“LEARNING TO BE MAD, IN A DREAM”:
THE COLD WAR AND THE BIRTH OF THE BEAT GENERATION

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts
in the Faculty of Arts and Science

TRENT UNIVERSITY
Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

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English (Public Texts) M.A. Graduate Program

September 2014
The Beat Generation shaped, and was shaped by, the post-WWII containment culture that arose in 1950s America. This so-called cultural containment reflected the social, political, and economic factors that were unique to the post-WWII period and are often considered concurrent to post-war McCarthyism, which promoted a national ideology of exclusionism that was foremost opposed to the threat of Communism. I propose in my thesis that containment was a major influence in the rhetoric of resistance that is found within the most prominent works of the Generation. My thesis also looks at the how Beat literature shifted from the counterculture to the mainstream and the impact that celebrity had on the Generation. When the Beats achieved literary fame their counterculture represented the forefront of the New Left and was synonymous with succeeding protest cultures of the 1960s.

Keywords: Beat Generation; Cold War; McCarthyism; Containment Culture; Postmodernism; Jack Kerouac; On the Road; Allen Ginsberg; Howl; William S. Burroughs; Naked Lunch; Second Wave Feminism
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dr. Mike Epp, my supervisor, for your mentorship, constructive criticism, and encouragement during the entire process. I would like to express my appreciation for the brainstorming sessions that helped direct me throughout the most difficult parts of writing my thesis. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Lewis MacLeod, for the valuable criticism during the second reading of my thesis. Finally, I would also like to express gratitude to my external reader, Dr. Finis Dunaway, for taking on the project at a busy time and providing challenging and constructive questions during my defence.

Dr. Beth Popham: thank you for taking on the task of Chair at the last moment. Your presence was very much appreciated!

To Dr. Sara Humphreys: Thank you for your guidance and mentorship for the past five years.

To the various professors I have had during my time in at Trent: You have all helped me wade through the waters of confusion and self-doubt and it is much appreciated.

To the Graduate Department at Trent: I am indebted to your patience and hard work that helped me to get settled into the Public Texts Program.

To my fellow Public Texts grads: The beer and conversation was a necessary distraction!

To the Beat Generation: You’re all mad, and I love you for it. Thanks for the inspiration.

And finally, to my family and friends for putting up with my stark-raving mad writer’s block and still providing words of encouragement.
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Introduction: The Best Minds of a Generation

“There is a universal rebellion in the air, and the power of two colossal super-states may be . . . failing in energy even more rapidly than we are failing in energy, and if that is so, then the destructive, the liberating, the creative nihilism of the Hip, the frantic search for potent Change may break into the open with all its violence” – Norman Mailer, Village Voice, May 9th, 1956.

I was seventeen when I discovered the Beats in an old book shop on the outskirts of my town. A dog-eared collection entitled, The Collected Works of the Beat Generation, contained in it poems that had a free style and a lack of grace I never imagined could be poetry. When I read Jack Kerouac’s On the Road for the first time I was impressed by its lack of plot, its haphazardness, and its collection of characters that were reminiscent of Steinbeck’s ensemble cast of misfits, hobos, and anti-heroes in Cannery Row. However, Kerouac’s work had a lawlessness about it that I felt was significant, different and, in some ways, classic.

Up until my mid-teens I had been weaned on a diet of traditional ‘classic’ British literature and the occasional American masterpiece. From Austen to Steinbeck and from Keats to Frost, when I reflect back now I realize that my literary upbringing had been a little unoriginal. I loved the authors that made perfect sense (and I still do); however, I fell in love with the Beats’ mad style. Before discovering the Beats, I had been under the impression that they were synonymous with beatniks, you know, those beatniks, the
caricatures with the berets and bongo drums, spouting nonsensical minimalist poetry in
dank, dark nightclubs, or the pre-hipster types, who smoked and drank, and rarely bathed.
As I discovered through reading the works of the Beats, the beatniks were not the Beats.
Destroying this preconceived notion of the Beats gave me an odd sense of satisfaction. I
felt as though I had made a discovery.

At eighteen, I started my Beat collection. I bought Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, William S.
Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* and some of Kerouac’s lesser known works, including
*Desolation Angels* and *Big Sur*. There was a madness that connected them all – and this
wasn’t a bad thing. The Beats lived in a schizophrenic era. The post-World War Two
United States was a skeleton in a veil. Death and the fear of death were still looming
about in the post-WWII years, yet that clichéd American Dream was advertised
everywhere, from television, to cigarette ads, to the pop music being played on the radio.
War had not ended in the West with the end of World War Two, V.E. Day, and the
bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Each victory had brought on yet another contest
and fuelled tensions between former allies, the United States and the U.S.S.R. It was the
nuclear age, but it was also the age of the nuclear family. Suburban sprawl began and the
racial, sexual, and political boundaries were as marked as the white picket fences that
separated neighbours. Grounds were gained and lost through the Cold War. The chill
would lead to the next decade, the 1960s, a time of heated social revolution and political
upheaval.

The Beat Generation was born from the Cold War. Their counterculture formed
around the idea, as poet Amiri Bakara puts it elegantly, “that society sucked” and was in
dire need of a change. In his anthem, “America,” Allen Ginsberg teases his country’s
communist fears, while weaving in a critique of racial segregation, capitalism, and cultural conservatism. Along with “Howl,” “America” stands out as one of Ginsberg’s most politically-charged poems. It is both patriotic and anarchistic, much like the poet himself. Ginsberg’s attitude towards the United States resembled that of his predecessor, Walt Whitman. Both poets boasted their loyalty and love for their country, yet expressed dismay at the politics that segregated America and separated brother from brother, effectively splitting the country up, making it far from united.

Patriotism is also expressed in Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*; however, Beat patriotism was nostalgic for an America of the past, a past that they romanticized. In his many travels, Kerouac sought to discover an America that had not been shaped by the containment culture. Burroughs delved into hallucinogenic drugs to imagine and illustrate his country and expose its hypocritical treatment of addicts. Ginsberg used radical politics to challenge his country’s aggressive military-industrial complex during the Cold War, which is best exemplified in “Howl,” where Ginsberg compares the state of America to an asylum. The fathers of the Beats – Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs – each saw the turmoil of their country as their own. The desire to understand and connect with this turmoil produced a generation of writers and artists.

So, what is “Beat”? There are many ways “Beat” defines the generation. *Go* author, John Clellon Holmes defines the word in his *New York Times* article, “This is the Beat Generation”:

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

Holmes is referring to the post-war ‘Lost Generation’ that the Beats saw themselves as. Similar to the previous Lost Generation of post-WWI times, the Beat generation lacked direction. They were naked in the face of an uncertain future and willfully amnesic of the past. The generation preceding had been immersed in two decades of economic and political upheaval. The Beats paralleled their modernist predecessors, but were facing a new world. They were facing postmodern times. These were uncertain, ambiguous, and media-driven times. The traditional mode in literature was undoing itself in order to represent a world that could not be separated from the larger culture as a whole. Social issues invaded literature and the book became a representation of the claustrophobia and anxieties of the current era. The Beat Generation was the product of these times. On the brink of the postmodern, the Beats were old and new; a heterogeneous group of authors that responded to and represented their culture.

“Beat” can also refer to “Beatified,” or something holy and angelic. This last term is used to refer to the pilgrimage taken by the Beats, one that helped to shape the generation that succeeded them. It is also used because in their works the Beats often expressed a certain desire for redemption and spiritual revival. The desire to become angelic, or to be canonized by their works, expresses the artist’s desire to transcend death and become
immortalized through their art. In this sense, the Beats resembled the Romanticists and Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century, both of whom sought the enigmatic ‘Truth’ through their works.

Finally, “Beat” also refers to the music that influenced the Beats. Be-bop, jazz, and swing were part of the underground music scene in 1950s New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Aside from their literary ventures, the Beats were defined by the cultural and public spaces they frequented. “The focal points,” as Clinton R. Starr states in “I Want to Be with My Own Kind”: Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture,” “of the social life in the Beat counterculture were coffeehouses, bars, restaurants, jazz clubs, and parks in urban bohemian enclaves” (Starr 45). The spaces allowed for the Beat counterculture to form and maintain itself, despite the alienation felt from the mainstream middle-class. The Beat counterculture existed outside of the regular, routine lifestyles of the middle-class. Beats and their followers, the beatniks, were often jobless or in between jobs. They pursued literary and other artistic endeavours and were persistent in starting up a new way of life, one that would exclude them from the social pressures to be part of the middle-class mainstream. As Starr further notes in his article, “[t]hroughout the late 1950s, there were a substantial number of African-Americans living in or frequenting bohemian enclaves . . . between 1957 and 1960, African-Americans in Greenwich Village went from an isolated and small group to a relatively large segment of the population” (Starr 47). Beat spaces also allowed for racial interaction that would otherwise be looked down upon in regular society.

To the mainstream middle-class, the Beats represented the antithesis of American values. So, how did they become renowned? This is what I will explore in the following
chapters. The shift from counterculture to mainstream culture is a focus on of my thesis. First, however, what is mainstream? What is counterculture? And what differentiates the two? It is hard to separate the two, especially after WW2 and during the early years of what was to become known as postmodernism. Mainstream is generally synonymous with mass culture, the cultural-industrial complex, and commoditization. In the 1950s, mainstream was produced by the likes of the mass media, corporate-controlled multinationals and Ivy League universities. This mainstream was also illustrated as a new form of political hegemony by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” According to Adorno and Horkheimer, mainstream culture is commodity culture. The stipulations placed on the consumer in a commodity culture are to conform. Horkheimer and Adorno’s Marxist critique of Western culture was in sync with how the Beats portrayed it in their works. “To be an outsider,” states Adorno and Horkheimer, “is the gravest guilt. In films such a person is, at best, an eccentric . . . but mostly he is a villain” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 121). Those who betray the standard normatives in society were, and still are to an extent, an object of ridicule and suspicion. The Beats were no exception to this. Their infamy was evidenced by the censorships trials that the likes of Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac, had to face. Both feared and reviled, Beat culture became synonymous with underground culture. It was a melting pot of ethnicities, sexualities, and politics. It was also a prediction of a cultural phenomenon to come.

Adorno and Horkheimer also critique the means in which mass culture creates (and sells) pseudoindividuality. The search for authenticity became a fledging romantic goal of Beat culture. Yet, Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of mass culture gives little
recognition of any culture within the nucleus of mass culture, including the Beat Generation. However, subcultures and countercultures, many of which are not part of the “standardized mode of production” become a way to converse with and eventually reform culture. In particular, counterculture is that which attempts to subvert or undermine the mainstream by replacing the process of commodification with the production of art that values aesthetic quality before profit. The Beat Generation first saw fame from infamy and utilized this infamy to gain a literary voice in the general public. The Beat Generation, with the help of independent publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, utilized their literary and, in some cases, a political voice to shape the youth generation of the 1960s.

The counterculture may also be synonymous with anti-art or political art. During the 1950s, the bohemian spirit of the Beats came to represent the search for an authentic culture amidst an aggressively conservative, conformist culture. To what extent the Beats were a product of the mass culture raises questions in regards to how authentic culture can be produced when everything that is culture is eventually commoditized. As Michael Davidson discusses in *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, “[f]ar from rejecting the cultural mainstream, the Beats embraced many of its more oppositional features” (Davidson 51). Davidson cites *On the Road* as an example. Fast cars, girls, and hitting up one diner after the next, becomes part of the sight-seeing adventure that the reader partakes in when reading Kerouac’s most famous work. The novel is mum regarding the Cold War or any other political issue of the decade; however, it does present a vision for readers. The spirit of *On the Road* is getting up and going, leaving suburban enclaves, and searching for a new identity on the frontiers of America. Not surprisingly, *On the Road* follows a distinct literary lineage. The America that Kerouac
presents is both old and new. Kerouac successfully merges the popular frontier narrative with Beat counterculture, the latter of which depends on his use of language familiar to the counterculture. Likewise, Ginsberg and Burroughs explore, mingle, and digest the commodity culture, both in order to critique and belong to it. Beat culture depended on the reproduction of their culture, which was only made possible by commodity culture. As Davidson notes, what makes the Beats significant as a cultural movement is that they “complicated the division between mass culture and aesthetic culture as it was being discussed in 1950s intellectual forums” (Davidson 52). The Beats were part of the burgeoning postmodern cultural era, an era that would blur binaries between previous dichotomies, not only complicating how the culture was viewed, but also releasing it from the past.

It should be noted that Beat culture is often associated with masculinity; however, many works also explored exigent issues of sex, gender, and sexuality. For instance, the nuclear family that became a symbol of the American Dream was challenged by the likes of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Amiri Bakara. Their own dysfunctional families became the inspiration for discovering alternative families in their literary and artistic circles. Furthermore, Ginsberg’s homosexuality challenged the heterosexual family unit and was present in numerous poems and was a factor in his activism in the 1960s. As well, female Beat writers such as Diane di Prima and Joyce Johnson emphasized the role of females in the writing community. Di Prima’s works do not shy away from discussing her frustrations with the lack of support for female writers in society. The Beat women became remembered by Johnson in her foundational work, Minor Characters. Overall, the Beats emphasized change and liberation from societal norms, especially from the
gender roles that were formed to adhere to the growing post-WWII consumer culture. Reshaping the family unit became a precursor for civil rights activism, including Second-Wave feminism and the gay rights movements.

Despite their denunciation of their own culture, the Beat writers’ anti-capitalist and hyper-political statements, as well as their bohemian lifestyles, became a trend picked up by the middle-class public. The sublimation of their works reflects a culture that was looking for a new literary aesthetic to reflect the post-war realities in Western society. After the Howl Trial, the Beats gained notoriety through the media. They also became part of what Michael Davidson appropriately refers to as the “unified narrative of the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1950s and early 1960s” (Davidson 1). The San Francisco Renaissance brought writers, artists, activists, and musicians together in a counterculture. Within a decade, San Francisco became the epicentre of progressive change and was a hub of activity during the 60’s hippie and peace movements. The San Francisco Renaissance, organized by Beat forefather, Kenneth Rexroth, were transformative events that allowed Beats and their followers to form a collective in their exploration of cultural exceptionalism, anarchy, eco-activism, and the place of the artist within society. The Beat Generation’s contribution to this renaissance was responsible for much of their fame. They became synonymous with change, revolution, and rebellion. In my thesis, I will focus on how the Beats used their popular, and sometimes infamous, image as a means to disseminate their own political ideologies. Crucial to their influence on the American literary culture and reading publics was how they deconstructed the social tribulations of their time and, in doing so, exposed the hypocrisy of the issues at hand. The Beats used their reading publics, including those within
mainstream middle-class America, to establish a literary identity unique to their counterculture.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the Howl Trial and the effects that this trial had on shaping the popular image of the Beats, the countercultural scene, and Ginsberg’s career. I look at one particular event in Ginsberg’s life, the illness and death of Ginsberg’s mother, Naomi, and discuss how it shaped one of his most renowned works, “Kaddish,” and how he viewed the Cold War. I look at Ginsberg’s most political poems, including, “Howl,” and “America,” and show how they relate to Gregory Corso’s, “Bomb” and “Marriage.” Both Ginsberg and Corso provide the most politically-charged anti-Cold War poems by reflecting how the anxieties and fears that surrounded the Cold War affected how and what they wrote about.

In Chapter 2, I look at how Kerouac used fiction to influence readers in the mass public, but also to contest this image. I focus on Jack Kerouac’s works, *On the Road*, *The Subterraneans*, *Lonesome Traveller*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, and *Big Sur*. Kerouac’s popular image as the ‘King of the Beats’ was responsible for some of the most notorious stereotypes associated with the generation. Furthermore, bridging the modern era with the postmodern, Kerouac was what Beat scholar Ronna C. Johnson calls a “pre-postmodern” writer. In *On the Road* Kerouac wrote a postmodern frontier novel that was a throwback to decades before. The haphazard journey Kerouac’s main characters take represents a quest for the American Dream in the face of a new era.

In Chapter 3, I discuss William S. Burroughs’s works, *Naked Lunch*, *Junky*, and *Queer* to look at how Burroughs’ depiction of the drug culture was influenced by a rising
culture of surveillance and the Lavender Scare. In this chapter, I separate Burroughs’
works from his own life, even though his works were based on his personal knowledge of
drug counterculture. I argue that Burroughs’s fame was a result of his radical
presentation of drug culture as a product of the narcotics legislation at the time.
Burroughs also created a dynamic and convoluted portrayal of the homosexual. He
illuminated the illegitimate identities in America and made them starkly real in his
fiction. The fame (and infamy) his works have gained has come to represent changing
attitudes towards what is considered literature and how to represent American culture.

In Chapter 4, I look at the women of the Beat generation. An often over-looked group
of writers, artists, and poets, female Beats played a part in the development of spaces for
women writers in the 50s and 60s. Beat culture is often associated with masculinity;
indeed, the most famous Beat works (*On the Road, Howl, and Naked Lunch*) are all
narrated by males; however, female Beat writers established a distinct identity within a
culture that associated artistic independence with masculinity and, in doing so, helped to
separate the connection between women and domesticity. For this section of my thesis, I
will connect some works by three female writers, including Anne Waldman, Diane Di
Prima, and Brenda Frazer to examine how each woman portrayed their culture and the
legacy of that culture. Their relationship with the Second-Wave of feminism will also be
discussed. My concern regarding this last point is how their sex and gender influenced
the success of their works. Since the 1950s and 60s were heated decades of sexual
segregation and sex wars, the female writer’s creative voice is crucial to creating a
culture that is inclusive of the female artist.
Overall, my thesis will focus on how the Beats used their popular image as a means to disseminate their own political ideologies during the Cold War. I question how the Cold War, McCarthyism, and the ensuing 60s social-consciousness influenced their works as well as to what degree the Beats influenced their social climate. I end with looking at how the Beats influenced the social and political movements of the 1960s. How were the anarchistic and/or subversive messages of the Beat Generation of the 1950s being interpreted by the culture of the 60s? Similar to other literary movements of the twentieth century, the Beat Generation’s fame was crucial to their success, but also ensured their eventual disintegration. Like their literary predecessors, the Beats have created a legacy that continues to influence how and what readers perceive as literature. Their works have created a legacy that is still relevant today. The Beat goes on.
Chapter 1: The Bomb, the Beat, and Brotherhood

“We were in the middle of an identity crisis prefiguring nervous breakdown for the whole United States” (Ginsberg, “Introduction to Junky,” vii).

You can’t fix it. You can’t make it go away.

I don’t know what you’re going to do about it,

But I know what I’m going to do about it. I’m just

going to walk away from it. Maybe

A small part of it will die if I’m not around

feeding it anymore


In Lew Welch’s, “Chicago Poem,” Chicago is a synecdoche for the modern world. The speaker, while reminiscing on his failed attempts to live in this world, is bidding farewell to his old life, as he seeks greener pastures in the wilderness, stating that even they will become insufferable, industrialized spaces: “The trouble is / always and only with what we build on top of it” (Welch 42-43). The city becomes a “monstrocity” (54) created by people, who suffer at the hands of their own creation. “Chicago Poem” was written shortly after Welch’s nervous breakdown, the first in a series of breakdowns he would suffer throughout his life, which he references in poems such as, “I Saw Myself,” and “Not Yet 40, My Beard is Already White.” Perhaps the most enigmatic Beat, Welch became a chronic traveller, eventually leaving his residence in Big Sur, California, until he disappeared into the mountains near Gary Snyder’s house just outside of Nevada City, California, in the spring of 1971 (Charters 136). Welch’s poetry discusses his lack of firm resolve in life, his fear of urban city centres and encroaching modernization, and his
nostalgia for a more natural world. The most notable symbol in Welch’s poetry is the ring, or the constant revolution of things, encircling all other things. Amongst his fellow Beats, Welch was the poet in the group who expressed the Beat’s iconoclasm most clearly. His means of rebellion was to leave – to just go. Except, unlike friend and fellow poet, Gary Snyder, Welch was unable to come back and shape the culture he felt was destroying him.

In this chapter, I intend to discuss the political climate that surrounded the Beat Generation. I focus specifically on poets Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, who both produced some of the most politically-charged poetry of their era that criticized the Cold War and who, like Welch, used escape – in its many forms – to find inspiration for their works. As part of a generation of writers who used travel as inspiration for their writing, Welch’s act of leaving society altogether signified a desperate attempt to escape the Cold War culture in America. While his fellow Beats wrote about their frustrations with the Cold War and the ensuing Vietnam War, Welch went to the extreme of leaving all behind. He, like other Beats, left society as a means of rebelling against it, except, unlike other Beats, he did not come back to witness the impact his actions would have.

The act of leaving society was what defined the Beats, who sought meaning in life on the decaying fringes of urban city centres or outside of society altogether. The so-called “containment culture” of the 1950s made the United States the “universal container,” according to Alan Nadel in his work, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*. By “containment” Nadel is referring to a “central motif” in the “national narrative,” wherein, “insecurity was absorbed by internal security, internationalism by global strategy, apocalypse and utopia by a Christian theological
mandate, and xenophobia – the fear of the Other – by courtship, the activity in which
Otherness is the necessary supplement to seduction” (Nadel 14). Containment became a
means for the United States to evade the communist threat by presenting a world that
negated the (very real) threat of atomic war. The American Dream became the icon of a
civilized America and synonymous of the ‘free’ West. The dream was founded on the
expectations of a better life that followed World War Two. However, this dream was
gradually becoming destabilized by a culture of surveillance that was also developing in
response to increasing heterogeneity in American society. Civil rights groups were rising
in America, driven by the glaring inequalities that still existed. Segregation laws in the
South fuelled racial tensions that were the ingredients for the following decade’s culture
of protest.

The Beat Generation was born from these tensions that arose throughout the country.
The tensions, especially those that existed between racial and sexual binaries, were the
ingredients for post-war protest poetry, which flourished during the McCarthy Era. A
young Allen Ginsberg began to write his most politically-charged poetry during the 50s
in response to the climate of fear, especially the fear of the Other, that was heating up
during this decade. In 1951, he published several poems that drew parallels between
America and the U.S.S.R., most notably, “A Poem on America” and “After Dead Souls,”
both of which implore readers to think about what America is becoming. In “A Poem on
America” Ginsberg tracks back to the 1930s to find a source for the current woes:

images of the thirties,
depression and class consciousness
transfigured above politics
filled with fire

with the appearance of God. (Ginsberg 17-21)

The last line leaves the lingering question of whom or what is God in post-WWII America? His portrayal of the 1930s corresponds to the changing political landscape during this decade – a landscape that planted the seeds for a new era of war, where God has become the machine of progress: military might, corrupt politics, and corporate power.

