

Zita, Antonín

The reception in the United States: the fifties and the sixties

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4 THE RECEPTION IN THE UNITED STATES: THE FIFTIES AND THE SIXTIES

There were several events which helped the Beat writers enter the spotlight of the nation and make the term Beat Generation a part of the vernacular. Still, two events tower above the others in their importance: the obscenity trial concerning *Howl and Other poems* in 1957 and Gilbert Millstein's rave review of Kerouac's *On the Road* for *The New York Times* in the same year. The latter not only launched Kerouac into stardom, but also started the media craze surrounding the Beats; a craze which lasted for several years and significantly tarnished the public's view of the Beats. This frequently led outright to dismissive articles, such as the one J. Donald Adams wrote in 1958: "To my possibly tone-deaf ears, the group of San Francisco writers who proclaim themselves the 'Beat Generation' have, by the omission of a letter, misnamed themselves. It seems to me the proper word is 'bleat'" (2). What is more, one of the results of the media coverage was the disappearance of the division between "the Beat Generation" as a small group of writers – Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso, and others – and "the Beat Generation" as a term in popular media for rebellious youth. The blurring of the lines between the two eventually turned out to be extremely detrimental to Beat artists, as the acts of people from their generation became identified with the acts of the Beats themselves, which then in an endless loop again reinforced society's preconceptions of a whole generation. As Challis notes, most of the commentary after the Beats' breakthrough into the public consciousness "has more often been remarkable for misinterpretation or malice than for constructive analysis" (10).

Jack Kerouac was the most prolific of the Beats during this period, publishing over a dozen novels and several poetry collections. Despite being best known for *On the Road*, he had published his first novel, *The Town and the City*, in 1950, that is two years before John Clellon Holmes popularized the term "the Beat Generation."

As a result, the reviewers approached the novel in a different manner than Kerouac's other novels. Granted, *The Town and the City* is written in a more conventional manner than Kerouac's other novels; nevertheless, in terms of content – providing a novelized account of a certain period of Kerouac's life – it sets the template for Kerouac's oeuvre as a whole. Since they cannot comment on the Beat Generation phenomenon, these reviews are invaluable in addressing the role of popular media in the reception of the Beats.

For example, Charles Poore's review of the novel for *The New York Times* refers to the author as "Mr. Kerouac," something that would become rather rare following the publication of *On the Road*, and describes him as "a brilliantly promising young novelist of 28" (25). Unlike a substantial portion of later reviewers, Poore clearly focuses on Kerouac's writing itself rather than what it might represent. While Poore addresses the shortcomings of Kerouac's prose, he ultimately recommends the novel: "[Kerouac] has almost no faults of spiritless omission, many faults of exuberant commission, and a magnificent grasp of the disorderly splendor and squalor of existence."¹³ Another positive review is written by Kenneth Rockwell and titled "First Novel Pictures Great, Tragic America." Rockwell considers Kerouac "the answer to a book reviewer's prayer, especially if the reviewer is over-tired of the psychopathic element that seems to be dominant in American fiction" (8). Importantly, while praising the novel for its style, a certain set of values that Rockwell represents and that he, perhaps unconsciously, defends can be found in the review. First of all, the reviewer applauds the novel for its sermon-like qualities and the way it indirectly "preaches against the evil," namely city life, which the novel portrays as "the final rottenness of our culture" and "a contemporary Inferno" (8, 9). Furthermore, Rockwell adds the following with an easy-to-trace air of moral superiority: "There is nothing in [the novel] that is *nasty*—no detailed bedroom scenes to *titillate the bestial*" (9, emphasis mine).

For Rockwell, Kerouac's first novel represents a criticism of contemporary society, yet it is a criticism that is still within the bounds of the rules set by the said society, whether through its content or its style. But a careful observation shows that even then Kerouac's writing bordered a bit too much on what the public had difficulties accepting. One such case is John Brooks's review for the Sunday edition of *The New York Times Book Review*. Describing the novel as portraying the slow decline of a Massachusetts family "by the recent war, the forces of modern life and the passage of time," he compliments the novel as a "rough diamond," but also criticizes it for providing an "exaggerated" portrayal of New York City (199). As Ellis Amburn then points out, it is likely that Brooks found the novel's contents unbelievable simply because he had "never met anyone like Ginsberg,

13 Notably, the review features a publicity photo of Kerouac in a suit and tie, which further contributes to the "non-Beat" portrayal of the novel.

Huncke, and Kammerer” (150). Even Kerouac’s first novel, while more traditional in its prose than his subsequent work, still proved challenging to its reviewers.

The most influential review of a Beat Generation work is undoubtedly Gilbert Millstein’s enthusiastic support for *On the Road*. Calling the novel’s publication “a notable occasion” and the novel itself “a major novel,” Millstein’s unconditional embrace of the text is important not only for the sudden exposure that Kerouac and other Beats gained, but also for its effort to define what the Beat Generation is and what the critical responses to the text might be (27). Millstein predicts both condescension on the part of academia and of “official” avant-garde critics as well as a superficial approach to the novel that describes it as merely “absorbing” or “intriguing” (27). “But the fact is,” Millstein continues, “that *On the Road* is the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as ‘beat,’ and whose principal avatar he is.” Another aspect of the review that sets it apart from the others is the way Millstein defines and contextualizes for readers what the Beat Generation might stand for, as Millstein tries to define the Beat Generation without immediately dismissing it. “The Beat Generation,” he explains, “was born disillusioned; it takes for granted the imminence of war, the barrenness of politics and the hostility of the rest of society (27).” The Beat Generation is further defined by “the frenzied pursuit of every possible sensory impression,” yet “these excesses are made to serve a spiritual purpose, the purpose of an affirmation still unfocused, still to be defined, unsystematic.”

Despite Millstein’s recommendation, the novel generally garnered mixed reviews. Still, these reviews generally avoided the topic of the Beat Generation in favor of a more balanced discussion. For instance, David Dempsey’s review of the novel describes it as an experimental fiction originating from the current bohemia in the USA. Pointing out the novel’s “morally neutral point of view” and eccentric characters, Dempsey claims that Kerouac’s success lies in the recent tradition in American literature to focus on outcasts and off-beat characters rather than the average. As he puts it, “Kerouac has written an enormously readable and entertaining book but one reads it in the same mood that he might visit a sideshow – the freaks are fascinating although they are hardly part of our lives” (3). The novel’s protagonist Dean Moriarty, with his restlessness and interest in women or smoking marijuana, is “Mr. Kerouac’s answer to the age of anxiety – and one of the author’s real accomplishments is to make him both agreeable and sympathetic.” Yet the novel is not without its faults. While it offers “great, raw slices of America,” it lacks character development and an overarching plot in general. “The non sequiturs of the beat generation,” Dempsey further elaborates, “become the author’s own plotless and themeless technique—having absolved his characters of all responsibility, he can absolve himself of the writer’s customary attention to motivation and credibility.”

Similar criticism was leveled in 1968 at *Vanity of Duluo*. For instance, Peter Sourian's rather long review focuses on the way Kerouac tells the story. Sourian argues that while Kerouac is not without talent, the Beat makes the wrong decision to focus the novel around his alter ego rather than on several of the interesting characters making an appearance throughout the novel. This leads Kerouac to make a basic mistake in storytelling: since the novel revolves around him, he can only refer to interesting events rather than portray them directly. In other words, Kerouac is *telling* rather than *showing*, which then leads him to examine "the petty circumstances of his own life and on the image of himself which he finds most entrancing" rather than some of the more interesting plots sketched out in the text (Sourian). For Sourian, the novel simply does not offer anything new. These objections to Kerouac's style can be found in another review of the same novel. Published anonymously in *Time*, it starts with the following lament: "How in the name of all the past and present editors of the *Partisan Review* did Jack Kerouac, cult leader of post-World War II intellectual vagrants, ever attain standing as a member (let alone chieftain) of the avant-garde?" ("Sanity of Kerouac" 96). Comparing Kerouac unfavorably to Norman Mailer, the review claims the Beat "lacks the verbal talent to match his passionate commitment to the truth in himself." In addition, the review complains that Kerouac's signature stylistic features – long sentences, the use of dashes instead of periods, the improvisational nature of the writing – have long overstayed their welcome.

Yet what some critics saw as flaws, others saw in a more favorable light. The topic of the inner search for the self and its constant redefinition is what leads Warren Tallman to consider Kerouac's writing style being closer to the "American grain" than that of any other writer since Fitzgerald (Tallman 229). The search for life itself in America is then the ultimate point of Kerouac's writing, and it is Kerouac's language which embodies his message of restless search for ever-elusive happiness. Similarly, Henry Miller in the preface to *The Subterraneans* hails Kerouac for doing "something to our immaculate prose from which it may never recover. A passionate lover of language, he knows how to use it" (230). Importantly, Miller does not forget to establish Kerouac as a writer of a considerable social impact: "We say that the poet, or genius, is always ahead of his time. True, but only because he's so thoroughly *of* his time." Harriet Frye's review of *The Dharma Bums* shows a similar approach; on the one hand, the novel is "highly readable because it is vigorous and exuberant"; on the other hand, "[t]hose of us settled in our houses with white kitchens and TV read it and say 'So that is what the restless young people are experiencing today'" (12).

Harriet Frye's second comment on *The Dharma Bums* is representative of a common approach to Beats and especially Kerouac: commenting mostly on the social or moral aspects of a Beat text. For example, George Davenport's review of Kerouac's *Big Sur* – "[one has] to wonder if one of the more puzzling hal-

lucinations of *Beatnikismus* isn't the assumption that its private lives and private language are a matter of general interest and universal concern" (325) – might be seen as another critique of Kerouac's stylistic choices. Yet the comment actually emphasizes existing standards of behavior, accepted opinion, or "common decency"; that is the aspects of life in 1940s and 1950s America which the Beats refused. John Brook's comment on the unrealistic portrayal of New York City or even Millstein's discussion of Kerouac as representative of the Beat Generation heighten the social aspect of their writing, i.e. Beats as a movement or representative of a segment of the American population. Granted, the Beat Generation authors do represent social changes by virtue of refusing the values of contemporary society. However, that is not the only thing the Beats symbolize, yet that is precisely the aspect to which they had been frequently reduced.

