

The Subculture of the Beats: A Sociological Revisit

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Introduction

Much has been written about the literary works and life-histories of key figures of the Beat Generation: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, John Clellon Holmes, Gary Snyder, and others (for overviews, see Charters, "The Beats," and *Penguin Book of the Beats*). More recently, lesser-known figures in the literary Beat movement (including women and black Beats) have also been studied more closely from such a perspective (Knight; Lee, *Beat Generation*). Many intimate details about the vicissitudes of daily life within the inner circle of the Beats, and their interactions with the outside world, have been disclosed. These historical "facts" are now well established, but little has been done in terms of assessing the movement sociologically. With the benefit of historical hindsight based on increased scholarly understanding of cultural developments in the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s, it may be worthwhile to look back at the Beats from a sociological perspective,¹ despite the explicit admonition against such "sociologizing" written by a Beat poet in 1959 (JOY). On the other hand, we will seek to go beyond an observer's view at the time who found it hard to imagine that Kerouac's writings "in the far future" would be read for anything except sociology: "this is what it was like to bum around the country with junkies and supposed Zen addicts; this is what it was like to live in a typical Beatnik's pad; this is what it was like to be sent by a Charlie Parker record, and so on" (Moore 385). Undoubtedly, the writings of Kerouac and other Beats can stand on their own, having intrinsic literary merits, but this essay is not concerned so much with the aesthetic qualities of Beat artistic products. Instead, the primary focus is on the Beat subculture and its constituting enclaves and scenes. Borrowing partly from contemporary sources and critical studies of autobiographical and self-reflective writings by participants, an analysis will be

made of the basic sociological characteristics of the Beat underground.

First, I will introduce the Beats as a Bohemian subculture and expressive social movement. Second, I will take a closer look at the intricate interplay between the media images and the "real" identities of the Beats, because of the former's impact on the Beats' life-world. Third, I will elaborate on the Beats' ethos (beliefs, values and attitudes), through a critical revisit of a sociological analysis of the Beats done at the time. This will be followed by a similar analysis of the substance of the Beats' cultural practices. Last, I will present my conclusions about the Beats as a complex sociocultural phenomenon.

A Bohemian Subculture and Expressive Social Movement

From a historical and sociological perspective, the Beats were a part of post—World War II Bohemian culture in the U.S. and constituted a subcultural movement that opposed "square," bourgeois culture; the Beats dubbed people "squares" whom previous Bohemians called "Philistines" and "bourgeoises" (Moore 378). In various respects, the Beats were a continuation of a Bohemian movement that has an extended history in itself. More generally, Bohemians can be defined as persons who as writers or artists are living an unconventional life usually in a colony with others (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 124). Bohemianism as such has always had a strong affiliation with the development of avant-gardes as movements within art; significantly, Bohemia has been called the "underworld of art" (Snyderman and Josephs). Historically, there have also been interrelationships between artistic and sociopolitical vanguards which have tended both to converge and to diverge from each other. The Bohemian culture itself "is characterized by an active, though perhaps, irregular communalism and group dynamic. In this sense, the Bohemian subculture can also be read in terms of

a movement, or an interwoven artistic community" (Allan 257).

The subculture of the Beats, which can indeed be studied as an art world (Becker, *Art Worlds*), was much broader in scope than simply those of discrete artistic forms such as literature, film, painting, and music. It also entailed specific signifying practices (Hall), that is, modes of ordering and coding the experiences of the group in question. These were manifested in expressive forms and rituals that not only referred to artistic work but also to specific attitudes, behavior patterns, dress codes and the like, as well as to objects and paraphernalia with which the members were associated. Thus, the artistic practices were located within a larger setting of modes of social expression employed by this particular group. Therefore, the more general term "cultural practice," which encompasses both artistic and lifestyle components, is more preferable for our purpose.

The Beat ethos was held together by some common elements characteristic of this particular avant-garde, including: alienation, that is, the sense of separation and place-bound estrangement from mainstream society; activism in the form of speed (sudden spasms of energy and information, mixed and flowing amorphously); angst, that is, a residual romanticism of the spirit of sacrifice (the "Beat" as in "beaten"). This was reflected in their self-immolation (testing personal limits regarding a death wish), which concentrated on the extreme passions aimed towards a goal that was ultimately unattainable as well as unsustainable. However, this reality did not dampen their attempts to live in a state of continual flux, aided by drug usage that enhanced their strong sense of defiance and exploration of psycho-physical states in order to test the farthest outreaches of human experience. Beat culture was also characterized by antagonism towards mainstream society, pitting the Beat artist against society. The Beat arsenal entailed subversion, anti-uniformity (in lifestyle and dress codes), provocation and "scandal," and the deliberate use of insiders' jargon (hip talk and invented idioms). Last but not least, there was the specific Beat imaginary, consisting of a visual language which was crucial for a counterculture that invested heavily in the visionary experience and "visionariness." (Consider, for example, the broadening of perception induced by drugs or meditation.) This imaginary comprised both a repertory of images and an inventory of sounds. The Beats wanted to experience the "rhythm of the image" in tandem with the "grain of the voice," which had too often been detached from the literary discourse (Minganti).

The Beat artists have come to identify the subculture itself. However, though the artistic production was an intrinsic part of the Beat subculture, not all of the members were artists, but all were active in cultural production, in a broader sense, just by their participation. By becoming a Beat, by adopting and using the Beat style, one was helping to define the movement itself (Allan 257-58). This perspective does not mean to denigrate the centrality of the artistic expressions of the movement, as will become clear during my further analysis.

Beats were predominantly adolescents and "young adults"—to borrow a term from Kenneth Keniston (*Young Radicals*) indicating a separate stage of life between adolescence and full-blown adulthood created by modern society—"roughly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight" (Holmes, "The Philosophy"). Yet, a significant minority of Beats were in their thirties and forties around 1960 (Moore 378; Polsky, "The Village" 150), displaying a cult of youthfulness: perpetual adolescence. Although this tendency is more generally characteristic of Bohemian subcultures, it was and still is more extremely articulated in the U.S. context, because of a prevailing emphasis on youth and youthfulness in American culture. John Arthur Maynard points out that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs were old enough to have served in World War II, and that most of the original members of the Beat enclave in Venice West (near Los Angeles) were enlisted men in the Korean War-era. Observers at the time, like social psychologist Kenneth Keniston, saw the Beats and their fellow travelers as people who chose "to opt out of the System altogether and to try to remain permanently within the youth culture," with all of its problematic consequences; he spoke of the "Beat evasion of the problem of identity" ("Social Change" 213). Therefore, it is inaccurate to conceptualize the Beats as a full-fledged youth subculture as several authors have done (e.g., Brake 88-89, Allan 257, Matza). On the other hand, the Beatniks, who gathered in North Beach, San Francisco; Greenwich Village, New York; and Venice West in 1959 and 1960, tended to be very young people who had heard about the "revolution" and wanted to join the movement (Maynard 12).

Three subcultural enclaves became well known for their highly visible Beat population: Greenwich Village, North Beach, and Venice West. There were, however, similar lesser-known districts in major cities and college towns throughout North America, including a drop-out scene in the fringes of Columbia University, New York, and in Harlem; Chicago; Denver; Wichita; and Rutherford, New Jersey (Lee,

"Introduction" 5-6). In addition, international Beat scenes congregated in Mexico, the Balearic Islands, Tangier, and Paris, visited by the hard core of the Beat Generation (Polsky, "The Village" 171n23). The coffeehouses which mushroomed in various American cities and university towns during the 1950s and early 1960s were favorite meeting places for their habitués—the Beatniks (Klinger-Vartabedian and Vartabedian). In this essay I will only look at the Beat movement in the United States.

The enclaves of Greenwich Village and North Beach have drawn the most scholarly attention, because of the star system that traditionally characterizes literary studies, and the fact that Beat "gurus" frequented these places in particular. Curiously, no thorough histories have been published about the Beat scenes in either Greenwich Village or North Beach, however. Nevertheless, Ronald Sukenick's memoir of life in the American cultural underground since the fifties (*Down and In*), based on some hundred interviews and participant observation, offers some good insights into the Beat scene in Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Michael Davidson's history of the San Francisco Renaissance in American poetry contains a thorough analysis of the Beat poets' cultural and aesthetic practices within the local literary community at mid-century. Steven Watson chronicled the Beats' fusion of life, legend, and literature, focusing on the close, even intimate friendships among the primary Beat figures from 1944 to 1960. And a detailed historical study of the rise and fall of the Beat scene in Venice West, southern California, has appeared (Maynard). Although many sociologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists publicly speculated and wrote about the Beats at the time, only two social-scientific investigations were carried out then: a psychiatric/psychological in-depth study of the San Francisco Beats during the winter of 1958-59 (Rigney and Smith), and a sociological field study of the Beats in Greenwich Village during the summer of 1960 (Polsky, "The Village").

A Complex Interplay between Beat Identities and Media Representations

Subcultures such as the Beat scene are not unmediated social formations, nor are they autonomous, grassroots cultures which only meet the media when they are in the process of "selling out," or when they evoke moral panics. From the very beginning, media and other culture industries are involved and active in the construction of subcultures. In fact, it can be argued that these industries are even central to the process of subcultural formation, integral to the

way we "create groups with words" (Bourdieu 139), as Sarah Thornton has emphasized (*Club Cultures* 117). In the past, students of subcultures in the tradition of the so-called Birmingham School (Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) located the media and their associated processes outside, in opposition to and *after* the emergence of that subculture. Thus, they omitted the labeling process that is crucial to both the insiders' and outsiders' view of themselves as different. For this reason, subcultures are best defined as social groups that have been labeled as such, a practice that I will follow here as well.

More than previous Bohemians, the Beats entertained close relationships with their social representations in public, due to the fact that America had turned into a true mass-mediated society by then. It enabled Beat writers to promote themselves more easily, and turned moral panics about their behavior among authorities at the local level into national events, thus enhancing their fame or notoriety, depending on one's perspective. The media attention also increased the likelihood that larger groups of youth who felt ill at ease in Eisenhower America and were attracted to an "alternative" lifestyle would join the Beat milieu as camp followers and imitators. The intricate interplay between media images and "real" Beats and Beat lifestyles, as well as the fluidity of the various categories of Beats and Beatniks, made it hard to disentangle these groups.

During their heyday, from the fall of 1957 until around 1964, the Beat Generation drew much media attention, culminating in true "media hysteria." Within less than three months after the publication of *On the Road* in September 1957, Kerouac's literary style ceased to be the main issue, as the media came to focus more upon the Beats' lifestyle and their "sexy chicks"—while downplaying the homosexual and androgynous components of the Beat culture. Beats were covered in all major news magazines, including *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, and in the tabloid press. Disapproving tabloid stories helped to legitimize and authenticate the Beat subculture to adherents. In fact, like other subcultures, it is hard to imagine a Beat *movement* without this news coverage. In turning the Beats into news, the tabloids both framed the subculture as a major event and disseminated it.

The Beats also received a significant amount of air time on national TV talk shows, and were the subject of at least two television documentaries. In addition, their writings were read at public meetings and their work and lifestyle were discussed by panels of "experts." Men's magazines such as *Esquire* and its coarser porno rival *Playboy* were the Beats' most

ardent promoters. The movement's shocking messages were even more disturbing or dismaying to middle America because of the almost programmatic ruthlessness that was linked to their impudence in public performances (Cook 5, 7; McNeil 190).

Of particular interest is the fact that the extensive media coverage was enhanced by strategic self-promotion, in which Allen Ginsberg, openly eager for fame, played a key role. After all, this highly conscious and even calculating public relations agent for himself and his fellow Beats was a "born-again marketing researcher" (Maynard 12), as well as a die-hard Beat. Having "the image of the quintessential outsider," he "never accepted outsider status," according to Ron Sukenick, an intimate of Ginsberg who interviewed some one hundred fellow-subterraneans for his history of the underground arts since the fifties (*Down and In* 14). Sukenick even contends: "It may turn out that Ginsberg's chief genius contribution to literary history, poetry aside, is that he was the first to seize the means of promotion" (14). He was also a consummate networker and a charismatic figure and role model for younger members of the cultural underground; he would continue to act thus until his death in April 1997 (Surgal).

Yet, although Ginsberg had been working on a broad media approach for two years, he was himself away in Europe during the launching of *On the Road* and the ensuing media explosion in the fall of 1957. This left Kerouac to absorb the principal shock alone, despite the fact that, according to one of his biographers, Kerouac had never intended the Beat Generation as a media event, but merely as a description: he had no program of his own to present in its support. Nevertheless, critics immediately considered Kerouac as the proponent *par excellence* of many social evils supposedly advocated in his book (Clark 161-64).

The Beats evoked moral panics in the conformist climate of the 1950s, just because they were *not* political in a conventional sense, as Barbara Ehrenreich rightly contends. Political leftists of whatever strain could be dismissed much more easily in 1950s America; "but the Beats spoke from an underclass of unassimilated people to an unassimilated corner of the middle-class psyche; and this, as much as the wanton beat of rock and roll, was dangerous" (Ehrenreich 58).