In the 1920s, the first Red Scare resulted in politically-driven anti-communist politics to turn into a representative social phenomenon that was to dominate nationalism and freedom for the next thirty years. The fear of communism after the First World War prompted the first Red Scare and measures were taken in the 30s to prevent homegrown communist activity, including tactics that would eventually be employed during the McCarthy Trials decades later. J. Edgar Hoover was appointed to interrogate any suspected communist threat within the American public. He began to compile files of suspects and began a series of investigations carried out by the FBI (Johnson 105). By 1921, Hoover had amassed a list of four-hundred and fifty thousand people. It was during this time that riots, both politically and racially-driven, began to break out throughout the nation. Race riots promoted the growing national fears of insurrection and alienation. Six cities, starting with Washington, dealt with the violent outbreak of racial protest, beginning with white citizens aggressively attacking blacks for fear that black individuals were more likely to sympathize with communism against the capitalist, white supremacist system that had oppressed and segregated them for centuries (Johnson 108).
If the 20s was a paralyzing decade for Hoover and his anti-communist brigade, the 30s, along with the Great Depression, would create a whole new set of fears. Desperation that was dealt with the blows of a failing economy swept through the public. Lack of employment and secure housing, along with a shortage of food resources led to a sway in political sympathies amongst citizens. Revolution was in the air. Hoover caught on to the threat of a mutinous and divided public. In response, he helped to form the House of Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1938.

It was at this time that the term, “un-American” became widespread and advertised as synonymous with the government’s intolerance of sedition against the nation (Johnson 113). The term “un-American” was used to contextualize appropriate attitudes one could have towards their nation. Anyone suspected of “un-American” opinions or activities was considered a potential threat. The Beats, especially Cold War poets such as Ginsberg, used this term to define themselves and redefine what American could and should mean. Ginsberg’s poem, “After Dead Souls” depicts Beat Americanism, which is associated with rediscovering America. In the poem the speaker states, “Where O America are you / going in your glorious / automobile [?]” (Ginsberg 1-3). Ginsberg begins with the journey, or the pilgrimage, to a new America. The automobile then races towards “the sunset / over Golden Gate / toward what wild city / jumping with jazz” (Ginsberg 8-11). The speaker’s America is a new land, full of mystery and promise, and far from the present fears. Ginsberg makes a brief reference to the motif of travelling westward (Golden Gate Bridge), where America can be rediscovered in the jazz clubs and Beat havens of San Francisco. The automobile symbolizes a new era, removing it from its association with modernization. In other words, the machines of modernization
can be used to create a new America. Thus, the “un-American” is embraced by the Beats as the new American in the 1950s, far from the meaning it had during previous decades, especially, and perhaps most importantly, during the Second World War.

By the Second World War, the ‘revolution’ that could have occurred in the 30s was shrouded by a new threat, fascism. In the 30s, fascism, as extolled by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi militia, was threatening Europe and the surrounding countries of Germany’s fellow Axis, Japan and Italy. Between 1931 and 1939, all three countries had invaded neighbours. Germany had seized the Rhineland from France, annexed Austria, and threatened to invade Poland. Japan invaded China, resulting in the devastating Nanking Massacre. Italy had conquered Ethiopia and was threatening further action against surrounding nations. By 1939, the Nazi regime began to instill harsh laws against the Jewish population of Germany. What was to become known as the Holocaust began with the incarceration and displacement of Jews throughout Europe (Ward 16).

Up until the attack on Pearl Harbour, the U.S. remained neutral to the war in Europe and the East. However, Pearl Harbour left the American population in fear of the extent that the Axis would go to threaten Allied forces. The deadly attack on Pearl Harbour prompted the American military to respond immediately, resulting in the shipment of troops overseas, to both Europe and the Far East. The height of the U.S.’s involvement in WWII came fairly late, in 1944, when America was embroiled in a war for the victory in the European and Pacific theaters. In the wake of victory came the realities of war, including the civilian casualties lost in genocide that occurred during the invasion of Russia, Germany, and the imprisonment of Jews. War had devastated parts of Europe and America’s fellow Allies had suffered immense collateral damage.
During the war, with the exception of Pearl Harbour and incidental enemy attacks on transport ships, America had not been threatened on their own soil. The development of policies of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which followed upon the invention of nuclear weapons, opened up the possibility of a supposedly 'cold' war which could be fought in ways distinct from classic "hot," or "shooting" wars. The Cold War was a war of aggressive politics that renewed the anxieties of the pre-war age. However, unlike the Great Depression, the late 40s and 50s were a prosperous time for the U.S. Any threat to this prosperity, including the threat of the expansion of communism, was to be stopped. As Johnson acknowledges in *The Age of Anxiety*, President Truman had set the stage for the next era, prompting fears within his own cabinet that another major war was to be fought, but this time it would involve nuclear power. From issuing the command to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to overseeing the rapid development of hydrogen bombs and nuclear missiles after WWII, Truman successfully expanded American military influence throughout the world. He was also responsible for the creation of NATO, the CIA, and oversaw the stationing of American military forces in fifty nations worldwide (Johnson 132). By the time McCarthy was elected to Senate, the U.S. had been established as a world leader in military power.

The period between 1948 and 1954 was known as the McCarthy Era and was perhaps most infamous for the McCarthy Trials that occurred in the early 50s. The trials reaffirmed, if not celebrated, the ideology of a contained America. Broadcast on television to millions, the McCarthy Trials became a metaphorical ‘witch hunt’ for individuals accused of being communists and those who aided and abetted communism in America. McCarthy took advantage of a vulnerable situation after WWII to engineer a
new threat. After the defeat of fascism during the war, the only remaining threat to America was another political superpower, the U.S.S.R. After the end of WWII, Stalin succeeded in dominating many states which his armies had liberated from the Nazis. He was motivated by one concern: losing power throughout Europe. Over the course of the war, the Soviet Union had managed to relocate almost two million people. The Eastern Bloc, as it would come to be known, served as the barrier from the West and became known as the Iron Curtain. With Germany divided into two separate states, Stalin began the Berlin Blockade, cutting off food and supplies from West Germany in an attempt to control the entire city. When the allies responded with the Berlin Airlift and provided food and supplies to the city, further tensions were ignited between the East and the West. Once Stalin called off the Berlin Blockade, the Soviets began the nuclear arms race, testing and building their own weapons in a heated competition with the West. By the late 40s, the Soviet Union was seen as an aggressive threat and the potential for yet another war loomed over Europe (Wagner 937-938). The Cold War brought about national fears that became the grit of Ginsberg’s and Corso’s works. Attacking this fear head on in their poems established their artistic technique. They used poetry and performance to expose McCarthyism, including its ugly national policies, frightening totalitarianism, and the possibility of nuclear war.

Provoking the growing fears of communism was foundational to Joseph McCarthy’s success. Using the Red Scare of the 1920s as a foundation for his anti-communist campaign, McCarthy rode on the coattails of those before him, including those of J. Edgar Hoover, by reassigning the HUAC with a new task. As Haynes Johnson notes in, *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism*:
It was the mission of the HUAC, as pronounced by its chairman and members, not to draft legislation, but to expose subversive Americans by subjecting them to rigorous publicity – this exposure was generated by the government at the public’s expense. And, because this exposure was free from the constraints of libel laws; because the HUAC operated under grant of congressional immunity, it could not be legally held responsible for defaming people called before it (Johnson 114).

Combined with an escalating arms race, an anti-communist crusade was initiated by the federal government. Propaganda leaflets, infomercials, and advertisements were presented on television, in schools, and in newspapers. The propaganda campaign included documentaries such as *Communism*, which exaggerated the impending takeover of America by communists. Furthermore, in 1953 the Bible became the bestselling book of the year, followed shortly by nonfiction works such as *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) by Norman Vincent Peale and Fulton Oursler and G.A.O. Armstrong’s, *The Greatest Faith Ever Known* (1953), both of which offered advice on how to deal with the anxieties of the present age. Hollywood films were also fuelled with nationalistic rhetoric and communist fears, including *Big Jim McLain* (1952) starring John Wayne as a HUAC agent hunting down communists, and Gregory Peck as a CIA agent in 1954’s *Night People* (Johnson 280-281).

Writers and artists who spoke out against anti-communism or McCarthy were suspected of sedition and, more often than not, put on trial. ‘Witch hunts’ were not only conducted on people, but also on ideologies expressed through art. “Social identity,” cites Nadal, was linked, “directly to questions of national security” (Nadel 24), hence,
culture reflected the politics of the era. Emerging from the Cold War was a new type of poetics, one of which rejected the containment culture by breaking down linguistic and social categories, focusing on the subjective experience, and was amnesic to past forms. Cold War poetry, “suggests that sexual, psychic, and linguistic energies are continually in flux and capable of defying the conventional premises that would keep them in place” (Axelrod 2). Energies built up and eventually led to “crisis poems” (Axelrod 10), in which anguish, trauma, and grief led to a higher consciousness that placed the poet in a liminal space, objective of the culture as a whole. The Beats were amongst a group of authors and artists that responded to the nuclear age by showing a desire to break out of cultural containment. Their crisis poems, such as Ginsberg’s “Howl” and Gregory Corso’s, “Bomb,” illuminated the fears of the time, but also presented how things were changing. In both poems, the poets place an emphasis on how language can create a new way of thinking about the atomic age and how to contend with fears of atomic apocalypse.

**Coming in from the Cold: Allen Ginsberg’s Poetics**

The Howl Trial in 1957 was a reflection of the fears that permeated the culture. Viewed as obscene for its sexual content and anti-American for its anti-capitalist stance, *Howl and Other Poems*, became the focus of an investigation initiated by the San Francisco Collector of Customs, Chester MacPhee, which led to the poem’s infamy. In a statement to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, owner of City Lights Bookstore and Publishers, defended the title poem, “Howl,” by stating, “[t]he San Francisco Collector of Customs deserves a word of thanks for seizing Allen Ginsberg’s, *Howl and Other Poems* and thereby rendering it famous . . . It would have taken years for
critics to accomplish what the good collector did in a day” (Peters 107). His defense of the book initiated a discussion on censorship. Censorship was solely based on the book’s subversive language, without regards to its message. Those who considered it crude and poorly written were missing the function of poetic language as a reflection of the culture it was written in. Ferlinghetti continues in the article to defend the poem, stating that its title poem, “Howl,” “an archetypal configuration of the mass culture which produced it. If it is also the condemnation of our official culture, if it is an unseemly voice of dissent, perhaps this is why officials object to it. . . For it is not the poet but what he observes which is revealed as obscene” (Peters 107). According to Ferlinghetti, the perception of the poem reveals more about the reader and the culture they live in than the poet. The censorship trial that followed the publication of “Howl” would demonstrate the force of the system that he challenged and become symbolic of the long road of change ahead.

As Ferlinghetti observed, “Howl” functioned as a trial to its readers to see beyond the few vulgar words the apocalyptic New York which Ginsberg uses as a microcosm of America. In the poem, Ginsberg declares himself as a comrade of “the best minds of my generation” who were “destroyed by / madness, starving hysterical naked,” (Ginsberg 1-2). The “best minds” are his fellow poets, artists, and outcasts, who have been reduced to living on the outskirts, impoverished by their nation. As Ben Lee notes in his article, “Howl and Other Poems: Is there Old Left in these New Beats?”:

[“Howl”] is full of expressions of longing, layered one on top of the other, and certainly not all are melancholic gestures toward a former faith in left collectivity and political agency. There are longings here for love (often a trope for longing itself), for male-male sexual relations or camaraderie, for the means to express a
self that feels infinite, and for the public acknowledgement of this capacious, God-like self and its capacity for poetry (Lee 375).

There are longings for a shift in politics and a change in the attitude of the American government towards difference. A longing for community. Ginsberg expresses his longing for an ideal communion between brother artists and poets. In the poem, the speaker desires to be with his brethren even in the worst circumstances. Together these authors are united against a world of uncertainty and hypocrisy. Yet, the speaker’s acknowledgment of a community is also what makes the poem hopeful. Ginsberg makes a strong argument against capitalism, viewing it as a greater threat than communism. However, Ginsberg’s loyalties were not with the Soviet Union, despite his allegiance against capitalism. Ginsberg was mostly concerned with achieving a communal force against the exploitation of individuals and of nuclear warfare. To Ginsberg, the nuclear bomb “was an all-inclusive metaphor” that required a new consciousness (Raskin xiv). For those without the power to control how it was used, the imperative was to focus on creation.

“Howl” reads like a diatribe, honouring social resistance against the industrialist, capitalist monster, “Moloch,” while also acknowledging that the fate of the artist in society is doomed – or so, at least, Ginsberg predicts. The poem is dedicated to Ginsberg’s friend and fellow poet, Carl Solomon. Solomon becomes the central figure in Part III, with the speaker reassuring his friend: “Carl Solomon! I am with you in Rockland / where you are madder than I am (Ginsberg 1-2) . . . I am with you in Rockland / where you imitate the shade of my mother” (5-6). Ginsberg’s subtle reference to his mother foreshadows the following lines, “I am with you in Rockland / where you
scream in a straightjacket that you are losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss” (26-29) and “where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void” (34-37). Rockland is a reference to the Rockland Psychiatric Hospital and is a substitute for Columbia Presbyterian Psychological Institute. The former institution is where Ginsberg met Solomon. The latter was where Naomi, Ginsberg’s mother, was lobotomized after being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia; (Raskin 26). Ginsberg’s use of anaphora and the repetition of images of the institution makes the institution a site of mourning, but also symbolic of his union with Solomon and the literary revolution that they represent. The images of violence, such as references to electric shock treatment, are a protest against the treatment of psychiatric patients. Ginsberg’s familiarity with mental institutions showed him a world that practiced inhumane treatments against those deemed abnormal. Electric shock treatment, frontal lobotomies, hormone therapy, and the sedation of psychiatric patients made them more like prisoners of a cruel scientific experiment than patients in need of treatment.

The poem also addresses Ginsberg’s homosexuality – something he uses as a symbol to expose the inhumane treatment of those considered different. It may also be targeting the Lavender Scare. The Lavender Scare accompanied the Cold War. During this time, thousands of homosexuals were deemed a security threat and were subsequently investigated, interrogated, and discriminated against. According to Andrea Friedman in her article, “The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics,” anti-homosexual campaigns were an extension of anti-communism. Both campaigns used the same strategies and employed the same rhetoric against each threat.
Friedman explains that communism and homosexuality were seen as “lacking masculine autonomy that enabled loyalty to the nation” (Friedman). Both groups were portrayed as slaves to their desires. Ginsberg’s expression of desire for his friend and fellow poet, Solomon, is a protest against the vilification of homosexuality and also symbolic of the desperation felt by others oppressed by McCarthyism. He expresses this desire most clearly in Part III of the poem, where he states near the end of the poem, “I’m with you in Rockland / where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the / United States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep” (Ginsberg 271-273). In these lines, Ginsberg interweaves his desires for male comradeship (whether homosocial or homosexual) with his own sense of patriotism. To “kiss the United States under our bedsheets” implies a secret love for his country, one that he is forced to hide from the public. Homosociality in “Howl” is not only a means to subvert and protest oppressive views on sexuality, but also a way to connect men together against the oppressive politics of the nation. Ginsberg’s use of the word “comradeship” suggests a comradeship of artists against the Cold War. The word expresses the desire to rise from the oppressive conditions that artists lived in and encompasses a social revolution.

In Part III Solomon and Naomi become indiscernible figures of resistance. One can be substituted for the other and both haunt the memory of the speaker, who suggests that they represent the only hope for America. They are “the best minds” that have been “destroyed by madness.” Both were institutionalized and subjected to the inhumane medical practices, which Ginsberg regarded as a consequence of not being normal in society. As Lee further notes, it was the mad ones who Ginsberg saw as the only hope in saving America from totalitarianism:
Images of a mental patient dreaming of revolution, or of the institutionalized joining together to sing the Communist Party anthem, are composites. They are meant to suggest that the cultural resources of the prewar Left have not disappeared in the postwar moment, that the costs of a fervent belief in social transformation are high in either case, and that the past and present can only be redeemed together (Lee 384).

Lee suggests that the pre-war communisms of the 1920s and 30s, Leninism and Stalinism, must be considered in the context of the Cold War. For instance, Ginsberg’s optimistic view of communism had its roots in his mother’s political leanings. Naomi strongly identified with communism and working-class culture (Raskin 26). Along with her husband, Louis, Naomi encouraged her son to pursue a career in social justice, which Ginsberg was fated for at Columbia University until his love for literature replaced his ambition to become a labour lawyer. By the time that Ginsberg had graduated from university in 1948 his mother had received a frontal lobotomy, for which Allen had signed. After spending nearly a decade in and out of mental institutions, Naomi died of a brain hemorrhage in Pilgrim State Hospital in 1956.

Unable to perform a kaddish, or a traditional Jewish hymn of praise, at Naomi’s funeral Ginsberg wrote the long, autobiographical poem, “Kaddish” (Raskin 116). Once again the poem begins within a claustrophobic urban setting and “Kaddish” transforms into a belated eulogy, one that is written in Ginsberg’s long-line, Whitmanian style with frequent dashes that pause on each image. The two parts of the poem separate two episodes in Naomi’s illness, her youth and her rapid decline after she became ill. The speaker narrates the poem to his mother and relates her experiences in institutions as a
symptom of a larger cultural illness. Naomi’s “apocalypse,” or her delusional fear of impending death by gas chambers, is a reference to the Cold War climate. The speaker states, “[d]reaming back thru life, Your time--and mine accelerating toward Apocalypse” (Ginsberg I.12-13). Ginsberg’s use of “apocalypse” may simply be a metaphor for his mother’s death. However, it may also be an expression of Ginsberg’s own fears. He is not only afraid of the memories of his mother’s mental breakdown, but also the potential of his own. From the outset of the poem, the speaker places himself in his mother’s footsteps:

as I walk towards the Lower East Side – where you walked 50 years ago, little girl
– from Russia, eating the
first poisonous tomatoes of America – frightened on the dock –
then struggling in the crowds of Orchard Street toward what? – toward Newark –
towards candy store, first home-made sodas of the century, hand-churned ice cream in the backroom on musty brownfloor boards –
Toward education marriage nervous breakdown, operation, teaching school,
and learning to be mad, in a dream – what is this life?
(Ginsberg I. 34-37).

As he attempts to retrace her life, Ginsberg finds few answers to her fated illness, but is instead left to think of his place within the society where she went mad. In line 35 in the above passage, the speaker itemizes his mother’s life, almost as a way to re-track, or to make sense, of her life, and connect it to the larger culture. Education is a synonym for institutionalization, followed by another institution, marriage. Nervous breakdown follows, with no commas to separate each word. The speaker illustrates Naomi’s life to
be a series of tragedies, instigated by how she was perceived by society – insane. She lived going in and out of institutions, with no escape of her eventual fate.

The final line of this passage emphasizes the previous line’s theme of institutionalization. Naomi learned to be mad; in other words, society taught her to be mad. “In a dream” may refer to the ambiguity between reality and fantasy, or delusion, which was a symptom of Naomi’s schizophrenia, but may also be a symptom of larger issues in society. The separation of American ideology and the realities of the Cold War stand in for this allusion. In the above passage, Ginsberg uses Naomi’s illness as a metaphor for the contradictions he sees, between how America should be, and the actions of nuclear war that they proposed. The utopic America that was advertised in magazines and on television conflicted with the increasing threat of an atomic war.

According to Tony Trigilio in his article, “Will You Please Stop Playing with the Mantra?: The Embodied Poetics of Ginsberg’s Later Career,” “Kaddish” and “Howl” “blur the boundaries between oppositional conceptual frameworks – such as between song and concentration [prayer], or between East and West.” The poems, “combine metaphysical and materialist modes of representation in revisionary poetic prophecy (Trigilio 188). “Kaddish” is both an elegy and a reaction to traditional modes of mourning in literature. It is written as a stream-of-consciousness poem that functions to recall emotional memory and Ginsberg’s witnessing of his mother’s illness, yet prophetic language meets the speaker’s recitation of real memories, recalled in vivid detail. He traces his mother’s illness alongside the century’s biggest events, including the rise of communism, the Great Depression, and world war. He recalls, “[f]irst nervous breakdown was 1919—she stayed home from school / and lay in a dark room for three
weeks—something bad—never said what / —every noise hurt—dreams of the creaks of Wall Street ” (Ginsberg II.71-73). Naomi becomes the prophet much like Carl Solomon in “Howl,” except her prophecy of a ‘Great Depression’ also foretells her own downfall. Ginsberg pieces together fragmented memories with prayer. Throughout her illness, and her many trips to and from mental institutions to receive electric shock therapy, a young Ginsberg became close to his mother (Raskin 25). The intimacy that developed between them is revealed by Naomi’s trust in her son. Naomi shared her paranoid secrets with her son, giving Ginsberg a glimpse into the severity of her schizophrenia. Even though Naomi was clearly suffering from a mental illness, there was a greater significance to her paranoia that was telling of the culture she was in. Ginsberg makes the connection between his mother’s paranoia and paranoia in the nation, as he narrates in the following passage:


“Kaddish” became one of Ginsberg’s most renowned poems that, despite its chaotic verse, stream-of-consciousness style, and use of anaphora, has moments of clarity. At the end of the poem, Ginsberg recalls his mother’s instructions to help her out of the institution, which were given to him in a note two days before her death. In the following passage, Naomi’s words become a metaphor for Ginsberg’s life:
Srul Avrum—Israel Abraham—myself—to sing in the wilderness toward God—
O Elohim!—so to the end—2 days after her death I got her letter—

Strange Prophecies anew! She wrote—‘The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key—Get married Allen don’t take drugs—the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window.

Love,

your mother’

which is Naomi— (Ginsberg II.500-507).

Naomi’s last few words in the letter, “the key is in the bar, in the sunlight in the window,” acts as a metaphor to explain her own insanity. The key is a metaphorical key; a piece of parental advice and Ginsberg ends his poem with explicit clarity. Throughout the poem, Ginsberg uses a haphazard form, repeated dashes as caesuras and jumbles memories with metaphor in order to represent that totality of his mother’s insanity, but, by the end of the poem, the message is clear.

