country . . . undermin[ing] 'em with grins," letting " 'em swoller you til they vomit or bust wide open" (Ellison 16)—then Charles's duplicitous smile may be read as a conscious minstrelsy that hides a dangerous potential.

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Kaufman presents jazz as a specifically black sound, a condition of blackness and the perfect racial soundtrack to his racial poetry. Jazz is, as he writes, "Africa's other face, stranded—in America yet to be saved" (*Ancient Rain* 12). The discussion of a black sound for a black condition raises almost immediately a charge of essentialism. However, the strategy behind Kaufman's apparent essentialism is my focus here. Kaufman's jazz poetry suggests that the shared history of oppression makes African American culture uniquely qualified to effect wholesale change, and Kaufman's jazz maintains a strategic guise that hides the danger and challenge it poses to American society. Whatever metaphor describes this danger, such as the natural destructive force of the black earthquake or the duplicitous gift of a Trojan Horse, the picture Kaufman paints is of a musical force that shakes to the core, assaulting conventions and beliefs and effecting wholesale revision of American society.

Kaufman's most explicit interrelation of history, racial memory, and jazz is the prose poem, "Hawk Lawler: Chorus," a thinly veiled fictionalization of the life of Charlie Parker. In "Lawler," Kaufman gives us his most detailed portrait of the origin and purpose of an earth-shattering, revolutionary jazz. In it, Kaufman positions Lawler in a messianic role. Upon first arriving in New York, Hawk is amazed at seeing so many black faces in one place at the same time. Kaufman has Hawk wonder "if some big dam had burst in Africa and spilled its contents, or laughed at the crazy thought that they were all white and this was some special holiday when they all wore black and brown

faces for some religious Mardi Gras" ("Hawk Lawler" 227). Kaufman inverts the social order for a moment as the whites now wear Dunbar's masks. This suggests another commentary on the "imitation Negroes" who are disciplined by "jazz cops," as discussed in "San Francisco Beat," since Hawk's thesis is soon debunked by the "sounds smacking into his eardrums which dispelled any notions of masquerade," sounds that cause him to search "for that big hidden jazz womb, oozing blues and down warmth" (227). Crucially, Kaufman has the sound of jazz and the blues "[dispel] any notions" of whites masquerading as blacks; there is, for Kaufman, an essential black quality to these sounds and the black music they make. The inversion here of the disguise motif from that of "Battle Report" is also significant. Whereas in "Battle Report" jazz is concealed and mis-recognized, only to reveal itself at the moment of "battle," in this instance it is the music that reveals and exposes. There appears to be an essentialism here in these works; only some can see through the disguise. Kaufman seems to pose the question: Are whites *unable* or *unwilling* to recognize the true nature of jazz?

Not five minutes after Hawk enters the club: "God created earth, Christ was born and Gabriel exchanged his trumpet for a saxophone," in order, it seems, to herald the coming of a new savior and a new era. And yet, Kaufman politicizes the moment: "For there in this headquarters of black revolution sat these long-sought comrades, blowing numbers. Illegal notes floated in air as though they had a right to" (228). The freedom attributed these notes suggests a parallel to the "rights" that are supposedly the birthright of all Americans but are denied black Americans. The ability to freely "float" as if it were one's "right" is thus equated not with the outside world of America, but with this "headquarters of black revolution." Black revolution, with its call for radical reorganization of American (and Western) society, is inextricably bound here with a musical "revolution" that called for a re-evaluation of traditional Western musical value systems. Significantly, Kaufman plays a bit with historical chronology. If Hawk represents Parker's story, then bebop, the revolutionary musical form with which he is directly associated, is in its infancy. However, Kaufman directly tells us that the "headquarters of black revolution" oozes blues. Thus, he places this revolutionary impulse before bebop and once again, as in the poem "Blues Note," places it back into the socio-racial history of the blues. The sounds in this club are indistinguishably political, sociological, and musical. The "numbers" Hawk had all his life been hearing and playing as religious and secular celebration are now used by Kaufman in a conflation of black revolution and the story of Revelations, both of which herald apocalyptic judgment followed by a utopian era. For Kaufman, this is precisely the consequence of jazz.

Again, it is the particular quality, sonic and structural, of black music that is key. Hawk joins in with his comrades and, as he puts the horn to his lips, out come:

> numbers, notes, songs, battle cries, laments, jazzy psalms, tribal histories in cubist and surrealist patterns, and an unmistakable call to arms, to jazz, to him,

> as others put down their horns in silent thanks that he had come, as the drums had promised he would come, come to lead into the unpromised land, littered with pains, odored of death, come to lead, with his pumping, grinning throat. ("Hawk Lawler" 227–28)

These sounds, already figured as sounds of blackness, take various forms in the air and ear, but there is one "unmistakable" reading: that is, of a "call to arms" that is indistinguishable from a "call to jazz." Hawk's music encompasses the whole history of black people enmeshed with his own history. Assuming multivalent identities, the same sounds realize the songs of a people, their laments, and their joys. In a recuperative move, Kaufman also has the sounds embody "tribal histories" *re*told in "cubist and surrealist patterns." The use of cubism and surrealism, while acknowledging European influence, appropriates them in order to engage their (re)creative power to reorganize the African cultural histories and techniques that had already been appropriated by Euro-Modernism. Situating himself and the jazz musician within a tradition of pan-African modernity, Kaufman claims modernist patterns of re-envisioning the world through a music that calls for battle *and* salvation.

As Hawk's sounds—simultaneously revolutionary, joyous and awe-inspiring—indicate, when it comes to jazz Kaufman reveals an essentialist strain that brings him close to Charles Mingus's assertion of jazz as "the American Negro's tradition. . . . White people don't have a right to play it, it's colored folk music" (Thomas 1994, 110). While perhaps not as severe as Mingus, Kaufman fixes jazz as "African" passed on by cultural inheritance and "memory," certainly, but also by a shared history that he characterizes through biological metaphor. Note, however, that Mingus's polemic doesn't state that whites *can't* play jazz, but that they have no "*right* to play it." Kaufman's essentialism is based upon a similarly socio-political and cultural "memory." *Golden Sardine*'s "O-Jazz-O" figures jazz as:

> Where the string
> At
> Some point,
> Was some umbilical jazz,
> Or perhaps,
> In memory,
> A long lost bloody cross
> (77)

The "umbilical jazz," a nutrient essential for life and passed on with all other prenatal nutrients, shows up as key in the unbroken string of tradition and memory. This "memory" certainly is meant to recall the crucifixion of Christ, but also the "bloody cross" that the poet, in "Benediction," sardonically forgives America for "nailing black Jesus to an imported cross every six weeks" (9). Understanding jazz is contingent upon occupying a particular social

position, being cast as martyr and dying for the sins of America. The problem is social, to be sure, but it is also spiritual.

The martyrdom of black America, and the inability or unwillingness of white America to recognize its own sins, is a dilemma that Kaufman hopes jazz can resolve in the "War Memoir" poems. There are at least three printed versions of "O-Jazz-O War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen to It at Your Own Risk," available. I will here focus on the two that most closely resemble each other: one from the 1967 collection *Golden Sardine* and the other from the 1981 selected poems volume, *The Ancient Rain*.[6] Virtually identical, these two versions differ in very fundamental and intriguing ways. Both versions begin with another reference to an umbilical jazz, a "secret jazz" found in the womb:

> In the beginning, in the wet
> Warm, dark place
> Straining to break out, clawing at strange cables
> Hearing her screams, laughing
> "*Later we forgave ourselves, we didn't know*"
> Some secret jazz
> Shouted, *wait, don't go.*
> Impatient, we came running, innocent
> Laughing blobs of blood & faith.
> (*Golden Sardine* 78, *Ancient Rain* 32)

The poems continue identically for 20 of their 47 lines. However, in line 21 there is a crucial shift. Line 21 in *Golden Sardine* reads, "Suddenly they were too busy to hear a simple sound" while the *Ancient Rain* version reads "Suddenly *we* were too busy to hear a sound." The pronoun shift then continues in the rest of the later poem.[7] In almost every instance in which the *Golden Sardine* version says "they," the *Ancient Rain* version uses "we." But the most significant difference lies in the ending. The *Golden Sardine* version ends:

> They hear a familiar sound,
> Jazz, scratching, digging, blueing, swinging jazz
> And listen
> And feel, & die
> (*Golden Sardine* 79)

In contrast, *Ancient Rain* version reads:

> We hear a familiar sound,
> Jazz, scratching, digging, bluing, swinging jazz
> And we listen
> And we feel
> And *live*
> (*Ancient Rain* 33, emphasis added)

Here, the contradictory impulses found in Kaufman's jazz meet in a head-on collision within the space of the poem. Life and death are found in the coalescence of the senses: Listening begets feeling, and feeling begets life and/or death. From the earlier poem's death from "feeling" jazz, we are brought unto the life of the later poem. And yet, if we engage the shift in pronouns we reach: "they hear [jazz] . . . / and listen / . . . and die" while "we hear [jazz] . . . / and listen / . . . / and live." However, this is not a simple "they/white/die, we/black/live" equation. In the second half of *Golden Sardine* version, Kaufman writes:

> So they sat down in our blood soaked garments,
> and listened to jazz
> lost, steeped in all our death dreams
> They were shocked at the sound of life, long gone from our own
> They were indignant at the whistling, thinking, singing, beating, swinging,
> They wept for it, hugged, kissed it, loved it, joined it, we drank it,
> Smoked it, ate with it, slept with it
>
> (*Golden Sardine* 79)

The *Ancient Rain* version, replacing every third-person plural with a first-person plural, does not create such a distinction between its players. But Kaufman here gestures again toward an essential experiential difference between jazz listeners. If we read "they" as white people, then whites, covered in the garments soaked with the blood of black people, are stunned by the sound of life that comes from jazz *even as* that jazz represents the "death dreams" of black people. Kaufman then differentiates jazz as sustenance for black people. It is the "sound of life long gone from our own." In short, it is the sound of life within the "social death," to use Orlando Patterson's coinage, of black people in America. Kaufman aligns "our" jazz with the actions necessary for sustaining life: eat, drink, sleep/sex. "Our" relation to jazz is familiar. Conversely, *"they"* have "joined it" from the outside; they can "hug," "kiss," and even "love" it, but their only relation to it is at least once removed. When Kaufman calls jazz "a familiar sound," this sound is both "familiar" and "familial." Playing with this concept, he recalls the image with which both of these versions of "War Memoir" also begin: of jazz in the womb, an "umbilical jazz."

For Kaufman, the potency of black music resides in what is hidden from the eye and the ear. The destructive potency of jazz is figured in "Letter to the Editor"as "the colors of an earthquake" that "are black, brown & biege [*sic*]" (a reference to Ellington's jazz opera which Ellington referred to as "my African suite"), which also illustrate the range of "not white-ness" (*Golden Sardine* 81). Earthquakes, as underground and—if I might stretch the meaning—"guerrilla" phenomena, are unpredictable, uncontrollable and at times unimaginably destructive. Earthquakes are invisible to the naked eye; their effects usually are not. Kaufman locates that earthquake in the sound of jazz, suggesting an awesome potential for destruction. This sound, which Kaufman,

in "Walking Parker Home," paints as "Smothered rage covering pyramids of notes spontaneously / exploding" is an awesomely ruinous *and* restorative force that is "beauty speared into / greedy ears," while "inviting the nerveless to feel once more / That fierce dying of humans consumed / In raging fires of Love" (*Solitudes* 5). Again, the conflicts in jazz, the structural and sonic fissures and ruptures of black music, are not resolved but remain contradictory.

Moreover, Kaufman simultaneously finds just as awesome a force in silence, specifically in the "silent beat in between the drums":

> That silent beat makes the drumbeat, it makes the drum, it makes the beat. Without it there is no drum, no beat. It is not the beat played by who is beating the drum. His is a noisy loud one, the silent beat is beaten by who is not beating on the drum, his silent beat drowns out all the noise, it comes before and after every beat, you hear it in beatween [*sic*], its sound is
>
> Bob Kaufman, Poet.
>
> ("Letter to the Editor" *Golden Sardine* 81)

The "silent beat" is hard to pinpoint, as is Kaufman's language. It jumps, breaks, and cavorts all over the drum and inside and outside of the audible beat. It is an essential element to the music, and to each sound that makes up that music, but it possesses a hidden agency that allows it to create and destroy, be the drum and the beat, be silent and loud. The "silent beat" exists in the third space between the heard and the not-heard; it is the "guerrilla action." It is also a constitutive element in the repertoire of the jazz musician, part of what Robert O'Meally calls "games of color and space," as the music of Thelonious Monk indicates (176). Just as one must "read between the lines" to truly understand, Kaufman suggests that with jazz one must "listen between the beats." And yet, the beat can be lived as Kaufman tells us in the final declarative statement: "its sound is / Bob Kaufman, Poet." The sound is poet, not poem. The poet's task is to translate into words the impulse in this sound.

If Kaufman does not explicitly proclaim himself "*Black* Poet" here, he places his sound and his effect on a scale of not-whiteness, all but pronouncing himself, at the very least, "Non-white Poet." It's a message that Kaufman would have us recognize in American culture writ large: its own ultimate not-whiteness. This inextricability of blackness from the American cultural matrix does not, however, signal that this blackness should be ignored or "integrated" *into* a white American culture, but that it instead be recognized, celebrated, and engaged. In the third version of "War Memoir," Kaufman pronounces jazz—in a parenthetical aside, almost *sotto voce*—"an African traitor" (*Solitudes* 53). Does this point to jazz as traitorous to Africa or as a traitorous African in America? The answer is, as I have argued throughout this essay, intentionally unclear. It might, after all, be both. The paradox that runs through Kaufman's conception of jazz is this two-ness that undergirds the African American presence. These contradictions were leading to increasing political protest by African Americans who fought in two world wars and by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement around the same time that

Kaufman began publishing, and Kaufman's poetry was part of these demands for inclusion and recognition. For we must remember that, even as Kaufman defines jazz as "Africa's other face, stranded—in America, yet to be saved," he says "saved," not "returned" (*Ancient Rain* 12).

## Notes

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1. Baraka notes that, as with any society, "One succeeded in that world to the extent that one followed those customs [of that society] and to the extent that one's taste was an extension or reflection of that place." Baraka is well-known for his emphatic break with what he calls the "white Greenwich Village—Lower East Side world of the late 1950s and early 1960s" ("Confessions," 20).
2. Because so much of Kaufman's attention is directed towards jazz specifically, I will use "jazz" and "black music" more or less interchangeably.
3. Inextricable from this is the configuration of the black jazz artist. See Panish's *The Color of Jazz* for a detailed account of the differences in white and black literary characterizations of jazz and jazz artists. I would also like to thank Sean Desilets for drawing my attention to the curiousness of the term "Caucosoid."
4. There are certainly poems in which Kaufman presents jazz as a sexual force. See, for instance, his poems "Jazz Chick," "Round About Midnight," and "Morning Joy."
5. The reference to "Bessie's crushed black skull" refers here to an apocryphal story that circulated widely after Bessie Smith's death in an automobile accident. For years, rumors that Smith was refused admittance to a white hospital and left to die without treatment, a victim of American Jim Crow segregation, were accepted as truth.
6. The third version, entitled simply "War Memoir," is found in 1965's *Solitudes Crowded With Loneliness. The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (1997) includes the 1981 version.
7. Raymond Foye, editor of *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956–1978*, notes that "many of the poems in this volume [have] been transcribed from a tape recording." Thus, I am less concerned about the loss of the word "simple" than I am with the consistent pronoun shift.

# Chapter 8

# Black Beat: Performing Ted Joans

*A. Robert Lee*

The Beat Generation played an important role in my life. I too have known some of the best Beat minds of that generation.

—"Je Me Vois (I See Myself)," Joans, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (*CAAS*), 242

I am the early Black Beat
I read with some of the
Best Beat minds
When the Apple was Beat Generating. . . .

—"I, Too, At the Beginning," Joans, *CAAS* 227

## I

Were a working synopsis—even, however unlikely, an academic-style *curriculum vitae*—to be sought for Ted Joans as Black Beat, then a number of touchstones immediately enter the reckoning. Foremost has to be his track record as long-published troubadour or strolling player. That embraces over thirty books, pamphlets, and broadsheets, which began with now largely unavailable small-press publications like *Beat Poems* (1957) and *Jazz Poems* (1959), had a follow-up in *All of Ted Joans And No More: Poems and Collages* (1961), *Black Pow-Wow: Jazz Poems* (1969), *Afrodisia: Old and New Poems* (1969), and that now looks to a most recent collection in *Teducation: Selected Poems 1949–1999* (1999).[1] Beat, to one or another extent, they all are—the "open" itinerant sense of life, the "open" poetic measure and wordplay to match, along with each invocation of the hip, the cool, the countercultural. Yet, and at the same time, can it doubted that they also carry their own black particularity and sting, the work of a writer both Beat and, more specifically, Black Beat, Afro-Beat?

In this, and of necessity, the published work also links to Joans as performance poet. For whether during the classic Beat-era 1950s and '60s, or in the years since, perhaps only Allen Ginsberg, whom Joans credits with getting him into performance-reading mode at a Greenwich Village coffee shop in 1958, could more be said to have pursued poetry as live interaction of poet and audience (Miller 268). Anyone familiar with a Joans reading would readily give confirmation. The notion of performance, moreover, has long had a wider ambit for him. Whether as a lifetime surrealist in writing and painting or as a trumpeter, installation artist, veteran inter-Continental European and African traveler, and conference panelist, each likewise gives context to, and interacts in, the making of Joans as Beat literary figure.

Few contexts have mattered more to him than surrealism, a hallmark borne out in his profound, enduring devotion to André Breton, along with names to include David Gasgoyne, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Réné Magritte, Joan Miró, Roland Penrose, and the black Martinique writer Etienne Lero. One of his own best-known surrealist icons, the rhinoceros, to which he gives celebration in the poem "Sanctified Rhino" (*Teducation* 72–73), even became the subject of an early correspondence with Salvador Dalí. In 1984, true to the call, he became the editor of the playfully named *Dies Und Das*, Germany's first ever, if short-lived, surrealist magazine.

His outpouring of surrealist verse amounts to a whole genre, whether, typically, a vignette to recall Magritte's canvases like "Jazz Anatomy," or in "The Statue of 1713" (*Teducation* 170, 220–23) as an homage written in 1967 to André Breton, and yet classic Joans surrealism in its own right. Among yet other visual art favorites, Joans often mentions the action painter Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, the street graffiti artist Basquiat—calling him "a Black Positive Power" in "The Ladder of Basquiat" (*Teducation* 83–88)—and the great African American presence of Romare Bearden, for whose canvases he has offered frequent, unstinting praise. Appropriately, and throughout his Beat phase and subsequently, his keen use of visual image and various kinds of collage have been identifying features.

Not everything, however, has been unabashed reverence as a piece like "Harlem to Picasso" confirms. In Afro-Beat argot, to include "Hey Picasso" or "dig man" or "Huh," he gives a wry salute to European surrealism's most acclaimed name for his inspired incorporation of "my black ancestors scriptural bebop" and Africa's "black thing" into his work:

> Hey PICASSO  aren't those Moorish eyes you have
> could there be a drop of Africa in your Malaguena soul
> Hey PICASSO  why'd you drop Greco-Roman &
> other academic slop then picked up on my
> black ancestors scriptural bebop
> Hey PICASSO  dig man how did you know
> the black thing would make the modern art world
> lively/sing  and actively swing
> How Did You Know  Huh  PICASSO  PICASSO?
> (*Teducation* 31)[2]

Jazz, equally, has been a key, abiding force. Given a lifetime steeped in the dazzling virtuosity of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon, and Coleman Hawkins—whose saxophone, in "The Sax Bit," becomes "a modern gri-gri" (*Teducation* 92)—can it surprise that it was Joans who, upon learning of his beloved Charlie Parker's death, created a canvas with the historic legend—BIRD LIVES?[3] His "They Forget Too Fast" and "Ice Freezes Red" (*Teducation* 98, 39–41)—two of many Joans's poems in which Parker, his onetime roommate and friend, features—bear eloquent, not to say angry and sad, celebration of the life and music.

The more general poems that invoke jazz have been just as plentiful, each the ongoing evidence of the music's absolute and necessary priority in his own history. "Jazz Must be a Woman" (*Black Pow-Wow* 76–77) provides a run-on lexicon of jazz immortals, at once praise-poem and imagist reverie. Each hornman, percussionist, piano maestro, or bassist becomes the embodied bearer of an art, an Afro-America, quite transcendent in spirit. "Jazz Is . . ." (*Teducation* 48) similarly seeks to go beyond mere almanac or musicology. Joans writes as though to reenact the music's riffs, its contrasting reaches as "joy's highest pitch" and "devil phrases." Given this singularity of "black sound," as he calls it, the closing refrain of "like water and air / Jazz is . . . / good for the soul" comes over as perfectly earned, the poet's own overlap of word and music, Blackness and Beat.

Blues, Afro-Beat blues as it were, has also become a near-category, whether "Long Gone Lover Blues" with its "WHERE WAS YOUR LOVER WHEN THE SAD SAD SUN / WENT DOWN??" (*Teducation* 57), or the poem Joans dedicates to Ntozake Shange as "Commonplace Bulues" (*Teducation* 142–43)—"Bulues" a deliberate imitation of right sound over right spelling.

In this respect, Joans's two most vaunted credos have become virtually a mantra or calling-card: "Surrealism is my point of view" and "Jazz is my religion." Often, moreover, he has fused the two. "Jazz Me Surreally Do" (*Teducation* 173) offers a case in point, a poem which uses a compendium of disjunctive flight and food imagery, for example, "the propeller is oxtail stew for aardvarks," to convey the "jazz wisdom" he finds typically, and authoritatively, embodied in the "sparse piano touch" of Count Basie.

Afro-America's literary tradition, inescapably, also has weighed. No one name, however, more supplies inspiration than Langston Hughes, and especially the Hughes of classic pieces like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921), "The Weary Blues" (1923), or "Harlem" (1951)—with its "What happens to a dream deferred?" Joans's own "Happy 78 Hughes Blues," for instance, written from Timbuktu, speaks with characteristic affection of his friend and oftentimes mentor. The poem acts as a blend of African memory, posthumous birthday elegy, and the continuity from one poet to another—suitably styled under its own variety of Afro-Beat inflection:

I SHADOW DANCE NEAR DAWN
HERE IN UPPER AFRICA

WHERE I STAND WITH YOUR BOOK
AND INHERITED LEGACY
ALREADY AT HAND
SO I LEAP OUT THERE
FREE AS A TREE
SAYING HAPPY HUGHES BIRTHDAY
TO YOU LOVELY LANGSTON BLACK LIKE ME!!
(*Teducation* 28)

"Another Dream Deferred?" (*Teducation* 7), echoing Hughes's line, links American ghetto privation to poverty, hunger, and death in Mexico City. "Promised Land" honors the "LANGSTON HUGHES" he sees having "PAID HIS DUES / IN THE HARLEMS / OF THE USA" (*Teducation* 69). "Passed on Blues: Homage to a Poet" (*Teducation* 65–67), written on Hughes's death in 1967, looks to a Harlem whose nightlife and music gave Hughes his own ambit. A 1985 interview Joans gave to *The Langston Hughes Review* also makes the affiliation quite explicit: "Langston Hughes . . . touched a lot of people because he was natural, natural, a natural creativeness that, you know, was natural as Louis Armstrong. And so I, my task, or my road is to follow—continue the road where he left off." Joans then introduced his poem, a reply to Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers":

Dear Langston, the rivers, Nile,
last month the Congo, and now last, the Zambezi,
Dear Langston.
Our Nile, champion of longitude,
our Niger, a soul server of black people.
Our Congo, a queen, a wet trance.
But our Zambezi outshines the greatest splash on earth. Dear Langston,
the Zambezi is a show stopper with its smoke that thunders
Man, if all Harlem could dig the Zambezi then I'm hip it would be a
great hit.
Dear Langston, this Zambezi is a super sensation,
a dancing river with its rapid rhythms and groovy falls. yes it's cool
and it's smooth as though it ain't done nothing spectacular.
Yes sir, Dear Langston, yes sir. I, too have known rivers.
("Ted Joans on Langston Hughes" 76)

Breton and surrealism, jazz, Hughes, and a warm admiration of African American verse from Paul Dunbar to Robert Hayden and Sterling Brown, along with blues, scat, and jive talk, and his African and other travel, all play into Joans's "poem life surreality," as he calls it in his recent autobiographical essay "Je Me Vois" (225). So, too, does Beat, or again, black Beat, Afro-Beat, whether in his own lived history, in his art, or in his very manner of writing "Je Me Vois."

## II

Joans has spoken often, and readily, of belonging to both Beat and Afro-Beat tradition. If a fellow spirit and one-time Manhattan companion to Jack Kerouac, a more than passing friend of Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, he continues to emphasize his association with his black Beat compeers. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Bob Kaufman especially rank, the former from the early verse phase of *Yugen* through to his Black Power and Marxist incarnations, and the latter the dedicatee of Joans's magic realist blues poem "Laughter you've gone and . . ." (*Teducation* 178–79). Others include A. B. Spellman, author of the poetry of *The Beautiful Days* (1965) and of the still underrated tribute to Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Jackie Maclean, and Herbie Nichols in *Four Lives in The Be-Bop Business* (1966), and Archie Shepp, Joans's longtime friend and frequent jazz and poetry co-performer.[4]

Two poems especially serve to identify Joans's Beat interests. "The Sermon," written in Greenwich Village in 1955 and pitched as playful, ironic advice to white, would-be Beat or hipster women, might almost be a working manifesto. In setting out a list of Beat desiderata, again replete in a slightly dated argot of "dig" and "squares," Joans also writes with typical good-spirited tease. The relevant section reads:

> If you wish to be a sweet child of godlike intelligence, DIG JAZZ,
> support its musicians, go to all the jazz concerts
> buy or cop Dixieland as well as Bop
> Ball to the music of Jelly Roll Morton
> at least once in your life,
> like your granddads did with my grandmothers,
> dance to rhythm and blues, but SIT DOWN and LISTEN to Jazz!
> If you want to be hip my cute young lovely hens
> Then—you must own a copy of *Howl*—
> you must have a copy of Jack (on the road) Kerouac
> on your shelf and know thouself
> by reading Norman Mailer's "White Negro"
> You should read all the French Dada and Surrealist literature
> and dig Whitman and Poe and all the great classics
> so that you too will be in the know—
> you should dig *Mad* comics and read the *Village Voice*
> so that you will be "au courant"
> You must visit all the museums and DIG every zoo in the vicinity
> AND YOU MUST NOT LET THE SQUARES BUG YOU,
> you must have missionary eyes for them
> FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO!
>
> (*Teducation* 94)

Each constituent Beat, and to be sure Afro-Beat, ingredient could not be better marked. The roll-call is symptomatic: jazz, blues, bop, Jelly Roll, *Howl*,

Kerouac, *The White Negro*, lineages back into Dada and Surrealism, Whitman and Poe, *Mad Magazine* and *Village Voice*, and the warning to avoid at all costs being "SQUARE." Each, however, is released as though classic "signifying," with inflections derived from black sermons and rap. This is Beat drawn from live black sources ("SIT DOWN and LISTEN to Jazz!") as much as white sources ("you must have a copy of Jack [on the road] Kerouac"), at once a black poetics of call and response and Whitman-Ginsberg breath line. The effect, in an old African American locution, is Beat poetry, more precisely Afro-Beat poetry, "talking to you."

"I know a man who's neither white nor black / And his name is Jack Kerouac." So, in a "funny little bit of doggerel" Joans invokes the closest of his friendships within the standard Beat pantheon (Nicosia interview 274). The contours of Joans's early Beat involvement, and with Kerouac among others, is usefully set out in a 1979 interview with Gerald Nicosia, to which he gives a brief addendum in "The Beat Generation and Afro-American Culture" in *Beat Scene Magazine*. Joans speaks with greatest affection of the poetry and jazz interests that, from the outset, brought him and Kerouac into a close, valued friendship. Kerouac, according to the Nicosia interview, even features as the nice paradox of "the white hipster showing the black one around Harlem" (274). If, thereafter, they went separate ways, that was anything but to close Beat as a working energy in Joans's writing.

Few poems, certainly, better confirm the connection, or its impact and meaning for Joans, than "The Wild Spirit of Kicks," written in commemoration of Jack Kerouac's death in October 1969. Seamed in both "on the road" and jazz allusion, it offers a fond, appropriately exhilarated Afro-Beat tribute to a Beat friendship. Kerouac is summoned as the begetter of *Mexico City Blues*, a jeans-and-sweater speedster, a blend of white, black, and Native identity, and above all Beat's "pale-faced chieftain," its "razorblade gone mad" and "fuel of a generation." The fund of affection, and Joans's sense of their beyond-race companionship of spirit, is unmistakable:

Jack in red and black mac
Rushing in derelict strewn streets of North America
Jack in well-worn dungarees and droopy sweater of smiles
Running across the country like a razorblade gone mad
Jack in floppy shirt and jacket loaded with jokes
Ole Angel Midnight singing Mexico City Blues
In the midst of Black hipsters and musicians
Followed by a White legion of cool kick seekers
Poetry livers and poem givers
Pale-faced chieftain tearing past
The fuel of a generation
At rest at last
J.K. says hello to J.C.
John Coltrane that is!

(*Teducation* 97)

The closing link to Coltrane—who better than Joans himself to make the conjunction?—brings all the working elements into best relation: Kerouac's inspirational spontaneity, America as odyssey, life lived on the pulse and for "kicks," the jazz, the street, and ultimately, the transcendence.

A yet fuller location of Joans as Beat would point to his auspicious July 4, 1928 birth on a Mississippi riverboat in Cairo, Illinois, to parents who were entertainers; the brutal, white-racist murder of his father in Detroit's 1943 riot; a bachelor of fine arts degree from Indiana University in 1951; and, shortly thereafter, arrival in the "the greatest mixed magic institution on earth: New York City's Manhattan," and within it the "Bohemia of Greenwich Village, U.S.A." ("Je Me Vois" 220), where his talent and ease of personality made him a well-known favorite, and where Beat had recently become vogue, resistance, a new American culture-wave. It cannot be thought other than symptomatic that Joans was among the first to take part in Fred McDarrah's Rent-a-Beatnik circuit, whose larky advertisements first appeared in *The Village Voice* in 1959, and that led to house visits and readings for a monied tier of white upper-class Manhattan and East Coast society. Beat playing Beat, Joans playing himself, offers a simulation, its own kind of performance loop, worth some pondering. His birthday parties, never without their own rhinoceros motif, were also features of his Village Beat performance calendar.

As to Manhattan-at-large, he names Bob Reisner and Babs Gonzalez as "my two Apple instructors" ("Je Me Vois" 223) and gives the both of them warmest remembrance in "Him The Bird" (*Teducation* 167), another major eulogy to Charlie Parker. Few could have taken more readily to New York than Joans, whether the Harlem jazz lofts and clubs, or the Bleeker Street and other Village cafe and poetry locations (his own first apartment was on MacDougal Street with a later studio in Astor Place), or the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan, Guggenheim and other galleries, many of whose curators or prime visual artists—from Frank O'Hara to Jackson Pollock—he came to know firsthand. He was also quick to show a keenest appetite for reading the literature of Afro-America, indeed of the wider Afro-globe, as housed at the Schomburg Library on 135th Street, with its indispensable book collections, manuscripts, and other holdings.

