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The Enduring Influence of the Beats

Few literary movements have left an indelible mark on culture quite like the Beat Generation did. What began in the late 1940s as a few bohemian creatives from Columbia University bringing an avant-garde twist to poetry and literature–namely the infamous trio of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs–culminated in the rise of the counterculture movement of the mid to late-1960s. With an influence so pervasive–musically as wide-ranging as psychedelic and progressive rock, jazz, pop, and experimental, to future decades of iconic writers both from the States and the entire globe, as well hippie culture itself (which originated with the aptly-named Beatniks)–it's hard to deny that the postwar-boom of American writing with the Beats hasn't left an obvious trace to the foremost writers of the present day.

Since the Beat movement largely came to an end just over sixty years ago, (arguably when Kerouac died in 1969 from his complications with alcoholism) the United States is a much different place to how it was back then. The age of free love and hippies came and went, the excess of the 1970s gave way for a stark shift towards conservatism in the 1980s. By the 1990s and the turn of the millennium, technology had begun to encroach into our everyday lives, and the 21st century marked the beginning of the Information Age. Even so, a lot of the topics that many famous Beats were fighting for back then are quite analogous to what many debate today. Sexual liberation, environmental awareness, respect for all walks of life, freedom from

censorship, and a clear opposition to war, are just some of them. None of these are new topics of debate, but the context behind those issues differs today versus in the mid 20th century.

Perhaps the most important work to come out of the Beat Generation is none other than Kerouac's seminal *On the Road*. Based upon Kerouac's own trips across the country with his close friend Neal Cassady, the novel straddles the line between autobiography and fiction. Names of characters are altered from their real life counterparts, but upon closer examination all of the major Beat players are present: Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Cassady are here, along with a lot of the "supporting cast" of the movement; Kerouac himself is the narrator. The first full draft of the book was completed all in the month of April, 1951, on a taped-together scroll of tracing paper about a third as long as a football field. Kerouac spent the next six years thoroughly editing and rewriting *On the Road* until finally getting it published through Viking Press in 1957.

With Kerouac as a white American of French-Canadian descent, his mostly-autobiographical novels very clearly present that perspective. In the many years since *On the Road* was first published, Literature has undergone a complete transformation as to how it is understood, taught, and analyzed at the university level. A complete sea change from the traditional literature studies and its understanding of the aesthetics has morphed into what is known as cultural studies; taking works and putting them under a lens of race, class, and gender. For a progressively-minded South African student body in the Humanities department of the University of Cape Town (UCT), bringing Kerouac's work into the curriculum would undoubtedly bring upon close examination of the text from that perspective. Hearing the perspectives of students with very different backgrounds to that of Kerouac on his work is fascinating to say the least.

Eric Strand, an American lecturing at UCT, was hired around the time that a political student movement sought to have *Heart of Darkness*, the now-contentious 1899 novel, removed from the required reading list for first-year English students. Their demonstrations and protests worked, leaving Strand to teach on *The Souls of Black Folk* instead. At first he was quite ecstatic to lecture on that novel instead, but was left sympathizing with the students. In an article for *The Beats: A Teaching Companion*, titled "Teaching Jack Kerouac in a Decolonizing South African University," he writes:

> While this was a happy outcome for me, one wonders if an expatriate American white male lecturing on *The Souls of Black Folk* was really what South African students and academics had in mind when they spoke of decolonization. Still, It was unlikely that there would ever be pickets or megaphones outside the window while my seminar was discussing *On the Road*.

Strand understands that Kerouac's work would largely live outside of the heated political debate going through his department. Regardless, its uncontroversial inclusion continued a trajectory noted by one of his peers, one where the university has shifted from teaching Eurocentric works to almost completely American ones. This noticeable shift was echoed by many of the students in his class.