4.1 The Beat Generation as a Subculture in the Public Image

Yet why was the Beat Generation so frequently dragged through the press? One of the explanations is tied to the ambiguity of the term "the Beat Generation" itself. As the fame of the Beats grew, so did their alleged association with youth violence or juvenile delinquency. Catherine Nash points out that the Beats have been understood to represent various things: a literary movement, a media creation, and an exploitative as well as exploitable marketing strategy (54). Yet as Nash further explains, several things about the relationship between the Beats and the 1950s are clear: firstly, a great deal of public attention had been paid to them during the period; secondly, although Beat writers pointed out the importance of individualism, the Beats were regarded by the media as an organized social group; and lastly, the focus on individualism of many of the authors was considered a "very real threat" to the accepted postwar social norms best exemplified by middle-class suburbia. The Beats have often been thought of not only as writers of literature, but more importantly as stand-ins for a whole segment of the population and as writers representing a certain set of values and attitudes which were often the very opposite of the generally accepted social norms. Ultimately, the Beats were frequently understood – and also *made* by the media to be understood – *only* as a social phenomenon, and this portrayal in turn shaped their reception, criticism, and their overall image. These reactions also show one more thing: using de Saussure's terminology, the social aspect of the Beats is a substantial part of the linguistic sign "the Beat Generation."

The Beats certainly piqued the interest of the general public and the common misuse of the term "Beat" as the equivalent of "hip" or "hipster" further blurred the lines between the Beat Generation as writers and the jazz-inspired hipsters, as opposed to the "squares." For instance, Paul O'Neil in his sensationalist treatment

reports that “[b]y their very nature and appearance, Beats make cops nervous and property owners indignant” (245). This, however, did not stop tourists from going to the “hip” neighborhoods of Greenwich Village just to stare at the locals (qtd. in Belletto 5). Crowds also gathered in North Beach in order to see the Beat phenomenon, which further raised the interest of the press; as Hartlaub notes, the resulting newspaper articles did not necessarily disparage its subject matter, but nevertheless still treated it in a sensational manner.

Importantly, this stereotypical representation was enabled through the invention of the derisive term “beatnik.” The term is a portmanteau of the words “Beat” and “Sputnik,” the first artificial satellite launched by the Soviets in 1957, and was first used by the columnist Herb Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Parkinson 276). As a result, the term not only indicates a certain otherness of the Beats, but also suggests that the Beats are communists and therefore represent un-American values. In addition, the term also indicates that the public frequently made no difference between Beat authors and young people who displayed certain Beat behavior in clothing, musical taste, or the use of marijuana.

For instance, in late February 1960 a 15-year-old Margaret writes to “Dorothy Dix,” a column answering readers’ inquiries sent by mail to *The Evening Standard*, and asks about the Beat Generation. Nevertheless, the anonymous columnist answers by characterizing the common beatnik stereotype, explaining that they “are mixed-up baffled kids who gripe against modern life as expressed by what they term our materialistic philosophy. They withdraw from life, create their own environment among other Bohemian Beatniks with defeatist ideas and in consequence do little to remedy the faults they complain about” (“Dorothy Dix”). The columnist continues by explaining that hipsters are beatniks with slight artistic talent, thus further proving the ever-present confusion over the terminology.¹⁴ Another article from the same newspaper, this time written by a faux-beatnik, titled “Beatnik in English”, is preceded by the following Editor’s note: “For anyone who doesn’t yet know this, a beatnik is a person who has forsaken all civilization as we know it. He expresses his distaste for humanity by writing unprintable poetry, by dressing like something from outer space, and by using a version of the English language that only a fellow ‘sufferer’ could use” (Beatnik). The image of a beatnik

14 This short article eventually led to a rather humorous mix-up. The column “Dorothy Dix: Thunder on Beatnik Front” from a later issue contains several letters from readers outraged by the simplification of the beatnik definition. Nevertheless, one of the readers was rather confused by the columnist’s use of “Bohemian” and wrote the following: “Listen lady! You recently referred to the beat generation as ‘Bohemian beatniks with defeatist ideas.’ Well, I’ve had just about all I can take! My mother is all-Bohemian and I’m half Bohemian. Why should a fine, upstanding people like Bohemians be classed with hipsters, beatniks, rebels and Greenwich Village drones? Why knock a nationality like the Bohemian? It’s crummy columnists like you who really stir my Bohemian blood. You’ve just lost an ardent fan.” While the columnist addresses the reader’s confusion, this also show the public was generally rather uninformed in this area.

as a barbaric individual spouting nonsensical poetry had then been codified by early 1960, and as a term invoking anti-social and dangerous attitudes had a lasting impression: concluding his 1965 manifesto on the dangers of The Beatles, Noebel rallies the readers to “make sure four mop-headed anti-Christ beatniks don’t destroy our children’s emotional and mental ability and ultimately destroy our nation as Plato warned in his *Republic*” (15).

At the end of the 1950s, when the term was still very recent, various industries tried to cash in the public’s curiosity about the Beats. For instance, the front cover of the July 1959 issue of *Playboy* advertises the “Beat Playmate” Yvette Vickers, and the centerfold includes various Beat paraphernalia such as various jazz LPs (“Playboy’s Beat Playmate”).¹⁵ The illicitness of the Beats made the term quite popular in the erotica and pornography market; one of the titles in the Evening Reader series by Greenleaf Classics, a publisher of pornographic fiction, is *Beatnik Wanton*, with the tag line being “She lusted in sin orgies and reefer brawls!”¹⁶ Nevertheless, a more visible presence of the Beats – or rather beatniks – is found in the film industry. Hollywood and other movie manufacturers, described by Sterritt as “self-designated safekeepers of consensus, classicism, and common sense” (140), certainly saw the Beats as an opportunity to produce movies in order to satisfy the public’s curiosity and at the same time create a certain image that would be in line with the popular opinion of the Beats. The film industry’s response is, as Sterritt continues, a valuable example of the motion-picture establishment’s mobilization and subsequent containment of the new “ideological foe” through the way it dealt with elements associated with the Beats such as jazz, drugs, coffee houses, avant-garde art and poetry, or the relaxation of sexual and racial taboos. The movies resulting from the sudden boom of interest in Beats generally tried to “defuse potential interest in Beat lifestyles by mocking, parodying, or misrepresenting them,” taking a stand against possible “alternatives to official thought, escape routes from socioeconomic conformity, and pathways toward the precarious pleasures of creative spontaneity rather than the engulfing security of repetition and routine” (141).

There are numerous movies that contain Beat elements, such as the 1957 musical *Funny Face* featuring Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn or Roger Corman’s 1959 *A Bucket of Blood*. Nevertheless, there are two MGM-produced movies that had an explicit Beat focus: the 1959 movie *The Beat Generation* and *The Subterraneans*, an adaptation of Kerouac’s novel of the same name released a year later. However, these were “beatnik” rather than “Beat” movies: exploitative pieces that

15 It should also be noted that this issue features several texts from Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso; in addition, the “Beat playmate” barely resembles the popular stereotype of a beatnik woman. Still, the issue advertised the content with “Beat Poems by Top Beatniks,” thus again showing the frequent use of the derogatory term.

16 Other Evening Reader titles are *Flesh Den*, *Alumnus of Sin*, or *Operation: Lust*.

tried to cash in on the popularity of the Beat Generation movement. This sensationalist approach to the Beats is already evoked by the tag lines of the two movies. The tagline for *The Beat Generation* is “Behind the weird ‘way-out’ world of the Beatniks!” and the one for *The Subterraneans* says “Love among the new Bohemians.” Much can be learned about the contemporary portrayal of the Beats by analyzing these beatnik films in further detail. For example, *The Beat Generation* was produced by Albert Zugsmith, and just briefly looking at his oeuvre gives an accurate impression of his chosen approach to the material. Zugsmith’s exploitation films are very blatant in their shock tactics. His 1960 film *Sex Kittens Go to College* has the tagline “You never saw a student body like this!” and its uncensored version featuring striptease dances was shown in adult movie theaters. Zugsmith’s other films also include the 1962 adaptation of Thomas De Quincey’s novel *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, starring Vincent Price as Quincey, or *Fanny Hill* (1964), an adaptation of the controversial 1748 John Cleland novel of the same name. While Zugsmith had produced a few serious motion pictures earlier in his career, for example the 1958 Orson Wells’s film *Touch of Evil*, most of his work is firmly exploitative in nature and usually features the sex symbol Mamie Van Doren; *The Beat Generation* is no exception in this regard.

The plot of *The Beat Generation* starts with Louise Armstrong performing a song with clearly anti-Beat lyrics: “You don’t have much ambition / and are aimless and depressed / you think you’re really with it / but you’re missing all the best.” This serves as a reminder that the filmmakers aimed at reassuring and entertaining their audience rather than providing a thorough investigation of the phenomenon (Sterritt 146). Eventually, it turns out that the Beat Generation is not the prime focus of the movie, but it is rather an average crime thriller about a serial rapist nicknamed “The Aspiring Kid.” Nevertheless, the main villain is a beatnik, therefore emphasizing and further reinforcing popular feelings of weirdness and dangerousness toward the Beats (147). In other words, the film helped spread the view of the Beats as dangerous criminals condoning violence.

Yet Zugsmith’s film was hardly the only one which tried to capitalize on the public’s interest in the Beat Generation. Other Beat-inspired films include *Beat Girl* (1960), also known as *Wild for Kicks*, with its sensationalist tagline being “My mother was a stripper... I want to be a stripper too!”, or *The Beatniks* (1960), which professed to divulge to the audience “the ultimate secrets of the beat generation!” These films have one thing in common: while they profess to portray the Beat Generation, they are in fact shallow crime thrillers exploiting the topic of the Beats for financial gain. Importantly, these films frequently draw inspiration from the juvenile delinquency films of the decade such as *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), albeit adapted to a Beat-inspired – or rather beatnik – setting. As a result, the promotional poster for *The Beatniks* shows a lurid image of a young man with a vicious smirk holding a gun to the temple of a disheveled young woman.

While extreme and explicit in its imagery, this is merely a logical continuation of the sensationalist trend set in cinema by *Blackboard Jungle* or Marlon Brando's *The Wild One* (1953). After all, the 1955 film was promoted as portraying "modern savagery" and the high-schoolers as "teenage savages" ("Blackboard Jungle"). However, violence is not the only link between the juvenile delinquency films of the decade and the "beatploitation" films. For instance, when the protagonist of *Blackboard Jungle* introduces himself to the classroom as Dadier, the students quickly nickname him "Daddy-O", the hipster slang for "dude" or "man"; unsurprisingly, *Daddy-O* is also the title of a 1959 film with the tagline "Meet the 'Beat'! Daring to Live ... Daring to Love."¹⁷ Finally beatniks are not only featured as the protagonists in such exploitation films; frequently, a beatnik setting is used as the background for actual crime. *The Rebel Set* (1959), a film about an armored car robbery, features a poetry reading in a beatnik café. Accompanied by a jazz band, the local poet exclaims: "This poem is a piece of baggage, a hatbox, it has no content, the brain is missing!"