## III

As America moved into the 1960s of Civil Rights and Black Power, however, both a vengeful white-supremacist Dixie and an urban North of shoot-outs and burnings, not to mention the loss of each well-known life (Medgar Evers and John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965—"My Ace of Spades" [*Teducation* 59] as he names him in the title of a tributary poem—and Martin Luther King in 1968), he found himself from 1961 onward embarking on self-imposed exile, a cycle of forays and respite both to Europe and Africa. Color-line America, the bullying and racist ill-practice, he has often remarked, had simply become too wearing. Poems like "No mo' Kneegrow,"

written while flying over Dixie ("I'M FLYING OVER ALABAMA . . . WITH BLACK POWER IN MY LAP," to be sung, as he says laconically, to the tune of "Oh! Susannah"), or "TWO WORDS," with its "those TWO / beautiful words BLACK POWER" were typical Joans responses (both in *Black Pow-Wow* 26, 20). Yet they also carried forward his Beat style—performative, easeful, always countercultural.

By the end of the decade, with more explicit Beat life and activity behind him, he had embarked on sojourns that would take him to virtually every European capital, whether street and bohemian Amsterdam, Berlin, London, the Scandinavian north, or, and above all, Paris. A reminder of the importance of the French capital to him was again underlined in his readiness to contribute to *Fire Readings* (Applefield 1991) as part of a fundraiser for George Whitman's historic Seine riverside bookstore, Shakespeare & Company, after it burned down to a near shell.

In keeping with the spirit of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Fireword," Joans's two contributions display a typical Afro-Beat flavor. "Good Morning," recalling an African night's sexual encounter, invokes poet and the continent's best-known peak in a state of undress:

> I on bedside sat
> saw my early morn new year shock
> through the window
> naked, nude and bare
> Kilimanjaro
> without her clouded underwear.
> (*Fire Readings* 39)

"To—*bâiller* or not to *éternuer*"—"To—yawn or not to sneeze"—offers a touch of surrealist whimsy (one of its two dedicatees is Marcel Duchamp) but ends with a line from black vaudeville—"So open the damn door Richard!" (*Fire Readings* 39–40). The Beat performer in him could not be said to have diminished.

Beat also enters Joans's continuing, and for him hugely important, personal close encounters with Africa. Mali's Timbuktu has especially drawn him, but also Africa's wider reach, its plurality of language whether indigenous or English and French, its religions whether Christian, Islamic, or animist-ceremonial. Arab Africa, for him, has meant Tangiers as the literary outpost of Paul and Jane Bowles, William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and their Beat visitors; revolution-shadowed Algiers; and always the haunting, expansive Sahara. As to sub-Saharan Africa, Mali has indeed been a frequent base, but also an Africa extending from Senegal to Sierra Leone, Upper Volta to Nigeria. To each he has brought his own Afro-Beat measure.

Surveying its myriad styles of *négritude*, peoples, language, music, art, and terrain in his 1960s poem "Africa," he speaks of a world beyond colonialism and as "My Africa, your Africa, a free continent to be" (*Teducation* 2).

The nuance can be thought one of blues or rap. But like all the poetry of his inveterate African journeying, it carries a Beat insignia. For Joans's on-the-road Africa, a mosaic, and told in due riffs and crescendos, can also be said to possess its own kind of on-the-road voice.

"My Trip," in *Afrodisia*, for instance, written as a species of ongoing and unfinished verse-prose, conjures up desert stays among the Tuaregs, fetish rituals and sex-encounters in Dahomey and Cameroon, cities from Marrakesh to Bamako, Baga girls in Conakry, and Highlife dances in Accra. These he calls "zig-zag directions" (66), a Beat cum Black self-insertion into Africa's time and place. Place-names become active energies, verbs:

> I have Moroccod/Algeried/Tunised/Libyad/Egypted/Mauritanied/Malied/
> Senegaled/Gambiad/Guinéed/Sierra Leoned/Liberid/Upper
> Voltaed/Nigerd/Togod/Ivory Coasted . . .
>
> (*Afrodisia* 64)

His own "Harlemese" (64) joins "Africa big Africa wide Africa" (67). He invokes, among others, Ginsberg, Rimbaud, Bebop, Malcolm, Sweet Potato Pie, even himself in third person as "His Hipness" (66). This is confessional rhapsody of a sort, written overlappingly in a genial Bad Boy pose in "National Nigger Nuisance" (64) and as Beat blackness in lines like "I have blown St. Louis Blues in Mali" (65).

A similar style of Afro-Beat panorama operates in "Afrique Accidentale" (*Afrodisia* 4–8), a poem dedicated to Hoyt Fuller and which he recalls in the Nicosia interview as "a long rhyming poem of mine, of me coming to Timbuktu, in *City Lights Journal*, No.1." Africa, *Afrique*: Whether named in English or French the continent becomes for him a hub, a magnet, a place of origins, and in which Timbuktu both real ("I finally made you" 8) and surreal ("for a peaceful night of sleep / I count African rhinos not American sheep" 6) does duty for Africa-at-large. But he also links himself back to Greenwich Village with "You know I'm a jiving AfroAmerican" (4) and "the Beat bread I made" (8). Beat in America so becomes Beat in Africa, himself the bridging voice:

> Greenwich Village is a long way off, with its coldwater flat & sink
> I have traveled a long way on the beat bread I made
> now I'm deep in the heart of Africa, the only Afroamerican spade
> TOMBOUCTOU . . . . . tomorrow, visions in my head
> TIMBUKTU . . . . . tomorrow, unless I wake up dead
> TIMBUCTOO . . . . . tomorrow, where no beatniks ever been
> TIMBUQTEW . . . . . tomorrow, gonna make my own scene
> TIMBOEKTOE . . . . . tomorrow, thank Allah & all the rest
> TIMBUCKTO . . . . . tomorrow, overjoyed I must confess
>
> so now lay me down to sleep
> to count black rhinos, not white sheep

Timbukto, Timbucktoo, Thymbaktou!
I do dig you!
Timbuctu, Tombouctou
I finally made you
Timbuctoo
Yeah!!

(*Afrodisia* 8)

One further refraction lies in how he makes "Afrodisia" not only a poem in its own right, the title of the 1970 poetry collection in which "My Trip" and his other early Africa-poetry appears, but also his own term for a "black," if always resolutely male, view of heterosexual encounter. In this respect, life can be said to have imitated art in the form of an early marriage, resulting in four "natural beautiful zebras" as he calls his children ("Je Me Vois" 230), not to mention the liaisons that led to ten offspring overall. "Afrodisia," its dedicatee Aimé Césaire, carries a black celebration of the senses:

WHERE EVER BLACK PEOPLE MAKE MUSIC DO DANCES
MOVE BLACK BODIES
OR SING BLACK SANE SOUNDS
IT'S OUR AFRODISIA CAUSING ALL THAT MOVEMENT
A NATURAL MUSICAL JOY ABOUNDS

(*Afrodisia* 71)

Yet however Africa, or Afro-America, centered, cannot also a Beat implication be heard, Blake as Beat precursor perhaps, or Ginsberg and Kerouac in beatificatory mode?

Latin America has also given its beckoning to Joans, notably the Mexico of Diego Rivera and of Frida Kahlo's Casa Azul that he made the subject of a documentary film, and of the country's great *muralista* tradition. He was early to meet, and admire, Octavio Paz, whom he continues to read. Cuba has also drawn him, especially on account of the surrealist sculptures of Augustin Cardenas and the startling dream-vision canvases of Wifredo Lam. A poem like "Eternal Lamp of Lam" (*Teducation* 156–57) offers celebratory incantation, a run of word variation, sound and typeset based on the poet's name and the words "AFRO, CHINO, CUBANO." But the effect is not without its own kind of Beat echo or cadence.

Trans-national or cross-border as a lexicon might almost have been invented for Joans, "travel" in all its deeper, existential implication as a kind of personal life-art. A poem like "Do Not Walk Outside This Area" (*Teducation* 152–55), based on a visit to Mexico and written up in 1997 in Seattle, uses an airport warning-sign to take off on a celebration of *mestizaje*, whether peoples, art, foodways, or English and Spanish. The point is to challenge, to out-write, boundaries, to bridge the Americas. So, typically, he invokes "*Sor Juana con Bessie Smith*" (*Teducation* 153), two legendary women from America south and north of the border, figures of *latinidad* and Afro-America, authorship and blues. Joans's Beat poetry, and different uses of Beat

motif, distinctive as they are, at the same time have both drawn from, and filtered into, this synchronicity and span.

## IV

"Je Me Vois (I See Myself)," documenting Joans's life and the importance of Beat activity to him, also doubles as a greatly revealing Beat photo-gallery. Joans can be seen as the seven year-old decked out in bandsman's peaked cap, the bow-tied arrivee before the Statue of Liberty in 1951, the duffel-coated jazz action trumpeter in 1955, the Paris sidekick to Langston Hughes in 1969, and the traveler in seeming hunter garb at the Tropic of Cancer line en route to Timbuktu in the 1970s. Each can be thought a kind of panel in an unfolding visual performance.

Other shots show him with an otherwise white group from the Phoenix Gallery, which he helped found and where he had the first exhibition of his own paintings (he has described his own canvases as evolving from "realist surreality" to "abstract-surreal" and "jazz painting"), reciting at a jazz and poetry session alongside Archie Shepp on sax during a Pan African Cultural Festival, and amid a Beat-style happening given over to "food sculpture"—a fruit-covered woman—at the cafe-theatre Vintergaarten in Copenhagen.

He is to be seen with Stokely Carmichael in London at whose death as Kwame Turé, and longtime resident of Guinea, he wrote a poem full of affection like "A Powerful Black Starmichael" (*Teducation* 8). He also appears alongside Aimé Césaire at a 1968 Black Power rally in Paris, with Jean Paul Sartre again in Paris panel, with a young-looking Ishmael Reed, and with Romare Bearden before a Senofu votive sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum. In a clearly fond invocation he is to be seen in filial embrace of his mother in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

It would be hard, however, to imagine him in more rapt colloquy than that in which he is photographed with André Breton in the latter's Paris studio in Rue Fontaine. Joans's body language speaks volumes, the utter attention, the outstretched arms, the concentrated brow. It offers a perfect companion to a poem like "Nadja Rendezvous" (*Black Pow-Wow* 113), one surrealist's uninhibitedly admiring salute to another. A 1992 image shows him with his longtime companion and "femmoiselle," Laura Corsiglia, before a window in which, bearded and in checkered muffler, and giving off a characteristically full, warm smile, he and the letters teasingly add up to TEDUCATION, the very title of his *Selected Poems 1949–1999*.[5]

These all stand well enough in their own right, Joans in his ongoing diversity of presence. They take their place, however, alongside an almost classic Beat portrait: Joans with Allen Ginsberg in London in 1967. Clad in familiar headgear he has his left arm around Beat's best-known poet-avatar, himself in full beard mode, jacketed, and with a charm hanging from his neck. The two meet directly, and fondly, each other's gaze. The image's "love-in"

configuration, against a background shelf of books, has superimposed the words "BLACK!" coming from Joans's mouth and "Flower!" from Ginsberg's. It offers a near perfect cameo, Ginsberg as Beat, Joans as Afro-Beat ("Je Me Vois" 243).

## V

A roster of yet other Joans poems invite their own due recognition and annotation as either Beat or, at least, Beat-shadowed. One grouping lies in his love verse, collected in *Teducation*. These writings, which run from verse dictionaries like "Alphabetical Love You" (125) or "Collected & Selected Groupings" (139–41), to a species of self-portraiture like "I Am The Lover" (168–69) with its slightly antic Beat footfalls like "I howled in prose" (168) or "I snore in code" (168), to "And None Other" (126), written as a long Beat-surreal homage to Laura Corsiglia for "Our on-the-road-reality" (130), "Mariachi marriage" (130), and "vegetal entanglement" (131).

Another offers flytings or exorcisms, often of a kind in impetus with Ginsberg's "America." These can always run the risk of polemic, message over poetry, as in "How Do You Want Yours?" (*Teducation* 35–38). But they can also show a keenest satiric swerve as in "God Blame America!!" (*Afrodisia* 79) and a line like "America / your mask has slipped" (*Afrodisia* 79) or "Dear Miss America," written at the time of the Vietnam War and pitched as though mock-apologetic Beat pacificism—"I don't mean to be funny / but you gotta give up / being square and selfish" (*Afrodisia* 100). To these should be added an early sound poem like "Uh Huh," written in 1949, an assault as much by phonetics as actual speech on the Dixie segregation which has created, as he calls it, "THE COLORED WAITING ROOM!!!!!" (*Teducation* 107). It would not have been lost on Joans that "uh huh," in fact, is an Africanism long passed into general American usage.[6] Few Joans poems, however, startle more than "The Nice Colored Man," first in its Beat-like, deafening, totemic iteration of the word "nigger" and then its closing use of nursery rhyme as a kind of cladding for the abruptness of the smack within:

> Eeny Meeny Miney Mo
> Catch Whitey By His Throat
> If He Says—Nigger CUT IT!!
> (*Teducation* 90)

Three other styles of poem also serve, each of which, duly, carries an accent both Beat and yet Beat plus. In "Why Try" (Joans 1999, 115) something of his Beat whimsy is on offer, replete in reference to bohemia and the Beat café, given to Joans's easeful sense of sexuality—liberating or full of male-gaze chauvinism according to interpreting readership, and deceptively

simple in its rhythm and wordplay:

> And she was brown
> And she always dressed and wore brown
> And she had a fine brown body
> And she had two beautiful brown eyes
> And she would sit in the Beat Café
> on her brown behind on a hard brown bench
> and listen to brown sounds entertain her brown thoughts.
> And she would often double cross her big brown legs
> And reveal her beautiful brown pleasing knees
> And as she sat in the Beat Café on her brown behind on the
> hard brown bench
> And listening to brown sounds coming from brown entertainers
> of brown bohemia
> I saw a young white girl throw away her brand
> new jar of
> suntan lotion and sigh: WHY TRY
> (*Teducation* 115)

It would be hard to miss the tease, a woman seeking to make her white skin be brown, and yet the "brown" object of desire infinitely more than a matter of skin. At issue, rather, has to be the complex styling of Afro-female pulchritude, posture, dress, thought, bodily show, music, nothing short of a whole way of being. "Suntan lotion," indeed, cannot work the change.

Joans's fusion of Beat with surrealism has few better verse expressions than "Sanctified Rhino" (*Teducation* 72–73), written in 1956. His signature icon again comes into play but as part of a wry "hipster" parable of sexual encounter and remembrance. Its use of surreal image—the poem's opening line of "The rhinos roam in the bedroom / where the lovely virgin waits" is typical—plays into an intertextual Beat reference like "the owl howls the Ginsberg address / that only the hipster would know." This Beat-surreal play works throughout the poem—a love affair won, lost, and then looked back upon, and told in both Dali-esque exaggeration ("The rhino and the virgin standing / where once lived a preacher cat / a Swahili instructor, tried to make her / she ran away with a dish and a bat") and Beat patois ("chicklet," "cat," "hipster"). This language of dream-canvas yet also of hip-talk works right through to the closing stanzas with its rueful moral to the fable just unfolded:

> So the rhino who balled the virgin
> on the twelve o'clock Saturday bright
> blew his horn, for she was reborn
> on wines, made 'em high as a kite
>
> Now rhino preaching in the wilderness
> about how he lost his great head
> by talking, and walking baby goose
> virgin to his purple pillow bed

And that's how he lost his head
by taking and shaking baby goose
the virgin to his purple pillow bed.
(*Teducation* 73)

"Him The Bird," a 1958 poem, blends jazz and Beat, Charlie Parker as ultimate sax genius and hipster, Afro-America's own, yet also, and in life or silhouette, America's own:

Once upon a time a few years ago now
There was a young café-au-lait colored bird
Who blew sax and his earth name was CHARLES PARKER

He mounted a small bandstand in Greenwich Village
And blew through Bob Reisner's Open Door where
Bohemian whores used to sit with big-assed business
Men talking trade backed Bird's funky lore

He lived at a flophouse on Barrow Street and froze
With a Moslem and me during the winter of my time '53
Eating canned beans sardines sipping wine and drinking tea

He blew for young Hebrew in Mafia-owned joint
Where sat James Dean with Weegee and some technicolored chicks

He blew for kicks and a few measly bills
Those solos he took on borrowed alto
Sax gave everybody their jazz-as-religious thrills

He blew his horn in the Village and wailed for the world
He died a pauper although now his every
Effort on wax will sell So the BIRD is gone and
in the outer world he cooks therefore women and
Men like me will always have the BIRD influence in
Their music paintings and poetry books
Bird Lives Bird Lives Bird Lives Bird Lives!!
(*Teducation* 167)

All the placing references add their own resonance—the Village, "Bob Reisner's Open Door," Barrow Street, the young James Dean, soon to become Hollywood's screen icon of alienation and "cool," Weegee as Manhattan's photographer royal, and, above all, Bird himself as highwire if fated hornman, not only Kerouac's but Joans's own Beat god.

The very spacing in the poem, each indicated pause and run-on cadence, suggests a jazz-Beat fugue of both lament and celebration. The wordplay, as always, gives supporting force, whether Parker as "café-au-lait colored bird," or hornman who "wailed for the world." Is there not, too, a beatifying in that final acclamation of life over death—"Bird Lives Bird Lives Bird Lives Bird Lives!!"? Ted Joans truly performing Ted Joans, at once Afro-Beat surrealist and surrealist Afro-Beat, and in a poem given to his best-loved jazz alter ego, could not be thought to have spoken, or written, in better form.

## VI

Why, then, has Joans often seemed to go missing in the Beat pantheon, his too-frequent omission from many of the ranking accounts and anthologies? Gerald Nicosia, who contributes a stirring introduction to *Teducation*, has not been the only admirer to note Joans's absence in key collections, from Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices* (1969) and its successor *New Black Voices* (1972) to David S. Wirshup's *The Beat Generation & Other Avant-Guarde [sic] Writers* (1977) and Ann Charters's otherwise exemplary *The Portable Beat Reader* (1992), and, of late, even the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997). For Joans, as both a Beat and an African American poet, redress has long been overdue.

In part, the cause could well lie in his itinerant history, the seeming gaps or absences. Murmurings have been heard about the risk of mannerism in his punning, rhymes, and slogans, not least to include the quirk of not caring to read novels on grounds of length (despite a promised one of his own, with the exuberantly mock politically incorrect title *Niggers From Outer Space.*) Also, Joans has not been immune from the charge, made against the Beat Movement at large, whatever its pan-sexual styles, of phallo-centrism—the too ready reduction, and with it a certain boastfulness, of women to sexual play-object.

Yet other factors enter the reckoning. Joans's poetry, whatever its self-evident sources in black life, has never easily been corralled into the Black Power stable: His interests in surrealism, jazz, erotica, painting, even travel as its own kind of performance, have put him ideologically at some distance from the voices of militant black nationalism. If, say, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) can also look to a Beat phase as in an early collection like *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, he has also, both as Black Nationalist and Marxist, long written in sterner voice. Joans has been tough enough, scathing at times, but rarely has he written in the 1960s confrontational vein of Baraka's anthem-poem "BLACK DADA NIHILIMUS" or his play *Dutchman.* Joans was always another kind of voice, as, indeed, he was from Bob Kaufman, whether the Kaufman of the anarcho-dadaist "Abomunist" broadsides, or of pieces as Beat-sad and edged in hurt as the impressive "Jail Poems" and "War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen to It at Your Own Risk," or, in addition, of the life whose swings alternated between the ten-year vow of silence he took on John F. Kennedy's assassination and the reveller in San Francisco's drug and bar scene.

Gerald Nicosia nicely underlines something of Joans's reluctance to be straight-jacketed either by subject or genre when, in his introduction to *Teducation: Selected Poems 1949–1999*, he mentions a conversation they had about the Kennedy-Johnson era of Malcolm and Black Power. Never himself a slouch in tackling racist abuse, Joans, he witnesses, at the same time always asked for the most plural expression of black, and of at-large human, experience: "He recalled that once, during the sixties, he met some young black poets,

and all their poems were 'dedicated to white racism and white villains.' Where, he wondered, were their 'love poems . . . poems about bears, about potatoes, or poems about the sense of smell, the sense of taste, or hearing?' " (ii).

There is also the issue of Joans as Beat performance-poet, the more so given his ease of wit, the accessibility of his style. Does not poetry like his—more than usually open to improvisation and spoken performance, as against the silent, self-enclosed reading—almost always tend to be assigned to the lesser margin?

Joans himself offers about the right measure of his Beat affiliations and writing when he speaks of its "important role in my life" (*Teducation* 242). It has not been everything. Surrealism, jazz, the visual arts, Europe, Africa, and his other journeyings clearly have all given shaping force to his creativity. But Beat, and within it Black or Afro-Beat, remains a hallmark of his vision and of his idiom, contributing to a career, a life in performance as it were, owed not only recognition but its own kind of garland.

## Notes

1. The Bancroft Library, at the University of California at Berkeley, has acquired a collection of Joans's manuscripts and out-of-print early writings.
2. "Harlem to Picasso," like "Sanctified Rhino," was first published in *Afrodisia.*
3. The canvas has now been acquired by the De Young Museum.
4. I explore Joans within this African American context in "The Black Beats: The Signifying Poetry of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans," revised and expanded as chapter 7, pp. 133–51, of my *Designs of Blackness: Mappings in the Literature and Culture of Afro-America* (London: Pluto, 1998).
5. A volume of Laura Corsiglia's drawings and his own unpublished poems has recently been published as *Our Thang* (Victoria, BC: Ekstasis Press, 2001).
6. See, in this regard, Roy Blount, Jr., "Foreword," p. x, in Lisa Howarth, ed., *Yellow Dogs, Hushpuppies, Bluetick Hounds* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

# Re-visioning

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# Chapter 9

# What Abstract Art Means in *Pull My Daisy*

*Terence Diggory*

The 1959 film *Pull My Daisy* is usually remembered as an early improvisatory performance by Beat writers Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky, narrated by Jack Kerouac and documented by the photographer Robert Frank. In the standard account, it represents realism in one version or another, whether it be the "raw esthetic" of the Beats or the "homemade, deliberately unpolished look of 'real life' " that became Frank's trademark as a photographer (Vicki Goldberg). However, what the film actually documents is the ease with which the Beats made themselves at home in the New York art world, still heavily influenced by an aesthetic of abstraction (Robert C. Morgan). The painter Alfred Leslie brought previous filmmaking experience to the project and took the lead as director and editor, although he and Frank officially shared the credits "and have been arguing for thirty years over the rights," as Larry Rivers testifies (1992, 173). Rivers, a fellow painter, performs in the film along with the painter Alice Neel and the art dealer Richard Bellamy. Two other women in the cast were each married to painters, Delphine Seyrig to Jack Youngerman and Denise Parker to Raymond Parker. The boy and girl who appear briefly (the girl only in a voice-over) were the children of Robert and Mary Frank, the latter a sculptor. Family ties to the visual arts extend into the fictional world the film evokes. The wife in the story is a painter, and the action takes place in a painter's loft, cluttered with (Leslie's) art work (Allan, 1998, 193).

Since the film's initial release, a variety of circumstances have combined to efface the role of the New York art world, but it is not my purpose to trace the history of this reception. Rather, taking the presence of the art world as a given, I want to borrow from that world the concept of abstraction and to use it as lens for viewing *Pull My Daisy*. The experience of viewing, now more widely available thanks to video distribution, is enriched by this approach, and our understanding of the Beats is enlarged beyond the confines of a narrow view of "realism."

## Modernist Abstraction and Action Painting

Deciding what abstraction means in *Pull My Daisy* requires close attention to the way the term was understood by the artists involved in making the film, although we should not expect consistency either in that understanding or in the resulting practice. Looking back in 1976 to his first solo show at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1952, Alfred Leslie recalled to John Arthur the excitement of being part of a movement that seemed poised to replace the old abstraction with a new realism. He confessed, however, that his first show still paid grudging homage to the work of the elder abstractionists whom he and his young contemporaries could not help but admire, so much so that his second show (in 1953) returned fully to abstraction. The vacillation in his third show (of 1954) was characterized by its sources, ranging from the paintings of Willem de Kooning to photos from *Life* magazine. In 1956, Leslie began a series of large, multi-panel abstract paintings that he pursued through the period of filming of *Pull My Daisy*; one of these paintings, or perhaps the beginnings of one, forms the backdrop to the scene of Ginsberg's riff on Guillaume Apollinaire. After 1960, Leslie returned to realism, starting with a series of self-portraits and evolving toward complex narrative sequences that critics connect with his work in narrative film (Judith Stein 15). However, Leslie's own comments suggest the making of *Pull My Daisy* was equally relevant to his abstract work. From a conversation with Leslie about *Castro!!*, a four-panel abstraction made just after the film, James Schuyler recorded the following notes, revealing the concerns of a film editor:

> "Where the edges meet is almost like a dissolve."
> Note varieties of speed.
> Note off-placement of the "cuts" (joinings of quarterings).
> (Schuyler 36)

As this last example suggests, to view *Pull My Daisy* in terms of framing and editing is to view the film abstractly, or formally, even though its content is realistic. The modernist avant-garde had rejected realism as a distraction from the true meaning of a painting, which lay in the formal qualities of the medium (Greenberg 1965, 140; cf. Greenberg 1940). By the 1950s, that principle was accepted as an essential tenet of advanced art, and younger painters sought a new standard to measure their own advancement. A number of them introduced some degree of realism in their work, not as a rejection of abstraction but rather as a test of their ability to *see* abstractly. Although they obviously enjoyed the attention that came with attacks from abstractionist purists, the younger painters took further delight in reversing the charge of disloyalty by insinuating that their attackers suffered from a limited ability to see beyond the painting's content (Rivers 1990, 113). The standard of advancement shifted from the look of a painting to the act of seeing or, more broadly defined, "a way of living." The shift was authorized by a member of

the older generation, Willem de Kooning, who declared in a 1951 symposium on the question "What Abstract Art Means to Me" that painting "is a way of living today" (560). In the following year, de Kooning exhibited his semi-figurative *Woman* paintings, Jackson Pollock also exhibited work that contained recognizable figures, and the critic Harold Rosenberg, in his essay "The American Action Painters," elaborated a theoretical justification for judging a painting not by the way it looked but by the quality of the act that produced it.

According to Rosenberg, modernist abstraction had been only one step in the artist's journey toward existential freedom. "The apples weren't brushed off the table in order to make room for perfect relations of space and color," Rosenberg explained. "They had to go so that nothing would get in the way of the act of painting" (1994, 26). As de Kooning's *Woman* series demonstrated, even an initial decision to paint a recognizable figure need not get in the way of the act of painting, provided each subsequent decision took off on its own free trajectory, necessarily compromising the distinctness of the figure and perhaps even the clarity of the painting's formal relations (Rosenberg 1982, 118–19). Painting "as a way of living" raised the level of abstraction above painting as a way of seeing. What was to be abstracted, distilled, from any creative product, whether it be figurative or non-figurative, was the essence of the creative process, its action or energy (Creeley 58).

## Photography and the New American Cinema

Since this essence was abstract enough to be shared by all of the arts, the theory of Action painting was quickly embraced by avant-garde artists in other media during the 1950s. However, within the close community of artists in New York, personal example could be at least as influential as theory. Looking back from the perspective of later developments in art, Barbara Rose has argued that the influence of Action painting began not with Harold Rosenberg's essay, published in 1952, but with Hans Namuth's photographs and film of Jackson Pollock painting, produced in 1950 and, respectively, published in *Art News* and screened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951. In the same year, MOMA mounted an exhibition entitled "Abstraction in Photography" that included work by Robert Frank, but the concept of abstraction that informed the exhibition was that of an earlier formalist modernism (Grundberg 25–26). Frank's exposure to Action painting began, once again, through personal example. From his Third Avenue flat he could see into de Kooning's studio and observe an Action painter in action. "I could see him walk to the easel and walk back, pacing like an animal in a cage," Frank recalls. "Every day I would see that scene. It was inspiring, that struggle" (Woodward 34).

The Beat writers with whom Frank began to associate in the later 1950s tended to view his example in the same way. Jack Kerouac agreed to write an introduction for the U.S. edition of Frank's photosequence *The Americans*

(1959) because Kerouac appreciated "the tremendous photographs taken as he traveled on the road" (19). As Rosenberg had noted, "the open road" was quintessentially the scene of American action (1994, 33; cf. Leslie, *100 Views Along the Road*). Early in 1958, shortly after Kerouac published *On the Road*, a trip to Florida in the company of Robert Frank gave him the chance to witness the photographer in action. Kerouac reported:

> I was amazed to see how a photographic artist does the bit, of catching those things about the American road writers write about. It's pretty amazing to see a guy, while steering at the wheel, suddenly raise his little 300-dollar German camera with one hand and snap something that's on the move in front of him, and through an unwashed windshield at that. ("On the Road to Florida" 24)

After sequencing photographs, as in *The Americans*, and taking photographs from a moving vehicle, as in the scene Kerouac describes, the next logical move for Frank was from still photography to film. In a first experiment during the summer of 1958, he filmed his wife and the painter Allan Kaprow acting out a vaguely surreal scenario (Brookman 84–85). By late fall, Frank was preparing to film *Pull My Daisy*. Kaprow, meanwhile, extended the logic of Action painting into the art of the Happening (Fineberg 188–92).

It is tempting to view *Pull My Daisy* either as a record of artists in action, like Hans Namuth's film about Pollock, or as the documentation of a Happening, like *Pat's Birthday* (1963), a film made by Robert Breer with Claes and Pat Oldenburg (Banes 90). Documentation of action is not the same as free, spontaneous action in itself, however. The documentary filmmaker faces prior constraint in the facts to be documented; the audience of the documentary film is invited to focus primarily on those facts, only secondarily on the film. Thus, documentary film is opposed to abstraction in two senses: first, because it assumes the task of representation as a limit rather than merely one among many possible decisions, as in the case of de Kooning's *Woman* series; second, because the making of the film itself is not a free act (Richter 17–18). Nevertheless, in the years following World War II, the incorporation of certain aspects of documentary—shooting on location, employing non-professional actors, emphasizing improvisation over scripted performance—had helped to liberate the filmmakers of Italian Neo-Realism and the French New Wave from worn-out conventions. By the end of the 1950s, there were hopes that a similar liberation might inspire a New American Cinema. Jonas Mekas, the chief promoter of this movement, heralded *Pull My Daisy* as evidence that his hopes were justified, bestowing upon it the second annual Independent Film Award (1960) through the journal he founded and edited, *Film Culture*. In "Notes on the New American Cinema," published in *Film Culture* in 1962, Mekas compared *Pull My Daisy*, as a "fictional film," with contemporary developments in documentary: "That feeling of 'being there,' of which [Richard] Leacock speaks in connection with the documentary, was achieved in this fictional film to the highest degree" (96).

That achievement should have drawn attention to the creativity of the film, but instead, Mekas noted, its documentary appearance had misled "even some very intelligent critics" to limit their attention to the film's content: "Instead of criticizing the film, they criticize the beat generation."

