

“Dragging Themselves Through the Negro Streets at Dawn”: The Influence of African American
Culture on the Beats

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: African American Cultural Influence on the Beats.....	14
Chapter Two: Influence of Blues on the Beats.....	43
Chapter Three: Influence of Jazz on the Beats.....	68
Conclusion.....	103
Works Cited.....	108

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Introduction

Following its victory in the Second World War, America paradoxically faced a period of prosperity and peace coupled with many underlying insecurities and tensions. There was a great deal of anxiety caused by the advent of the atom bomb, the great destruction of Europe during the war, and the growing fear of Soviet aggression. Just as there had been an effort to unite Americans against the earlier threats of German and Japanese hostility, Americans attempted to create a united front in the United States to combat the growing fear of Communism throughout the world. Members of the American middle class felt tremendous pressure to conform to mainstream culture, and this push toward homogeneity further ostracized those on the margins of society, such as African Americans. Many African Americans who fought for civil rights, such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka, were branded as Communists. Along with a growing sense of conformity, technological advances, increased nationalism and economic growth helped to strengthen the middle class in the United States. This provided the middle class with increased wealth and a strong sense of identity. The Beats, reacting to society's emphasis on homogeneity, created a counter culture literary movement that was strongly influenced by African American culture, especially the uniquely African American genres of music: blues and jazz. The incorporation of African American traditions by the Beats in turn created a rich multi-cultural form of American literature that resulted in the inclusion of a myriad of voices in mainstream discourse, voices that had hitherto been silenced by mainstream society.

The Beats were a literary group that gained recognition in the 1950s for their counter-cultural style and message. They heavily influenced the culture of the 1960s and were instrumental in the rise of Hippy movement. Some claim that the Hippy movement was derived from the Beats. However, the Beats generally sought to disassociate themselves from the former's political agenda and radical methods. Part of the association of the Beats with future

counter-cultural movements, such as the Hippies of the 1960s and later the Punk movement of the 1970s and 1980s, is due to the loose definition of the Beats. There are three central authors associated with the Beat movement: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. Although the movement expanded to encompass a variety of authors, making it difficult to definitively categorize the movement, these three central figures represent the ideals of the Beat movement.

The three founding members of the Beats met at Columbia University in New York in the 1950s. The great diversity which was later reflected in the Beat's multi-cultural community is seen in the diversity of these three men. Kerouac came from a Northern working class family. Burroughs' family was a wealthy and established American family. Ginsberg was the son of a school teacher. This diversity is perhaps most visible through Kerouac and Ginsberg because they were able to have a close friendship despite their disparate backgrounds. Their friendship was based on their writing and the turmoil of the time. Kerouac came from a Franco-Canadian Catholic family and spent most of his childhood with French as his first language. He eventually received a football scholarship to Columbia. Ginsberg, on the other hand, was raised in a Jewish household where his father was a poet and school teacher and his mother was a hospitalized schizophrenic during most of his childhood. Despite their apparent different backgrounds, Kerouac says he found in Ginsberg "a kindred absorption with identity, dramatic meaning, classic unity, and immortality" (qtd. in Theado 17). This bond is based on friendship, on a shared sense of confusion with life, and a search for identity, much in the same way that the Beats were able to identify with African Americans despite almost completely different cultural backgrounds.

In stark contrast to their counter cultural nature, the Beats actually met at the heart of mainstream culture in an academic setting rather than on the streets of an African American neighborhood or jazz club as one might expect. Kerouac and Ginsberg both attended Columbia University, while the Harvard educated Burroughs simply spent time on campus. Their time at Columbia was short; after a year they traded their dormitories for tenement rooms in the African American neighborhoods of New York City. These three men sought to embrace the lifestyle of those outside of mainstream society, even dropping out of college to pursue their writing. This lifestyle focused on living for the moment and ignoring societal responsibilities and constraints. This reckless lifestyle is typified by Kerouac's association with the stabbing of David Kammerer by Lucien Carr. Kerouac was even briefly detained by the authorities (Theado 18). The Beats' association with the underground elements of society included experimenting with a variety of drugs ranging from marijuana and benzedrine to more dangerous drugs such as heroin and hallucinogens. These same drugs were also common in African American jazz and blues cultures. While the drug culture brought the Beats closer to African Americans, the Beats were also encouraged to further explore marginalized cultures by their friend Neal Cassady. Cassady was familiar and at home with African Americans and other cultural groups because he lived in the slums of Denver, following his homeless, alcoholic father and drifting through the city's multi-cultural neighborhoods. Not only was he familiar with marginalized cultures, but he also demonstrated his waywardness by pursuing deviant adventures and ignoring the law. He was infamous for having "stolen five hundred cars and been to bed with five hundred women by the time he was eighteen" (Theado 19). Cassady was seen as the blues' stereotypical image of the hyper-masculine character who followed his desires, in much the same way that African Americans freed themselves from inhibitions. The Beats searched for a true self in a number of

sources ranging from Romantic authors such as William Blake to African Americans. The common quality was a desire to throw off the constraints of society in order to find a pure, uninhibited self. Unfortunately, with the removal of inhibitions, the Beats wandered into dangerous and murky territory, which became evident through trouble with the law and destructive addictions. At the root of their pitfalls, however, there was desire to reach an authentic element of humanity.

In efforts to find their identity, the Beats sought Blake-like visions and revelations, but rather than seeking divine revelations, they turned to drugs and hedonism for these experiences. In addition, the Beat writers used spiritual terminology and concepts from various traditions (Catholicism, Judaism, and Buddhism) to describe their spiritual or personal journeys. While not concerned with orthodoxy, the Beats were very religious, which also was a connection to the African American culture that respected religion. The spirituality of African Americans was filled with syncretism, featuring a mixture of African folk religions along with the adoption of Christianity during slavery. The Beats were able to identify with a similar mixture of religious beliefs. They embraced both Western and non-Western religions, such as Eastern religions.

As a result of their radical lifestyle, the Beats are often associated with obscenity rather than scripture. However, Kerouac argues that the term *Beat* has a strong religious connection to the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5). Matt Theado suggest in *Understanding Jack Kerouac* that Kerouac “also found universal spiritual connotations in the term *beat*, especially as it implied the beatitudes and Kerouac’s strong sense of humankind’s essential unity” (23). When asked on the Johnny Carson show what the term *Beat* meant, Kerouac replied that it simply meant “sympathy.” The concept of sympathy appears in the Beatitudes with Jesus blessing the merciful and peace makers and urging His followers not to

judge. On William F. Buckley's television program, Kerouac again connected Beat with his faith in an effort to dispel the radical associations attached to the Beats, saying, "Being a Catholic, I believe in order, tenderness, and piety" (qtd. in Theado 25). Rather than connecting the essence of Beat with a radical counter-cultural doctrine against society, Kerouac instead relates it to his Catholic faith in simple terms. Similar to the message of Christ on from the Sermon on the Mount regarding the meek, Kerouac is interested in the downtrodden of society, people like the hard-working Neal Cassady and especially African Americans who, to Kerouac, represent the simple working class American, as well as the "salt of the earth." The admiration for the common working man was unfortunately lost as the movement evolved into the Hippy movement and subsequently into Beatniks. The Beats were not hyper-political or overly idealistic. They were interested in humanity at its most basic level. The search for the common man led the Beats to African Americans and others on the margins of society. They began to incorporate these sub-cultures into their own with a sense of awe and respect as they created a multicultural body of literature that they believed would be the writing of the future. The Beats, in their attempts to write about and use a different discourse, admired marginalized groups and adopted their discourse.

The inventive nature of African American culture made it particularly attractive to the Beats. A prominent creative outlet for African Americans was music, which the Beats incorporated into their writings. The uniquely African American and rapidly evolving jazz movement found in cities throughout America was especially influential on Beat writing. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs frequented jazz clubs and there interacted with many African American musicians. While these night spots were the primary locations intended for experiencing jazz, it was hardly limited to only these clubs. Kerouac was actually mentored by a

jazz saxophone player during his time as a merchant marine. One of the most important encounters with jazz for Kerouac occurred at a show featuring Charlie Parker, a legendary jazz musician who specialized in the spontaneous form of jazz called Bebop. Kerouac saw Parker perform in San Francisco at least once. There is evidence that he once met Parker, which provides a significant connection between the Beat writer and jazz musician. Whether or not the two had a chance to discuss jazz and its relation to poetry, Kerouac was certainly able to recognize a connection between prose and the Bebop method of Charlie Parker. He then incorporated the Bebop music philosophy into his theory of writing, a theory he called spontaneous prose. Kerouac viewed himself as following in the jazz tradition, continuing Charlie Parker's legacy. Jazz technique is an essential and defining element of Kerouac's poetry. As he explains in the preface to *Mexico City Blues*: "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday" (i). Kerouac's jazz poetry would serve as inspiration to Ginsberg and other Beat writers. Kerouac was able to filter the music of bop musicians into his poetry. This influenced both African American authors and popular musicians such as Bob Dylan.