What makes Strand's article particularly compelling is the discussions that followed his lecturing on the book. Inspired to follow famous academic Gerald Graff's mantra to teach the conflicts, he describes that "[that] approach involved balancing an appreciation for Kerouac's artistry and blending of cultural forms with an attention to his problematic attitudes toward race, gender, and class," (Strand 270). His students, after many debates on several key topics–whether or not the novel engages in marginalization, misogyny, or even aspects of imperialism; across

both his undergrad and graduate classes that interacted with the text–successfully critiqued and praised the work through their final analyses on the work as both thought-provoking as a narrative on individualism and rebellion in youth, *and* as an example of the cultural appropriation of black culture (mostly in the book's many nods to jazz and blues music, who's descriptions omit any of the real racial struggles that have always been so synonymous with those genres). One student thought that reducing the novel to nothing more than another tale made possible by white privilege left out an important dichotomy between the two main characters, where the stereotypes demonstrated by Kerouac's point of view with Sal are outclassed by Cassady's character Dean, who truly strives for "[a] rich experience and personal self-transformation" (Strand 274). The article gives a fascinating insight as to cultural differences, sometimes even between teacher and student, creating strong, polarizing, and fascinating reactions to just one text.

Of course, *On The Road*'s influence can't be underestimated. Infamous for its spontaneous prose, and highly influential towards more than half a century's worth of road-trip themed novels and films, it stands as an important touchstone of American literature. For all of its strengths, it wasn't without its detractors. Beyond the previously mentioned issues raised by the students of Strand's class at UCT, a Roger Bill from the University of Newfoundland argues that even with Kerouac's self description of being a "religious wanderer," of sorts, "An examination of [Kerouac's] texts and life suggest his travels may also be understood as tourism." In "Traveller or tourist? Jack Kerouac and the Commodification of Culture," Bill goes into detail on why he believes that for all of Kerouac's spiritual motives and personal aspirations for driving cross-country, not just with *On The Road*, but also with his various travels around the world, Bill

states that, “It is my view that Kerouac and his circle of friends behaved in ways that resemble travellers we call tourists.” (Bill 400).

Right at the end of the abstract for the article, Bill writes: “Kerouac's travels were [either] those of the last in a line of wanderers rebelling against conformity and modernization, or a precursor of mobile mass tourism in America.” He goes on to cite several examples of “touristy behavior,” first being obsessive picture taking. He gives the example of one of Kerouac’s travels to Morocco, where Burroughs was also present. Burroughs made a joke about photographing a man praying in the street, calling it a “real American tourist” thing. (Bill 398). Kerouac was never much of a photographer, that was more of Burroughs’ thing, so that doesn’t fit him well. A strong counterexample would be from Kerouac biographer and Beat historian Ann Charters, whom he quotes her saying that for the various trips he took to Mexico–where Burroughs lived for a time–“had two things Kerouac could not easily get in the United States: dope and women," (Bill 401). Bill also references two Kerouac novels, namely *Mexico City Blues* and *Visions of Cody*, both of which allude to him and Neal Cassady having a great time getting high and visiting whorehouses. Kerouac’s use of overtly sexual language in a lot of his work when describing such encounters also reads a lot like the equivalent of a young bachelor visiting Southeast Asia for sex tourism. Bill quotes a section of *On the Road*, where Kerouac describes an experience in Mexico with a whore going somewhere along the lines of “[making] the bed bounce a half-hour,” (Kerouac 236).

Ultimately, while a lot of what Kerouac exhibited in his life and work did portray very tourist-like tendencies, Bill almost changes his opinion at the end of the article, stating:

> The irony in making a case for Kerouac as a precursor for the coming of mass tourism in America is that Kerouac's travels could also be fairly described as an example of

> "anti-tourism," or the search for real as opposed to tourist experiences. Kerouac's quest was a search for the real rather than the fake, and his was a rebellion against the inauthenticity of everyday life in post-World War II America. The irony in that is highlighted by a coincidence in timing.