As I noted at the outset, the view of *Pull My Daisy* that Mekas characterizes as an error is a view that has persisted up to the present time. That Mekas himself frequently falls into the error, despite his declared intention to correct it, testifies to the difficulty of constructing an alternative view. Paradoxically, the alternative requires abandoning the very distinction that seems to define the error in the first place, the distinction between art and life. The concept of Action art erases that distinction, as de Kooning implied when he stated that painting is a way of living. Mekas quotes that statement at the opening of "Notes on the New American Cinema" (88). However, when Mekas objects to viewing *Pull My Daisy* as "a slice-of-life film" (96), he implies that it is to be viewed as an art film, thereby opposing art to life. On the other hand, when Mekas describes Leslie as an Action painter, in an earlier essay on "Cinema of the New Generation," he seems to favor life over art, though it is interesting to watch art resurface as the description unfolds: "In painting, for instance, Alfred Leslie's final touches on the work consist of splashes and drippings of paint with which he intentionally destroys the illusion of Art, reminding one of the studio and brushes—a touch of actuality and action which has a strong quality or [*sic* for 'of'?] lyricism and which we find in all modern American art & life" (12). Art-and-life as a dialectic relation, neither one destroying the other, would indeed be the most appropriate formula for the style that the filmmakers sought to achieve in *Pull My Daisy*. In a press release quoted by Mekas, they announced their intention of realizing the kind of film envisioned by James Agee: "The films I most eagerly look forward to will not be documentaries but works of pure fiction, played against and into, and in collaboration with unrehearsed and uninvented reality" (Mekas, "Cinema of the New Generation" 13; cf. Agee 237).

To correct the overemphasis by Mekas and, later, by musician David Amram (1971, 311–16) on "unrehearsed and uninvented reality," as Agee calls it, Alfred Leslie has emphasized the careful planning that went into the making of *Pull My Daisy* (" 'Daisy': 10 Years Later"), an argument that has subsequently been expanded through the research of film historian Blaine Allan. In terms of the parallel that Mekas draws between the film and Leslie's painting, Leslie is calling on Mekas to look beyond the "splashes and drippings of paint" to the geometrical grid pattern that lies underneath. However, film being an art of time rather than space, what lies underneath cannot be experienced directly. If, as Leslie explains, the improvisation of his actors arose through their response to the strict parameters he defined for each scene, it remains the case that what we see is the improvised action. How can we see past (or beneath) that action to parameters articulated at some prior time? *Pull My Daisy* stops short of the self-referential extreme of Shirley Clarke's *The Connection* (1961), which includes the making of the film in the story it

tells (Hanhardt 228). Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which the film registers the decisions that produced it, just as the gestural brushstrokes record the series of decisions that produced a *Woman* by de Kooning. In the painting, if each brushstroke appears free in itself, their final arrangement still reflects the initial decision to portray the figure of a woman. As organized form, the figure stands in tension with the apparent randomness of the brushstrokes. As organic form, the figure stands in tension with the geometrical regularity of the frame. Analogous tensions in *Pull My Daisy* imbue the film with the spirit of Action art. The analogy extends to the spirit the Beats brought to the film through their experience of writing.

## Beat Writing and Visionary Cinema

At the most basic level of viewing, the analogue to the female figure in de Kooning's painting is the event that *Pull My Daisy* sets out to portray. It reached the filmmakers in the form of a play by Jack Kerouac that was never produced and has never been published, unlike the narration that Kerouac speaks in the soundtrack for the film (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy*), which was improvised after the action was shot silently and intended to present all the characters as heard in the author's mind (Leslie, " 'Daisy': 10 Years Later"). Kerouac's original scenario attracted Leslie because "nothing happens" (unpublished interview), but this judgment must be understood in contrast to the melodramatic notion of "happening" exemplified by the standard Hollywood film of the day. What Kerouac described in the third act of his play has the clear and simple outline that marks off events in daily life, and it is in fact based on an actual event in Kerouac's life. Two sets of characters simultaneously visit the home of a married couple, based on Kerouac's friends Neal and Carolyn Cassady. In the film, Delphine Seyrig plays the role of Carolyn, so designated in the Cast List (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 7), although the narration refers to her only as "the wife." Larry Rivers plays the role of the husband, called Milo, who shares with his original the occupation of railroad worker. The first set of visitors are the "beatnik" friends of the husband (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 37). In the "real life" event, they included Ginsberg, Orlovsky, and Kerouac, whose part is played in the film by Gregory Corso. The second set of visitors are a "bishop" (played by Richard Bellamy) and his mother and sister (played by Alice Neel and Sally Gross, respectively). They have been invited by the wife, "hoping to convert her husband to middle classism through spiritual salvation," according to the press release for the film (Mekas 1960, 12). Although this explanation may express the understanding of the filmmakers at one time, and certainly reflects the sort of tensions we might expect to find in such a scenario, the tensions that are realized in the film are actually situated quite differently. "Spiritual salvation" proves to be a goal that the Beats and the bishop fully share. Originally, as it turns

out, they even shared their approach to this goal through exotic means, the bishop, according to Carolyn Cassady (264), having been ordained in "the Liberal Catholic Church" and enlightened by the teachings of Sri Aurobindo.

If "middle classism" poses a threat in this context, it is represented less in religious terms than in theatrical terms, as the expectation that a person's behavior should follow a certain script appropriate to the occasion. By the end of the film, the wife and husband are at odds because he and his friends have not followed the script appropriate to a formal visit by the bishop and his family:

> She says, All this time we should have fed them some food, we should have done 'em some good, we shoulda—all that time you give 'em wine and beer and give 'em all these beatniks in the house. (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 36–37)

In this way, the tension between scripted and improvised performance that is part of the film's production is reproduced in the story the film tells. Even the improvising Beats seem to require a predetermined role from which to improvise, whether it be the role of "poet," through which they are introduced to the bishop, or the role of "cowboy," which they play with childish rivalry just at the moment when the tensions between the wife and the husband erupt in open conflict, leading to the final departure of the "boys." That departure reminds us that the action we have been witnessing has all been contained within the apartment, within the minds of its occupants, or within the mind of the author, as noted above. The very existence of the film seems to have required some constraint on the energy that animates it. Its "network of controls and liberties," as Blaine Allan calls it (1998, 187), belongs more to the nature of existence, more to metaphysics than to "middle classism."

Equally metaphysical are the ultimate limits to which the characters in *Pull My Daisy* must adjust their actions, as de Kooning adjusts each brushstroke ultimately to the edges of the canvas. In this connection the Beat text of most immediate relevance is an essay published by Allen Ginsberg in 1959, the year *Pull My Daisy* was completed. Entitled "Abstraction in Poetry," the essay appeared in *It Is*, "a magazine for abstract art" that grew out of the artists' Club. Ginsberg briefly considers "abstraction in poetry" in the modernist sense of abstraction, the reduction of the artistic medium to its essential properties. A poetry of "pure sound," as Ginsberg understands the work of dadaist Kurt Schwitters or Letterist Isidore Isou, would be abstract in this sense. But Ginsberg shows more interest in, and more confidence in analyzing, the work of writers closer to him, principally Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and William S. Burroughs. For these writers, as Ginsberg presents them, abstraction is not a matter of pure sound but of pure mind, understood, according to the teachings of Eastern religions, as the negation of mind preoccupied with sense perception and of self preoccupied with sensory satisfaction. When he experiences abstraction in poetry, Ginsberg

explains, he experiences "the sensation of the self-elimination or disappearance of the universe and all being with the disappearance of the mind: when the mind is eliminated into unconsciousness either by yogic withdrawal or artificial knockout or possibly death" (243).

As an example of Kerouac's "abstract prose," Ginsberg refers to *Old Angel Midnight*, an experiment in automatic writing inspired variously by the speech rhythms of Kerouac's friend Lucien Carr and by Kerouac's study of Buddhism (Charters 1993). The opening line of the manuscript, "Friday afternoon in the universe" (1), obviously states the theme from which Kerouac derived the opening line of the narration in *Pull My Daisy*: "Early morning in the universe" (21; cf. Ginsberg, "Kerouac's Ethic" 372; Floyd 13). By themselves, these words might seem to establish the universe as the ultimate frame of reference rather than effecting the disappearance that Ginsberg associates with abstraction. However, later in *Pull My Daisy*, the phrase reappears in a context that moves toward what Ginsberg calls "the sensation of self-elimination." Midway through the film, after a significant halt in the action that is punctuated by a period of silence, the narrator picks up, as it were, from where he began: "Yes, it's early, late or middle Friday evening in the universe. Oh, the sounds of time are pouring through the window and the key" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 30–31). In his essay, Ginsberg quotes the closely related passage from *Old Angel Midnight*: "All the sounds of the universe coming in through the window." (The published transcription reads: "the sounds of the entire world are now swimming through this window.") In any version, this sentence attempts an impossible containment of sensations, and the impossibility seems to be the point. Universal awareness will necessarily burst the frame (the window) available to ordinary human perception. The result is intimated in the next sentence in *Pull My Daisy*, which moves toward the condition of "pure sound" but assigns more than formal meaning to the explosion of sense: "All ideardian windows bedarveled bedarveled mad bedraggled robes that rolled in the cave of Amontillado [*sic* in the text, though Kerouac says 'Amontidayo'] and all the sherried heroes lost and caved up, and transylvanian heroes mixing themselves up with glazer vup and the hydrogen bomb of hope" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 31).

In the Cold War period, possible death seemed truly universal under the sign of "the hydrogen bomb of hope." *Pull My Daisy* is only one of many instances in Beat writing proving that the hope of annihilation was a genuine hope (see Corso's "Bomb"). It could also be sought through the "artificial knockout" of drugs, to which Ginsberg refers in his essay on "Abstraction in Poetry" and through which he reached the "abstract and mindless nowhere" recorded in the related poem "Laughing Gas" (1958; *Collected Poems* 196). Or it could be sought in sexual ecstasy, the path to which the suggestive title of *Pull My Daisy* seems to point. The origins of the title phrase, however, reveal metaphysical connotations inseparable from the physical, or perhaps separable through a death envisioned as religious transcendence. Among the "Bop Lyrics" that Ginsberg improvised in 1949, initially in collaboration with Jack

Kerouac and Neal Cassady, are the following lines:

> A flower in my head
> Has fallen through my eye;
> Someday I'll be dead:
> I love the Lord on high,
> I wish He'd pull my daisy.
> (*Collected Poems* 42–43)

The title of Ginsberg's "Bop Lyrics" returns us from the far reaches of metaphysical abstraction to formal considerations. To the extent that "abstraction in poetry" has a formal dimension, for Ginsberg, does it derive from contemporary painting or from jazz? Or is one of these sources more important to Beat writing, in particular, as opposed to other contemporary writing, such as the poetry of the so-called New York School? Looking back on his essay "Abstraction in Poetry," Ginsberg saw it as an "attempt to bridge spontaneous composition methods of NY School Poets [he mentions Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch in his essay] trained in abstraction so to speak by the painters and Kerouac, trained to improvisatory 'far-out-ness' ('abstraction') by Bop sound."[1] If this formula were accepted as accurate, it might be applied also to *Pull My Daisy* as a bridge between visual artists trained in the New York School (Frank and Leslie) and artists of word and music (Kerouac and the composer David Amram) with a Beat or jazz orientation. The substance of Ginsberg's essay, however, complicates this formula in two important respects.

First, if it is necessary to distinguish visual and aural media as separate influences in *Pull My Daisy*, it is also necessary to distinguish different styles within a single medium. However, this necessity works against Ginsberg's insistence on a spiritual abstraction transcending the abstraction that distinguishes artistic media. *Pull My Daisy* employs two markedly different musical styles, baroque and jazz, both composed by David Amram. If we hear them *as* different styles, they reinforce a contrast between the stodginess of the bishop and his family and the hipness of Milo and his "beatnik" friends. On the other hand, if we hear them as equal variations of "the sounds of the universe," as "yin and yang" (Amram 2002, 64), they reinforce my earlier point, that both the bishop and the Beats share the goal of "spiritual salvation." Shortly after the central moment of silence in the film, the bishop's mother starts to play slowly, perhaps "religiously," on a pump organ with which Leslie had dressed the set as a sign of normal domesticity (Allan 1998, 194). Within a few moments a jam session breaks out, with David Amram (who plays the character Mezz McGillicuddy) on French horn and Larry Rivers (a jazz musician as well as a painter in "real life") on saxophone. It would be easy to hear the jazz as antagonistic to the organ were it not for the words, attributed to Ginsberg, that accompany the jazz: "Bishop are holy flowers holy? Is the world holy? Is glasses holy? Is time holy?" . . . and so on (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 33). In their spiritual striving, these words function

like the "Transcription of Organ Music"(1955) Ginsberg had already written to evoke an experience of "all creation open to receive" (*Collected Poems* 141). If "all my doors are open," as the theme song of *Pull My Daisy* promises, they must be open to organ music as well as jazz.

A second complication preventing too simplistic an alignment of visual art with the New York School and aural art with the Beats arises from the Beats' own derivation of "spiritual abstraction," as I have called it, from "a new type of visibility" that Harold Bloom finds in Romantic poetry (22). Even in "Transcription of Organ Music," where we might have expected the ear to be foremost among the "doors of perception" Ginsberg seeks to keep open (Blake 39), he shows greatest concern for the eye: "Will thought of transcription haze my mental open eye?" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 140). In "Abstraction in Poetry," he describes William S. Burroughs's method of writing as "a noncommittal transcription into words of a succession of visual images passing in front of his mental eye" (244). What Ginsberg refers to as "transcription," Kerouac calls "sketching," a term more closely linked to the visual arts. In "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose," published in the same year as Ginsberg's essay, Kerouac advises, "Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind" (72). What Ginsberg calls the "mental eye," focused on the flow of images within the mind, Kerouac calls "[t]he jewel center of interest . . . the eye within the eye" (72). The notion of a mental or inner eye is, of course, a central trope of Romanticism (Bloom 22). Its centrality to Ginsberg and Kerouac is thus a further indication that what distinguishes the Beats from the New York School is the anti- or ante-modernism of the former, not a simple preference for one medium over another. From the Romantic perspective, the choice of medium can be only a secondary consideration, because "no medium has inherent limitations so great that the Imagination cannot overcome them" (Bloom 35). Harold Bloom wrote those words in 1969 as a challenge to modernist criticism but also as a challenge to the cinema, "including the rubbish that currently passes for experimental or 'new' cinema" (34). The challenge, in effect, was for cinema to overcome the camera eye, a mere technological extension of the physical eye from which the Romantic poets had sought to liberate human consciousness. Since *Pull My Daisy* was shaped in part by poets who remained faithful to the Romantic ideal, it seems reasonable to ask whether that film realizes to some extent the ideal that Bloom defines as "The Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry." What would we expect to see in a film that does not look *with* but rather *through* the eye, to use the distinction Ginsberg derived from the Romantic poet Blake (484, 512) and applied to the modernist painter Paul Cézanne (Interview with Tom Clark 31)?

## Viewing *Pull My Daisy*

Taking a cue from Ginsberg, who imagined Cézanne "looking at his own eyeballs in a sense" (Interview with Tom Clark 29), one thing we would

expect to see in visionary cinema would be the activity of the camera itself as a medium, a means of seeing *through*. The shaky hand-held camera, a device that rather too easily signals this activity in many experimental films of the period, is not employed in *Pull My Daisy*. Robert Frank's camerawork maintains the stability offered by a tripod. However, as a still photographer, Frank had already demonstrated his inventive use of framing to invest the field of vision with a sense of dynamic action. Recognizing the connection to film, Jonas Mekas observes: "It is enough to look at Frank's still photographs to realize that even his still photographs are actually never still or static. They are framed, cut-out in such a way that the balance of the image is constantly destroyed—it always swings and moves toward the borders of the frame, towards something bigger, towards the totality of life in action" (1960, 14). Actually, many shots in *Pull My Daisy* are quite classically balanced, which only bestows greater significance on the shots that seem "self-consciously skewed," in the words that another critic has applied to Frank's still photography (Sandeen 157). I find that the Bishop's mother seems especially to be targeted for such treatment. But rather than being led away from Mekas's observation into psychoanalytic speculation, we should note that Mekas is interested in Frank's style of framing less for the significance it bestows on objects within the frame than for the suggestion of what lies beyond the frame. According to Mekas, the frame, at least "the static, pictorial, arty frame," is burst open by the pressure Frank applies to it, and the particular object in view suddenly stands amid "the totality of life in action" (14). It is the visual equivalent of Kerouac's opening words: "Early morning in the universe" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 21).

As I noted above, variations of those words appear twice in the film, once at the opening, and again at a crucial point midway. Each of these moments is marked by an extended panning movement of the camera, used nowhere else in the film. In this case, the camera physically moves, but there can be no doubt that, as in the case of framing, the work of the camera is meant to be taken abstractly, as connoting mental activity. The pan, as its name implies, is the equivalent of the consciousness of the universe to which Kerouac's words refer explicitly. The longer the panning movement extends, the more fully it describes a circle, archetypal symbol of universal wholeness. The pan of the painter's loft at the start of *Pull My Daisy* is shot from above, further emphasizing abstraction from a "normal" point of view (cf. Ginsberg, Interview with Tom Clark 44). It extends about 180 degrees and then cuts to a shot, held some moments for emphasis, looking down directly on a circular table arranged as an abstract still life. Later, this table becomes the organizing point of the second pan, which ranges a full 360 degrees and takes some five minutes of viewing time, about one-sixth of the film's 28-minute duration overall. The camera slowly surveys the faces of the company seated around the table: first the bishop; then Mezz McGillicuddy; then the bishop's mother, Peter Orlovsky and the bishop's sister (seated together further away on a couch); then (back at the table) Corso, the wife, and Ginsberg; and then back to the bishop. After viewing the film, Ginsberg identified this scene as a

moment of Enlightenment in the spirit of Buddhist teachings. "I was overjoyed," Ginsberg reported,

> with that one panoramic awareness scene, when after asking if the cockroaches are holy, there's a moment of silence, and Kerouac says, "The angel of silence has descended," in response to what Robert [Frank] did. [The published text reads: "The angel of silence hath flown over all their heads" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 30).] He panned the camera 360 degrees, surveying the entire universe of that room from every side. I thought that the acme of visionary art, of ordinary mind, allowing the viewer to see everything in a 360-degree circle, all the space compressed. It is akin, I think very much, to Kerouac's panoramic awareness. (Brookman 86)

It is also akin to the theory of mind that is the basis of Ginsberg's essay on "Abstraction in Poetry": "the mind instinctively attracted to images coming from opposite ends of itself which, juxtaposed, present consciousness in all its irrational, un-figure-outable-in-advance completeness" (243).

In his account of the "panoramic awareness scene" in *Pull My Daisy*, Ginsberg overlooks the most radical aspect of juxtaposition, a feature of the editing rather than the camerawork. In the style of its editing, above all other techniques, *Pull My Daisy* most closely approaches the strategy of "counterpoint" that Harold Bloom sees as key to overcoming the tyranny of the bodily senses in "The Visionary Cinema of Romantic Poetry" (19, 27–28, 32). Bloom starts from the great theorist of cinematic montage, Sergei Eisenstein, but in my conversation with Alfred Leslie, he characterized his approach to *Pull My Daisy* by using a term from another great Russian filmmaker and theorist, V. I. Pudovkin. The term is "relational editing" (Pudovkin 75–78), described in Karel Reisz's classic handbook as "editing to an idea, without respect for unity of time and space between adjacent shots" (Reisz 66). Editing "to an idea" is an "abstract" technique (Pudovkin 77; Reisz 66), but it becomes even more so when joined with the metaphysical aspirations that link the Beats to the Romantics. The great Romantic faith, as Harold Bloom describes it in the terms of William Blake, was that "the Eternal Great Humanity Divine can tear Himself free from any local time-bound accidents of context" (Bloom 24). Ginsberg records a similar faith in "Howl" (1957), anticipating his reference to "images juxtaposed" in his essay on "Abstraction in Poetry." The heroes of the poem "dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed."[2] From this perspective, the juxtaposition of images through "relational editing" would not only be achieved "without respect for unity of time and space," as Reisz puts it, but would deliberately aim to destroy the illusion of such unity, to create "gaps" through which the Beat visionary might drop out. Alfred Leslie told Blaine Allan that the editing of the "panoramic awareness" scene arose from a sense that an early version of the film was too "claustrophobic" (Allan 1998, 196); he wanted to open up the space. Leslie told me that he felt the editing achieved a sense of "real" time distinct from "naturalistic" time. When we see *through* the eye of

the editor in *Pull My Daisy*, we see, synaesthetically (cf. Bloom 19, 32), the ultimate reality that Kerouac's narration describes: "[T]he sounds of time are pouring through the window" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 31).

As is appropriate to a "panoramic awareness" scene, the windows that Leslie opens through "relational editing" take us inside the minds of the characters rather than outside in the physical world. The scene begins, as Ginsberg recalls, with a question about holiness, attributed to Peter Orlovsky and directed at the bishop, though Ginsberg misremembers the specific question. It is not about cockroaches (an image that enters the scene later), but rather baseball: "Is baseball holy?" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 30). Orlovsky has thrown the bishop a curveball, so to speak, and the period of silence that follows arises from the bishop's inability to respond. However, he can imagine himself responding, and there follows the first "mental interior" sequence. It shows the bishop standing outdoors on a platform, sermonizing to a small gathering of rapt listeners as a large American flag, held by his sister, comically flaps in his face.[3] With the narration suspended, all that we hear is a slow, plaintive melody played on an oboe. It is a "song without words," lamenting the loss of words, or rather their emptiness, since we see the bishop as well as his audience mouthing words that we do not hear. After a full minute devoted to this sequence, we return to "reality" at the circular table. The narration resumes with the statements about the "angel of silence" and "the sounds of time" quoted above.

As the camera continues its slow pan, three more "mental interior" sequences cut the temporal flow. When we reach Corso's place at the circular table, we see him nodding off in a rocking chair, evidently beginning to feel the effect of all the wine he has been drinking. Suddenly, from a different camera angle, we see the wife struggling to release the wine jug from his grip. Although the locale does not shift, as it does in the case of the bishop's silent sermon, it is clear that this action is imaginary, because we return immediately to the earlier view of Corso dozing, undisturbed by any violent action. Meanwhile, the narration is once again cut, this time not by silence, but by the voice of four-year-old Andrea Frank reciting "Humpty Dumpty," the only moment in the film where we hear a voice other than Kerouac's. Then, as the camera pans past the kitchen stove, Kerouac picks up his commentary: "Poor Gregory, the hero of stove and pipe butter" (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 31). In the next "mental interior," the wife slaps her husband as the narrator speaks her thoughts ("Well, it could have been better because if Milo wasn't so silly and invited all these silly friends of his . . ."), then cuts to a quote from a Rodgers and Hart song, "Unrequited love's a bore," as the music takes up the "Pull My Daisy" theme.[4] Finally, a shot of Ginsberg leaning toward the camera with a wide-eyed stare cuts to an image of Ginsberg in a mirror, hands cocked in the familiar child's sign for "gun," with which he eventually "shoots" Corso. Syncopated drumming and "animal" cries imitated on a saxophone cast Ginsberg as a hunter in a fantasy "jungle," although the narration, cued by a shot of dishes stacked by the sink, conjures up urban wildlife:

"Dishes, toothbrushes, cockroaches, cockroaches, coffee cockroaches, stove cockroaches, city cockroaches," and so on (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 32). At the conclusion of this strange litany, the narrator pronounces the names "Jung. Freud, Jung, Reich," and we catch a glimpse of a hand holding a book. From other scenes, we know the hand belongs to a seductively dressed woman (played by Denise Parker) who lounges in a bed throughout the action of the film, and who never interacts with the other characters nor is referred to by the narrator. Perhaps her presence signals that the imagination has taken up permanent residence in this scene.[5]

Although it is possible to describe what we see in this sequence of "relational editing," it is difficult to summarize the idea that we are meant to see *through* it. That may be precisely the point. Whereas summary depends on some continuity linking individual examples, the distinct treatment of each "mental interior" I have just described emphasizes discontinuity. Taken together, they can only be said to represent what Kerouac called "the unspeakable visions of the individual" ("Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" 72). From this perspective, what most distinguishes the vision of the bishop's sermon from the visions that follow is the dream of a collective meaning transmitted to a group through a charismatic leader. Whether it appeared as foreign totalitarianism or as home-grown conformity, the period of the 1950s in America was haunted by that dream, and both the Action painters and the Beat writers reacted against it (Rosenberg [1959] 1973). Yet within both the painting and the writing lurked the seeds of conformity that threatened to subordinate individual practitioners to a school or a movement, or, equally threatening, to elevate certain individuals as leaders of a school or a movement. *Pull My Daisy* was produced just as these threats were starting to be realized and the film seems to contribute to the realization. When Milo appears to his buddies at the end of the film, calling out "Hello, gang" and performing for them an impromptu dance at the bottom of the stairs (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 38), it is difficult not to see an ominous parody of the vision of the bishop's sermon. To view the bishop and the Beats in this film merely in opposition to each other is to miss the important sense in which the bishop serves for the Beats the function of a kind of self-criticism: criticism of their "gang" psychology, of their "other-worldly" tendency, of their fascination with esoteric doctrine. It is to miss the point of Ginsberg's lesson about "images coming from opposite ends" of consciousness uniting in juxtaposition.

Viewing *Pull My Daisy* through the lens of abstraction helps us to experience the creative energy generated by the juxtaposition of contraries. It permits us to look with the eye of realism but at the same time to see through it, as a medium, to a universal consciousness that knows no medium. It challenges us to see the formal limits of visual art at the same time that we hear "the sounds of time . . . pouring through the window" established by those limits. And within the field of time called history, it helps us to locate the Beat writers both in their own moment and in the past, to identify them as

both postmodern and Romantic. Ironically, to the original Romantics "abstraction" was a term of derogation. To William Blake, it represented the process of thought that required one term in a set of opposites to negate the other, rather than stand in creative juxtaposition (151). For abstraction to acquire the creative promise that it holds for the Beats in *Pull My Daisy*, it had to descend from "the light-tower of the philosophers," as Willem de Kooning called it, and enter the painter's studio (557). It had to be transformed from a preconceived idea into a spontaneous action. As in *Pull My Daisy*, we can sense in de Kooning some misgivings about the political implications of abstract mentality, prompted as much by contemporary events as by Romantic inheritance. In his reflections on "What Abstract Art Means to Me," de Kooning recalls the "very abstract look" on the face of a man he knew who vacillated between extremist political groups, from the Jugend Bund to the Communists (561). To protect the artist against such a fate, de Kooning insisted on painting "as a way of living" (560), thereby juxtaposing art and life in a relation that permitted neither one to negate the other. As a dimension of art, abstraction took on meaning only as something the artist did. "If I *do* paint abstract art, that's what abstract art means to me," de Kooning declared (561). In the spirit of de Kooning, the artists who made *Pull My Daisy* made what abstract art meant to them.

## Notes

1. Note in Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose* 245. In other respects this note is unreliable, mistaking the name of the poet E. A. Navaretta, to whom the essay was originally addressed, as well as the date and source of original publication. O'Hara responds to Ginsberg's essay in "Personism."
2. Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 130; the passage concludes with a reference to Cézanne's vision of "Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus." Cf. Ginsberg, Interview with Tom Clark 29, 31.
3. The flag in this scene functions as an imaginary expansion of the small flag the sister carries when she first enters the apartment. Critics of *Pull My Daisy* tend to see a parallel between this detail and the iconic appearance of the flag throughout Frank's *The Americans* (Sterritt 98). However, Paul Schimmel notes a similar use of the flag in earlier work by Leslie (36).
4. The song by Rodgers and Hart is "Glad to be Unhappy" from *On Your Toes* (thanks to Jay Rogoff for supplying this identification). Joyce Johnson (*Door Wide Open* 172) reports that Kerouac quoted the same line to her at the time of their breakup, just before work on *Pull My Daisy* began.
5. Allan (1998, 194) explains that the shots of "Girl in Bed," as she is designated in the cast list (Kerouac, *Pull My Daisy* 7), are left over from an early stage of the film when Denise Parker was cast as Carolyn the wife.

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Chapter 10

# Jack Kerouac, Charlie Parker, and the Poetics of Beat Improvisation

*Richard Quinn*

On March 12, 1955, the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter found her houseguest's dead body sprawled across the sofa. He had arrived three days earlier on his way to a club performance in Boston suffering from an aggravated ulcer, but he refused to check into a hospital despite a doctor's urging. Legend has him dying in front of the television, laughing at jugglers on the Dorsey Brothers Show. The death certificate estimated his age at between fifty and sixty, but Charlie ("Bird") Parker was only thirty-four years old.

On the very day the Baroness discovered Bird's body, Jack Kerouac was across town celebrating his thirty-third birthday. Only a year-and-a-half younger than Bird, Kerouac found in the musician a spiritual and aesthetic model as influential as any writer living or dead. Six weeks after Parker's death, while kids were still scrawling "Bird Lives!" on walls and sidewalks across New York, Kerouac wrote a letter to Arabelle Porter, editor of *New World Writing*, which had recently published Kerouac's essay, "Jazz of the Beat Generation."[1] The letter was written in response to a reader who had complained, in a letter to the editor, that literature judged according to Kerouac's standards would become, "subject to evaluation and representation by illiterates" (*Letters, 1940–1956* 486). Kerouac's letter included the initial text of what would become his most significant statement on Beat aesthetics, "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose." Finally appearing in the spring 1959 issue of *Evergreen Review* as a thirty-item list, Kerouac's "Modern Prose" developed out of an exceptional collaboration between the writer and Parker, exceptional in that these two lions of mid-century American culture never met. We know that Kerouac often attended Parker performances and that he "almost always tuned in to [Symphony] Sid's all-night show" of Parker's live music, yet Kerouac's letters, autobiographical writings, and interviews say

nothing of a meeting (Nicosia 1983, 207). Kerouac's "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" is a collaboration not because he and Parker sat down and developed the work together but, because without Parker's sound, Kerouac's text seems incomplete. Parker's sonic improvisations, when brought into contact with Kerouac's language, extend the meaningfulness of both artists, of sound and text in tandem.

While critics like Regina Weinreich and Jon Panish have explored Parker's influence on Kerouac and established the chronology from 1940s bebop to 1950s Beat literature, my intent is to consider the ongoing semantic importance of these improvisational arts for contemporary readers. In other words, my goal is less to explore the chronology between bebop and Beat writing than to investigate the racial and semantic significance of these seemingly distinct artistic practices in both post–World War II America and within contemporary life. Listening to Parker's music in the early twenty-first century provides a unique opportunity for understanding Kerouac's writing while simultaneously clarifying the nature of improvisation as practiced across generic and racial boundaries. In Parker's music, Kerouac discovered literary methods and enigmatic forces that empowered him (and his readers) to engage in processes of active meaning-making while experiencing depths of significant feeling postwar life seemed incapable of providing.