In his poem, “America,” Ginsberg subverts the ideology of the American Dream by presenting his own frustrations with these ideologies. The poem is a direct protest against Cold War politics and the persecution of communist sympathizers. When Ginsberg states, “America when will we end the human war” (Ginsberg 4) he is talking about the Cold War (Raskin xv). The use of “we” suggests that everyone in America, including Ginsberg himself, is responsible for the continuation of war. He continues in the following lines to attack the military-industrial complex, when he states, “Your
machinery is too much for me. / You made me want to be a saint. / There must be some other way to settle this argument” (Ginsberg 17-19). The “argument” to be settled is détente and Ginsberg believes that nuclear war is not the answer. The America illustrated by Ginsberg is a colonizer and capitalist, yet, he also parallels his country to himself, when he states, “It occurs to me that I am America / I am talking to myself again” (Ginsberg 64-65). Up until this point, Ginsberg confesses his sympathies for communism; however, when he mirrors himself with America, the poem takes a turn. By mirroring himself as America, Ginsberg issues the central argument of the poem: that all Americans, whether communist or capitalist, Jewish or Christian, straight or gay, are Americans. As a result, all are affected by decisions made by those in power. America is imprisoned by its own ideologies, imprisoned by its media, which are leading it to war: “America you don’t really want to go to war / America it’s them bad Russians” (Ginsberg 91-92). The speaker critiques how the media has created the Cold War climate and with it widespread paranoia. He simultaneously admits his loyalties to socialism while also confessing his desire to belong to the country by the end of the poem when he states, “America I am putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (Ginsberg 93). The poem attempts to open up the containment culture that was created, in part, by the media.

“America” reveals that not only is Ginsberg anti-capitalist, but he is also queer – in other words, Ginsberg directly outs himself, which would have been considered a bold confession in the 50s. Whether for protest of personal reasons, Ginsberg’s outing of himself is a crucial element of his confessional works. Ginsberg’s confession of his queerness in “America” may be a response to the smearing of McCarthy after the Lavender Scare. In 1954, shortly after McCarthy was censored from the Senate,
McCarthy found himself the subject of gossip in the media regarding his own relationship with White House attorney, Roy Cohn. The malicious gossip that surrounded McCarthy further denounced him as not only unethical, but also hypocritical and fraudulent (Friedman). Ginsberg’s admission of his homosexuality dislocated the connection between sexuality and secrecy. Raskin states that the poem “reflected and furthered the intimal crumbling of the anti-communist crusade” (Raskin 183). By 1956, when the poem was written, McCarthy had been censored by the U.S. Senate and his anti-communist brigade had all but dissipated. Even though there were still fears of communism, the McCarthy Trials had left the Senate with a marked reputation. There was growing public distrust in the government and the Senate targeted McCarthy as the cause, which Ginsberg epitomizes in “America.” By 1957, shortly after “America” was published, McCarthy was condemned for abuse of ethics and the denunciation of the Watkins Committee, a committee in charge of his censoring, as fraudulent and deceptive (Johnson 437). By the end of the McCarthy era, McCarthyism had come to represent the threat of a contained and, to the Beats, a totalitarian, society.

**Fearing the Bombdeath: Gregory Corso’s “Bomb”**

Another Beat poet who captured the apocalyptic fears of the time was Gregory Corso in his poem, “Bomb.” In “Bomb” (1958) Corso refuses to take the atomic threat seriously and instead proclaims, “O Bomb I love thee” (Corso 162). To Corso, the fear of atomic war has distracted people from the desire to live and the fear of everyday threats. His poem juxtaposes a pastiche of images referencing death. Corso speaks to the bomb and places it’s terror beside other forms of death. He states, “All Man hates you they'd rather die by car-crash lightning drowning / Falling off a roof electric-chair
heart-attack  old age  old age  O Bomb / They'd rather die by anything but you” (Corso 9-11). Corso belittles the fear of the bomb and reminds the reader that “Death’s finger is free-lance” (Corso 11) and that death kills with “extravagance” (Corso 13). By repeating “old age” twice Corso emphasizes the inevitability, yet the distance, of death. Unlike Ginsberg’s apocalyptic terror in “Howl” and “Kaddish,” Corso uses humour to resist the atomic fear and replaces it with possibility. The poem lays out Corso’s irony:

I do not know just how horrible Bombdeath is I can only imagine
Yet no other death I know has so laughable a preview I scope
a city New York City streaming starkeyed subway shelter
Scores and scores A fumble of humanity High heels bend
Hats whelming away Youth forgetting their combs
Ladies not knowing what to do with their shopping bags (Corso 21-26).

In this passage, New York becomes chaos before the fall of the bomb. As Christine Kraemer Hoff notes in, "The Brake Of Time: Corso's Bomb As Postmodern God(Dess)," Corso provides a fragmented catalogue of images, much like Ginsberg in “Howl.” She notes specifically that both poems express, “the absurdity of the human condition,” while playing with the idea that it is just a dream, or a hallucination (Hoff Kraemer). Both poets also portray atomic power parallel to a new religion. Corso’s poem becomes almost a prayer or a chant to the bomb. Hoff Kraemer states, “[t]hroughout the poem, Corso equates the bomb with various incarnations of the godhead, speaking of it in religious terms and assigning it cosmic powers of creation and destruction. The poet’s suggestion that the technological bomb might serve as a partial replacement for God, however, carries serious metaphysical consequences” (Hoff Kraemer). By replacing god,
the bomb has become a symbol of a new, atheistic, and technologically deterministic age, one that is ruled by a military-industrial complex and a strong sense of competition between nations. Those who have the capability of using the bomb inevitably will kill themselves. Corso and Ginsberg recognize the self-destructive, if not suicidal, tendencies of the United States and show how absurd reality is. Both poets also connect atomic fear with capitalism. Ginsberg’s numerous references to the bomb in “Howl” portray it as a menacing evil, “Moloch,” used by society against its own people. Corso, on the other hand, makes it synonymous with a Christ-like figure when he states, “the earth will madonna the Bomb / that in the hearts of men to come more bombs will be born / magisterial bombs wrapped in ermine” (Corso 300-302). The bomb, as Hoff Kraemer states, is “both the creator and destroyer of worlds (Hoff Kraemer) and is unlike the God of the Judeo-Christian faith. Corso’s bomb god is appropriate for the Cold War.

Corso critiques Cold War containment in his satirical poem, “Marriage,” which targets the institution of marriage by equating it with death. He begins the poem with the famous lines: “Should I get married? Should I be good? / Astound the girl next door with my velvet suit and faustus hood? / Don’t take her to movies but to cemeteries” (Corso 1-3). In “Marriage” Corso’s speaker contemplates the value of marriage. He is torn between conforming to society’s expectations and his own desires to be part of a different world. Corso depicts marriage as a prison. His identity is reduced to the very limitations of his conventional lifestyle. The speaker imagines the consequences of a sheltered life, “it’s Connecticut and snow / and she gives birth to a child and I am sleepless, worn, / up for nights, head bowed against a quiet window, the past behind me, / finding myself in the most common of situations a trembling man” (Corso 67-70). The speaker believes
that he is unfit for marriage. He blends his love for art and poetry into his conventional lifestyle and realizes the two cannot cohabit. The sacrifices of marriage are too great. Corso’s poem is not a protest, but a proclamation; a confession. Yet another quality he shares with Ginsberg is his practice of confessional poetics—an unabashedly frank portrayal of his perspectives on controversial issues. Corso’s confessionalism also created his distinct poetical voice. The speakers in his poems, especially those in his most famous work, *Gasoline*, exemplify what Ginsberg called Beat “nakedness,” “nakedness” being a reference to the rawness of their poetry where all details are revealed in order to reach a truth about the poet (Morgan 122). “Marriage” reveals Corso’s fears of commitment and of containment, but also of loneliness. The speaker’s dilemma represents the ultimatum with which he feels society presents him. Marriage is the only legitimate way to be “good” and acceptable in society. Where love is concerned, the speaker is ambivalent, since he does not equate marriage to love. He concludes the poem by reassuring himself that there must be a woman out there who is like him. The poem is both a personal statement presenting the poet’s dilemma, as well as a political satire portraying marriage as a symbol of containment.

**Language, Violence, and Confession:**

During the 1950s, confessional poetry responded to the politicization of culture by the media. Confessional poetry required the reader, or listener, to be intimately involved with the speaker/poet; thus, breaking down the boundary between the public and private spaces that were normally a part of the social context of everyday life. The impulse to confess helped to define and determine the fate of the Beat Generation. Whereas fellow poets at the time, such as Frank O’Hara and Elizabeth Bishop, wrote about similar issues
in a metaphorical context, Corso and Ginsberg personalize their narratives, founded on autobiography, and tread the difficult territory of confessionalism.

The thematic interjection of Beat confessional poetry and public protest is one of the most notable markers of the generation. Both Corso and Ginsberg, more so than Kerouac and Burroughs, merge politics with the personal experiences of everyday life, creating a form of protest poetry that stems from the personal desire for change. By doing so, the poet becomes far more than a literary figure, but also a social critic. One of the most significant effects of protest poetry is the connection made between language and violence. The poet’s language is able to convey the challenging issues that a nation faces in the style and rhetoric of his or her works. The poet’s presence is likened to that of a prophet or teacher, and is far removed from the political rhetoric that surrounds war that separates individuals based on nationalities. Specifically, anti-Vietnam War poetry was popularized during the mid-sixties, along with the popularity of folk music, and promoted peace. Unlike Cold War poetry, anti-Vietnam War poetry was more concerned with increasing violence in the East. The loss of young lives, combined with the use of Napalm, and the widespread civilian deaths that resulted, transformed Vietnam into a controversial war that resonated throughout the Beat counterculture of the 1960s.

Corso and Ginsberg were active figures in the formation and popularization of the 1960s counterculture. In particular, Ginsberg represented a new ethos for a community of (mostly young) people who deemed the conformist attitudes and aggressive consumerism of the previous decade a cause for the social and political issues of the time. Ginsberg provided artists and poets an access to the youth culture that was to become known as the “hippies.” Along with his renowned connection to Buddhism, Ginsberg led
anti-Vietnam protests and was in favour of dismantling the government of the time. His radical roots served him in becoming a guru of new age protest and vision. By 1965, Ginsberg had reached his peak fame. His poetry had evolved to incorporate the radical politics espoused by anti-Vietnam protesters and musicians. More so than other Beats, Ginsberg was concerned with the public influence of his generation. His poetry transitioned easily to spoken word and he was known for performance. Poetry, when combined with an audience of like-minded people, could achieve a political force and birth new communities. The popularization of Ginsberg’s works was achieved by the poet himself, who served as a spokesman for his generation and acted as middle-man for the press to have access to the activities he and his fellow Beats were up to. Until his death, Ginsberg was actively involved with promoting free speech by publishing material that he was aware would be considered risqué. His design was to achieve a readership and a conversation in order to legitimize any topic in print.

Ginsberg’s and Corso’s uses of language refuse to be contained within the territory of official language; instead, there is a subversion of boundaries both in how the poets structure their poems and how the poems are read. For example, “Howl” uses anaphora to show how the poem redoubles on itself, tracking back to the first part of each line in order to connect one thought, and one image, to the next. The reader can see that the chaos is all connected within the poem. For example, Ginsberg repeatedly uses the word “who” at the beginning of lines throughout the poem when describing ‘the best minds’ of his generation. The Beat Generation are those people,

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of
cities contemplating jazz, . . .

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkan-
sas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,

who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes

on the windows of the skull (Ginsberg I.10-23).

The use of “who” connects all of the activity in the poem in one context – they are all
part of the Beat Generation, a community that would later inspire the 60s community of
anti-war protesters. Likewise, Corso’s “Bomb” creates a collection of separate images
that build the connection between the speaker and his main theme, the bomb. The
“bomb” is a holy figure at the beginning of the poem, one that the speaker worships; it is
god-like and he “loves” it. The bomb-god is replaced by the reality of atomic warfare.
The bomb becomes a symbol for the seemingly endless worldwide conflicts. The
speaker’s tone finally turns to anger, and is directed at describing the bomb as ‘unholy,’
in the first lines of this except. The bomb exists in its own separate hell:

There is a hell for bombs
They're there I see them there
They sit in bits and sing songs
mostly German songs
And two very long American songs
and they wish there were more songs
especially Russian and Chinese songs
and some more very long American songs
Poor little Bomb that'll never be
an Eskimo song (Corso 87-96).

The speaker connects the bomb to their “songs,” perhaps metaphorical for patriotism; the song representing anthems of nationality, of power and hegemony, and, as revealed by the last two lines, of colonialism. Bombs are weapons of colonialism, ones that some nations are too disenfranchised to have. The speaker’s voice represents the rhetoric of a generation to come, one that understood the dangers of nuclear war, and protested the unfair politics attached to nuclear power.

Critics have connected the 60s hippie subculture with the Beats, noting how the New Left arose from the same geographical regions that were formerly occupied by Beats, as well as how the hippies made Beat bohemianism into a political stance against corrupt politics. They actively engaged in politics that were synonymous with socialism. The elements that allowed for the birth of the hippie movement included the baby boom, economic and social prosperity in the middle class during the 50s, the idealism espoused by the Civil Rights’ Movement, as well as feminism. They used art, music, and literature, to create a community that was focused on protesting for a new vision of society. However, unlike the hippies, the Beats were more concerned with achieving an artistic identity in the face of uncertainty. Beat politics were varied and there was no consensus amongst them over what they should protest. Ginsberg’s influence in the 60s is perhaps most significant is how he transferred his own feelings about the Cold War to Vietnam. Ginsberg deemed the war a corrupt extension of the Cold War. In his collection, *The Fall of America*, written between 1965 and 1971, Ginsberg condemns the war and establishes his comradeship with the new generation of protestors. In his poem, “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” Ginsberg juxtaposes images of Kansas to that of Vietnam, linking the
conservatism of the heartland with the violence in Vietnam and elsewhere. Ginsberg takes especial aim at the temperance crusader, Carry Nation, who began a temperance movement in Wichita, for helping to bring in an age of intolerance that reached far beyond her country:

Carry Nation began the war in Vietnam here

with an angry smashing ax

attacking Wine –

Here fifty years ago, by her violence

began a vortex of hatred that defoliated the Mekong Delta (Ginsberg II.494-497).

Ginsberg continues after this passage to describe the same intolerance that led to his mother’s lobotomy and her eventual death. Throughout the poem, he uses images from the media to illustrate the containment culture that surrounds the poet. He also attempts to convey meaning and sense to his surroundings, but instead replaces sense with a pastiche of winding images of the United States and Vietnam. In the United States the newspapers claim, “Vietnam War Brings Prosperity,” (II.63) but Ginsberg can see that the war is a “human meat market” (II.73). He takes a direct hit at capitalism and the media that supports its form of neocolonialism: “The war is language / language abused / for Advertisement” (II. 26-28). The language used is a “magical formula” for power and control over other nations. In other words, wars are the product of the manipulation of language to fit the colonial intentions of America. Ginsberg further argues that these colonial intentions, in the guise of foreign policy, have created the paranoia culture in America. He writes, “of oriental anxiety molecules / that’ve imagined American Foreign Policy /and magick’d up paranoia in Peking / and curtains of living blood /
surrounding far Saigon” (Ginsberg II.219-223). As Cary Nelson notes, “[m]uch more than most poets, [Ginsberg] recognizes that the war for the majority of Americans was only language and photography” (Nelson). The media-driven war had become part of a national illusion. “Wichita Vortex Sutra” is an example of Ginsberg’s most political poems. His anti-war rhetoric parallels that of the 60s anti-war protests; however, Ginsberg manages to bring the realities of war to home soil, showing readers the distinct connection between the Vietnam War and neocolonial attitudes in America. He writes, “Napalm and black clouds emerging in newprint / Flesh soft as a Kansas girl’s / ripped open by metal explosion” (Ginsberg II.189-191). Ginsberg transfers the horrors of war onto American soil, forcing readers to imagine how war would affect their lives. The violence is transformed into language – his gritty descriptions of “bullet shock, bayonet electricity / bomb blast terrific in skull and belly, shrapneled throbbing meat” (Ginsberg II.194-195). The violence he describes is then transformed into the war on the airwaves, or the linguistic violence being committed against the people: “While this American nation argues war: / conflicting language, language / proliferating in airwaves / filling the farmhouse ear, filling” (Ginsberg II.196-199). The language becomes the bullets and, like war, threatens to spread to every part of the country. The language war is a vortex, sucking the life of the country into it.

Ginsberg’s focus on linguistic violence, or the use of language to rationalize violence against others, shows how the media has become a tool for neocolonialism and how language, like weapons, are used to threaten people into submission. As a poet, Ginsberg has always been concerned with rethinking the uses of language. His experimental literary style parallels his frequent interjections of radical politics and is a testament to
thinking beyond official language and outside of the political containment culture. In “Witchta Vortex Sutra,” like “Howl” and “America,” the poet show how language can be used to defend oneself against the corruption. He ends “Witchita Vortex Sutra” with mentioning his personal cause to change the use of language:

Witchita

cast the first stone! –

That murdered my mother

who died of the communist anticommunist psychosis

in the madhouse one decade long ago

complaining about wires of masscommunication in her head

and phantom political voices in the air

...

Many another has suffered death and madness

in the Vortex (Ginsberg II.499-508).

Ginsberg once again connects his mother’s illness to the greater social disorder, which he names the “Vortex.” As he shows in the above lines, social disorder becomes internalized, as it did with his mother. The culture of paranoia that was built throughout the twentieth century, erupting in the 1950s, drove his mother into madness. To defend against this madness Ginsberg offers the solution of transforming language, using it as a tool for protest and to expose the social disorder that corrupts.

Both Ginsberg and Corso were part of a ‘transition era’ in poetry, which began with the attitudes espoused by Lew Welch. Beat poets used their poetry to express their dissatisfaction with the culture of fear and containment during the McCarthy decade.
Ginsberg’s poetry paralleled this culture to the lives he knew were affected by it and created confessional poetry that exposes, satirizes, and denounces the containment. His confessionalism sought to reveal the underlying troubles in America. Likewise, Corso’s poetry took an absurdist and satirical angle on the culture, encompassing the unresolved tensions between America and Russia that remained in a seemingly hopeless stalemate. Ginsberg and Corso’s Beat rhetoric and bohemianism evolved into protest poetry in the 1960s, ushering in the subversive attitudes the new youth movement had towards their government. In the 60s, McCarthyism began to be shunned by the nation that had once submitted to it. A liberal culture that promoted radical change rolled in, established by the artists who pushed for it in the previous decade. Ultimately, Beats were formed from the system they protested.
Chapter 2: On the Road to the Postmodern: Jack Kerouac and the Post-WWII Literary Frontier

[The Duluoz Legend] forms one enormous comedy, seen through the eyes of poor Ti Jean (me), otherwise known as Jack Duluoz; the world of raging action and folly and also of gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye (Kerouac i).

Kerouac’s canon of works is an index of a writer’s role during the Cold War and the early sixties. His works comprise what he called, “The Duluoz Legend,” a collection of semi-autobiographical novels. The eclecticism of this collection, which ranges from the neo-Frontier adventures of a young writer in On the Road (1957), to Kerouac’s account of his conflicted spiritualism in Desolation Angels (1965), to the writings of his lacklustre travels in Lonesome Traveler (1960), and his embodiment of the fifties underground jazz life in his affair with African-American Mardou Fox in The Subterraneans (1958), show the influences other literary forms had on Kerouac’s works. In this chapter, I will use these works to argue that Kerouac is a pre-postmodernist writer in his style and technique of writing; in other words, Kerouac was part of the emergence of the postmodern, representing a transitional era that was connected to the larger politics of the Cold War.

In her article, “Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence,” Ronna C. Johnson connects Kerouac’s iconic status to the mainstream acceptance of the Beat counterculture and argues that Kerouac defined a generation of transitional writers, stating, “Kerouac's hybrid literary forms and composition techniques – amalgamations of African-American cultural and musical styles with canonical European-derived literary ones – manifest his pivotal status” (Johnson). The literary forms that influenced Kerouac’s works, especially the trope of the American Character in On the Road, revive a tradition based on a well-
known archetype within American literature that reasserts the white, masculine tradition, one that connected to the tradition found in Frontier narratives. Kerouac’s “pivotal status” was the revival of the Frontier narrative during an era of aggressive politics and Cold War containment. Finally, I will include the effects that celebrity had on shaping Kerouac’s pre-postmodernist status and how celebrity affected his place in the said tradition.

The Transitional Era: Kerouac, Cold War Containment, and Beatnik ‘Cool’

Cold War America stimulated the restoration of the culture of domesticity in the new and ever-growing suburban sprawl on the outskirts of cities. By the fifties, popular media had become incorporated into the daily lives of individuals with the inclusion of the television in most homes. As a result, literary culture was defined by the media practice that sought to commercialize the containment culture and McCarthyism. Difference, as outlined in the Introduction of this thesis, was met with distrust. Individuals who did not conform to the containment were regarded as outsiders.

The American public initially viewed the Beat Generation, who strove to find an alternative identity in a post-war world, as a caricature; a comedic interval between low and high American aesthetics. Beats were underground hipsters that defined cool, but they also held beliefs and values most Americans shunned. To the middle-class public, the Beats were synonymous with communists, hence, the term, “beatnik,” a derogatory label used to stereotype Beats as anti-American. The “nik” suffix resembled “sputnik,” the world’s first satellite which, to America’s humiliation, had been launched in 1957 by the Soviet Union (Evans 154). Much to the chagrin of Kerouac and his fellow Beats, this
stereotype was exploited through the media and became synonymous with other countercultural movements taking place, including bikers, greasers, and punks – all of which were placed in the unfavourable category of Otherness. Popular films and their title characters showed some of American culture’s most controversial characteristics. James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause (1956) and Marlon Brando in The Wild One (1953), along with the Charles F. Haas’s film noir, The Beat Generation (1959), are famous examples of how Beat culture was becoming synonymous with the underground, dissident, culture, or perhaps best known as the culture of the dangerous, edgy, new ‘cool.’