Jazz was not the only element of African American expression the Beats incorporated into their writing. While jazz influenced the style and spontaneous nature of Beat writing, the actual language of Beat poetry relied on the influence of the unique and innovative language found in the blues. The blues is an older form of African American music with origins in slave songs that relies more on vocals than on instruments. The language in the blues consists of bringing new meaning to existing words, often creating multiple and sometimes reversals of meaning, which is referred to as *signifying*. As a result of *signifying*, blues lyrics display much of the African American argot. An obvious influence of the blues on the Beats is seen in the

common use of the blues argot in Beat writing. The Beats were no longer satisfied with one prescribed system of language determined by society, but instead found the language of African Americans to be more authentic. The Beats did not completely abandon traditional language, but instead incorporated the language of African Americans as well as other cultural groups into their traditional language. This is evident in their use of slang, changing the spelling of words to fit their purposes and ignoring punctuation to create writing that reflects a recreation in English of the sound and syntax of a different discourse, a process J.M. Coetzee calls “transfer”—“meaning the rendering of foreign speech in an English stylistically marked to remind the reader of the foreign original” (117). This personal form included unorthodox language and questionable subject matter in Beat writing.

This counter-discourse resulted in difficulty finding success in the mainstream market. Even as the Beats distanced themselves from society to inhabit the margins, they still made efforts to find acceptance in the society through publication. However, because of the use of their counter-cultural devices and themes, many of the writers had difficulty being published. Much like their African American counter parts, they were relegated to the margins and, in a sense, temporarily silenced. Kerouac struggled for over seven years to find a publisher for his novel, *On the Road*. Once the manuscript was accepted by Viking Press, he was forced to make changes, such as adding punctuation and changing the names of characters so that they might appear more fictitious. After waiting close to a decade for recognition, the Beats enjoyed great success in the late 1950s with the publication of Ginsberg’s *Howl* in 1956 and Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 1957. *On the Road* was well received, earning a place on the best seller lists. Theado explains that the immediate success of *On the Road* was due to its association with the “Beat Generation.” The public became fascinated by the Beats’ sensational real life stories (Theado

23). The sudden mainstream success of the Beats in turn allowed them to influence a wide audience, and their counter-cultural lifestyle featured in the book appealed to those on the margins of society, such as African Americans. Their expanding influence resulted in not only African American culture influencing the Beats, but also African American literature finding encouragement from the Beats. A prominent example of this reciprocal influence is Amiri Baraka, formerly known as Leroy Jones, a founder of the Black Arts Movement, who radically changed the direction of African American literature by making it more Afro-centric. Baraka was closely associated with the Beats. He was even considered to be a member of the Beat community when he lived in Greenwich Village. His writing career began while living in Greenwich Village, and he received support for his writing from Allen Ginsberg. Even after Baraka left the Beats to explore his career as an African American writer, Ginsberg continued to both promote and encourage him.

However, the influence of the Beats on African American culture is only minimal in comparison to the creative debt the Beats owe to African American culture. Beyond just music, other elements of African American culture were very influential on the Beats. Just as oral performance is a central element of African American literature, so poetry readings are an essential part of Beat culture. For example, large gatherings for public readings of poems, such as Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in San Francisco, helped to define the Beats. In these readings, the Beats explored feelings of marginalization, which are central to the African American experience. Another element of African American culture that influenced the Beats is the way African Americans experienced music. African American culture has a deep connection with music as a form of expression. In much the same way that African American authors were influenced by the blues tradition, so were the Beats, although it arrived through Bebop, a distant

ancestor of the blues and the hip form of jazz in the 1940s through the 1960s. The blues tradition was invaluable to the Beats because it allowed them to capture the spirit of jazz in an accessible language. This fast paced and spontaneous writing was able to capture the marginalized voices that typically would have been left silent.

As an African-American Beat, Amiri Baraka is in a unique position to analyze both blues and jazz. He offers helpful insights into racial relations within the Beat community in New York in his letters and essays. Most importantly, Baraka also focuses on the importance of music to African Americans. In fact, he became famous for writing jazz reviews and later for his work on African American music. In *Blues People*, he explains the importance of music, blues in particular, to African American culture. Baraka notes the evolution of African American music from the music of Africa to its Americanization into work songs then into the blues, eventually jazz, and even more recently Hip Hop. Baraka explains that this evolution is vital to African American music and also is reflective of changes within American culture. This reflective quality makes it possible to learn about the African American culture from music. He argues it was through music that African Americans were able to communicate and express their message, pointing out the blues' ability to link aspects of the African American community together by a common language and culture. Baraka also shows the socio-economic aspects of the blues reflected in the restlessness of African Americans as they traveled throughout the United States during reconstruction. Music plays a prominent role in African American culture, and a critical understanding of it is important for identifying elements of African American culture in the Beats as their prose was influenced by African American music.

To create a critical frame for analyzing African American discourse found in Beat literature, it is helpful to use African-American criticism, especially the critical theories of Henry

Louis Gates, Jr. in his work *The Signifying Monkey*. It is necessary to understand African American culture and discourse in order to understand both their appeal and its adoption by the Beats. Beat writers frequently mention *signifying*, showing that they understood this quality of African American discourse. Along with Gates, the critical theories proposed in Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* are useful in analyzing the blues culture in African American literature, particularly the unique space for discourse it creates by adopting non-traditional discourse. The framework of African American culture is helpful in order to analyze the elements that appear within Beat literature. As the Beats identified with marginalized groups, they began to adopt some of others' unique uses of language in their writing and explored new spaces to express themselves; as a result, this makes the theory of discourse as defined by Michel Foucault relevant.

Stephen Slemon, in his "Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter-Discourse/Post-Colonial Writing," succinctly explains Foucault's "discourse" as the

name for that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the field of 'truth' through the imposition of specific knowledges, disciplines, and values. Discourse, in other words, is a 'complex of signs and practices which organises social existence and social reproduction, . . . and [which] . . . works to constitute 'reality' not only for the objects it appears passively to represent but also for the subjects who form the coherent interpretive community upon which it depends. (6)

In the Foucauldian sense, discourse includes power relations and hierarchical structures in society that sanction particular ideologies, viewpoints, values, and even ways of speaking/writing at the expense of others that are marginalized or considered inferior. By identifying with

marginalized groups and creating independent identities through a new discourse that deviated from mainstream discursive structures, the Beats created what Richard Terdiman terms counter discourse: “the present and scandalous trace of an historical potentiality for difference which . . . inherently situate[s] [itself] as 'other' to a dominant discourse which by definition attempts to exclude heterogeneity from the domain of utterance and is thus functionally incapable of even conceiving the possibility of discursive opposition or resistance to it” (11). Albeit different, this counter-discourse ironically expanded and enriched mainstream discourse, thus creating new modes of language use. One may even argue that the mere act of rejecting mainstream discourse and identifying with a marginalized group to create a counter-discourse is subversive.

This thesis argues that this counter-discourse is a result of the Beats’ interaction with African American culture and music. Chapter one focuses on this interaction with African American culture and racial politics. This chapter analyzes the interaction between the Beats and African Americans, especially prominent African Americans, such as Amiri Baraka and Ted Joans. Chapter Two analyzes the blues’ culture and its influence on African American culture and the Beats. Finally, Chapter Three addresses the importance of jazz to African American culture and its influence on the Beats, especially in relation to Kerouac because he saw himself as a “jazz poet” and sought to incorporate the tenets of Charlie Parker’s jazz into his prose theory.

The Beats, despite coming from their white perspective, were able to embrace a variety of marginalized groups in America in their effort to create a counter-cultural movement. They particularly identified with and borrowed from African Americans, thus influencing African American literature. This multi-cultural, rich Beat literature went against the academic community at the time but was eventually able to enjoy great success which then influenced

American literature. The success of the Beat movement made it possible for new voices of discourse to be heard in American literature. The inclusion of a variety of voices is important for American literature because of the diverse nature of American culture. Silencing or marginalizing these voices presents an inaccurate view of the landscape of American culture. While these voices may at first seem as though they are competing, the many voices lead to sense of community when allowed free expression. The Beats were at times insensitive and even misinterpreted marginalized groups, yet underlying Beat literature there is a genuine desire to come to a better understanding of humanity. The counter-culture literary movement of the Beats, influenced by African American culture, was a significant step in moving toward a multi-cultural and polyphonic canon of American literature.

Chapter One: African American Cultural Influence on the Beats

African American culture is a key element of the Beat identity because it offered a new space for the Beats to explore and create their own identity. The popular form of jazz made African Americans particularly fascinating to the Beats. The quality and depth of expression found within blues and jazz are notable given the societal limitations with which African Americans were forced to grapple. African Americans held a unique place in American society for their ability to defy the oppression of society and to create a counter-mainstream and thriving culture in the margins of society. As outsiders to African American culture, the Beats tended to romanticize this culture at times in order to fit their needs. As the Beats incorporated elements of African American culture into their identity, they also contributed to the evolving African American culture as it progressed into the Civil Rights Movement. While the American cultural scene was torn by racial tensions as a result of civil rights activism, the Beats and African Americans were merging to create a literature that reflected not just one culture but attempted to capture the diversity found in America.