Books like W. T. Lhamon's *Deliberate Speed* and Daniel Belgrad's *The Culture of Spontaneity* have effectively explored the relationship between postwar cultural production (such as Kerouac's and Parker's) and postwar life, ultimately arguing that, in Lhamon's words, "fifties culture was an oppositional culture" (28). Similarly, Belgrad maintains that the 1950s "culture of spontaneity," including Beat writing, bebop, abstract expressionism, pottery, and dance, "developed an oppositional version of humanism, rooted in alternative metaphysics embodied in artistic forms" (5). This brand of '50's culture represented a counter-hegemonic rebellion, a rejection of a society dominated by racial segregation and suburban isolation. Belgrad splits the sides neatly, calling 1950s hegemony "corporate liberalism," counter-hegemony "the culture of spontaneity," and attributing mutually exclusive characteristics to each. Corporate liberalism, Belgrad maintains, was the product of a "governing elite" seeking to manipulate the "working masses" through the imposition of top-down bureaucratic control, a total system that "embraced an ontology and epistemology of objectivity" as a way of justifying its actions to a society rooted in scientific faith (5). Furthermore, corporate liberalism "guaranteed higher living standards to the working masses in exchange for their social docility and their participation in the military-industrial economy" and relied on support from advertising, mass magazines, movies, TV, and radio to celebrate the "suburban standard of living" preferred by the elite themselves (26, 4). On the other side of the coin, Belgrad portrays "a coherent" spontaneous culture opposing corporate liberalism through an embrace of an "alternative metaphysics" based on "intersubjectivity and body-mind holism" (1, 5).

Belgrad's book performs a tremendous service in its interdisciplinary sweep. That spontaneity as both an ethos and artistic technique appeared in a number of creative processes of the postwar era, and acted in part as political opposition to suburbanization and other trends, cannot be denied. Yet, in his desire to assert the political relevance of postwar cultural production, Belgrad conflates spontaneity with improvisation (the full title of his book is *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*), causing him to equate the partial courting of powerful feeling inherent to improvisation with large scale anti-intellectualism. In doing so, intellect becomes the exclusive province of hegemonic, traditional, rational thought and is therefore largely excluded from the improvisational artistic processes Belgrad wishes to celebrate. As Paul Berliner explains in *Thinking in Jazz*, conceptions of improvisation that overemphasize spontaneity miss the mark: "This simplistic understanding of improvisation belies the discipline and experience on which improvisers depend, and it obscures the actual practices and processes that engage them. Improvisation depends, in fact, on thinkers having absorbed a broad base of musical knowledge, including myriad conventions that contribute to formulating ideas logically, cogently, and expressively" (492).

To be fair, Belgrad does argue that "the culture of spontaneity" was "informed by a substantial intellectual tradition," but he ignores the implications of intellect and tradition as active elements, particularly in bebop (247). Bebop employs spontaneity as a significant element, but equally important is an intellectual mixture of past and present in which improvisers call upon musical traditions and practiced riffs. In addition, improvisational processes sought to attract the active participation of consumers through engagement of both their intellectual and emotional powers of understanding. The music was removed from the dance hall and performed in small clubs, requesting increased listener attention. In its production, this improvisational music sought to foreground what John Fiske describes in *Reading the Popular* as the openness of consumption. Bebop musicians, in performing improvisational music, asked listeners to improvise as well, this time on the improvisational music itself. As consumers, listeners took the musical statements offered by the musicians, considered these statements through an engaged intellect and feeling, and made the music personally meaningful. As such, the music both expressed its own internal meaning and became a dialogic material for the creation of additional meaning.

Kerouac took the hint, engaging with the openness of bebop and extending its improvisational practices into language. The Kerouac-bebop relationship has been the subject of much critical debate, although most critics accept the fact that bebop, particularly Charlie Parker, influenced Kerouac, that something in Parker's persona and performative technique inspired Kerouac to invent his Beat persona and ostensibly "spontaneous prose." Some critics, like Regina Weinreich in *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac*, concentrate more on Kerouac's method than his identity as a Beat writer. Others, like Jon Panish, find work like Weinreich's "fuzzy" and choose to

focus less on Kerouac's technique than on Kerouac's literary representations and self-image. My hope is to merge these two approaches while addressing a subject neither considers, namely the improvisational experience in reading Beat writing. Like listening to Parker, reading Beat writing requires intellectual and emotional engagement with the text. Readers are asked to treat the text as Parker treats Ray Noble's pop song "Cherokee," as a potentially open process to be manipulated into meaning. Kerouac himself engages the idiom of bebop as just such a process, something with which to experiment. Improvisation, defined here as the active manipulation or experimentation with established entities (i.e., traditions, texts, identities), defines both the Beat text and its preferred method of consumption. In modeling the active process of improvisation, the Beat text, like bebop, critiques hegemonic postwar passivity while simultaneously fighting its effects.

Given the ways in which some critics have mischaracterized Beat writing and bebop as pure "spontaneous emotion," it is important to emphasize the intellectual demands of these activities. Parker needed knowledge of musical traditions and established techniques in order to perform "Koko," and Kerouac needed knowledge of modernist literary traditions and African American music in order to mold his unique prose style. Readers and listeners may not require this particular knowledge in order to appreciate these texts, but they do need an intellectual curiosity in order to engage the innovative artistic forms and complex meanings within the texts. Without intellectual engagement, Kerouac's prose and Parker's music may appear as inscrutable technical exercises with little artistic or critical value. In addition, Kerouac's writing considered alongside Parker's music models the cross-cultural potential of such intellectual engagement. Parker first understood white popular song forms before converting them into improvisational experiences of complex meaning. Similarly, Kerouac's prose, without his active knowledge of black jazz traditions, might simply appear as derivative Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. In each case, Kerouac and Parker invoked something outside their particular ethnic traditions in order to enliven the creative process as a whole. Listeners and readers, in actively discovering traces of white modernism, popular song, and black jazz within these texts, will hopefully experience similar cross-cultural understandings.

Ironically, little in Kerouac's "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" addresses jazz directly. "Blow as deep as you want to blow," Kerouac writes, a clear reference to Parker's blistering, winding runs in songs like "Koko." Otherwise, he seems more focused on invoking intellectual processes of writing or courting emotional states. Lines like "Something that you feel will find its own form" and "Submissive to everything, open, listening" suggest that mysterious outside forces rather than personal intent will determine the written text. Obeying other instructions like "Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition" and "Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind" demand much more intellectual engagement, in this case, a willingness to act, to "remove" or "struggle." "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" only seems to be about jazz because its deceptively simple and emotional

statements ("Be crazy dumbsaint of mind" or "Work in recollection and amazement of yourself") make stunningly complex intellectual demands, much like Parker's improvisational lines. Consider Kerouac's requirement that the writer "Accept loss forever." To "accept loss forever" requires an intellectual willingness to refuse personal control, to realize that one cannot relive the past but can only cast the future. To try to recapture lost opportunities, fleeting emotions, or brief visions is to deny oneself a full presence in the moment. This does not mean that one must reject the past or tradition, but rather that one should see traditions as undergoing constant transmutation in an active present. Parker's improvisations, the sonic transcript of experiments with tradition, ask that we "accept loss" as well.

Despite the intellectual demands of both Kerouac's "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" and Parker's "Koko" (a sourcebook for Kerouac's beliefs), critics have attacked Kerouac for perpetuating stereotypes of jazz as anti-intellectual. One of the most recent and vociferous critics, Jon Panish, cites lines like "Blow as deep as you want—write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first" from Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" and "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better" from "Belief & Technique" as proof that "Kerouac takes possession of and represents jazz improvisation as a process that is individualistic, ahistorical, and 'naïve' " (110). This claim, other than missing the importance of mind in Kerouac's writing, also misreads "satisfy yourself first" as "individualistic" and "undisciplined" as "naïve."

Like many critics, Panish interprets Kerouac first and foremost as a representative Beat writer. He accepts the general critical perception of Beat writing, still very much in evidence, as self-absorbed, confessional, and intellectually irresponsible. Panish's interest in detaching Kerouac's "individualistic" prose style from the improvisational methods of jazz stems from his larger desire to foreground the collective, intellectual basis of African American culture. Bebop as an African American art form, it should be remembered, faced criticisms very much like those levied against the Beats, particularly that it was self-indulgent, overwrought, and undisciplined. If Kerouac's writing is anti-intellectual and jazz improvisation the obverse, then Kerouac cannot have duplicated the methods of jazz improvisation accurately in his prose. "[T]here is nothing," Panish argues, "inherently musical or jazz-like in Kerouac's writing" (136).

The problem here is that the general critical reading of Beat writing, a perception Panish supports, misinterprets Beat writing much as some have misinterpreted bebop. When Kerouac writes "satisfy yourself first," he does not suggest that satisfying the self requires absolute detachment of the self from others or from history. On August 26, 1947, long before "Belief and Technique in Modern Prose," Kerouac wrote in a letter to Neal Cassady:

> Life must be rich and full of loving—it's no good otherwise, no good at all, for anyone. If I feel affection for someone, and am blocked by superficial things such as intellectuality or "social difference" . . . if I feel affection for someone and

> it's all warped by the things of this world . . . then it's really time for me to arrange matters myself, following the impulse of my affection, and letting that impulse work both ways, since it's the main thing. (*Letters* 117)

Kerouac turns to "impulse" not as a means of reviving individual value and excluding others but to discover the interpersonal force of affection that drives a life "full of loving." He condemns "intellectuality" as a form of posturing that hardens social boundaries, but he celebrates intellect as a tool for arranging "the things of this world" into an order more conducive to mutual affection.

Far from individualistic, Kerouac ultimately came to envision the dissolution of the self. In a 1954 letter to Neal's wife Carolyn, he wrote, "Remember that pity and compassion sits at the heart of golden truth. . . . There are really no Neals, Carolyns, Allens or Jacks, but figments in a dream, believing themselves to have fundamental selfhood and yet they are buried and their flesh melts away . . . Biggest trouble is hangup on self, on ego-personality. I am not Jack . . . I am only Jack when I act myself, which is mean, silly, narrow, selfish" (*Letters* 428). Kerouac recognizes the self as an obstacle to perceiving the "golden truth" of compassionate interconnectedness. It becomes clear that Kerouac turns to impulse not in order to assert the value of his individual being but to deny its centrality. His prose, as the product of a conscious decision to open the self to influence by enigmatic, trans-personal forces, becomes an action of self-abandonment rather than self-assertion.

Kerouac spent his entire life struggling with self-denial, often failing to summon the strength to keep his mind free of what he himself recognized as cruelty and selfishness. To define Kerouac and Kerouac's methods as individualistic and undisciplined in order to deny their connections to improvisational jazz is to misread Kerouac's complexity and, I might add, the complexity of improvisation. Kerouac and Charlie Parker affirm each other's creative processes as mixtures of intellect, emotion, tradition, experimentation, sound, language, individuality, collectivity, clarity, enigma and many other factors. As such a complex mixture, Kerouac's writing runs beyond his controlling identity, displacing him as the central organizing figure.

Duplicating Charles Bernstein's arguments about Ezra Pound in *A Poetics*, I contend that in the struggle for authorial control, Kerouac's "methods and materials routed . . . [Kerouac's own] authority and preconceptions" (125). Improvisational processes motivate Kerouac's writing even during those periods when Kerouac's self-interest or religious anxieties dominated his individual psyche. Improvisation, then, occupies the obverse position of postwar conformity, isolation, and segregation. Like conformity, improvisation dissolves the individual personality, though not as a means of segregating and manufacturing suburban hyper-consumers. Rather, improvisational processes subvert the organizing self in order to further intersubjectivity. Improvisational activity removes the process of meaning-making from the isolated individual and hands it to an interactive collectivity. In the case of Beat writing and bebop, the move creates an inter-ethnic grouping where white and black traditions merge without the complete absorption of either.

This collectivity is defined less by its members' identities than by its affinity for the very improvisational processes that form the collectivity in the first place. Traditions, experiments with traditions, respect for meaning beyond language, intellectual and emotional engagement: these all define the improvisational collectivity embodied in Beat writing and bebop.

To see how Parker's music and Kerouac's writing resonate, we might take a look at Parker's "Koko" and a few poems from Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*. Critics often place Parker in a pantheon of two (along with Louis Armstrong) responsible for rewriting jazz history, and people of many backgrounds point to a compelling, yet enigmatic quality in Parker's improvisations that they feel reflects a meaning beyond language. Bassist Charles Mingus, not one to lavish unfounded praise on anyone, said of Parker:

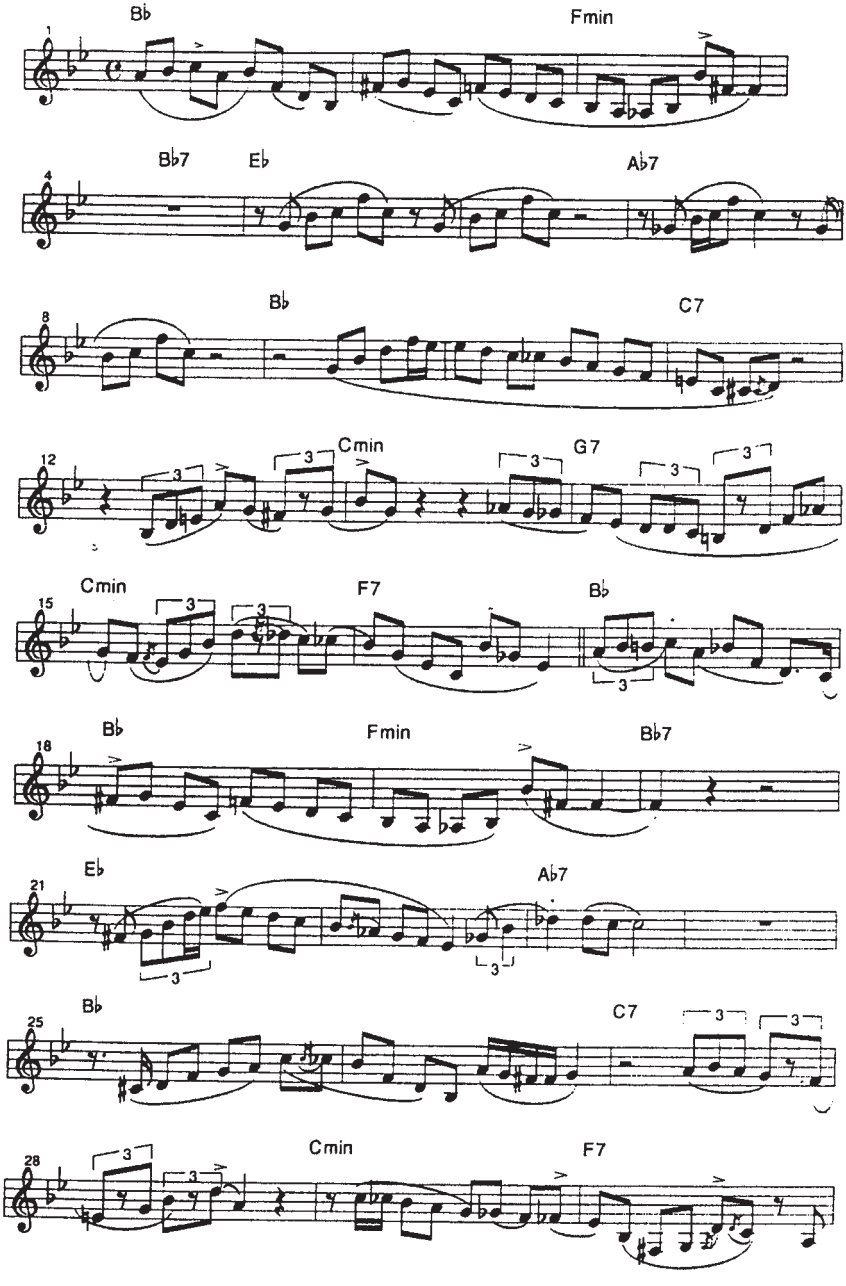
> He put something else in there that had another kind of expression . . . more than just, say, the blues or the pain that the black people have been through. . . . I knew I had an uplift to life from hearing his playing. In fact, I immediately gave up what I believed in, which came from classical and from Duke [Ellington], and I felt a whole change in my *soul* when I joined in and accepted that I liked Charlie Parker. (Priestly 47–48)

Mingus remarks here on the music's enigmatic ability through "another kind of expression" to travel beyond identity to the very depths of complex meaning. Many others focus on Parker's intellect and his ability to transmit African American intellectualism through sound. Saxophonist Anthony Braxton, for example, explains how Parker's "work made it possible for intellectual and vibrational dynamics of African American creativity to be carried further," while trumpeter Red Rodney, who played with Parker, feels that "Charlie Parker was the most intellectual of them all" (Lock 327; Gitler 313).

This focus on Parker's intelligence undermines the infantilization of African Americans and the frequent misstatements that jazz is an expression of essential black joy.[2] The need to emphasize Parker's intellectual ability in particular relates to oft-cited facts concerning Parker's addictive personality. Like many alcohol and heroin abusers, Parker would steal from friends and ignore his professional responsibilities to support his habit. Critic Neil Leonard sees in Parker's behavior an expression of "liminality." Ostensibly celebrating Parker's freedom from social constraint, Leonard cites the work of Victor Turner to support claims that Parker is a liminal figure, a "naked unaccommodated man, whose nonlogical character issues in various modes of behavior: destructive, creative, farcical, ironic, energetic, suffering, lecherous, submissive, defiant but also unpredictable" (127). Leonard continues, adding insult to injury, by arguing that while "Parker seemed conscious enough of the law, he was too childlike, irresponsible, or crazy, to honor it except when it suited him" (127).

Ideally, in understanding how Parker's music illuminates the poetics of improvisation, we would begin by listening to Parker himself. Nothing can take the place of responsive listening to performances, but given the constraints of space, language, and technology, we must make do with a representative tune for textual explication. Anybody who has tried to explain

music through language recognizes that descriptions of sounds, whether in words or musical notation, can only partially articulate their significant depth. Ironically, such linguistic description mimics improvisation itself, an always unfolding, complexly referential, and partial activity subject to future qualification. Let's consider Parker's infamous recording of "Koko."



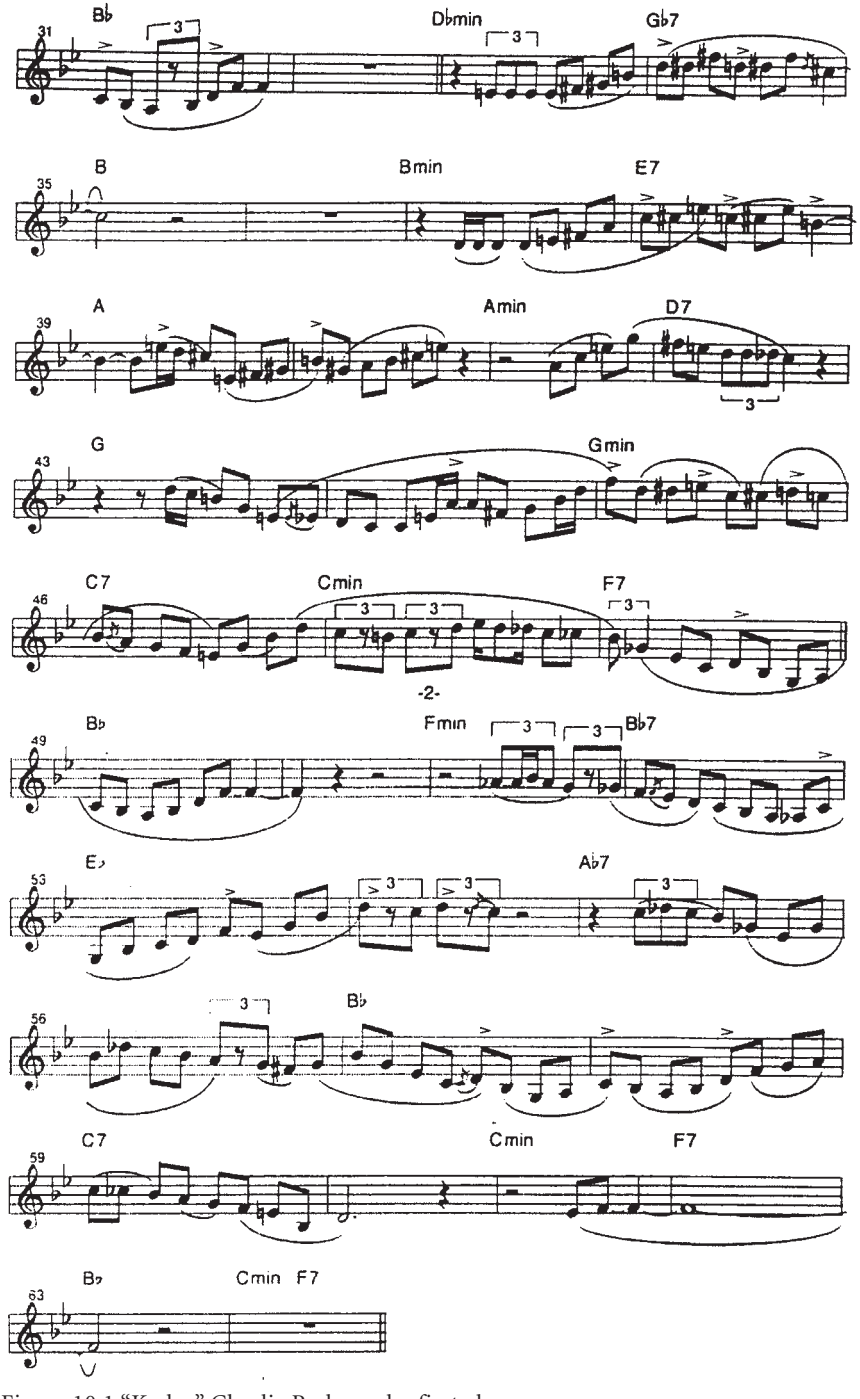



Figure 10.1 "Ko ko," Charlie Parker solo, first chorus

Source: Giddens, Gary. "Charlie Parker (Flying Home)." *Visions of Jazz.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. 261–82.

Recorded on November 26, 1945, at Parker's first session as leader, "Koko," a standard AABA tune in B flat, based on Noble's "Cherokee," features Parker on alto, Curly Russell on bass, Max Roach on drums, and Dizzy Gillespie on trumpet and piano. In a well-known piece of jazz lore, Gillespie was forced to play trumpet and piano because Miles Davis, present at the session and heard on three other songs recorded that day, could not negotiate the complex and unusually long 32-measure introduction. Some, like Parker's main transcriber Thomas Owens, argue that Davis was simply unfamiliar with the arrangement, while others contend Davis lacked the technical ability to perform a tune at such breakneck tempo (Owens 18). In any case, the tune makes audible sparkling displays of intellectual and emotional power, complexly textured and rich with feeling. Parker composed only sixteen measures prior to performance, the first and last eight bar sections of the introduction, with the remaining sections entirely improvised. The center two sections of the introduction are brief eight bar improvisations, first by Gillespie and then by Parker, supported by Roach's brushwork on the snare. Following the introduction, Parker performs two dazzling improvised solo choruses that quickly became a litmus test for future saxophonists. Roach follows with a half-chorus solo (32 bars), then Parker, Roach, and Gillespie perform the coda, a repetition of the introduction with one significant exception: The musicians truncate the final three measures, landing firmly on the dominant (B flat).

At two minutes, fifty seconds, "Koko" leaves listeners amazed. Parker breaks out the bebop handbook, employing quirky punctuated riffs in bars five through eight that he alters with the addition of single note triplets and repeats at the bridge (measures 33–38). Other techniques include the use of unexpected rests (bars 8–9 and 13), arpeggiated chromaticism (bars 33–36), and rhythmic displacement (bars 25–26). Phrases begin and end unexpectedly, and asymmetrical accentuation ignores traditional strong beat/weak beat distinctions. Behind Parker, Roach keeps regular time on the snare and Russell plays a walking bass line, creating a polyrhythmic effect against Parker's oddly accentuated solo. Gillespie comps asymmetrically and sparsely with occasional subtle chords seemingly appearing out of nowhere at unpredictable points. The overall effect on listeners is one of angularity, swooping motion, aural disruption, and intellectual disorientation. Parker clearly knows his horn, yet his playing does not reflect the quiet rationality of many previous saxophonists, even similarly muscular players like Coleman Hawkins. Instead, Parker substitutes a form of disruptive logic intertwined with passion.

Despite the radical nature of Parker's sound, his links to tradition remained strong. He had been working on "Cherokee" since his earliest days, and his regular use of the AABA form kept him connected to popular song traditions. In fact, Parker composed very few completely original tunes, choosing to reinvent tradition through the imaginative appropriation of

extant music. He expanded well-known harmonies and displaced existent rhythmic structures through addition rather than abandonment. His improvisational reconstruction of existing musical material, like many other bebop musicians, marked his method of returning to the past in order to discover the future. Such a move in the postwar era (and even today) may have sounded like the radical substitution of spontaneity for intellectual form, but only because anxious postwar consumers caught up in an increasingly regimented society perceived sources of disruption as impulsive, anti-intellectual rebellions. Faced with Parker's music, a combination of emotion, intellect, experimentation, and tradition, many Americans chose to retreat into their less complex, more secure suburban lifestyle. Yet Parker's music, in making audible meaning as a complex, improvisational process, replaces the siren song of consumption with one of intellectual and emotional engagement. That he did so through the invocation of significant feeling, an expressing of an inarticulate meaning beyond language, made Parker a hero to Kerouac.

Written as 242 untitled "choruses," Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* progresses much like Parker's "Koko": in fits and starts. Some poems, like chorus 159, display brief motifs with slight variations: "Blook Bleak. / Bleak was Blook, / . . . Blook on the Mountaintop, / Bleak; / Blake by the Mountainside, / Baah!— / Boom went the Crasher." A sense of improvised semantics, the intelligent selection of a poetic structure coming into being through the combination of articulate language ("Blake by the Mountainside") and alliterative sound ("Bleak was Blook") is the dominant motif. Other poems combine brevity with longer, more winding lines as in chorus 220:

> Pieces of precious emerald and jade
> Come from igneous rock once on fire,
> Erupted through a volcano, sandstone,
> Came out oozing in crevices
> Pieces of light long buried in the earth
> Are diamonds and floods of them.

The text displays polyrhythmic drive and counterpoint. Poetic structures move back and forth against themselves, often within a single chorus, to create rhythmic pull as in Parker's "Embraceable You." Clear narrative form ("Pieces of precious emerald and jade / Come from igneous rock once on fire") runs up against a more enigmatic verse ("Pieces of light long buried in the earth / Are diamonds and floods of them"). In chorus 152, contrapuntal melodies combine portrait realism, "The edge of the tray / is bright red— / The strawberries are crimson," with surrealistic vision, "The rim sadness aluminum / ALCO Shipwave / cup" to form compelling counter-images. A reader attaches herself to the portrait, only to be pulled way by its countermelody: the staccato "ALCO Shipwave cup." Rhythm and melody intertwine in *Mexico City Blues* much as they do in "Koko." The *Blues* poems

articulate both an unfolding of time, a progression from chorus to chorus, and the repetition of time, a return to prior motifs through subtle variation.

Occasionally Kerouac's regressions in time overpower his progressions, his poems appearing shockingly traditional. Kerouac calls upon American modernism much as Parker calls on "Cherokee." Chorus 124, for instance, with its quotidian, short lines and direct language reads like pre-*Paterson* William Carlos Williams:

> The thick rawboned fellow
> Come up to Paw and me
> On the misty racetrack
> "Got a good one in the fourth."
> "How do YOU know"
> says my Dad
> "I'm a jockey"
> His hat waved over his eyes.

Yet Kerouac moves in more experimental circles as well, texturing his poems like sound collage as in chorus 202: "A white poem, a white pure / spotless poem / A bright poem / A nothing poem / A no-poem non poem / nondream clean / silverdawn clear / silent of birds." This approach mimics the way Parker approaches and releases notes, with precision, forward movement and varied repetition.[3]

At times, however, Kerouac's writing reflects Parker's *vision* more than Parker's improvisational methods. The interpretation of Parker's vision predominant today focuses on music as a socially corrective force. Since its nascence, many critics have perceived bebop as a form of counter-hegemonic critique. This critique, resting on the belief that bebop embodies African American intellectual and emotional strength and that it expresses that strength through forms combining tradition and experimentation, asserts that the music enacts values that contradict postwar passivity and identity stereotyping. The music demands an engagement that precludes passive consumption and smug acceptance of the status quo. If listeners are to grasp the music as a complex expression of African American identities, they must interact with the music improvisationally, bringing their knowledge, experience, and feelings into open-ended dialogue with African American traditions and practitioners. This process of improvisational consumption, reflected in the process of the music itself, seems less a possibility than a necessity. The music embeds its consumptive pattern within its sonic structure. As active participants, consumers of bebop come to recognize the limitations imposed on them by hegemonic power, whether stereotypes of identity or overblown materialism.

Such is the assessment of Parker's vision. That Parker himself never articulated these views in language means little considering the expressive power of his music. Most questions surrounding Kerouac's relationship to Parker, including those concerning Kerouac's appropriation of Parker's

improvisational methods and Kerouac's representation of African American experience, hinge on an assessment of Kerouac's listening skills. Did the author listen carefully enough and with enough engagement to participate in the kind of cross-cultural and counter-hegemonic interaction that Parker's vision implies? Those responding in the negative tend to focus more on questions of representation than on questions of form and often begin with attacks not on Kerouac but on writer Norman Mailer. Mailer's 1959 essay, "The White Negro," continues to inform the scholarly imagination on the subject of black-white relationships in the 1950s, particularly in Mailer's definition of the "hipster" as a "white Negro" whose actions and psyche mimic those of African Americans imprisoned in urban ghettos. The "Negro," Mailer writes:

> could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm. (314)

Mailer's deplorable representation of the "primitive" Negro, one who chooses "pleasures of the body" over those of the mind and prefers music of "lust" over that of intellect, clearly misreads African American identities and African American music. Charlie Parker's intellectual approach to music undermines Mailer's characterization entirely.

Despite Mailer's weak understanding of the "Negro," however, many scholars choose to accept his characterization when applied to the "White Negro." Like the "Negro," the hipster is "a sophisticated and wise primitive in a giant jungle" seeking to "encourage the psychopath" in himself. The hipster wants "to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness" and to exist "in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat…" (313). In addition, the hipster knows that "new kinds of victories increase one's power for new kinds of perception; and defeats, the wrong kinds of defeats, attack the body and imprison one's energy until one is jailed in the prison air of other people's habits, other people's defeats, boredom, quiet desperation, and muted icy self-destroying rage" (339). Like African Americans trapped in segregated postwar ghettos, the hipster is a "primitive," albeit a "sophisticated and wise" primitive. He (the hipster and the Negro are never women in Mailer's eyes) seeks escape from "the prison air of other people's habits" through violent emotion and courting insecurity. As Mailer describes him, the hipster lacks faith in history, in organized society, and in others. He is alone, uninterested in social betterment, interested only in personal experiences of passionate intensity or selfish explorations of his own individual being. In a world of increasing regimentation and suburbanization, Mailer argues, hipsters joined African Americans and simply refused to participate.

This view of hipster culture resonates with paradigms of opposition adopted by many scholars of the postwar period. Edward Foster, for example, echoes Mailer when he argues that the "hipster, by withdrawing from the world, implied that its problems were irremediable—or at least that he had better things with which to be concerned" (90). Similarly, Clyde Taylor describes "hipsterism" as "a counter-assertion to brand-name, white values and the conformism of middle America" (113). Such claims, meant less to affirm Mailer's arguments than to celebrate the oppositional hipster and his embrace of an alternative "Afro-American ontology," have been complicated by critics like Andrew Ross who see in hipsterism a justification for self-interested laissez faire economic practices. Ross argues that to "encourage the psychopath in oneself" meant in the 1950s "not to trust in History in the old marxist-Hegelian way, but to exploit the libertarian possibilities of free enterprise with one's most violent fantasies and desires" (87). His contention that hipsterism encouraged materialistic self-absorption and the abandonment of responsibility to others transforms the hipster from oppositional rebel to virulent capitalist.[4] Whether one believes in Taylor's oppositional hipster or Ross's materialistic one, Mailer's definition of the hipster as ahistorical and individualistic remains uniquely influential.