The dangerous dynamic was attractive because it presented a life far removed from suburbia, to a place where social ethics regarding sex, race, and sexuality were actively subverted or abolished altogether. Beatnik culture was seen as an ‘anything goes’ type of culture, replacing suburban homogeneity with the postmodern advent of cultural heterogeneity. The heterogeneity of beatnik culture reeked of everything the nuclear family strove not to be: radical, disobedient, and unresponsive to social expectations. The radical aspects of Beat culture drew attention to the most controversial characteristics of the Beats, resulting in the Beats becoming a spectacle. The media saw the Beat culture as a representation of a change coming; however, it was uncertain what this change would bring. This is highlighted by writer and former jazz age bohemian, Lawrence Lipton, in his famous survey of the Beat Generation, The Holy Barbarians (1959). In his analysis, Lipton portrays the beatniks as a wild generation of uncouth youth, who pushed boundaries in ways never seen before. The novel’s subtitle boasts, “At last the complete story of the “Beats” – that hip, cool, frantic generation of new Bohemians who are
turning the American scale of values inside out” (Lipton). It is complete with a glossary of slang terms used by beatniks. *The Holy Barbarians* serves as a guide for non-beatniks on how to understand beatniks and imitate, or mock, their style and vernacular without committing to the Beat lifestyle. According to Lipton, the Beat Generation represented the “the explosive mix of the new avant-garde, while returning to the primitive spiritualism of cultures outside of Western understanding. Beats want to maintain a signature, mystic status that could infect a whole generation of youth” (Lipton 24). The problem with *The Holy Barbarians* is that it places the new bohemians into a typically negative context (for instance, Lipton’s repeated use of the word “primitive” and “archaic” portrays the Beats as backwards, not necessarily grounded or connected to their roots. In other words, the Beats have devolved from the previous generation). *The Holy Barbarians* was published in 1959, the apex of the Beat Generation, and remained a popular book for several years as the Beat Generation gradually transformed into sixties hippies, while others, such as Kerouac, dropped out of the spotlight as a means to escape the growing craze that followed their lifestyles.

Similar to *Howl*, *On the Road’s* infamy added to the Beat Generation’s reputation as literary radicals of the new youth movement underway. The pressure to form a public image as a writer inevitably connected Kerouac’s writings to a line of American male writers, representative of a masculinized literary tradition in America, including, most notably, Walt Whitman. Kerouac’s works live up to the tradition of the neo-Transcendentalist narrative – one equipped with the ethos of a former generation. In particular, Whitman’s emphasis on discovering freedom through travel. In *On the Road* the narrator discovers this dream through discovering the land and its people, suggesting
that the dream he sought was far removed from the suburban middle-class containment. Kerouac’s pre-postmodernist literary style was informed by the journey he took to write *On the Road* – it is seemingly plotless, haphazard, and without boundaries. Characters come and go and there is no centre to the book, no apex, but pieces of fragmented memories strung together. The driving force behind the novel is the relationship behind Dean and Sal, which is to be discussed, as well as the frequent references Kerouac (as Sal) makes to questing subjects in literature that came before him. When these two factors are tied together, *On the Road* sits in a transitional era between a new, unrecognized postmodern world and that of an older narrative form, one that is informed by a lineage Frontier and Creation stories. For instance, Sal describes the landscape as “unknown,” and “mysterious,” (Kerouac 44) as if it has yet to be discovered. The road becomes his way of life and the rhetoric he uses to describe his surroundings show an ideal picture of what he considers to be a more authentic America, one on the outskirts of modern society, and one that seems, to him, as untouched by modernization. He states in chapter two, that the “golden land” lays before him with “all kinds of unforeseen events wait lurking to surprise [me] and make [me] glad [I’m] alive to see” (Kerouac 45).

In his journey, Sal searches for something more than material. He seeks a transcendental experience by linking the landscape with a new way of life, and his old life with death. The process of travelling becomes transitional. He states that he has the, “remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb” (Kerouac 36). This “lost bliss” is renewed by performing his “one noble function of the time, [to] move” (Kerouac 38) and the landscape is the platform he uses to perform this function. The language he uses consistently refers to transition, change, and evolution. On the road
he is becoming something new, and escaping a life that is decaying, or perhaps already
dead. Thus, *On the Road* achieves its portrayal of an America that is all at once too old
and conventional, which needs to be escaped, and the new one, that is full of mystery.
Kerouac’s questing subject finds his new road following a familiar path – a journey that
would lead to Kerouac becoming an icon of a generation.

When Kerouac shot to fame after the success of *On the Road*, he became known as the
father of a generation of writers who, instead of attempting to follow literary conventions
of the time, usurped convention in favour of a renewed literary aesthetic that began a new
chapter of American modernism. Furthermore, according to Johnson, mass media culture
created Kerouac’s iconic image that he felt pressured to live up to. Kerouac’s climb to
fame was not his own doing, but rather a mix of both press fame and the spotlight given
to the underground literary culture building in the fifties. For instance, one of Kerouac’s
last works, *Big Sur* (1962), recounts his struggle with fame and his inability to live up to
the role of a beatnik hero and the father of a generation. Kerouac relates his own
experiences through his narrator, Jack Duluoz. After a difficult, emotionally-tumultuous
trip across the United States to Big Sur, California, Duluoz meets up with a young
beatnik who is star-struck by the literary icon. As the beatnik tries to impress Duluoz,
Duluoz states, “the poor kid actually believes that there’s something noble and idealistic
and kind about all this beat stuff, and I’m supposed to be the King of the Beatniks
according to the newspapers, but at the same time I’m sick and tired of all the endless
enthusiasms” (Kerouac 109). Kerouac’s rejection of the beatnik’s praise gives a glimpse
into how quickly Kerouac’s impression of his own fame burnt out.
By the time *Big Sur* was published, Beat counterculture had become mainstream and the beatnik figure was a mass-marketed identity that eroded the counterculture’s claim of authenticity. The birth of the Beat Generation brought the spotlight to the underground movements that had been taking place across the United States in the late forties and early fifties. As Joyce Johnson recalls in her memoir, *Minor Characters* (1983), Beat culture became appropriated by the middle-class: “[The] "Beat Generation" sold books, sold black turtleneck sweaters and bongos, berets and dark glasses, sold a way of life that seemed like dangerous fun—thus to be either condemned or imitated” (Johnson 14). In other words, the culture was easy to market and was transformed into a mocking parody of the original counterculture. Popularity problematized Beat authenticity, yet, more significantly, it also revealed the conventionality of what their culture represented – a rejection of the current political and moral systems in favour of radicalism. For Kerouac, Cold War containment was not a direct target in any of his texts; rather it was his personal escape from the middle-class expectations he had grown up to aspire to. Kerouac’s personal escape, especially as chronicled in *On the Road*, evolved into a radical ethos that hit a nerve with readers. Thus, the narrator’s journey came to signify a generation, and Kerouac himself became the symbol of this generation.

Kerouac’s pre-postmodern status was influenced by the post-war media culture that arose in the form of television, magazines, and the news media that bore the celebrity culture that surrounded the Beats. Johnson brings in Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum to explain Kerouac’s disassociation with his celebrity image. She states, “[i]n Baudrillard’s account of the postmodern culture, which he sees as mass media culture, the disappearance of a Kerouac ‘real’ by the ‘images of Kerouac’ is an effect of
simulation. Simulation operates, Baudrillard holds, to structure experience by producing a real according to a model, eroding distinctions, and replacing the real with the model” (Johnson). The layers of identity that Kerouac had were born through celebrity, from his iconic status to his characterization of himself in his novels, in exchange for the “Kerouac real;” thus, fame transformed *On the Road* into a social text, an icon, which connected readers under a common ideology of freedom through ideological revolt.

Adding to this distancing was what Fredric Jameson refers to in his work, *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, as pastiche. The beatnik craze created a culture of pastiche and blind mimicry. Jameson explains the term: “pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives; amputated of the satiric impulse . . . Pastiche is thus blank parody” (Jameson 17). Kerouac, along with his title as beatnik king, became the blank parody of Beat iconography in the eyes of the publics, but a charged self-parody in his personal life.

*On the Road: The Rebirth of the Frontier*

The popularity of *On the Road* developed Kerouac’s status as beatnik king. The protagonist, Sal Paradise, becomes symbolic of the questing subject readers may have been familiar with from other frontier narratives. As the questing subject, Paradise is placed on the frontier, one that has been shaped by the modern world and, seemingly, forgotten. Paradise, led by Dean Moriarty, rediscovers this frontier. Kerouac uses the pseudonym, Sal Paradise, to create a duality between himself and Dean Moriarty, who is
based on Kerouac’s friend and muse, Neal Cassady. Blurring fiction and nonfiction, *On the Road* is a frontier novel with a Biblical subtext. It fuses these two together to produce a novel that explores essential American ideologies of faith, nationhood, and freedom.

Paradise, or rather Salvatore Paradise (“Saviour of Paradise”), meets Moriarty, the embodiment of the said ideologies, and the two friends travel through America, opening up the landscape to a world far from their suburban surroundings. Sal begins his life on the road escaping his grief over the death of his father. As he narrates at the beginning of *On the Road: The Original Scroll*: “I first met Neal [Dean] not long after my father died. . . I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about except that it really had something to do with my father’s death and my awful feeling that everything was dead” (Kerouac 109). The arrival of Dean draws Sal out of his grief and effectively replaces his lost father figure with Dean. Sal’s impulse to record his life on the road results from his need to recall and shape memory – to transform these memories into a narrative that represents Dean’s spirit; transforming the landscape into the character of Dean, the hero figure and cowboy-like idol to the book’s narrator. While on the road, Dean leads Sal to an America outside of the containment culture – to the cold nights in Colorado spent with hobos, the hot days working on a farm in New Mexico, and to the back roads on the outskirts of San Francisco. The landscape that Dean’s road trip leads to returns Sal to the ideal America, unconquered – a figurative “Holy Land” – that is devoid of containment politics.

Omar Swartz argues in *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac*, that *On the Road* serves as a metaphor in support of radical social ideologies that are, in part, due to the attitude the characters have to the road. The road represents a
sacred journey. How it provides meaning is intended to influence how readers see the road as an escape from their own lives. Swartz states, “On the Road is a rhetorical text because, through it, Kerouac constructs systems of meaning that influence a reader’s life decisions, structures of influence to direct action, and an ideology to promote and maintain a coherent and encompassing worldview” (Swartz 27). The inconsistency of plot, with characters constantly turning to the road as a lifestyle, does not focus on the consequences of living a life on the road, but on the seemingly limitless possibilities that the road offers. Kerouac presents a way of life that contradicts values in America centred on the family and domesticity, but not necessarily on traditional tropes, such as freedom and the American Dream. Instead, family is found in strangers through companionship, love is not limited to monogamy, and security is found on the outskirts of society, far from the social securities of the middle-class, domestic life. He revels in portraying America as one big family – to Kerouac, this is the American Dream. Like Whitman, he portrayed the people as the place; the nation was the people.

Sal’s meetings with an eclectic mix of eccentric and vibrant characters redefine what it means to be an American. Kerouac places his narrator in a liminal space on purpose because it allows the reader to access the margins of America and those who occupy these outskirts. Values are embodied by characters, which can be seen as representations of Kerouac’s own interactions with the counterculture that was forming in post-war America. In Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination, Nancy M. Grace notes that On the Road focuses around four themes of the American Character, all of which are embodied within the Sal-Dean tag team: “social consciousness,” “an Emersonian and Whitmanian individualism,” “psychic wholeness,” and “spiritual enlightenment” (Grace
82). By embodying these characteristics, Sal and Dean become the reincarnations of
their Transcendentalist literary forefathers, while also embodying the ideological freedom
sought by America’s forefathers – an interesting and problematic identity. The
embodiment of freedom came through mobility. Mobility contrasted the stagnant life of
the modern day, middle-class individual. It also countered the fears of a worsening Cold
War. However, what is problematic about this identity is that it was not available to
many outside the white, masculine identity. As ‘King of the Beats,’ Kerouac was
canonized because of his rootlessness, bohemianism, and brotherly relationship with Neal
Cassady – all masculine tropes. Thus, the popularity of the Beats depended on very
traditional tropes and On the Road stays within the (oftentimes narrow) framework of
these tropes. Ultimately, the American Character functions in a similar way as it has in
frontier narratives before On the Road: to reaffirm the white, patriarchal hegemony of the
frontier.

Sal and Dean escape the changing landscape and return to the celebrated masculinist
trope that can be found in early frontier narratives. Thus, their journey through the heart
of America becomes one of rebellion and resistance to the culture of domesticity that
flourished in the fifties containment society. As Tim Cresswell notes in his article,
“Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac’s On the Road,” “the
pioneering spirit popular in American literature is a means for the reading public to
contest the hegemonic culture” (Cresswell 253). To go ‘on the road’ is not merely
escaping the pressures of the modern world, but also serves as a way to reconnect with
the American Dream. Sal’s sheer enthusiasm is not to chase a new ideology, but to
restore one that has been forgotten, especially one that is embodied by ‘lost’ Americans,
most notably including the “old hobos and beat cowboys” (Kerouac 21). Sal believes that embracing the wayfaring, impoverished life will lead him to a higher truth. Dean is Sal’s closest connection to this life. As Grace states, to Sal, “Dean is the original American character that had by the twentieth-century been rendered impotent” (Grace 83) and he becomes the source of a Sal’s enthusiasm – his ability to escape containment. Grace is referring to the domestic culture that had transformed the male role in society into a contained character: a domestic patriarch. Dean re-enacts the traditional frontier journey taken by Americans before him; thus, he represents the resurrection of the American Character in the post-war era. Grace’s description of the American Character in the twentieth century as “impotent” is significant. She implies that the American Character had been rendered infertile; that this label is fruitless, as it can not apply to the modern American landscape, including the physical, psychological, and political frontiers of this landscape. His role in the novel challenges the modern white male and attempts to shun this identity in favour of something he considered more authentically American: the racial Other.

Kerouac’s portrayal of Dean appropriates supposedly more authentic identities and perhaps even imitating, the ethnic Other. Upon meeting Dean, Sal is distanced, even fearful, of Dean’s open association with African-American culture -- his fearless love of African Americans. He travels with Dean into what would have been once outlawed territory – the jazz clubs that were specifically associated with African-American musicians, poets, and clientele. Dean sought to become one of those that they deemed “fellahin,” or brothers, in the struggle against the mainstream. Soon, Sal’s desire to become fellahin kicks in after his realization that identifying with fellahin means shaking
off his old world. After a wild night out at a jazz club Sal states, “Here I am wishing I were a Negro feeling that the best that the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, not enough night . . . I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor, overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a “white man” disillusioned. All my life I had white ambitions” (Kerouac 148). Of course, Kerouac’s view of non-white Americans is problematic; however, it stems from a romanticized view of race – one not informed by the problems of appropriation. For instance, African-Americans were canonized by Kerouac for their oppressed and segregated state. To Kerouac, race gave individuals an automatic connection with a more authentic culture, one that was not white-washed and commercialized. However, instead of commemorating them, he seeks to appropriate race using Dean, his central spectacle and focus, who he portrays as a freak of white nature, but also the bearer of a spiritual reawakening. Sal refers to Dean as “the hero of the West,” (Kerouac 87) and “holy,” (Kerouac 65). To Sal, Dean represents the Western frontier, the voyage to new horizons: “[w]ith the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I’d often dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off” (Kerouac 1). Part of Dean’s appeal to Sal arises from his origin. Dean is portrayed as the ultimate outsider, someone who embodies the spirit of the frontier.

Politics began to redefine the nation and the traditional Frontier narrative and replace it with a contained America. Dean leads Sal to not only explore the Other, but make love to it, merge with it, and become it; to connect with the people who were conquered and those that were enslaved to the land. In other words, Dean encourages Sal to view
everyone, especially those who were oppressed, as American. Dean’s nation is not separated by borders or social boundaries and love is not confined to a white, middle-class, woman, but to women (and one man, Carol Marx (Allen Ginsberg) he meets along their journey. In contrast to this, the Other becomes an opportunity for Sal to explore his relationship with the nation.

While *On the Road* was being written, theHUAC began its second round of hearings, which had extended to artists, writers, and academics that had to defend themselves against an increasingly virulent interrogation. As Penny Vlagopoulos notes in her article, “Rewriting America: Kerouac’s Nation of “Underground Monsters”,” the beginning of the McCarthy hearings demanded “compulsory confession,” from citizens who were considered the most suspect. Citizens who presented a threat to the nation, especially those who could be grouped under the title “alien Americans” (Mexicans, Hispanics, Asians) were viewed as potential threats because of their cultural heritage (Vlagopoulos 55). Sal’s exploration of deviants, wanderers, and outsiders across the landscape defies the fears of the time. Sal glorifies the search for selfhood and meaning in life by seeking it through others. Vlagopoulos further states, “*On the Road* asks us to consider, if not fully share, perspectives beyond those of white men, but it also endorses the creation of a new version of outsideness” (Vlagopoulos 62). This outsideness includes the white man disillusioned by the culture he dominates. Sal is unable to fit into society from the beginning of the novel. He finds life within society to be too regular, insipid, and meaningless. Dean represents the outsider, a prophet of the authentic, the mysterious ‘Moriarty’ figure who gives Sal purpose and a reason to explore outside his own “white ambitions.” Kerouac’s writing method can be understood symbolically as a counterpoint
to HUAC. His method of writing spontaneously avoided formalities that got in the way of writing his ideas on paper. Kerouac’s emphasis on finding the truth – or the nugget of wisdom – behind an idea is displayed in how he typed continuously in the scroll format, a format that represents the connection of his novel to that of a spiritual journey or pilgrimage. He attempts to relinquish himself of ‘white ambitions’ by defining his frontier text with influences from old and new methods.

Furthermore, the scroll format of his original work reflects the importance Kerouac placed on challenging the norm by reviving a writing technique from the past to tell his story. It also represents the novel’s spiritual undertone, reflecting a similar format to those of holy texts that recall pilgrimages. The novel’s structure reflects this format – one that is a continuous journey, uninterrupted by formalities that take away from the meaning of the words. Tim Cresswell argues that the structure resembles a jazz riff: “Passages contain rhythms and cadences and internal sound systems in the manner of prose-poetry derived from jazz. This style allows for the fluctuations and movement of Kerouac's intent” (Cresswell 256); however, On the Road, although containing frequent references to the jazz scene in America in the 50s, takes the plot structure of the traditional frontier novel and contextualizes it within a postwar frame. When the novel is still, Sal is reflective of his own transition. The following passage shows the emphasis placed on reflection in the novel:

I woke up and the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, that I didn’t know who I was . . . I was far away from home haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I’d never seen . . . I wasn’t scared, I was just somebody else, some stranger, whose life was a
haunted life, the life of a ghost . . . I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that’s what happened right there” (Kerouac 120).

The disassociation that happens in the above passage represents the gradual fragmentation of Sal’s identity. The passage above exemplifies how Kerouac’s novel is pre-postmodern for its lack of structure, jumping from the present to the memories of the narrator. In the new, postmodern world, roads and maps illustrate the many directions one can take. The road becomes a seemingly limitless place. It is constant in its change. Joshua Kupetz writes in a preface essay to On the Road: The Original Scroll that, “If a reader approaches Kerouac’s sprawling prose and allows the narrative to turn, to reverse, to be set back upon itself in a series of deflections, and accepts that the shifting horizon of signification is part of the experiences of meaning, the reader can proceed and be “headed there at last’”’ (Kupetz 91). Shifting significations forces the reader to encounter and contend with the text’s immediacy. The narrator’s subjective experiences and intent focus on the immediate world makes him unreliable, resulting in textual aporia and self-reflexivity. On the Road blurs fiction and non-fiction, which further forces the reader to decide how to read the novel – as autobiographical, semi-autobiographical, or a work of modern day myth with religious undertones. Overall, the text refuses formalities, and attempts to define itself by how the reader interprets this journey, a notable characteristic of postmodern works.
The Road after *On the Road*:

Kerouac’s other works, such as *The Subterraneans* and *Lonesome Traveler*, which were both published shortly after *On the Road*, are intensely focused on retelling Kerouac’s own ventures, self-exploration, and his endeavour to write from memory. *The Subterraneans* is an icon of Beat experimentalism. Its frantic, expressive, stream-of-consciousness prose is hardly broken by grammar and functions to mimic the narrator’s momentary sensations and perceptions. The prose is best described as a verbose jazz song, diffused in riffs that depict the pursuit of his passion, his resentment of this passion, and the resurfacing of this passion. Kerouac’s narrator, Leo Percepied, falls in love and has a brief relationship with a biracial woman named Mardou Fox, who is part African-American and Cherokee. Like other Beats, Kerouac was accused of exploiting the African-American character for the sake of portraying something unconventional and transgressive of white culture at the time. Leo’s tantalizing attraction to Mardou makes her an uncanny representation of black culture. He portrays her as carnal, primal, and, in any other circumstance, unattainable: “her wild Indian eyes now staring into the Black with a little fog emanating from her brown mouth, the misery like ice crystals on the blankets on the ponies of her Indian ancestors” (Kerouac 25). She embodies a freedom and musicality that whites can’t have, yet she is also part of racial categories that were still considered inferior. Nancy M. Grace argues that Mardou represents the line between the sublime versus the grotesque. Her sublime qualities, such as her sexuality and otherworldly goodness are born out of, “abject poverty, disease, and female essence . . . [They are] metonymized in her dark skin colour, which projects the grotesque as well as the otherness of the oppressed and tabooed female body” (Grace 51). Leo views this
body as a means to escape his white, male existence; hence, the only means of his release from this existence is founded on his ingrained racial and sexual prejudices, which eroticize ethnic female bodies as social spectacles of both disgust and exotic beauty; to be experienced, but not seen as equal. Mardou functions as Leo’s most intimate connection with the Other. Leo’s appropriative view of race equalizes Mardou’s ethnicity with what he considers the esteemed group of ignored and marginalized Americans that embody his own desire for disassociation from white masculinity.

Upon meeting Mardou, Leo finds himself attracted to the culture she represents. He figures he has found a kindred spirit: “no girl had ever moved me with her story of spiritual suffering and so beautifully her soul showing out radiant as an angel wandering in hell” (Kerouac 36) and compares Mardou to himself, viewing her as the black woman to his white man. Leo Perceped is fascinated by Mardou’s ‘hipness,’ or her embodiment of the jazz culture. Parallel to On the Road, Mardou compensates for Dean as a spectacle, someone for Kerouac’s narrator to observe, follow, and embellish. What fascinates him is that she, like Dean, is able to exist outside of social expectations. Also similar to Dean, she is a representation of the impossible desire, the embodiment of defiance against the white American culture, and something to be imitated. This is what initially attracts Leo to her, but since Leo is aware of the social stigma attached to having an interracial affair, he reminds himself of how his relationship with Mardou could be nothing but a fleeting affair. In the following passage, Leo considers the impact that his relationship with a black woman would have on his family:

Doubts, therefore, of, well, Mardou's Negroness, naturally not only my mother but my sister whom I may have to live with some day and her husband a
Southerner and everybody concerned, would be mortified to hell and have nothing
to do with us--like it would preclude completely the possibility of living in the
South . . . what would they say if my mansion lady wife was a black Cherokee, it
would cut my life in half (Kerouac 45).