This coincidence in timing that he talks about goes many different ways–this is after Kerouac's first trip with Cassady that would be somewhat fictionalized in *On The Road*–Bill specifically mentions several major social developments would come to fruition, with the interstate network in the U.S. that would be finalized in the 1950s, to how the first McDonalds would open for business, and how friend of Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg would perform his poem *Howl* to the public for the first time at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 55', (Bill 416). It might be easy to conclude that Kerouac was just a tourist with low aspirations to become a wannabe writer, but I don't believe that to be the case at all. He might have had the now quite outdated social tendencies of the average American man in the 1950s, but he certainly embodied the spirit of freedom that many of us cherish to this day in the country. That, for one, is quite laudable.

In *First Thought: Conversations with Allen Ginsberg*, published by the University of Minnesota Press, journalist Al Aronowitz and the aforementioned Beat writer engage in a series of interviews detailing his life as a writer and prominent figure of the wider movement. If Kerouac was the figurehead of the generation, Ginsberg proudly appointed himself as second-in-command. Known as a very outspoken, vocal, and controversial figure in his day, the mind behind the literary classic *Howl* is laid bare here. The chapter titled "Portrait of a Beat," is an expanded version of Aronowitz's 1959 piece on Ginsberg from the New York Post, taken from a larger series on the Beats written around that time. Ginsberg, for all his talents in the literary world, was also a skilled self-promoter, either through his persona being adapted in many

Beat novels, from Kerouac's *On the Road* to John Clellon Holmes's *Go*, or from his many well-known antics at major events. Described as highly persuasive, Ginsberg was "at his best in conversation," (Aronowitz 6).

One such infamous stunt of Ginsberg's was during a poetry reading in Los Angeles, where he famously completely stripped down naked in response to a heckler in the audience who kept interrupting him with sardonic questions. Ginsberg recalled the event fondly, saying this: "...I had to show [the guy] what I meant in some way that would really get across and a way that would move him. So I pulled my clothes off, which shut him up." (Aronowitz 7). In the article, you get the sense that Ginsberg really believed in what he was doing, that he believed in the power of his words and actions. His influence within the movement was definitely unmistakeable. The piece mentions how famous figures like Kerouac, Ginsberg's partner Peter Orolvsky, writers Paul Bowles or Michael McClure, and the like would all enter and exit Ginsberg's New York apartment at will; often to party, more often to work on writing, and sometimes even to stay the weekend, staying up all night and sleeping into midday. If one wasn't aware of Ginsberg's popularity within that circle, it's been made abundantly clear. While today it's often Kerouac who's portrayed as the face of the Beat Generation, Aronowitz's piece shows that Ginsberg was in fact the one who spent a lot of time in the spotlight.

Even with his literary fame, the faculty and alumni of Columbia University spoke very little of his name after he graduated: "At Columbia, from which he received a degree, Ginsberg is remembered not with reverent silence, perhaps, but usually with silence, and mention of him brings a great shushing of lips from former professors and classmates alike," (Aronowitz 10). One counterpoint to the hush-hush attitude of Ginsberg's alma mater is of a professor of his, named Lionel Trilling. Privately, he thought highly of Ginsberg far after his years as an

undergraduate student, although publicly spoke very little of his former students' proclivities. The article opines that, "...in retrospect, Trilling seems to look upon Ginsberg with a professorial and growing affection," (Aronowitz 10-11). If nothing else, Columbia gave Ginsberg the opportunity to cross paths with both Kerouac and Burroughs, which upon their meeting of course blazed a trail that would lead far past their collective college days. Ginsberg comes across as some kind of neurotic addict poet-savant, described further as the kind of guy who is willing to try out new kinds of acid, or willingly pursue electric-shock therapy, "...just to see what it would do to his mind," (Aronowitz 12). This is all the while also simultaneously being someone with enough prestige to get invited to dozens of countries around the world to present and discuss his works.