Kerouac got himself caught in the hipster net partially because he became a hero to those Mailer describes in "The White Negro" and partially because he expressed an affinity with certain hipster characteristics. In a 1959 *Playboy* article, "The Origins of the Beat Generation," based on a speech he delivered at Hunter College, Kerouac describes how "the hipsters, whose music was bop . . . kept talking about the same things I liked, long outlines of personal experience and vision, nightlong confessions full of hope that had become illicit and repressed by War, stirrings, rumblings of a new soul (that same old human soul)" (*Good Blonde* 60). Despite Mailer's characterization of the hipster as ahistorical and hopeless, Kerouac describes the hipster as he would like to envision himself, "full of hope" and embodying originality, yet with profound historical connections to "that same old human soul." In his Kerouac biography *Memory Babe*, Gerald Nicosia contends that Kerouac "objected very strongly to [Mailer's] emphasis on the hipster's psychopathic and murderous instincts, on his delinquent, selfish, and self-destructive conduct." Hip, to Kerouac, "was the furthest refinement in a civilized understanding of life. It meant showing the utmost kindness and consideration to one's fellow sufferers in a world becoming progressively more flawed" (206). Kerouac's sense of hip in "The Origins of the Beat Generation" bears this out. He perceives confessions of "personal experience" as vehicles of human interaction, ways of transmitting mutuality of feeling, and expressions of intelligence in an increasingly isolating and repressive world.

Despite obvious differences with Mailer's "White Negro," Kerouac suffers from guilt by association. As I suggested earlier, many condemn Kerouac not for his attempts to adapt the improvisational methods of bebop to writing but for the same reasons they resent Mailer: Each romanticizes the complexities

of African American identity in their representations. Such arguments have a great deal of merit. Perhaps the most famous of Kerouac's misrepresentations appears in *On the Road*, where protagonist Sal Paradise walks through "the Denver colored section" wishing, as he puts it, "I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (180). That Sal, feeling alienated by "the white world" of suburban tract homes and stultifying conformity, finds solace in a vibrant, urban neighborhood hardly comes as a surprise. The better part of the novel depicts anxious white kids struggling to escape a soulless postwar life, finding an enigmatic yet significant depth of feeling only in jazz clubs and Beat conversations. The problem is not that Kerouac uses Sal to celebrate African American urban life; it is that his celebration demeans the very thing he hopes to extol. He populates "the Denver colored section" with "the dusky knee of some mysterious sensual gal" and the "happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America." He breathes an air "filled with the vibration of really joyous life that knows nothing of disappointment and 'white sorrows' and all that" (180–81). Sorrowful Sal wants to be a joyous African American boy playing ball in a streetlot, a boy who "knows nothing of disappointment"; he wanders the happy streets, seeking to escape his own identity.

As roman à clef, *On the Road* has been interpreted as Kerouac's personal confession. Sal's romanticized depiction of African American existence and dreams of identity transformation are seen as veiled articulations of Kerouac's own beliefs. Certainly these sections reduce the intellectual and emotional complexities of African American identity to one of minstrel joy. Yet equally significant, Sal finds in the urban neighborhood an opportunity for human salvation in collective interaction. The neighborhood is just that, a collection of people "of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian" playing together, somehow detached from the instrumental life of corporate hierarchy. Kerouac's failure to recognize the ways in which certain ethnicities are denied participation in corporate life or are forced into urban ghettos problematizes the image. Yet the scene carries a strong sense of women, men, and children, whom Kerouac calls "all humanity," saving themselves from spiritual death. Kerouac may romanticize African American life in this particular scene, but he also sees in the collective black experience a life-affirming, meaningful quality of being he first heard in the music of Charlie Parker.

Kerouac's other representations of African American identity frequently involve Parker. In *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac's first-person narrator describes a night at a San Francisco jazz club, the Red Drum, listening to Bird, "the king and founder of the bop generation at least the sound of it in digging his audience digging the eyes, the secret eyes him-watching, as he just pursed his lips and let great lungs and immortal fingers work, his eyes separate and interested and human, the kindest jazz musician there could be while being and therefore naturally the greatest" (14). Other representations

of Parker appear in choruses 239 to 241 of *Mexico City Blues*, including one where "Charley Parker looked like Buddha / … / was called the Perfect Musician. / And his expression on his face / Was as calm, beautiful, and profound / As the image of the Buddha" (chorus 239). Kerouac portrays Parker as a serene, quiet soul, a musical conduit for universal yet enigmatic forces of intersubjective connection. Bird's eyes and those of his audience are bound together in a moment in time, responding to each other actively through an improvisational music. Bird articulates understanding through music and the audience seeks its own understandings inside the musical contours.

Nevertheless, the image does seem voyeuristic, an objectification and oversimplification of Parker. Perhaps it seems this way because Parker appears on stage as a performer at risk, one who might at any minute be overwhelmed by the demands of playing an improvised music, or perhaps because knowledge of white literary traditions causes us to anticipate voyeurism in white representations of African Americans. Jon Panish criticizes Kerouac for "patronizingly [reducing] this undeniably complex human being to a single characteristic—kindness" and for focussing on Bird's kindness, "especially its connotations of a natural gentleness and helpfulness" that evoke "elements traditional in minstrel and minstrel-like depictions of black people" (59). Given Panish's focus on complexity, his interpretation of "kindness" seems especially narrow. Kindness carries minstrel connotations when applied to an African American performer, but it also suggests, as Kerouac describes, spiritual "greatness." Parker's greatness comes from trans-historical talent, "great lungs and immortal fingers" combined with his own "eyes separate," an evocation of collective historical experience articulated through Parker's immediate, individual presence. The musician's complexity comes through his role as active conduit, a mediational figure for enigmatic binding force brought into contact with individual intellect and material being.

Kerouac, sensing Parker's greatness "Musically as important as Beethoven, / yet not regarded as such at all" asks Bird, "pray for me— / Pray for me and everybody" (choruses 240, 241). Parker, a spiritual figure for Kerouac, appears more complex in Kerouac's work than Panish will allow. He stands as a means to salvation but only as a participant in collective history, partially immortal, partially material. He does not save us from ourselves, from our racism or misunderstanding, but through his complex presence we become saved. Through active intellectual and emotional engagement with his music, itself a knowledgeable expression of immortal black traditions materialized in communication between Parker and listener, we lose our limited identity and become part of "everybody."

Some critics have argued that, in turning to Bird, Kerouac committed cultural theft and romanticized African American identities. Such arguments certainly have some validity, but we need not condone romanticizing the other to recognize that Kerouac perceived Parker's improvisations as intellectually and emotionally demanding, demanding enough to serve as models for his own equally complex literary activities. Kerouac may have misinterpreted

black life, but he also saw in this life a meaningful presence that would empower the lives and work of all peoples. Kerouac made mistakes, but in turning to Parker he converted musical improvisation into a literary practice, providing the method for many writers yet to come.

## Notes

1. This essay comes from Kerouac's early manuscript of *On the Road*. When the manuscript was divided into separate novels, *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*, the portion containing "Jazz of the Beat Generation" was also divided. Consequently, discrete sections from the essay appear in each novel.
2. In his book *Hard Bop*, David Rosenthal argues that, despite "bebop's experimental audacity, feelings of rage and rebelliousness do not come through in the music itself. Most bebop, in fact, is exuberant, and this is not primarily a matter of fast tempos. The joy of creation and delight in newness are its most notable affects, and in many bebop performances, it would be hard to identify any other, more non-musical emotion being expressed" (18).
3. Almost any section from "Koko" illustrates this point, though measures one through three and fourteen through nineteen of Parker's initial solo chorus are particularly strong examples of his precise articulation and sense of progress.
4. Aspects of Ross's arguments, it should be noted, stem from his recognition (a recognition of many Beat writers and bebop musicians as well) that hipster culture depended on capitalistic distribution systems to spread its message. To claim, however, that participants in capitalism somehow condone all of its features or support the hegemonic social systems with which it interacts misses the very real possibility that participants can be subversives.

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Chapter 11

# "All things are different appearances of the same emptiness": Buddhism and Jack Kerouac's Nature Writings

*Deshae E. Lott*

Jack Kerouac's ties with Buddhism are well known. Steve Odin, after mentioning D. T. Suzuki and before mentioning Philip Kapleau, Thomas Merton, and Alan Watts, writes that "it was Jack Kerouac's novel *Dharma Bums* (1958) that triggered the 'Zen boom' in America" forming "an East-West kind of 'Beat-Zen' " (582). Carole Tonkinson reiterates this idea that Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* was among the texts written by Americans who "recounted the teachings of the Buddha to the general public for the first time" (viii). Stephen Prothero also argues that "*The Dharma Bums* soon proved itself capable of marking new eras in individual lives" (2). Prothero's introduction to *Big Sky Mind* traces Kerouac's initial "devouring [of] everything he could find on Eastern religions" and also asserts that Kerouac fostered "similar searches in other members of the Beat Generation and in the hippies of the sixties" (2); Prothero deems Kerouac's writings part of the transition stage in America "between the early era of armchair Buddhism and contemporary Buddhist practice" (4); the highly prolific Kerouac, according to Prothero, became "the official spokesperson" of the "Beat Buddhists" (16). Similarly, in Thomas A. Tweed's history of American Buddhism, Kerouac is the representative 1950s to 1970s American interested in Buddhism (160).

Kerouac himself anticipated these reactions, sometimes welcoming the role and other times fearing the responsibility and the misinterpretations and misapplications that would result from sharing his awareness of Buddhist concepts. In his December 1954 letter to Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac gave two reasons why he saw some "danger" in being anyone's teacher as opposed to

conceiving of himself and others as "fellow disciples": "1) I'm too ignorant still to give the true teaching and am only in the early stages of vow-making, not actual turning about within. 2) The teaching may & will be appreciated by intelligent but insincere poseurs who will use it for their own terrestrices and evil and heretical ends—This includes myself—i.e. a poet using Buddhist images for his own advantage instead of for spreading the Law" (*Letters 1940–1956*, 452). Accordingly, Alan Watts challenged Buddhist expressions by Beat authors, arguing that they proved "a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident" to be authentic; Watts asserts that, for the Beat authors such as Kerouac, Buddhism became a means "for justifying sheer caprice in art, literature and life," for engaging in "very forceful social criticism," and for understanding the universe (Fields 221; Charters 1995, 582).

Despite his own and others' criticism, Kerouac used Buddhism. In his January 1958 letter to Philip Whalen, he even predicted what scholars testify occurred: that with *Dharma Bums* he "will crash open whole scene to sudden Buddhism boom and . . . everybody going the way of the dharma. . . . I dunno about 1959 but 58 is going to be dharma year in America . . . everybody reading Suzuki on Madison Avenue" (111). *Dharma Bums* certainly occupies a pivotal role in American responses to Buddhism; however, as recent scholarship attests, that novel is but a small sampling of Kerouac's explorations into Buddhist philosophy. Ben Giamo's *Kerouac, The Word and the Way* (2000)—which concentrates on the spiritual aspects of Kerouac's prose works—offers four chapters directly on the Buddhist influences in Kerouac's *Tristessa, Visions of Gerard*, and *The Dharma Bums*. Recent anthologies also include a section with a range of Kerouac's writings treating Buddhism. For example, Ann Charters's anthology *The Portable Jack Kerouac* (1996) groups together a few of Kerouac's works as Buddhist writings, and Carole Tonkinson's *Big Sky Mind* (1995) includes Kerouac in a collection specifically devoted to excerpts of Beat Generation texts demonstrating Buddhist influences. Recent scholarship, then, has begun responding to a broad and prolonged array of Buddhist elements in Kerouac's work. However, few studies as yet closely examine how Buddhism influences Kerouac's nature writing, and this essay aims to open a dialogue on that topic.

It would be unfair to Kerouac to characterize him as strictly Buddhist. Evidence abounds to show that Kerouac himself was aware of his coordinated interdependencies, his historicity (*Lonesome Traveler* vi; Odin 258; Charters 1995, 582; Prothero 14); aware that his French-American, Catholic roots influenced every other relationship that he formed. Without minimizing all that separates Kerouac from Buddhism, we still can recognize the prevalence of certain Buddhist attitudes throughout his works. Scholars agree that Kerouac found philosophical direction from the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, particularly the first truth that "all life is suffering."[1] Buddhism gave Kerouac a means for dealing with the pain in his own life and the pain he observed in the world. Charters notes that Kerouac's interest in Buddhism began to flourish in 1954, when he felt "lost and alone" (1973, 199). She goes on to argue

that in "trying to live out his Buddhism," Kerouac "embraced loneliness and humility," for a while finding comfort and fortitude in the Buddhist idea of *maya*, which he interpreted to mean that "the world and the individual soul didn't really exist and that life was a dream" (1973, 198–217). In an August 1954 letter to Malcolm Cowley, Kerouac sums up the understanding he had arrived at by then from studying Buddhism: "All things are imaginary and in a state of suffering due to Ignorance, all things are manifestation from Essence of Mind" (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 430). These ideas also appear on the very first page of notes Kerouac took when studying other texts on Buddha and Buddhism (*Some of the Dharma* 3).

Kerouac was attracted to Buddhism as a way to deal with suffering. He told Philip Whalen in a February 1956 letter that "Pure Essence Buddhism is what I think I want . . . lay aside all the arbitrary rest of it, Hinayana, Shuinayana, etc. Mahayana, Zen, Shmen, here's what I want to do: . . . One, train our mind on the emptiness aspect of things, and Two, take care of our body. Because all things are different appearances of the same emptiness" (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 547). Kerouac articulates here the Buddhist ideas of the void from which all emerges, the interconnectedness of all things, and the requisite attitude of reverence and care toward one and all indiscriminately. The Mahayana Zen Buddhism that interested Joanne Kyger, Gary Snyder, Lew Welch, and Philip Whalen Kerouac found "tricky and intellectual" (Fields 215). Though Kerouac especially admired Snyder for his dedication to living as a disciplined Buddhist, displayed, for example, by Snyder's dedication to ritualized daily meditation and simple unmaterialistic living, the two often disagreed on interpretations of Buddhist thought. Charters concludes that "their disagreements were primarily differences of emphasis, with Jack [Kerouac] a-inayana Buddhist, hostile to the intellectual effetism . . . of Snyder's Zen Mahayana Buddhism" (1973, 238). Kerouac told Snyder that the mythology of Buddhism and the different versions of Buddhism little interested him: " 'I'm not a Zen Buddhist, I'm a serious Buddhist, I'm an old-fashioned dreamy Hinayana coward of later Mahayanism' . . . my contention being that Zen Buddhism didn't concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect to make it perceive the illusion of all sources of things" (Charters 1973, 259). In general, then, from his studies in Buddhism, Kerouac valued the possibility of detachment from one's ego and the need to be aware of arbitrary conceptions or the a priori assumptions and metaphors humans tend to live by, including the use of language systems. However, the Buddhist concepts that most attracted Kerouac to the philosophy were those of life as inescapable suffering and of the "individual's" need to move beyond a sense of individualism and to compassion toward all that exists.

When Jack Kerouac titles a collection of his essays *The Lonesome Traveler* (1960), he fittingly characterizes his position in most of his writings. For Kerouac in 1960, *lonesome* does not suggest a Marxist, Freudian, or Existentialist sense of disconnectedness or alienation. As he tells us at the beginning of this book, while his "true-story novels [are] about the 'beat

generation,'" he himself was "actually not 'beat'" (vi). Stephen Prothero points out that, sometime after first studying Buddhism, Kerouac "had a vision in a church in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, and saw 'Beat' as part of the word 'beatific'" (13). Douglas Brinkley expands upon this idea, asserting that Kerouac considered the word *Beat* "a shorthand term for 'beatitude' and the idea that the downtrodden are saintly" (50). Similarly, Kerouac's *lonesome* embodies the paradox of his Buddhist inclinations: In this trek called life, the single entity (the lone) is inextricably connected to and transformed by the plurality (the some). Such a connection in no way removes the typical denotation from Kerouac's *lonesome*. However, when Kerouac feels a part of, rather than apart from, his community he minimizes and, at times, eliminates his sense of estrangement, transforming a sense of being out-of-place into a trust in the cosmic chaos. The moments in which Kerouac can accept calmly his lonesomeness reflect his explorations into Buddhist philosophy; and his writings, including his nature writings, demonstrate his efforts to understand and to live that philosophy.

## A Community of Voices: Differing Views on the Buddhism in Kerouac's Texts

The Beats, with Kerouac as one of the leaders, emerged in 1944 as a group ready to honor transiency and process above teleology and eschatology, eclecticism over conservatism. The American fabric already included philosophies valuing transiency and process, as works by American philosophers William James and John Dewey demonstrate. However, the discovery of Buddhism, a foreign religion with such values, not only gave these ideas a sense of cultural freshness at a time of social and political transformations but also, with its ritualized daily practices and belief in Buddha-Nature, affirmed the spiritual nature of a growing focus on secular concerns such as civil rights and environmentalism. Moreover, lacking scriptures and theology, Buddhism appealed to some Americans like Kerouac because it appeared to support their anti-intellectualism and subjective spirituality. The irony, then, of Americans' acquaintance with Buddhism manifests itself on multiple levels, as Kerouac's life displays. First, Kerouac learns of Buddhism from books; second, Kerouac records ideas and reactions to these readings; third, some scholars will describe Kerouac's account of his Buddhist meditations as "surprisingly thin" (French 1986, 52), for Buddhist practitioners frequently see written transmissions of Buddhist philosophy as inauthentic and language itself as something from which the individual needs to detach.

Though critics differ in their opinions of the thoroughness of Kerouac's understanding and application of Buddhism, his ties with Buddhism are well known.[2] Kerouac's interest in Buddhism emerged in October 1953. In New York at the time and contemplating a lifestyle presented by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, Kerouac had sought out Thoreau's works at the library, seen Thoreau mention Hinduism, and at random picked up a book on

another Eastern philosophy: a book on the life of Buddha (Charters 1973, 201; Fields 13, 210–11). From New York and San Jose public libraries, Kerouac continued to check out texts on Eastern philosophy. Correspondingly, Kerouac began to drink green tea, to meditate sitting on a pillow with his legs folded and hands joined, and to develop concern for his human intimates and inanimate objects alike (Charters 1973, 212). Starting in December 1953, he made notes as he read, wanting to share them with Allen Ginsberg, whom he hoped would pursue similar studies (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 525–26). From these notes, which he often wrote under the influence of marijuana, Kerouac eventually typed several hundred pages, adding personal writings and spending hours decorating individual pages in the spirit of the Mahayana Buddhist practitioner's mindfulness (Charters 1973, 201–4, 214, 257–58, 312; Fields 211). In March 1956 he finished this collection titled *Some of the Dharma*; it would be published for the first time posthumously in 1997.

Also in 1956, while living in a California cabin with Gary Snyder, Kerouac wrote *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, a re-telling of the Buddhist Diamond Sutra. Kerouac revised this carefully since he felt that scriptures allowed no room for spontaneity; although Kerouac typically advocated writing with such freedom, he approached the writing of "scripture" more thoughtfully. Rick Fields, a historian of American Buddhism, describes *The Scripture* as "the clearest and most direct expression of [Kerouac's] Catholic Buddhism" (216). According to Fields, despite the "occasional Catholic images of saints, heaven, and roses," *The Scripture* captures "emptiness, nonattainment and egolessness in the net of American poetic language" (216). In 1960 Kerouac arranged a meeting with D. T. Suzuki and at the meeting's end told Suzuki, "I would like to spend the rest of my life with you" (Fields 224). Accordingly, in a February 1961 letter to Philip Whalen, Kerouac continued to make comments like "Buddha was right. I'm going back to Buddha" (*Letters, 1957–1969*, 321).

Historians' and biographers' varied interpretations of Kerouac's Buddhism demonstrate the complexity of the topic. On the one hand, a biographer like French will assert that

> when Kerouac is subjected to really serious trials, Buddhism fails to provide the resources necessary to carry him through them, so that he returns increasingly to traditional Catholicism. . . . The concept of joy as a permanent state of serenity achieved through meditation is something that Kerouac never really grasped. He was too deeply imbued with the French-Canadian peasant conception of suffering through a hard week's work to find explosive relief in a riotous Saturday night, followed by a physical and spiritual hangover on Sunday. (1986, 120, 126)

French argues that, before 1960, Kerouac grew "flippant about the whole Buddhist adventure" and completely "abandoned Buddhism" and his "Beat associations generally" and returned to "the Roman Catholic faith of his childhood" (1986, 15–19, 53). Similarly, Fields notes that Kerouac records

Christian visions at times of personal despondency (248). On the other hand, Fields also argues that the inescapable joy arising from meditations on Buddha's Noble Truths and the Middle Way explains why Kerouac's interest in Buddhism increased (211). As critic Ben Giamo suggests, we can better appreciate the complexity of Kerouac's Buddhism if we see his spiritual struggle as that of "a lapsed Catholic pre-Vatican II figure with pagan impulses and a medieval load on his conscience, let loose amid the secular strife of the modernist era" (79).

This analysis of Kerouac's nature writings strives to establish why we need not use an either/or dichotomy when we think of Kerouac's exposure to and adherence to Catholicism and Buddhism. In an October 1955 letter to John Clellon Holmes, Kerouac gives us some insight into his perception of the two religions: "[Neal] says that Jesus is at his side constantly—Buddha's at mine—but that's just personalities, names, figures of speech—all things are different forms that the same holy essence takes" (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 525). Kerouac asserts that he uses metaphors from both religions to express his ideas. His writings show a vacillating but abiding interest in both Buddhism and Catholicism, his two acquired religious "personalities, names, [and] figures of speech" that, for him, appeared to emerge from "the same holy essence." Such religious syncretism appears regularly in twentieth-century American culture, even in works by traditional Catholics like Thomas Merton.

Nonetheless, Fields contends fairly that Kerouac's approach to Buddhism "was mostly literary" (214). Kerouac may call himself an "old-fashioned" Buddhist, but he did not with longstanding consistency abide by Buddhist practices such as *zazen*, formalized sitting and breathing for a prolonged period of meditation. He often acknowledged and struggled with this inconsistency. As he wrote Robert Lax in October 1954, "I'm no saint, I'm sensual, I cant resist wine, am liable to sneers & secret wraths & attachment to imaginary lures before my eyes—but I intend to ascend by stages & self-control to the Vow to help all sentient beings find enlightenment and holy escape from the sin and stain of life-body itself" (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 447–48). Striving to attain a Buddhist understanding of nonattachment, for a while Kerouac—according to his personal notebooks and others' testimonies—aimed to relinquish his "women-lust and drunken booze binges," to eat a mostly vegetarian diet (he even planted his own large vegetable garden), and to work toward "embrac[ing] the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (no self) by doing 'no more writing for communicating, . . . no more writing or I art-ego of any kind' " (Giamo xvii; McNally 193). In reality, though, Kerouac continued, with few respites, to drink to excess, to engage in frequent and multiple sexual relations, and to write prolifically. Unlike Snyder, for example, he never went to the Far East to study intensely with a roshi, a master teacher of Buddhism. Instead he was "a self-taught student of Buddhism" (Charters 1973, 199); this approach, for better or worse, has become typical of American Buddhism's lay practitioners who followed Kerouac's lead (Fields 371, 374). As Kerouac himself noted in an August 1955 letter to Ginsberg, "Bhikkuhood [which, in

this letter, he defined as 'compassionate, contented solitude'] is so hard to make in the West—it would have to be some American streamlined Bhikkuhood" (*Letters, 1940–1957*, 505–6). If Kerouac's Buddhism seems inauthentic and intermittent, it is also representative of the ways Americans would use the philosophy after the 1950s. Some of these ways made Kerouac himself uncomfortable.

Kerouac biographer Ann Charters, attempting to reconcile Kerouac's support of two religious systems, notes that "at the center of Kerouac's religious faith ['Kerouac's particular brand of Buddhism, mixed as it was with his Catholicism'] was his waiting for death, for heaven and for the ultimate realization of 'why he was there' " (1973, 259). Perhaps the best authority on the matter, however, is Kerouac himself. The year before he died, Kerouac emphasized how important to his life and creative work were both the French-Canadian Catholicism under which he was baptized and raised and the Buddhism that he studied intensely between 1954 and 1957:

> What's really influenced my work is the Mahayana Buddhism, the original Buddhism of Gotama Sakyamuni, the Buddha himself, of the India of old. . . . Zen is what's left of his Buddhism, or Bodhi, after passing into China and then into Japan. The part of Zen that's influenced my writing is the Zen contained in the haiku. . . . But my serious Buddhism, that of ancient India, has influenced that part in my writing that you might call religious, or fervent, or pious, almost as much as Catholicism has. Original Buddhism referred to the continual conscious compassion, brotherhood, the *dana paramita* meaning the perfection of charity. ("The Art of Fiction XLI" interview 84–85)

Literary scholars, to varying degrees, explore these Buddhist resonances in Kerouac's works. The majority of early studies that examine links between Buddhism and Kerouac primarily or solely focus on *The Dharma Bums*. For example, Robert S. Ellwood notes these Buddhist influences on Kerouac: his "mysterious wordless cosmic joy" in the El Paso desert (152), his use of technology to "augment [his] freedom" (154), his poverty (155), and his "compassion for a chained dog or dead crow" (156). Each of these observations helps set the stage for future fuller explorations with similar approaches, approaches such as Tiffany McCaskill's senior thesis chapter "Jack Kerouac." McCaskill notes that Kerouac's Catholic sense of death "was ameliorated to a large degree by a Zen sense of the sanctification of every moment of existence" and that he began to "spread blessings in his travels" as well as in his literature (53, 51). Perhaps McCaskill's most important scholarly contribution occurs when she integrates excerpts from Kerouac's 1959 and 1960 articles in the magazine *Escapade* (53–56), broadening the range of texts we might explore.

In contrast to Ellwood's and McCaskill's positions, other studies on Kerouac's Buddhist tendencies side with English Buddhist scholar Alan Watts and suggest inauthenticity on Kerouac's part.[3] David Robertson's essay "Real Matter, Spiritual Mountain," for example, uses *The Dharma Bums* to contrast Gary Snyder's Buddhist traits with Kerouac's Christian biases.[4] Robertson's

work can help identify the complexity of the philosophical traditions from which Kerouac draws. For instance, Kerouac not only depicts himself as a sacrificial lamb, as a pure, "chosen one" suffering "vicariously" for the good of a group, as Robertson contends (222), he also, as Kerouac biographer Gerald Nicosia argues, aligns himself with the Buddha, who had "renounced the privilege of his genius to share the simple sorrows and joys of the fellaheen" (1983, 458). For other reasons we might question applying the "Christian" label to Kerouac at the expense of a "Buddhist" label. Robertson argues that Kerouac's repeated asking of *why* "make[s] sense only if Ultimate Reality has intentionality" (221–22); however, the answer that Kerouac repeatedly derives from his *whys* is a silence, the void (*Big Sur* 35–36; *Desolation Angels* 4–5; *Dharma Bums* 57; *Lonesome Traveler* 125). For example, Kerouac writes, "I just lay on the mountain meadowside in the moonlight, head to grass, and heard the silent recognition of my temporary woes. . . . no effort, no path really, no discipline but just to know that all is empty and awake" (*Lonesome Traveler* 132). The mountain meadow and its rocks and trees and "blade of grass jiggling in the winds of infinity, anchored to a rock" speak to his "poor gentle flesh" by giving "no answer" but "perfect silence" (*Lonesome Traveler* 128, 130). If by "intentionality" Robertson means experiencing something of value throughout the relational process of life, then Kerouac indeed believes in intentionality. But here Kerouac does not write about First Causes or intentionally created redemptive plans. Kerouac instead simply testifies to the glory of existence: "[It] is," "just what it is, and so it is"; "It was neither good nor bad (consider the dust)" (*Desolation Angels* 4; *Lonesome Traveler* 132). For Kerouac, "Heaven" is "here, this, is *It*," "the world as it is," and not something "outside what there is" (*Dharma Bums* 114). With his head pressed against the earth, Kerouac relates to the blade of grass only temporarily anchored to a rock; he similarly submits to the endless, ever-changing Void from his position on a seemingly stable part of a seemingly solid planet. And, like a practicing Buddhist might, he detaches from a rational understanding of what it is, what it means, to be. Nonetheless, or perhaps consequently, Kerouac believes that he supra-rationally understands existence.

Kerouac's *via negativa* nature writings provide a powerful sense of uncertainty coupled with a pervasive and abiding sense that what exists in the moment is enough even in its impermanence and emptiness. When Kerouac notes the empty void that all things share, he deviates from mainstream Christianity. While Catholic mystics who discuss meditation practices use similar concepts, these concepts are not isolated to Christian discourse; the manner in which Kerouac employs the concepts coincides with his investigations into Buddhism, not to the exclusion of his Catholic understandings but as a (perhaps transitory but verifiable) supplement to them.

Claudia Gottschall's dissertation chapter "Jack Kerouac: The Search for the Golden Eternity" provides another reading of Kerouac's relationship to Buddhism. She agrees with Watts and Robertson that Kerouac "remained firmly rooted in his family's Catholicism" and that "Kerouac's approach to

Buddhism was highly cerebral and analytical"—almost too much so to be authentic (99–100): "Even though Kerouac studied and understood the Buddhist principles, his knowledge of Buddhism never actually merges with his discursive practice. Instead, he seems to use Buddhism as another form of discourse with which he can criticize American 'nationhood,' gender and race polarities, and the quest for individual self-fulfillment" (128). However, Gottschall also notes that in *The Dharma Bums* "hiking becomes an activity in its own end, almost like counting breaths during meditation, and a possibility to revitalize the mind's senses" (125). While, as Gottschall argues, Kerouac's experiencing of Buddha Nature may never fully merge with the overall spirit of his writings, his nature writing constitutes a space where he was not anti-American but detached from "America" and connected to the flux of creation and destruction, a space where he was not so much analytical as he was open, receptive, vulnerable—and hopeful even while despairing. Kerouac's aestheticism (in the original sense of that word: his capacity for sensuous living) has long attracted attention. The rawness of the writing compels us to heed it as much as the fleeting displays of insight. Kerouac's energy works to convey a man undergoing the relational process rather than to fabricate a tightly interrelated literary product. As such, Kerouac's texts show how creativity and respect emerge from personal and environmental chaos. Kerouac provides authentic representations of the external landscape and the internal terrain, images of a person approaching spirituality experimentally, neither abiding by creeds nor being unaware of them. This sort of aloof detachment grounded in the metaphors of his moment understandably creates some problems for those of us trying to use labels that help imbue his texts with meanings.