The moral panics about the public stances and writings of the Beats that arose among authority figures, Ginsberg's obscenity trial regarding his long poem "Howl" in San Francisco in 1957, and a heavily publicized crackdown on the Beat enclave in North

Beach in the summer of 1958 by the San Francisco Police Department also helped to thrust the Beat Generation into the spotlight (Maynard 4; McNeil 190; Wisker 85-87). Ginsberg and his friends must have relished the incomprehension of the authorities and the moral crusade mobilized as a result of the "Howl" trial. (This notwithstanding Ginsberg's assertion in later interviews that he wrote "Howl" for his own fun, and then had no intention of publishing it, for he did not want his family to learn about his personal sex life.) What could be a better badge of their cultural rebellion? They themselves and their defendants may have framed the Beats as innocent victims of negative stereotyping and harassment, but, from a distanced historical view, the moral panics and the Beats' media representations can also be seen as a form of hype orchestrated by the culture industry. The established firm the Viking Press (in the case of some of Kerouac's writings) and Ferlinghetti's small-scale City Lights Press/Pocket Book Shop, in tandem with Ginsberg's public relations machinery, targeted a growing niche in the counterculture market in the United States at the time. Whereas subcultural studies in the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies tradition have tended to regard subcultures as subversive until the very moment that they are represented in the media (Hebdige, *Subculture* and *Cut 'n' Mix*), Sarah Thornton has rightly argued that these kinds of taste cultures (not to be confused with activist political organizations) become politically relevant only when they are framed as such. This implies that "derogatory media coverage is not the verdict but the essence of the resistance" (Thornton, *Club Cultures* 137).

However, it was neither Kerouac's media presentations nor the "Howl" trial but the representations of the Beats of Venice West, portrayed in the book *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), which would stick most in the larger public's mind. Written by Lawrence Lipton, then 48 years old, an immigrant from Tsarist Poland and an obscure novelist and poet who himself had taken part in various other Bohemian scenes, *The Holy Barbarians* became the outsider's handy guide to the Beat scene, complete with photographs, brief biographies, transcribed conversations, a ready-made historical context, and a glossary of Beat jargon in the back. It offered a vivid picture of the movement, but a distorted one (Maynard 13, 16). In his book and many radio and TV appearances that launched its publication, Lipton exaggerated the number of Beats living in Venice West, suggesting that it was full of Beats, whereas there were only "about two or three dozen people, most of whom knew each other,...and all of whom could have crowded into the Venice West Café

[the only hangout for local Beats] on a slow night" (Maynard 101). The photo essay at the back of the book gave a very biased picture of the local Beat scene as well. The book, which went on sale in June 1959, was an immediate success, but as John Arthur Maynard concludes, "not necessarily for the right reasons. The author had intended it as a serious work of popular sociology; people bought it as a primer on a fad" (108). Kerouac was heavily opposed to its interpretation of the Beat stance, and thought that it diverted entirely "from the open mind and universal intelligence, Shakespearean intelligence, Burroughsian intelligence, to an angry and violence-prone, anti-family, anti-middle-class attack and demeaned the whole scene" (according to Ginsberg in retrospect, as quoted in Sukenick, *Down and In* 113).

The representations of the Venice Beats in the media were part of a much broader process of social intervention by the media and cultural industries. Paradoxically, the subculture of the Beats became a part of "something real merging with something fabricated to produce...a new branch of popular culture dedicated to the *rejection* of popular culture" (Maynard 13). It entailed, in other words, a counter-culture that was "jointly" produced by its members in tandem with the communications media and subcultural industries involved, aimed against mainstream mass culture in America. Although the popular magazines and tabloids, the television networks and movie industry all borrowed Lipton's ready-made clichés to exploit the Beats as "weirdos," they also spread the Beat gospel of "art for art's sake," simplicity, spiritual independence, and freedom from possessions to a broader audience. Thus, the same people who manufactured the images were involved in an assault on the American way of life (Maynard 20).

Most likely inspired by the name of the Russian satellite "Sputnik" launched in 1957, the black poet Bob Kaufman, co-founder of the important Beat literary journal *Beatitude*, coined the term "Beatniks" to describe the Bohemian enclave in North Beach of bearded, sandaled coffee-house habitués, and their female counterparts (Saloy 163). From there the use of the term spread rapidly to other parts of the United States, indicating Beat trend followers. Blaine Allan has suggested that through publications in *Life*, *Look*, and *Time*, "hipsters and beats became the more Soviet-sounding, and derogatory or threatening, beatniks. With that name the publicity emphasized the subculture's subordination on the one hand, and its antagonism on the other" (259).

The Beatniks would even eventually become a part of the national American folklore. Beatnik char-

acters appeared on television, in the movies, and in such long-running comic strips as *Popeye* and Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy*. One of the most unorthodox comic strips, Gus Arriola's *Gordo*, even featured a Beatnik in the form of a six-legged spider named Bug Rogers, while one of the most popular situation comedies on television, *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959-63), had the funniest Beatnik character of them all, Maynard G. Krebs. He had been written into this family show, which dealt with the antics of a middle-class grocer's family and various friends and customers, in order to capitalize on the national obsession with the "weird" Beat subculture of the late fifties and early sixties. The Krebs character looked almost like anyone else, except that he wore sweatshirts with holes and no collars, chinos, and sneakers, had longer hair than Dobie's crew cut, and sported a goatee, since a mustache would have been considered too masculine. Ineffectuality was the essence of this character. In his own time, the "Beatnik" tended to be the brunt of jokes rather than someone to be feared (Ehrenreich 53; Maynard 3, 118).

Contemporaries all knew the Beatnik cliché: a short, sloppily groomed man, usually wearing a goatee, dressed in shabby clothing (habitually wearing chinos, sweater, or turtleneck), with horn-rimmed glasses or sunglasses. Beatniks wore sandals all year round, and never seemed to do anything. A cigarette often dangled precariously from the lower lip and a black beret covered the unkempt hair underneath. These features were also easy to draw, and evolved into caricatures. The Beatnik was almost always depicted with a knowing grin or a smug look. Enigmatic he was, utterly convinced of his own intellectual superiority, speaking in vague hip talk or rhyming couplets; it was easy to see through his pretensions though. The Beatnik character in the media actually embodied two U.S. middle-class prejudices: one against intellectuals, and the other against "people who do not work." Further insult was added in the taken-for-granted view that the Beatniks did not wash, an affront to the modern American obsession with personal hygiene. His female counterpart was the Beat chick, who was just as silly but portrayed as much sexier. She tended to wear over-sized black sweaters, black stockings, and lots of eye makeup. Her hair would be long or short, but always out of fashion. She was weird and spacey, sitting in coffeehouses all night long with a glazed expression on her face. Since she was principally a male fantasy, it was assumed that she was sexually available, although it was unclear how she ever connected with the stereotypical male Beatnik in this regard. What she probably needed, in

the eyes of most observers, was a "real man" (Maynard 3-4).

Another stereotype of the male Beatnik, however, was the "bad" guy who figured in many crime stories, especially after the San Francisco Police Department conducted a heavily publicized crackdown on the Beat enclave in North Beach in the summer of 1958. The "bad" Beatnik smoked pot, or, in some accounts, even took heroin, which automatically labelled him as a deviant. Since the broadcast media had strict guidelines about the representation of drugs, even in crime dramas (the comics could not mention them at all), the "bad" Beatnik was more often represented as a social misfit, perhaps a psychopath, but certainly a man who had rejected conventional society because he was a "loser," incapable of succeeding in it by establishment standards (Maynard 4-5).

The original Beats were flamboyant individualists, "speedy," "mad to live," Ehrenreich suggests, while Beatniks were studiously "cool"—conformists like everyone else, but in a different way; they conformed to the values and norms of their subculture. The one thing that the Beats and the Beatniks (both as media images and real-life persons) had in common was their rejection of the nuclear family system, the bedrock of American society. "All of America could see that there were men (and most Americans only saw the trivialized Beatnik version) who refused to undertake the support of women and seemed to get away with it" (Ehrenreich 53). Ehrenreich refers to the fact that, after the publication of *On the Road*, Kerouac instantly drew attention as a sexy new literary figure. The Beatniks did not have such an appeal, because they lacked the passionate energy of the Beats derived from a world outside the middle class; they were merely dropouts, declass   and slightly effete. "By 1959," Ehrenreich contends, "there were just enough real-life counterparts of the media's Beatniks—college students and arty students drawn to the Beat centers of North Beach and Venice—to give the image credibility" (60). It was these groups of young trend followers who gave the Beat milieu as a whole a more homogeneous stamp. Both in their habits and outfits they tended toward uniformity: "In organizing against one kind of conformity, they have set up another" (Moore 377). Rather than being detached, garish individualists as many Bohemian writers and artists of the past had been, the Beatniks were "in their own way Organization Men," according to a contemporary observer (Moore 387). The Beats' stance of social disengagement and their underground culture of disillusionment, expressed in caf   scenes where pot smoke intermingled with blues and jazz

music, created a "bliss of indifference." This scene attracted many young and even middle-aged people to the Beat scene who in the past would not have entered Bohemian culture (Moore 378).

Behind the distorted media images there were, of course, real people with genuine beliefs and behaviors. But it is hard to differentiate them from the trivialized images that have lingered on in popular culture since the late 1950s. This is further complicated by the fact that the Beat Generation as a whole enjoyed a peculiar relationship with its own hype as disseminated by the mainstream media. "It was always the cultural equivalent of that old science fiction standby, the cyborg—part human, part manufactured, and no one, least of all the creature itself, quite able to say where the organism left off and the contraption began" (Maynard 12). The Beats were involved in creating and generating mass-mediated images about themselves and, in turn, responded to these depictions. This social dialectic has been crucial to the Beat movement and should be considered when attempting to understand the Beat *Weltanschauung* and lifestyle.

Besides Ehrenreich, several other authors make a rigorous distinction between the original Beats and their trend followers, the Beatniks (among others, Holmes, "The Name" 78-82). Still others refer to this distinction but emphasize that it was, and still is, not always easy to distinguish between the groups, thus recognizing the contested character of "Beatness." "Kerouac's biographers usually treat the publicity, the hangers-on, and the rebellion's worshipful younger recruits either as aberrational (Jack never wanted *this!*) or as a skewed confirmation of his power to inspire," Maynard writes (12). He admits that this was certainly true from Kerouac's point of view. It is important to recognize, however, that this was *not* the case from Ginsberg's perspective, since he and his Beat friends proselytized recruits, and deliberately sought a larger audience. Maynard also stresses that, thus, Kerouac's biographers avoid the issue of who and what the Beat Generation really was, and also fail to explain its pull on the public's imagination (12-13).

A Contemporary Social-Scientific Study of the "Real Bohemians"

Chicago School sociologist Ned Polsky's field study of the Greenwich Village Beat scene in the summer of 1960, based on participant observation and open interviews among over 300 Beats, offers relevant information concerning the various subgroups in the Beat scene. The Village Beat scene was at its peak then, because many Beats from North Beach, San Francisco, who were harassed by police and tourist

hordes, had fled to New York. Shortly after Polsky concluded his study, a similar situation developed in Greenwich Village; in this case Beats left the Village and headed for the Lower East Side—a process that had already begun at the time of Polsky's investigation. As Beats were pushed out, tourists and "ethnic" teenagers moved in. The latter were historically minded, scholarly middle-class youths, mostly Jewish, who were interested in the folk music "of the 'ethnic' set" (or "world music" in today's terms), an affinity that they shared with a few, mostly younger Beats. All Beats rejected the "folk" teenagers who also increasingly showed up in the Village; they were devotees of folk music (including protest, labor, and African-American songs) in the vein of the Popular Front of the 1930s and early 1940s (Aronowitz 153-55). The Village Beats considered this "folksy-artsy group," despite the number of blacks among them, as "un- or anti-beat" (Polsky, "The Village" 177).

With the gentrification process underway, the rents went up and there was a great proliferation of Village coffee shops, chiefly because of a growing market of square customers. Within three years the Village became a major tourist attraction, following the San Francisco pattern set earlier. However, the Beat subculture in its original form still survived in parts of the Lower East Side, albeit on a greatly diminished scale (Polsky, "The Village" 153-54).

Though most of Polsky's findings purportedly held true as well for Beats living elsewhere ("The Village" 150), his inquiry (to which we will return) did not meet the rigorous methodological standards of mainstream social science either then or now. However, today Polsky's study is seen in a more positive light by a strand of cultural sociology more attuned to anthropological studies of everyday life in modern urban societies. Francis Rigney and L. Douglas Smith's study of the Beats in North Beach, San Francisco, conducted during the winter of 1958-59, was better in quality according to established methodological criteria. Yet, admittedly, the psychological projection tests employed at the time do not fully meet today's standards for validity and reliability either. Nonetheless, Rigney and Smith's investigation resulted in the briefly famous monograph *The Real Bohemia*, published in 1961. But by then the fad phase of America's obsession with the Beats was largely over.

San Francisco psychiatrist Francis L. Rigney spent nearly every night from October 1958 through January 1959 in the Grant Street section of North Beach, becoming known and getting to know committed Beats (several of whom actually became his

friends), attending as many private and public functions as possible, interviewing informants, and collecting sociological data in order to describe and categorize the North Beach Beats and recruit subjects for individual psychological analysis. Rigney also studied the members of the North Beach enclave in relation to their social environment—the press, the tourists, and the police, especially as regards the moral panics about Beat activities among authorities, local residents, and the general public. Fifty-one persons cooperated fully out of a total Beat population estimated between 180 and 200 persons. These subjects were given four psychological tests by psychologist L. Douglas Smith. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) was designed to assess psychological and psychiatric abnormality. The California Personality Inventory (CPI) was administered in order to appraise certain personality characteristics important for social interaction and living. In addition, two so-called projection tests were given: the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)² and the Rorschach Ink Blot Test.³

A major interest of the researchers, of course, was the Beats' mental stability, about which everyone seemed to have an opinion, but no one had studied carefully as Rigney and Smith tried to do. Based on the MMPI test results, the authors developed a taxonomy of six Beat types, four categories for males, two for females: Tormented Rebels, Lonely Ones, Earnest Artists, Passive Prophets, Angry Young Women, and Beat Madonnas. Eight individuals fell outside these categories, and were labeled "Atypical Bohemians."