As a result, rather than the Beats, these films featured their parodic versions. Since they frequently drew from the established genre of juvenile delinquency films or used beatnik elements such as poetry readings in cafes as the setting for their crime plots, these films helped associate the Beats with juvenile delinquency and violence, which is true even when a beatnik was not the actual perpetrator of the crime. While none of these films truly aspire to be balanced in their representation of the Beat Generation, shortly after *On the Road* was published there was a large likelihood of the novel being adapted with Kerouac's input. As Kerouac writes in an October, 1957 letter to Neal Cassady, Paramount and Warner Bros. apparently had plans to shoot the movie with the possibility of Marlon Brando starring, and fought over the script (*Letters* 83). Earlier in the letter, Kerouac mentions that Warner Bros. opted to purchase the rights to the novel for \$110,000, but Kerouac's agent refused the offer because he believed better ones would soon be available (82). In a July 1958 letter to a friend Kerouac mentions that the Hollywood producer Jerry Wald was "just about to buy it for 20th Century when we sold it" to Tri-Way Productions (156). While the offer from Tri-Way was substantially smaller than those from major studios, Kerouac opted for the smaller studio either because of a larger share of the profits or more direct input on the film; however, the film never materialized, as Tri-Way experienced financial difficulties and was unable to finish the film (Geis 301). Ultimately, Kerouac did not appear to regret that a movie adaptation starring Marlon Brando was not made (Geis 305). As Kerouac later put it, he felt that *On the Road* was already too close in the public eye to the violence of *The Wild One's* "hoodlum jacket thing" (*Letters* 330). In the end, the only exception to the sensationalist portrayal of the Beats in the tradition

17 As usual, the prime focus of the film was crime, this time murder and drug smuggling.

of juvenile delinquency movies is the short film *Pull My Daisy* (1959), which was an adaptation of Kerouac's play *The Beat Generation* and actually starred some of the Beats such as Ginsberg or Corso.

While it frequently portrayed the Beats as dangerous individuals, the beatnik stereotype also commonly ridiculed the phenomenon, thus creating unthreatening caricatures. This is best symbolized by the character Maynard G. Krebs, the stereotypical, though lovable beatnik sidekick to Dobie in the popular sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959–1963). Krebs, with his goatee, unkempt clothes, and nonsensical poetry, embodied the popular stereotype of the beatnik at that time which, as some argue, represented the Beats in a similar light to that in which Stepin Fetchit portrayed African Americans (Womack 17). Various newspaper ads promoting beatnik paraphernalia further attest to the popularity of the beatnik stereotype. One was able to rent “genuine” beatniks for private parties, purchase beatnik berets, or order a whole beatnik costume, goatee included.¹⁸ Even if the product or service advertised was not directly Beat-related, the use of Beat imagery as a way to promote a certain message was not uncommon. For instance, the Hat Corporation of America ran an advertisement in *Life* magazine in 1961, which featured a beatnik “in a characteristically insouciant slouch” (Frank 209). The ad's line – “There are some men a hat won't help” – explains that wearing a hat makes one better suited for climbing the corporate ladder; as the ad further explains, hats “can make the rough, competitive road between you and the top a little easier to travel” (qtd. in Frank 209). As Frank quickly adds, beatniks were at that time “figures of consumer horror,” and therefore unsuitable for providing any models of behavior to follow.

Portraying the Beats as juvenile delinquents or docile and nonsensical beatniks was one way of curtailing the social critique the Beats might inspire. Yet some of the more far-reaching representations were significantly more nuanced. For instance, Kerouac's publicity photo which appeared on the *On the Road* cover was significantly altered by the majority of newspapers. The original photograph features Kerouac wearing a crucifix; importantly, the cross was edited out by most publications (Nash 58). As Kerouac recalls, *The New York Times* was the only publication which included the crucifix in the photo (“Origins” 69).¹⁹ This tactic was not limited to newspapers or popular magazines, nor was it the only method of

18 A scene in which a street vendor is selling genuine beatnik apparel as a popular party costume appears in the 1980 film *Heart Beat* starring Nick Nolte and Sissy Spacek as Neal Cassady and Carolyn Cassady, respectively.

19 A comparison of the photo used in *The New York Times* and the one without the crucifix shows that original photo was cropped so that the crucifix was not visible. Interestingly, while they kept the crucifix, *The New York Times* decided to edit Kerouac's slightly disheveled hair. View the following links for comparison: <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/29873672@N02/3681361217/>>.

<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/29873672@N02/3681370693/>>.

compounding the existing sensationalist treatment. Not only does the 1959 Signet Book edition of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* use the cropped version of the photo on its back cover, but the publisher's *peritext* on the cover also shows the general proclivity of paperback editions of Kerouac's novels to stereotype the Beats as juvenile delinquents at worst or as scandalous Bohemians roaming aimlessly at best. While the novel's back cover advertises the novel as emerging "[f]rom the pagan depths of Frisco's Bohemian bars," its front cover describes it as "[t]he sensational bestseller about two reckless wanderers out to scale the heights of life ... and love." The publisher's sensationalist language only accentuates the extent to which public discourse was rife with stereotypical portrayals of the Beats and usually focused on superficialities or clear misrepresentations rather than trying to pay attention to their literary work or their ideas. Ultimately, the word "Beat" was taken over and reinterpreted by critics and media in such a way that Kerouac stopped using the term in the mid-1960s.

The extent to which the reputation of the Beat Generation was tarnished is further portrayed by the meeting that took place in a New York apartment on 26 January 1961. On that day a small group of writers, including James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Ted Joans, met to discuss the end of the Beat Generation (Wilentz). As Wilentz further explains, "most of the writers had gathered to bury what was left of a movement that they believed had been thoroughly co-opted by the commercial mainstream. What had begun as an iconoclastic literary style, whether one approved of it or not, had become, the detractors said, just another fad, a subject fit for television comedies." Nevertheless, while the label "Beat" had become corrupted, the impact the Beats had in the 1960s cannot be ignored. Their influence on music, for instance, is well documented. Ginsberg's relationship with Dylan has been already mentioned. Similarly, Burroughs was featured on the cover of The Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and, after two controversies in the United Kingdom, was considered by artists such as Paul McCartney or Mick Jagger as a sort of underground icon (Baker 168).²⁰ Outside of influence on specific artists, the presence of the Beats can be felt, for example, in advertisement strategies of the late 1960s. While the beatnik was still a common target of disapproval at the beginning of the 1960s, in 1967 rebellious attitudes had become so commonplace that "the rebel had become a paragon of consumer virtue" (Frank 209). Gradually, conformity and convention had become undesirable in the West; conversely, defiance toward rules and traditions was not only tolerable, but also the ideal which should be reached, and therefore also heralded in advertisements (209–11). While the label had been discarded, the ethos of the Beats managed to thrive in the 1960s in less direct ways. Protesting

20 The two controversies were Burroughs's attendance at the International Literary Festival at the Edinburgh Festival in 1962 and the discussion following a negative review of *Naked Lunch* excerpts in the Times Literary Supplement. For more information, see Baker 140–41.

the norms and established forms of behavior became so commonplace that it had become co-opted into the mainstream. This would not be the case if it were not for the Beats; without them, the counterculture of the sixties, which profoundly changed American society, would not have existed.

4.2 The Beat Generation as Enabling Social Commentary

Since the terms Beats, beatniks, and juvenile delinquents were in many media outlets used interchangeably, it makes sense that such portrayals led to discussions on the Beats' effects on society even outside reviews of a particular Beat text. For instance, Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg published their anthology *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* in 1958, which discussed the two literary movements and their refusal of social norms. They read the Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men as “the new barbarians” who are cut off from values spreading the false image of a satisfying lifestyle, and as a result refuse to be enslaved to the illusions they know to be untrue (9–10). Feldman and Gartenberg then continue by defining both the Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men as “social phenomena which have found increasing literary expression” (10). This definition has far-reaching implications. The Beats, in other words, are a social phenomenon first, and their work as artists is secondary. Feldman and Gartenberg also use the lives of the Beats rather than their writing to discuss wider social issues, and this approach is reflected in the texts they chose to anthologize; as Steven Belletto notes, Feldman and Gartenberg chose “the more lurid or outré aspects of bohemian living (Burroughs on heroin use, Kerouac on Times Square, [Carl] Solomon on life in a psychiatric asylum, and so on)” (“Introduction” 8). While such a reading is understandable, Belletto adds, it also exemplifies the critical approach to the Beats common in the period, which virtually reduced the Beats to an excuse to discuss society as a whole.

Ultimately, the terms “beat” and “the Beat Generation” came to symbolize something more than what a term describing a close circle of friends and a loose group of artists could ever symbolize – a social phenomenon. The understanding that a substantial number of responses to the Beats was made in terms of social commentary rather than the quality of their writing then explains reviews such as Victor R. Yanitelli's critique of Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*. Written in 1965, the review claims the Beat Generation “passé” and that it is the reviewed novel which proves it (90). The text further continues as a social commentary rather than a review of literature:

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

For Yanitelli, the Beats were important only for their role in relation to society as a whole, not for their work. Such reading ultimately leads Yanitelli to argue that the novel is "a testament to the dying, if not the already dead," the dead being the Beats as a social movement of note (91). A similar attitude is echoed in Robert Mazzocco's evaluation of the same novel for *The New York Review*. Dubbed by the reviewer as "the first, and certainly the best, of our visionary L'il Abners," Kerouac was the first "to set down the sound of a particular generation, and the first to 'put down' the institutional values of the fifties, the fringe benefits and the swimming pool in the backyard" (8). These sentiments were the main point, if not the only point, of many reviews in magazines and newspapers. Adding to the discussion, the academic John Ciardi complains of "juvenile delinquency" in the novels that leads to the blood and violence of street gangs, while Paul O'Neil, reporting on the Beat Generation for *Life* magazine, complains of the passivity and "childish rage" of the Beats ("Epitaph" 257; 246). According to Ciardi, the Beats were directly responsible for the juvenile delinquency of the period, and he sees the movement as a whole promoting dangerous anti-social behavior.