This essay, like other analyses, responds to only a small collection of Kerouac's passages; however, as a group the analyzed selections here attest to Kerouac's authenticity and spirituality. James I. McClintock suggests that a person's mystical sensibility often can "intuit that our knowledge of nature, our social arrangements, and our spiritual conditions can be integrated positively" (xvi), that they all can be part of a redeeming journey. It is in Kerouac's passages imbued with nature that he openly explores his own mystical sensibilities, his integrated and noncondemnatory vision. But even some of Kerouac's accounts of social interactions suggest a movement toward a mystical sensibility. For instance, we can find this attitude when Kerouac shares gondola space and food with "the little Saint Teresa Bum" who joins him near Camarillo in September 1955 and when he says that while working for the railroad "everytime [he and his co-workers] went by the Pomo Indians working sectionhand tracks, . . . gandy dancers with greasy black hair I waved and smiled and was the only man on the S.P. who did so. . . . The dark Indian and the eastern Negro, with sledgehammers and dirtypants to them I waved" (*Dharma Bums* 3–9; *Lonesome Traveler* 70). Here Kerouac provides almost a Whitmanesque tribute to the beauty in all Americans, the beauty in all landscapes. But this celebration of the beauty in all is not the consistent spirit of his socially descriptive, socially engaged works. In revealing his attempts at

a relationship with the workers of other ethnicities, he subtly rebukes other Americans' unwillingness to forge such relations. The I–Them distinction regarding who waves certainly validates such an interpretation. However, Kerouac also is learning how to articulate the ugly without condemning or ignoring it. While Kerouac never finds his knowledge of nature, social arrangements, and spiritual conditions themselves completely redemptive, when he turns to the nature beyond the tracks, he often recounts moments of joy and of inner peace that echo Buddhist mystics' responses to life enacted mindfully. Hence, Kerouac does present the nation with an irrecoverable, unforgivable indictment, but, along with the criticisms, he conveys a serene and tender attitude toward the global community that he portrays. In this light, Kerouac offers criticisms not so much to demonstrate a "Me v. Them" image as to edify the whole group, the "Us." Rather than facilitating homophobia and xenophobia, Kerouac's more socially oriented works shock readers into an attitude of receptivity toward difference and show us the commonality that we all share. In effect, the Buddhist influences in Kerouac's works serve as more than a convenient rhetorical mode in which to condemn the values of his fellow Americans.

Tom Clark's 1990 biography of Kerouac shows how Kerouac aspired toward a merging of life and art. As Claudia Gottschall observes, "Burning his writings, he [Kerouac] believed . . . would be the only way to assure their *purity*, because it would prove that they had not been 'done for ulterior, or practical motives' " (103). Such a process accords with writing as a spiritual practice that Zen Buddhist painter, poet, novelist, and nonfiction writer Natalie Goldberg teaches in her writing workshops and books.[5] In her published works, Goldberg cites Kerouac, attesting that she caught some of his inspiration, regarding him as part of her spiritual lineage. Both authors use writing to access a deeper aspect of mind. Many of Kerouac's texts show his theory in practice; however, in his essay "The Last Word," first published in 1959 but revised in 1967, Kerouac explains a part of his method that Goldberg adopts: "If you don't stick to what you first thought, and the words the thought brought what's the sense of bothering with it anyway, what's the sense of foisting your little lies on others? What I really find 'stupefying in its unreadability' is this laborious and dreary lying called craft and revision" (Bartlett 125). Kerouac, like Goldberg, values facing and embracing, rather than denying, sincere thoughts and feelings. Moreover, just as Goldberg writes that "Buddhism never asked [her] to deny anything [she] was"—not her Judaism, her feminism, her lesbianism, or her American suburbanism (*Highway* 97), Kerouac does not feel pressured to deny his Catholic roots. He is exploring his own mind and his own experiences; and, as he knows, that requires being "in love with yr life," having "no fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience," and writing "for yr own joy" (*Belief & Technique for Modern Prose* 72–73). Kerouac imbues his activities with dignity because he values them. For him, living is an art, and his writings show him living mindfully, artistically. Indeed, he is an artist with Buddhist sensibilities, not just a literary social critic.

While I would not go so far as to say that Kerouac is un-Christian, I do not separate his spirituality into an either/or dichotomy. Just as we accept consciousness as disparate parts in flux, so, too, our spiritual matrix can be in flux if we are open to environmental stimuli, as was Kerouac. To confine Kerouac to a narrow cultural place seems unnecessary, for there is room to see two cultural landscapes emerging in Kerouac's works. Kerouac certainly embodies the American tradition where the individual is the microcosm of the human condition and of humanity's potential regeneration. In *On the Road* Kerouac travels across America, reaches the end of the continent, and circles back. It is in reaching this end that he becomes the symbolic modern American; there is no place left to "go"; so, as he re-crosses the land again and again in the future, he learns ways to merge with it—not to flee from it and the past, the baggage, that it represents. In his diary in 1949 Kerouac wrote, "I'll rush around this world I insist is holy and pull at everyone's lapel and make them confess to me and to all" (Brinkley 50); in the process, historian Douglas Brinkley argues that Kerouac was "compelling others to join his roaring drive across Walt Whitman's patchwork Promised Land" (50). Beyond characterizing Kerouac as a typical American who hopes despite the surrounding madness, we might also see Kerouac as a would-be bodhisattva who cannot attain nirvana, a blissful sense of peace, until he helps others bear their burdens and climb their mountains. Connecting Kerouac either to Christianity or to Buddhism while disconnecting him from one or the other of them seems unfair to his identity, to how Kerouac survived for as long as he did, to how he struggled with fits of loneliness and moments of celebration.

Undeniably, Kerouac is a French-Catholic American, but he is a French-Catholic American who was deeply moved by Buddhism. Just how deeply he connected to Buddhist thought emerges in his nature writings, which reflect moments when he was living not on the road but off the well-worn path, times often full of social isolation when the only mad, burning mind that he could gravitate toward was his own. This essay, like former studies, can only be cursory. However, with it, I would like to instigate another way of discussing Kerouac's writings—in particular his passages related to nature. By looking more closely at *The Dharma Bums* and by looking at passages from *Lonesome Traveler*, *Desolation Angels*, and *Big Sur* we can see how Kerouac, like a Buddhist, uses concepts or language to transcend concepts: Descriptions of natural objects reveal not decipherable identities but coordinated interdependencies and the emptiness filling all that is.

## Buddhism Embodied: Kerouac as an Inexpert Buddhist[6]

In some ways Kerouac more fully embraces Buddhist sensibilities than other American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, and Peter Matthiessen. Like other American nature writers, in nature Kerouac confronts his self—his limitations and potentials, tries to accept himself,

and then tries to apply this same acceptance in his dealings with others. But Kerouac's method for developing compassion differs in significant ways from many American nature writers. Thomas J. Lyon accurately notes that American nature writing tends to combine Romanticism and science (20). Kerouac's nature writing, though, does not include any of the typical passages demonstrating scientific inquiry. While Kerouac asserts that an author should "write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it" (*Belief & Technique for Modern Prose* 73), he offers no technical descriptions of thawing clay and sand (Thoreau 544–46), of frogs and water bugs (Dillard 5–6), of rams and blue sheep (Matthiessen 200–1). Awake to the extraordinary in the ordinary, Kerouac follows another of his own listed "essentials" in "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose": He is "submissive to everything, open, listening" (72). Yet what he means by "exact pictures" of the world might be best explained with another of his listed "essentials": "struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind" (72). One fitting example of a Kerouacean "exact picture" comes in a description of meditating on a mountain: "[T]he roar of silences was like a wash of diamond waves going through the liquid porches of our ears, enough to soothe a man a thousand years" (*Dharma Bums* 71). Silence is an animal; silence is water; silence is a gem; silence is a salve. The mixed metaphor of "diamond waves" is not "natural." Kerouac's "exact picture" lacks boundaries. It uses common signifiers on its signposts; we can follow his ideas. But his words cause us to transcend the things in themselves, cause us to relate seemingly unrelated things: The traditional signifiers do not give us the traditional signifieds. And, thus, Kerouac conveys to us his sense of Oneness. Kerouac's ability to see and to portray the world as living flux grounded in Emptiness emerges throughout his writings, especially his writings related to nature—even if the natural descriptions that he offers never approach scientific discourse for the layperson.

However, like works by Thoreau, Dillard, and Matthiessen, Kerouac's nature writings do demonstrate unity by integrating the beauty and the horror in the environment. For example, he describes his experience on a "poor groomus lonesome boat . . . pitching like a bottle in the howling void" of waves that were "two stories high" and "frothing in [his] cabin window" (*Lonesome Traveler* 135–36). The images are animalistic, palpable: Nature is a howling beast about to devour Kerouac with its frothing mouth. Yet the revelation he has precisely at the moment he "was certain it was the end" is that "everything is God, that nothing ever happened except God" (*Lonesome Traveler* 136). And he asks, "[w]hat was that storm anyway?" (*Lonesome Traveler* 137). He gives us a sense of his peace in the midst of chaos, shows us that he participates in the happening, feels united to this great big Nothingness that makes the storm seem comparably inconsequential as a "storm" and significant only in its ability to convey the message that it, too, is part of Kerouac, as Kerouac is a part of it. Kerouac moves from the disconnected panic at his powerlessness to the connected freedom to merge his

own power with the rhythm of the waves. By connecting with that power that he first views as an opponent to be feared, Kerouac asserts both his own sense of control and his willingness to participate in the Vastness surrounding him.

Kerouac repeatedly uses the image of water; for him, as for the Buddhist, it becomes a metaphor of the diversity and the impermanence in Oneness: the beauty and the horror, the yielding and the resisting, the coming and the going. For example, of his listening to the sea at Big Sur, of his attempts to record the sea's voice, Kerouac writes in part: "I stand there barefoot by the sea stopping to scratch one ankle with one toe, I hear the rhythm of those waves, and they're saying suddenly, 'Is Virgin you trying to fathom me'—I go back to make a pot of tea" (*Big Sur* 34). His feet anchor him to the earth, and an ankle itch makes him very aware that his feet are there right then supporting him; the ocean is connected to his mind is connected to his body. It is an everyday act "to scratch one ankle with one toe," but Kerouac is mindful of it. The ordinariness of Kerouac's scratching his foot, making his "pot of tea," and writing his poem "Sea" envelops the reference to the bowl-you-over concept of limited mind power, of never being able to answer your questions, of there being no "meaning" to the ceaseless transformations we know as "life." Kerouac tries not to be distracted by the horror of his realization but to partake again of the beauty emerging from experiencing his daily life mindfully.

In a way similar to his experiences with water, Kerouac's experiences with mountains bring out his Buddhist sensibilities. Again alone with and mindful of his everyday acts, he cannot escape the horror of his environment and must create some sense of beauty from his encounters with it:

> I'd thought, . . . "When . . . I'm alone I will come face to face with God" . . . but instead I'd come face to face with myself, no liquor, no drugs, no chance of faking it but face to face with . . . Me and many's the time I thought I'd die, suspire of boredom, or jump off the mountain. . . . it finally comes to me, after even tears, and gnashing, and the killing of a mouse and attempted murder of another, something I'd never done in my life (killing animals even rodents), it comes in these words: "The void is not disturbed by any kind of ups and downs, my God look at Hozomeen, is he worried or tearful? . . . Even Hozomeen'll crack and fall apart, nothing lasts." . . . I come back into the house a new man. (*Desolation Angels* 4–6)

Here there is no buffer of scientific objectivity for the author confronting the horror; it is a purely affective encounter with nature. Kerouac experiences great angst over facing the horror of his own violence (represented by the killing of a mouse) and the earth's violence (represented by the idea that Hozomeen and all the disparate forms of life it supports eventually will disintegrate). To cope, he does not estrange himself from the horror but rather deeply connects to it. The wilderness of his external landscape correlates with his own wild mind. Ironically, by accepting this connection, he can begin to practice Buddhism's detachment: a way of securing an inner sense of peace, a

source to draw upon when creating one's own beauty while living mindfully. This is a point of turning for Kerouac, a turning to something he did not come to understand completely or apply fully at any point before his death in 1969.

Just as he listens to the message of the oceans and the mountains, Kerouac also listens to the message of the woods. In concert with the sea and with Mount Hozomeen, leaves cause Kerouac to confront impermanence and to see himself as a comparably small part of nature:

> The leaves say "We are leaves and we jiggle in the wind, that's all, we come and go, grow and fall" . . . I remember seeing a mess of leaves suddenly go skittering in the wind and into the creek, then floating rapidly down the creek towards the sea, making me feel a nameless horror even then of "Oh my God, we're all being swept away to sea no matter what we know or say or do"—And a bird who was on a crooked branch is suddenly gone without my even hearing him. (*Big Sur* 35–36)

Here again is the "nameless horror," the flux, that Kerouac must transform into beauty. And indeed he does. For, from the leaves in what Kerouac refers to as "the more human woods" (*Big Sur* 33), a part of nature he feels more connected to than to the sea, for instance, he finds a model for applying what he first realizes with his spiritual turn on Mount Hozomeen:

> One afternoon as I just gazed at the topmost branches of those immensely tall trees I began to notice that the uppermost twigs and leaves were lyrical happy dancers glad that they had been apportioned the top, with all that rumbling experience of the whole tree swaying beneath them making their dance, their every jiggle, a huge and communal and mysterious necessity dance, and so just floating up there in the void dancing the meaning of the tree. (*Dharma Bums* 179)

Like the leaves, Kerouac will try to dance meaning into his environment—the meaning of communal necessity, of interdependency. In effect, from the same leaves that demonstrate Nothingness, Kerouac learns to celebrate in and despite and perhaps because of that No-thing-ness. The leaves become more than a thing when they dance; they become Spirit.

Kerouac sometimes finds that he can hear and dance to the same music that the leaves use: that he can dance in rhythm with the universe, not being forced by it to move one way or another. At these times, he feels every particle of himself connected to the Buddha nature in every particle of his environment. Beauty here is so embodied that Kerouac can completely trust it, and he celebrates this with singing and dancing (*Dharma Bums* 98, 109–10, 185). One such example of this occurs on a "late afternoon" as Kerouac "lay in the grass with all that glory before [him] and grew a little bored and thought 'There's nothing there because I don't care.' Then [he] jumped up and began singing and dancing and whistling through [his] teeth" (*Dharma Bums* 185). Kerouac takes a supra-rational leap. Illusion, in the Buddhist sense, disappears, for Kerouac knows that the phenomenal world, as science typically

perceives and portrays it, is not the whole. His joyful response to "nothing there" is seemingly irrational; it is purely affective.

Unlike many other American nature writers, Kerouac rarely gives extensive descriptions of nature or constructs extensive philosophical and metaphysical explanations based upon the happenings in nature that he experiences. Moreover, there is no questioning of, but rather a yielding to, the relational process. In a sense, Kerouac's prose works are more representative of haiku than of the Emersonian idea that nature serves as a sign of spiritual laws. While nature always suggests to Kerouac the emptiness and interconnectedness of all that is, for him nature is not just a symbol of spirit. It is spirit. Fog, leaves, tree stumps, the sky, the sea, and even the sand speak to him directly of unity and impermanence; and, as a result, he asks: "Can you imagine a man with marvelous insights like these can go mad within a month? Because you must admit all those talking sands were telling the truth" (*Big Sur* 36). And Kerouac knows that his chosen truth is hard to hear, harder to swallow, hardest to digest.

Kerouac's nature writings are like titled impressionistic paintings of the landscape as compared to many other American nature writers whose writings take a photograph and give not just a title but a rhetorical analysis of the image. In sum, Kerouac's nature writings focus less on nature than on the Buddha nature that his environment embodies. American nature writers who combine mystical philosophy and science in a sense combine the Western need to imbue the environment with intelligibility and the Buddhist view that one cannot interpret the flux. Accordingly, they express a paradoxical world view that is freeing. But Kerouac cannot readily combine these two approaches. He cannot analytically interpret nature even when he tries: The meaning he derives returns again and again to the Buddhist supra rational void where everything is everything and where everything is empty. The *via positiva* for him becomes another sign of the *via negativa*, that which is Nothing. Kerouac finds himself unable to cling to any things but able to express compassion toward them. In this way, Buddhism gives Kerouac a method for inducing intense moments of community in the midst of chaos, fear, and incomprehensibility. While Kerouac's use of drugs went against the precepts of the Buddha's Middle Way between self-indulgence and self-mortification, Kerouac is not the only Buddhist practitioner in history to have died from drug-related complications. He is not the only mystic to have or to have had lapses, doubts, and insecurities, or to have had moments when he felt overwhelmed by the transformation of sight to insight. Kerouac's was not, as some critics argue, an inauthentic use of Buddhism but an authentic syncretism common to Americans who remain open to possibilities. Buddhism instigates a turn in Kerouac, gives him new eyes when there's nowhere new in America to go.

Ben Giamo argues that "Kerouac was primarily a religious writer . . . hell-bent on testing experience to its profane depths and transcendent heights. . . . His overall purpose in writing was to glorify life and offer comfort and

sustenance to readers despite the antagonisms, hostilities, defilements, contentions, and sorrows weathered on the road and in town and city" (xvi). Like Giamo, Ann Charters sees Kerouac's investigations into Buddhism as "a discovery of different religious images for his fundamentally constant religious feelings" (1973, 199). Douglas Brinkley similarly argues that, for Kerouac, the Beat movement "was not about politics but about spirituality and art" (50). Whether we deem Kerouac *primarily* a religious writer, we might agree with Giamo, Charters, and Brinkley in this: We need not let debates about precisely how much a single religion appears in Kerouac's texts or to what degree Kerouac could accurately present such beliefs negate the beauty of Kerouac's spiritual messages or the literary importance and cultural relevance of his syncretic approach to integrating ideas from different religions in his works, as in his life—a process he used to revivify for himself the traditional or inherited culture and its forms. As Stephen Prothero notes in the introduction of an anthology aiming to present texts written at "the moment when the Beats discovered and practiced Buddhism," the Beats left not only a significant "literary legacy" but also a significant "spiritual legacy": "A new Buddhism began to take shape in the America of the fifties and sixties [that] has transformed, and is transforming still, the landscape and culture in which [Americans] live" (3). Kerouac held no small role in this process.

Perhaps Kerouac is not "the new Buddha of American prose" but an Emersonian poet-prophet of the twentieth century telling us that in the midst of chaos there is hope; there is peace; there is forgiveness; there is compassion; there is life; there is suffering; and there is death. As Kerouac writes in the prefatory comments to *Big Sur*, all of his works show "the world of raging action and folly and also of gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of [his] eye" (n.p.). Kerouac could not escape suffering, but he connected to the suffering in all, understanding the Buddha's first Noble Truth.

When Kerouac tells us that "the woods are full of wardens" (*Lonesome Traveler* 183), his meaning is two-fold. On a literal level, he attacks the social structure that is eliminating a person's ability to explore nature. But on a deeper level, Kerouac is cautioning us against all social constraints that impede our unification with our landscapes. No matter where we are "on the road," Kerouac is inviting us to make connections with the Buddha nature in all of nature. He is inviting us to participate in the Zen Buddhist tradition that requires the adept to carry the monastic vision into active living, to see every everyday happening as part of the spiritual journey. But not only does Kerouac give us an invitation to make connections: Through his nature writings, he also provides us with a model for doing just that.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Odin 258; Tweed 160; Charters 1995, 582; Ellwood 152–56; McCaskill 51–56; Robertson 220–26; Tytell 25, 73; Watts 338–40; and Gottschall 99–100, 128.

2. See, in particular, Giamo and Charters's biography.
3. There is a tendency among literary critics to see the Beats' appropriation of Buddhist elements as purely political or purely selfish acts. In relation to Kerouac, see Gottschall 99–100, 128; Tytell 25, 73; Watts 338–40. For instance, when Tytell writes about Buddhism "supporting [Kerouac's] spiritual needs" (74), it is in the context of Kerouac's anger at America (25; see also Gottschall 99–100, 128); his acceptance of his own failures (73; see also Watts 338–40); and his "denial" of his roots (73).
4. Watts dislikes Kerouac's characterization of Snyder in *The Dharma Bums*, while Snyder and Robertson feel it conveys the spirit of Snyder's position (Ellwood 160; Robertson 220, 226).
5. Goldberg has studied Zen Buddhism for more than twenty-five years, including intensive years at the Minnesota Zen Center where she studied with Zen Master Dainin Katagiri, participating in *zazen*. She now resides in Taos, New Mexico and—as a result of the guidance and the encouragement of her Zen teacher—uses writing as her Zen practice. Goldberg throws away entire notebooks containing her writing, practicing detachment from empirical motives for self-discovery and self-worth. See Natalie Goldberg in works cited.
6. Kerouac sincerely grappled with—but did not master—seeing the world "whole." In *The Three Pillars of Zen*, a Zen Master explains what I mean by an "inexpert" Buddhist: "It is true that there are people who have had a *kensho* experience and yet who seem to be, morally speaking, inferior to those who have not. How does it happen, you ask. These enlightened people have perceived the truth that all life in its essential nature is indivisible, but because they haven't yet purged themselves of their delusive feelings and propensities, the roots of which are imbedded in the unconscious, they cannot act in accordance with their inner vision. If they continue with *zazen*, however, gradually their character will improve as they become cleansed of these defilements, and in time they will become outstanding individuals" (Kapleau 110).

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Chapter 12

# "Will You Please Stop Playing with the Mantra?": The Embodied Poetics of Ginsberg's Later Career

*Tony Trigilio*

As Chicago police rushed the crowd in Lincoln Park the day before the 1968 Democratic National Convention, Allen Ginsberg gathered himself into full lotus position and began chanting mantras. The audience had convened in the park for a concert by John Sinclair and MC 5. Earlier, Ginsberg led the crowd in 15 minutes of chanting the Hare Krishna mantra; now, as police moved violently through the park, Ginsberg sat near the stage repeating the Sanskrit syllable, "Om." Ginsberg's chanting spread, and before long, groups of fellow chanters formed around him. According to Ginsberg's biographer Michael Schumacher, the crowd's continuous chanting that day eased tension and prevented a full-blown riot in the park (511). As Ginsberg explained in a 1969 interview with Paul Carroll, he expected to chant for roughly twenty minutes to calm himself, "but the chanting stretched into hours, and a big circle surrounded me" (92). The chanting eventually lasted eight hours. He later told Carroll that the effect of chanting surprised him. The experience "felt like grace," he said, adding, "I was in a revolving mass of electricity. I was in a dimension of feeling other than the normal one of save-your-own-skin" (92).

However visionary and politically productive this event was for Ginsberg, his experience of "grace" emerged from spontaneous religious feeling rather than authoritative religious practice. Indeed, as he explained to Carroll, the chanting that day in Chicago achieved its full potency only when "somebody passed me a note on which an Indian had written, 'Will you please stop playing with the mantra and do it seriously by pronouncing the 'M' in OM properly for at least five minutes?' " Ginsberg added, "I realized I'd been using the mantra as song instead of concentration, so I started doing it his way" (92).

This moment in Chicago can suggest a vocabulary for the shape of Ginsberg's later career, where he sought to fuse "song" and "concentration" in his appropriation of mantra speech. Ginsberg's desire to blur the boundaries between oppositional conceptual frameworks—such as between *song* and *concentration*, or between East and West—dates back to his 1948 Blake vision, which inspired his tendency in "Howl" and "Kaddish" to combine metaphysical and materialist modes of representation in revisionary poetic prophecy. Ginsberg's impulse toward a "mid Heaven," as he describes in "Kral Majales," between *song* and *concentration* was intensified during the last three decades of his life, in study and practice of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, a form of the Madhyamaka (translated as "middle way"), or Centrist, philosophical school.

Critical discussion of Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics has been meager, likely a result of Western distance from the poet's Eastern sources and of Ginsberg's own self-fashioned "hipster" mythos. Works by Jay Dougherty and David R. Jarraway offer fairly recent critical models for discussion of Ginsberg's later poetry, yet neither fully explores the effects of Ginsberg's deepening Buddhist commitment on the development of his poetics.[1] Dougherty argues that the 1973 *Mind Breaths* volume inaugurates a "significant thematic shift" in Ginsberg's poetry that has been overlooked, a shift that includes Ginsberg's Buddhism as a significant tendency. However, Dougherty himself admits that a substantive understanding of Ginsberg's poetry still awaits an exploration of the poet's Buddhist influences; the poems would "be better understood" if audiences read them "with a knowledge of Ginsberg's Buddhist-Trungpa teachings and vocabulary" (84). Jarraway's work with "Wichita Vortex Sutra" implies that the poem contributes to a larger body of Vietnam War literature that identifies and engages a crisis of knowledge at the heart of late twentieth-century American culture. Jarraway's focus on the "vortex" of language at the core of "Wichita" is important, but he does not explore the religious sensibility crucial to a poem whose title, a "sutra" after all, demonstrates its Buddhist influence. Ginsberg's increasing study of Buddhism frames the prophetic impulse of his later career, the period from "Wichita Vortex Sutra" through his final volume, *Death and Fame*. In this period, Ginsberg continues to emphasize the improvisatory, breath-centered poetics that marks his early vatic poems, but he increasingly incorporates the mantra as a mode of speech to represent visionary experience as a conjunction of embodied and transcendentalist frames of reference.

In the mid-1960s, Ginsberg began to trust language as a performative vehicle that undoes its own referential power—and, more important, he represented such undoing as a practice of the sacred. Performative speech offers a vantage from Western linguistics to read the Eastern influences in Ginsberg's language for sacred experience in his poetry. Linguist J. L. Austin describes performative speech as language that is "*doing* something rather than just *saying* something. . . . [I]n saying what I do, I actually perform that action" (235).[2] Ginsberg writes in "Reflections on the Mantra" (1966) that a

poetics of mantra speech presupposes a trust in words that extends beyond their referential function; he argues that mantra recitation produces a relationship between speech and action in which "the original thin-conscious association with meaning disappears and the words become pure physical sounds uttered in a frankly physical universe" (148). Mantra chanting becomes, for Ginsberg, "a vehicle for the expression of nonconceptual sensations of the worshiper" (148). Based on a conflation of Hindu metaphysics and Buddhist materialism—the sort of conflation that led to complaint in Chicago—Ginsberg argues that "the names of the Gods used in the mantra are *identical* with the Gods (or powers invoked) themselves" (149). The mantra is a mode of speech that, as Austin writes of performatives, operates on the boundary between speech and action, transferring attention from "what a certain utterance *means*" to "what was the *force*... of the utterance" (251). For Ginsberg, a performative, mantric poetics reaches beyond materialist language to the expressive body of the speaker, specifically the speaker's breath. Without a concomitant emphasis on the breath-unit, with which he first experimented in "Howl," a mantric poetics risks, for Ginsberg, language underwritten by an illusion of self-presence, speech that leads "to spiritual delusion of Godhood rather than breakthru [*sic*] of common awareness" ("Contemplation on Publication" 213). David Loy's conjunction of Mahayana Buddhism and poststructuralism might suggest a way of thinking through Ginsberg's embodied East–West poetics, where a Mahayana-poststructuralist account of language and subjectivity can point, for Loy, "to an experience beyond language—or, more precisely, to a different way of experiencing language and thought" (60). Thus, as Loy offers a familiar critique of the potential for linguistic freeplay to lead to a deconstructive void, he also frames this critique with an argument for the critical possibilities of poststructuralism, asserting that Western radical thought limits postructuralism in a celebration of freeplay that is "defective only because it is not radical enough" (59). Ginsberg's construction of a poetic language underwritten by Buddhist conceptions of the immanent sacredness of body and breath—where textuality can point to "a different way of experiencing language and thought," to borrow from Loy—is a crucial organizing principle for his later work from "Wichita" onward. His emphasis on a fluid, mediated subjectivity is circumscribed by a poetics that unravels the solidity of the Western human subject with the deconstructive impulse of Mahayana Buddhism; yet his poetics also tempers linguistic freeplay, containing subjectivity in a position of tremulous certainty, in the fluctuating inflows and outflows of the spoken breath.

## Into the Vortex: Language, Magic, Power

By 1965, Ginsberg recognized a need to continue and revise the prophetic language of "Howl" and "Kaddish" to address the deepening crisis in Vietnam.

The trust in naming that marks "Howl," and the trust in nonreferential language that suffuses "Kaddish"—especially its penultimate Long Island graveyard scene—represent both the limit and possibility of language, a boundary condition he engages in "Wichita." As in "Howl" and "Kaddish," Ginsberg's concern in "Wichita" is to reawaken the creative potential of human desire, to remind readers that "ecstatic language" might be produced from human suffering. A new language is necessary, even if it must be spoken in the poem by an aging poet ambivalent about his potency at a turn in his career. "I'm an old man now," he writes, "and a lonesome man in Kansas / but not afraid / to speak my lonesomeness in a car…" (*Collected Poems* 405). Ginsberg constructs a mantra from which a language for pacifism might be shaped, a reflection of his public persona of the 1960s: "I lift my voice aloud, / make Mantra of American language now, / I here declare the end of the War!" (*Collected Poems* 407). The poem functions, furthermore, as a Western sutra, as a Western Buddhist scripture, transforming wartime language with the same urgency that an earlier poem, "Sunflower Sutra," incorporated revisionary prophetic language to transvalue the human form's "mummied roots" into "blessed" and "golden" figurations (*Collected Poems* 139).

Yet "Wichita" evades history at the same time that it stages the historical as an occasion for political activism. In a 1968 interview with Michael Aldrich, Ginsberg argues that the mantric poetics of "Wichita" emerges from the poem's historical moment, an effort to "make a series of syllables that would be identical with a historical event" ("Improvised Poetics" 46):

> I wanted the historical event to be the end of the war, and so I prepared the declaration of the end of the war by saying 'I hereby make my language identical with the historical event, *I here declare the end of the war!*'—and set up a force field of language which is so solid and absolute as a statement and a realization of an assertion by my will, conscious will power, that it will contradict—counteract and ultimately overwhelm the force field of language pronounced out of the State Department and out of [Lyndon] Johnson's mouth. ("Improvised Poetics" 46–47)

The poem stages a mantra-based, performative poetics of opposition to the Vietnam War. Yet, as if anticipating later accusations of "playing" with the mantra in Chicago, Ginsberg's poetic strategy in "Wichita" does not reach beyond a reductive mythologizing, one that recasts the language of the nascent peace movement as "white magic" to Lyndon Johnson's "black magic" in a rhetorical battle for public opinion: "Where they [Johnson and his military advisors] say 'I declare—We declare war,' they can say 'I declare war'—their mantras are black mantras, so to speak. They pronounce these words, and then they sign a piece of paper, of other words, and a hundred thousand soldiers go across the ocean. So I pronounce *my* word, and so the point is, how strong is my word?" ("Improvised Poetics" 47). In "Wichita," the language of the Pentagon is mythic speech, even though the Pentagon's actions in history are circumscribed by the materialist language of wartime propaganda

broadcast on the radio and documented by Ginsberg in this poem. The language of Johnson and his advisors is variously voiced as "language used / like magic for power," language that naturalizes imperialist power inequities, and voiced also as "Black Magic language" wielded "by inferior magicians with / the wrong alchemical formula for transforming earth into gold" (*Collected Poems* 401).