The racially diverse community of Greenwich Village in New York, formed and shaped by Kerouac and his contemporaries, contributed to the Beat view of African Americans. While the rest of the country was polarized racially, there was a surprisingly tolerant atmosphere within Greenwich Village. It was from within this New York community that the Black Arts Movement originated with the influential writer, Amiri Baraka, who began his career there. John Gennari notes in his article, "Baraka's Bohemian Blues," that Greenwich Village served as "a kind of downtown Harlem Renaissance on the Lower East Side, with the Umbra writer's collective, Freedomways magazine, La MaMa Experimental Theater, and the Negro Ensemble Company foreshadowing the full flowering of the Black Arts Movement uptown" (254). There is a wealth of new literature that comes from the Greenwich Village Beats, which can be

attributed to the multi-cultural composure of the community. Jon Panish, author of “Kerouac’s The Subterraneans: A Study of ‘Romantic Primitivism,’” explains that the 1950s were important for racial change. Panish states, “The amount and vitality of both the white and black literary work with these materials during this decade combined with the proximity of this period to the succeeding boom in white and black cultural interaction has prompted cultural historians to speculate about this decade’s unique characteristics” (108). In the early 1950s, the Beats began to interact with outside cultures in new ways. People who shared interests in artistic expression brought cultural groups together. Amiri Baraka, in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, describes the racial structure of the Village, saying, “I could see the young white boys and girls in their pronouncement of disillusion with a ‘removal’ from society as being related to the black experience. That made us colleagues of the spirit” (132). A common disillusionment with American society was uniting people across cultural boundaries. Some whites, such as the Beats, experienced alienation from society; they were able to identify personally with African Americans. Baraka recognizes this shared frustration with society and its ability to create a community of respect. The Beats, in their search for community within a society that was becoming increasingly alienated, created an environment that fostered cross cultural discourse, which is reflected in their literature.

By examining the Greenwich Village Beat community, one can gain insights into the often confusing and misinterpreted views held by the Beats. Both Kerouac and Ginsberg acted as guides for the Beat community in New York. Their friendships extended beyond racial lines, a testimony to the progressiveness of the Beats. An example of this cross cultural mentorship is the poet Ted Joans, who is considered to be a Beat writer. Robert Lee, in his article “Black Beat: Performing Ted Joans,” provides a telling description of Joans’s relationship with Kerouac:

“Joans speaks with the greatest affection of the poetry and jazz interests that, from the outset, brought him and Kerouac into a close, valued friendship. Kerouac, according to the Nicosia interview, even features as the nice paradox of ‘the white hipster showing the black one around Harlem’” (qtd. in Lee 122). Joans’s image of Kerouac shows an unusual cultural interaction because one would expect Joans to guide Kerouac through the traditionally African American neighborhood. Kerouac, instead, is the one at home in African American Harlem. Once again it seems that Kerouac is extremely knowledgeable about African American culture. The roles for these two men are not determined by race, but instead by the progressive nature of the Beat community that allows them to cross boundaries and take on new roles in a community that is striving to overcome racial polarization.

Beyond Kerouac contributing to Joans’s familiarity with Harlem, Kerouac and Joans also formed a connection through creative outlets. Kerouac and Joans find a shared interest in the arts, particularly Jazz from the African American community, and poetry likely influenced by traditional white poets. The fact that Kerouac, a white man, and Joans, an African American, are able to enjoy Jazz together suggests that Kerouac’s knowledge of jazz was authentic and not simply that of a white man looking from the outside. Joans, in his poem, “The Sermon,” provides a description of Hipsters and shows the African American influence on hip culture: “If you wish to be a sweet child of godlike intelligence, DIG JAZZ, / support its musicians, go to all the jazz concerts / buy or cop Dixieland as well as Bop” (94). Joans suggests that if one wishes to learn about African American culture, he should approach it through music. Kerouac does seem to follow Joans’s instructions.

Ginsberg also served as a mentor to African Americans in the Greenwich Village Beat community, including Joans and, most famously, Amiri Baraka. In fact, Ginsberg served as

Baraka's initial connection to the Beat community. It was Ginsberg who welcomed Baraka to the community. In his essay, "'Howl' and Hail," Amiri Baraka describes his journey to becoming a Beat, which began when he was discharged from the U. S. Air Force for being "a commie Buddhist colored guy, busted for books and an alarming hostility to dumbness" (20). Upon leaving the Air Force, he explains that "we shot off in ecstasy to the City, the Apple, New York, Bohemia, The Village, to try out our vicious learning on those we were sure wd dig how heavy we had got" (20). Within "The Village," the Beat movement that Kerouac and Ginsberg founded was generating acclaim in the late 1950s and also reaching beyond racial boundaries. Baraka set out for the Greenwich Village with the expectation of a community without racial constraints. This yearning was fulfilled. He describes his reception in Greenwich Village: "And it was Howl again. Plus Allen Polite and his cohorts, Cunningham, Cage, Charlip, Czernovitch, RhBlythe, Suzuki, Zen, gals in black stockings, Yeats, Poetry Poetry Poerty, that brought us panting into the Village. 1st crib 104 E. 3rd St, \$28 a month 3 rms no heat, my mother wept" (20). The Beat community in Greenwich Village served as a refuge for anyone rejected by society. Baraka's reference to his mother weeping suggests that not all African Americans had accepted the merging of cultures, but Baraka embraces the melding of cultures. Baraka's descriptions of Greenwich Village consistently describe a welcoming atmosphere. This willingness to accept people from all cultures into their community is reflected in Beat writing as well. In their writing, the Beats often included interaction with marginalized groups. With the transient nature of the Beat lifestyle (they were known for their frequent travels throughout the country), the Beats were taking in more cultures than just those they found by visiting New York.

In fact, Baraka's interaction with the Beats began even before he stepped foot in Greenwich Village. Baraka first corresponded with Ginsberg in an unusual method: "[he wrote] Allen on a piece of toilet paper to Git Le Coeur asking was he for real. He [Ginsberg] answered on French toilet paper, which is better for writing, that he was tired of being Allen Ginsberg. And sent a broad registration of poetry for the new magazine YUGEN. And that began some forty years of hookup" ("Howl' and Hail" 21). Baraka derived the title for his magazine YUGEN, which has Japanese origins, while exploring Buddhism with his Jewish wife in New York. Despite their racial differences, the two writers were able to fuse a relationship that spanned across many cultures. Ginsberg reached out to the younger Baraka, expressing his dissatisfaction with life and contributing to Baraka's magazine, which no doubt was a boost to its popularity. Ginsberg's willingness to allow his work to be published in an African American magazine further reveals the post-segregation mindset that he possessed. By continuing to correspond with Baraka, Ginsberg was able to foster Baraka's creative ability and also promote Baraka's personal projects.

Baraka readily gives credit to Ginsberg for being a significant influence on his career. In an interview with Debra Edwards, Baraka is asked if he considers Ginsberg a teacher, to which he responds, "Yeah, he was, actually, a good teacher" (154). By affirming Ginsberg as a teacher, Baraka is essentially confirming the Beats' contribution to the Black Arts Movement. This testifies to the contributions by the Beats toward a more multicultural literary environment. Ginsberg's role as a teacher is often reinforced by Baraka in conversations: "Plus talking to Allen about Western poetry was always part of a course" ("Howl' and Hail" 21). Ginsberg, much like Kerouac with Joans, guided Baraka through classical literature, sometimes even literally taking him to meet legendary writers. Baraka details, "[a course] On Blake, Smart,

Rimbaud, the troubadours, we visited Pound and he apologized for being anti-Semitic, at least Allen heard that, that crazy motherfucker. William Carlos Wms funeral, we trooped over for” (“Howl’ and Hail” 21). Ginsberg introduced Amiri Baraka to prominent and established writers, whom Baraka ordinarily would not have been able to meet. By including Baraka, Ginsberg demonstrated that he was able to relate to Baraka through their shared struggles and interests, regardless of racial differences. This shared sense of equality is visible in the way that Baraka describes his friendship with Ginsberg: “For all our endless contention, often loud and accompanied by contrasting histrionics, we remained, in many ways, comrades in and of the word, partisans of consciousness” (“Howl’ and Hail” 22). Eventually, the two drifted apart ideologically as Baraka became more involved with Black Nationalism. However, the bond that they formed within the Beat culture did not diminish. This was simply because Ginsberg had influenced Baraka so strongly on a foundational level. Their ideologies did diverge as Ginsberg continued to promote peaceful resistance, while Barak advocated more violent means, especially after the death of Malcolm X. Despite their differences, the two writers remained in contact as they went separate ways.