The male test results also purportedly showed a significant level of hostility towards women, who were seen by the Tormented Rebels as "encumbrances," a "source of problems for man." Few of these men expected anything but sex out of relationships with women; most had trouble imagining a heterosexual relationship that was "warm and enduringly human" (Rigney and Smith 73). This did not keep several men with artistic ambitions from accepting the financial support of their female partners, however.

Overt and exclusive homosexuality was rare. Only a few of the Bohemians in the North Beach enclave (and only one of the thirty-three subjects of the research project) were exclusively homosexual. However, twelve of those subjects had homosexual as well as heterosexual experiences (Rigney and Smith 48). With regard to drug addiction, Rigney found that while there was more of it among the Beats than in the general population, it was still a minority phenomenon. The major difference was that the Beats treated the addicts among them with sympathy rather than as

outcasts. Moreover, the real threat was alcohol; beer on tap and wine by the bottle or jug were the most popular (Rigney and Smith 52-65).

The standards of sickness and health utilized in these tests were understandably biased in favor of conventional society—one was, or was not, “adjusted” and able to function within society. One was healthy or not healthy, and from that perspective, it is not surprising that many of the Beats concerned were found to be “sick” (180). A brief summary of the many and variegated data on the subjects’ mental stability is not easy to give, and by definition also entails a loss of significant nuances, of course. According to a report by *Life* (November 30, 1959), which drew the most attention among the general audience, sixty percent of the Beats in Rigney and Smith’s study (then still to be published) were found to be “so psychotic or so crippled by tensions, anxieties and neuroses as to be incapable of making their way in the ordinary competitive world of men,” and another twenty percent were “hovering just within the boundaries of emotional stability” (O’Neil 245-46, quoted by Ehrenreich 66).

Nevertheless, Rigney found much to admire among the Grant Street Beats; at least they did not conceal their problems (in this he apparently ignored the fact that some subjects had manipulated the test results), and they also had created a combined artistic and therapeutic community whose members tried to help themselves, albeit in their own way. These Bohemians also scored high on tests indicating “self-acceptance” (Rigney and Smith 180-81).

Interestingly, contrary to many references in the Beat literature about religious feelings as being essential to “beatness” and best approximating “beatific” feelings, the Bohemians in North Beach did not constitute a “holy movement” of “Holy Barbarians” (Lipton). Fewer than half professed having any religious belief; of those who did, less than half followed any orthodox view, too few to constitute such a movement. Instead, these Beats were characterized by intense expressions of feelings which only in some appeared in religious form. It was the religiosity expressed by only a few that created the false impression of religion as integral to Beatness (Rigney and Smith 34, 38).

Rigney and Smith also studied the social and economic backgrounds of their subjects. In media representations, the Beatnik was by definition a failure; according to several sources, varying from *Partisan Review* to *Time*, he was also unlettered, and hostile toward the prevailing culture, an attitude which was attributed to envy. Of course, he rejected high art and

middle-class morality, mostly because he supposedly knew little about either one.

However, Rigney and Smith’s study challenged these commonly held assumptions. The fifty-one Beats in this study came from middle-class backgrounds, with a distribution heavily skewed towards the upper end of the social scale. Sixteen percent of the subjects were the children of professionals and successful entrepreneurs, compared to a national average of only 2.7 percent (class I); 20 percent came from “educated semiprofessional” backgrounds, as opposed to 9.8 percent of the general population (class II); 30 percent described their parents as “white collar” workers, whereas the national standard was 18.9 percent (class III); 28 percent mentioned “blue collar” origins: skilled and semi-skilled labor (class IV), whereas 48 percent of the American people met that description. While a fifth (20.2 percent) of the nation then was still “unskilled” (class V), only four percent of Rigney’s Beats had such a background (Rigney and Smith 20-21; Maynard 18-19).

When the subjects’ own socioeconomic conditions were studied, a different picture emerged however; there was a clear downward shift toward the lower end of the class scale. The authors even added another category, class Vb, the “not employed,” who were supported by the government (unemployment insurance, veteran’s pension, welfare, etc.) or maintained by a partner (wife, husband, mistress, and so forth) or by family (parents, uncles, and so forth). Six subjects were supported by the welfare state: two male subjects had veteran’s pensions; the rest received welfare benefits. Four men and two women were maintained by their partners. Six were supported by their own families and all were living on subsistence incomes. Only one of these North Beach Bohemians had a job at the Class I level; three were working or had worked at the Class II level: two as writers, and one as a program director. Only two were working at the Class III level; both were women who had jobs in more upscale department stores. Twelve men worked at the Class IV level; three were bartenders, and five were jazz musicians. The remaining worked as skilled laborers (carpenter, linotype operator, etc.). Three men and six women had jobs at the Class V level; five of the women were waitresses (Rigney and Smith 21-22).

Moreover, *The Real Bohemia* contained relevant information about what the “real” Beats looked like, and what their dress habits were. Contrary to the prevailing stereotypes, of the thirty-three men studied, nineteen were consistently clean-shaven, four had mustaches, and only ten had beards; twelve indeed

went about in sandals much of the time, but nearly half (fourteen) wore ordinary business suits practically every day. Twelve of the eighteen women studied wore black stockings "more than once," and seven wore black dresses frequently; only six wore leotards. Three were labeled "very chic"; the rest "varied," with eight described as "very neat" and only five as "shabby to sloppy" (Rigney and Smith Appendix, 236). One should be cognizant of the fact that these observations took place in the winter of 1958-59, just before the true media blitz around the Beats, after which the manifested "presentations of self in everyday life" (public behaviors) and sartorial styles might have been partly different, due to the arrival of many more tourists, weekend Bohemians, and Beat imitators.

The evidence clearly indicated that the mass media representations of the Beatniks were largely a figment of journalistic fantasy rather than an accurate reflection of "real life." Rigney suggested that outsiders probably needed the distorted images about the Beats in order to preserve their own "health." In this way, the Beats functioned as scapegoats for an ailing society (Rigney and Smith 181-82).

The Beats were a deliberate affront to an American Dream that worked in the eyes of most fellow Americans; on the other hand they also helped to validate the American Dream, as Beats were depicted as losers. They challenged the Puritan work ethic ingrained in American culture (Maynard 21). Through their example, the Beats cast doubt on the validity of the values chosen by others. This, of course, led to fears and defensive strategies among members of the larger society.

A Closer Look at the Beats in Terms of a Bohemian Subculture

The Beat subculture also drew attention in a special issue on "teen-age culture"⁴ published in the established journal *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (volume 338) in November 1961. Sociologist David Matza of the University of California, Berkeley, gave his view on deviant patterns among youth that were manifested in rebelliousness. He looked at three major forms in American society: delinquency, radicalism, and Bohemianism. Because of the systematic approach it offers, which has proved to be useful, I will take his theoretical framework as a starting point for my analysis.

In Matza's view, Beat culture was merely the most recent expression of American Bohemianism, and could best be understood as a response to internal

conditions in the United States, particularly postwar prosperity, and as a reflection of developments on the French scene, most notably the emergence of "café existentialism" (111). However, though there was a superficial affinity with French existentialism, a major difference was that the existentialists believed in engagement, whereas the practice of the Beat Generation was "disengagement" and "disaffiliation" (Moore 388), as we will see later.

Matza also pointed out that Bohemianism emerged as a widespread phenomenon in the first part of the nineteenth century in France, and had since then spread to other parts of the world, particularly Europe and the United States. Actually it appeared in the 1830s, but the notion of Bohemia only gained a clearer place in the French public consciousness during the late 1840s (Seigel 3-30). Concurrent with Albert Parry's established view at the time (Parry xxi-xxiii), Matza emphasized that, "despite indigenous sources in the United States and despite internal influences, the periods of rise and fall have coincided fairly well with its cycles in France" (111).

What components of the Bohemian tradition did Matza think were present among the Beats, and in what ways? He identified "romanticism" and "expressive authenticity" as being characteristic of the Beats' spirit, and elaborated on both aspects. Thereafter, he gave his view of the actual substance of the Beats' cultural practices. In the next two sections, I will reconsider each of Matza's depictions, and give my commentary, based partly on a close reading of relevant materials that have been published in the meantime.

The Beats' Ethos

I. Romanticism and Primitivist Views of "the Folk."

Artistically, the Beats shared the romanticism which has traditionally been characteristic of Bohemianism. They identified with the romantic ideology expressed by Blake, Shelley, Whitman, and D. H. Lawrence, as well as with the romantic components of American Transcendentalism. However, their romanticism was qualified and questioned by the modernism of both American and European artistic strains that they adopted as well, as we shall see later when we discuss the substance of the Beats' cultural practices.

In line with romanticism, Bohemians have always had a strong commitment to spontaneity and originality, manifested in various forms, particularly in the visual arts. Beats put greater emphasis on expressions of creativity in other art forms, most notably through

the celebration of improvisation in modern jazz, poetry, and "spontaneous" novel-writing. For this reason (among others), jazz and jazz musicians have occupied a glorified role in the Beat worldview (Matza 112). The Beat scene partly grew out of the jazz community (Merriam and Mack). Therefore, it can be seen as a community of interest which had its special heroes—musicians like Charlie Parker and Lester Young and poet Dylan Thomas among the more notable—and its rites of marijuana, heroin and other drug use, jazz, and, later in the 1950s, coffee-house poetry. The Beats' play at mysticism and Zen Buddhism had a similar purpose, a disciplined attempt to reach *satori*, an "enlightened" state of "wisdom, understanding, reconciliation" (Holmes, "The Philosophy" 75), tranquillity and harmony, or, as in the case of less rigorous discipline, as put more negatively by a critic, "a return to a mindless mode of being" (Powell 369-70). The Beat scene also had its special argot and housed the figure of the hipster borrowed from the African-American jazz tradition (Carr, Case, and Dellar). The hipster was a person, typically a male, "who [was] unusually aware of and interested in new and unconventional patterns especially in jazz, in the use of stimulants (as narcotics), and in exotic religion" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 542).

The celebration of spontaneity in artistic endeavors is reflected in the Bohemian view of "the folk" (Matza 112). Bohemianism tends to cultivate a distinctive form of populism, which is best termed "romantic primitivism," that is, a belief in the superiority of a simple way of life close to nature, as well as in the superiority of pre-industrial societies and peoples to those of the present (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 914). From the outset the Bohemian folk hero was the gypsy (see also Seigel 4-5), but, perhaps due to the gypsy's chronic unavailability, the notion of primitive folk was expanded to include other groups. Particularly the *Lumpenproletariat* has occupied a central position in the primitivist mystique of Bohemians. In the modern rendition in the United States it was mostly lower-class African Americans who have been identified as the primitive folk. African Americans, however, were not the first American ethnic group who were so labelled. East-European Jews, too, were perceived by previous Bohemians as the incarnation of primitive folk (Matza 112).

Matza's characterization fits quite well with the great appeal that the hipster and other members of the underclass like Neal Cassady (a former juvenile delinquent, car thief, womanizer, and drifter), Herbert Huncke (a junkie, drug dealer and petty thief hanging

around at Times Square), and similar "rebels without a cause" had to the Beats. They provided American instances of what Kerouac called the "fellaheen" (literally the peasantry), a term borrowed from Oswald Spengler—whose cultural pessimistic work *The Decline of the West* (originally in German, two volumes, 1918-22) was very influential in the ideology of the Beat movement. In the first instance, however, the term was applied to the idealized folk of Mexico, conceived as the pure Other. By that time, a generation or two of American junkies, Bohemians, remittance men (i.e., who were sent money by their parents to stay away from home), and GI Bill expatriates had created a sad and eccentric subculture in Mexico, in which Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Neal Cassady would repeatedly stay in the late forties and fifties (Maynard 86). More generally, Kerouac used the term "fellaheen" in a vague, non-Marxist sense to indicate "the people," or the "real people": low-paid manual workers, drifters, hobos, street people, migrant farm workers, loggers, and prostitutes. He employed this construction "to articulate a sense of cross-cultural global solidarity with oppressed and deprived peoples who could be romanticized as being without nationality, as primitive, instinctual, cunning and in tune with the 'cosmos'" (Bush 130). Carolyn Cassady, however, saw the construction of this particular subject as a legitimation for irresponsible male behavior (Cassady 166, quoted in Bush 130), an issue to which I will return in a separate section.

Spengler's view of the city as merely dominated by utility and the spirit of commercialism found strong resonances among the Beats, according to John Muckle. They took seriously his prophecy regarding the emergence of the city-dweller as a new kind of hunter or shepherd, an "intellectual nomad," estranged from "organic," socially cohesive forces of community based on hearth, family and piety. But, whereas Spengler had nothing but contempt for these people, whom he considered the displaced refuse of mass civilization, to Ginsberg they were a chosen people, as embodied by the likes of Neal Cassady; no one fit the "new primitive man" type better than he (Muckle 22-23).

From Spengler, the Beats moved almost naturally to Nietzsche and his conclusions on art and religion, which offered them a means to come to grips with the consciousness of becoming, the ironical self-consciousness that resulted from conventional historical scholarship and the overpowering of life by history. Thus understood, art and religion were "the cures of the historical disease" (Bush 134).