The sociological approach was not limited to the detractors of the Beats; many of their supporters relied on bringing up morality or social issues in their defense of the Beats. For example, Bruce Cook, one of the earliest Beat supporters, aligns the Beats with a positive understanding of the act of protesting, pointing out that the fundamental meaning of the word "protest" is to "witness for" something or to make an affirmation of an idea or a cause (22). For Cook, the Beats test one's strength against the community and provide the image of America that could exist in the future; while critical, these acts are in Cook's reading also essentially American (23). Yet here it should be mentioned that the Beats were to a degree forced to play such a role. After all, one of the breakthroughs made by the Beats into the public consciousness was the obscenity trial of *Howl*, which had to defend the right of Ginsberg's poetry to even exist. When Lawrence Ferlinghetti discusses the initial reception of Ginsberg's *Howl*, he mentions that the "critical support for *Howl* (or the protest against censorship on principle) was enormous" ("Horn on *Howl*" 127, emphasis mine). Ferlinghetti's mention of the protest against censorship hints at the different readings of the Beats. Due to the *Howl* and *Naked Lunch* trials, the Beats were often viewed as challengers of censorship practices. Naturally, the Beats were opposed to censorship simply because it affected their work

as artists; in addition, they did protest many of the social norms of their time, thus validating an analysis of their social importance. Yet by stressing their part in refusing the principles of censorship they could be supported by anyone also protesting censorship who might otherwise find their works unappealing. Overall, the censorship trials signify two things: not only were they supported – and therefore used – by others purely on the grounds of a fight against censorship, but the very existence of the Beat Generation has been politicized by the censorship trials of their work. This in turn further emphasizes the social aspect of the Beats, and thus further contributes to readings favoring a discussion of the Beat Generation as a social phenomenon.

The social importance of Beat literature, therefore, was a topic present from the very outset of the emergence of the Beats into public discourse. After all, it was also the focus of Judge Clayton Horn's verdict on *Howl*. The verdict states the following:

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

As the verdict shows, the social commentary made through the works of the Beats was an important part of the initial responses to the Beat Generation. Judge Horn's verdict thus exemplifies the understanding of the Beats as a social phenomenon, which in turn initiated the custom of expressing one's beliefs about the social attitudes the Beats represented rather than commenting on the writing itself. The reduction of the Beats to a social phenomenon is brought up in John P. Sisk's “Beatniks and Tradition.” Although Sisk is clearly dismissive of the Beats – he weighs the idea that “Beat literature may turn out to be an ephemeral oddity that fifty years from now exists only for desperate Ph.D. candidates” (194) – he emphasizes that criticizing the Beats for representing certain values is not a valid approach to their writing. Instead, he explores the Beat Generation as a social phenomenon in line with the subversive tradition in American literature. This causes the middle class to view the Beats as destructive because they are frequently the targets of the Beats' revolt. As he puts it, “the important and easily-overlooked fact is that it is in the American grain, and that however we react to it we are reacting to part of ourselves” (194). The subversive tradition, Sisk argues, started with Emerson and Thoreau and moves through such figures as Whitman

or Twain to twentieth century authors like Hemingway or Vidal, and the Beats are simply a new addition to this tradition (195).

Rather than simply responding to the Beats, Sisk instead focuses on addressing the dynamics of responses. He further argues that the writer, a critic of society by nature, is locked in dialectic with the society he writes about (195–196). Importantly, although writers within the subversive tradition criticize society, they are still its members; often the corruption that is present in society is located within the writers as well, thus further heightening their critique of the society and its norms (197). Ultimately, the frequently vicious responses to the Beats or those sharing their views lead to a harsh critique of middle-class values on the one hand and perhaps even harsher critique of the criticizing element on the other. There simply is no middle ground, which further contributes to escalating the situation beyond the point of no return:

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

For Sisk, the Beats are caused by the conformism and consumerism of the era. By focusing on a reading that classifies Beats as belonging to a certain tradition of American writing and therefore being an inherent product of American culture, Sisk uses the Beats to discuss what they are able to say about the society in an increasingly complex world (200). Christine Lindey further elaborates on the relationship between the individualist artist and the public in the 1950s: “The very desire to seek extremes, to reveal taboos, to allow free range to imagination, implies the existence of repression. . . . Artists expressed raw emotions and direct responses to experience at a time when the petit-bourgeois mentality of democratic capitalism stressed vigilant, prudent and measured behavior” (106–107). Under such circumstances, the backlash the Beats faced and the wildly inaccurate portrayal of them was inevitable.

Paul O’Neil has a stance toward the Beats similar to Sisk’s. Writing for *Life* magazine, he also does not have a particularly positive view of the Beats. His phrasing and choice of words, such as the rather mocking description of Ginsberg a “the lion of the poetry-reading circuit” or his gleeful way of divulging shocking biographical information about the Beats, are more than revealing. In addition, he seems to be quite inconsistent in his references to the Beats: at times he uses the term to refer to the actual artists, at other times it is a whole segment of America’s population.

Nevertheless, calling the Beats “the most curious men of influence the twentieth century has yet produced,” O’Neil defends them by deriding their critics for using biographical data in order to judge their literature (235, 242). As he puts it himself, “it is too easy to forget that Poe was a drunk, Coleridge an opium eater and Vincent van Gogh a madman, and that a great deal of the world’s art has a disconcerting way of getting produced by very odd types” (242). While he argues that only few of the Beats have real talent, their primary importance lies in their decision to raise voices against “virtually every aspect of current American society” (232). The Beats are “the voice of nonconformity” and, through their embodiment of “nonpolitical radicalism,” they are “the only rebellion in town” in the United States of the 1950s (242–43). He claims that while there are others who question the values of fifties America, only they “have actually been moved to reject contemporary society in voicing their quarrel” with the society’s materialism or conformity (246). Despite numerous lurid claims, such as that about 80% of the Beats suffer from crippling psychosis, O’Neil ultimately sees the Beats as a necessary product of society: they should be discussed and understood in relation to the zeitgeist of the fifties rather than immediately dismissed as naive or threatening.²¹

While Sisk’s or O’Neil’s articles try to defend the Beats, they actually further emphasize their social aspect by doing so. For many commentators, the Beats were a conduit for discussing the dynamics of social protest against the values of American society. Published in 1959, Lawrence Lipton’s *Holy Barbarians* was a book-length study of the Beats, and its hardcover jacket promoted it as “the complete story of the ‘Beats’ – that hip, cool frantic generation of new Bohemians who are turning the American scale of values inside out.” The work gives off a rather sensationalist impression at first, which is further increased by the cover of its 1962 paperback release. The front cover says, “The first complete inside story of the Beat Generation. Who they are / What they believe / How they live,” thus being perfectly in line with other sensationalist treatments of the Beats. The back only adds to such an impression by claiming that the book answers such questions as “[w]hat effect have the ‘Beats’ had on the American Way of Life?” or “[w]hat are their beliefs regarding sex, jazz, the use of drugs?” While the majority of the book recalls Lipton’s various encounters with various Beat or beatnik characters, several essays at the back of the book do contain a few insightful analyses. For instance, Lipton argues that the Beats herald not a new literary school but “a change in the literary use of language itself” and therefore were anticipated by Walt Whitman and Henry Miller (1962, 230). After making several other observations, for example noting the Beats’ emphasis on sound rather than mere text,

21 Nevertheless, the article does not shy away from portraying the Beats as beatniks. The photo which accompanies the article is clearly posed and contains many of the elements present in the sensationalized depiction of the Beats; these include using hipster terms in the description of the photo, or refer to stereotypical beatnik fashion such as sandals and leotards.

Lipton counters the approach of his peers to the Beats as a social phenomenon by discussing the bias of academia against the movement. It not only fails to see the antecedents of the Beats such as Rimbaud, Verlaine, or Yeats, but it even perpetuates the stereotype of Beats not valuing learning when the opposite is true (231, 234). Mentioning Ferlinghetti's poem "Constantly Risking Absurdity (#15)," Lipton then offers a reason why academic poets refuse to accept the Beats:

The poet on the college payroll can risk religious heresy (except in denominational colleges); he can risk subversion (except in state-supported universities); he can even risk outspoken sexuality (if he doesn't publish it too conspicuously); but he can never risk absurdity. In decent society, even among the best-educated people, it is the cardinal sin. It is something that only the disaffiliated poet of the slum can permit himself. Yet it is traditionally one of the high moments of the poetic rite. (241)

According to Lipton, the refusal of the academic poets is due to their inability to step down from their pedestals of dignity and self-respect. It is therefore not only their inability to accept other poetic forms as valid, but also their self-image as serious academic poets that lead to their dismissal of the Beats. In addition, Lipton's text makes one important distinction: it clearly differentiates the Beats, that is the artists of the Beat Generation such as Ginsberg or Corso, from beatniks and hipsters, which is a distinction that a substantial number of contemporary texts did not understand or did not bother to make.

4.3 The Depravity of William S. Burroughs

The public's stance toward William S. Burroughs was slightly different than toward the other Beats. Unlike Kerouac or Ginsberg, he did not legally publish a book-length text in the United States until the beginning of the 1960s: his first novel, *Junky*, was published under a pseudonym while *Naked Lunch*, first published by the Parisian Olympia Press in 1959, was not available in the United States and the United Kingdom.²² Furthermore, several sections from *Naked Lunch* printed in *Big Table* magazine in 1959 were deemed obscene by the U.S Post Office Department and hundreds of copies of the magazine were seized. This meant two things: first, that Burroughs's writing was essentially out of reach for American readers; second, the public was still able to read *about* Burroughs despite not being able to

²² *Junky* was originally published as *Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict* under the pseudonym William Lee. It was published for Ace Books' double-book paperback edition, the other novel being *Narcotic Agent* by Maurice Helbrant. It was marketed as a pulp fiction crime thriller and as such had gained virtually zero attention outside its target audience.

read any of his work. After all, Ginsberg dedicated *Howl* to Burroughs, while the character Old Bull Lee from *On the Road* is Kerouac's fictionalized version of Burroughs. As a result, information about Burroughs was available; however, the way Burroughs was written about significantly shaped the initial reception of his work.

The fact that *Naked Lunch* was originally unavailable in the USA and the UK significantly increased the appeal of the book. As Burroughs's biographer Barry Miles recalls, the original Olympia edition had "uncompromisingly modern, yet somehow sinister cover" in an age of bland book jacket designs; the book's "coolness" was further enhanced by the notice inside the back flap: "Not to be sold in the USA or UK" (*Naked Lunch* 114–15). Ownership of *Naked Lunch* thus became a status symbol: "[I]t represented an attitude, a state of mind, the detachment of the cool hipster from the mundane crowd. It was a shorthand way of saying you were cool" (116). The association of Burroughs with obscenity and forbidden fruit was further amplified by the novel's original publishing house, as Olympia Press released either pornographic works or novels which would not be touched by other publishers: famously, Olympia was the first to release Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. As a result, it was virtually impossible not to associate *Naked Lunch* with the subversive and the forbidden before even reading it.