The mentor-like relationship between Ginsberg and Baraka was possible because of the cultural values that they both shared. Ginsberg and Baraka shared a frustration with American society and desired to resist it in their writing and in their lifestyle. Upon Ginsberg’s death in 1997, Baraka explains that the mutual ideology of resistance to an oppressive culture was an important part of his friendship with Ginsberg:

What we uphold is the defiance and resistance of ‘Moloch,’ in the collective tongue of the multinational multi cultural American tongue and voice. What it was I first dug in *Howl*. And that great line from *America*. ‘America go fuck

yourself with yr atom Bomb.' Now that's poetry! And for this sentiment, and stance, and revolutionary democratic practice, part of revolutionary art for cultural revolution. ("Howl and Hail" 23)

In Ginsberg's *Howl*, the verses addressed to Moloch condemn America and its imperialism. Baraka acknowledges the counter-culture and revolutionary nature of Ginsberg's work. The Beats were not simply rebelling against petty bourgeoisie woes, but were instead attempting to make an impact on the culture. To Baraka, there is depth and meaning behind the words in Ginsberg's famous poems. This probably only was enhanced by the lifestyle of boldness in which Ginsberg was engaged. The fifties and sixties were a tumultuous time for African Americans as they were engaged in the Civil Rights struggle. Ginsberg was an active participant in the movement. Baraka recounts a public reading together during this time: "that historic trek, reading on the campus, refused from all the buildings" ("Howl' and Hail" 21). In addition to this connection during the Civil Rights Movement, Baraka's admiration for Ginsberg's views extend beyond just social issues, and ultimately relate to language. Ginsberg's unique and multi-cultural understanding of language goes against mainstream culture because of his willingness to embrace voices in the margins with unique writing and spelling strategies. Multi-cultural groups also influenced the subject matter of Ginsberg's poetry. Within Ginsberg's poetry, social issues are examined and engaged. His poetry explores the frustrations of his generation especially with society's unwillingness to accept members of all segments of society. Baraka writes about Allen Ginsberg's use of language to combat oppression and how it was able to bring groups together around the cause of fighting injustice: "And for this, this we cd bring the San Francisco School, the Beats, Black Mountain, O'Hara and the New Yorkers together to do battle against the zombies of Euroformalism, neo colonial death verse was where our deepest comradeship was

formed” (“‘Howl’ and Hail” 22). The Beats identify not with their European heritage, but instead with those outside of this tradition. Their feeling of separation from the European tradition would inspire them to try techniques from different cultures. Baraka, who often used language and poetry as a “weapon,” shows the use of literature across race for similar purposes. The Beats shared a common message in their writing with those who were struggling for freedom. This ability to sympathize with the struggle of marginalized groups demonstrates the Beatitude vision from Matthew 5, to which Kerouac sought to connect the Beats.

There were also cross cultural exchanges taking place outside of a political realm. For example, John Gennari, in his article “Baraka’s Bohemian Blues,” details a cross cultural moment for Ginsberg, “I met Langston Hughes at LeRoi Jone’s party one night when Ornette Coleman was playing music and everyone was dancing. That’s the only time I met Langston Hughes. In ’59 or ’60. A great touching moment in history. When Black Mountain, Beatniks, the Abstract Expressionists, the freedom jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, all met in one room” (254). This moment is tremendous for the mixture of cultures within the same room and Ginsberg’s recognition of African American writers. Unfortunately, this is a rare moment of interaction between established African American writers and the Beats. Despite a failed connection with established an African American like Langston Hughes, there is plenty of evidence to suggest the Beats were creating communities of racial tolerance, a theme that they tried to reflect in their writing.

In Kerouac’s journals, there is a clear aspiration for equality based on the respect of other cultures. Kerouac writes on February of 1948 in his journal, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*, of a desire to treat all men as equal in his writing: “I’m going to write ceaselessly about the dignity of human beings no matter who and or what they are, and the less

dignity a person has the fewer words I'll use. It's the sheer humanness of a man that comes first, whether geek fag, 'Negro,' or criminal, whether preacher, financier, father, or senator, whether whore, child, or grave digger. I don't care who or what" (56). Kerouac wants to represent each voice in society as an equal voice that deserves to be brought to light in his writing. While this is Kerouac's desire, he is not able to actually put this into practice in his own writing. Although his stories feature interactions with the many cultures found throughout America, these cultures are explored from Kerouac's white perspective. Despite his goal to broadcast these voices with dignity, Kerouac continues to silence these voices at worst, and misinterprets them at best. However, this particular journal entry preceded the height of the Beat community, foreshadowing the tolerance found in Greenwich Village. In his journal, Kerouac describes a moment on a train ride in which he looks past racial stereotypes: "In the subway I saw a Negro woman with a Bible who might well have been my mother. Did you know that the subway is a great living-room of humanity? How else can men, women, and children sit facing each other, as in a home! The subway is the front parlor of New York" (166). Kerouac is able to look past racial boundaries, identifying an African American woman with his mother. He then continues the analogy of family to describe the diverse group of passengers as being in the "living-room of humanity" where they are facing each other. The image of this random and diverse group facing each other in a domestic setting implies an intimacy between strangers. By facing one another, they are able to confront their differences and know one another. From these journal entries, there is a reoccurring idea of the importance of humanity, which the Beats believed runs through all cultures. They sought to explore these different aspects of humanity, especially through the context of community.

As the cultures interacted within the context of the Beat community, a mixture of styles across cultural boundaries was created, resulting in new mindsets within the community that were not defined by racial stereotypes. Kerouac's novel, *The Subterraneans*, in which Kerouac details his love affair with an African American woman (Mardou Fox), demonstrates the anti-segregationalist qualities of the Beat community. Kerouac finds this mixture of culture appealing as he describes his attraction to Mardou: "I heard the cultured funny tones of part beach, part I. Magnin model, part Berkeley, part negro highclass, something, a mixture of language and style of talking and use of words I'd never heard before except in certain rare girls of course *white* and so strange even Adam at once noticed and commented with me that night—but definitely the new bop generation way of speaking" (*The Subterraneans* 7). Language is an important aspect of identity to Kerouac, and he analyzes Mardou's language in this passage. Ultimately, Mardou's speech sounds unusual because it is characteristically white, yet comes from an African American. Her speech is not totally white because it is associated with bop, an African American form of fast paced jazz with its own argot. Mardou's speech has become blended so that her race is indiscernible, a very notable sign of the post-racial dynamic developing in the Beat community.

While traditional racial stereotypes seemed to be disappearing in the Beat community, there are still moments in Kerouac's work in which he seems to be clinging to older racial stereotypes because of the derogative language that he uses when describing African Americans. His use of racial slurs leads many to label Kerouac as a racist who completely misunderstands African American culture and wishes only to steal from the African American culture. For example, Jon Panish writes that "[i]t is an indication of how deeply racism is embedded in American discourse that the African American characters and art forms in Kerouac's novels are

not substantially different from the ‘Negro symbols’ used by the romantic racialists over a century earlier” (107). While Panish makes a good point, his argument does not take into account the ‘signifying’ nature of African American culture. Insults become a form of discourse in the African American community. Lawrence Lipton, a member of the Beatnik community, explains in *The Holy Barbarians* that the presence of derogatory racial slurs among the Beats are actually a sign of acceptance in the community: “The holy barbarians, white and negro, are so far beyond ‘racial tolerance’ and desegregation that they no longer have to be polite about it with one another” (317). When Kerouac and other Beat writers used racial slurs, it is because they considered themselves to be beyond racial politics. The use of racial slurs actually creates a sense of community because as these derogatory terms are only reserved for those in the community. In the case of the Beats, their interaction with African Americans allowed them to use African American language. Rather than raiding African American culture, the Beats participated in their discourse and blurred racial lines, thus promoting multi-culturalism.

As the Beats began to participate in African American discourse, they also began to adopt other African American cultural characteristics. In A. Robert Lee’s article, “Performing Ted Joans,” Joans is quoted as saying, “I know a man who’s neither white nor black / And his name is Jack Kerouac” (122). The two cultures have merged together to blur the lines of race. John Tytell, in his work, *Naked Angels*, describes how the Beat or Hipster lifestyle led many of them to a racially ambiguous place in an otherwise polarized society: “The hipster—affecting a looseness in body movement that was reflected in his judgment—was the connection between black and white cultures, the man whose being throbbled to the beat of bop music’s variable rhythmic base” (21). The Hipster is described in terms of movement, which extends beyond just physical movement. It includes bringing about revolutionary change to society and resisting

preconceived roles, especially racial roles. The Hipster represented a new type of American, one who is able to transcend race and appreciates humanity.