Nietzsche's relativism, which stressed that life only consisted of subjective impressions rather than

established truths, led to nihilism. How can anything have intrinsic value, when everything is relative? How can a person be an individual when everything s/he does or says proves that s/he is a mere victim of circumstances? The answer was hidden in the individual's personal narrative. The intrinsic value of the individual, the endless variety of human experience, could not be grasped by a theoretical summary in the abstract language of science. In Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (German original, 1887), the conditions for the self are laid down: "To be oneself is to deny the obligations which both past and future lay open, except for those obligations that one chooses for oneself and honors simply because one finds them 'good'" (White 361, quoted in Bush 134). Activity is more important than adaptation to one's social-historical environment, the philosophy of which the Beats adopted.

Given the deep, "existentialist" anxiety of the years following 1945, it is not surprising that a post-war generation of American writers was attracted to the anti-communal nihilism of Nietzsche. They returned to the writers of sixty years earlier, for whom Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche had been the champions of historical pessimism and that new world of the id, with its associated theory of natural drives, rationalizations, sexual masochism and sublimation, of guilt as a product of cultural suppression—so closely resembling Freud's work (Bush 134).

Andrew Ross has reminded us, however, that the Beats' impulse to go underground was not only nourished by a romantic infatuation with the nihilistic vanguardism of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, but had also much to do with the McCarthyist victimization of those who were identified as leftists. The link between the Beats' visionary identification with the nineteenth-century vanguard (next to Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, among others, Rimbaud, Blake, Lautréamont) and their own contemporary patronizing of drifters, hobos, proles, and reform-school prodigies, becomes clear when seen in its specific historical context. "Between the time of the anti-bourgeois demimonde and the romantic pietism of Beat comes the period when intellectuals put themselves in the service of revolutionary movements, and when intellectual sponsorship of the masses was seen as a *responsibility*, and not as an act of free political will" (Ross 84). When seen against this backdrop of the leftist movements of the 1930s, it is very understandable why the existentialist *acte gratuite*, which the Beats celebrated, represented such a relief from that burden of responsibility (Ross 84).

"Primitive" outcasts like Herbert Huncke and Neal Cassady were also surrounded by the aura of the

sacred attributed to them by the Beat writers. The Beats revered these hipsters as folk heroes. Via reading the works of Rainer Maria Rilke and Federico García Lorca, they turned them into angel-headed hipsters of the poetic imagination. Their role as life-models, friends, lovers, destroyed writers, thieves, spendthrifts, jailbirds, and drug suppliers were used both to furnish relief and as sources of literary inspiration by the writers who had not lived very similar lives. In this the Beat writers were strongly influenced by Sartre's work on Jean Genet (Sartre). *The Thief's Journal* (1949) was read thoroughly by Beat writers in the 1950s. Its relevance was not so much its content—which deals with the banality of petty betrayal, sexual manipulation, and violence among men who never had a chance—but "its capacity through tone and structural/aesthetic considerations to mock the moralising legitimations of law, police, petty officialdom and bureaucracy" (Bush 138).

The Beats' romantic primitivism can also be recognized in their attitudes towards African Americans, as expressed in Kerouac's concept of black beatitude, among others. The idolization of the black jazz musician by white hipsters and Beats may have been reinforced by a "romantic version of racism" which imagines "blacks as pre-social, at ease with play" (Frith 88). Jon Panish has compared Kerouac's attitude towards blacks to that of nineteenth-century American "romantic racialists." He argues that, in Kerouac's view, blacks symbolized those qualities that he felt were tragically absent in white civilization, namely the existential joy, wisdom, and nobility that evolve from a history of suffering and victimization. This image resembles the classic image of the Noble Savage. Panish contends that, thus, Kerouac trivialized the true nature of racial oppression in the United States by blurring the difference between voluntary and forced outsiderism (Panish 108), an issue to which we will return below.

Upholding virtually the same kind of spiritual primitivism as in the Harlem Renaissance philosophy of ethnic purism in the 1920s, glorified among white intellectuals of the time, "black culture, and especially jazz, was cast as a vital, and *natural* source of spontaneous, precivilized, anti-technological values—the 'music of the unconscious,' of uncontaminated and untutored feeling and emotion" (Ross 74). Several observers have suggested that in the case of the Beats this proclivity often entailed a racism disguised as liberalism (Hamilton 121). The latter became especially manifest in the custom of white Beats choosing black partners, as if making this choice would make their descent into primitive sensuality complete. In prac-

tice, the heterosexual relationships of this kind were mainly restricted to white woman-black man partnerships, which frequently strained relationships between white and black men in the Beat milieu. Paradoxically, whereas the white Beat men might consciously take a liberal stance towards such interracial partnerships, at a subconscious level they could be envious, or even have racist, male-chauvinist concerns about these black men "taking away and possessing our women," almost akin to the traditional racist thought regarding the "black defilement of white womanhood." There was also a relatively larger number of bisexual relationships among Beats (males and females) than among their "square" counterparts (Polsky, "The Village" 164); the sexual ambiguities of these relationships were laden with similar tensions in the case of interracial intercourse.

Ned Polsky's field study among the Beats in Greenwich Village in the summer of 1960 even claimed that the white Beats accepted the Negro only for his/her "Negro-ness" (as bringer of marijuana and jazz, and so forth) and thus practiced an inverted form of "keeping the nigger in his place" ("The Village" 181):

Although the white Beat grants the Negro a fuller role than other white "pro-Negro" groups do, he does it merely by compounding the limited roles those groups demand. For the white Beat, the Negro fulfills the liberal's demand that he entertain plus the radical's demand that he symbolize the results of reactionary oppression plus the Harlem thrill-seeker's demand that he act out the primitive in all of us. One thing the Negro must not do is try to be white. (184)

John Clellon Holmes, a member of Kerouac's inner circle and leading intellectual advocate of the Beat philosophy, gave a very different interpretation of this phenomenon:

What attracts the alienated white to the Negro in this century is that, having been excluded from the society, the Negro has been stultified, in his soul at least, by it. To see this attraction as "an inverted form of keeping the nigger in his place"...rather than as a sign of how completely the world (by starving our intuitive faculties) has aroused a hunger in us for the spontaneities of the spirit, is to confess an inability to conceive of any problem that is not a cut-and-dried social issue. ("The Name" 84)

Thus, according to prevailing Beat thought, whites might indeed derive clear benefits from African-American culture. Nevertheless, the element of "primitivism" found in Holmes's attitude towards

lower-class blacks cannot be denied, although in his novels he gave a more nuanced portrayal of African Americans and their relationships with whites than most of his fellow Beats (Hamilton 121; see also van der Bent 6-133).

A similar sentiment regarding blacks was briefly expressed by novelist and Beat sympathizer Norman Mailer in the late 1950s. In his essay "The White Negro" (1957), an apologia for the hipster as the prototypical American existentialist, he argued that "the Negro's equality would tear a profound shift into the psychology, the sexuality, and the moral imagination of every White alive" (Mailer, as quoted in Lee, "Black Beats" 159). For his "white Negro," Mailer even reclaimed the term "psychopath" from a medicalized discourse on criminality which by the end of the 1950s in America had already been replaced by the term "delinquent."

Mailer's romantic use of the term engendered an enhanced capacity for choice, risk-taking, and courage in a stagnant society (Bush 130):

In short, whether the life is criminal or not, the decision is to encourage the psychopath in oneself, to explore that domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is Beat, where he must gamble with his energies through all those small or large crises of courage and unforeseen situations which beset his day, where he must be with it or doomed not to swing. (Mailer 339)

This existentialism at the gut level implied "the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society":

The only Hip morality...is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible, and—this is how the war of the Hip and the Square begins—to be engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone, because that is one's need. Yet in widening the arena of the possible, one widens it reciprocally for others as well, so that the nihilistic fulfillment of each man's desire contains its antithesis of human co-operation. (Mailer 354)

It is especially because of such legitimations of the nihilistic component in the Beat movement that it has occasionally been called a revolt of the right, not of the left. A disturbing analogy was signalled whereby the Beats were viewed as "a form of neo-fascism, with the motorcyclist in black leather jacket in the role of the SS" (Powell 367). Mailer's celebration

of male virility and the “orgasmic” moment of hip played into many of the cultural myths about black masculinity and sexuality that later drew severe criticism from the women’s movement. It should be noted, however, that even at that time, leading Beats were critical of Mailer’s aggressive posturing. Kerouac abhorred the implied celebration of violence, and Ginsberg giggled at Mailer’s notion of the hipster as being cool and psychopathic, which he personally felt was a macho folly (Ross 88-89). Retrospectively, in the mid-1980s, Ginsberg argued that Kerouac thought that Mailer’s interpretation of the hipster as “a psychopathic knifer”—as well as John Clellon Holmes’s depiction of this archetype as a juvenile delinquent (“The Philosophy” 71-72)—was “an idiotic misinterpretation of a yes-saying, Dostoyevskian, healthy colossus like Neal Cassady” (Ginsberg as quoted in Sukenick, *Down and In* 113). Thus, in Kerouac’s view, as stated by Ginsberg, Mailer was “praising psychopathy instead of the Holy Lamb and the second religiousness,” and diverting the Beats’ stance to “an angry and violence-prone, anti-family, anti-middle-class attack..., into materialistic fighting and arguments and anger, whereas there should have been a much more angelic and lamby politics all along” (Sukenick, *Down and In* 114). Of course, this stance did not go down well with either hipster ideologues like Mailer who were intent on divorcing themselves from a hopeless scene, nor with old intellectual leftists engaged with *Realpolitik* (74).

In a contemporary response to Mailer’s essay, Ned Polsky critically pointed out a major shortcoming of the novelist’s view of the black hipster’s societal position:

Even in the world of the hipster the Negro remains essentially what Ralph Ellison called him—an invisible man. The white Negro accepts the real Negro not as a human being in his totality, but as the bringer of a highly specified and restricted “cultural dowry,” to use Mailer’s phrase. (Polsky, “The White Negro” 369)

Mailer failed to signal a crucial distinction between the hipster and “the Negro.” Whereas the first refused to accept conventional society, the latter was refused by it. The writer also did not ponder what African Americans themselves thought about his reflections on the “white Negro.” It was novelist James Baldwin who publicly responded in a personal essay about Mailer called “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” written in 1960. Mailer had spent the summer of 1956 in Paris, where Baldwin lived as an expatriate; when introduced to Mailer, Baldwin imme-

diately took a liking to his boastful character, and introduced him to some of his black jazz musician friends (Campbell 256). In his essay, Baldwin looked back on their Paris nights with fondness, but could not help feeling a little weary when considering his friend’s intellectual romance with the outlaw. Baldwin administered a gentle but effective putdown, which was, however, intended to make a serious point about “hip” and the different perspectives of blacks and whites. He wrote, “I could not, with the best will in the world, make any sense out of ‘The White Negro.’” In searching for the gist of Mailer’s essay, Baldwin recalled their nights in Paris: “...the Negro jazz musicians, among whom we sometimes found ourselves, who really liked Norman, did not for an instant consider him as even remotely ‘hip’ and Norman did not know this and I could not tell him.... They thought he was a real sweet ofay cat, but a little frantic” (Baldwin 221). Mailer himself had written that hip language could not really be taught; this is precisely what Baldwin tried to tell him (Campbell 260).

Baldwin also responded to Kerouac’s well-known passage in *On the Road*: “At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night” (180). According to Baldwin, “Now, this is absolute nonsense, of course.... I would hate to be in Kerouac’s shoes if he should ever be mad enough to read this aloud from the stage of Harlem’s Apollo Theater” (231).

Notwithstanding this problematic aspect of the Beat orientation on African-American culture, it provided a significant source of revitalization of white culture. It also needs no further explanation that the black influence on white culture went well beyond Beat parameters. From a more distant historical perspective, A. Robert Lee has recently argued that “in virtually all white-written Beat poetry and fiction, or associated polemic, Afro-America supplied a touchstone, a black vein of reference and inspiration” (“Black Beats” 159). He also acknowledges that, with the exception of LeRoi Jones (who was yet to change his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka), the black Beat writers themselves were hardly in the spotlight at the time. Jones/Baraka did have company though: Ted Joans, the self-styled “Afro-American surrealist,” and Bob Kaufman, the Jewish-black and Zen-inclined “Abomunist,” along with the painter-poet A. B. Spellman and the verse-writing jazzman Archie

Shepp. Lee's final conclusion only underlines that ultimately the discourse of white America was hegemonic within Beat culture as well: "black writers or not, whatever the borrowings from blues and black 'cool' and speech, Beat ever so rarely seemed to speak other than from, or to, white America" ("Black Beats" 159).

In his sociological analysis of the Beats, David Matza also saw a close connection between the celebration of the primitive and "dedicated poverty" (Lipton 59), a basic characteristic which they shared with previous groups of Bohemians. This "voluntary poverty" was partly a natural consequence of Beat commitment to primitivism, but simultaneously a conscious way of avoiding the corrupting influence of the commercial world (Matza 112). In a few cases, though, such as the Bohemian life in Venice West at the time, it was almost possible to live on imagination alone because of very inexpensive housing and easy living conditions (Maynard 47).