Another event that further shaped the initial reception was the decision to print the first ten chapters from *Naked Lunch* in *Big Table* magazine. After the magazine was seized due to obscenity charges, several writers and intellectuals leapt to Burroughs's defense.²³ One of them was the English professor and poet John Ciardi, who publicly denounced Burroughs's critics in the influential *Saturday Review* weekly. Ciardi describes Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* as the "writing of an order that may be clearly defended not only as a masterpiece of its own genre, but as a monumentally moral descent into the hell of narcotic addiction" ("Book Burners" 30). "[T]he writing does, to be sure, contain a number of four-letter words," he continues, "but the simple fact is that such obscenities – if obscenities they are – are inseparable from the total fabric and effect of the *moral message*" (emphasis mine). Ciardi's point regarding the moral message is quite important: not only does he claim that the moral aspect of the novel redeems its obscenities, but such a reading also completely ignores the novel's satire which partially was targeted precisely on morality and common decency. More importantly, the defense had some unforeseen consequences. As Meagan Wilson points out, Ciardi's

23 This was not the first controversy surrounding Burroughs: originally, excerpts from *Naked Lunch* along with a short piece by Kerouac and a few others were supposed to be printed in *Chicago Review*, a literary magazine edited by University of Chicago graduate students. Nevertheless, a short *Naked Lunch* excerpt from its fall 1958 issue was judged obscene by a local newspaper. As a result, the magazine was barred by the university from publishing another potentially controversial issue, thus forcing all but one editor to quit the magazine and start *Big Table* with the purpose of publishing the first ten chapters from the novel.

certainly well-meant defense of *Naked Lunch* as a moral book greatly shaped the reception of the novel (101). She further elaborates with the following:

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

In other words, the first major public defense of the novel not only promoted it as containing controversial content, but also heralded the novel as a major moral achievement, with its moral focus ultimately redeeming the controversial content. For Ciardi, the only way to redeem the content of the novel is to understand it in an autobiographical – and therefore moral – reading. Such a reading in turn further highlighted the image of Burroughs as a writer of depraved images caused by his drug-induced hallucinations long before readers even had a chance to legally read the book in English-speaking countries.

The emphasis on obscenity and graphic content elicited strong reactions from readers, thus again emphasizing Burroughs as a "dirty" writer. Grove Press, the American publisher of the novel, not only expected such a reaction, but also encouraged it. Grove not only had a reputation for publishing literary avant-garde material, especially focusing on European titles, but also was explicitly political in its publishing policies (Wilson 107). Barney Rosset, the owner of the publishing house, was a staunch opponent of literary censorship, having already published several works that were challenged in the courts such as D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*.²⁴ Upon its release in 1963, several states took legal action against *Naked Lunch*, resulting in Boston courts declaring the book obscene in 1965, its presiding judge calling *Naked Lunch* "obscene, indecent, and impure ... [and] taken as a whole [it] is predominantly prurient, hard-core pornography, and utterly without redeeming social importance" (qtd. in Wilson 111). Upon appeal the Massachusetts Supreme Court declared the novel not obscene one year later; however, reviews for the book were available before the court decision and they either applauded the novel or condemned it, thus further showing the polarizing nature of the book in the popular press (112). Importantly, Grove Press further fanned the controversy surrounding the novel in its promotion, as the advertisements and catalogue descriptions often stressed the work's illicit perception. One such advertisement states in large letters, "*Naked*

²⁴ Grove Press did not avoid publishing controversial non-fiction as well, which it proved in 1965 by publishing *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Lunch ruled ‘not obscene’ in Boston” and then provides a short excerpt from the court ruling on the “modern American classic” (qtd. in Wilson 118); while proving the novel is not obscene, referring to the obscenity trial further accentuated the novel’s controversial nature. Another advertisement campaign for the novel was conducted in the pages of *The New York Times* and lasted from 1966 to 1967. One of the ads invites the readers to “share in the new freedoms that book and magazine publishers are winning in the courts” and “join with a group of like-minded readers in a unique club which keeps you in touch with the best writing of our era” (qtd. in Wilson 117). Importantly, the ad’s headline reads “For Adults Only,” while the text in the bottom right corner – right above the subscription form – says “Dear Sir: I swear I’m over 21” (qtd. in Wilson 117, 120).

The recurring accentuation of the novel’s obscene language and immorality resulted in many reviews emphasizing the novel’s reputation as an immoral and subversive text. One such review was Charles Poore’s critique in the *The New York Times*. As Wilson points out, one of the subheadings of the review is “Its Content Already Known,” suggesting that writing the review is a mere formality (112). In the review, Poore explains that in the novel “the insufferable prig and the insufferable sinner will find a forlorn meeting ground” (31). Although he does comment on the writing style for a moment, a critical analysis of the novel, according to Poore, should focus on two of its elements: “One is the tragic dilemma of the narcotics addict and the manifest failure of society to deal with it effectively... The other is the glaringly gaudy way Mr. Burroughs has chosen to represent his case – using shocking words by the shovelful and concentrating on perverted degeneracy to a flagrant degree.” The review simply ends with, “I advise avoiding the book.” A similar and even harsher review was published in *Time* magazine. Renaming the Beats as “the Young American Disaffiliates,” most of the review is again concerned with Burroughs as a person rather than the novel itself:

The Burroughs gambit was, until recently, almost unanswerable, because it was almost impossible to track this author down, physically or in print. He was the greyest of grey eminences, a wraith who flickered into occasional visibility in Mexico, Paris or Tangier... [H]e was the legendary “Bull Lee” of *On the Road*; he spent 15 years on junk; he wrote an unprintable book called *Naked Lunch*, which no one had read but which everyone said hit the veins like a jolt of heroin. (“King of the YADS” 98)

The reviewer then tries to unveil the “mystery” of Burroughs by providing additional information about the writer: “[Burroughs] is not only an ex-junkie, but an ex-con and, by accident, a killer. In Mexico, having acquired a wife, he shot her between the eyes playing William Tell with a revolver”; in contrast, information about the novel, apart from a brief summary of the narrative, is sparse. The

reviewer ends with, “the value of [Burroughs’s] book is mostly confessional, not literary.” British reviewers reacted in a similar fashion, an example being the infamous “Ugh” review in the *Times Literary Supplement* which resulted in a long polemic between numerous correspondents defending or lambasting the novel. The reviewer complains that the “pornographic” scenes of the text are “too uncritically presented, and because the author gives no flicker of disapproval the reader easily takes the ‘moral message’ the other way” (qtd. in Johnson, “Good Ol’ Boy” 50–51).

The impact of the discourse emphasizing the explicit language of the novel was substantial. Upon the novel’s release, reviewers of *Naked Lunch* had problems with evaluating the text separately from its history and marketing, both of which identify and further promote the novel as controversially obscene and prohibited (Wilson 115). In addition, using an autobiographical lens was frequently touted as the only way to actually approach the novel, which in turn further emphasized the novel’s controversial character. Ultimately, depending on where one stood regarding explicit language and defying literary taboos, Burroughs was either a drug addict who created a drug-fueled text riddled with obscenities and profanities, or a novelist who braved the conventions of literature, thus resisting the conformism of the period. In other words, the way Burroughs and his work were initially interpreted was significantly affected by events outside Burroughs’s control.

4.4 The Criticism of Academia

The gatekeepers of poetry were usually recruited either from the ranks of academia or from influential literary magazines and were prone to dismiss any voices calling for change in contemporary approaches to poetry. As Bruce Cook explains, two groups held the monopoly on literary criticism: university scholars following New Criticism, and the group of New York intellectuals known as “the Family” or the “*Partisan Review* crowd” (10). These two groups, Cook continues, “dominated the arena without themselves ever really falling into serious contentions... A sort of polite trust prevailed between the two that was based on overlapping interests and mutual advantage. Outsiders—and there were many of them—spoke wryly of this coalition as the ‘*Kenyon Review–Partisan Review* axis’” (10–11). The New York Intellectuals included critics Harold Rosenberg, Lionel Trilling, Nathan Glazer, and Alfred Kazin, and writers such as Paul Goodman, the author of *Growing Up Absurd*. These intellectuals adopted the values of the Old Left, yet were wary of any significant social changes, which was the result of experiencing the disappointment of the Stalinist purges after their initial support for Communism. The emergence of the New Left, with their positive stance toward Communism, was then a threat to the Old Left vanguards (Menard). While it was not until the mid-1960s that the New Left, centered around identity issues such as rights for African

Americans or feminism, formed, they were in their ideas the precursors to the movement of the 1960s. As such, these intellectuals and the Beats, as well as other groups such as the San Francisco Renaissance poets or the Black Mountain Review group, could not possibly get along.

The Beats were familiar with these New York intellectuals; after all, both Kerouac and Ginsberg were students at Columbia University. Ginsberg was particularly close to Trilling, who took him under his wing and discussed Ginsberg's own poetry with him, something Ginsberg was afraid to undergo with his own father, an author of run-of-the-mill newspaper poetry. Trilling also repeatedly intervened on Ginsberg's behalf (Kirsch).²⁵ Yet it was another member of the Family, the up-and-coming Norman Podhoretz, who became a visible figure in the spat between the Beats on the one hand and the intellectuals and academics on the other. Podhoretz ran in similar social circles as Ginsberg: not only he was a fellow Columbia student, but also soon developed a close relationship with Trilling, eventually becoming his protégé (Oppenheimer). This, however, did not stop him from penning "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," possibly the most vitriolic attack on the Beat Generation authors. Naturally, the text appeared in *Partisan Review*.

The text begins by discussing the Beats – "a new group of rebels and Bohemians" – in a rather sensationalist manner that already shows his contempt for the writers (305). Among other things, he comments that the photo of Kerouac featured in Millstein's *On the Road* review shows the writer "unshaven, of course" and is further "topped by an unruly crop of rich black hair falling over his forehead." Claiming that the Beats are unlike the radical bohemians of the 1920s and 1930s, Podhoretz claims that the Beats represent primitivism and anti-civilization attitudes. He then continues by discussing the presence of sex in Beat writings. Sexual behavior unrestricted by conventional moral standards was, according to Podhoretz, one of the defining characteristics of the old Bohemians: "the 'meaning' of Bohemian sex ... was at once social and personal, a crucial element in the Bohemian's ideal of civilization" (309). However, its role is sharply different in Beat texts, Podhoretz argues, and it in a way replicates the dynamics of con-

25 As Adam Kirsch enumerates, these scandals were the murder of David Kammerer by Lucien Carr, the "graffiti" finger-painted in the dusty window of Ginsberg's room saying "Fuck the Jews," and finally Ginsberg being the accomplice to Herbert Huncke, who had stored stolen goods in his apartment. Regarding the first, while Ginsberg was not directly involved, he was a close friend of both Carr and Kerouac, to whom Carr ran on the night of the murder for help. Kerouac was later arrested as a material witness. The second incident was Ginsberg's attempt to get the custodian, whom he suspected was anti-Semitic, to properly clean his room; while trivial, the affair caused Ginsberg to withdraw from Columbia for a year. Finally, the final incident occurred after Ginsberg had left Columbia; still, Trilling intervened, thus Ginsberg landed up in a mental hospital rather than in jail where he would have to serve time. Importantly, Ginsberg met Carl Solomon, the addressee of "Howl," while at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. As Kirsch notes, "Howl" would not have been written if it were not for Trilling. For an overview on the relationship between Trilling and Ginsberg, read Kirsch, "Lionel Trilling and Allen Ginsberg: Liberal Father, Radical Son."

sumerism the Beats seem to criticize. Interestingly, Podhoretz's analysis seems to contradict itself under a careful scrutiny. He starts his argument by showing that although homosexual sex does represent freedom from social restrictions and conventions, heterosexual sex is often connected with forming permanent relationships, which can be seen in Kerouac's novels with frequent marriages occurring during the narrative. While concluding that Kerouac's persona in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise, seems to be afraid of sex and sexual performance, he also points out the sexual prowess of the womanizer Dean Moriarty (309–310). Importantly, it does not cross his mind that it might be an intentional contradiction of the text. For Podhoretz, both characters are manifestations of the primitivism and spontaneity – that is “Beatness” – of the writing which in his reading results in shallowness and “an anti-intellectualism so bitter that it makes the ordinary American's hatred of eggheads seem positively benign” (313).