Once again, Leo is reluctant and torn between his old life and his present one. His
“doubts” are the internalization of white supremacy and his realization, above his desire
for Mardou, of society’s disapproval. He coordinates himself in opposition to her
blackness and femaleness and tries to relate to the reader: “Bear with me all lover readers
who’ve suffered pangs, bear with me men who understand that the sea of blackness in a
darkeyed woman’s eyes is the lonely sea itself and would you ask that sea to explain
itself [?]” (Kerouac 45). As their relationship progresses Leo ‘whitens,’ or appropriates,
Mardou as he becomes aware of the consequences of an interracial affair. Despite his
efforts, the value attached to her blackness evades him: “so hip, so cool, so beautiful, so
modern, so new, so unattainable.” (Kerouac 50). A black woman’s love to Leo is out of
his sphere of comprehension. She is a woman, the “most enwomened woman” (Kerouac
51), yet her love is, “like a nice convenient dog chasing after me” (Kerouac 53). Self-
conscious of his own appropriation, Leo believes that Mardou eventually leaves him
because of his hostility towards ethnic women: “[When] I see a Mexican gal or Negress I
say to myself, “hustlers,” they’re all the same, always trying to cheat and rob you –
harking back all relations in the past with them – Mardou sensing these waves of hostility
[from my words] and is silent” (Kerouac 94). Ultimately, his inability to appropriate this
ethnicity results in the self-reflection of his own lack of ethnic connection, one that has
been replaced by a commercialized white culture. In her article, “A White Man in Love:
A Study of Race, Gender, Class, and Ethnicity, in Jack Kerouac’s, *Maggie Cassidy, The Subterraneans*, and *Tristessa,*” Nancy Grace McCampell states:

When [Leo] begins to date [Mardou], possessing her body and appropriating her "otherness," he joins a younger, hipper group, shedding a self that he defines as aging and isolated; a dumb "Canuck" who can barely control the English language, his sexuality, or his huge ego; a marginalized ethnic racist with no self-confidence. In this respect, Leo fetishizes Mardou's blackness, not in the sense defined by rigorous psychoanalytic theory but rather as a magical device that will transfigure him into his vision of the essential American (McCampell).

Mardou’s ethnic mix establishes her place in society regardless of her choosing. Through his relationship with Mardou, Leo attempts to de-privilege himself, with each attempt becoming a realization of his own privilege and the inequality within their relationship. Throughout the book he makes a series of confessions – perhaps a testament to Kerouac’s own Catholic upbringing. The starkest confession is his own disgust at Mardou’s nakedness. Waking up from an alcoholic nightmare, Leo sees Mardou very differently than the previous night: “[I] see beside me the Negro woman with the parted lips sleeping, and bits of white pillow stuffing in her black hair, feel almost revulsion” (Kerouac 18). Later in the novel, when he first views her body he is repelled at her dark skin and hair. His confession confronts his own fears of her blackness and recognizes his own internalization of white beauty.

*The Subterraneans* presents the inevitable problem that Beat culture faced. Middle-class white Beats were inevitably part of a culture of privilege, who longed to escape this
culture and become more like the true bohemian, or ‘beaten down,’ people. Kerouac’s representation of race in *The Subterraneans* transforms the narrator, but does not dispel the racial tensions that eventually break apart his relationship with Mardou. What *The Subterraneans* does manage to do is publicize an interracial relationship without completely sacrificing ethnicity in favour of stereotypes. Leo develops Mardou throughout the novel, from spectacle, to sexual object, and, eventually, into a memory. He shows the indolent and depressing side of beatnik culture – Leo and Mardou’s irresponsible relationship, resulting in both being broken-hearted and seeking the companionship of loveless relations, is contradictory to his previous treatment of Beat culture as free-spirited. Instead, *The Subterraneans* represents the beginning of a trend in Kerouac’s works that focuses more on the consequences, tragedies, and realities of the bohemian life. The wandering bohemian life becomes contained once Kerouac settles down and the full impact of his fame erases the line between fact and fiction. In *The Subterraneans*, Leo’s avoidance of the containment culture, leads him into a containment of his own, one that has been built by the counterculture.

In *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac further explores Otherness and devotes the latter part of his novel describing the lifestyle of hobos and wayfarers in America. Similar to *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac glorifies marginal identities, or those viewed as outcasts by the white, middle-class. The last chapter of *Lonesome Traveler*, entitled “The Vanishing American Hobo,” is one of Kerouac’s most direct addresses to the containment culture. He ends the chapter with the statement, “[t]he woods are full of wardens” (Kerouac 183), giving the implication that everywhere has become contained. To Kerouac, the American Hobo embodies the ideologies of his country. He cites the likes of Benjamin Franklin...
and Walt Whitman as “original hobos” whose successes were in part due to their experience of poverty. Kerouac’s admiration of hobos is rooted in his own lack of resolve to stay on the road, as he admits that literary fame got in the way: “I myself was a hobo but only of sorts, as you see, because I knew some day that my literary efforts would be rewarded by social protection” (Kerouac 171). Throughout the essay, Kerouac does not admit to his fame, but rather places himself amongst the ranks of travelers who are being discriminated against by the police. Kerouac envisions the death of the hobo culture, which he views as essential to the Beat Generation. The traveling spirit of Whitman’s days, the solitude-seeking wayfarer, have become akin to criminals and outcasts. Kerouac’s essay critiques the suburbanization of towns, technology, and the ecological impacts of modernization. *Lonesome Traveler* is the most autobiographical of the Duluoz Legend and serves as his most socially-critical work; however, when compared to his other novels, *Lonesome Traveler’s* modest success speaks to the rhetorical strength of Kerouac’s fiction in getting across his criticism of the modern way of life.

Kerouac’s pre-postmodern status is also evident in his nature writing and devotion to both Catholicism and Buddhism. The search for individuality and freedom in nature is a common theme in Beat literature, but has been a particular focus on Kerouac’s friend and fellow poet, Gary Snyder. The Beat Generation became famous for its rejection of modern industrialization and a promotion of naturalism, or seeking spiritual enlightenment in nature. Kerouac viewed Snyder as a mentor who had succeeded in achieving an authenticity uninformed by popular culture. Snyder also reminded Kerouac of his own problems with institutionalized religion. As Ann Charters notes in her
biography of Kerouac, Kerouac’s discovery and practice of Buddhism began shortly after finishing *On the Road*. Charters states:

[Kerouac’s] interest in Buddhism was a discovery of different religious images for his fundamentally constant religious feelings . . . At the root of his absorption in Buddhism was the fact that he felt it offered him direct philosophical consultation for the disappointments in his life, and, particularly, for the drawn-out agony waiting to publish *On the Road* and the refusal of publishers to recognize his genius (Charters 190).

In Kerouac’s later works, especially *Dharma Bums* (1958) and his collection of poetry, *The Scripture of Golden Eternity* (1960), Buddhism becomes the focus of the narrators’ musings. Throughout these works loneliness and spiritual solitude are constant, inextricable themes. Loneliness does not denote alienation, although Kerouac’s works are often seen as exploring Beat alienation from society; rather, loneliness represents the connection between the individual and the community. By seeking spiritual enlightenment on his own, Kerouac believed he was able to reconnect with a society he felt estranged from when he was part of it. The link between Kerouac and the American Transcendentalists is fundamental to understanding Kerouac’s spirituality and its influence on his works. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay, “The Transcendentalist,” transcendental thought began with Immanuel Kant and John Locke, who both espouse the importance of intuition through the senses. Nature is the ideal space to explore these senses (Emerson 86). Kerouac was familiar with the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but related to Thoreau’s *Walden*. Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau mentions Hinduism as a source of inspiration for the
Western imagination. When Kerouac researched Hinduism he ran across another Eastern religion, Buddhism. What attracted Kerouac to Buddhism was its teaching of suffering, also known as “Samsara.” Kerouac, like many Western Buddhists, sought to resolve the connection, and distinction, between “Samsara” and “Nirvana” (enlightenment) by seeking his own renderings of the two terms. Through his nature writing, Kerouac was able to put Buddhism into practice. As Deshae E. Lott states in his article, “All Things Are Different Appearance of the Same Emptiness,” “Like other American nature writers, in nature Kerouac confronts his self – his limitations and potentials, tries to accept and then tries to apply this same acceptance in his dealings with others” (Lott 180). Unlike his fellow nature writers, Kerouac avoids any form of scientific, or practical, description; he is solely concerned with the spiritual experience of nature and with how nature contrasts to modern society. Both Dharma Bums and Desolation Angels recite Kerouac’s post-fame experiences. Both feature his journey to Desolation Peak in Washington. However, Desolation Angels concerns itself with seeking spiritual enlightenment alone. Kerouac’s lone journey to Desolation Peak is both an attempt to reconcile with society and to leave it.

Ronna C. Johnson argues that Desolation Angels is Kerouac’s most reflective work on his fame and that it functions as the first novel that predicts Kerouac’s fading career. Since Desolation Angels was published in 1965, but written nearly five years earlier, it presents a reflection of Kerouac’s life from his early fame years in the late 50s compared to the height of his celebrity in the mid-60s, a few short years prior to his death. Johnson states, “This fame of movie-star dimensions preoccupies “Book Two” of Desolation Angels, as the protagonist Jack Duluoz endeavors to escape the prison of scrutiny through
the liberating act of narrating, ultimately to no avail” (Johnson). Book Two chronicles Jack Duluoz’s trek down Desolation Peak and back to San Francisco. The San Francisco that Kerouac illustrates is submerged in counterculture. At a jazz club, Duluoz is in the heat of the Beat culture, his fellow hipsters surrounding him. He announces the Beat Generation: “It’s the beat generation . . . it’s the beat to keep, it’s being beat and down in the world and like the oldtime lowdown and like in ancient civilizations the slave boatmen rowing galleys to a beat and servants spinning pottery to a beat . . .” and uses Herbert Huncke (referred to as Huck) to describe the faces of the Beats: “somnolent and alert, sad-sweet, dark, beat, just out jail, martyred, tortured by sidewalks, starved for sex and companionship, open to anything, ready to introduce a new world with a shrug” (Kerouac 137). The Beats in these passages are liminal, perhaps the most liminal they will be in Kerouac’s works. They are pre-fame and still shrouded by counterculture; however, as Johnson argues, Kerouac’s act of narrating, and introducing, the Beats created his renowned status as the forefather of the Beats that he so eagerly rejected in the 60s. The mention of Herbert Huncke in the passage actually refers to Kerouac’s own vision of the Beat forefathers. Like Huncke, they were ex-criminals, subversive con men, and nonconformists, who were beatified through their experiences of the other side of life, far removed from the cozy comforts of home. Huncke was a figure of resistance that was “martyred” for his lack of place in society. Similar to Neal Cassady, Huncke represented a new frontier, a lifestyle that required leaving the modern world – rejecting it instead of being rejected by it. Interestingly, Johnson also brings in Michel Foucault to help contextualize Desolation Angels as a response to the loss of liminality. She states, “[m]irroring Foucault’s claim that the state transforms individuals through surveillance,
Desolation Angels recounts the coercive power of media recognition which functions as a regulating agent analogous to the police” (Johnson). Johnson makes an overstatement, but not an inaccurate one. For instance, in Desolation Angels Jack Duluoz finds himself faced with modern society even when he thinks he has escaped it. While on the road back to San Francisco with his mother, he notices that their relatively simple trip becomes a reminder of how inescapable society is:

Sometimes during the night I'd look at my poor sleeping mother cruelly crucified there in the American night because of no-money, no-hope-of-money, no family, no nothing, just myself the stupid son of plans all of them compacted of eventual darkness. God how right Hemingway was when he said there was no remedy for life - and to think that negative little paper-shuffling prissies should write condescending obituaries about a man who told the truth, nay who drew breath in pain to tell a tale like that! (Kerouac 320).

As Kerouac wrote Desolation Angels his fame reached its peak. In this passage he refers to this fame as “the eventual darkness,” which is a startlingly contrast to the description of his mother, a working-class woman, who was left impoverished by the death of her husband (referenced in the last few lines of the passage). In comparison to beginning of Desolation Angels, in where he enthusiastically travels to Desolation Peak, after leaving Desolation Peak, he dreads coming back to a society he feels he does not fit into.

Although Desolation Angels does show a transformation in content and structure from “Book One” to “Book Two,” this transformation is not Kerouac’s self-conscious awareness of his own fame. More so, Kerouac infuses the text with rambling prose as he and his fellow Beats travel. In Part Three of “Book Two,” Duluoz becomes wary of
travelling. He is in Tangiers, Morocco, when he experiences “a complete turningabout . . . turning from a youthful sense of adventure to a complete nausea concerning experience in the world at large . . . Avoid the World, it’s just a lot of dust and drag and means nothing in the end” (Kerouac 335). Duluoz’s homesickness is a desire to return to a place of comfort. This passage may also be a reference to Kerouac’s desire to escape fame and his ‘worldliness.’ Duluoz suffers an existential crisis, much like Sal in the former passage cited. However, just when he is finished with his life on the road, Duluoz heads back home only to find fame looming over his future. The following passage predicts Kerouac’s fame: “I see the Golden Gate Bridge shining in the night, and shudder with horror. The bottom drops out of my soul. Something sinister like Ma says something like the forgotten details of a vague secanol nightmare” (Kerouac 395). The appearance of the Golden Gate Bridge, a symbol of the iconic Six Gallery Reading that shot the Beats to fame becomes uncanny. The horror felt by Duluoz is Kerouac’s representation of what was to come. The “forgotten details of a vague secanol nightmare” shows how Kerouac’s past is interrupting his future. Duluoz’s mother predicts what has already happened: the fame and fallout of the Beat Generation. When Desolation Angels was finally published, the Beats’ liminality had been exposed. Kerouac’s vision of the Beat Generation was replaced by his overexposure to the media. His subsequent obsession with the underground spiritual movements, including Buddhism, was an attempt to escape something he knew was inevitable. The 60s brought a change in Kerouac’s works. As he became more famous, the search for authenticity became an obsession, eventually leading him back to longing for his pre-fame years, especially his youth. Desolation Angels chronicles this trek backwards. It also chronicles Kerouac’s trek back
to Catholicism. *Desolation Angels* is the archetypal Kerouacian pilgrimage, now far removed from the innocence and ignorance displayed in *On the Road*.

To conclude, essential to Kerouac’s works is the questing subject. From road trips to drug trips, the questing subject is consistently looking for answers and meaning in life. Convention equals containment within a social prison that does not allow the subject to seek higher knowledge outside of convention. Kerouac’s obsession with writing about travel, both physical and spiritual journeys that lead to some form of knowledge, can be seen as a personal response to the Cold War politics of the late 50s and the politically-charged years preceding the Vietnam War in the 60s. Although he glorifies the American landscape, Kerouac presents his characters as always on the go, always leaving, and lacking stability in their lives. His most political statement was his personal rejection of the sedateness of modern life, the fidelity required for marriage, and his lack of interest in his country’s international affairs. Kerouac’s politics, therefore, were located within his search for the authentic and came to represent a key theme in the works of the Beat Generation. The search for the authentic and desire to abandon conventional culture was a most extreme measure for subverting social expectations at the time, yet it was founded on a conventional and even conservative trope of the real and the genuine.
Chapter 3: Naked Politics – A Nation of Consumers, Corruption, and Cravings

“The naked need of the control addicts must be decently covered by an arbitrary and intricate bureaucracy so that the subject cannot contact his enemy direct”

(Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 19).

The transition from counterculture to popular culture proved to be difficult for William S. Burroughs, who is considered the heart of the Beat Generation and responsible for its extension into drug culture. His works explore the fringes of society – the morally-bankrupt edges of America that were regulated by a constant cycle of craving, hunger, and indulgence. His characters are reduced to the biological functions of hunger and desire and their cravings become a metonym for a culture of endless consumption. More so than his fellow Beats, Burroughs shows in his work how language is used as an instrument of control, and how this instrument can be manipulated by the writer to achieve, or counteract, control. Burroughs’s early works, including *Junky* (1953) and *Queer* (written between 1951 and 1953, but published in 1985), explore marginalized identities, including drug and sex addicts, dealers, and criminals. In these three works, Burroughs’s discussion of the “junk virus” is the central trope that he uses to show how consumption controls and destroys a population.

Up until Burroughs’s infamous *Naked Lunch* (1959) his works were formal in structure, but considered pulp in content. If *Naked Lunch* didn’t stir up enough trouble regarding its explicit sexual content, then its lack of plot, phantasmagoric mode, and shifting narration became reasons enough to deem the book unworthy of publication. What saved *Naked Lunch* was its obscenity trial in 1965. Much like the *Howl* Trial years before, the trial of *Naked Lunch* represented an opportunity for authors to break down the
boundaries of censorship that controlled what could be published. Far from merely being obscene, *Naked Lunch* travels into the arena of what Fredrick Whiting calls the “monstrous.” (Whiting) In effect, the novel became a challenge for critics who were trying to understand its exploration of illicit sexuality and violence as a commentary on society. Critics agreed that the monstrous should be written, especially in an era that remembered the horrors of war, genocide, and political corruption witnessed during the Second World War and the ensuing Cold War, but could not wrap their heads around Burroughs’s rawness.

Burroughs’s representation of a dystopian America obsessed with drugs and sex is an allegory of 1950s America. *Naked Lunch* explores totalitarian worlds all within the context of a drug nightmare. What separates it from his previous works is its fragmentation. *Naked Lunch* has no sense of time, space, or order. Instead of relying on conventional storytelling, Burroughs presents *Naked Lunch* as a sequence of unrelated episodes, creating a collage of events, effectively showing how form can imitate, or embellish, content. The fragmentation of the plot adds to the effect of the novel being an experiment, which is a testament to Burroughs’s desire for the book to “spill off the page in all directions” (Burroughs 191). Still, the novel is not merely abstraction. By framing his narration within the drug culture of America, and creating a work that mimics the absurdity of this culture, Burroughs allows for the illicit to be imagined as a potential reality. Once the illicit becomes a part of the fictional experience, it can be considered whether Burroughs’s junk consumerism is more than just the author’s imagination, but also a reality in the society that he lived in.
Characters are also reflected by the text’s fragmented structure. They function to represent an aspect of a corrupted culture, including sex addiction, drug abuse, or violent crime. The protagonist, William Lee (a.k.a the Agent), is an observer, never revealing any intimate details about his purpose in the text; he simply moves from one event to the next and takes part in the consumption and creation of the junk virus. The lack of intimacy between the reader and the characters is also an important aspect of the text. Since no character requires emotional involvement from the reader, the worlds that Burroughs illustrates are devoid of emotional connection and function on two reactions, shock and horror.

One of the goals of the novel, according to Burroughs, is to critique capital punishment, which he sees as a symbol of the malevolent by-product of relentless consumerism (a.k.a. the “junk virus”) in the United States. In the “Preface” Burroughs writes, “Since Naked Lunch treats [the junk virus], it is necessarily brutal, obscene, and disgusting . . . Sickness is often repulsive details not for weak stomachs” (Burroughs 205). Burroughs presents the most primeval and dark side of human nature, which in modern society is fed by the capitalist system. In this primitive society, capitalism creates and regulates all life and death. The dystopian world is created from our own greed and bodies become resources for this greed.

The perverse exploitation of bodies in the novel is a central motif in each fragment and symbolizes the exploitation of bodies in a capitalist society. Through this motif, the novel exposes a culture of addiction and how addiction becomes part of medical practices that are considered legitimate therapies. As Whiting further notes, “Burroughs was preoccupied with the role that such legal, scientific, and popular representations played in
the construction of the monstrous identity of the addict/psychopath” (Whiting).

Burroughs believed that the treatment of ‘illicit’ identities, including drug users and other criminals, by those in power was criminal in itself. For instance, Burroughs gives a strong, condemnatory critique of the police, which he sees as part of the punishment system: “And always cops: smooth college-trained state cops, practiced, apologetic patter, electronic eyes weigh your car and luggage, clothes and face; snarling big city dicks, soft-spoken country sheriffs with something black and menacing in old eyes color of a faded grey flannel shirt” (Burroughs 11). Authority becomes the regulation machine for the drug-addled society. The bodies of the addicts and criminals become experiments, used by the state to control and observe the effects of drugs and punishment.

In an appendix to the text entitled, “Deposition: Testimony Concerning a Sickness,” Burroughs states: “The junk virus is public health problem number one of the world today. Since Naked Lunch treats this health problem, it is necessarily brutal, obscene, and disgusting” (Burroughs 205). He continues to address its sexually explicit content: “Certain passages in the book that have been called pornographic were written as a tract against Capital Punishment in the manner of Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal. These sections are intended to reveal capital punishment as the obscene, barbaric and disgusting anachronism that it is. As always the lunch is naked” (Burroughs 205).

Indeed, the title of the book, Naked Lunch, is a reference to barbarism in modern, ‘civilized’ culture that created a spectator sport of the McCarthy Trials. As with the McCarthy Trials, voyeurism and the spectacle are central in Naked Lunch. For instance, the demeaning sexual exploitation of several characters can be read as a representation of hyper-consumerism of the spectacle. The reader’s eye becomes the spectator. Burroughs
presents a moral dilemma to his readers: his fiction is censored for obscenity, yet the obscene treatment of real individuals is not accused. Similar to “Howl,” Burroughs’s work challenges moral codes in society in order to expose their hypocrisy. Language, in all its uses in the novel, becomes a means to expose what is already corrupt. Burroughs’s presentation of language as, what Christopher Breu calls, “a virus,” shows readers how language can be used to distort the real. Breu states in his article “The Novel Enfleshed: Naked Lunch and the Literature of Materiality” that, “[l]ike the Lacanian symbolic, language is, for Burroughs, a viral, yet necessary imposition on material life, a system of social control structuring our very conception of reality” (Breu). Breu’s argument centres on the idea that Burroughs’s work is a product of late-capitalism. He states, “late-capitalist literature of materiality is a product of the overdeveloped core of the capitalist world-system,” where, “the built environment, modes of representation, the figuration of the body, and the experience of everyday life are profoundly intertwined with late capitalist production, consumption, and signification practices” (Breu). What is left of the material culture is its ‘junk’ in the literal and figurative sense. Junk becomes the central commodity of a world that turns addiction into a commodity and bodies into fetishes. All things that are considered resources to the addict’s appetite become entwined with the cultural production and consumption of cravings.