Lawrence Lipton used the term "disaffiliation" to indicate the Beats' outright rejection of capitalism, materialism, and middle-class family life more generally. He spoke of the "art of poverty" and employed the term "New Poverty" in contrast to the increased affluence in American society, the "New Prosperity" (Lipton 149-51). Andrew Ross even speaks of "the Beats' neo-Franciscan cult of voluntary poverty," which he sees as "an imaginary solution for an impiously affluent society that would not officially discover its invisible real poor until the publication of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962)" (Ross 86). It was a response to a perceived middle-class "poverty of spirit" which the rites of the "angel-headed hipster" were meant to exorcise.

In his field study in Greenwich Village, Ned Polsky confirmed that the Beats there believed that voluntary poverty was an "intellectual gain" that they derived from getting rid of the evil effects of meaningless work, gadgetry, and the mass media ("The Village" 161). But he also pointed out that this could have paradoxical consequences:

The net effect on their leisure is that even the most ardent intellectuals among them often can't spare the carfare to get to the better free libraries and concerts and art exhibits, seldom can attend cultural events for which admission is charged, and never can build up reasonable book and record libraries of their own. Their meager amount of intellectual consumption is not only questionable as such, but of course also stunts their growth as intellectual producers. "*Holy poverty*" enforces comparative poverty of the mind. (161, italics added)

Polsky's findings also indicated that at best only one-sixth of the Village Beats he studied were accustomed to reading—none seemed addicted to it—and far fewer were concerned with writing. "Most square articles on 'the Beats' go astray because Beat writers, being highly visible, get all the attention and thus a small and typical part is taken for the whole" (Polsky, "The Village" 175).

Although Polsky's conclusions may be somewhat overdone, they may contain strong kernels of truth, as far as the larger group of Beatniks and camp followers is concerned. On the other hand, an important feature of the hard core of Beat writers and poets was that they were bookish. Despite their vaunted populism, their writings clearly carried the impact of antecedents within the literary tradition (Lee, "Introduction" 3).

Finally, Matza mentioned an aspect of romanticism which is fully consistent with primitivism, and that he somewhat confusingly called "medievalism," that is, "an apocalyptic view without the apocalypse." "Medievalism accepts the first part of the apocalyptic formula, man's part from grace, but makes no provision, as in radicalism, for man's redemption" (131). Here the Berkeley sociologist referred to a particular form of cultural pessimism involving a rejection of modern life and modern progress that the Beats adhered to. This also explains the popularity of Spengler's *The Decline of the West* among them. In a way this disposition resembled the more conventional cultural critique of modern "mass culture" among academics at the time (see, for an overview, Rosenberg and White).

Yet, the Beats' ambivalent attitude towards modern life differed from that of the mass culture critics of the 1950s in some significant ways. In contrast to the cultural pessimism of the then-established intellectual elites (from left to right), and certainly to Theodor Adorno's viewpoint, the Beats adhered to a form of populism through their romanticized view of lowly and marginal people. The latter were supposed to embody counter-tendencies against the "massification" of modern society. This made the Beat Generation the scapegoat *par excellence* of leading cultural critics at the time. The Beats' contempt for rational intellectual discourse, according to accepted standards, also was severely criticized by the New York intellectual and then left-liberal, anti-communist Norman Podhoretz.⁵ At the time, Podhoretz spoke for most of his colleagues among the literary establishment:

The Bohemianism of the 1920's represented a repudiation of the provinciality, philistinism and moral hypocrisy of

American life. It was a movement created in the name of civilization.... But that of the 1950's is a different kettle of fish. It is hostile to civilization; it worships primitivism, instinct, energy, "blood." To the extent it has any intellectual interests at all they run to mystical doctrines, irrationalist philosophies.... Its only art...is cool jazz.... Its bop language is a way of demonstrating solidarity...and expressing contempt for coherent rational discourse which being a product of the mind is in their view a form of death. (308-9)

In his *The End of Ideology* sociologist Daniel Bell denounced the Beat Generation as a "hopped-up, jazzed-up, souped-up, self-proclaimed group of outcasts" (35). The Beats hated crowd culture and consumer values no less than their contemporary mass culture critics, but according to John Arthur Maynard, "in claiming to find the alternative in the untaught human mind, belly, heart and crotch, they also threatened to put their cultural betters out of business. Who needed a cultural elite when the purest poetry and fiction sprang out of the typewriter with the spontaneity of thought itself?" (9). Moreover, the Beats were involved in the further development of popular culture forms which were at right angle with mainstream popular culture, and would nourish the broader counter-culture of the sixties, especially through Ginsberg (Howard, Dickstein 3-24).

II. Expressive Authenticity and Two Major Bohemian Moods.

The second component of the Bohemian tradition that Matza discerned among the Beats was "the insistence on the expression of authentic inner feelings," manifested in an "intense moodiness" (113). Mood was not to be suppressed or obscured, but rather embraced, indulged, and demonstrated. Mood was considered to be a crucial part of authentic experience, and, therefore, deserved unhampered expression (Matza 113). This was a quintessential characteristic of the Beats' attitude and lifestyle indeed. It was particularly this Nietzschean bent in the Beats' ideology that fit well with the strain of expressive individualism (Bellah et al.) in American culture that Beats cultivated almost limitlessly. The narcissism and civil privatism which are characteristic of strong forms of expressive individualism (Wuthnow 488) can clearly be found among the Beats. Their writings often reflected a social narcissism in which they wrote about each other, and their circle of intimates.

Nevertheless, there were also tendencies of social engagement in the Beat milieu, as manifested, for instance, in Ferlinghetti's social anarchism and the fight for freedom of expression in the "Howl" trial,

Ginsberg's concerns with outcasts and underdogs and his later participation in the New Left movement, and even, in a way, in Kerouac's preoccupations with the "fellaheen."

Matza also referred to two different strains in Bohemianism, which were often combined in the life course of the same person. The one was "frivolous Bohemianism, reminiscent in many respects of aristocratic 'dandyism'"⁶ and the other was "morose Bohemianism," initiated by Edgar Allan Poe and popularized by Baudelaire (Parry, quoted in Matza 113). In the Beat milieu they were reflected in the distinction between "hot" and "cool," as Matza insightfully suggested by quoting from Kerouac's typification of these two basic stances:

By 1948 the hipsters, or beatsters, were divided into cool and hot. Much of the misunderstanding about...the Beat Generation...derives from the fact that there are two distinct styles of hipsterism; the cool today is your bearded laconic sage...before a hardly touched beer in a Beatnik dive, whose speech is low and unfriendly, whose girls say nothing and wear black. The "hot" today is the crazy talkative shining-eyed (often innocent and open-hearted) nut who runs from bar to bar, pad to pad, looking for everybody, shouting, restless, lushy, trying to "make it" with subterranean Beatniks who ignore him. Most Beat Generation artists belong to the hot school.... In many cases the mixture is 50-50. It was a hot hipster like myself who finally cooled it in Buddhist meditation, though when I go in a jazz joint I still feel like yelling "Blow, baby, Blow!" (Kerouac, "The Origins" 73, quoted in Matza 113-14)

More generally, however, outside of the hard core of hipsters indicated by Kerouac, the Beats tended to be somber of mood in contrast to the gaiety prevailing among previous Bohemians in America (Moore 377), a difference not mentioned by Matza.

According to Andrew Ross, the Beats' personal quest—to be on the road, and live fast, die young, burning like "fabulous yellow roman candles"—was reminiscent of the code of aristocratic self-extinction espoused by fin-de-siècle aesthetes like Walter Pater, who had wanted to "burn always with a hard gemlike flame" (Ross 86). It should be remembered that Pater, a British essayist and art critic (1839-1894), had introduced the art for art's sake doctrine into British literature, and that his aesthetic view—aimed at the fullness of life, the energy, the vitality and independent choice, ennobled by pain and grief—had inspired a large group of artists, including Oscar Wilde and the Pre-Raphaelites (*Grote Winkler Prins Encyclopedie* 164).

By cultivating these frivolous and morose stances, with manic and depressive manifestations, Bohemianism had pushed to the limits of human expression. Matza acknowledged that these styles were not expressed solitarily; Bohemians needed "scenes," because Bohemianism had always been cultivated within a setting of like-minded eccentrics (thereby referring to Rigney and Smith, Lipton, and Parry). The clubs, cafés, coffeehouses, dives, garrets, or pads were their "monasteries," places where the bonds of familiarity could be assumed. Here one hardly needed to check out a scene before feeling secure in it—except for the danger of police intrusion. However, Matza also emphasized that this "monasticism" concerned communities of authentic adherents, which meant that these were *exclusive* communities. "Bohemians are not evangelists; on the contrary, the newcomer must prove in a variety of ways that he belongs" (114). In other words, the newcomer must demonstrate that s/he is fully familiar with the specific kind of "hipness" that prevails in the Bohemian milieu in question. There are also specific points of entry and gatekeepers on guard at these entrances to the scene. This means that only "true" devotees have the necessary knowledge and right cultural tastes regarding this milieu, which can be seen as a particular *taste culture* to which people congregate on the basis of their shared tastes in art. An instructive example is the "deviant" culture of jazz musicians in the late 1940s studied by Chicago sociologist Howard Becker. In order to make their living, these musicians were often obliged to perform popular dance tunes, but aspired to play jazz, especially bebop, an innovative art form, for an audience of like-minded enthusiasts. They saw themselves as "in the know," possessing a mysterious attitude called "hip," which could not be acquired through education, and rejected conventional social norms, disdainful of others, particularly their own audiences at the commercial gigs (Becker, "The Culture"). Inspired by Bourdieu's sociology of cultural distinction, Sarah Thornton has suggested, more generally, that "hipness" may be understood as a form of subcultural capital (Thornton, "The Social Logic" 202). Just as cultural capital is personified in "good" manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being "in the know," using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if one were born to perform the styles (art and music genres, dress codes, drugs and drinking habits, rituals, etc.) that are currently in vogue within the scene concerned. "Both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the 'second nature' of their knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the

sight of someone trying too hard" (203), as is the case with the "wannabees," those uninitiated to the scene.

Here a typical dialectic between Bohemia and the outside world can be recognized that often led to the decline or even the complete vanishing of the scene in question. Traditionally, two groups of outsiders have been particularly fascinated by the Bohemian life. From the perspective of the Bohemians, these were the "unauthentic" (pretenders or "phonies") and the outright conventional (tourists or "squares" in Beat terms). Because of their emphasis on authenticity, Bohemians have been guarded in their relations with phonies and squares. Matza contends that the "monasticism" of Bohemians, combined with the persistence with which the squares and phonies invade their territories, has meant that virtually no Bohemian scene could long survive. "When the phonies and squares arrive, some of the most zealous Bohemians leave. From that point on, the process seems irreversible; the phonies move in, the rents increase, many of the remaining Bohemians are forced to leave, and a new pseudo-Bohemia...is created" (114). At the turn of the 1950s/1960s, boundaries were constantly strained between the Bohemian scene and the outside world. All three major Beat enclaves, North Beach, Venice West, and Greenwich Village, underwent this process.

However, the emphasis on authenticity and "acting naturally," as seen by the Beats at the time, as one of the most effective ways to assert authenticity, is much more complicated than initially appears. Authenticity has various meanings, of which one in particular seems to have relevance here: a distinct sense of "authentic" that refers to that which is true, consistent, sincere, or real as opposed to the imitative, artifactual, contrived, or phony. In this sense, the primary measure of authenticity is the person or performance being judged. In this usage, if any artist/Bohemian or performance is considered authentic, any reproduction of it is necessarily inauthentic, because to be authentic, a person or a performance must be different from what has come before (Peterson 209). When one tries to apply these abstract notions to concrete examples, severe problems arise. How can we tell where exactly the distinction between authenticity and naturalness on the one hand, and phoniness and artifice on the other hand lies? And who is going to decide this? Undoubtedly, a fascinating politics of authenticity claims is at issue here. Intriguingly, Lionel Trilling, the established professor of literature at Columbia University with whom Ginsberg entertained a complex love-hate relationship in his early career, has cautioned that "authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept" (94).

Cultural sociologist Richard Peterson has suggested the expression “fabricating authenticity,” which may be applied here. He uses this seemingly contradictory phrase to emphasize the fact that authenticity is not inherent in the object or event that is designated authentic but is a socially agreed-upon construct (Peterson 5). Peterson also points out that authenticity through naturalness does not come naturally or spontaneously but rather is a self-conscious *act* on the part of the person in question. Therefore, the adage to “act naturally” or “be spontaneous” is paradoxical. Bohemians like the Beats were not the only ones to be self-conscious about “the art of being artless.” Borrowing from Barbara Ching (122), Peterson brings up the very fitting example of Oscar Wilde, the English romantic playwright and Bohemian dandy, who had observed a hundred years ago, “To be natural is such a hard pose to keep up” (211). To what extent were the original Beats also *poseurs* themselves, in terms of their public behaviors and obsessions with the *acte gratuite*? In this light their ideal of “spontaneous” prose, a “spontaneous bop prosody” (as Ginsberg called it), and visionary, performative poetry, should be reexamined as well.

In Kerouac’s view, spontaneous writing was similar to good jazz improvisation; it was not coincidental that he called it “jazz writing.” For Kerouac, jazz was the model for complete spontaneity; the actions of “blowing” by the jazz musician and conscious thinking were incompatible. In fact, Kerouac described the ideal mental state for blowing/writing as “without consciousness in semi-trance” (“Essentials” 67). In his opinion, the best writing, or the best solo jazz performance, was simply realized without the thought process of the creator intervening. However, Kerouac’s perception about the spontaneity of the successful jazz performance was not the informed one of a musician. “He saw the virtuoso bop players of his generation, such as Charlie Parker, who repeatedly gave the impression onstage of being effortless improvisers, able to rip off incredible solos so fast that to the average spectator, thinking seemed impossible” (Noferi 4).