Podhoretz does occasionally have ideas which might have been developed into a more balanced criticism, for example when discussing Kerouac's reliance on real-life events when they seem to be unnecessary for the novel's narrative. Nevertheless, the review eventually turns into a diatribe against the Beat Generation and all that they supposedly represent. Insisting on a strictly autobiographical reading of Kerouac's novels, Podhoretz argues the following: “The hipsters and hipster-lovers of the Beat Generation are rebels, all right, but not against anything so sociological and historical as the middle class or capitalism or even respectability. This is the revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul” (316). In the end, Podhoretz becomes agitatedly personal, and not only claims that the Beat Generation represents the same “spirit” which inspires “the young savages in leather jackets,” but also adds several pathetic (in both senses of the word) stories such as the one about a nine-year-old boy stoned to death, for whose death the Beats are supposed to be responsible (318). Not only are the Beats severely limited in their intellectual capacities, Podhoretz claims, but they are also hoodlums condoning violence and juvenile delinquency. The anti-intellectualism that the Beats in Podhoretz's reading symbolize eventually leads one to “[k]ill the intellectuals who can talk coherently, kill the people who can sit still for five minutes at a time, kill those incomprehensible characters who are capable of getting seriously involved with a woman, a job, a cause” (318). The Beats, the critic argues, then represent a serious threat not only to society's norms but also to society itself; following their lead would then lead to a corrupted and immoral society. Utilizing a moralizing rhetoric, Podhoretz's reading results in an extremely divisive text and the essay clearly shows on which side one should stand. Ultimately, the reader should choose the critic's side, since anyone supporting the Beats is clearly “against intelligence itself” (318).²⁶

26 The essay was the last – and certainly the most acerbic – in Podhoretz's series of essays attacking

Diana Trilling's "The Other Night at Columbia: A Report from the Academy" follows in a similar vein. Trilling was one of the "three wives from the English department" that attended the poetry reading featuring Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso at Columbia University and a certain "motherly" attitude is present throughout the text (214). Trilling makes clear that certain norms should be followed without being questioned: "[W]hy should I not also defend the expectation that a student at Columbia, even a poet, would do his work, submit it to his teachers through the normal channels of classroom communication, stay out of jail, and then, if things went right, graduate, start publishing, be reviewed, and see what developed, whether he was a success or failure?" (215). This description naturally refers to Allen Ginsberg as it was he who deviated "from respectable standards of behavior" and who therefore should be scorned by readers. The rather subjective tone of the essay is further emphasized by Trilling's discussion of her personal relation to Ginsberg and her view of the attendees at the reading. She describes Ginsberg as a "case": "a gifted and sad case, a guilt-provoking and nuisance case but, above all, a case" (218). The audience was in Trilling's eyes similarly defective, as only few of the women in attendance were pretty and few of the men masculine, though she notes, with some disappointment, that they were clean and did not smell (224). As the essay progresses, her patronizing tone becomes more and more apparent: "[T]hese *were* children, miserable children trying desperately to manage, asking desperately to be taken out of it all; there was nothing one could imagine except to bundle them home and feed them warm milk, promise them they need no longer call for mama and papa" (226).²⁷ For Trilling, the audience members, despite being adults, are not mature, and the poetry reading she is describing was not an endeavor worth serious consideration. Ginsberg's poetry, with its vivid description of music, drugs, and sex, "can be read simply as an advertisement for fun, for sex, drugs, and rock and roll," which might be the reason why the young audience had enjoyed it while those of Trilling's generation may resent it (Kirsch). Perhaps, Kirsch further adds, the reason behind Trilling's dismissal was seeing the Beats as commodifying radical politics into an apolitical lifestyle. Yet it would be naive to believe that Ginsberg, who professed to Podhoretz that he wanted to completely get rid of middle-class values rather than just reexamine them, was merely playacting (Oppenheimer). Simply put, Trilling was unwilling to

the Beats. Soon after the essay was published, Ginsberg invited Podhoretz to his flat to discuss with him and Kerouac the esthetics and actual goals of the Beat Generation writers. The result was a heated debate during which neither Ginsberg nor Podhoretz caved in to the other's arguments. After several relentless hours of back-and-forth disagreement, Podhoretz decided to leave when Ginsberg quipped: "We'll get you through your children!" (Oppenheimer).

27 It should be pointed out that Trilling uses the personal "I" throughout the majority of the text, therefore her use of the more general and inclusive "one" hints at the assumption that the reader should agree with her by default.

consider Ginsberg's radical poetics on their own terms, thus considering him and other Beats as poseurs without much to say (Kirsch). This then naturally leads her to conclude that Beat writing and supporters of Beats are adolescents not worthy of serious attention.

Ultimately, Trilling's text comes very closely to representing the "moral majority" of the fifties. Trilling expects Ginsberg and other Beats to follow the same norms and rules that she does, both in an academic setting as well as outside of it. Her identification with academia and what she perceives as good manners is palpable throughout the text. The first can be witnessed in Trilling's claim that Fred Dupee, who gave an introductory speech before the reading itself, was "speaking for the Academy, claiming for it its place in life, and the performers were inevitably captive to his dignity and self-assurance" (226). The capitalization in the word "Academy" is especially telling, since Trilling constantly refers to the Beats as "beats," quotation marks and lowercase "b" included. The second, Trilling's cry for good manners, is evident even more than her staunch defense of academia. Suggesting that the Beats are best ignored "as merely another inevitable, if tasteless," expression of the era's zeitgeist, she explains that "Lion in the Room," a Ginsberg poem dedicated to her husband, was a "decent" poem because it contained no obscenities (222, 228). The way Trilling effectively equates taste with style is another telling point of her critique, which is based on a "moral judgment" of literature and its authors. Trilling expects everyone to follow the set precedents and conventions, Ginsberg and other Beats included. Failing to do so, the Beats cannot command respect in more serious circles such as academia, thus they are logically, in Trilling's account, inferior by default.

For those representing academia, the Beats boiled down to representing a narrow primitivism. This view eventually leads John Ciardi, an early supporter of the Beats, to complain that they do not stand for a true intellectual uprising but rather for the mere search for "kicks" through sex, drug abuse or delinquent behavior ("Epitaph" 257). The theatre critic Robert Brustein, whose dissertation was supervised by Lionel Trilling, published the essay "The Cult of Unthink" shortly after completing his doctorate, and his reading follows the same lines as that of the previously-mentioned academics. In other words, he sees the Beats as supporting violence and general ignorance. Brustein achieves such a reading by comparing the average Beat to Stanley Kowalski of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*: similarly to Marlon Brando's character, they are inarticulate and often turn to violence (50). The Beats are self-contained in their own feelings and "kicks," thus are pseudo-existential as a result; there is no personality to such people, only negation. In effect, the Beats are only conformists who merely pretend they are rebels, but what is more, their self-proclaimed reverence of life is actually a reverence of death, as the search for pleasure will lead them to a "bottomless void" of desires which simply cannot be fulfilled (52-53). Unable to articulate what they

rebel against, the “hipster literati” use the same vocabulary as violent street gangs (54, 56). Soon, it might be more than just vocabulary that they share: “It is not so long a jump from the kick-seeking poet to the kick-seeking adolescent who, sinking his knife into the flesh of his victim, thanked him for the ‘experience’” (54). Ultimately, Brustein is able to articulate his and his colleague’s sentiment in only a few words: the problem of the Beats is simply their inability to “come to grips with life” (58).

Other critics see the Beats in the context of “teen culture.” For instance, James F. Scott argues that the Beats are inherently influenced by society and it is therefore also society which should be questioned (150). Importantly, Scott takes the view of the Beats as a social phenomenon a step further by arguing that they are merely another proof of the general rise of teenage culture in the United States:

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

The problem then is not the Beats themselves, but the trend of growing immaturity, of which the Beats are merely a symptom. What is happening, Scott claims, is a general dumbing down of society by lowering the generally-accepted standards to the level of teenagers (153). Consequently, the Beats are simply one of many manifestations of the emerging teen culture; their desire for “kicks” only mirrors the emerging culture of instant gratification, opposition to which is necessary to prevent the impending takeover of the country by a less intelligent and childish generation. American society should take a step back and reevaluate its ideals and tendencies to prevent it becoming a society of children in adult bodies.

Yet why did so many critics portray the Beats as promoting violence? Apart from the popular representations analyzed before, two important events help illuminate the answer to this question. First, in 1957 Norman Mailer published his pamphlet “The White Negro.” By providing a romanticized image of African-Americans, the essay strives to explain the recent phenomenon of the “hipster” and the new psychology that the atomic age will require. Mailer argues that the world is at a unique point in its history, as the existence of concentration camps and the development of the atomic bomb makes the unconsciousness of every living person face the idea that one might die at any given moment (Mailer).

This grim *deus ex machina* is in direct contradiction with the teachings of modern industrial society – that one can subject nature and time to its will – thus leading to inevitable anxiety in society. This existential crisis, the need “to live with death as immediate danger,” forces everyone to choose: either entertain the psychopath in the self by ignoring the boundaries between the lawful and the criminal or accept the conformity of the “totalitarian tissues of American society.” If one chooses the former, Mailer claims, they choose the identity of hipster – an amalgam of the bohemian, the juvenile delinquent, and the Negro, the last of which is in Mailer’s account used to continuously living on the sidelines of white society where law does not apply to them, thus being perfectly adapted to the new age. The hipster, or “the white negro,” is a philosophical psychopath, and therefore he is not only able to denounce the laws of society and cross the boundary from law into lawlessness, but also establish the inner philosophies from which a post-twentieth century society could spring. And in order to establish the new morality – to do what you want – this society of the future requires new language, the language of hipster talk.