There is arguably no work that captures the changing nature of the Hipster more famously or influentially than Norman Mailer's essay, "The White Negro." In the essay, Mailer explains how there was a cultural revolution occurring within Beat culture in response to the pressures of American society. Mailer attributes the change in racial roles within the Beat community to the increasingly totalitarian American society: "A totalitarian society makes enormous demands on the courage of men, and a partially totalitarian society makes even greater demands for the general anxiety is greater. Indeed if one is to be a man, almost any kind of unconventional action often takes disproportionate courage" (243). These demands of conformity made by society disrupted the identity of the middle class as class dynamics were radically changed in the post-war era. The middle class was further separated from those on the margins of society and encouraged to pursue consumerism. At the same time, technology was rapidly evolving, affecting normal everyday life and contributing even more to the growing sense of consumerism. The government's efforts to combat communism became increasingly evasive and created a general feeling of mistrust and anxiety for the average American. There was a fear of being labeled as the "other" and, as a result, being pushed out of society. Robert Holton, in his article, "Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity," explains that during this era, there was a struggle for many to find a sufficient space to handle these pressures from society:

With the exception of marginal socialist groups, the focus of remaining postwar dissent shifted by the Depression, eroded by the horrors of the war and the ugly politics of McCarthyism, glutted by the new profusion of consumer goods and

lost in the explosion of mass marketing techniques, no cohesive political movement emerged to direct alienation toward positive social goals. (14)

Without a proper channel to cope with their feelings of alienation, the Beats began looking outside of their own culture. By embracing marginalized cultures, the Beats were able find a larger sense of community and a new sense of joy within this community. While the Beats did not always reach positive goals, they were successful in encouraging diversity and a sense of respect for each individual. However, stepping away from the middle class to explore other more diverse communities placed the Beats in a societal limbo location in society. This made them unable to claim any space as their own. Robert Holton notes that as the Beats searched for a new identity, they were not able to find an appropriate place in society, which led to uncertainty and confusion. His perception was that “[i]t seemed impossible ‘to walk away from it’—to leave the room or the cage—without also walking toward something else, without finding some heterogeneous dimension or space in which to exist, and that space was not readily available” (15). The place designated for them in society only created a claustrophobic feeling for many young Americans during the postwar era. By setting out to find a place in society to express themselves, the Beats carved out new roles that were counter-cultural, borrowing from and merging with groups on the fringe of society.

The Beats were in some sense orphans of American society, which refused to accept them. Oliver Harris, in his “Introduction” to *Junky*, reveals the tumultuous beginning of Burroughs’s writing career as he attempted to develop what would be his first solo novel, *Junky*. He states, “Burroughs began his ‘book about junk’ at the dead center of the twentieth century, only a couple months after relocating his family to Mexico City in late fall 1949. Escaping the punitive regime of the Cold War America after a string of drug busts, Burroughs was beginning

what would turn into a quarter of a century as a writer-in-exile” (xii). American society would not tolerate Burroughs’s lifestyle because it violated the social norms of the time. As perhaps one of the most extreme rejections from society, Burroughs was even deemed insane by society and placed in mental institutions in his youth. Ginsberg, in “Junkie: And Appreciation,” describes one of the first times Burroughs was detained for mental health reasons. Burroughs was asked about his studies in Yoga. Ginsberg explains, “Presumably he had no formal instruction in the latter discipline, since on being challenged to prove its efficacy, he announced that he was impervious to pain and demonstrated this by cutting off a finger. This exploit led to his incarceration in a private sanitarium, from which he was soon released, as he seemed composed and cognizant” (147). Though labeled mentally unstable by society, Burroughs was simply exploring his creativity. When he was taken to the mental hospital, Burroughs told the attendants about Van Gogh, but they did not understand the connection. This seems difficult to believe, but Oliver Harris says, in his introduction to *Junky*, that “case records from the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic prove that Burroughs’ doctors really had ‘never heard of Van Gogh’” (xiv). American society could not understand the exploration taking place by the Beats and, as a result, labeled it as mad. This claim that the Beats were mad is not entirely unfounded, but it can be argued that the repressive society pushed them to madness.

Conflict with American society was an ongoing struggle for the Beats. This was especially true in the early stages of their careers. Robert Holton details the sordid history of the early beats in the year 1950:

A couple of years earlier Burroughs fatally shot his common-law wife Joan.

Cassady, himself a bisexual, became a bigamist in 1950 by marrying his pregnant girlfriend only to leave her a few months later to return to his other wife...Kerouac

was briefly married to a woman, whose lover, a friend of Kerouac's, had recently been killed while climbing through the window of a moving New York City subway car. Allen Ginsberg was released from a psychiatric hospital after his involvement with drug addicts and thieves led to his arrest...He was about to meet another poet, Gregory Corso, who was completing a three-year term at Clinton State Prison. (12)

The Beats appear to be utterly incompatible with American society with its prescribed roles and norms. Their search for identity and meaning brought them to the most extreme margins of society. Their frequent criminal involvement shows an almost deliberate effort to defy society. They disregarded the norms of marriage by agreeing to wed in exchange for gaining bail from jail, practicing bigamy, and extreme marital violence. These are all examples from the lives of Kerouac, Cassady, and Burroughs. It is worth noting that these dysfunctional moments occurred early in the Beat movement, suggesting that these people were eventually able to find a balance outside of the mainstream. The disposition of Beats eventually began to resemble the joyfulness found in the African American community, which is a testament of the African Americans' influence.

Just as the Beats identified with African Americans who were marginalized by society, they also expressed dissatisfaction with what capitalist societies had to offer. This frustration with capitalism is exemplified in William S. Burroughs's largely auto-biographical novel, *Junky*. The narrator, William Lee, details the sheltered life that his parents attempted to create in an effort to avoid the undesirable parts of society. The speaker in *Junky* recalls, "When I was about seven my parents decided to move to the suburbs, 'to get away from people.' They bought a large house with grounds and woods and a fish pond where there were squirrels instead of rats.

They lived there in a comfortable capsule, with a beautiful garden and cut off from contact with the life of the city” (Burroughs xxxvi). The narrator’s family members situate themselves in a safe and restricted residence, as opposed to the growing cities that were becoming increasingly diverse as a result of the prosperous postwar era. His parents’ decision to totally separate themselves from other cultures is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Beats. The same decision was made by many in the middle class. The decision by the Beats to embrace city life is a direct reaction to the middle class fleeing the cities. The suburban neighborhood to which they move resembles the famous Levittown, which Holton describes as a symbol of suburban life in the American social conscience. He writes, “The July 13, 1950 cover of Time carried a photograph of entrepreneur William Levitt, the man behind Levittown, the Long Island subdivision that defined postwar” (12). The narrator then goes on to expand, “Other glossy magazines were replete with images of prosperous families enjoying the consumer revolution then in full swing as the modern supermarket and shopping mall were coming into being” (12). The incredible growth of consumerism satisfied many members of society, but left others with a feeling of alienation. With the expansion of consumer culture, a feeling of detachment developed as everything in society was gradually turned into a commodity. While this consumer revolution seems appealing with its many offerings, Burroughs does not express approval of it. He sees it as “capsule,” which separates him from those in the margins of society.

Similarly, Ginsberg expresses frustration with American capitalism in his poem “America.” The poem addresses issues from imperialism to McCarthyism, but one of the most recurring themes throughout the poem is a critique of consumerism. In the opening lines of “America,” Ginsberg writes, “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing. / America two dollars and twenty seven cents January 17, 1956. / I can’t stand my own mind” (154). The

pressures of economic demands from society have forced Ginsberg to measure his self-worth in monetary terms. He then shows evidence of the alienation he feels by stating that he is uncomfortable within his own mind. The Beats felt that the spread of consumerism brought with it a cheapening of self. In Ginsberg's preface to the 1977 edition of *Junky*, he explains that "we were in the middle of an identity crisis prefiguring nervous breakdown for the whole United States" (155). This identity crisis brought the Beats to the brink of self-destruction. Their rampant drug use and criminal activities stem from their sense of alienation and lack of identity. Rather than trying to reform society and find their identity in positive efforts, the Beats instead rebelled against mainstream society, which earned them a negative reputation.

Unable to find the sense of belonging for which he is looking in the middle class, the narrator of *Junky* looks outside of the stability of his family, leading to almost endless searching. In a complete turn away from his family's suburban lifestyle, the narrator reveals that "[a]t this time, I was greatly impressed by an autobiography of a burglar, called *You Can't Win*. The author claimed to have spent a good part of his life in jail. It sounded good to me compared with the dullness of a Midwest suburb where all contact with life was shut out" (Burroughs xxxvi). The lack of variety found in suburban life is boring and unsatisfying to the narrator, which leads him to look to the fringes of society to find his fun and identity. This character seeks out an unhealthy extreme from the mainstream, which so commonly happens with the Beats. In this case there is the turning to a work by a convicted criminal. Oliver Harris, in his introduction to *Junky: The definitive Text of "Junk,"* elaborates on the importance of the book mentioned in the passage, Jack Black's book *You Can't Win* to Burroughs's life: "Burroughs took the chance to pay back the pseudonymous Jack Black by writing a foreword to the republication of *You Can't Win* (New York: Amok Press, 1988). Here, Burroughs recalls how he was 'fascinated by this

glimpse of an underworld of seedy rooming-houses, pool parlors, cat houses and opium dens, of bull pens and cat burglars and hobo jungles” (Burroughs qtd. in Harris xvi-xvii). In a dangerous way, Burroughs is attracted to the segments of society that his parents sought to avoid. Rather than finding inspiration within the pages of *Time Magazine*, he searches in criminal literature that romanticizes the worst in society. Robert Holton notes that the Beats had a “fascination—even identification—with the social ‘dregs,’” identifying “not with the modern consumer culture but with its garbage” (16). To the Beats, the garbage of society presents a more authentic picture of America than is offered in the middle class. This group has conformed to look like the same mold of an ideal citizen and denied elements of its humanity in doing so. The Beats valued diversity over conformity. African Americans and other members of society who have been tossed aside from American society, as Burroughs himself experienced because of his drug use, were the ones that with whom the Beats identified.