Kerouac’s ideal of “jazz writing” was based on the *ideal stage persona*, the performer projected at his best, or his “front stage” behavior, and not on his “back stage” behavior: the actual practices that comprise the creative process of jazz. What Kerouac failed to understand was the amount of preparation, rehearsing, revision, and thinking that went into the jazz solos he heard. As any jazz musician knows, one simply cannot reach the state of successful spontaneous expression without the necessary amount of

preparation and stock of knowledge to draw from. Rigorous practice routines and improvisation drills are crucial to the effective improviser. Every jazz improvisation includes, along with a new phrase that is “spontaneous,” a whole series of stock phrases that are well rehearsed.

Thus, Kerouac’s ideal fell rather short of actual practice. Whereas he seemed to assume that good writing, or good jazz improvisation, could erupt spontaneously as an organic whole, in practice neither the jazz musicians Kerouac tried to emulate, nor Kerouac himself, could achieve this ideal (Noferi 3-4).⁷ Yet, as Mark Noferi has pointed out, in his actual writing, Kerouac was remarkably more true to the musical practice of jazz. He modeled his prose around the musical concept of storytelling, and the musical time of effective jazz playing. By attending to sound and rhythm, he succeeded in injecting musical texture into his prose (Noferi 12), which is quite different than merely a spontaneous outburst of unreflected experience as Kerouac himself saw it. I would add that the many “sketches” of persons and situations which he jotted down in his notebooks contained stock phrases which he incorporated into his novels. They can be seen as preparations and rehearsals for the “spontaneous” writing that Kerouac cultivated.

Ultimately, authenticity and naturalness are socially defined, and their importance also changes over time. In a subculture like the Beats—with no institutionalized standards guarded strictly by a ruling group—the definition centers on being believable relative to a more or less explicit model, and, paradoxically, at the same time being original, that is, *not* being an imitation of the model. In this context, it is the way members of the incrowd and those who want to become part of it deal with “hipness” that is decisive. Is this done in a credible way in the eyes of the initiates within the scene? Furthermore, what is considered to be authentic does not remain static; it is “a renewable source” in Peterson’s terms. In the course of time, the meaning of authenticity may be renegotiated in a continual political struggle in which the goal of each contending party is to naturalize a particular construction of authenticity as if this were part of the natural order of things (Peterson 207, 212, 220). It is all about position, context, and timing. The underground’s subcultural capital has a built-in obsolescence so that it can maintain its status only as the prerogative of the “hip” insiders (Thornton, *Club Cultures* 118). Thus, the Beat movement has shown tendencies to naturalize specific forms of “Beatness” among its adherents, thereby essentializing differences between Beats and “phonies” or “squares,”

respectively. Because of the relatively short life span of the movement, as far as I can tell, this did not lead to fundamental historical changes in the prevailing definition of "authenticity" in the Beat milieu, though. In the current, late-modern era the whole notion of authenticity has become heavily contested. So has the idea of an avant-garde which would make original contributions to the arts that the Beats still adhered to.

III. Defiant Masculinity and Narcissistic Male Bonding.

When reconsidering Matza's characterization of the "spirit" of the Beats as a U.S. Bohemian group, one remarkable omission stands out: namely, the obvious fact that the Beat milieu was male-dominated, exhibiting a defiant masculinity, often accompanied by male chauvinism. This was not surprising, given the overarching patriarchy of American society at the time, and duly reflected by male writers of the 1950s. The Beat ethos assigned women to an inferior and secondary role that objectified women sexually or thought of them in terms of muse or mom; women were never considered artistically equal. They were summarily excluded from the network of literary friendships marked by a kind of boys' club mentality; or, in the event that a woman was included, her acceptance was conditional (Davidson 175). Michael Davidson points out that, despite the rhetoric of communal tribalism or mutual aid adopted by many writers of the San Francisco Renaissance during the 1950s, in which the Beats took part, the actual practice of community in the literary scene was rigidly gender-bound. Male Beat writers often took recourse in exclusionist rituals that contradicted their democratic social ideals. The Bohemian bar-scene of the time was "a competitive arena in which many of the power struggles of the dominant [male] culture were acted out in microcosmos. Poetry became not only a vehicle of personal expression but a complicated intertextual and dialogical field in which rivalries and sexual preferences could be encoded and defended" (Davidson xi).

In Barbara Ehrenreich's *The Hearts of Men* (1983), the Beats are examined within the gender context of the 1950s, against the backdrop of the middle-class world of other-directed organization men, the "aimless" family life in suburbia, and the consumerist orientation toward women among readers of *Playboy*. Ehrenreich acknowledges that in Bohemian culture many of the same male chauvinist attitudes could be found as in suburban America, but that within the former culture lay a potentially liberating alternative to the prevailing gender roles: "In the Beat, the two

strands of male protest—one directed against the white-collar work world and the other against the suburbanized family life come together into the first all-out critique of American consumer culture" (52). The Beat ethos opened up a new range of role opportunities for men, and by default, for women, too. Even though women were subordinated to Beat men, it at least offered an alternative to the consumerist ideology and sexual objectification depicted in *Playboy* and the *Saturday Evening Post* version of the nuclear family.

Ehrenreich sees the Beat world as one of narcissistic male bonding, where women only existed as burdens of a responsibility these men did not seek nor desired to shoulder. The companionship of the men offered them a release from the obligations of suburban, heterosexual family life. "Beat pioneers were deeply, if intermittently, attached to each other. Women and their demands for responsibility were, at worst, irritating and more often just uninteresting compared to the ecstatic possibilities of male adventure" (54). The Beats' adventures did not include women, except, perhaps, as thrilling opportunities that men might seize. Their relationships with women often lacked mature emotional intimacy.

This tendency of insolent masculinity is reflected in Beat films at the time, especially in what Ray Carney has called the "dramatic mercuriality of the characters" (197) played by Taylor Mead, the best-known Beat actor of the period. Characters like those in Ron Rice's films *The Flower Thief* (1960) and *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963) and Vernon Zimmerman's *Lemon Hearts* (1960) were not adult in any respect. "They are eternal children, divine fools, pure-hearted simpletons detached from the world and innocent of its machinations. They illustrate what Kerouac might have had in mind when he defined Beatness as beatitude" (Carney 202). Mead's characters embody a tendency within Beat culture to renounce the social responsibilities and emotional demands of adulthood. Although there are lots of women and a good deal of nudity in Beat films, representations of mature sexual or social relationships are rare, Carney contends.

The characters Mead plays (as well as the male leads in *Adventures of Jimmy*, *Pull My Daisy*, and many other Beat works) display a boyish charm, but to notice that is to suggest why the women in these films all function, more or less, as glorified mommies. They are mainly there to make meals and clean up the messes the little boy or his friends make.... It is significant that the closest *The Queen of Sheba* gets to a sex scene is when the Mead character either nurses

at [the film's main female character] Winifred Bryan's breast or physically positions himself as if he were returning to emerging from the womb.... Beat culture was infantile in many respects. In rejecting adult values, many Beats rejected adulthood itself. Like Peter Pan, they never wanted to grow up. (202)

Carney makes the necessary qualification, however, that not all Beat films embraced such states of "terminal arrested development." He refers to Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason* (1967), about the archetypically hipster of the time, which is quite skeptical about its title character's level of maturity, and John Cassavetes's *Too Late Blues* (1962), which takes the choirboy asexuality of its central figure as a dramatic problem to be dealt with. Furthermore, there are also complex adult characters who are sexually, emotionally, and socially mature in some Beat films, including Jonas Mekas's film *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1949-63). This is a moving portrait in the form of a film diary of what it felt like, in America in the 1950s, to be a "displaced person" in all respects: linguistically, culturally, socially, and artistically. This state of social marginality and imaginative alienation, however painful to experience, also conferred some freedom (Carney 199-200, 202, 212). But it can be argued that these were counter-strains which did not really challenge the dominant Beat discourse of the perpetually adolescent male as described by Ehrenreich.

In an analysis of the works of Beat women writers, Amy Friedman contends that the male Beat Generation writers succeeded in refocusing the age-old female paradigm of Virgin mother. She recognizes "a paradoxical reconfiguring of the female" fixed upon "an axis of Angel-Prostitute"; the woman cast in the impossible role of the "beatific whore" (200). It is therefore not surprising in her eyes that writings by female members of the Beat Generation like Diana di Prima, Bonnie Bremser (maiden name Brenda Frazer), Joanne Kyger, or Anne Waldman foreshadowed some of the major issues of the feminist movement of the 1960s and thereafter (Friedman 201-11). Friedman criticizes the way in which Beat historians have tended to mythologize "the spark of spontaneous intimacy among the central coterie of the Beat writers, underscoring the group's awesome capacity for closeness, generally ignoring the complications of their intellectual, creative and sexual intersections" (211). These historians considered Beat women as largely peripheral to the artistic and personal lives of Beat men; likewise the literary contributions of female Beat writers have been depicted as marginal. "Against the phenomenon of foregrounded, idealised

and highly idolised mothers—Naomi Ginsberg, 'Memère' Kerouac—the attitude of male Beat writers was to reify the abstract axis of female sexuality into a mode of expectation of the female which privileged her (sexual) subservience and silence" (Friedman 211). More recently, a counter-history has evolved which rightly acknowledges the substantial contributions of Beat women, in the works of memoirists such as Joyce Johnson, Carolyn Cassady, and Bonnie Bremser, and embodied in long-overdue readers on women of the Beat generation (Knight, Peabody). However, many of these women wrote and published their work well after the heyday of the Beat Generation, which only underlines that they were marginal figures—or "minor characters" in Joyce Johnson's terms—in the Beat milieu at the time.

Helen McNeil has looked at what she calls "the archeology of gender in the Beat movement," and sees the Beats as a "boy gang," a term originally brought forward in a "dream letter" from John Clellon Holmes recorded by Allen Ginsberg in 1954, to indicate the ideal model of creativity: "The social organization which is most true of itself to the artist is the boy gang," to which Ginsberg added in his journal: "Not society's perfum'd marriage" (Ginsberg, as quoted in Johnson 79). According to McNeil, "The discourse, the definition and the often punishing lifestyle for the Beat Generation were set by the men, even more markedly than in other literary *avant-gardes*, because the men tended to share lives and to support each other actively" (178). She acknowledges that the Beat discourse about gender can be traced back historically to the American mythos of the frontier or of the "bad boy," or seen as simply a continuation of the romantic topos of the quest-romance (Stull; Fiedler, *Love and Waiting*). Contrary to the dominant masculinity model of the 1950s, in which the individual had to endure the strain between individualism and responsibility, in the Beat idiom "freedom for the quest must be absolute; the Beat hero is responsible only to that quest and sometimes to his friends; the 'gang' is held together by ties of love" (McNeil 187).

Although McNeil stresses that the Beats did break with the establishment line of American literature in their time, she points out that the stance of literary vanguardism is no guarantee of a break from a dominant societal discourse (179). She acknowledges that the Beats did not display a single shared attitude towards gender. Nevertheless she has no problems in generalizing that, in terms of gender, the innovation of the Beat movement for the larger American culture of the 1950s was the insertion of the "chick"—the attractive, young, sexually available and above all, silent ("dumb") female—into its discourse.

Even less threatening to Beat males were the “fellaheen” women who had few expectations, lower on the social scale than even the hobos Sal Paradise (= Jack Kerouac) and Dean Moriarty (Neal Cassady), the male protagonists in *On the Road*. Often the fellaheen woman in question did not even speak English, or only barely (McNeil 189).

McNeil’s conclusion necessarily entails a devastating critique of the dominant male Beat discourse:

The insertion of the chick category does not violate any existing gender codes, rather it opens new opportunities for sex without responsibility (for there is no marriage, or marriage...is not taken seriously). It is sex without guilt (for the true chick never complains). And it is sex without financial cost (because the chick is not a professional prostitute). And it is sex with those who will—mostly—not tell their side of the story. (189)

It must be added, however, that the 1950s chick had her historical precursors, as embodied by various pin-up girls, and Hollywood film actresses like Carole Lombard (1908-1942) and most of all by Jean Harlow (1911-1937), called the “platinum blonde” or the “blonde bombshell,” in the thirties and forties.⁸ This character type was therefore already part of U.S. popular culture at the time.

Certainly Kerouac’s Beat discourse about gender was not the only one, though it was (and still is) the most widely known among the general heterosexual audience, and by default, the most influential. Ginsberg and Burroughs, among others, had their own views on gender. Ginsberg’s “Howl” may be interpreted as a coming-out poem; its liberational intensity becomes clear when located within the constraints of the 1950s closet (Osbourne 16). Yet, “Howl” also contains a few negative references to what Ginsberg experienced as female control figures (including his mother). Burroughs’s misogyny, reflected in his published works, which include many vitriolic generalizations about women, is shocking even from a woman-blaming discourse of the 1950s. It is not surprising that some women’s groups find Burroughs’s writing very offensive. But there has been a tendency among critics not to view misogyny as a major theme in his work, because it is part of a diatribe against control in general—with the threat of the controlling woman as a comforting recognizable element in alien fictive worlds. In all of these discourses, the female is seen as threat. Much of the Beat rebellion generally projected power onto the maternal/domestic sphere, specifically blaming women for dominating what they did not and could not control. In the Beat life-world, it appeared

that the less social and economic power the woman had, the more she was perceived to have (McNeil 191-92).