Ginsberg's language reveals the burden of the very prophetic lineage that inspires the poem. His literary influence in "Wichita" traces, of course, back to Walt Whitman's attempt in *Democratic Vistas* to revive American literature and democracy by throwing off what he saw as the materialist decadence of the U.S.'s European legacy. Ginsberg constructs a Whitman for "Wichita" who inspires as much as ruptures the Western prophetic lineage, and this rupture is crucial to Ginsberg's revisionary poetics in "Wichita." Whitman's trust in the metaphysics of industrial progress, his hypostatic drama of manifest destiny in "A Passage to India," for instance, is undercut in Ginsberg's opening lines. "Blue eyed children" clasp Whitman at the beginning of "Wichita" and, alongside Whitman, these children "envision / Iron interlaced upon the city plain" in an echo of the visionary optimism of "A Passage to India" (*Collected Poems* 394). However, this romantic vision is overwhelmed by the persistent drone of banal, often propagandistic, radio commentary that Ginsberg incorporates in the poem as a force that colonizes the imagination—as "language abused / for Advertisement, / language used / like magic for power on the planet" (*Collected Poems* 401). Commercial language is the language of conquest in "Wichita"; the technological sublime that sparked Whitman's optimistic "Iron interlaced" prophetic nationalism is subsumed into materialistic power relations that prop the war. As much as *Democratic Vistas* inspires *The Fall of America*, the war fever of Whitman's own work, such as "Beat! Beat! Drums!" and "Song of the Banner at Daybreak" (*Leaves of Grass*) is rewritten in "Wichita."[3] Whitman's trust in poetic language that heals the wounds of war, his universalist "Word over all" that unites the postbellum United States in "Reconciliation," is untenable, for Ginsberg, during the Vietnam War. The problem in "Wichita" still is "Language, language"; and the force of candor, crucial for both Whitman and Ginsberg, is not enough to redeem without recourse to Ginsberg's Eastern influences.

This song of self and nation rent by war also is a "sutra," a Buddhist scriptural text, that takes Blake's vortex as a central figuration for consciousness. It is an artifact of both *song* and *concentration*, a poem divided in its attempt to redeem the language of Johnson's "inferior magicians" and of materialist radio propaganda. In "Wichita," language is the stage upon which *song* and *concentration* meet, where Ginsberg's Buddhism intersects with Blake's vortex. The vortex is Blake's agitated, violent image for apocalyptic consciousness, generating the movement from the "mundane shell" of human consciousness to the Fourfold Human Form Divine, where, as Blake writes in his annotations to Bishop Watson's *An Apology for the Bible*, "every man" might "converse with God & be a King and Priest in his own house" (615).

"Wichita" intervenes in the rhetoric of war with a language suffused by the Buddhist conception of *shunyata* (emptiness), which deconstructs Western metaphysics by recasting subjectivity as a constructed performance rather than an irreducible ontological essence. Ginsberg counters wartime language with the "Prajnaparamita Sutra over coffee" (*Collected Poems* 395), an effort to render such language empty of an essentialist presence, as Blake's vortex does with representations of human consciousness. The Prajnaparamita Sutra, the definitive sutra on *shunyata*, appears casually—introduced "over coffee"—in the struggle over language in "Wichita"; as such, *shunyata* functions not as mystic speech but as a form of common language, as sacred speech that might "overwhelm" the State Department's "force field of language."[4] As Loy argues, fusing Mahayana and Western poststructuralism "opens up the possibility of deconstructing another duality: that between Western philosophy, defining itself as rational inquiry, and its 'shadow' the mystical tradition" (80). Whether Ginsberg actually achieves such fusion, or whether mantric speech in "Wichita" is merely a dualistic counterweight to Johnson's "black language," is a question Ginsberg begins to address, fatalistically, later in the poem, and also in its companion poem, "Iron Horse." By the time of "Iron Horse," wartime rhetoric continues to "hurry" the country to war (*Collected Poems* 445). Rather than craft a language to counter the words that prop the war, as he does in "Wichita," Ginsberg retreats in "Iron Horse" from the linguistic environments that inspire the revisionary impulse of these poems: "Better withdraw from the newspaper world / Better withdraw from the electric world / Better retire before war cuts my head off" (*Collected Poems* 446).

Ginsberg's compositional process in "Wichita" forecasts the shape of his later poetics, especially in its embrace of a "middle way," Madhyamaka influence. The spacing and line breaks of "Wichita" re-create broken, fragmented language that is both the casualty and cause of war fever in the poem. "Wichita" was composed on a trip through Kansas, as Ginsberg spoke his immediate impressions into a tape recorder that also picked up passing sounds and radio news snippets, many of which were included later in the poem. The on-off clicking of the tape recorder determined the line breaks in the poem, extending Ginsberg's *one speech-breath-thought* poetics into an ambivalent compositional space framed by a tension between improvisation and craft: Enjambment, then, becomes an effect of both multimedia spontaneity and reflective revision in the poem. Ginsberg later termed this compositional process "auto poesy," punning on *automobile*, *automatic*, and *autoerotic* to suggest the importance of transience, spontaneity, and desire in the poem's composition.

In his work on the role of tape recordings in contemporary literature, critic Michael Davidson observes that the ability to record the human voice reduced notions of literary *voice* to artifice, to an illusion of self-presence that could shape new forms of political resistance. This "divided character of orality" in contemporary literature empties authentic speech at the same

time that it, paradoxically, "posits self-presence as its ground" (1997, 100). Framed by such a tension between the artificial and the genuine, this impulse in contemporary literature fashions itself as "authentic" in order to interrogate dominant discourses of authenticity in a Cold War culture of surveillance in which "technology is capable of separating voice from speaker, conversation from community" (1997, 103). Davidson observes that the tape recorder provided Ginsberg with a tool to recast prophetic language as a function of technological culture, where prophecy "no longer emanates from some inner visionary moment but from a voice that has recognized its inscription within an electronic environment" (1997, 106).[5]

"Wichita" anticipates the linguistic turn in contemporary U.S. poetry at the same time that, as Davidson suggests, it re-envisions Whitman's desire to "sing the body electric" in the surveillance culture of the Cold War ("Technologies" 106). For Ginsberg, the tape recorder he used to compose "Wichita" is the teleo-technological component of mantra speech; a means by which an authentic speech—and authentic speaker—could be constructed that would declare the end of the war. As he explains to Aldrich, the machine recorded the spontaneous composition of the poem: "[T]hese lines in 'Wichita' are arranged according to their organic time-spacing as per the mind's coming up with the phrases and the mouth pronouncing them" ("Improvised Poetics" 29). Ginsberg's improvisatory poetics posits the boundary between spontaneity and reflection as a critical location for imaginative speech. He notes that the "organic time-spacing" of the lines is predicated upon pauses "of a minute or two minutes between each line as I'm formulating it in my mind and the recording" (29). The edge of improvisation, where its frame and end meet, is a location that simultaneously limits and produces speech in the poem with each click of the microphone's on–off switch. The ritualized boundary of this improvised voice emerges from Ginsberg's Eastern sources. He tells Aldrich that composition-by-tape-recorder "is like a form of Yoga: attempting to pronounce aloud the thoughts that are going through the head" (29). The poem forecasts the turn to language that would become known as Language poetry in the following decade, where form *is* content rather than an extension of content. Innovations in contemporary poetry such as organic form and open-field poetics can be recast as "organic time-spacing" in "Wichita": The mind's thought and the mouth's utterance are coexistent in time, and the line itself performs the circumstances of its composition, with tape-recorder clicks reproduced as line breaks that climb down the page.

Buddhism and the technologies of Cold War culture combine to create a boundary site that produces pacifist language in "Wichita." Yet Ginsberg's belief in the magic of mantra chanting eventually confuses the terms of his engagement with materialist governmental rhetoric. The Vietnam War rages, of course, toward the Tet Offensive, and U.S. race relations continue to decay in a white supremacist culture. As the final lines of the poem sardonically caution, "The war is over now— / Except for the souls / held prisoner in

Niggertown / still pining for love of your tender white bodies O children of Wichita!" Ginsberg's note to the poem explains "Niggertown" as, an "Area of Wichita between Hydraulic and 17th streets" (*Collected Poems* 780). Schumacher writes that this section of Wichita was segregated and impoverished as a result of racism and indifference, a significant cultural context for the relationship between mantric poetics and the poem's ending. Despite Ginsberg's attention to language and politics, Schumacher argues, "his words were not necessarily going to change the course of history—not as long as racists had hateful mantras of their own" (465).

## Mind Breaths, Speech Breaths

The mantra simultaneously summons and subverts the referential power of language. In its emphasis on spontaneity as a mode of production and containment, Ginsberg's mantric poetics reveals what Dick Hebdige calls, in his study of late-twentieth-century improvisation, "the illusory permanence of any enframed edge" (346). What Hebdige describes as "deliberate spontaneity," referring to a broad range of late twentieth-century cultural practices, I instead would term "ritualized spontaneity," to represent Ginsberg's use of the mantra in his contribution to a poetics of the sacred (340). This bounded condition of improvised speech is, as Hebdige describes, both "plain" and "secreted": "[I]n its compound resistance to the self-evident logic of representation, [deliberate spontaneity] takes us to the very edge of language (the word *edge* referring here to 'the border or part nearest some limit; the commencement or early part; the beginning; as, the *edge* of a field; the *edge* of evening')" (340). For Ginsberg, a mantric poetics enables poet and audience to experience together this edge of representation; it is poetic language poised at the limit of a frame, and beckoning past the point where that frame, as active, performative language, collapses into the beginning of a newly enframed structure. This edge of representation revises the isolated consciousness of "Howl," Part II—where the speaker's truck with Moloch reduces him to "a consciousness without a body" (131)—with performative speech constructed as redemptive language. As Ginsberg describes to Aldrich, mantric poetics "catalyze[s]" in the audience the "same *affects* or emotions" experienced by the poet during the composition of the poem. The form of the poem, then, is the content of the poem: "Doing mantra made me conscious of what I was doing in Poesy, and then made my practice a little more clear, because now I realize that certain rhythms you can get into, are . . . *mean* certain feelings" (36). Continuing his insistence on a primal language for prophecy, the "noun and dash of consciousness" in "Howl," Ginsberg asserts that the metrics of the Hindu Gayatri mantra represents a sacred "universal meter" for poetic prophecy. The Gayatri meter, he tells Aldrich, is "as complicated as the nature of the human body . . . or is fitted to the nature of the human body and touches all the key combinations" (35). "Wichita"

shaped a universalized mantra poetics into a form of contestatory "magic"; however, Ginsberg's continued study of the mantra led him to construct the body—as a source of breath, speech, and desire—as the materialist location of such meter, producing a language both transcendental and immanent.

As language blessed and spoken by past masters of a spiritual tradition, the mantra is spoken within the boundaries of an authoritative metaphysical lineage; but its dependence on language itself renders its metaphysics untenable, establishing the speaker's body, speech, and mind as the authoritative locus for visionary change promised in the actual recitation of the mantra. Ginsberg's language for subjectivity in his mantric poetics produces fissures in the humanist self without debilitating the humanist subject or substituting a fictive discourse of wholeness and referentiality for this fissured self. Thus, what is at stake in the poetry after "Wichita" is how a language for sacred experience can assert the authority of the speaking self without surrendering to metaphysics, the standard by which the sacred is most often defined in the West.

In "Mind Breaths," the body moves outward in a sacred breath that gathers with it continents of people and their histories. The organization of breath and line mirrors the content of the poem in the act of reading. The travel of the reader's breath in strophes in "Mind Breaths" parallels the travel of the poet's breath, beginning at Chögyam Trungpa's meditation center in Wyoming and circling the world, returning back to the individual poet's opening breath-unit. This breath reaches a crescendo of wind blowing "choppy waters" and "black-green waves" across the globe, finally alighting at the end of the poem, once again in the breath of the individual poet. "Mind Breaths" is structured as a dialectic governed by the body—more specifically, a dialectic of breath. Of course, from the *one speech-breath-thought* strophes of "Howl" onward, the breath has been critical to Ginsberg's composition process. By the time of "Mind Breaths," and through the remainder of his career, the importance of the breath is intensified by his Buddhist practice, first with Trungpa and later with Gelek Rinpoche, and the breath finds language in the articulation "Ah," an anchoring syllable in his later career. Ginsberg's 1984 annotations to "Mind Breaths" suggest that the "Ah" syllable functions like the seed syllable of a mantra; as a "vocalization" of the "purification of speech," the "Ah" syllable represents a "one syllable summary of the Prajnaparamita Sutra" (*Collected Poems* 791). With the "Ah" articulation, Ginsberg posits a subjectivity that is displaced by every breath at the same time that it is stabilized by the organized ritual of the mantra. Ginsberg's dialectic of breath, his language of ritualized spontaneity, proceeds from personal to global in "Mind Breaths." Eventually, it fuses the two terms into a speaking subject no more solid than any given breath from the poet's nostrils—a subject continually created and re-created within the impermanent framework of a historically contingent body. Breath and body serve as the locus of improvisation and as the steady, anaphoric base of the poem's dialectical movement.

This combination of singularity and fragmentation—of selfhood and self-diffusion—occurs at the edge of representation, where, as Hebdige describes, representation serves both the limitation and proliferation of meaning. As much as this approach contributes to the pilgrimage of "Mind Breaths," it also risks a self-canceling gesture, as in the language of "On Cremation of Chögyam Trungpa, Vidyadhara" (*Cosmopolitan Greetings* 25–26). Faced with the death of his teacher, Trungpa, in 1987, Ginsberg responds with a poem that intensifies the authority of the speaking subject at the same time that it seems to diminish the linguistic authority of mantra chanting to banal reiteration. "On Cremation" emphasizes the limitations of language while also acknowledging the power of language to provide narratives, however fictive, of consolation or redemption. Between the poles of reiteration and innovation—between Ginsberg's tense engagement with *song* and *concentration*—the poem acts as a statement of Buddhist poetics, functioning as an elegy to Trungpa as it dramatizes the heightened, imaginative perceptions of its speaker in the act of elegizing. Where the goal of a traditional Western elegy is consolation through language that reaffirms metaphysical authority, consolation in this Buddhist elegy might best be expressed as a representation of the mind in an intensified condition of awareness, proof in the poem that the guru's lessons on meditation and perception have been put into practice after his or her death.

Just so, "On Cremation" threatens to continue Ginsberg's alienating tendency toward the "declarative poem," as Dougherty has described of verse in Ginsberg's later career that does not "offer anything for the reader to grasp onto . . . besides the speaker's declarations" (83). Dougherty argues that the success of such poems "depends upon the listener's being sympathetic beforehand to the statements made by the artist" (84). These poems risk failure, Dougherty writes, because they prefer "the dogmatic-statement convention of the declarative poem" at the expense of a poetics that would frame "dogmatic-statement convention" with "illustrative context built up around the statements" (83–84). As an example, Dougherty notes that the "Buddhist-Trungpa-related" detail of "Gospel Noble Truths" lacks illustrative context that would resonate with readers who may not feel sympathetic toward Ginsberg's declarations, straight from Buddhism's basic tenets, that "You got to suffer" or "You got no soul."[6]

"On Cremation" restages Trungpa's cremation at his Buddhist center, Karme-Chöling, in a series of long, chanting breath-lines anchored by the phrase "I noticed." The poem offers as its illustrative context the past body of Ginsberg's work and influence, specifically his impulse toward anaphoric, mantra-chant phrases anchoring list-catalogue lines. Like many of Ginsberg's mid-1970s Buddhist-inspired declarative poems—such as "Ego Confession," "Mugging," and "Thoughts on a Breath"—it could alienate the reader who has little or no knowledge of the guru-student relationship in Tibetan Buddhism. Each line accelerates in an accumulating catalogue demonstrating the virtues and limitations of Trungpa's legacy, from the suspicious "ticket

takers" and "guards in Khaki uniforms" gathered that day at Karme-Chöling to the "all-pervading smiles & empty eyes" of mourning students filling the center's parking lot. As Ginsberg earlier told interviewer Paul Portugés, his Buddhist poetics owes much to William Carlos Williams's "elemental observations" (*Visionary Poetics* 148). "On Cremation" can be read alongside "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour" (1947) and, much later, "Mugging" (1974), as examples of how Williams's "elemental observations" can be deployed within the framework of a Buddhist-inspired poetics. If truly "no ideas" exist "but in things," then the poet's means of observing these things take center stage in the poem. In "On Cremation," the poet's ability to "notice," to perceive, is as important as any observation dramatized in the poem itself.

The guru's legacy, after all, lives on after death in the abilities of his students. Thus, the turning point of the poem arrives in the shortest, most clipped breath-line of the poem, after a series of long, chanting breath-lines catalogue the mourners' arrival and the preparation of the corpse, ending with the direct statement: "I noticed the Guru was dead" (*Cosmopolitan Greetings* 25). As profound as the cremation ceremony might be for Trungpa's students, Ginsberg describes his observation as more of a glimpse or glance, a merely "noticed" situation rather than the eschatological metamorphosis of consciousness one might expect upon the death of a venerated guru. The poem reconceives the most profound visions as images subject to the transitory attention span of passing frames of reference. The cremation of Trungpa produces a "rainbow round the sun" witnessed by all the mourners and, according to Stephen T. Butterfield, "the sign and seal of a great teacher" in Tibetan Buddhist tradition (151). Yet the rainbows are, crucially, no more or less a part of the poet's hierarchy of vision than anything else he "notices." The mundane and the apocalyptic flit past the speaker's consciousness with equal claims to transience, perhaps the most significant elegizing gesture a student might make for his or her guru:

> I noticed food, lettuce salad, I noticed the Teacher was absent,
> I noticed my friends, noticed our car the blue Volvo, a young boy held
> my hand
>
> (*Cosmopolitan Greetings* 26)

As in "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," Ginsberg risks banality in "On Cremation," and this risk precisely is what sustains the poem. So, too, does he take this risk in "Mugging," where the repetition of mantras would seem to Westernized ears a pale response to predatory muggers who have dragged the poet into an abandoned building. What Dougherty describes as "Ginsberg's Buddhist-Trungpa teachings and vocabulary" deserves further attention, however. For Trungpa, an acknowledgment that passing thoughts are hierarchized by the rational mind is the first step to enacting, through meditation, a nonhierarchical vision in one's daily life. Subjectivity is constituted by conceptual and linguistic frames of reference that comprise a "theater" of the self, as Trungpa described in a 1974 lecture, a "portable stage set that we carry

around with us that enables us to operate as individuals" (88). The mind, Trungpa argues, is suffused with *shunyata* and therefore is nothing but a theater of passing performance; it is the practitioner's task—here, the poet-practitioner's task—to inhabit this theater and empty its essentialized identity through meditation and, in the case of this poem, through the performative speech of mantric poetics. Such distrust of the human tendency toward hierarchization indeed is crucial to all forms of Buddhism, not just Trungpa's, and is the core teaching of The Prajnaparamita Sutra. Thus, a banality of vision actually elegizes the dead guru in "On Cremation"; it confirms that the guru's teachings carry on substantively in his students. With each utterance of "I noticed," the "absent" guru is made present.

As Dougherty implies, approaching Ginsberg's later work mindful of his Buddhism imposes vexing complications. That is, in Ginsberg's later poetry, *song* and *concentration* may be as much matters of urgent aesthetic concern as they are a lax conflation of each other. To further complicate critical reception of Ginsberg, his later poetry seems to borrow ambivalently from both the postmodern avant-garde and from traditional humanism, emphasizing intersubjective relationships in which language mediates the boundaries between absence and presence while, at the same time, valorizing presence itself. The limit, and possibility, of this strategy is most pronounced in "Is About," from Ginsberg's final volume, *Death and Fame*. In "Is About," the relationship between words and what they represent is first staged as an expression of postmodern banality: Where referents once redemptively enacted what they represented, as in his performative incorporation of the mantra, representation in "Is About" only serves to sustain and justify its own reiterations. The poem begins with a series of abstract generalizations, each of which proffers the idea that meaning is nothing but a chain of abstract equivalencies that can be brokered equally by commodified or sacred language. In its lack of concrete particularity, the chant-phrase "is about" produces an endless repetition of abstraction that erases the particulars of difference. Ginsberg would seem to violate the poetics of one of his primary influences, Pound, who once famously counseled poets to "go in fear of abstraction." At first glance, "Is About" stands as an anomaly in a career devoted to particulars, as best seen in "Kaddish," where a "release of particulars" enables redemptive candor (*Collected Poems* 214). After seven lines of commutative generalization in "Is About," the speaker steps back as if to correct himself: "Russia is about Tzars Stalin Poetry Secret Police Communism barefoot in the snow / But that's not really Russia it's a concept …" (*Death and Fame* 27). The real Russia, presumably, is to be found in "particulars," not in unpunctuated lists of nouns that elide any notion of difference. Nevertheless, the speaker returns straightaway to "is about" reiterations: "A concept is about how to look at the earth from the moon / without ever getting there" (*Death and Fame* 27). In this instance the moon is the primary frame of reference for a chain of conceptualizations that threaten the imagination's ability to "make it new." From the vantage of abstraction—from the

poet's perch on the moon—the speaker chants a perspective that combines ideas in such a way that the act of their fusion is foregrounded at the expense of the ideas themselves. Thus, one can "look at the earth from the moon / without ever getting there." The poem no longer functions as an occasion for meaning-making; instead, it seems to be a confined space where meaning is delivered in the form of banal postmodern equivalencies that are "about" looking but never really seeing.

Yet the chant repetitions of the poem offer a reminder that postmodernism is more than just a celebration of pop idioms, and instead can represent a vibrant avant-garde counterforce, as the Language movement's most politicized practitioners argue. As Bruce Andrews has written, avant-garde poetics restages the dominance of "established sense & meaning" in order to disrupt its "reign" (31). Ginsberg's "Is About" can be seen as a dramatization of Andrews's remarks, an occasion when "[w]riting's method . . . can suggest a *social* undecidability, a lack of successful *suture*" (Andrews 31). Instead of lapsing into banality, the chant-phrase "is about" sutures undecidability in order to burst its seams, restages commodified speech in order to disrupt its "reign." Eventually, the poem suggests that the "is about" mantra chant is a trick of artifice: "Everything is about something if you're a thin movie producer chain-smoking muggles" (*Death and Fame* 27). If one indeed is a narcoticized Hollywood producer—where "muggles" is slang for marijuana—then truly "[e]verything is about something," and the rich and variegated world can be understood (and this same understanding summarily shelved) by chanting the commutative phrase, "is about." Just as repetitious language forms can combine breath, body, and mind in a sacred mantra speech, they also can underwrite a world of packaged and commodified ideas in which human language is a source of plunder, where "[c]ommunication is about monopoly television radio movie newspaper spin on Earth, i.e. planetary censorship" (*Death and Fame* 27). The "is about" mantra is exhausted in the poem at the moment that its power to territorialize audiences with banality is vocalized, an instance in which speech empties commodified language from within by performing, rather than overtly countering, the force of banal utterance.

The final lines of "Is About" re-envision the reductive mantra of the entire poem—the "language abused," as in "Wichita"—and declare that this mantric poem is a call to further concrete action and not a mere collection of abstract statements: The speaker asks, "Do you care? What are you about / or are you a human being with 10 fingers & two eyes?" (*Death and Fame* 28). If subjectivity is produced and confined by language, then, for Ginsberg, the only locus of prophetic change might be the body, down to its "10 fingers & two eyes." The final question of the poem asserts humanistic confidence in both the subject who speaks the poem and in his readership. Ginsberg suggests a unified voice that "cares what it's all about" can emerge from the constraining chains of signification that frame the poem; furthermore, the first step in caring "what it's all about" involves dismantling the entire notion that

"[e]verything is about something" and instead localizing a fixed language for subjectivity in the body. Eventually, the poem asserts that the act of being "about" something is contrary to *being* in itself: One is either "about" something, or one is a flesh-and-blood human "with 10 fingers & two eyes."

The ending of "Is About" presumes an ontological commitment that situates Ginsberg in a curious position in debates over language and subjectivity in contemporary poetry. As much as Ginsberg's mantric poetics might be described by the vocabulary of postmodernism favored by the Language movement, "Is About" nevertheless suggests that Ginsberg keeps a neo-Romantic humanism in the offing as a form of spiritual pastiche, combining Judeo-Christian teleology with Buddhist *shunyata*. As a Madhyamaka practitioner, Ginsberg crafts a "middle-way" in "Is About" that represents, to borrow from Vernon Shetley's discussion of Language poetry and New Formalism, an effort to forge a poetics of both "lucidity" (*concentration*) and "lyricism" (*song*). Incorporating Charles Altieri's work on contemporary poetics, Shetley adapts Altieri's use of the terms "lucid" and "lyric" to name "institutional alignments" in the debate over forms of the genuine in contemporary poetry: Language poetry is aligned with critical theory, itself an extension and revision of Enlightenment lucidity; New Formalism, on the other hand, takes shape from humanist conceptions of selfhood, privileging lyricism "against the skeptical ironies of a 'lucid' literary theory" (Shetley 18–20). Of course, Ginsberg is an unlikely figure in a discussion of authenticity that combines New Formalist and Language poetry. As Shetley writes, Ginsberg "is practically the Devil himself in New Formalist demonology" (158). Ron Silliman has described Ginsberg as a "directly (and positively) felt" influence on Language poetry, and for Silliman, "Wichita" is the "defining text" of this influence. Even though Ginsberg's construction of sacred speech reflects poststructuralist thought in his mantric poetics, his belief in a primal form and meter from which authentic subjectivity can emerge resembles claims for language and subjectivity made in New Formalist poetics. Indeed, formalist poet Dana Gioia's remarks on poetic form and primal language can function as a Western equivalent of Ginsberg's interest in the Gayatri meter. Privileging the legacy of inherited Western forms, Gioia writes that poetry shares a premodern cultural space with "religion, history, music, and magic. All were performed in a sacred, ritual language separated from everyday speech by its incantatory metrical form" (33). Given that lyricism predates writing, Gioia argues, it follows that "[b]efore writing, the poet and the poem were inseparable, and both represented the collective memory of their culture" (33). It would seem imprecise to cast Ginsberg as a New Formalist "Devil" when he, too, claims an archetypal authenticity—a "universal meter," no less, but of Eastern rather than Western origin—in which poet, poem, and audience are inseparable in a mantric poetics that sparks the "same *affects* or emotions" in poet and reader alike ("Improvised Poetics" 36). I do not mean to imply that Gioia and Ginsberg are unproblematically kin. I would argue, instead, that our terms for describing debates over poetic

language and subjectivity need to be recast to account for variations such as Ginsberg's. Perhaps Annie Finch's suggestion of "multiformalism"—a term that encompasses traditional, avant-garde, and non-Western poetic forms—can contribute a useful critical vocabulary. For Finch, an emphasis on a multiformalist poetics would draw "critical attention to forms from other than European traditions as well as to the procedural and other forms used by 'experimental' poets" (xiii).

Rather than establish a place for Ginsberg in one particular movement, or in either conceptual pole of East or West, this chapter has attempted to begin a conversation about the complexity of Ginsberg's poetics after "Wichita." For Ginsberg, the breathing body is the teleological source of the spoken line, and operates as a mode of containment for the spoken line; the spoken line proceeds, by contrast, to unravel the ontological certainty of the speaking self in linguistic forms of indeterminacy whose roots extend from contemporary postmodernism through the sources available to Ginsberg as a serious student and practitioner of Mahayana Buddhism. The tension between *song* and *concentration* so pronounced for Ginsberg in Chicago informs a continuing effort throughout his career to incorporate Buddhism in the construction of an authentic language for subjectivity. This language negotiates oppositional tendencies in which the "authentic" is framed in contemporary critical and poetic discourse, collapsing the boundaries between its conception as either an attractive fiction or a neo-Romantic, transcendental ideal.

## Notes

1. As I have discussed in "*Strange Prophecies Anew*," critical approaches to Ginsberg's Buddhism only occasionally explore the poems themselves in depth. Gordon Ball's discussions in *Journals, Mid-Fifties: 1954–1958* are an exception, where Ball argues that the influences of Buddhism and William Blake are critical elements of Ginsberg's Eastern–Western prophetic poetry. Michael Rumaker's 1957 review of "Howl" and Helen Vendler's 1996 appraisal of Ginsberg's *oeuvre* typify, at differing poles in Ginsberg's career, most critical rejections of Ginsberg's Buddhism. Both Rumaker and Vendler argue that the political urgencies of Ginsberg's poems are muted by an unearned, Buddhist-inspired silence. Paul Portugés has explored Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics in the journal *Contemporary Literature* and in his book, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. But Portugés's discussion of Ginsberg's Buddhism is at times cursory, as in his discussion of the Buddhist idea of *shunyata* in *Contemporary Literature*. Interviewed in *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, Ginsberg asserts that Buddhism cannot be separated from his Western influences, a separation upon which Portugés nevertheless insists in his line of questioning.
2. Discussions of the performative utterance in contemporary critical discourse are often communicated through Judith Butler's work, especially in her emphasis on how performatives can function in Queer political discourse and action. Ginsberg's Queer activism was vocal and productive, but did not engage in a systematic or thoroughgoing revision of the Buddhist tradition in which he practiced.

Thus, Austin is a primary source for material on performativity in this essay, a position his work also occupies in Butler's writing. For more on Ginsberg's conception of a contemporary U.S. Buddhism that could include homosexual and bisexual desire as significant components of sacred practice, see "Allen Ginsberg on Buddhism and Gayness," in *Queer Dharma: Voices of Gay Buddhists.*

3. Ginsberg's simultaneous embrace of, and withdrawal from, Whitman is not isolated to "Wichita," despite the central place of Whitman in Ginsberg's career. Of course, Whitman's abiding faith in U.S. industry is nowhere more empty than in Ginsberg's Moloch. As much as Ginsberg and Whitman share a desire to heal a platonic split between body and soul, Whitman's transcendentalist impulse is continually revised in Ginsberg's work, from the materialist language for prophecy of "Kaddish" through Ginsberg's increased incorporation of the antimetaphysical conceptual framework of Buddhism throughout his career.
4. See also Ginsberg's letter to Richard Eberhart, May 18, 1956, in which he describes "Howl" as an attempt to re-envision mystical experience as common, concrete experience: "I am paying homage to mystical mysteries in the forms in which they actually occur here in the U.S. in our environment" (*Howl: Original Draft Facsimile* 152).
5. This visionary voice inscribed within a materialist environment echoes the Blakean vortex in "Wichita." Blake's vision of a world where conversations with God take place in a person's own house is materialist in its own right, insofar as "houses" signify states of consciousness in Blake's work, and "All deities," for Blake, "reside in the human breast" (38).
6. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, the didactic impulse of these poems warrants further attention as instances of Ginsberg's Buddhist poetics. "Do the Meditation Rock," for example, may seem like nothing but a passing ditty. However, the song undertakes a purpose common to Buddhist texts, containing an entire practice—in this case, Buddhism's Six Perfections—in verse form, in much the same way Western prayers accomplish their purposes.

Chapter 13

# "Virus-X": Kerouac's Visions of Burroughs*

*Oliver Harris*

## This Legend Business

The mythic narrative of Beat legends has either been told and retold, taken up by generation after generation of fascinated and uncritical listeners, or it has been critically ignored, dismissed as an essentially false and empty story. Rarely has this narrative been subjected to close textual or historical analysis. But the very durability of Beat myths suggests their cultural power, and that we need to ask questions about their material origins, their precise forms, and their often complex functions and effects. My specific purpose here is to bring together Jack Kerouac, as the greatest Beat mythmaker, the one who joked that he had "worked harder at this legend business" than the rest (*Vanity of Duluoz* 157), and William S. Burroughs, as the greatest object of Beat mythmaking. I am interested particularly in how representations of Burroughs's image in Kerouac's fiction define the role that Burroughs played for the Beats, and the degree to which the legendizing of the Beats shaped not only the reception of Burroughs's early work but also its *production*. Going beyond issues of biographical infidelity, my point is that Kerouac's representations served particular needs for his own work and the work of the Beats at large, and that his image-making had a material impact on Burroughs's identity and practice as a writer at least as significant as any other influence Kerouac may have had.