Identifying with the dregs of American society often created increased isolation for the Beats. The narrator of *Junky*, William Lee, experiences alienation when he commits petty criminal acts with a friend and they are eventually caught. He explains, “We were caught, and our fathers had to pay the damages. After this my friend ‘packed me in’ because the relationship was endangering his standing in the group. I saw there was no compromise possible with the group, the others, and I found myself a good deal alone” (*Junky* xxvi). This childhood memory, which turns out to be a turning point in Lee’s life, demonstrates that there is rejection from society when its norms are violated. In a reversal of meaning in his word choice, the narrator refers to those who are members of the established group as the “others,” while he is actually joining the “other” society by embracing crime. With the risk of isolation from society and even friends, the Beats still chose a counter culture lifestyle. Holton explains that the attraction for the

Beats toward the discarded “garbage” of American society was based on a “search for a new and authentic space ... closely related to the recurring American impulse to found identity on the bedrock of naked self, free of compromising cultural and historical accretions, an Adamic desire for an experience of freedom, integrity, and authenticity generally unavailable within conventional culture” (17). African American culture seemed fresh and authentic to the Beats in contrast with the stale middle class culture to which they had become accustomed. As the Beats escaped the constraints of society by aligning themselves with groups already rejected by society, most importantly African Americans, they were able to carve out a new identity without compromising to the anti-individualistic demands of society. Eventually the Beats began to emulate African Americans rather than the iconic figures of society, leading to the concept of the white-negro, which stands in contrast to the white middle class citizen.

William S. Burroughs’s apocalyptic novel, *Naked Lunch*, features those on the margins of the Orwellian-like society. The government actually provides heroin for its citizens in an effort to imprison them to the highly addictive substance. One group in the novel that opposes the government is described as being a “white negro” or Hipster-like figure. The narrator describes the fear of being a “white negro” because it often leads to death: “If some citizen ventures to express a liberal opinion, another citizen invariably snarls: ‘What are you? Some stinking Nigger’s bleached-out replica?’ The casualties in bar-room fights are staggering. In fact, the fear of Negro replicas—which may be blond and blue-eyed has depopulated whole regions” (Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 150-51). Burroughs fictionalizes the concept of the “white negro” by making these Hipsters actual replicas of African Americans. This fictional society, much like American society in the postwar era, is hostile to the disappearance of racial boundaries.

However, the Beats welcomed the erosion of racial boundaries because they envied the care-free and creative attitudes of African Americans.

The search for identity via outside groups of American society led the Beats into contact with many cultures ranging from the Fellahin Indians of Mexico, the migrant workers of California, junkies, and hobos within America's cities. However, the most influential of the Beats were African Americans. Mailer argues that the history of oppression that African Americans experienced made them very identifiable to the Beats. He states, "So it is not accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries" (243). As the Beats found it increasingly difficult to see themselves fitting into mainstream culture, they naturally turned to African Americans who have been oppressed from the inception of the nation. Jon Panish explains that the Beats found "their identification as victims of nuclear terror with the traditional victims of American governmental policy—African Americans—and their need to replace the cold logic and reason of this scientific terror with a strategy for living that is more spontaneous, emotional, and spiritual" (108). As a response to the newly recognized dangers of technology, particularly the nuclear bomb, the Beats turn from rational thinking to a more human, inner voice centered on emotions and the personal self. This voice, based on compulsive or spontaneous thoughts, can be found within the African American culture, which brought the Beats closer, once again, to a multi-cultural perspective.

The interaction of African American and white cultures took place primarily within cities, such as San Francisco, Denver, and most notably New York's Greenwich Village. Mailer recognizes the significance of the community: "In such places as Greenwich Village, a ménage-a-trois was completed—the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the

Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life” (244). There are representations of this new Hipster or “white negro” throughout Beat literature. Kerouac thought of himself as this new “white negro,” often identifying with African Americans, particularly through his suffering. In particular, Kerouac associates himself with the legendary jazz musician Charlie Parker, who is found in several of Kerouac’s novels. There is never a dialogue between the two. Parker merely looks at Kerouac, and they are able to connect through eye contact. When Kerouac encounters Parker in *On the Road*, he describes him, saying that “[h]is big brown eyes were concerned with sadness” (199). Kerouac identifies with the suffering of African Americans, which he demonstrates by portraying them as sad and burdened in his novels. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are visiting a jazz club and witness Parker playing. Kerouac describes the show as a significant moment because he believes that Parker is attempting to impart new knowledge to him. Kerouac writes, “He looked at us, Dean and me, with an expression that seemed to say, Hey now, what’s this thing we’re all doing in this sad brown world?...because here we were dealing with the pit and prune juice of poor beat life itself in the god-awful streets of man, so he said and sang it” (*On the Road* 199). Kerouac uses Parker, speaking to Sal and Dean, to affirm that despite their race, they are still in the same “sad brown world.” The common feeling of suffering is able to transcend racial boundaries and creates a feeling of unity as the oppressed. Parker’s ability to communicate with the young Beats through eye contact cultivates an image of Parker as prophet or soothsayer. The fact that Parker is able to convey his message through his eyes provides a personal aura that the Beats associated with African Americans. Kerouac feels a sense of belonging and identity when watching Parker and as the musician continues to play and sing despite the suffering, his African American art form serves as a solution to the sadness. The emotion that Bebop musicians transferred into their

music serves as a therapeutic outlet, which Kerouac seeks to translate into his writing to serve the same purpose.

The suffering of Charlie Parker serves as a symbol of the Beat lifestyle in Kerouac's works. After the aforementioned jazz performance featuring Charlie Parker, Sal and Dean find Parker who just "staggered off the platform to brood. He sat in the corner with a bunch of boys and paid no attention to them. He looked down and wept. He was the greatest" (*On the Road* 200). Kerouac projects the despair and alienation that he feels onto Parker, who is perceived as a great, suffering African American. As they talk to Parker, his lifestyle seems to resemble that of the Beats, showing the mixture of cultures. Parker describes the jubilation and therapeutic effect of playing Bebop to forget about his troubles: "I got to sing, Man, I live to sing. Been singing 'Close Your Eyes' for two weeks—I don't want to sing nothing else ... I ain't got no money and I don't care tonight" (200). Parker is immune to the consumerism of American society because as an African American he is outside of it. Instead, he focuses on his music and performance; thus, he acts as a prophet-like figure for the new generation of Hipsters like Kerouac. Kerouac views Parker as a prophet of the new Hipsters and, as Panish explains, Kerouac uses Parker to link Bebop musicians with the Beat writer. He states, "Kerouac uses this rhetorical strategy, finally, not to say something about Parker or jazz musicians in general but to enhance his own image as a suffering, victimized artist and man by connecting himself to the already established image of the exploited jazz musician. Kerouac needs a de-historicized symbol of suffering and outsiderism so that he can link himself to it" (114). Panish's analysis ignores Kerouac's desire to find an authentic view of America, which Parker represents for Kerouac. African Americans are able to represent a uniquely American struggle, which is expressed in the uniquely American form of music, jazz.

Kerouac's larger-than-life account of Charlie Parker is indicative of a generally romanticized view of African American culture. For example, Panish accuses Kerouac of "primitivizing and romanticizing the experiences of racial minorities" (108). Panish ignores the respect Kerouac held for the technique that goes into Bebop as well as Kerouac's interaction with the African American community in which Kerouac engages them as equals. In contrast to his idealized view of African American culture, Kerouac shows a distaste and self-hatred for his own white culture. In a scene from *On the Road*, which Kerouac mirrors in his own journals, Sal Paradise passes through a neighborhood in Denver that is largely composed of minorities. As Sal observes the community, he remorsefully declares, "I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned" (*On the Road* 180). Kerouac looks past the economic situation of those in the neighborhood and even considers his white status in society to be a disadvantage. The term disillusioned is suggestive of the confused identity that the Beats felt from society. In his journal, Kerouac relates his desire to specifically be an African American: "and I walked on Welton Street wishing I was a 'nigger;' because I saw that the best the 'white world' had to offer was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (*Windblown Journals* 215). Kerouac views African Americans as having joy and excitement in their lives. This is very appealing to the Beats when considered with the internal conflict with which they wrestled. The African American mindset offers relief from trying to rationalize a difficult world. For African Americans, one should simply enjoy life to its fullest or, as Kerouac would say in *On the Road*, "dig life." Sal Paradise pauses to watch a game of baseball in the neighborhood and is again awed by this childhood event:

The strange young heroes of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian, were on the field, performing with heart-breaking seriousness ... Never in my life as an athlete had I ever permitted myself to perform like this in front of families and girl friends and kids of the neighborhood, at night, under lights; always it had been college, big time, soberfaced; no boyish human joy like this. (*On the Road* 180)

Kerouac compares this neighborhood game of baseball to his own sports experience, which includes football at Columbia University. Despite having reached a high level of competition in college football, Kerouac finds that these athletes perform with more joy and passion than he has ever experienced. He even suggests that his white nature would not allow him to achieve this level of ecstasy. When recounting the same event in his journal, Kerouac explains, “Never in my life had I ever been innocent enough to play ball this way” (*Windblown Journals* 216). The traditional, middle class, white way of dealing with society’s pressure was to buy into consumerism and lose the innocence and joy of one’s soul. In order for the Beats to explore their “madness” for life, they needed to engage in African American culture.