Substance of the Beats’ Cultural Practices

The Beats had a wanderlust and an enormous hunger for experience, not simply in order to satisfy themselves, but in the hope of discovering a “New Vision.” They bummed around and generally “dug” life—hoping to find for themselves a way of living free from such “bourgeois” considerations as moderation, respectability, security, and self-control (Turner). This was manifested in their preoccupations with drugs, sex, religious experimentation (including meditation), community and communal living, travel, anarchistic politics, a fascination with criminality, and “being on the offensive against society whilst at the same time acknowledging alternative kinds of society” (Wisker 84). Needless to say, these issues were articulated in their cultural practices which had to do with art: writing novels and poems, painting, music, photography, and filmmaking.

The last part of Matza’s 1961 exposé was devoted to the Beats’ artistic preoccupations—to what he called the “business” of Bohemianism, consisting of two components: the creation of unconventional art and the pursuit of unconventional experience. In line with the Bohemian tradition, Beat art was disaffiliated from the major institutions that generally produced and distributed art: the modern university, with its direct and indirect subsidization of the arts, as well as the modern culture industries that dealt commercially in art (e.g., publishing firms) or traded in commercialized art: advertising and the like (114-16).

Clearly, Matza overlooked the fact that, although the Beat writers and poets were alienated from the literary-academic establishment, they did not completely distance themselves from it, often entertaining ambivalent relationships with members of that same establishment. Beat literary work was considered anti-academic indeed (Trilling, “The Other Night”). Yet, their actual approach differed from the myth of simple, spontaneous anti-intellectualism that has surrounded writers such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso. They were able to use their sources, predecessors, and influences, transform these elements and set them in new contexts (Allan 260).

Beat writers were highly ambiguous towards the literary canon, especially Ginsberg, who desired to break into the established literary precincts. This issue of “in-fighting” can also be seen in Kerouac’s quest to publish *On the Road*, which was finally accepted by Viking Press (261). Ginsberg ultimately succeeded in

becoming part of literary academia, many years later, thereby bringing “where he came from with him, both the writers he hung out with and the radical attitudes he began with, and did his best to change the mainstream that had finally accepted him” (Sukenick, “Out and In” 12). According to John Muckle, the Beat stance may have been built out of several negations of official academic options, aesthetical and social; nevertheless, the Beat writers (particularly Ginsberg) did “mirror the academy in their archivism” (32). Ginsberg also was responsible for the later institutionalization of the literary Beat movement in the form of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado. With its own “canon,” the institute is a kind of alternative pantheon of great works and artists (Muckle 30):

[Ginsberg] always kept lines of communication open to the academy, sought approval in a sense, wanted to take over, recognised its importance—as access to young minds, audiences. He concerned himself with making alternative “traditions,” a faculty, living and dead, for the academy of the future, and finally incarnated that in a school of his own. (32)

This also means that Ginsberg and his kindred spirits did not consider the Beat subculture as an exclusive community; in a way they were “evangelicals” in their attempts to spread their version of the Beat gospel. This part of the Beat movement was much more inclusive than Kerouac’s strain, for example, which was more in line with the Bohemian tradition as typified by Matza.

Second, Matza contended that stylistic innovation was also characteristic of Bohemian art; in each of the arts, Bohemians had been experimenters with new styles of expression. It is obvious that this tendency was present among the Beats, although with some qualifications. In creating their particular aesthetics in the culturally repressive Cold War era, the Beats opposed what they saw as “philistine and repressive mores by exploring and exploiting the extreme potential of the individual self” (Wisker 84). Understandably, these attitudes were reflected in the art works produced, and it is not surprising that the Beats claimed strong affinities with some of the leading figures of the romantic movement, particularly the romanticism of Blake, Shelley, Whitman, and Lawrence, and the transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. The free borrowing of gnostic and Eastern religious texts by the Beat writers was an earlier strategy of transcendentalist American writers (Bush 133). However, the Beat writers did not merely adopt

romanticism, but qualified and questioned it by the modernism so prevalent at the time in the literature of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe, and Henry Miller; the surrealism of Apollinaire, Prévert, Eluard, Reverdy, and Lorca; and the existentialism of Hemingway, Céline, Artaud, Sartre, and Camus. What was innovative about Beat literature was precisely this interrogation of romanticism by specific characteristics of modernism, which also explains the energy, tensions and volatility of the best Beat writing, according to Alistair Wisker (84). The dynamics in Beat writing can also partly be attributed to the fact that, as novelists and poets who were deeply conscious of themselves as *American* writers, Beat writers underwent the tensions between opposites in American life. Bruce Cook has pointed out how strong the influence on the Beats was of William Carlos Williams, who, as an American poet, had an intense awareness of the teeming contradictions, what he called the “torsion,” of American life. In the writings of the Beats there is the same sense of a past lost and a present wasted that can be felt in the works of Williams. Cook also referred to the tradition of protest and dissent, of the beleaguered minority against the tyrannical majority, the individual against the community—which is the American tradition (Cook 18-23). On the other hand, the Beats were, paradoxically, also among the most “European” of postwar American writers, because of their borrowings from Spengler, Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, various European modernists, and French existentialists (Muckle 21).

The Beat writers had a strong penchant for experimentation in consciousness that resulted in drug use as a source of literary inspiration, practicing and popularizing avant-garde writing styles like free-form “spontaneous writing” and so-called cut-ups, the idea of putting random words together (the latter in Burroughs’s work in particular).

The Beat approach to literature is a legacy, primarily because of the fact that “it holds together, through communality, a discourse that manifests a visceral relationship to language,” which became a “Beat literature canon,” according to Anne Waldman. Like Black Mountain poets Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, San Francisco Renaissance poet Robert Duncan, and others, the Beats felt “a need to return language to the body, to the physiology and musculature of the writer” (Davidson 77). They tried to practice a physical poetry, “to recover the body in poetry through a return to speech rhythms, through the disordering of conventional syntax, through a lineation

based on the breath" (Davidson 80). This reclamation of certain aspects of romanticism that could be found in the work of Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Whitman, was only unique in the 1950s against the backdrop of the then-dominant New Critical orthodoxy that valued detachment and ironical distance.

Despite the Beats' fervent assertions of individuality, the Beat spirit had a communal bent, and was structurally marked by a strong intertextuality. This was manifested in the forms and means of dissemination chosen by the Beats, as Franco Minganti has pointed out. He refers to the large published collections of letters circulated between Beat writers; the mimeographed "zines" (little magazines) edited by anyone with the inclination, regularly offering an outlet for contributions by others within the Beat orbit (and quite a few times these were works written by more than one author); the public readings and performances which were mostly a collective effort where even members of the public were invited to participate; the photographs that many took of themselves and their friends (including large numbers of group photos). Apparently, the Beats derived pleasure (with obvious narcissistic implications) from getting together, recognizing and watching each other, taking photographs of each other, and then reproducing their own images for a wider audience (Minganti).

Furthermore, the Beat sensibility has never limited itself to any one field, but was active in different fields at the same time. Writers, painters, filmmakers and musicians rubbed shoulders in the Beat scene, exchanged artistic views and products, and collaborated in many ways. This resulted in a mixing of the senses, and various manifestations of multimodality (Minganti). Very significant in this regard are the Beats' creative attempts at synthesizing oral and literate forms of expression, in which they cultivated all kinds of kinaesthetic and synaesthetic experiences. Synaesthesia, or mixing of the senses, is "a concomitant sensation," that is, "a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of color) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated," according to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1183). It is well known that these kinds of sensations can be enhanced by the use of certain types of drugs, and further stimulated by specific senso-motoric experiences in relation to, among other things, listening and dancing to jazz and rock music. In a cultural context—that of post-Second World War America—in which forms of "secondary orality" became ever more prominent (see below), it was precisely these artistic cross-breeds and mixtures of literary texts, film, theater, music and painting, both in their "high-brow" and "low-brow" variants, that were innovative.

However, whereas the Beats primarily tried to assimilate writing (and thought) to speech and rhythm—thereby introducing originally African-American forms (e.g., *toasting* in blues and *scatting* in jazz music) into white culture—recent artists are much more attuned to the visual, to syntactic disruption which is more generally characteristic of post-modernism (Muckle 33).

Although they were neither the first nor the only ones in this regard—well-known predecessors are Dada and the surrealists—the Beats did contribute to the creation of a cultural legacy which, among others, rappers have continued today. One of the Beats' achievements was to make literature as "sexy" as movies, jazz, and rock 'n' roll, as Steven Turner has emphasized. Along with Dylan Thomas and San Francisco senior poet Kenneth Rexroth, the Beats were largely responsible for a revival of interest in public reading performances during the 1950s. They helped liberate poetry from the confinement of the written text (in the private home, study or lecture hall), and took it to places more commonly associated with music, visual art, or stand-up comedy—the jazz club, the art gallery, and the coffee bar. Thus, the Beats brought the written word back into live breath and musical time. It was first of all an action-oriented aesthetics: "Poetry was performed, not filed away. Word was stood by" (O'Brien 185). Michael Davidson has argued that these performative strategies were developed in response to the alienation and cultural malaise of the postwar era. In his view, the creation of this new poetry was directly linked to the need for alternative social forms during a period of consensus and conformity (216).

In his seminal work *Orality and Technology*, Walter Ong has suggested that the electronic age is "an age of 'secondary orality,' the orality of telephones, radio and television, which depends on writing and printing for its existence" (3). Thus, this concept refers to the merging of orally-influenced traditions that are created and embedded in a post-literate, technologically sophisticated cultural context (Rose 36-38). Jazz-poetry readings and similar signifying practices in the Beat culture were a clear manifestation of this "secondary orality," and one can regard rap as a very distinctive, recent variant of this tradition. This is understandable, since, like contemporary rappers, the Beat poets themselves in their performances borrowed from the African-American habit of "toasting," a form of talking over the music, of being a witness, talking about what one sees, feels, and experiences. It can be found in the blues tradition and is derived from an older African practice of music

making, dancing, singing and story telling, but is to a degree part of a common stock of folk and popular music among whites and blacks, particularly in the South of the United States (Russell). This style was foremost employed by the black, "talking-blues," international performance-poet Ted Joans, who, together with other Beats including black writers like LeRoi Jones and Bob Kaufman, was especially drawn to black jazz musicians like Archie Shepp or Miles Davis (who, in turn, were drawn to them) (Lee, "Introduction" 3).

The third feature of this type of art concerned its subject matter. Bohemian art had frequently broken taboos and dealt with issues that were deserving or open to censure. It was Matza's view that Bohemians had often been guilty of confusing or equating two meanings of "depth": the depth of human existence and the bowels of forbidden matters. He saw this proclivity as a consequence of the Bohemians' characteristic style of populism in which "authentic life" supposedly coincided with "primitive" life, such as it was lived in the lowest social classes and the underworld (114-15). In this context it should be remembered, however, that, despite the populism they celebrated, the Beat writers were bookish in their own way and willy-nilly took an active part in the literary tradition. In this connection Maynard contends that:

Few of the Beats really rejected literary tradition as ferociously as the keepers of that tradition rejected the Beats. The real source of the quarrel was that both parties, the Beats and the mainstream intellectuals, believed strongly enough in literature to fight over it. The intellectuals thought of the Beats as charlatans and barbarians; the Beats thought of them as members of a worn-out cultural gentry who had held power for so long that they had forgotten what to do with it. (10)

If the Bohemian feared the *Lumpenproletariat*, or found out that their behavior was not open to censure, s/he could always turn to what was, after all, the most frequent subject matter of Bohemian art—Bohemians. "This was fortunate," Matza contended, "for if Bohemian life was not sufficiently censurable, there was always the possibility of making it so" (115). Undeniably, the latter aspect holds especially true in our case: the art world of the Beats with its celebration of demonstrative gestures and acts, including shock tactic "obscurity," vis-à-vis the square world.

Here we arrive at the second component of the "business" of Bohemianism that Matza recognized: the pursuit of unconventional personal experiences. These persistently fulfilled a crucial function for

young aspiring artists, since it provided them with a subject matter to which they could apply their talents. Characteristic of Bohemian life generally was that more time was spent in pursuit than in actual experience, which was confirmed by most novels written by Beats or those close to them. Here Matza referred to Kerouac's novels in particular, and to Chandler Brossard's novel *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952), as "accurate replicas of Beat life."

Two kinds of unconventional experiences were sought. First, there was the pursuit of hedonism which often overlapped with illegal activities such as sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, intemperate alcohol use, disturbing the peace, illicit drug use, and breaking speed limits. Matza hastened to add, however, that with the obvious exception of the last, most of these activities were exhibited among Bohemians during the nineteenth century (115).

The second kind of unconventional experience concerned a quest for transcendence from everyday reality, closely related to the problem of creativity. It represented another way of experimenting with the limits of human perception. It was in this light that one could best understand three esoteric Beat activities, identified by Matza: religious mysticism as practised in Buddhist meditation, called the "Zen kick" in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*; the flirtation with, and acceptance of psychosis; and the use of hallucinogenic drugs (115-16).

While it may be true that the Beats did not attain "a new threshold of hedonistic experience," as Matza contended (115), their public behavior offered a "shock of the new," and met with outcries from parents, and authorities at high schools, colleges, churches, corporations, and in the armed services. It fit with the moral outrage about juvenile delinquency in the 1950s (Gilbert). This association in the public's perception was clearly recognized by John Clellon Holmes, who grasped, at the time, the affinity between the Beats' counterculture and the fifties' undercurrent of youth rebellion (Holmes, "The Philosophy" 67). This undercurrent was embodied specifically by "a new breed of nihilistic, overtly sexual male rebels" like Marlon Brando and James Dean, introduced by Hollywood, "who seemed to be the last repository of defiant masculinity" (Ehrenreich 57). Each group acted distinctively against the grain of mainstream America.