While giving an air of trying to appear more radical than he actually is, Mailer in “The White Negro” actually proposes more than just juvenile individualism. He essentially claims that going back to the barbarian in us is a way to liberate society from “the collective violence of the State.” The price to pay – an increase in individual violence – is more than acceptable when humanity gains renewed faith in building a better world. In other words, Mailer claims that the hipster could break the established social order as a way to avoid the mass, systematic violence ultimately represented by the atomic bomb.

Before commenting further on the impact of Mailer’s essay, the other impactful event should be discussed as well. In January 1958, the nation was shocked by the murder spree of twenty-year-old Charles Starkweather and his companion, fourteen-year-old Caril Fugate. Overall, eleven people were murdered by the young couple in Wyoming, including Caril’s parents, who were against the two seeing each other, and their two-year-old daughter. The modes of killing were also particularly brutal – multiple victims died from a shotgun blast to the head – as was their capture, which involved “a high-speed shoot-out through downtown Douglas” (Wischmann). In the end, Starkweather received the death penalty, while Fugate, whose active role in the murders was disputed, was sentenced to life, although she was paroled eighteen years later.

Since the victims did not fit any profile, the killing spree was beyond the grasp of rationalization: rich or poor, young or old, Starkweather and Fugate did not discriminate in their killings. What is more, this was the first time in America’s history that mass murderers were on the loose “in the television age and no one knew where or when [they] might strike next” (Wischmann). Starkweather, wearing a black leather jacket and rimless glasses, glamorized James Dean and thought of himself

“as a rebel without a cause” (Birmingham, “William Burroughs”). Importantly, it was the feeling of being in control which truly fueled Starkweather: “He had money. He had a girl. He had killed and not been bothered by it. It gave him an enormous feeling of power. He now operated outside the laws of man. He felt as if he were invisible, could do just as he pleased, take what he wanted. The law was helpless against him” (qtd. in Birmingham, “William Burroughs”). This feeling of power is, in Mailer’s terms, the orgasm which frees the hipster from the constraints and contradictions of society as well as the drive behind the hipster’s acts. Importantly, this connection between Starkweather and Mailer is what substantially contributed to society’s conception of the Beats as condoning and even promoting violence.

As Mailer in “The White Negro” claims, “the nihilism of Hip proposes as its final tendency that every social restraint and category be removed.” The following passage from the essay reveals that such liberation could even lead to murder if deemed necessary:

It can of course be suggested that it takes little courage for two strong 18-year-old hoodlums, let us say, to beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper, and indeed the act – even by the logic of the psychopath – is not likely to prove very therapeutic, for the victim is not an immediate equal. Still, courage of a sort is necessary, for one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old-man but an institution as well, one violates property, one enters into a new relation with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one’s life. The hoodlum is therefore daring the unknown, and no matter how brutal the act, it is not altogether cowardly.

Commenting on the similarities between Mailer’s essay and the crimes of Starkweather and Fugate, Birmingham succinctly points out that it appeared “as if Mailer had written Starkweather into existence” (“William Burroughs”). The image of the hipster seeking violence as the ultimate act affirming one’s liberation is thus ultimately emblemized by Starkweather. What is more, such imagery would then haunt the public reception of the Beats, despite Mailer stating that being “beat” – that is losing one’s will and confidence – is of utmost fear to the hipster. The respected writer thus provided the public and critics with the framework to use against the Beats despite the glaring inaccuracies (Birmingham, “William Burroughs”). Simply put, “The White Negro” turned out to be published at the best possible moment. As J. Michael Lennon specifies, Kerouac’s *On the Road* was published in September 1957; that is only a few months after Mailer’s essay (239). Lennon further explains that *On the Road* became famous overnight, and therefore the public desired to know more about the Beat Generation. Importantly, Mailer’s essay proved to be the vital key – “its intellectual manifesto,” as Lennon puts it – which was frequently read to explain the origins and motives of the Beats.

Since they disagreed with Mailer's insistence on violence, neither Ginsberg nor Kerouac was thrilled by such a connection (242).²⁸

Mailer's "The White Negro" thus "established Mailer's reputation as a philosopher of hip," which meant that others turned to him for a better understanding of the Beats (Lennon 189). As a result, Mailer's role in the public image of the Beats can be clearly felt from the critiques of Podhoretz or Brustein.²⁹ Their constant allusions to the Beats' almost wholesale endorsement of violence or their anti-intellectual stance is the direct result of the public image of the hipsters, and therefore the Beats, which Mailer helped create. For instance, Podhoretz's reference to "good orgasms" as the "first duty of man and the only duty of woman" in "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" does not make much sense without reading "The White Negro" as well (309). That is not to say that otherwise no one could form a link between the Beats and petty criminal activities. After all, Ginsberg in "Howl" alludes to the many joyrides in stolen cars that Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac undertook, and which are later fully portrayed in *On the Road*. Yet linking the Beats with violence was a relatively new connection that Mailer helped cement. Seeing the Beats as a social phenomenon, readers and critics alike hungered for an explanation of the phenomenon. Mailer's essay then in their eyes validates the Beat representation in popular media, thus leading to Beat exploitation films such as Zugsmith's *The Beat Generation*, which usually contain a Beat element to sell a B-grade movie about juvenile delinquency or a murderer on the loose.

The tendency to read the Beats through both Mailer's essay and their popular portrayals is best documented in Mary Elizabeth Rucker's master's thesis submitted for defense in August 1959 at Atlanta University. Titled "The Literature of the Beat Generation: A Study in Attitudes," it aims to expound the motivation of the Beat Generation writers. The thesis begins with the explanation that literature is "a reproduction of the minds of a people" rather than its reflection, thus setting the stage for a sociological analysis of the Beats, as the text aims to clearly define the philosophy of the Beats and to discuss their philosophy in the context of American society (ii, iv). The main body of the thesis is separated into four chapters with telling titles: "Social Attitudes," "Political Attitudes," "Religious and Philosophic Attitudes," and "Aesthetic Attitudes." While the thesis does refer to several primary sources written by the Beats, for example Holmes's "This is the Beat Generation" or a few of Kerouac's novels, it also frequently uses non-Beat writing and presents it as actual work of Beat Generation literature. For instance, the the-

28 Nevertheless, it should be also stated that Ginsberg thought highly of the essay overall, as it managed to articulate the disengagement of young people in contemporary society (Lennon 242).

29 Curiously, while Podhoretz denounced the Beats in "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," he was taken aback by the sheer tour de force of Mailer's essay, even though he was also shocked by the beliefs of the hipster. Soon, Podhoretz would write a "warm, generous appraisal" of Mailer's work and the two became close friends (Lennon 227, Menand).

sis refers to the novelization of Zugsmith's *The Beat Generation* several times, and even quotes the poem which the actress Vampira reads in the movie, yet the text employs the novel as if it were a genuine Beat work. Outside of Zugsmith, Rucker also relies on Mailer's "The White Negro" – namely the sections on the psychopath and use of violence – as well as on Podhoretz's series of essays critiquing the Beats; other sources she relies on are numerous articles in *Time* and *Nation*. Thus in the religion section, Rucker argues that the Beats' "worship of primitivism and spontaneity is more than a cover for their way of life; it arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling as well," and subsequently quotes from "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" to illustrate her point (21–22). In another telling example, Rucker's discussion of the use of hipster slang concludes that such "new language expresses contempt for rational discourse, which is to the beatnik a form of death because it is a product of the mind. If one is articulate, he has no feeling, for feelings cannot be expressed in syntactical language" (35). The Beat Generation for Rucker is a generation of inarticulate, irrational, and violent barbarians.

The conclusion of Rucker's text is then rather predictable. First, she is dismayed by the Beats' disavowal of the family, as this refusal stops them from being able to function in society (39). Rucker's tone then becomes substantially more agitated. The Beat Generation has chosen to live outside society because their nation "has failed to help [them] adjust to or find their places in our society" (40). This development, Rucker continues, is not limited to the United States, as similarities can be found in the existentialists in France or the Angry Young Men in England. "And this fact," she then adds, "is a serious one in relation to our destiny... It is frightening to think of a world that is governed by the standards of groups such as these." Ultimately, either society, or the "guardians of our civilization," as Rucker puts it, help "these young people to solve their problems," or they will soon start entering the world of politics. And that is, Rucker concludes, "among the greatest threats of the Beat Generation (40)." Rucker thus follows in the footsteps of Trilling or Podhoretz. The Beats themselves are not only without value as artists, but they are also an indication of the rapid decay of the measures and ideals holding society together. Importantly, such a reading is again possible due to the vagueness of the term the Beat Generation.³⁰

30 The influence of Mailer on academic public discourse was felt even a decade later, when the literary and social critic Irving Howe in his essay "The New York Intellectuals" written in 1969 analyzes the urge to pursue immediacy on the politics of the New Left. Using Mailer's example of realizing the self by brutally murdering an old candy-store keeper – but also adding that perhaps he would wish to "cut up a few Jews" after reading LeRoi Jones – Howe warns that the heedless overindulgence of will would ultimately lead to a loss of complexity, whether in literature or life in general (115–16). Howe then states that constantly surrendering to the immediacy of the present, as Mailer proposes, leads to self-gratification with diminishing returns, which eventually fails to register in the person numbed down by such exploits (117). Ultimately, Howe's conclusion is in its reasoning similar to "The Know-Nothing Bohemians": he charges the New Left with injecting "rhetorical violence" and "verbal 'radicalism'" into

Academics and intellectuals thus frequently portrayed the Beats not only as being directly responsible for juvenile delinquency, but also as the heralds of the downfall of civilized public discourse. Yet there were also those who supported the Beats, albeit such support was mostly limited to fellow writers and poets. For instance, William Carlos Williams wrote the introduction to *Howl and Other Poems*, while Norman Mailer and Mary McCarthy voiced their support for the controversial *Naked Lunch*. In terms of support from academia, the output was rather restricted, and it took a substantial amount of time before the Beats were treated as a serious object of study.

For example, Frank D. McConnell's "William Burroughs and the Literature of Addiction," published in 1967, is one of the first serious studies of a Beat generation text in a scholarly journal which does not make allusions to the Beats representing an attitude or social movement.³¹ Other studies, such as *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* by Paul Portugés or William L. Stull's "The Quest and the Question: Cosmology and Myth in the Work of William S. Burroughs, 1953-1960," have one thing in common. The Beat Generation was considered largely irrelevant by the end of the 1960s, therefore it was not until several years later that interest in the Beats resurfaced. Consequently, the texts by Portugés and Stull, both of which were published in 1978, are great examples of the initial lack of serious academic interest in the Beats. This general avoidance of the Beats by academia was certainly connected to the media craze surrounding the writers, the stereotype of the beatnik, or seeing the Beats only as a social phenomenon.