Kerouac demonstrates this longing in his journal, as well as in *On the Road*, when he recalls walking by a group of African American women when one calls out to him, mistaking him for a lover named Eddy. This causes Kerouac to reflect that he “wasn’t so fortunate as to be Eddy—some kid who dug the colored girls down there. I was merely myself” (*Windblown Journals* 215). Kerouac is filled with contempt for himself and wishes to be more aligned with THE African American culture. His remorse continues to build until he exclaims, “I’d been cheated out of actual life!—How I yearned to be suddenly transformed into an Eddy, a Neal, a jazz musician, a nigger, anything hereabouts, a construction worker, a softball pitcher, anything

in these wild, dark, mysterious, humming streets of the Denver night—anything but myself so pale & unhappy, so ‘white collar,’ so dim” (216). Kerouac longs for a simpler place in society, and a life worth living. Words that are typically viewed in a negative connotation, such as wild, dark, and mysterious, are for what Kerouac longs. This is a complete reversal of what is expected by mainstream society. Kerouac wishes in the passage to be a jazz musician, which he spends his career trying to emulate in his writing. This demonstrates how Kerouac attempted to apply his longing to his life.

From the section from *On the Road* and his journal, Kerouac associates his friend, Neal Cassady, with African American culture. Cassady was Kerouac’s inspiration for *On the Road*, which details their cross country trips together. He is also the subject of *Visions of Cody*, which provides both an overview of Cassady’s life and a perspective on the events behind *On the Road*. Kerouac found Cassady fascinating and inspirational because of his rough childhood on the streets with a hobo father. Cassady embodied the “white negro” of which Mailer wrote, providing Kerouac with the hope of escaping the restrictions of his white persona. Cassady possessed a care free attitude and remarkable ability to express his true feelings based on real world experiences. Cassady’s lifestyle influenced Kerouac’s writing.

Kerouac viewed Neal Cassady as a bridge between white culture and African American culture because of his unique upbringing. It is again the theme of suffering in which Kerouac is interested and that causes him to associate Cassady with African Americans. Kerouac, in his novel *Visions of Cody*, expresses his frustration with American society when reflecting on Cody’s life by writing, “America, the word, the sound is the sound of my unhappiness, the pronunciation of my beat and stupid grief” (90). Kerouac captures the essence of oppression by society found in the word *Beat*. This feeling of oppression led to the counter-culture of the Beats

and their identification with African Americans. Kerouac then expands on this feeling of oppression with a description similar to events that affect African Americans: “America is being wanted by the police, pursued across Kentucky and Ohio, sleeping with the stockyard rats and howling tin shingles of gloomy hideaway silos” (*Visions of Cody* 90). Kerouac places Cody (or Neal Cassady) in this margin of the African American. He shares that “Cody sat in a lunch-cart at three o’clock in the morning in the middle of the poor unhappy thing it is to be wanted by the police in America” (*Visions of Cody* 90). This image reinforces the view that society is against Cody because he is in the margins of society. The police, acting as the repressive instrument of the totalitarian mainstream society, are actually looking for Cody because he is at odds with society. In the same way, African Americans at the time were forced to live in fear of the police.

Kerouac then goes on to connect this location in society which Cassady inhabits with African Americans: “Where Negroes, so drunk, so raw, so tired, lean black cheeks on the hard arms of benches and sleep with pendant brown hands and pouting lips the same as they were in some moonlit Alabama shack when they were little” (*Visions of Cody* 91). Kerouac describes a vision of America from the perspective of an African American and uses it to show the America that was Neal Cassady’s as a Hipster. Kerouac continues to emphasize the weariness of being in the margins of society as he describes Cody’s America where an African American exclaims, “see my hand untipped, learn the secret of my heart, give me the thing, give me your hand, take me to the safe place...I’m too tired now of everything else. I’ve had enough, I give up, I quit...take me to where there is no home, all peace and amity, to the place that never should have been or known about, to the family of life” (*Visions of Cody* 91). The African American in the passage demonstrates a tired spirit that is reminiscent of the weariness expressed in *On the Road* by Charlie Parker. While African Americans are ecstatic when playing jazz or some other

activity, there is still a great sadness and suffering from the unfair treatment they are dealt by society. Kerouac admires this quiet suffering as he frequently says he longs for the “darkness” that African Americans experience. After visiting downtown Denver, Kerouac expresses dissatisfaction in his journal: “So sad I was—in the violet dark, strolling—wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-minded, ecstatic Negroes of America. Moreover all this reminded me of Neal and Louanne who knew this place so well and had been children here and nearby” (*Windblown Journals* 215). Cody is able to relate to the African Americans because he has lived on the same streets with them, the same streets of Denver on which Kerouac walked and expressed contempt for his middle class identity that separated him from the suffering of the streets.

Disappointed with their own standing in society, the Beats searched the margins of society to find new groups and discourses with which to identify, from which to borrow, and upon which to expand. This exchange of cultures created new multi-cultural communities that would eventually enrich American society. Communities such as those found in Greenwich Village and San Francisco, which not only promoted art but also a respect for all cultures, had not occurred previously in American history. The singularity of the suburbs was contrasted by the diversity of the cities. The Beats wanted to include all the voices found in America within their art. While they were not fully successful in this because of their own limitations, they were nevertheless able to create an awareness of marginalized groups. This reconciliation of the American voice was taking place as a reaction to the divisiveness of McCarthyism. The Beats desperately tried to escape the constraints of middle class life, by periodically going too far and engaging in crime. However, they were eventually able to find identity from exploring the many cultures of America. From observing those who had pushed away from society, they were able

to learn how to function without the constraints of society. The Beat fascination with jazz resulted in African American culture immensely influencing Beat culture. It was from jazz that the Beats learned to express themselves and draw from their experience. Despite sometimes false views of African Americans, the Beats were still able to glean valuable parts of that culture as well as contribute to the struggle of African Americans. The role of the Beats in the Civil Rights struggle is downplayed, but cannot be ignored, especially with friendships of Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka who united in a struggle against oppression. The Beats engaged the African American culture of the 1950s and 60s and, as a result, were strongly influenced by them.

Chapter Two: Influence of Blues on the Beats

While jazz served as a tremendous influence on the Beats, it still lacked a direct connection to language. Instead, it relied on instruments. Kerouac indicates this divide in *Pic*, a novel he wrote near the end of his career. In this novel, the narrator, an African American boy, declares, “I got a million ideas and can shore pour them out of that horn, and I ain’t doin so bad pourin them without the horn” (62). While jazz became a trademark form of expression for African Americans, it was not the only method or even the most effective method. African Americans have always been very comfortable with the counter-discourse voice found in the blues tradition. The blues tradition made a resurgence in Hip Hop, which finds its origins in the Black Arts Movement. Even the great jazz icon Charlie Parker made attempts at writing poetry, perhaps recognizing the limitations of his musical instrument (Woedick 103). Just as Parker found value in writing poetry, the Beats followed the tradition of combining the principles of music and literature. Much of the Beat’s literature was influenced by African American blues tradition, which both preceded and influenced jazz. The blues have a closer connection to African American and slave culture than jazz. Because the blues and Beat literature both utilize spoken language, the blues is more recognizable in Beat culture than is jazz. The Beats thrived from a deeply personal and individual use of language in order to cope with life’s challenges, much as the early blues singers who traveled across America did. As the Beats journeyed to the streets, they came in contact with both blues artists and the cultural legacy that they left behind. From the blues’ tradition, the Beats were able to experience the unique ways that African Americans used the English language.