Burroughs has never claimed any connection between the postwar environment and his novels; however, many critics view his works as dealing with the peripheral, the abject, and the absurd as a means to contest the hypocrisy of post-war America. Michel Foucault’s view of power as a network rather than hierarchy in The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction (1976) helps to contextualize Burroughs’s portrayal of junk as
a central commodity that is exchanged. Junk, like money, creates an exchange system between individuals that also helps to regulate power structures. The junky is equivalent to the consumer: he/she is part of a social body, one that is controlled and contained by hegemonic forces beyond them. Their own participation in the culture enables these forces to exist. Foucault develops the concept of biopower in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* and explains that it is, “an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (Foucault 141). In *Naked Lunch* bodies are exploited constantly: consumed, raped, eaten, transformed, and replaced. For instance, the “interrogation of subjects” at the beginning of the novel sets the premise. Citizens of Annexia are subjected to constant surveillance and brutal, inhumane interrogation. In the section entitled, “Benway,” Dr. Benway is a psychiatrist who works for the government. He is, as the narrator explains, “a manipulator and coordinator of symbol systems, an expert on all phases of interrogation, brainwashing and control” (Burroughs 19). Dr. Benway leads the “assembly line” of investigations into any subject suspected of drug use. These investigations consist of humiliating body searches, psychological torture, and drugging the suspect to induce withdrawal symptoms. This exploitation of subjects takes place with, as Dr. Benway boasts, “just enough physical violence” (Burroughs 20). Punishment consists of drug-induced obedience, or drugging the addict enough to control him. In other words, the drug addict is punished with drugs, which creates a vicious cycle of cravings and criminality. Drugs are the institution, the network of power, and the means to reproduce and incarcerate. Burroughs illustrates society to be an institution,
enclosed and controlled by subjects themselves, who are too terrified to break any rule imposed by their government. Subjects self-regulate their behaviour, addicted to junk and haunted by withdrawal symptoms.

The novel is, like Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, a Juvenalian satire, which mocks the futility of the addict, but also acknowledges the part he plays in his addiction. In the passage entitled, “Habit Notes,” the narrator describes the junky: “Junkies have no shame . . . They are impervious to the repugnance of others . . . The addict regards his body impersonally as an instrument to absorb the medium in which he lives, evaluates his tissue with the cold hands of a horse trader” (Burroughs 57). Similar to *A Modest Proposal*, the subject’s body is a microcosm of the political corruption of the nation that is treated as an organism of profit. National greed and corruption creates the virus that is systemic. It is an epidemic ideology, a way of life, which is transmitted from the outer world into the veins of an addict. To, “absorb the medium in which he lives,” (Burroughs 222) suggests that the junky lives within the addiction and the drug is his world. The absolute power over bodies that drugs have is similar to the nationalism that pervades the United States through the media, causing similar symptoms of drug use: paranoia, delusions, fear, and obsession. The paranoia of the Other, or the representation of alien and foreign nations and bodies, creates within the junky citizen a desire to protect their bodies from this reality. Thus, they seek more junk to induce the delusion. Foucault’s concept of biopower suggests that bodies are instruments of capitalism, the resource of its power and management. Burroughs’s presentation of the junky as a product of his drug suggests the same idea. The junky is a citizen of a national culture of addiction. They
believe they are in control of their own addiction, when in reality they are supporting a national ideology of addiction and, thus, are but a resource to biopower.

Likewise, sexuality is a resource of biopower. *Naked Lunch*’s presentation of ‘monstrous’ sexual deviancy is deliberate. In his presentation of sexuality, Burroughs parallels sex to death. Sexual unions result in the destruction of bodies and are closely tied with the destructive power of McCarthyism. For instance, in the fragment entitled, “Hassan’s Rumpus Room,” Burroughs depicts young men being forced to participate in a violent orgy with a sordid character named Mr. America and the monstrous Mugwump, who both have sex with the young men while guests at the orgy watch. The significance of the orgy scene is to show that the bodies of the young men are dispensable, only used for pleasure and entertainment. This scene echoes the destruction of young men’s lives by Mr. America, who is an embodiment of perverse ideologies espoused by the government to control and contain its citizens under the umbrella of nationalism.

When the novel became the focus of a censorship trial, its sexual content was considered explicit. In 1965, the same year as the trial, literary critic Leslie Fielder held a conference focused around the new youth culture entitled, “The New Mutants,” and argued that the cultural and sexual revolutions underway were a revolt against masculinity. “The New Mutants,” according to Fielder, were disaffected youth seeking to tumble the system of their forefathers. Part of this revolt was the exploitation of drugs, alcohol, and illicit sex. In effect, these young people were being physically and psychologically transformed into a ‘mutant’ generation much different from their parents. Fielder targets the rising drug counterculture as a key threat stating: “The widespread use of such hallucinogens . . . is not merely a matter of a changing taste in stimulants, but of
the programmatic espousal of an anti-puritanical mode of existence – hedonistic and detached” (Fielder 245). According to Fielder, the traditional mode of existence was being challenged by a generation of youths who prefer the “hedonistic and detached” way of life, one that not only avoided fulfilling expectations placed on them by society, but attempted to separate themselves from the society their parents created altogether. In his analysis, *Naked Lunch* becomes Fielder’s main target. He considered the book as a testament to the success of the new drug culture in shaping a wayward generation. The novel was predicting, perhaps even realizing, the harrowing future to come. Fielder states that *Naked Lunch* is, “no mere essay in heroin-hallucinated homosexual pornography – but a nightmare anticipation (in Science Fiction form) of post-Humanist sexuality” (Fielder 392). Fielder’s analysis separates the youth generation from social influence, alienating them from their predecessors and sensationalizing their otherness. Unlike Fielder, Burroughs shows that the deviant, or mutant, behaviours of this generation are a response to the prohibitions instilled by the country. He shows that there is a connection between power structures and countercultures. For instance, in one instance Burroughs targets the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914 as the beginning of “anti-drug hysteria [that is] now worldwide” (Burroughs 212). Thus, he argues that the prohibition of drug culture forced it into underground, illicit spaces. In effect, a counterculture was born. Burroughs argues that drug culture is an extension of the containment culture, which produces a symbiosis between the addict and the greater hegemony in place.

Whiting further comments on the complex influences on drug culture in the United States. The controls forced on citizens were attempts made by the American government
to avoid locating the source of the drug culture, instead targeting the junky. As Whiting states, “up until the late 1960s concern over narcotics was focused primarily on the user. Both public and scientific discourses in the years preceding and following World War II were preoccupied with elucidating the problem of the "dope fiend." (Whiting 154). The dope fiend was akin to a foreign agent, the dangerous Other, who threatened American values and the American family. Infomercials regarding the dangers of drug addiction usually featured actors who portrayed the typified fiend as symbolic of a virulent agent that spread addiction and illness throughout the community. In the 1960s, as drug culture arose alongside youth counterculture, drugs were seen as symptomatic of a systemized revolt against the nation. Whiting further states, “the Harrison Act brought their licit use under the aegis of the medical establishment by requiring a physician’s prescription. By extension, it located the problem of addiction squarely in the medical domain, a significant first step in what came to be the complex nexus of stigmatization of the addict by the federal government and the medical community” (Whiting). Alongside communism, drug addicts were viewed as a national threat, one that required ‘treatment’ or management and isolation from the population. However, illicit drug use, although widespread, especially in urban centres, was not as systemic as the unparalleled use of prescription medication. The ‘pharmaceutical decade’ saw the incorporation of prescription drugs into daily life. Tranquilizers, amphetamines and barbiturates, and weight loss medication were all symptomatic of post-WWII era affluence. Psychological prescriptions that produced the “mother’s little helper” phase created new dynamics between families and nationhood. In spite of all the negative press associated with its use, marijuana became a popular drug amongst the youth culture, representing a revolt
against the systematic control of drugs. The Narcotics Control Act updated its mandate to control the increasing use of marijuana and abuse of prescription medication (DEA Museum). Notwithstanding the laws and regulations placed on drug abuse and drug selling, both illicit and licit drug use rose substantially in the late 1950s. Drug advertising and the rising popularity of the countercultures in the late 50s created the foundation for the next decade of drug exploitation, which reached beyond the typical junky, to incorporate communities and subcultures into the regular practice of drug abuse.

In *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs takes on another critique of consumption -- sex. The sexual mores that were instituted in Cold War-era America is his target and he willingly explores, and perhaps even exposes, the hypocrisy of these ideologies, especially the perception of homosexuals in 1950s America. Despite Burroughs being bisexual himself, homosexual relationships in *Naked Lunch* are presented as perverse and monstrous. The homosexual represents the ultimate deviant, but is used as a tool to indulge readers in the 1950s and 60s with a stereotype they had already been taught. The fear of the homosexual was based on the belief that homosexuals were perverse, dangerous, and linked with paedophilia. Burroughs exploits the homosexual, confirming readers’ fears, but simultaneously showing the reader his own perversion. The reader becomes part of the monstrosity, or, as Fiona Paton notes in, “Monstrous Rhetoric: *Naked Lunch*, National Insecurity, and the Gothic Fifties,” is “forced to face the abject” (Paton 52). Paton states, “Burroughs, writing out of a cultural space that was intensely Gothic in its own fear of Otherness, deploys highly inventive monstrosity against the paranoid discourse of nationhood” (Paton 52). Burroughs seeks to show the monstrosity within America. The novel acts as a reflection of these fears, imitating and exaggerating them. What is really
monstrous is how society is allowed to continue this perversity and regulate it as if it was any routine commodity. The political parties of Interzone, for example, are all equally perverse. They include the Senders, the Liquifactionists, the Factualists, and the Divisionists, each of whom shape society to their version of normal. The Divisionists are “all latent or overt homosexuals” who “divide. They cut off tiny bits of their flesh and grow exact replicas of themselves in embryo jelly . . . eventually there will be only one replica of one sex on the planet: that is one person in the world with millions of separate bodies” (Burroughs 137-138). The Divisionists represent complete conformity; the narcissistic desire to replicate oneself, where any other replica is considered “undesirable.” The Senders are known “for their ignorance . . . for barbarous and self-righteous manners, and a rabid fear of any fact” (Burroughs 136). The Liquefactionists are “given to every form of perversion, especially sadomasochistic perversion” (Burroughs 136). The Factualists are “anti-Liquifactionalist, anti-Divisionist, and above all anti-Sender” (Burroughs 139), who work to eliminate the other races from the planet, calling them “viruses” that must be “isolated and treated” (Burroughs 141). Burroughs’s Interzone is befitting for a horror story. The place is given to extreme acts of violence and perversity, yet is also paranoid, totalitarian, and self-destructive. Burroughs’s use of horror language is significant. The people are described as “viruses” and, repeatedly, “queer,” insisting their distinction from ‘normal’ society. In particular, replicas mutate and transform themselves. As Paton further notes, Burroughs’s language and descriptions of replicas imitate those of Joseph McCarthy during the McCarthy Trials:

James Darsey has identified certain recurring tropes in McCarthy's descriptions of
Communism – octopi, snakes, and spiders, for instance—and his frequent use of words such as "fantastic" and "monstrous" (Darsey 74). Noting that McCarthy's world "was a dark world where things were not always what they seemed to be." Darsey concludes, "As nocturnal creatures, McCarthy's enemies have an implicit association with witches, vampires, bats, rats, and wolves" (Darsey 75).

The Red Scare became synonymous with an infiltration, infection, and a plague of an alien species. The Soviet Empire was a threat to the health of America and the purity of American ideologies. Burroughs uses language that readers at the time would have likely recognized from a decade before. He describes the horrors of what could be and presents the paranoia of his culture as the biggest threat to its survival.

The disposability of humans in Naked Lunch represents how the commodity culture had become a means of homogenizing the culture, draining it of any difference and eliminating what was different, regardless of the cost. Burroughs’s focus on homosexuality is of particular interest. He presents homosexuality as a deviation that has gone awry, thus, he is feeding the fears of readers who, at the time, would have likely associated homosexuality with mental illness and perversion. Appealing to readers’ fears allows Burroughs to satirize the actions of his government in the 1950s, who dismissed scientific studies of sexuality, especially the view that sexuality was fluid, in favour of the notion of fixed sexual identities.

In his works, including Naked Lunch, Queer, and Junky, Burroughs presents a paradigm: Queerness is outed. Drug abuse is exposed. Through Naked Lunch Burroughs deconstructs the culture of paranoia that used what was considered deviant behaviour as a means to employ stricter laws and regulations on people and shows how normalcy is
dangerous in its own right. His libertarian leanings juxtaposed the harsh and corrupt politics of the McCarthy era. The “control addicts” as Burroughs calls them in the excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, have created a culture of fear that punishes anything not within their scope of normal. In *Naked Lunch* Burroughs embellishes these fears, transports them into fiction, and shows, using allegory, the dangers of a totalitarian society. His novel argues against capital punishment, the surveillance culture, and the exploitation of individuals.

A Queer Notion: Burroughs’s Portrayal of Cold War Era Queerness

In Burroughs’s 1953 novel, *Queer*, he tells a semi-autobiographical tale about William Lee, who pursues a friend and fellow veteran in the American expatriate scene following WWII only to find his feelings are unrequited. Compared to *Naked Lunch*, *Queer* provides a realistic and intimate account of being queer in the 1950s and the implications that this identity had on everyday life. The novel was first published by Viking in 1985, having been previously viewed as too controversial not only for its homosexual content, but also because it was written while Burroughs was on trial for accidentally murdering his wife, Joan Vollmer. Burroughs’s exploration of queerness steps beyond the typical story of gay love and seeks to explain how this love exists and functions in a society that disapproves of it. Queerness in *Queer* is not portrayed favourably, but more or less a secret that is painful and alienating. Lee becomes frustrated with his queer lifestyle. He displaces his desire for Allerton on the young, male prostitutes he meets in Mexico and, as he discovers, his queerness is a commodity in Mexico, to be bought and sold, and always within certain conditions; thus, he becomes afraid of it and even more isolated than he was in America. As Lee learns, Allerton’s emotional unavailability leaves Lee
stranded in his setting. Although there is a connection between Lee and Allerton, this connection is limited by Allerton’s awareness of the stigma attached to homosexuality.

It is significant that the setting of Queer is in Mexico. Mexico serves as a space outside of the American body politic; hence, it is outside the ongoing Lavender Scare, an extension of the McCarthy Trials that targeted gay men and women. However, the pervasiveness of homophobia ignited by McCarthy disturbs Lee throughout the novel. Lee’s consistent mentioning of espionage, secrets, political scandals and figures of the past, especially Napoleon, reflect Burroughs’s awareness of the oppressiveness of modern day imperialism. In spite of this, Lee is portrayed as both the colonizer and the colonized. Queerness places him within the role of the Other, yet, in Mexico he discovers how his whiteness gives him dominance over those selling sex as a commodity. According to Oliver Harris in his “Introduction” to Queer, this is intentional. Burroughs portrays Lee as the exact opposite to the stereotypical queer identity that readers may have expected in 1965 in order to break down the stereotype of the queer-victim. Harris states, “[Lee] seeks to reverse the demonized position of the queer in Cold War America by fully identifying with American power at is most demonical. From radically dehumanizing others . . . Lee simultaneously refuses his own status as victim and reveals just how ugly the Ugly American can be” (Harris xxxiii). Queerness substitutes for the heterosexual colonizer in Queer. Lee is Burrough’s colonizer – his “Ugly American,” – who uses sex as a commodity to achieve a level of power in his social circles. Lee treats sex as a capital. However, Burroughs’s rhetoric critiques the hypernationalistic attitudes of the McCarthy era that proved to be hypocritical and self-serving in the end (much like
Lee’s). By 1965, it was suspected that McCarthy and Roy Cohn’s hunt for homosexuals in the government was in part a cover-up for Cohn’s own homosexuality.

The 1950s homosexual man was often portrayed as effeminate, or a contrast to the masculine ideal in the 50s. Gays were often hypersexualized as well. A gay man was portrayed as a deviant because he couldn’t control or contain his sexual needs. Lee contradicts these assumptions. He is neither overly masculine nor feminine. He desires both sexes, but is never aggressively looking for sex. Rather, Lee is in a state of sexual inertia in Mexico. Lee’s relationship with Allerton, based on Burroughs’s own relationship with Lewis Marker, never develops beyond a platonic friendship. Despite some casual physical contact, Allerton is wholly uninterested in Lee. The lack of emotional compensation leaves Lee in despair once again. When Allerton begins to reject Lee, Lee realizes the impossibility of their relationship because Allerton cannot live up to Lee’s expectations in a relationship. Burroughs establishes these expectations in stating, “In any relation of love or friendship, Lee attempted to establish contact on the non-verbal level of intuition, a silent exchange of thought and feeling” (Burroughs 50). The communication is dead from the beginning of their friendship. Burroughs shows Lee’s complex sexual needs: his desire for more than just sex, his ability to love, and need for a genuine queer connection with someone, one that is outside of heterosexual normatives. Lee’s search for a genuine, reciprocal queer experience is a representation of Burroughs’s desire to escape the confines of mandatory heterosexuality in the 1950s.

This explains why Lee is also obsessed with the “Theory of Games,” or what can be considered his desire for unconventional love, natural love; the spontaneity of love. “The Theory of Games” helps Lee understand a system he does not want to be part of; a
system that rejects queer relationships in favour of safe, albeit impotent, relationships. Lee pursues the contradiction. Lee does not attempt to get in a relationship with Allerton, but makes a point to colonize heterosexual time. Instead of leaving Allerton alone, he shadows him and dismissing Allerton’s desire for a heterosexual relationship. Lee eventually attracts Allerton when he begins his search for the drug, yage. Yage is a “confession drug” that causes hallucinations. According to Lee, it is used for thought and behaviour control. He explains that yage is a drug that can be used against the population: “Automatic obedience, synthetic schizophrenia, mass-produced to order. That is the Russian dream, and America is not that far behind. The bureaucrats of both countries want the same thing: Control” (Burroughs 81). Here Lee once again becomes the colonist. His despair is replaced by the excitement of pursuit, which is only relieved when he finally sleeps with Allerton. However, by the end of the novel, Lee and Allerton’s relationship has not reached new heights, but has once again become platonic and stagnant. Burroughs shows the inability for the queer figure to connect, his desire to live up to the expectations of a straight world, and the internalization of heterosexualism. He explains in his “Introduction to the 1985 Edition,” “[w]hile it was I who wrote Junky, I feel that I was being written in Queer. I was also taking pains to ensure further writing, so as to set the record straight: writing as inoculation. As soon as something is written, it loses the power of surprise, just as a virus loses its advantage when a weakened virus has created alerted antibodies” (Burroughs 128). Burroughs “achieved some immunity” from the shock of his own homosexual experiences and the realization of the consequences of these experiences.
Ultimately, in *Queer* Burroughs critiques the over-arching system that makes individuals feel like Others. His novel, much like *Junky* and *Naked Lunch*, shows the intersection of sexuality and drug culture, both of which are portrayed subversively in order to counteract the cultural containment.

**Burroughs’s *Junky* and the Drug of Capitalism**

The body in Burroughs’s works – *Junky*, *Queer*, and *Naked Lunch* – is a social spectacle that represents postmodern cultural consumption. As discussed, Burroughs’s capitalism controls the body by making it consume without conscience. As the author, Burroughs functions as the observer – showing this consumption without commentary. Like his readers, he is part of the panopticon; however, unlike his other ‘inmates’ Burroughs is aware of his role in regulation. He is aware of his lack of agency. His comparison of drug culture to capitalism allows Burroughs to show readers the addictive nature of consumption and the role that the media plays in fuelling this addiction.

Michel Foucault, in his work, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) introduces the concept of panopticism, a social model of surveillance and hegemonic control based on Jeremy Bentham’s 19th century prison system. A panoptic society relies on bilateral surveillance, in which prisoners monitor other prisoners’ behaviour and their own behavior in accordance to the rules and expectations enforced on their bodies. Panoptic forces, which according to Foucault are akin to the democratic political forces in our modern world, provide the illusion of self-control. Foucault explains its function,

The panopticon . . . has a role in amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself, nor for the immediate salvation of a threatened society: its
aim is to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply (Foucault 207-208).

Foucault establishes discipline as synonymous with social normatives. Subverting or refuting these normatives results in forms of punishment, all of which are marketed and popularized; they are well-known and universal. The consequences of abnormal behaviour result in correctional methods in the medical institutions and/or the prisons. In both cases, individuals are taken out of normal society in favour of a controlled environment of rehabilitation. To relate this to Burroughs’s works, the body in these works already exists outside normatives; however, it is society that has been shaped around abnormality. Burroughs exhibits the drug-addled, the hypersexual, and the deviant bodies in order to show an alter-ego of social normatives that functions under the very same system of panopticism and spectacle commodification as normal society does.

In *Junky*, the underworld of drug addicts is contextualized in everyday experiences. Drugs are consumed like food; they are regular, necessary, and normalized. The only incident in which drugs are considered abnormal is in the long section set in the Public Health Service at Lexington. Burroughs makes a reference to a real institution that opened up in the 1930s as a way to control drug abuse, which was viewed as an ‘epidemic,’ similar to any other physical disease that is airborne. In Caroline Jean Acker’s article, “Creating the American Junkie: Addiction Research in the Classic Era of Narcotic Control,” Acker discusses the social experiments performed on junky populations in the United States that attempted to separate junkies from criminals and rehabilitate them using moral adjustments performed by psychiatrists (Acker 21). Drug
addiction was associated with the destruction of the moral fabric in America, but it also became an underground commodity, a system of profit on its own.

In *Junky*, Burroughs portrays this system as one both favourable and damaging. Like the drug itself, junkies are addicted to the system. Junkies have their own ethics and set of values, which function very similar to social normatives. A junk dealer sells drugs to make profit and, in order to make these profits, he seeks willing customers. His drug selling becomes a business that allows him to function normally in society, without having to become part of the social grind. As Nathaniel Rich writes in his article, “American Dreams, 1953, *Junky* by William S. Burroughs,”

The main reason the junkie does heroin, despite its horrors and despair, is because it’s better than the alternative: not doing heroin. It is better to be a junkie than to end up what Burroughs might have been, had he followed in his family’s line. The life of an “American business man,” [Burroughs] writes, “is a one-way process. When his organism reaches maturity it can only start dying” (Rich).