Furthermore, whether the Beats' "quest for transcendence" was always that serious has been questioned. Michael Davidson refers to "a popular misconception" about the Beats that they were "dabblers in esoteric religion..., in order to discover new spiritual

highs" (95), as can be inferred from contemporary criticisms. For example, Harry T. Moore asked how an undisciplined group of egocentrics like the Beats could even pretend to approach a discipline such as Zen, which demands of true disciples many years of intensive mental and physical training, as well as self-denial, to master the concentration required to attain satori (388). Zen Buddhism and related meditation practices may indeed have been no more than an exotic fad among Beat camp followers, and rather superficial in many cases—easily changed to Tao or tarot cards (Polsky, "The Village" 175). This does not apply to most key Beat figures, however. Their interest in alternative religious systems and practices was certainly not casual (Davidson 95). Some, like Ginsberg, Kerouac, and West Coast Beat Gary Snyder, took Zen quite seriously. Both Ginsberg's and Kerouac's Buddhism remained mostly literary at the time; only later in his life would Ginsberg turn into a highly committed, practicing Buddhist. Snyder, however, spent years in spiritual quest in learning and practicing Zen through retreats at Japanese meditation centers. Kerouac's interest in Buddhism grew as he drifted back and forth across America. He made extensive notes while reading books about Buddhism, memorized and recited sutras, and tried to discipline himself in meditation. In addition he worked on four Buddhist books, including *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, completed in 1956. The last was reportedly "the clearest and most direct expression of his Catholic Buddhism," according to Rick Fields in his history of Buddhism in America (215-16). Apart from this text, none of the other books were published during Kerouac's lifetime, however; *Some of the Dharma* appeared posthumously, in 1997. To Easterners Kerouac and Ginsberg, Snyder represented the mythical genius of the Far West. Cook mentions Snyder's influence on many of the Beats through his anecdotes and poems of the wandering Zen Buddhist monks ("truth bums"): "They gave a sense of intellectual, even religious justification to the Beats' deep natural impulse to freedom, their wish to stay unattached and on the move" (29). Apparently, it was this legitimating function of Zen, justifying sheer caprice in art, literature, and life, particularly "as an alibi for sexual irresponsibility" (Moore 388), rather than its intrinsic merits to reach a mystical state, that was most significant to Beat adherents. This selective appropriation of Zen may also partly explain the Zen boom that flourished among artists and pseudo-intellectuals in the late 1950s (Fields 221). Ironically, however, Kerouac ended up rejecting Buddhism because it "preach[ed] against entanglement with women"; instead, he

returned to the Catholicism of his youth, and retreated to the bottle (Tonkinson).

A certain superficiality was attached to most of the Beats' preoccupations with psychosis, with the exceptions of William Burroughs and Ginsberg, who both were true explorers of all kinds of mental deviation and altered states of consciousness. In a way, their behavior in this domain foreshadowed similar yet more politicized tendencies in the anti-psychiatric movement of the sixties and seventies. In the fifties, however, the use of illicit drugs as a means to reach an altered state of consciousness was quite common in the jazz world, among theater people, and related Bohemian scenes, although, admittedly, these did not concern large numbers of people. Of the addictive drugs, heroin was the drug of choice for Beat junkies, next to barbiturates. Of the non-addicting kinds, dexedrine was popular. But, because of its hallucinogenic effects, the drug of choice of Beats was first of all marijuana, next to peyote, hashish and synthetic mescaline—in order of frequency (Polsky, "The Village" 166-69). In a 1967 retrospection, Ned Polsky gave his opinion that the Beats' "most enduring imprint on American culture" was the diffusion of marijuana use to a larger group of middle- and upper-class whites outside the jazz world. "Such contemporary white use, although now self-sustaining and still growing, stemmed largely from public attention given to Beat practices and Beat literature proselytizing on the matter" ("The Village" 172). He presented a chart depicting this spread of marijuana use in the United States which highlighted the role of the Beats as the key transmitters for the use of marijuana among whites at the time.⁹

Polsky's view may have been somewhat biased because of his heavy reliance on sources concerning Greenwich Village and its environs. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that more generally, the popularization of the Beat lifestyle ushered in the use of soft drugs among a larger audience in the late fifties, and on a massive scale within the counterculture of the sixties.

Conclusion

Generally, Matza's sociological characterization of the Beats as a mid-twentieth-century American variant of Bohemianism has stood the test of time regarding the main features of their mentality and the various implications of these: romanticism and the celebration of spontaneity and "primitivism"; expressive authenticity and the two major Bohemian moods: frivolity and moroseness. This also applies to the contents of the Beats' cultural practices and artistic

output, in which several forms of unconventionality could be recognized which are characteristic of other Bohemians, too. The uncritical adoption of the notion of "authenticity" had to be rejected, however, and the social constructedness of authenticity and naturalness to be emphasized. The merging of the Beats' emphasis on the articulation of "authentic inner feelings" with the civil privatism of expressive individualism in American culture that they cultivated to the extreme was accentuated as well.

Since quite a number of middle-aged people followed in the Beats' track, it is incorrect to see the Beat subculture as a pure youth culture, as Matza, among others, tended to do. Furthermore, it was necessary to add a crucial component to his sociological typification: the prevalent (that is, Kerouac's) Beat discourse on gender, with its truculent masculinity and tendency toward immature and non-binding commitments to women. Of course, this was not really something new among male Bohemians, or, more generally, non-Bohemian male chauvinists, who have displayed similar irresponsible behavior in the past and present. But the joint insertion of the defiant male category of a new breed of nihilistic, overtly sexual male rebels, and the "chick" category, of the attractive, young, sexually available and "dumb" female, into the gender discourse of mainstream 1950s America was relatively "innovative," although this female stereotype certainly had its historical precursors in U.S. popular culture.

Also, in more specific ways the Beats differed from previous Bohemian groups in America, most significantly in the somber rather than frivolous mood that prevailed among them, and their lateral, instead of vertical, deviance—a characteristic that the Beats had in common with their successors in a way, the hippies of the 1960s. Vertical deviance happens when persons in a subordinate position attempt to enjoy the prerogatives of those in a superior position. The former are then trying to model themselves in ways considered inappropriate for persons in their higher status positions. Lateral deviance occurs when those in a subordinate position develop their own standards and norms apart from and opposed to those of persons of a superior rank. It occurs in a context in which the former reject the values of the latter. Whereas value-consensus characterizes vertical deviance, there is a certain kind of value dissensus involved in lateral deviance. In the case of vertical deviance, power ultimately resides and remains with the privileged. The social subordinates want what they have; the advantaged can control them by gradually extending prerogatives to them in return for conforming behavior. In

the case of lateral deviance, however, the possibilities of conditional rewards as devices to induce conformity are not available. The deviants do not want what the privileged have; therefore, the latter cannot control them by promising to let them sample a bit of their privileges (Howard 52-53). It is precisely this distinction between vertical and lateral deviance which differentiates the Beat Generation from the Lost Generation. "The deviant youth of the 1920's simply lived out what many 'squares' of the time considered the exciting life—the life of the 'swinger.' Theirs was a kind of deviance which largely accepted society's definition of the bad and the beautiful," John Robert Howard has emphasized (53).

Other relevant dissimilarities with preceding Bohemians were the Beat writers' more ambiguous stance towards the literary canon (including strong endeavors to fight themselves into literary academia), their appropriation of romanticism as challenged by modernism, as well as their pronounced Americanness and creative synthesizing of European and American art forms and cultural styles rather than a mere emulation of European artistic tendencies. In the latter respect, the Beats made a clear break with a long-standing tradition among American Bohemians of simply following primarily what went on in France. After all, they embodied a quintessentially *American* protest against the American Way of Life.

The Beats were also creative in practicing and popularizing avant-garde styles like free-form "spontaneous writing," cut-ups and other forms of *bricolage*, as well as in their attempts to syncretize oral and literate forms of expression. In their writings, they entertained a visceral relationship to literature, trying to reconnect language to the body, to the physiology of the writer.

Despite the Beats' avowals of individuality, the Beat spirit was very much a communal affair. It distinguished itself by a strong intertextuality, manifested in the forms and media of dissemination that the Beats chose. This also entailed self-celebration; the Beat Generation ended up spectacularizing itself, and offering itself to a larger audience. The Beat sensibility was characterized as well by a mixing of the senses, and various manifestations of multimediality. Through jazz-cum-poetry performances, and all kinds of hybrids of literary texts, film, photos, music, and painting, the Beats sought synaesthetic experiences, partly aided by the use of hallucinatory drugs. These cultural forms were distinctive articulations of "secondary orality," which is so characteristic of the electronic age that came into being during the Beats' lifetime.

As part of a broader underground culture from the late 1940s until the early 1960s, which was quite loosely bounded with regard to territory and style, the Beats mounted a frontal attack on the hegemonic everyday culture of America. This culture was neither monolithic nor unassailable, however. As Dick Hebdige has pointed out in another context (in a discussion on punk of the late 1970s): "The consensus can be fractured, challenged, overruled, and resistance to the groups in dominance cannot always be lightly dismissed or automatically incorporated" (Hebdige, *Subculture* 16). In American society at the time, which was very much aimed at cultural homogenization, the Beats' assertion of cultural difference in terms of deviance and dissidence was an essentially progressive gesture, from their perspective a move in the right direction away from conformity and submission.

While the making of art may overtly express withdrawal, as was the case with the Beats, the actual production of art itself always constitutes an engagement. Consequently, the notion of disaffiliation appears more precise than, and preferable to, the notion of withdrawal, as Blaine Allan has argued. Since the hegemonic culture in question was capable of appropriating antagonistic forms, the wish for disaffiliation indicated activity which constantly produced different forms for this culture to contend with. Appearance and behavioral style formed one such battleground for the assault the Beat subculture made on the American Way of Life. Language in the form of Beat terminology and street argot, also part of the shared discourse, constituted another insult. Eisenhower America's counter-response consisted of an incorporation and assimilation of these and other characteristics—or some filtered versions thereof—into acceptable, diluted types (Allan 262-64). Thus, the Beatnik turned into a stereotype, and a domesticated version of the Beat subculture became predominant, a process in which the initial threat of the Beat subculture was only partially defused, though. The intricate interplay between social representations and social identities of the Beats that occurred precluded their full containment within the consensus culture of mid-twentieth-century America, which was never totally hegemonic.

Notes

¹I am indebted to my wife, Nancy A. Schaefer, for her valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

²This involved a series of pictures of people shown on a card (seven cards for the male subjects and eight for the

female subjects, with five cards used for both sexes), where the subject was asked to make up a story about each of these pictures (Rigney and Smith 212-30).

³This consisted of a random array of ten symmetrical ink blots printed on cards, onto which subjects supposedly projected their primary subconscious preoccupations (Rigney and Smith 230-31).

⁴As we have seen above, the Beats included significant numbers of young adults, and people who were in their thirties and forties. This makes the term "teenage culture" inadequate to categorize the Beat milieu.

⁵Podhoretz had studied with Lionel Trilling at Columbia University, as Ginsberg had for a brief period. Podhoretz would metamorphose into a neo-conservative ideologue beginning in the late 1960s (Wald 354-55).

⁶This reference is somewhat confusing, since dandyism is traditionally known for its demonstrative coolness.

⁷Kerouac's published novel *On the Road* is not just the result of one uninterrupted, "spontaneous" flow of his stream of consciousness. Kerouac had indeed produced a single-roll typescript of *On the Road* in 1951, but "very substantial revisions to *On the Road* occurred while he was evolving his spontaneous prose approach" (Ellis 60n39, basing himself on Charters, *Kerouac*, and French 84). Malcolm Cowley had an active part in this revision of the manuscript; the manuscript first had to meet his literary and editorial criteria of conscious styling and shaping of form before it was published by Viking Press in 1957 (Gussow, quoted in Bak 51).

⁸Jean Harlow played the main character in, among others, Frank Capra's *Platinum Blonde* (1931), and in *Bombshell* (1933), which both featured her platinum hair and obvious sexuality (Golden, Stenn).

⁹According to this chart the diffusion started from Mexico and the introduction in the Southwest United States by Mexican laborers about 1910, then through introduction to blacks, via Mexican-Americans, in New Orleans by 1920. The use of marijuana becomes well established among urban lower-class blacks both South and North by the late 1920s, spreading to black jazz musicians and black fans in the 1920s, among some white jazz musicians by the late 1920s and spreading rapidly among them in mid-1930s, but to white jazz fans only since the early 1940s; among white lower class in racially mixed neighborhoods, some by the mid-1930s but mostly since the late 1940s, and then arriving at the Beats by 1950. In the late 1950s, the drug spread from the Beat subculture to white middle- and upper-class "pseudo-Bohemians" (playboy types, e.g., the sportscar set, "hippie" advertising copywriters), to white "ethnic" and "folk" teenagers, and "folksy-artsy circles" (e.g., the scene in which the early Bob Dylan hung out), as well as to white college students (some by 1950; rapid spread since 1960). From the "folksy-artsy circles" mari-

juana use diffused to white middle- and upper-class high school students (mainly since 1961), and in this regard the latter milieu interacted with that of the white college students involved (Polsky, "The Village" 173).

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