Ginsberg's famous work, *Howl* (first published in 1956 with a collection of works titled *Howl and Other Poems*) made history by being the central figure in one of the last obscenity trials in the United States. Coupled along with Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, which was also under the gun in its own trial in Boston just a few years later, both works actually won their respective cases, thus being granted the rights to be published in the U.S., bringing the era of book banning in the country to an end. Ginsberg's victory from the trial in San Francisco, gave way for *Howl* to be more widely accessible to those so inclined to read it. He even made his influences obvious when it came to his most important epic; they're listed right out in annotated form within a 1986 "academic" reprint of the text. All of his heroes are name-dropped: Whitman, Blake, WCW, Artaud, and even his good friend Jack Kerouac.

According to Jeffrey Meyers, Independent Scholar writing for the Penn State Press, Dante Aligheri is notably absent from the aforementioned list. In his article, "Ginsberg's Inferno: Dante and 'Howl'," Meyers finds a lot of interesting allusions to *The Divine Comedy* in

Ginsberg's poem, most notably in its structure. Both works line up fairly well, with the second, third, and fourth (i.e. Footnote to Howl) chapters of the poem making allusions to the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. Characters in the chapters have allusions as well. Moloch, in the second part, makes clear connections to Lucifer in Hell. Carl Solomon, in the third part, who Ginsberg met at a psych ward in 1949, goes through his own form of purgatory when he is committed into an insane asylum six years later (*Howl* is also dedicated to him). Solomon acts as a sort of "Virgilian companion in the Underworld," for Ginsberg (Meyers 90). In the footnotes or the fourth part, nearly every line begins with "Holy!" which brings allusions of paradise. Meyers had this to say as a whole on *Howl*:

> In *Howl*, Ginsberg places his own revolutionary poetry of suffering—his portrayal of outcast homosexuals and drug addicts, the insane and suicidal—in opposition to the traditional values of society. At the same time he uses Dante's scholastic philosophy, with fearful punishments and circles of Hell as the foundation of his own poem, to heighten yet control the personal guilt and terror in his frenzied lamentation.

Meyers adds an important bit of context in the beginning of the article, quoting part of a letter that Ginsberg wrote to Kerouac while he was at Columbia: "I have been reading Dante, which I have found very inspiring." (Meyers 89) Since the letter was written not even ten years prior to the initial publication of *Howl*, the influence is clear. Perhaps Ginsberg found his allusions to be a bit too on the nose and decided not to divulge further, unlike with his other prized influences.

Gerald Alva Miller's, *Understanding William S. Burroughs*, published by the University of South Carolina Press, details Burroughs' origins in the eponymously named first chapter. The oldest of the three main Beats, Burroughs was born in 1914 to a wealthy family in St. Louis, MI. Burroughs quickly became a black sheep in his family, subjected to ridicule by the men in his

family, and psychological torture and even an instance of rape by the women. He went to high school in New Mexico, and eventually got into Harvard and earned an arts degree. He discovered his homosexuality during his travels to NYC while in university, and picked up a drug addiction not long after. He later went to Columbia to study anthropology, where he would meet both Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, completing the Beat trifecta. Burroughs would never finish the degree at Columbia, but his studies there influenced his first three novels, being *Junky*, *Queer,* and *The Yage Letters*. He also had a brief stint in Vienna, where he studied medicine. In a rather out of character move, he also married a Jewish woman who was trying to escape Nazi Germany, in order for her to get safely to the U.S. (Miller 3-5).