Thus, junk provides a mode of existence or, “a way of life,” Burroughs states, that acquaints the junky with death, resulting in an even more intense desire for the junky to experience his life again (through junk) (Burroughs 12). This tantalizing cycle equips the addict with the ability to see through the social order. He becomes entangled in the web of the law, his dealer, his clients, and the medical system. Once inside this web, he inevitably is part of a much larger social conundrum than he had imagined.

The system he is caught in is both poisonous and intoxicating – Lee cannot escape it, because he is inevitably part of it. Lee’s roles in the novel are interchanged from a junk criminal to an object that draws sympathy from the law. He discovers that the anti-junk
campaign that was spreading across the nation had begun to employ junk agents as part of its crusade: “Like during prohibition, when bums and hoodlums flooded the Internal Revenue Department, now addict-agents join the department for free junk and immunity. An agent who has to connect or go sick will bring a special zeal to his work” (Burroughs 142). The cruel irony that Burroughs outlines was not too far from the truth. Narc addicts were a popular source of information that acted as informants for the law. Burroughs subtly points out how poisonous this system is. The anti-junk campaign in the novel is portrayed as a self-satisfying project that is more concerned with its personal success than the health of the addicts, who become relegated to a specific underclass of people, only useful if they serve the system with their knowledge of a targeted drug.

By the end of the novel, Bill Lee is forced off junk and goes through a hellish withdrawal that leaves his body in worse shape than it was during his addiction. Lee explains that the search for a kick is what he still needs for the very same reason as before: “Kick is seeing things from a special angle. Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened, flesh” (Burroughs 150). The final statement reveals that the drug is simultaneously the cure and the alternate disease to what Burroughs considers far more excruciating: society.

**Conclusion: Withdrawal Symptoms**

What is most compelling about Burroughs’s three works is the complex critique he provides of the post-war society. The prevailing metaphor that links the three works is the comparison made between addiction and consumption; most notably the alignment of drug and sex addiction to consumer capitalism. Burroughs’s drug narratives provide a no-hope scenario; readers are shown the ‘bop apocalypse’ of modern times, where
anything can be consumed for profit and all forms of consumption serve the purposes of those in control. His books are places where the reader can “contact his enemy direct,” as stated in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, and serve as a means to exploit those in control, to parody them, and to reveal the grave situations that McCarthyism and post-war capitalism really were. All three novels portray a potential reality through an absurdist lens: the potential of a totalitarian Annexia in *Naked Lunch*, the insipid loneliness of William Lee in *Queer*, and the drug-pushing society in *Junky*, are all possibilities that present a dreadful, nihilistic, future, one that has been shaped by an oppressive authority that transforms society and its people into prisoners of inhumane ideologies that have become normatives. People are confined in their own psychological panopticon; they are the watchers and the watched. In his writings, Burroughs attempts to break this chain by revealing the readers to their own fears, presenting them a moral quagmire that cannot be escaped. Perhaps the most profound aspect of his novels is how he exposes an unfair society through concealing it in fiction, revealing the reader’s world to be stranger than the ones they are reading.
Chapter 4: Muses, Mothers, and Revolutionaries

I’m the chopping wood woman
the woman with the axe
I’m the trailblazer
I clear the woods

I take out my own mind (Anne Waldman, “Fast Speaking Woman” II.180-185).

In her memoir, Minor Characters (1983), Joyce Johnson recounts her love affair with Jack Kerouac while weaving in a social commentary on the roles that Beat women played in helping female authors achieve literary success during the height of the generation. The bulk of her memoir serves to show how female writers of the 1950s and 60s were forced to overcome gender expectations and to be accepted into a community of writers. Johnson notes, “[a] girl was expected to stay under her parents’ roof until she got married . . . Experience, adventure – these were not for young women . . . As for art – decorative young women had their places as muses and appreciators” (Johnson xxxii). Experience, as Johnson notes, meant experimentation. In the 1950s, social expectations required that young women maintain a degree of sexual chastity, which translated into expressing little interest in breaking the social bubble that surrounded them, containing them from the world of men. To seek experience meant that women who wished to discover the world outside their childhood home would have to leave home. When they did, women entered a world that still lacked spaces for female artists, writers, and entrepreneurs. The Beat women sought to form these spaces and, while doing so, were part of a much larger movement: the Second Wave of feminism that was beginning to boil in the United States in the late 1950s. To breach the containment culture meant that women writers had to
become public figures in literary communities still dominated by men. In this chapter, I explore how women of the Beat Generation helped to create a literary counterculture that became one of the first literary movements to include a substantial number of female writers who used their works to support feminist causes and to reshape a place for the female artist in post-WWII society.

While completing the research for this thesis, I nearly came to the conclusion that I would have to portray the Beat Generation as masculine. After all, the founding members, including Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, along with their counterparts, Neal Cassady, Lucian Carr, and Herbert Huncke, were all men who rejoiced in a shared brotherhood that sought to challenge the postwar containment rhetoric of the time, social normatives, and ideal masculinity. They functioned within a masculine culture and did not step too far outside of the boundaries of their masculinity. More so, they are famed as a masculine generation. The very essence of Beat counterculture revolves around a masculine praxis of self-discovery and nonconformity against the larger culture as a whole, including, as exemplified by Kerouac’s denizen travels, the refusal of the nuclear family. However, in recent years there have been an increasing number of critical texts, which have focused on the women of the Beat Generation. Female Beats have not been ignored, but have rather been seen as less significant to the overall success of the Beats in reaching the public masses. Beat scholars Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace consider the Beat women to be distinct “technically, stylistically, and aesthetically,” with a principle focus on the autobiographical impulse and “mystical, vernacular poetics” (Johnson and Grace 2). Where this differs from the likes of Kerouac’s autobiographical impulse is the desire of Beat women, including the women to be discussed, to rewrite
myth and supercharge it with an underlying feminist message; to challenge the gendered praxis of writing memoir in the Beat community. Johnson and Grace also note that these gendered practices within the Beat counterculture all took place within the same time and geographical frames. Beat praxis collectively “rejected cold war paranoias, button-down corporate conformities, consumer culture, sexual repression, and McCarthy-era gay-bashing” (Johnson and Grace 2); however, there is a link between female Beats and the Second Wave of feminism, even though Beat women never openly acknowledged this link in their texts. Perhaps they didn’t need to. Whether they knew it or not, they created a rhetoric that could be considered radically feminist, even for our time. For one, their works readily challenged gender binaries, as can be seen in the excerpt from Anne Waldman’s, “Fast-Speaking Woman,” at the beginning of this chapter. Waldman portrays the woman as the trailblazer, one that seeks to gain the ground she had been denied in the past. Throughout the rest of the poem, Waldman consults mythology to explain the timeless, and fierce, presence of the ‘everywoman,’ a woman not inhibited by barriers or limitations based on her sex. Waldman shows ferocious goddess that is both profound and terrifying – a woman certainly out of context in the 1960s.

Prior to the 1960s, the containment culture and its bedfellow, McCarthyism, created the ingredients necessary to demand change, as Johnson and Grace note in Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing in the Beat Generation: “Women Beats and their efforts to express literary and social subjectivity emerged at a crucial juncture. Beat writing came to public attention as a countercultural phenomenon at exactly the same postwar moment as the massive redeployment of conformist ideologies of home, family, and normative heterosexuality” (Johnson and Grace 9). In the face of these ideologies, which included
the segregation of women in the public arena, Beat women wrote from the margins, in order to show the social expectations they rejected. As the Second-Wave of feminism began to gain momentum in the 1960s, literary and artistic circles became synonymous with women’s liberation. Female artists were the grassroots that gave “rhetorical shape and urgency to the social freedoms necessary to women’s viability as literary producers” (Johnson and Grace 9). As part of the counterculture, female literary circles were also part of a nexus of social groups that were defiant against the postwar reconstruction of traditional identity politics regarding gender, race, and sexuality. Along with other women writers of their time, Beat women challenged the stagnancy of postwar America by using their own experiences as females to show their opposition to the larger culture. Far from merely underwriting their male predecessors, Beat women sought to show the exigent issues that impacted women of the time: sexism, rape, abortion, and the expectations placed on women to adhere to oppressive social normatives. Without a doubt, these minor characters were part of a major cultural shift.

One of the most prominent women of the Beat Generation was the poet Diane di Prima. What helped raise her to prominence was fearless poetics that radicalized the feminine voice, giving it body and substance, and making it a powerful signifier of the new woman. During her early years in New York City, Di Prima was a student and correspondent of other poets, including, Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg, and Frank O’Hara, who were all important to the development of her signature poetics. Di Prima’s poetry exemplified the Beat yearning for experience and transcendence, from the perspective of a female (Knight 123-125). Her most notable prose were memoir, including Memoirs of a Beatnik (1969) and, most recently, Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New
York Years (2001), both of which explore her experience as a female writer in a largely male literary community. In Memoirs of a Beatnik, di Prima explores the free love sixties and transfers her experiences into subversive art. At the time, the work was viewed as obscene by the public; however, the controversy led to its popularity because it was seen as an accurate portrayal of the sexual liberation movement that proved to be an important ally to feminism in the 1960s. Female sexual liberation contradicted the attitudes associated with the female body in the 1950s, which idealized it as chaste, delicate, and prized – the epitome of the all-American virgin. By exploring her own carnal desires and reflecting on them, di Prima shows her own desires and what influenced them. She places herself within illicit spaces: orgies, the bedrooms of her fellow poets in slum districts, and at love-ins in the park, all heterotopias of sorts, where social restrictions based on gender and sexuality could not contain her. By doing so, she breaks down the structures that contain a woman and her body. Her transcendence is both physical and psychological. Sexual liberation did not equate serving a particular power structure, but serving the self and the body’s own needs; hence, it was a tool used by feminists to gain sexual freedom and control over one’s body.

In her article, “‘Total system, total solution, total apocalypse’: Sex Oppression, Systems of Property, and 1970s Women’s Liberation Fiction,” Maria Farland outlines the changes in feminism that took place in the 1970s, an era which produced a discursive shift in how feminism engaged in politics and protest. Farland states that in the 1970s, “[a]nalysis turned to the question of whether nature or nurture was the decisive factor in the normative construction of gender norms, and mainstream feminist analysis framed itself around the question of biology versus culture as the primary locus of socialization”
Gender studies became a crucial element within feminist analysis. In poetics, the gender question became ultimately tied in with the subjectivity of the speaker. Di Prima’s collection, *Revolutionary Letters* (1971), is one of her most politically-charged works where she begins to employ the use of “sisters” to describe her female contemporaries. Di Prima’s poems are raw, earthy, and self-justifying; her poetic voice refined and forceful. In, “Revolutionary Letter #44,” di Prima speaks of the shared experience of womanhood:

> as our cries
> yield to the cries of a newborn, as we hear
> the plea in the voices around us, not words
> of passion or cunning, discount
> anger or pride, grow strong
> in our strength, women’s alchemy, quick arms
> to pull down walls, we liberate
> out of our knowledge, labor, sucking babies, we liberate, and nourish, as the earth (di Prima, 5-13, 57)

Di Prima’s emphasis on “liberate” conjures up a reference to women’s liberation from the oppressive previous decade. The “walls” can be seen as symbolic of patriarchy. The “Cries” are a reference to protest rallies and the “newborn” or new life that is symbolically born from these protests. Moreover, the ability to give birth liberates women from the structures around her: “in our strength, women’s alchemy, quick arms / to pull down walls, we liberate.” Similar to Waldman, di Prima illustrates an everywoman; or a symbol of all women and the connections they share. The
everywoman is synonymous with di Prima’s ‘universal mother’ figure, which extends throughout her work. Accordingly, female fertility is a weapon of women’s liberation or, at the very least, is an unavoidable, and necessary, ally to women’s agency over their own bodies. To expand on the above, the “cries of a newborn” simultaneously represent the oppression of women within the domestic role as well as their connection with nature. These cries become a metaphor for the rallying cries of protests. According to di Prima, women’s liberation is located within them: their freedom equates their autonomy over their bodies.

Di Prima was part of the transitional years. Similar to many Beat women, she began writing during the “protofeminist” era in the 1950s (Johnson and Grace 10). By the 1960s and 70s, Beat women’s poetry developed into highly subjective, personal, and introspective narratives, which emphasized the importance of individuality and authenticity. Female Beats were revolutionaries, driven by their male counterparts to start something new, as di Prima shows in her poem, “Revolutionary Letter #10”:

These are transitional years and the dues

will be heavy.

Change is quick but revolution

will take a while.

America has not even begun as yet.

This continent is a seed (di Prima, 1-6, 20).

Di Prima’s revolution means the beginning of a whole new America. Once again, she makes a reference to birth, implying the significance of the feminine influence on the birth of a new nation. The “dues” that di Prima refers to are the social costs – the stigma
of being different, the consequences of activism, and the new role that women would occupy in society. Her recurrent references to maternity in her poetry represented the theme shared by Beat women. The difficulty of being a woman and belonging to a counterculture included the fear of getting pregnant and the costs of motherhood; in other words, the threat of motherhood replacing their artistic integrity. In her poetry, di Prima wrestles with this fear, eventually concluding that the challenge of motherhood was an important experience in a woman’s life, a belief in conflict with mainstream feminism.

Many Beat women, including Joyce Johnson, Brenda Frazer, and di Prima herself, became pregnant while living amongst fellow Beats and all faced a form of single motherhood – a new dynamic that resulted from the rise of the counterculture and the subsequent break-up of many nuclear families. Abortion also affected many Beat writers, most notably di Prima, who wrote about her own experiences in her poem, “Brass Furnace Going Out: Song, After an Abortion.” Di Prima’s unborn child remains a ghostly presence throughout the poem, as she contemplates what could have been and recites memories that could have been formed with the child. The father of the child was LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), who convinced di Prima to get an abortion. Di Prima’s guilt and shame are directed at Jones and the baby. Her harsh words emphasize her loss: “I want you in a bottle to send to your father / with a long bitter note. I want him to know / I’ll not forgive you, or him not being born / for drying up, for quitting” (di Prima, 15-18, 363). Di Prima addresses both the unborn child and Jones, paralleling the two as if they were one person. By paralleling him to their child, di Prima is showing Jones that he has lost part of himself along with the child. In Part V of the poem, she once again parallels father and child:
I have cut the shroud to measure
bought the stone
a plot in the cemetery set aside
to bury your shadow
take your head & go!
& may the woman that you find know better
than me to talk about it (di Prima 90-96, 365).

The child was the “shadow” of a man, implying the child’s presence as well as its loss. Di Prima follows this stanza with an image of a decaying child’s corpse and then to an image of the child at the age of three. The poem signifies the loss that is incurred by the mother and the bitterness that follows this loss. Di Prima’s experience represents that of other women, who sought abortions in spite of the consequences that they were left with afterwards. She also attacks the system that does not support the mother who chooses to abort. The lack of choice, the complications from abortion, and the loss of a potential child, all become signifiers for di Prima’s feminist message. She writes about abortion in her memoir, Recollections of My Life as a Woman, stating, “[a]bortions in those days were held to be simply women’s business . . . One of the unsung, unspoken, ways women risked their lives.” (di Prima 230). The risk that di Prima took was becoming a secret herself. Her desire to have a child was buried beneath her fear of the stigma attached to having a child out of wedlock.

Raised in a working-class Italian family, di Prima still held onto her family’s traditional views on marriage, even as she became more immersed in the bohemian culture developing in Greenwich Village. Di Prima’s feminism was born from her own
conflicted conscience, but also her interactions with the counterculture at the time. The feminism of the counterculture was one that infiltrated the arts in the 60s and 70s. Women’s liberation became aided by the proliferation of female artists, writers, and musicians, many of whom were influenced by the radical activism of their time. Di Prima’s memoir links her literary works with the major uprisings of the time: from civil rights (her affair with LeRoi Jones) that is inextricably linked to women’s rights (writing about her abortion and the place of the female artist), to sexual liberation and anti-war movements, both of which di Prima writes about in numerous poems. Farland further notes how female writers of the post-war generation were the beginning of the breakdown of the patriarchal control of intimate relationships. As a result, the ideal of the nuclear family was withered away in feminist literary circles and was replaced by a whole new ideal: individuality. Beat counterculture offered access to a culture that encouraged individuality. Male Beats exemplified the subversive lifestyle sought by female writers and also presented an openness to change, difference, and radical philosophy, the latter of which feminism at the time may have been considered by the mainstream. Sexual politics between male and female Beats relinquished ideals of monogamy and matrimony, and replaced these ideals with polyamory and sexual experimentation. The consequences of the politics resulted in the loss of freedom, not necessarily the gain of a free love subculture, as Farland notes, “sexual experimentation appeared to be in a kind of inverse relationship to possessive individualism and private property” (Farland). In this passage, Farland is directly referring to the early parts of di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, which outline how fellow authors, whether associated with the Beat movement or not, eventually became lovers. Bohemian friends, who
boarded together in a small, inner-city apartment, soon shared beds. Polyamorous relationships, however, eventually took a toll on the community. Former communal families became single-parent families as lovers moved out and into the next lover’s apartment. The destruction of the home hit the single mother the hardest; however, it also became the subject of di Prima’s poetics, which transferred the emotional loss of a community into a vividly personal, bodily, and existential experience.

The *Loba* and the New Woman:

The movements in the 1960s opened up doors for experimental literature, leading to the advent of widespread bohemianism and avant-garde art and literature.

‘Consciousness-raising’ was the key theme, as di Prima notes, “anything that took us outside – that gave us the dimensions of the box we were caught in, an aerial view, as it were . . . Because we knew we were caught, knew beyond a doubt we were at an impasse: where to next [?]” (di Prima 203). Kerouac and other Beats ask the same question in different ways. The ‘all too big world’ that Kerouac refers to in *On the Road* is only conquerable by the imagination and by exploring it by writing. In her statement, di Prima indirectly refers to the containment culture, which was even more claustrophobic for working-class women.

Surely, there were parallels between di Prima and other women in the Beat circle, including Naomi Ginsberg. Allen Ginsberg and di Prima shared a rare friendship during the 50s and 60s, one that was built around a mutual love of poetry and the fact that they both were children of immigrants and grew up in working-class urban neighbourhoods. Both found it difficult to fit in to any particular institution, including academia. Both also had the urge to be outside of the society that they felt oppressed the artist. In Anthony
Libby’s article, “Diane di Prima: “Nothing is Lost; It Shines in Our Eyes,” Libby argues that “a tendency toward nihilism was one of the markers of Beat consciousness, not opposed to but in some sense complementary to the lust for beatitude, since both are marked by a passionate revulsion against the mundane” (Libby 62). The measures Beats took to revolt, including bohemianism, drugs, and Eastern religions, allowed the Beats to develop a culture that was far-removed from the fifties Cold War containment and the post-WWII nationalism that began the terror of the arms race. When di Prima took up Buddhism, her intent was to chronicle her own journey towards self-enlightenment. Roman Catholicism had taught di Prima to be a woman in a patriarchal world. Buddhism had allowed her to relinquish her ties with Catholicism, in order to find her own identity, one that is not influenced by Western patriarchy. In Loba, di Prima explores her spirituality and places her spirituality within a feminist context. Loba is representative of di Prima’s divine, feminist, individuality; her own spiritual revelation that is inextricable from her sexual and gender politics. Di Prima’s Loba explores the spiritual psyche by addressing the contaminated religious practices in modern times and replaces them with a refusal of institutionalized religion in favour of the religion of the self. Loba the goddess is di Prima the poet. Both male and female. Both human and beast. As Gillian Thomsen writes in her article, “Representations of Gender and the Body in Diane di Prima’s Loba,” “[Loba] is multitudinous and, like the author, seeks to re-inscribe tropes of femininity by overlapping the boundaries between such tropes. The Loba is a bodily incarnation of the natural, the organic” (Thomsen, 3). The tropes take significant inspiration from Indigenous culture and rely on the presentation of women as akin to nature, or the Mother Earth. Di Prima describes Loba as “the hills,” “the tent,” and “the buffalo skins” (di
Prima, 37). She is a manifestation of a lifestyle that has been replaced by “city walls,” as Di Prima explains in the following lines: “Is she city? Gate she is we know / & has been” (di Prima, 49-50). These lines indicate two possibilities. As Thomsen argues, they may indicate that “the feminine has been a passive medium, through which the masculine passes, metaphorically speaking” (Thomsen, 3). They may also indicate that the woman has served as a connection between the natural world and the man-made one. In other words, she is the vessel that harbours the past, the primordial, and, therefore, eternal. Di Prima’s Loba is certainly godly, or supernatural, in all respects. Similar to other poems by di Prima, Loba discusses motherhood; however, this time di Prima presents it as a sacred role. She states,

she fluttered  
thru amniotic seas to draw him on.  
caught in black  
womb spasm  
struggled weaker  
toward earthlight  
she offered (di Prima, 66-73).

The word “amniotic” connotes the connection between mother and child. The unborn child journeys through the mother’s body towards life, which only her body can give. Loba as mother becomes an omniscient creator figure. “Earthlight” further connotes the connection between the natural world and the human one, with woman once again representing nature. It may also suggest that a new world is born through a new child opening its eyes.
Interestingly, in *Loba* di Prima synchronizes the male and the female. The binaries that she does construct between the two are eventually broken down through her characterization of Loba. Loba is, as mentioned, both a masculine and feminine character. Her androgyny is represented through the act of sex. Di Prima portrays her as follows: “The deal she offers in her business suit / seems straight enough” (di Prima 89-90). The “business suit” is a direct reference to the masculine sphere of work, commercialism, and conformity; however, the context of these lines takes place before the sexual act, where Loba eventually reveals herself to be wholly feminine. Di Prima connects the public and the private to the masculine and the feminine, showing how Loba can cross and traverse these boundaries. As Thomsen notes, “[di Prima] validates the revision of gender definition into a more fluid realm, which would inevitably expand the possibilities of signification and the more generalised debate of the relative usefulness of dichotomous logic” (Thomsen, 11). Expanding language enables the discussion of gender roles to be diluted of traditional rhetoric. Di Prima’s presentation of Loba as androgynous is feminist because it deconstructs the binary between male and female, while establishing the female as a creator figure.