Finally, I propose that Kerouac's visions of Burroughs belong to that order of phenomena which exercise *fascination*—not in the term's casual, everyday use, but in its fullest philosophical and psychoanalytical sense: as a powerful but profoundly ambivalent relation between subject and object in which there is a meaningful blindness at the very heart of vision. Several critics, such as Allen Hibbard (ix) and Graham Caveney (12), have briefly addressed

Burroughs's image's power of fascination directly. What has been missing to date is any attempt to go back to Kerouac as a crucial point of origin, to see how, from the very beginning of Burroughs's career as a writer, Kerouac so exactly and astutely inscribed Burroughs's participation in what might be called an economy of fascination. As well as going back to the image's historical origins and material effects, what also remains to be done is to inform the term itself by drawing on the rich range of meanings it has acquired in cultural and political theory and in philosophy and psychoanalysis, through such theorists of fascination as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Blanchot, Jean Baudrillard, and Slavoj Žižek. To Benjamin, for example, fascination is not simply an irresistible state of illusion, but represents, as Ackbar Abbas puts it, "a willingness to be drawn to phenomena that attract our attention yet do not submit entirely to our understanding" (51). For Blanchot fascination names another type of interminable obscurity, an ambivalent experience of attraction–repulsion provoked by what Lacan called the enigmatic and traumatic "thing" that marks the psychoanalytical "real" of desire. Perhaps Lacan offers the most salutary and therefore relevant account because he was so directly concerned with the relation of desire to *authority*, especially the seductive authority of the teacher supposed to know the secret: "The lesson of the master," Adam Phillips observes, referring to Lacan but with relevance for Burroughs, "is the one we should stop listening out for" (112). Since space doesn't permit a rigorous inquiry into the distinct and complex dynamics of blinding and revelation, seduction and signification sketched here, in what follows I read Kerouac's representations of Burroughs as a material parable of the psychology and politics of fascination.

## Shadowy Unknown Genius

Everything about William Burroughs's cultural debut is suitably paradoxical and eerily prophetic. He looms into view for the first time at the dead centre of the twentieth century in the guise of a "malicious-looking smile" that appears in Kerouac's own debut novel, *The Town and the City*, published in March of 1950 (373). This enigmatic smile, which is at once sinister and comic, intensely material and weirdly spectral, is an image that initiates and seems to predict Burroughs's equivocal presence across the next fifty years. To adapt a line of hyperbole from the better-known character sketch in *On the Road*, you might say all of Burroughs is in that smile.

What enables us to read a condensed history of Burroughs's future in a smile? Most obviously, the way that he first appears as a character imaged in another writer's novel. That is to say, from the very beginning the appearance of his identity had the quality of a fiction, and this trope of a fantasy projected by others would remain the dominant model for representing Burroughs. Take, for example, Leslie Fiedler's double jibe from 1964, that "Burroughs is himself a character out of science fiction," rather than a writer

of it, and that "Ginsberg invented Burroughs" (186). Or, from the same year, take Carl Solomon's similar, but more considered, observation that Burroughs's "character and personality seem to have had reflections in fictional characters in the writings of his protégé, Jack Kerouac. This is particularly evident in the character of Dennison in Kerouac's first novel, *The Town and the City*" (6). The appearance that Kerouac first projected and that Fiedler and Solomon and so many others since them have repeated describes, in fact, less a fictional identity than a *simulation*, a copy reproduced by others behind which there was no original.

This is what makes the first sighting of Burroughs in *The Town and the City* so remarkable, because it establishes precisely the unique form of artistic mediation that would shadow Burroughs's career. For Kerouac presents an extraordinary *double* displacement, an uncannily *twice*-mediated representation, since it is not actually Burroughs's own persona, Will Dennison, who sports his "malicious-looking smile," but Levinsky, the character based on Allen Ginsberg. More curious still, this imitated smile, this spectral grin without a material Cheshire cat, is present not only in Dennison's absence but ahead of his first appearance proper in the novel, so that the image of the man precedes the real thing. Burroughs's reputation during the decade that followed *The Town and the City* was almost entirely mediated by Kerouac and Ginsberg, given the neglect of *Junkie* (1953), the non-appearances of both *Queer* (1985; written 1952) and "In Search of Yage" (published in *The Yage Letters* 1963; written 1953), and the publication of *Naked Lunch* (1959) outside America. It is easy to grasp therefore how Kerouac's scene marks the creation of Burroughs as a legendary persona *of* the Beats *by* the Beats, as well as being more broadly symptomatic of how his identity has been fabricated and mediated in advance of his own work.

*The Town and the City*'s drama of ambiguous anticipation was a compelling prototype, the first of a script written out again and again during the Beat decade: in John Clellon Holmes's *Go* (1952), the "first Beat novel" (Cook 46), a roman à clef which simply borrowed "Will Dennison" directly from *The Town and the City*—and sought Kerouac's permission, but not that of Burroughs (Holmes xix); in Ginsberg's dedication to "Howl" (1956), where the unwritten *Naked Lunch* was promised as an "endless novel which will drive everybody mad" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 802); in Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), where "Old Bull Lee" is endowed with "phenomenal fires and mysteries" and appears like "something out of an old evil dream" (145, 151); in articles such as that co-written by Ginsberg and Gregory Corso at the height of Beat media attention, which advertised Burroughs as "the shadowy unknown genius behind the more publicised figures of Kerouac and Ginsberg" (166); and in Corso's own novel, *The American Express* (1961), where he appears as the "spectral" Mr. D, who "stands for danger! disaster! death!" (17, 57). Such dramatic promotion in, outside, and on the margins of fiction, inevitably generated a kind of phantom figure. Those images, vivid yet ghostly, seductive but ambivalent, constituted the spectacular substance

of Burroughs ahead of his own work, so that his texts were liable to be read as the products of a simulacral identity not only preceding but cancelling the "real."

The usurping force of Beat mythmaking and fictionalised biography significantly affected how Burroughs has been critically received and popularly imagined. Of course Burroughs has always been tangential to the Beat movement, its elder statesman, godfather, mentor, or tutelary spook, but that has been precisely the point. If the image of Burroughs has remained central to the cultural popularity of the Beats, it is for the paradoxical reason that its presence was always essentially marginal, equivocal, and fantasmatic. He was never completely there and never quite belonged, but always marked a limit, a point of excess, a kind of strange inner extremity. This anomalous status in turn affirmed the very fantasy identity projected in Burroughs's own work, as the irredeemably alien and Other, forever out of place. This position has also in turn been reproduced in Burroughs's location within "Beat Studies," where, in largely unproductive ways, he has remained neither in nor out.[1]

From the point of view of Burroughs criticism, it is tempting to free Burroughs from the Beat Generation altogether, to quite simply disregard the context, and this is what some have tried to do: Two of the best studies, by Robin Lydenberg (1987) and Timothy Murphy (1997), don't even *mention* Kerouac. But there are good reasons not to yield to this temptation, and those who think that Burroughs's early texts can now be read outside the Beat context, taken out like a picture from an old frame, should think again. For contemporary readers, each of his four texts written during the 1950s comes framed in some way by Beat reference, none of which actually dates from that decade, so that, like it or not, Burroughs remains bound by and to the Beats.[2] And what is true for how these texts are received is also true for how they were written: The effects of the association are too material and too enduring to be ignored, so that it is impossible to advance a serious case for Burroughs's development without understanding those effects. Indeed, one reason why the ambiguities of his evolving identity as a writer so troubled Burroughs in the 1950s is that the legendizing of the Beats shaped *simultaneously* the production and reception of his early writing.

If Burroughs's "most important 'work' may be his legend, which exists somewhere between the realms of fact and fiction," as Jennie Skerl claimed (1985, 2), then it was there from the very start. In March of 1950 Burroughs had settled into Mexico City and was just beginning work on what later became *Junkie*. A couple of days after *The Town and the City* arrived in the mail, on March 10 he wrote a letter back which began by praising Kerouac's novel and ended by revealing he'd started his own. And so, at the very moment he was embarking on his own mature writing, literally no more than a few weeks into his first manuscript, Burroughs must have looked into Kerouac's fictionalizing mirror and seen this impersonation of his "own" persona's smile, smiling enigmatically back. For general cultural impact, the image of Burroughs from *The Town and The City* does not compare to the far

more widely read *On the Road*, and Carl Solomon's comments on the portrait of Dennison have never been taken up or developed further. But, paradoxically, the most overlooked representation may well have been the most materially important. To grasp this paradox we must bear in mind not only that the image of Dennison appeared to Burroughs exactly at the point he began to write, but that it remained his sole published image during the period he wrote *Junkie*, *Queer*, "In Search of Yage," and much of *Naked Lunch*. This scene from *The Town and the City* is both a material point of origin and the most potent instance of image-making, and we ought to pay it the closest attention because no representation affected Burroughs *himself* more deeply.

The nature and extent of *The Town and the City*'s impact on Burroughs's own creativity will become clearer from a precise comparison of *Junkie* and *Queer*. For now, we should remember that the name Burroughs used for his persona throughout the writing of *Junkie* was not William Lee—a late substitution—but none other than Will Dennison. This was, in turn, the name Burroughs had used when co-writing "And the Hippos Were Boiled In Their Tanks" with Kerouac five years earlier, which meant that he was using for his own authorial identity the *nom de plume* that Kerouac had just transformed into the name of a fictional character. It is only a mild exaggeration to conclude that Burroughs's career as a fiction writer began not at the moment of Kerouac's inspiring success, but at the moment he recognized himself as a fictional character, and a character of a very particular kind: one whose potency to affect others coincides with a disturbing power of autonomy from its real-life author.

We might ask, did Kerouac "read" Burroughs with prophetic knowledge, or did he "write" the Burroughs we know into being? The question raises the fundamental issue of his mythologized image, an identity that we cannot simply wish away. Like Dennison's ghost of a smile, it persists and lingers on for the very reason that it seems a text without an accessible and material author, a signifier without any signified. This is the significance of Burroughs to the Beats: They already conjure him as the name of a peculiar kind of secret, an *empty secret*, in the sense that this shadowy figure, hidden "behind the more publicised figures," serves as a Master precisely because he is never really there at all. The effect depends on a certain distance, one rendered literally through Burroughs's geographic removal from America and figuratively through the resolutely enigmatic quality of Beat representations. In *Doctor Sax*, the closest Kerouac ever came to writing "a book about Will just by himself" (*Vanity of Duluoz* 156)—which is still not very close—it is said that Sax both knows "something that no other man knew" and that he "just does nothing," while his habitat gives evocative architectural form to the enigma: "If one were to approach the shack from the back, from the side, from the front—nothing would be revealed. The shack was as square as a perfect block; it suggested nothing" (*Doctor Sax* 142, 140, 137). Given Kerouac's insistence and precision, I would suggest that in philosophical terms this "nothing" is *something*, a positive negativity, that it denotes a kind

of hole in knowledge, a blind spot in the field of vision, a traumatic blank, a secret that cannot be disclosed. In Kerouac's fiction, Burroughs is represented consistently in very particular ways—obliquely, by negatives and contradictions—fixing a seductive template for what later critics have called a "suppression of presence so ghostly as to become its own powerful identity" (Ward 112), or simply "a formidable *absence*" (Craig Karpel, in Hibbard xi).

## Avoided, Yet Hypnotic and Compelling

Since a proper taxonomy of Kerouac's representations of Burroughs would be tedious, I offer an opportunistic reading of Kerouac's scenario in *The Town and the City*. Its aims are to make visible typical features whose effect is cumulative, to demonstrate Kerouac's understanding of the ways in which fascination in the form of a smile can work, and, finally, to establish the material impact of Kerouac's representations on Burroughs's own production. The scene has Peter Martin, Kerouac's chief alter-ego in the novel, arguing against Levinsky's belief in a spreading "atomic disease" or "universal cancer" that he dubs "Virus X" (370, 371). "Everybody's trying to be decent," Peter insists:

> Levinsky was aroused with interest. "Let them *try!*" he brought out with an imitation of a snarl, and a malicious-looking smile—a smile he had learned from Dennison.
>
> "There you go imitating Will Dennison again!" Peter taunted.
>
> "Nonsense, my days of sitting at Dennison's feet are over—the position is almost reversed, in a sense. He listens to my ideas now with great respect, where it used to be just the other way around." (373)

Here, *in absentia*, Dennison is cast in the role of guru and located at the key point in a triangular drama of ideas and influence. The striking and complex ambiguity of this casting should suggest something quite different from what has long remained the portrait of Burroughs from this period: the revered master of the Beats. Kerouac's representations of Burroughs as a teacher figure are fully conscious efforts to dramatise fascination as a profoundly *equivocal* experience. Pedagogy here is all about power, the power of fascination, and this relation is made particularly clear in *On the Road*. "He spent all his time talking and teaching others," Kerouac writes of Old Bull Lee, "Jane sat at his feet: so did I; so did Dean; and so had Carlo Marx" (131). Since Carlo Marx is, like Levinsky in *The Town and the City*, another version of Ginsberg, that "had" establishes the continuity of the scenes across the two novels; he is the one who ceases to sit at His Master's feet. And, since Kerouac is at pains in *On the Road* to parody or undermine Old Bull's ideas—like his plan to build a shelf that will "last a *thousand years*" out of a "piece of rotten wood" (149)[3]—his sketch sustains Carlo's changed position. Kerouac appears

to offer a simple choice—the blind devotion of homage, or detached vision: fascination or freedom.

Kerouac says that Levinsky has "learned" this smile from Dennison; Peter accuses Levinsky of "imitating" him. If learning is imitation, then education is a form of mimesis, or possession. It is less that Levinsky has copied Dennison, than that the student becomes a copy *of* his master. Once this is pointed out to him, Levinsky immediately denies it, in a swift about-face that actually suggests the contrary forces simultaneously at work in fascination: seduction and shame, attraction and repulsion. The point about Levinsky's denial, with its tell-tale qualifiers—"almost reversed, in a sense"—is that it goes too far, suggesting that it is mere wishful thinking. Far from reproducing authority or mastery, by imitating his master Levinsky puts himself in the opposite condition of inauthenticity and service. Peter's charge that Levinsky is imitating Dennison *again* confirms that his idiosyncratic ideas about "Virus X" only recycle what Dennison has told him; in resisting Levinsky's "continual attempt to convert him to his, Levinsky's, point of view" (366),[4] Peter is therefore also resisting Dennison. No coincidence, then, that Dennison's "close friend," Waldo Meister, is described as "an evil magician . . . despised like Philoctetes, avoided, yet hypnotic and compelling . . . " (368), or that Kerouac should observe repeatedly the "glittering eyes" with which Levinsky "fixed Peter" (366, 367), since the scene he evokes here is Coleridge's encounter between Ancient Mariner and Wedding Guest. Since this most famous of cautionary tales of fascination would, a decade later, model the pedagogy of *Naked Lunch*, it's hard to say whether Kerouac intuited the economy of writer–reader relations in Burroughs's future writing, or whether *The Town and the City* gave him the script.

Kerouac's first two novels feature portraits of Burroughs that may or may not fascinate the reader, but which are certainly *about* exercising the power of fascination. While Kerouac dramatises this sinister power in relation to his portraits of Ginsberg, at the same time we can understand this drama as a displacement, a way of working through his *own* enduring fascination with Burroughs. As early as March 1945, Kerouac wrote that "nobody can actually *like* Burroughs": "I think he studied occult yoga magic with which he could throw a cold curse on everybody around him" (*Letters, 1940–1956*, 89). Three years later, Kerouac admitted in another letter that, even if Burroughs had "lost most of his human qualities" and refused to pay him any attention, paradoxically this actually "makes him even more fascinating" (163). These ambivalent biographical relations feed directly into Kerouac's fictional representations, but more importantly they carry over from Kerouac into Burroughs's cultural and critical reception: Does not the fascination of his image lie in the perverse appeal of someone we imagine *fully* capable of throwing a cold curse on us? More generally, we might see a direct line running from the sketch of Dennison in *The Town and the City*, via Ginsberg and Corso's image of the "shadowy unknown genius" and Kerouac's later designation of Burroughs as "a shadow hovering over western literature" in *Vanity of Duluoz* (161), all the way to

David Ulin's 1996 portrait of "a shadowy, wreathlike figure infiltrating our collective consciousness" (George-Warren 206), or Jim Jarmusch's obituary for the "godfather of outlaw artists" who "was always hovering in the shadows" (George-Warren 222). In other words, the sinister figure looming in the fictional texts of other writers has been taken up, and perpetuated in a multitude of contexts, by the repetitions of critics and other artists.

## That Inscrutable Thing!

The subtlety of Kerouac's narrative lies in the way it sets up a series of expectations about Dennison as a mysterious figure: Friends sit at his feet, they repeat his strange apocalyptic ideas and mimic his cynical expressions. And so, when Dennison finally appears in person Kerouac presents us with an astonishing paradox: Having witnessed the compelling, enigmatic presence of the man in his absence, now, when Dennison himself appears in full view, the enigma is *not there*. Far from being a seductive source of fascinating ideas, he talks only about the dull practicalities of his drug habit, pays "no attention whatever" to Peter, and when he smiles does so "charmingly" (400–1). The reader is entitled, if not invited to ask, what is going on?

On a banal level, Kerouac seems to have staged a deliberate anti-climax: He builds up to a spectacle that never happens, rather like the baffling contrast between the mysterious reputation and mundane reality of Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel. More profoundly, Kerouac takes the fictional representation of Burroughs and splits this into an original preceded and displaced by a disembodied image. We are then provoked into asking what relation ties one to the other. At this point it is useful to take up Ronna Johnson's analysis of Kerouac as a victim to "the hyperreal effects of his iconic fame" (23). Borrowing from Jean Baudrillard, Johnson's case is that Kerouac belonged to the first generation of writers to become celebrities of the modern mass media and to have suffered the wholesale displacement of the real by the image. What we should add to this analysis is that such a fate, whereby the image stands in for the writer and is contingently related to him, was one that Kerouac himself first produced for Burroughs. In *The Town and the City*, the fictionalisation includes *within itself* the structural confusion of real and model, while the image precedes the real and is more potent than it. The priority of origins is lost together with any chance of an "objective" viewpoint, and Dennison falls short of the image of himself, is less impressive than it because his *impression* is visible as an already circulating and autonomous image. And so what Johnson says of Kerouac's writing—that it "is 'secret' because his immense cultural visibility foregrounds only itself" (24)—is not simply just as true for Burroughs. For what Kerouac's scene establishes is that, while we are used to recognising how Burroughs's writing comes to us mediated by the iconic image, this destiny was already initiated and dramatised for him at the very point he began to write. In Baudrillard's

terms, *The Town and the City* showed Burroughs the image's fate of becoming its own simulation, one that has ceased to reflect, distort, or conceal any reality at all (Baudrillard 6).

Here it is worth noting the consistency in Kerouac's representations of Burroughs of what must otherwise appear as entirely inconsequential details. In *On the Road*, where Old Bull Lee is paradoxically both a "nondescript-looking fellow" and "a Kansas minister with exotic, phenomenal fires and mysteries" (145), he again first appears *before himself*, in the form of a long-distance, telephonic voice: "We heard Bull's whining voice eighteen hundred miles away" (133). In *Visions of Cody* this mediated vocal presence is reproduced by first Jack and then Cody as *imitations* performed in their transcribed taped dialogue, during which Jack dwells precisely on the dynamics of Burroughs's original appearance and reputation: "I had already heard about Hubbard, my impression of Hubbard was of a short, squat . . . *tough* guy . . . I . . . hearin, you know, you hear a guy, you hear about a guy continually—" (184–85). In *Vanity of Duluoz*, Kerouac is even more explicit about the "peculiar intensity" created by advance reports, and how, after such fantasy projections, the actual encounter becomes entirely paradoxical: Hubbard is "inscrutable because ordinary-looking (scrutable)" (156). Here the key word is invested with the philosophical dimension it derives from its given source in Melville's *Moby Dick*: "I seek that inscrutable thing!" (qtd. in *Vanity of Duluoz* 204). The "secret wisdom" of the Burroughsian Doctor Sax, "concealed in that unholy head beneath that black slouch hat," is a secret that must stay concealed (*Doctor Sax* 141). Always appearing before he is present, and always remaining absent even when he seems to be most there, Kerouac's representation of Burroughs figures an essentially unfathomable relation between appearance and essence.

Dennison's failure to live up to his advance billing in *The Town and the City* also suggests something about Levinsky and, insofar as it makes sense to read this scene as a parable for reading Burroughs, Levinsky can stand in for our desires and needs in the way that he appears caught between the desire for mystification and the need for de-mystification. Kerouac prompts this suggestion quite brilliantly through a telling detail about Dennison's apartment: "[I]n the moldy doorway hung a moth-eaten green drape that concealed whatever was behind it" (400). Of course now we are forced to ask, what is the secret behind the green drape?

The short answer is: nothing. To put this another way, the drape is what it appears to be, and it is only our desire to discover something hidden that turns appearance into mystery and a moth-eaten green drape into the veil hiding a secret. The more subtle answer is the paranoid play of secrecy itself, a game Burroughs would make explicit in "The Conspiracy," written in the mid-1950s as part of *Naked Lunch*: "[T]he secret is that there is no secret" (*Interzone* 110). Applied to the seductive power of Burroughs's own image as a mysterious master, the secret of fascination turns out to be nothing but *our fascination for the secret*. There is a political as well as psychological lesson

here, one that Burroughs would spell out in the last words of *Naked Lunch*: "No glot—C'lom Fliday" (235). If you want to know the secret, ask again. . . .

## Monstrous Perversity

When Burroughs began writing *Junkie* in March of 1950, with the example of *The Town and the City* before him, he was returning to the New York City of 1945, so that in terms of period, place, and personalities his novel began exactly where Kerouac's ended. However, just as representations of Kerouac and Ginsberg are conspicuous by their absence in *Junkie*, so too is the image of Dennison's smile, whose sinister potency seems a world away from Burroughs's narrating persona William Lee, née Will Dennison. If anything, Lee in *Junkie* resembles Dennison *without* the smile, since he is defined largely by his anonymity, indifference, and detachment from those around him. There is a very particular history to this identity, since it represents a choice between the two potential aesthetic identities that emerged from Burroughs's dramatic collaborations with Kerouac back in 1945.

The first identity that Burroughs and Kerouac acted out was captured by Ginsberg's ever-opportune photographic lens: as the caption says, they are playing out a scene from Dashiell Hammett.[5] Hammett was valued—with some license—for the tough, native masculinity and journalistic objectivity of his prose, a stylization well-suited to a work of underworld reportage such as "Hippos," based on the Carr-Kammerer murder case. And of course, the dominant style of *Junkie* is routinely described—with no less license—as that of Dashiell Hammett. But in 1945 Burroughs and Kerouac also staged a second identity of a different national and aesthetic order, when they acted out scenes from André Gide's novel, *The Counterfeiters*. If Hammett stood for an indigenous realist mode, then Gide represented the extreme of narcissistic European modernism. Five years later, Gide's novel is discussed at length in *The Town and the City*, where his name represents "monstrous perversity"—intellectual, sexual, aesthetic—for Kerouac (154). And this unnatural "corrupter" of youth and artist of "falsity" (154, 153) is specifically associated with the image of Burroughs. "Dennison," it is said, "is a first-rate fabricator of Gidean romances" (393). In other words, that malicious-looking smile—seductive, ambiguous, suspect—identified Burroughs negatively in moral, intellectual, and class terms. Together with Waldo Meister (based on Kammerer), Dennison is for Levinsky one of the "evil figures of decayed families" that index the zeitgeist, and for Kenny Wood (based on Lucien Carr) one of the city's sinister "faggot spooks" (367, 414). When Kerouac returned to this scene in *Vanity of Duluoz* he would group Burroughs, Kammerer, and Carr together as giving his "first glimpse of the Real Devil," while making explicit their perverse attraction to him: "The fascination of Hubbard at first was based on the fact that he was a key member of this here 'New Orleans School' " (157).

Once we bear in mind the broader historical context, it becomes even clearer why a careful reading of Kerouac's sketches of Burroughs is so necessary, because in that context the stakes were so high. For by tying Burroughs to the Carr–Kammerer murder case, Kerouac fixes Dennison's name to a scandal of predatory homosexuality that resonates with national, not just local, significance. Dennison signifies Burroughs as "queer" in every negative sense: homosexual; corrupt; counterfeit; criminal; decadent. Not only corrupt but *corrupting*—seeking to "convert" others—the ominous smile fits seamlessly into the Cold War's governing pathological figure of deviance as contagion; an infectious force of viral toxicity threatening the health of the American body politic. Just as Cold War rhetoric worked according to a logic of guilt-by-association, so, too, through references to Gide and resemblances to other characters, Kerouac cast Dennison as dangerously un-American. In historical context, this was even more reckless than the recurrent associations Kerouac later made between Dennison/Hubbard and the Germans—he looks like a "Nazi" in both *Vanity of Duluoz* (156) and *Desolation Angels* (343)—while both characterizations suggest the economy of violent attraction–repulsion at the heart of the fascination that Burroughs exercised over Kerouac.

## You'll Be Simply Fascinated

The key point, then, is that a highly suspect identity was firmly established for Burroughs through *The Town and the City*, and that in 1950 he did not take it up. On the contrary, he refused it: As a visible sign of seduction, Dennison's malicious-looking smile simply does not fit the William Lee of *Junkie*. However, in *Queer*, the novel Burroughs began in 1952 as its sequel, Lee does indeed resemble the Gidean figure of Dennison, being not only an unnatural "corrupter" of youth and artist of "falsity," but a first-rate fabricator of the sinister romances Burroughs called "routines." Both wildly funny and frighteningly ugly, the routines of *Queer* stage seduction *visibly*, as a quasi-fascistic force to be resisted, and Burroughs would go on to develop exactly this economy of coercive fascination in *Naked Lunch*. More immediately, Kerouac himself reconfirmed the association in *Doctor Sax*, which he wrote while staying with Burroughs in Mexico City as he worked on *Queer*. In one of many unremarked but very precise readings of Burroughs's work-in-progress, Kerouac endows Sax with "a malignant smile" and "malevolent humour," describes "an evil Gidean" speaking what sounds like the "Slave Trader" routine from *Queer*, and declares "you'll be simply fascinated" by him (142, 140).

If it is important to establish how fully Burroughs's own productivity was shaped by the material impact of Kerouac's, then we must not lose sight of the specific thematic discontinuity that separates *Junkie* from *Queer*, since what this suggests is how precisely Burroughs first rejected and then two

years later embraced the suspect identity and seductive image already given him in 1950. Because the entire narrative of *Queer* consists of Lee's ugly and desperate attempts to disarm, seduce, control and ultimately possess his victim, it is clear that *Queer* is about exercising, and exorcising, the power of fascination in a way that *Junkie* simply is not. And it is equally clear that this basic distinction is precisely related to Kerouac's representations of Burroughs in *The Town and the City* and *Doctor Sax*. Then again, was Kerouac *reading* Burroughs in 1952 or once again *writing* him?

Since even the most conventional literary reputations are what John Rodden calls "radically contingent"—made by "a constant interaction of images and information" (x, xi)—it is not surprising that Burroughs's active participation in the making of his own image has always remained in doubt. In the Beat context, he occupies an indeterminate space somewhere between Ginsberg and Kerouac; which is to say that he neither embraced the self-marketing strategy of Ginsberg, whose genius for Ron Sukenick was to "seize the means of promotion" (14), nor suffered Kerouac's illusory faith that a published writer could escape the reach of the reifying commodity image. However, Burroughs's inclusion within the Beat field itself remains problematic. Referring to his own fictional use of a Burroughs persona, Clellon Holmes once observed that "we all took delight in dropping these enigmatic intersecting references into our books" (*Go*, xi), but this is not the case. For while the Beats all engaged in forms of self-mythologizing, when it comes to the *mythologizing of others*, which is surely one of the hallmarks of Beat writing, this was never a part of Burroughs's project.[6] Just one among the many signal features that separates Burroughs's work from the Beat label, this is an important distinction, because it suggests more than a temperamental, artistic, or even ideological difference; it suggests his early experience of the power of the image, and that he grasped at once the danger of its autonomy. Burroughs's position may well therefore suggest a calculated reaction *against* the practice of the other Beat writers, especially Kerouac. For what Holmes equally overlooks is the disturbing potency of these enigmatic references, which, like forces conjured up by the Magician's Apprentice, quickly ran out of control and began to take on a life of their own.

Elsewhere, I have explored the issue of Kerouac's *moral* responsibility for his mythologization of his real-life fellow Beats.[7] Here, I can only conclude that Kerouac's rendition of Burroughs as the Virus-X of the Beat Generation, the mythic object of a radically ambivalent fascination, had material effects on Burroughs's writing and popular image, and that it did so because it reflected back a fantasy identity in which both Burroughs and Kerouac had a deep investment. In 1956 Burroughs wrote in his journal: "I'll maintain this International Sophistico-criminal Mahatma con no longer. It was more or less shoved on me anyway" (*Interzone* 130). The ambiguity in the second sentence perhaps explains why Burroughs could never make good the resolve in the first, and so was fated to exercise a power of fascination that he could never quite stop—and that we can never quite resist.

## Notes

* A version of this essay appears in my book, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

1. See my essay, "Beating the Academy," *College Literature*, 27.1 (2000): 213–31.
2. The re-edited *Junky* (New York: Penguin, 1977) is prefaced by Ginsberg's long introduction; the belated publication of *Queer* sports back-flap comments by Ginsberg or Kerouac; *The Yage Letters* combines "In Search of Yage" with Ginsberg's "replies" from 1960; and all editions of *Naked Lunch* after 1962 begin with Burroughs's introduction that credits the book's title to Kerouac.
3. The element of parody in this passage is crucial, but rarely acknowledged. Significantly, Corso would repeat this material in his own novel (133), continuing the *parodic* thrust of Beat visions of Burroughs.
4. It is important to recognize that what is at issue here is not Levinsky's fidelity to the historical Ginsberg, but rather the dynamics of Kerouac's scene, which invite us to read Levinsky's denials as further proof that Dennison remains his master.
5. See Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: Straight Arrow, 1973): photograph between pages 64 and 65.
6. As Dave Moore has pointed out to me, Kerouac does, in fact, "appear" in one scene in *Junky*, as Peter (15), his name no doubt borrowed from "Peter Martin" in *The Town and the City*. However, what makes this minimal appearance of Kerouac in *Junky* so revealing is that Moore can recognize Kerouac and make the identification only because he is aware of a much more detailed description of this same scene in Kerouac's novel, *Visions of Cody* (192–99).
7. See my essay, "Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel: Homosexuality and Beat Textual Politics," in *Beat Culture: The 1950s and Beyond*, edited by Cornelis van Minnen et al. (Amsterdam: VU Press, 1999): 221–40.

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