Miller's text continues with how the Beats were formed, along with details on the first major legal entanglement within the group: the murder of David Kammerrer by Lucien Carr. Both Burroughs and Kerouac were arrested as accomplices, however Burroughs was quickly bailed out by his family, and Kerouac married his girlfriend Edie Parker so her parents could bail him out (Kerouac's family refused to do so). Parker had previously lived with a roommate named Joan Vollmer, which would later become Burroughs' S.O. They would have a son together, Burroughs III. She famously would be shot by Burroughs in their home in Mexico City due to a "drunken game of William Tell," where he missed shooting a glass cup on her head, killing her. He had little legal recourse for his actions, only getting a two-year suspended sentence, but the killing had a profound impact on his life and work. Before and after this event, Miller's writings paint a picture of Burroughs going any which way around the country. He would find himself, and later on with Joan and his son, in Chicago, New Mexico, Texas, and New Orleans, supporting himself and them with all kinds of work, from working on a farm and even growing pot, later fleeing from the authorities due to it (Miller 6-7). Later on he would travel to Tangiers,

now a former international zone that resides in Morocco. Without much in the way of social restrictions or legal ramifications for what would then be considered taboo behavior, Burroughs would flourish there.

His experiences in Tangiers would undoubtedly lead to some of his finest literary works. It was there in fact, that his opus, *Naked Lunch*, was written (or more accurately, cut-up). Miller would describe Burroughs' time during the writing of *Naked Lunch* as follows:

> Burroughs made his literary breakthrough as he churned out hundreds of pages that would come to be called the "Word Hoard," from which Burroughs would cull his breakthrough novel. Burroughs worked in a frenzied manner, pouring out pages and tossing them around the room, where they lay in a chaotic pile on the floor. He eventually convinced Ginsberg and Kerouac to visit him in Tangier, and the two began to realize the brilliance of the work that was scattered about the room. Kerouac ended up staying with Burroughs, typing up and somewhat organizing the literary disarray.

Kerouac would also provide the name for the book to Burroughs, and later it would initially be released in France. Much like Ginsberg and *Howl*, Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* would see similar pushback in its importing to the United States, specifically in Massachusetts, a state that at the time had pretty draconian laws regarding obscene literary material. After another landmark victory, both Ginsberg and Burroughs would help "usher in a new era of free literary expression," (Miller 8). If not for the Beats, there could've possibly been more attempts at literary censorship by the government past the 1950s.

Something less spoken about in relation to Burroughs was his fascination with photography, and more importantly how it worked in tandem with his writing process. Eric Banks, Director of the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU, and contributor to

Princeton University's Art Museum *Aperture* journal, has a feature on Burroughs and his work in photography. Titled "William S. Burroughs: Still Shots," Banks describes that photographs "possessed peculiar powers," for the author. Burroughs apparently had his walls plastered in photos during the writing process of Naked Lunch, which "worked so well, that he's said to have done the same when he was hard at work on other novels," (Banks 80). He didn't only take abstract photographs for the sake of artistry or literary inspiration, he also took photos of his close friends and lovers, particularly during his time in Europe. Interestingly, a famous portrait of a young Allen Ginsberg, one of him on an East Village rooftop, was taken by Burroughs (Banks 80). Burroughs work in photography mirrors a lot of his experimentation with the cut-up method in his writing. Burroughs would explain his work with photography in further detail in a book called *The Third Mind*, released in 1978, and co-written with artist and friend Brion Gysin. Burroughs finds photography and writing for him to be incredibly similar: "Street shots from movie or still cameras are by the unpredictable factors of passersby and juxtaposition cut-ups. Photographers will tell you that often their best shots are accidents... writers will tell you the same."

While not directly associated with the Beat Generation in their heyday, Charles Bukowski might be one of few to have the unique honor of being an outsider to a movement that embraced those very types. The Buk wasn't quite Beat enough to be Beat, nor was he mainstream enough to be a household name. As such, he existed for the most part in a league of his own, just about at the bottom of the ranks. He himself did not think he was a Beat, but with his aptitude for crafting vivid depictions of the seedy underbelly of L.A.,–where he lived for much of his life–teeming with wretched characters, each more unflinchingly realistic than the last, it's safe to say that he was at least Beat-adjacent. He did not stray away from sensitive material in his work by any

stretch of the imagination. Much like Burroughs, Kerouac, or Ginsberg, he wrote on what he witnessed and experienced in his own life.