The above being said, there was a small yet noticeable effort by a few scholars to approach the Beats from a more neutral or even supportive point of view. For example, the poet and professor Thomas Parkinson edited *A Casebook on the Beat*, the first scholarly text discussing the work of the Beats rather than Beats themselves. In the concluding essay to the collection of Beat texts, Parkinson sees the Beats in terms of social refusal rather than a revolt and criticizes the way popular media refer to the Beats: the media focus on the lives of the Beats makes them into a larger-than-life spectacle, thus inhibiting any serious discussion (277, 286). He also touches upon several important aspects of Beat poetry, one of which is their non-conventionality; that is its importance of pitch or loudness. Bruce Cook's *The Beat Generation* published a decade later is another early study of the

public discourse, thus bringing to an end the "liberal humaneness and rational discourse" (122-23). Importantly, it was Mailer who was the chief architect of this change in public discourse (122).

31 The article being published in a scholarly journal, namely in *The Massachusetts Review*, must be emphasized. Steven Belletto notes that one of the earliest serious treatments on the Beats is Warren Tallman's "Kerouac's Sound," first printed in 1959 in *The Tamarack Review* and reprinted a year later in *Evergreen Review* (11). However, not only were both literary magazines rather than scholarly journals, but *Evergreen Review* was also founded by Barney Rosset, publisher of Grove Press, who strongly favored counter-cultural art and therefore definitely supported publishing the article. Still, Tallman was a professor of English at the University of British Columbia, so his contribution should not be overlooked.

Beats, while notable anthologies include Seymour Krim's *The Beats*, released in 1960, and *The Beat Scene*, which was edited by Elias Wilentz and published a year later. Yet the most important early Beat scholar is undoubtedly Ann Charters, the author of the first Kerouac biography. This was a daring feat at that time: the Beat Generation, both as a literary movement or a stand-in for a social movement, dwindled away and Kerouac, whose star had faded away by then, had drunk himself to death. Levi Asher, the editor of *Literary Kicks* weblog, explains Charters's determination in more detail:

This woman wrote about Jack Kerouac in 1973, back when *nobody* took him seriously as a writer. I mean, *NOBODY*. Her book wasn't even published by an established firm: Straight Arrow Books was a division of Rolling Stone magazine. That was what the mainstream literary world thought of Jack Kerouac back in '73, four years after his death. It took courage, vision and selfless dedication to devote her career to a writer whose literary reputation had never been good, and was now in a state of utter ruin.

Now everybody from Viking Penguin to New York University kisses Kerouac's ass, and it's an all-new world for Beat scholarship. But let's have a little respect for the person who put her reputation on the line back when it meant something.

Asher's expressive comment not only deals with Charters and the dangers of publishing a Kerouac biography, but also helps explain the lack of academic interest in the Beats. The stereotypical beatnik portrayals and the association of the Beats with physical violence via Mailer's controversial essay significantly affected the image of the Beats, and the term "The Beat Generation" was all but forgotten.

The Beat Generation was then frequently brought up as a pretext for discussing the state of society as a whole, thus leaving out discussion on the quality of Beat writing. This construction of the Beats was common during the period, Belletto points out, and was used by both Beat supporters as well as their detractors (10–11). The frequent focus of Beat criticism in the 1950s and the 1960s was not the literature itself, but rather the personal lives of the Beats and what they represented in relation to society. As a result, this led to common disagreements between the two camps, as they both saw the Beats as representing thoroughly different values and attitudes. During such quarrels, the texts themselves took a back seat.

4.5 The Changing Landscape of American Poetry

While the Beats did not command any respect from academia during the period, the situation outside academia was substantially different. The concept of poetry

was carefully curated by academics and intellectuals commonly abiding by the formalist rules set by the New Critics, which can be seen in the anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957) edited by the poets Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson. The Beats viewed themselves as standing against the university poets and fought against their influence in American poetry (Belletto 1). Together with other poets outside this “ivory tower” of academic poetry, this opposition was consolidated in the seminal anthology *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* edited by Donald M. Allen and published in 1960. Allen’s book was a direct response to the 1957 anthology, as it showcased numerous essentially unknown poets who refused to follow the tradition of academic poetry. The poets featured include Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, or Charles Olson, and several Beat figures are also present. Ultimately, the anthology represents the counter-tradition in American poetry.

Allen makes the objective of the publication clear from the very beginning when he states that all the poets present in the anthology have one thing in common: “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi). The anthology turned out to be the most influential poetry anthology published after WWII and many of the poets contained within have become widely read and taught (Golding 180). Importantly, the anthology has achieved this status not only because it helped institutionalize numerous innovative poets, but also because it spearheaded the criticism of academic poetry. It was extremely impactful and was quickly reprinted, which was rather unusual for poetry anthologies at that time; overall, it sold over 100,000 copies in its first ten years (Golding 181, 192). The poets featured were separated into five groups: Black Mountain poets, New York school, San Francisco Renaissance, Beats, and finally the most recent poets. The Beats featured in the “Beat” category are Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky; however, the anthology featured several other Beats and Beat-associates, namely Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and LeRoi Jones. In addition, the section “Statements on Poetics” included short texts by the anthologized poets on the state of poetry at that time. Notably, the Beats authored seven out of the sixteen texts, thus further popularizing Beat esthetics to a wider audience.

The categorization of the Beats and Beat-associates into different groups indicates several facts. First, in regards to poetry, the Beats were only part of a larger trend to abandon contemporary standards of poetry. Second, the categorization also shows that the boundaries between the various groups are often muddled and frequently crossed, thus proving yet again the unstable nature of the term Beat Generation even when isolating individual writers. Finally, the nature of the critique of academic poetry often varied between these groups. The poets chosen by Allen “tend variously to oppose the academic criticism of their moment, the poetry written under the aegis of that criticism (often, but not always, by teacher-

poets in mainstream institutions), the larger institutional structures of academe, and the intellectualism associated with academic pursuits” (Golding 200). In other words, a sizeable number of American artists demanded a significant reformation of how poetry should be understood. Regarding the position of the Beats, Carolyn Gaiser argues that they aimed to “free writing from the stringencies of stale academic form” because “[t]heir distrust of form in writing reflects their equally profound distrust of formal codes for human behavior” (271). In Gaiser’s account, the poetry contained within did not only strive to change the stilted nature of contemporary poetry, but in more general terms also the ways in which society expressed itself.

The anthology *Contemporary American Poetry* edited by Donald Hall and released in 1962 is a perfect example of the changes taking place during this period. While the 1957 anthology *New Poets of England and America* supported academic poetry, *Contemporary American Poetry* published a mere five years later is quick to denounce the traditionalist approach to poetics. Hall begins with a denunciation of the state of poetry: “For thirty years an orthodoxy ruled American poetry. It derived from the authority of T. S. Eliot and the new critics; it exerted itself through the literary quarterlies and the universities. It asked for a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit. The last few years have broken the control of this orthodoxy” (Introduction 25). Granted, Hall’s anthology is definitely not as radical as Allen’s, since the anthology contains a large number of poets representing the more traditional stance. That being said, the inclusion of Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg hints at the substantial change in American poetry occurring during the 1950s and 1960s. This is further compounded by the fact that Ginsberg did not originally make the cut in the first edition and was only included in subsequent editions. Writing in 1969, Hall comments in the preface to the second edition on the evolution of poetry and the changes from the first edition. Regarding the initial exclusion of Ginsberg, Hall remorsefully states that “it was ridiculous to omit [him] in the first place” (36–37).

Other anthologies which were either dedicated solely to the Beats or at least gave them ample space began to flourish. For instance, in 1963 Corso, Ferlinghetti, and Ginsberg were anthologized in the fifth volume of the Penguin Modern Poets, a series which aims to provide an overview of three modern poets in a single volume. More importantly, the Beats managed to stay relevant even when their time in the spotlight was diminishing. In 1969, the year of Kerouac’s death and four years after Victor Yanitelli called the Beats a dead movement in his review of *Desolation Angels*, another influential anthology was released: Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey’s *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*. The anthology includes Ginsberg and Corso, but also Beat-related poets Kenneth Rexroth and Kenneth Patchen, the latter being a huge influence on the Beats due to his experimentation with poetry readings accompanied by music. Berg and Mezey

explain that their initial approach was to include a definitive and comprehensive essay to provide an overarching conception of contemporary poetry, which is at its best when foregoing formalist concerns in favor of venturing into “the wilderness of unopened life” (xi). However, they soon realize that trying to find a collective classification for the poets in the anthology is an impossible task, as there always were a few exceptions to the unifying principle they devised. Ultimately, Berg and Mezey confess that what matters most is the impact these poems have on their readers, and for this readers do not need them as interpreters (xi).

The Beats then played a major role in the shift in American poetry, and it should then not come as a surprise that as early as 1961 poet Tuli Kupferberg claimed the Beats “destroyed the importance of the Academy in American poetry” (qtd. in Belletto 1). The gradual change occurring in the world of poetry serves as a reliable testament to the changes to American literature as a whole during the 1950s and the 1960s. Together with other artists, the Beats helped reshape the American landscape of both art and thought. Yet all this was at a cost. The idea of the Beats as a group of fellow-minded writers or the Beats as the young generation protesting conformism soon ballooned into a vulgar media image of the beatnik. The public often relied on sensationalized and unreliable accounts, thus pitting itself against the Beats. During the period, the Beats were usually either ignored or dismissed outright by academia, which often relied on virtually the same accounts as the public. They were also harmed by the image of the hipster as defined by Norman Mailer superficially associated with the Beat Generation, or by the vast number of talentless poets spewing forth Beat-inspired poetry. The Beats bear at least partial responsibility for the latter. As Lawrence Ferlinghetti in an interview with Colin Robinson recalls, some of the poets Allen Ginsberg recommended to City Lights would not normally have been published, since they simply were not good enough, and were published only after Ginsberg put in a word for them. Nevertheless, Ferlinghetti then adds that the Beats had a lasting impact on American literature, and one of the milestones was certainly the not-guilty verdict for publishing *Howl and Other Poems*: “After that the floodgates were opened. People like Barney [Rosset] . . . were able to publish *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, Henry Miller’s *Tropics*, Jean Genet, and so on.” Beat writing also managed to sustain itself outside of its social importance, as Gary Snyder receiving the Pulitzer Prize in 1975 for *Turtle Island* shows. Despite the often dismissive reception, it would be therefore naive to claim that the Beats did not play a substantial role in American literature or its history in general.