Another aspect of di Prima’s and other Beat women’s writings are their use of the first-person pronoun “I” to narrate their poems and memoirs. Whether through a fictional lens or autobiography, the use of “I” is a substantial step forward to claiming the role as creator and author, of their own narratives. As Nancy M. Grace notes in her article, “Snapshots, Sand Paintings, and Celluloid: Formal Considerations in the Life Writing of Women Writers from the Beat Generation,” life writing becomes a means for women writers to tell their stories, their histories, and ideals from a female perspective; hence,
from a new vantage point, one that is not interrupted by patriarchal forms. Grace states, “Life writing also takes on political and artistic import for women writers in its connection to self-validation, self-expression, and authority, a conceptual link, assuming heightened importance for women writers effectively erased as legitimate artists from the historical Beat record” (Grace 143). Beat women who were “erased,” including the likes of Carolyn Cassady and Joyce Johnson, become important in the metanarrative of Beat feminism. Cassady and Johnson both produced memoirs that stemmed from an impulse to retell the stories of the Beat men from a female perspective; to provide a greater scope of what occurred. Life writing serves multiple purposes: one, it enables the author to establish her authority on the subject. Women of the Beat Generation could reclaim this authority through memoir. Second, it shows the important roles that women had in the formation and management of the Beat Generation. In Caroline Cassady’s memoir, *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg*, Cassady describes her struggle to bring up the children she had with Cassady during his constant travels across America and Mexico. She reconstructs scenes and dialogues between her and Cassady, placing importance on her voice and her role in the lives of Neal and his friends. Grace writes that life writing affirms “individual female agency and action in ways that fiction, poetry, and other literary forms do not . . . [In life-writing] Women Beat writers resist the dominant ethos and form both of autobiography and of the Beat community, both of which stipulate that the “boy gang” allow in women as long as they remain mothers, wives, sisters, lovers, virgins, whores, demons, or angels” (Grace 143). By embracing the power of historical subjectivity, women writers of the generation were able to use
Beat form and story-telling, to acquaint the reader with the world of women that surrounded these Beats.

Johnson’s memoir, *Minor Characters*, is a coming-of-age story, which tracks her life from a young age to her time with the Beat Generation. It proposes, like other female Beat memoirs, to shift the perspective of the Beats on to the roles of the ‘minor characters’ – the mothers, wives, girlfriends – of the Beat males. Johnson is also the most out-spoken of her contemporaries about Beat misogyny. Johnson’s relationship with Kerouac was intimate for two years and the consequence of being his lover was being his subject. Johnson notes that she never became a “fellaheen woman,” like Tristessa or Alene Lee. Instead, she was relegated to a much less prized place: she was an American, middle-class white girl. Young, pretty, and bookish – the type of girl who would make a good wife to Kerouac, but not a worthy lover. In *Minor Characters*, Johnson uses a passage from Kerouac’s *Desolation Angels* to show how Kerouac viewed her. The passage, which describes his “awful metaphysical linking of sex, birth, and the grave” (Johnson 133), explains that in *Desolation Angels* Kerouac sought the wilderness to escape the “women who hate me,” those women who “lay their bartering flesh all over the divans” forcing Kerouac to “sit through eternities of horror.” (Johnson 133). Johnson explains that the passage was referring to Kerouac’s many notable lovers, including herself. Women to Kerouac represented, first and foremost, the home. Ultimately, his lovers would turn into fiancés, mothers, and wives, in an attempt to appropriate their relationship into something that was more than just casual. Kerouac, leading the life that he did, could not conform to a domesticated lifestyle where demands of fatherhood and commitment were expected. However, as Johnson notes, her understanding of Kerouac’s
words force her to “mourn” and “forgive” his way of thinking (Johnson 133). Johnson, like her fellow Beat women, realized that the culture created by Beat men was a wilderness of its very own; a place where misogyny was still present.

“Damn the pain; it must be written”: Brenda Frazer and the Lost Memoir

Brenda Frazer’s *Troia* (1969) is an oft-overlooked work of the Beat Generation. Frazer remained distant from her contemporaries during the 1960s, leading a life with her husband, the poet Ray Bremser, in Mexico. Her experiences during this decade were chronicled in *Troia*. In this raw and angsty travel memoir, Frazer recounts her life as a wife of a runaway criminal, who followed her husband with their child, Rachel, to Mexico to start a new life, only to be forced into prostitution when her husband could not find work. Similar to di Prima, Frazer’s central themes are motherhood, loss, and the changing nature of womanhood in society. *Troia* can be viewed as a radical experiment because Frazer challenges patriarchal notions of womanhood. Sexual piety and moral decency become Frazer’s tools for deconstructing the notions that maidenhood is sacred. She argues that her prostitution was not only for money, but also a means of gaining autonomy over her sexuality. She admits to being both attracted to and disgusted by her sexuality and acknowledges the psychological struggles that a prostitute faces. Sex becomes merely a method to gain money, but it is also inextricably associated with survival. The following excerpt exemplifies the complexities of Frazer’s experiences. Trapped in the male gaze, she becomes aware of her own power in these circumstances, even though this power is entirely based on a transaction:

The young man asks me to sit down and I allow him to join me. His youth is a motivation for me to set the price as soon as I can. I am nervous, he tells me how
impressed he is by my entire profile in silhouette, like a queen, a young queen . . .

He is short of money and reluctant at first to pay the 300 pesos I ask for, but . . . I lay the whole story on him of the baby sleeping back in the hotel and Ray across the river, and he came across with what I needed (Bremser 102).

After carrying through the transaction, Frazer concludes, “I have succeeded in taking care of business” (Bremser 103). Frazer’s exploitation of her own body hardly seems empowering, but she discovers being a prostitute gives her more physical and emotional autonomy than she ever had before. As Nancy M. Grace notes, Frazer’s autonomy in *Troia* is not without its eventual consequences: “as [Frazer] becomes more self-assertive and independent as a prostitute . . . her Beat effort to free herself from the middle-class sexual mores leads to a costly drug addiction, life-threatening abortions, humiliating beatings at the hands of johns and Bremser, and the devastating loss of her daughter” (Johnson and Grace 172). The freedom-seeking feminist Beat she attempted to be is eventually replaced by an expected reality: loss. Her independence is eventually replaced by her dependence on marijuana and tranquilizers. Her recurring abortions, being forced to give up Rachel to adoption due to a worsening drug habit, leaves Frazer traumatized and isolated from her husband. As Grace further notes, Rachel becomes a signifier of a painful reality in Frazer’s life: that her initial decision to stay with Ray, in spite of the obvious dangers it presented, costs her a greater price than she could afford. Grace states, “[Throughout *Troia*] Rachel is a ghostly presence . . . whom Frazer seems to speak to throughout [her] letters . . . Unafraid, uncorrupted, open to natural wonderment, this construction of Rachel is an innocent version of her mother, an elegiac shadow of Frazer” (Johnson and Grace 172). The loss of Rachel also transforms Frazer’s attitude towards
Ray. She condemns him, but also admits to her own participatory guilt: “Ray is in control I discover later, and I am just a useless wife who was so tired out that I did not dare to enjoy anything anymore . . . The baby Rach sleeps next to us on the seat and I am unable to take care of her anymore. Say this is the end” (Frazer 112). The ‘tired’ and ‘useless’ wife is aware of the substantial loss and that her daughter will be an absence throughout her life.

The travel narrative that Frazer writes transforms into an exploration of Mexico; a picturesque narrative, similar to Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Frazer parallels travelling to spiritual enlightenment and introspection. Like Kerouac, she explores Mexico with fervour, emphasizing its spiritual geography. Kerouac’s America was wide, open, and diverse – a thorough reimagining of Whitman’s America. Frazer’s Mexico is seen through the eyes of an American eager to escape an America that she found stifling.

Mexico becomes her muse and allows her to create a confessionary tale using a confessional voice – one that also establishes the importance of personal experience and, in particular, the experience of a female in these circumstances. Throughout her travels, Frazer notes the changing landscape, lamenting the industrialization of what she considers a “sacred wilderness” (Frazer 22). She refers to the Cuban revolution’s impact on her surroundings, including the tensions forming in Mexico between revolutionaries and the encroaching capitalism of America that had begun an industrial transformation of the nation in the 1960s. The following passage expresses her frustrations with these political tensions:

I am full of moods and bad humors, always brooking my importance as the breadwinner. When revolutionaries come to stop at our house on their American
way to Cuba, I am ungracious, not timid, but contemptuous. They are on their way to Cuba and idealism and here we are left to grope with the snake of time and capitalism growing; I wince every time I see a Coca-Cola sign (Frazer 55).

Frazer is cynical towards the idealism of change. The “snakes of time,” as she notes, are inevitable. Getting caught up in the constant consumption of things is an eventual reality, as her ‘breadwinning’ prostitution is proof of. Her idealization of communism makes her envious of revolutionaries seeking the socialist exhibition that Cuba became in the media, much to the chagrin of American politicians.

Despite the disruptive changes occurring around her, Frazer notes her life was split into three roles: motherhood, prostitute, and author. She gradually awakens to the fact that her “eye is on visions of writing instead [of prostitution]” (Frazer 57) as her letters and autobiographical sketches became a means for her to begin to make sense of her experiences in Mexico; to face realities that had become very clear, especially after the loss of Rachel. Frazer discovered through stringing her stories together in her memoir that her and Bresmer’s desire to escape American middle-class expectations was a delusion, albeit a necessary delusion for her writing. The confessional role is abandoned and replaced by a narrator, or storyteller, that enhances her own experiences with language of the sublime and the surreal. One particularly emphatic narration occurs when Frazer describes an abortion. She transforms a surreal moment into the grotesque. Her procedure results in nightmarish delusion stimulated by the morphine she is given: “I woke up through horrifying dreams later, through memories of retching and trying not to. I cried, pleaded the nurse to tell me it was done. Yes, she said, and pulled ten yards of bloody gauze out of my cramping womb” (Frazer 170). When she discovers that the
baby was two months developed after the doctor holds a section of the vertebrate in front of her, she admits she “felt everything of sanity slipping away” (Frazer 171). The abortion becomes the last straw in her and Ray’s relationship; a final dead-end that Frazer had chased fiercely. Mexico becomes associated with bitter memories and Frazer’s damaged body. Her portrayal of its transcendental qualities, such as the “myriad stars and constellations . . . [and] the horoscopic screen of Mexican heaven,” and Frazer’s desire “to see where all the roads go” (Frazer 20) juxtapose the tragic and traumatic experiences endured every day. She escapes the life she led under the shadow of romance, revolution, and desire to eventually return to the United States.

Frazer ends her memoir by reconceiving the possibilities that existed in Mexico, as she is unable to separate herself from the place that was the focus of her fantasies and the sight of her regret. This reconstruction of an ideal past is suggestive, as Grace notes, of “movement out of the Beat and into the counterculture of the sixties and early seventies” (Johnson and Grace 173). Her desire for revolution and escape from her past is replaced by aporic tension in the present, as if Frazer is asking her readers where she should go, only to ensure readers she can manage.

To conclude, Frazer’s Troia, alongside di Prima’s, Memoirs of a Beatnik, both establish the feminine voice in Beat memoir. Through their memoirs these Beat woman harness the rhetorical power of subjectivity and memory to portray women as legitimate figures of the Beat community, ones with important stories to tell and teach.
The Successor: Anne Waldman

When Anne Waldman arrived at the literary scene in the 1970s, Beat women had achieved a place within counterculture. The fear of being seen as different, of being isolated, or marginalized – the experiences of Joyce Johnson, Diane di Prima, and Brenda Frazer – had all but faded away and were replaced by a community of shared radicalism. Beat women were part of the Beat counterculture, which had reached the mainstream by the end of the 1960s, with the death of Kerouac and Cassady, as well as the rise of the hippie subculture. Bohemianism had become a more accepted way of life and had changed the styles, literature, and television that were consumed. Waldman’s biggest challenge was to forge an identity for artistic women in the 70s, one that would reflect the changes that occurred within society in the past decade. Her literary style embodies the organic quality of her predecessors, with a rawness that is reflective of Ginsberg and di Prima. Similar to Ginsberg, she draws upon political issues for her content, but also infuses her work with Beat feminism, both of which are featured in her seminal work, Fast-Speaking Woman (1975). The title poem of the work is a feminist reflection of “Howl.” Waldman’s rallying descriptions of herself as the universal woman, the antecedent and descendent of women today, emphasizes her connection to the earth, creation, and destruction. She rallies for a new feminist consciousness, one that is free from the rhetoric of previous generations. She presents Kali, the goddess with spite, attitude, and anger: “I’m the Kali woman / the killer woman with salt on her tongue” (Waldman, II.4-5). Her rhetoric is reflective of di Prima’s earth mother. The destructive force of Kali is also reminiscent of Corso’s, bomb-goddess in “Bomb”:

I’m the celebrity woman
I’m the luminary woman
I’m the standout woman
I’m the braggart woman
I’m the shrew at the window woman
I’m the stigma woman
the beaten woman
the disgraced woman
hag woman

where will I go (Waldman II.41-50)

The Kali woman, much like di Prima’s Loba, is a fierce and uncompromising symbol of new womanhood that is simultaneously rooted in the primordial figure of womanhood from ancient times – a woman that is both savage and nurturing; a mother and a beast. Waldman uses anaphora in the statement, “I’m the…,” to forge an identity and to emphasize the process of self-creation. The poem is a chant and an invocation to the power of language. The speaker asserts stereotypes of women: she is at once the “celebrity,” “luminary,” and the “stand-out woman,” who is the focal point of the performance, while also being the “braggart woman,” “shrew,” “beaten,” and “disgraced,” “hag.” Waldman’s Whitmanian list shows the many ways her speaker can be perceived; her complexity is one of her strengths. The lack of capitalization of the word “the” in lines 46-47 emphasizes the status of women who have become outcasts. It is the speaker’s vulnerability that serves as evidence that her poem is also a politically-charged sentiment for women who are misunderstood. Waldman’s speaker
acknowledges her poverty. She is an exile and a pariah. A woman who is condemned, expressing a similar sentiment as her fellow Beats:

I’m the lone assassin I’ll sit in my cell
I’m the inflamed woman ready to burn
I’m the notorious infidel

. . .
I’m the vixen
the woman in the hovel
the woman on the dole (Waldman I.488-498).

Once again, Waldman uses no capitals at the beginning of the last two lines of this stanza, thus, emphasizing the meaning of the statements before. The “lone assassin” incarcerated, the “inflamed woman,” and “notorious infidel” all become the “vixen,” a statement that refers to a woman that is both “ill-tempered and quarrelsome” (OED) and sexualized. Waldman transforms this vixen into a woman living on welfare. The connection between these statements suggests that the fierce woman Waldman describes throughout the poem is also a woman who is an outcast. The femininity of this woman is not tolerated by society.

The reference to being an outcast is consistent in “Fast-Speaking Woman;” however, Waldman may also be referring to being an outcast within the community of poets. Part of the uniqueness, and power, of Waldman’s poems, which is highlighted in “Fast-Speaking Woman,” is her emphasis on her own distinctive oral performance. The poems are transformed into primitive, ritual chants and open up to new interpretations. The spiritual, or metaphysical, evocation of “Fast-Speaking Woman,” is stressed throughout
the poem, and the exhibitive elements of the poem establish that it is meant to be radical – a testament to a radical woman. Performance of the Kali Woman allows her to become a full character, a possibility, and realized through the voice of the speaker (Smith).

Waldman, unlike di Prima, separates her poetry from an historical moment. While di Prima’s poetry, especially the “Revolutionary Letters” cited, show how di Prima was eager to tie her politics with poetry, Waldman is far more concerned with the place of the artists in society, or the lack thereof. Perhaps the most political element of her poetry is her oral impulse. In his article entitled, “From Revolution to Creation: Beat Desire and Body Poetics in Anne Waldman’s Poetry,” Peter Puchek lumps Waldman in with the likes of early Ginsberg and Corso, explaining that all three poets had a similar desire (a “Beat desire,” as Puchek terms it) to “break free of T.S. Eliot’s classicism and the New Critics’ hermeticism, to make a poetics of body and soul organically fused to each other and to the underside of America’s mid-century prosperity and geopolitical ascendency” (Johnson and Grace 227). Waldman’s poetry is a succession that is connected to what came before. She adopts Beat sensibility, but shies away from the tortured male artist/disenfranchised poet and instead replaces it with an empowered, confident voice. As Puchek further notes, Waldman privatized her politics, instead focusing on changing consciousness, as the following excerpt from her poem, “How the Sestina (Yawn) Works” shows:

This is a sample of my own revolution
taking the easy way out of poetry
I want it to hit you all personally
like a shot of extra-strong methedrine
so you’ll become your own television

Become your own yawn! (Waldman 31-36).

“How the Sestina (Yawn) Works” uses irony to grab the reader, as Waldman explains that, “I opened this poem with a yawn / thinking how tired I am of revolution /
the way it's presented on television” (Waldman 1-3). According to Waldman, revolution has become akin to the violence and war that is being protested – it is mindless. Instead, poetry, being the “easy way out” is far more effective, since it is the act of creating a new way of thinking; it is communication and connection.

Waldman’s most comprehensive work, Iovis: Colors in the Mechanism of Concealment, is a testament to both the power of poetry and Beat feminism. Iovis, which spans three books, details the misdeeds of patriarchy using a traditional masculine form, the epic poem. The epic poem has long been the province of male writers--not just the Greek classics, but also male writers of the past century. Waldman attempts to rewrite, or perhaps, reconfigure, the epic. She designs her work by classical epic conventions while interweaving experimental and avant-garde motifs. She aligns the past and the present, such as in her poem, “Mangala.” The speaker of the poem is the female lover of the patriarch, who describes him as “seductive in his humility” (Waldman 4). The poem describes religious patriarchy, especially that within the Judeo-Christian doctrine. The patriarch transforms from a lamb into a lion (5), and becomes obsessed with the power he has over others. His lover remains in “lowness” (6), but eventually gains power through writing a new doctrine, or, as she metaphorically describes it, building her own “temple” (25). Through her writing she becomes a lover to her own works, her poetry and stories. She states, “O He is a great king / but I am in my writing / & in my richness / I speak a
new doctrine to an old form” (33-36). The capitalization of “He” may very well be a reference to a male God, or a highly-esteemed male figure within the Judeo-Christian faith, while the speaker remains an unnamed woman, who describes herself as a “prophet” that eventually transforms into a “goddess” through her writing (29).

“Mangala” sets the stage for the rest of the collection, initiating a feminizing of history, religion, and power, by starting with Biblical history.

In the first book of the trilogy, Waldman focuses on Greek mythology, and considers it the origin of the “Male Religion.” Her speaker, who is referred to as “the poet,” addresses religious patriarchy and beseeches it to transform itself so the world can continue: “Don’t mock me as I avenge the death of my sisters / in this or any other dream / In order to make the crops grow / you men must change into women” (Waldman 45-48). This transformation is symbolic. Through her speaker, Waldman is addressing the connections between patriarchal religion and violence. This becomes the most prevalent theme throughout the entire trilogy, in particularly in Books II and III. Waldman interweaves personal commentary with her poetry in both chapters. In Book II, she opens up about her views of women in poetry, including a commentary on Beat misogyny: “I can’t claim to have psychoanalyzed these guys [the Beats], but I recognized the torment there, and the deep-rooted fear of women’s power, which is blatant in cultures & religions & whole nations worldwide (Islamism, Christian fundamentalism, some styles of Buddhism, Judaism . . . and our so-called modern enlightened Western is no exception” (Waldman 476-477). Waldman continues to explain that the male Beats are not necessarily intentionally misogynistic, but responding to and reproducing a system that is much greater than them.
In *Iovis* Waldman recognizes that misogynistic systems are tied directly with oppression of all kinds. In spite of being considered a radically feminist text, *Iovis* does not attempt to merely challenge or criticize misogyny, but to understand it and suggest a solution. In a recent interview about the trilogy, she comments on her goal to deconstruct gender: “[In the *Iovis Trilogy*] I was also thinking in terms of a feminist plan of explicating the male, usurping with the female and the hermaphrodite, and then resolving in something transcendent beyond gender perhaps” (Cohn). Waldman credits her “feminist consciousness” in helping her, as a poet, “transcend” outright criticism and protest against misogynistic power. Since the trilogy was written over twenty-five years, her feminist consciousness evolves throughout each book. For instance, in Book III, subtitled “Eternal War,” she writes about the most current age, from 9/11 onwards, and parallels the current era’s war in the Middle East with that of the World War Two and the Vietnam War, stating that casualties of all wars are sacrifices for the eternal war for peace:

what are we dying for?

58,000 of “our own”

did die, then died on them

did die them, then

& now?

we die others, many thousands

de die on us

die on me (725).
Waldman connects all casualties from war, regardless of what side they are on, as dying for the same cause, for a state of peace within the “Polis.” Later on in the book she makes the statement, “Tragedy begins with Polis,” (830) using the Greek word for city to symbolize civilization. In other words, wars throughout the world are fought to maintain stability within ‘civilized’ nations.

**Conclusion: Light in the ‘Dark Continent’**

Beat women writers have often found themselves positioned against the status quo, not just because they wrote about issues that were subject to censorship during the 1950s and 60s, but also because they were women in a literary community dominated by male writers and publishers. Through their writings they challenged a system that saw them as invisible, or merely as parts of a greater whole. The phenomenon that the Beat women expose in their writings is the opposition they faced in a community that established themselves as anti-hegemonic. Instead of being part of the fellahen (or brothers) of the Beat Generation, women writers were excluded from narratives that were countercultural and discursive practices that espoused a Whitmanian unity and brotherhood in America (re: Ginsberg, Kerouac). However, this exclusion may have been the ingredient that drove them to rewrite the feminine in Beat literature. Beat women countered the Beat male impulse to portray women as secondary, as domestic, or as objects. Di Prima, Frazer, Waldman, as well as a host of other female writers of the generation, created a discourse from male narratives, to both oppose and expand on how women were portrayed by their counterparts.

Overall, the critical reception of the works of Beat women has been a crucial part of post-Beat identity. The memoir, which was a form taken up by Beat women to expose
their oppression during the height of the Beat Generation, helped to ensure their survival into later decades. In other words, the writings of Beat women have become artefacts of more than a counterculture, but also crucial objects of study for feminism and literary studies.
Bibliography