In the years since his passing in 1994, Bukowski has re-emerged as a brand of sorts. Gaston Franssen, writing for the Amsterdam University Press with his article, "Allegories of Branding: How to Successfully Fail Charles Bukowski," notices a contradiction to his character that very well has existed before his death, that being of the "successful loser," (Franssen 131). While being relegated as an outsider for much of his life, Bukowski did find great success in his work, enough that he was able to make a living off of his poems of dirty realism. This recent trend of the "Bukowskian brand," so to speak, exhibits a serious disconnect between what Bukowski is posthumously today versus what the author stood for in his lifetime. Franssen specifically points out a common phrase, "What would Bukowski do?" that is so commonly adorned on clothing and uttered by many a hipster. This phenomenon is summarized quite succinctly: "...the phrase functions as an indicator of a specific attitude, or mode of being – in other words, of a lifestyle. 'Bukowski' has become a successful brand," (Franssen 132).

This idea of Buk becoming a kind of brand or lifestyle is completely incongruous to his ethos. Before anything else, it's incredibly unlikely that if he were alive he would sell off his image for the sake of merchandise or cheap advertising. Beyond that, his disinterest in anything mainstream, or his astute unwillingness to conform would sound the alarm at the sight of any attempts to make him a brand. Franssen states that, "On closer inspection, the quintessential Bukowskian lifestyle appears to be deeply at odds with the process of branding," (132). Having such an imbalance makes such current attempts at profiting off of his personality look ridiculous. Unlike Ginsberg, for example, who very much had control over his image during his lifetime, being outspoken enough to stand above whatever critics that trashed him, Bukowski in his

eternal indifference never cared much for his self-image at all (This, assumedly, is part of the charm, and what makes his persona so valuable today). Bukowski's mantra of "Don't try," which is engraved on his tombstone, to him was his number one rule in life to follow. Without the man to embody the image, his personal words of wisdom have been distilled into cheap memorabilia.

Franssen dives deeper into the author's backstory to clearly define what Bukowski was, and how he came to be who he lives on as, before circling around to the conclusion of what Bukowski has now become. Amsterdam (the city from where this article originates) is where a pub named "Bar Bukowski" resides, much to the chagrin of Franssen. The bar really has the veneer of only the most marketable Buk traits: alcohol and sex (the drinks are named "Wild Blondes," for example). Franssen describes this nightmarish place best in the last paragraph of page 16:

> Bar Bukowski presents its customers with a gentrified Bukowski – a branded author that has been adapted to meet the demands of the creative urban middle class. By doing so, it cannot help but fail the author: popular as the bar may be, it is unlikely that Bukowski, upon entering the establishment, would have smiled approvingly. Paradoxically, it is much more likely that he would have not felt at home in such a place.

For such a defining figure in underground poetry and literature, it's a shame to see Bukowski's likeness and identity watered down for the masses in such a tasteless manner. While he wasn't highly respected in many literary circles, if any at all, the Buk's absolute commitment to his values is still commendable nonetheless. Leaving the current cultural interpretation of the man up to those running novelty bars and selling merch likely is the last thing Charles would have wanted.

The Beat Generation might exist on its own today as a relic of another time, having had their heyday even before hippies were really a thing, now close to seventy years ago. Regardless of age, the influence that era had on art and culture cannot be understated. Literature, music, modern art, cinema; all of which have seen serious shifts in the last half-century or so due to the Beats. What started with just three wide-eyed bohemians in college in the 1940s grew to something of seismic proportions by the late 60s. Now that the three founding members have all passed for quite some time, the power retrospect gives a lot of insight as to just how widespread their reach was. Touching artists and creatives from around the world, there just hasn't been such a challenging, unique, and boundary-pushing movement since. All hail the beats.

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