Adapting the language of their American white masters during the time of slavery, the blues artists created a personal and counter-discourse argot. This was possible because African Americans were marginalized, providing a unique vantage point of an outsider transforming the

language of the culture into which they were forced. Houston A. Baker, Jr., author of *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, identifies the location of the African American artist in the blues tradition as “[i]nvisible, massive in its energies, erasing old law, nullifying time and space in its singularity, the black hole metaphorically” (151). This metaphor shows the incredible pull on mainstream culture exerted by African Americans to bring outside elements into their culture and then build upon them. Baker comments on the subversive nature of the “black hole,” drawing on Henry Louis Gates’ trickster figure. He explains that “[t]he *black hole* assumes the subsurface force of the black underground. It graphs, that is to say, the subterranean *hole* where the trickster has his lucid, deconstructive being. Further, in the script of Afro-America, the hole is the domain of *Wholeness*, an achieved relationality of black community in which desire recollects experience and sends it forth as blues” (151). African Americans were able to take in the dominant culture and subvert it through the expression of the blues. This process of expression served as a therapeutic act, allowing them to feel a sense of confidence despite their location in society. This therapeutic element of the blues appealed to the Beats and helped them to process their conflict with society and channel it through the subversive art forms of African Americans. While violently forced to accept a new culture that was not their own, African Americans were able to subvert this situation through their art. Baker adds that “[t]o be black and (W)hole is to escape incarcerating restraints of a white world (i.e. black hole) and to engage the concentrated, underground singularity of experience that results in the blues desires expressive fullness” (151-152). Through the unifying experience of a shared and counter-discourse language, African Americans formed a community on the margins of American society. Rather than suppressing their emotions as a result of traumatic experiences, African Americans instead allowed their expression through the blues to fully represent their true

self. Kerouac utilizes the blues tradition when he advocates in “Belief & Technique for Modern Prose” that in writing there should be “[n]o fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience” (483). Here, Kerouac draws on the importance of human experience to writing, an idea derived from the blues. The ideas of the African Americans were influential to the Beats because of their subversive nature, making the blues an underground, yet well-known, culture.

Baker’s concept of a subversive underground community is also manifested in the Beats as well. Kerouac’s aptly titled *The Subterraneans* details the underground, counter-cultural group of Beats in San Francisco. There is a common thread of alienation between blues culture and the Beats of *The Subterraneans* with a central theme of suffering and being forced into the margins. Kerouac notes that the Beat characters in the novel were given the name of “subterranean” by Adam, who represents Allen Ginsberg, for being “hip without being slick, they are intelligent without being corny, they are intellectual as hell and know all about Pound without being pretentious or talking too much about it, they are very quiet, they are very Christlike” (1). The Beats resist conforming to the intellectual culture of the mainstream, but instead use their knowledge to be quiet and Christlike. Kerouac seems to be alluding to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount with an emphasis on the meek (Matthew 5.5) to develop his definition of “Christlike.” The idea of being Christlike manifests throughout the novel in relation to “the subterraneans,” and suggests a quality of humility and suffering. While the characters of *The Subterraneans* are at a Charlie Parker show, Kerouac describes a junky in terms of a holy man with “a pale pale junkey anemic face and we say junkey when once Dostoevsky would have said what? If not ascetic or saintly?” (13). Kerouac reverses the mainstream notion of a saint and instead uses the standard of Dostoevsky—who writes of marginalized characters—to portray a junky as an American saint. Kerouac identifies with his Beat friends in *The Subterraneans* for

their shared suffering: “the great men I had known in my youth, great heroes of America I’d been buddies with, with whom I ventured and gone to jail and known in raggedy dawns” (36). Again, Kerouac subverts the mainstream definition of a hero, calling his delinquent (by society’s standard) friends the actual heroes of America, or at least of the underground community they form. Kerouac views his community members as victims of society, which vindicates their criminal record. His animosity toward society is less justified than that of the African Americans with whom he seeks to align himself. African Americans actually have been unfairly victimized by the law, whereas much of the punishment received by the Beats was deserved. Nonetheless, Kerouac continues to see a mutual victimization shared between the Beats and African Americans.

Kerouac’s affinity with the suffering of African Americans attracts him to an African American love interest. Kerouac is attracted to Mardou because of her “story of spiritual suffering” (36). In the account provided in the novel, it is from Mardou and artists such as Charlie Parker that Kerouac learns from the marginalized African American community that also exists in the subterranean regions of society. Kerouac describes her as a subterranean angelic figure: “[her] little brown body in a gray sheet bed in the slums of Telegraph Hill, huge figure in the history of the night” (42). Kerouac considers her significant because of her ability to take on qualities of both cultures. He perhaps envies her because of her African American heritage and the mindset that comes with it, something he is not able to completely achieve. While contemplating this image of Mardou, Kerouac then experiences “visions of great words in rhythmic order all in one giant archangel book go roaring thru my brain, so I lie in the dark also seeing also hearing the jargon of the future worlds” (42). Mardou’s speech is recognized by Kerouac as the speech of the future. The rhythmic quality of her words suggests that she is able

to speak in a way that mimics jazz or the rhythmic lyrics of blues. As society becomes increasingly alienated, Kerouac must look to groups that have experience with alienation. He looks to “others,” such as Mardou. Mardou demonstrates the presence of the blues tradition with her language, which is filled with jargon unique to the margins of society. In an almost prophetic way, Kerouac recognizes that America is becoming increasingly multi-cultural, and because of this, the jargon of minorities eventually becomes more common. Kerouac proceeds to describe how this blues language fits his need for a fast paced and deeply personal method of communication: “needs of typing, of the flow of rivers, words, dark, leading to the future and attesting to the madness, hollowness, ring and roar” (42). The literary use of rivers is reminiscent of the African imagery employed by African American poet Langston Hughes, and this is further reinforced with the idea of darkness. There is also a sense of fast paced or spontaneous use of language. Kerouac realizes that a new vocabulary is necessary in order to find an authentic voice in a culture that is becoming rapidly more diverse. This new vocabulary was already being used by those in the city, including the Hip “white Negros” who mixed together their high culture with the spontaneous and counter-discourse of African Americans. The language Kerouac desired to use was not purely African American, but did rely on their jargon and improvisational style.

The depth of language that Kerouac appreciates in the blues was created from a unique lifestyle of oppression. The blues often focus on the difficulties of life, and the music itself is an attempt to cope with these hardships. Sterling Brown, author of “The Blues,” explains that the blues “had many concerns—including hard times, peonage and jail” (286). One blues artist who exemplifies the struggles against oppression both in his life and in his lyrics is Huddie William Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly. Jared Snyder, in his article “Leadbelly and His

Windjammer: Examining the African American Button Accordion Tradition,” details the difficult events that occurred in Leadbelly’s life: “His musical career came to halt temporarily in 1918 with his conviction for murder, when he began serving time for what would be the first of two prison sentences for felonies (first in the Texas State Prisons, 1918-25, and then at the Angola State Prison in Louisiana, 1930-34)” (158). Leadbelly’s lyrics reflect trying experiences, often showing the consequences of a reckless lifestyle and the oppression from society. In Leadbelly’s song “New Orleans (House of the Rising Sun),” the singer laments his time in a whore house in New Orleans:

There is a house in New Orleans
 They call the rising sun
 And it’s been the ruin of many a poor boy
 And me oh God I’m one.
 I’m going to tell my baby sister
 Please don’t do like I have done
 Please shun that house in New Orleans
 They call the Rising sun.

Leadbelly, who was from Louisiana, addresses the problems that surround institutions, such as whore houses, and the long term damage they cause to those involved. Stressing the damage from the experience, he says that it has “been the ruin” of the narrator. In contrast to the lyrics in popular music at the time, Leadbelly instead portrays an authentic view of realities for many on the margins of society. The Beats also sought to portray a genuine and sometimes gritty picture of reality in America. With a similar approach, the Beats were sometimes labeled obscene due to their subject matter of their works, such as Ginsberg’s *Howl* and Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*,

when they were simply trying to display an honest picture of reality. In Leadbelly's song "The Bourgeois Blues," he addresses the struggles of his economic status along with race struggles. Leadbelly writes, "Home of the brave, land of the free / I don't wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie," showing the class discrimination that exists in America. Leadbelly also uses the traditional lyrics from the "American National Anthem" in a new context of condemnation, an example of using language in a counter-mainstream manner. He addresses racial issues by writing, "Well, them white folks in Washington they know how / To call a colored man a nigger just to see him bow / Lord, it's a bourgeois town." Leadbelly uses the blues to create political songs that point out the oppression that existed in society. Leadbelly's critique on the strains of society would resonate with the Beats. This also demonstrates that the blues offered a critique of society, and not merely ignoring and existing in a primitive mindset. While African Americans were seen as very joyful by the Beats, they were not oblivious to the struggles in society as their music demonstrates.

The emphasis on oppression and suffering that is found in the blues is a shared struggle between African Americans and the Beats. While the Beats could not claim to have experienced that same suffering as African Americans, they did share a similar lifestyle. However, one clear difference is that the Beats chose to step into this rough lifestyle whereas many African Americans had no choice. The word "beat" is associated with the kind of lifestyle that many blues artists lived. This lifestyle is one of wandering without steady income and often dealing with difficult situations. In response to pressures from society, the Beats began to adopt a similar lifestyle that became the mantra of their movement. In Peter Tarmoy's article "Beat Generation: Beat: Beatniks," Kerouac explains one account of the origins of the word Beat:

When I first saw the hipsters creeping around Times Square in 1944 I didn't like them either. One of them, Huncke of Chicago, came up to me and said 'Man, I'm beat.' I knew right away what he meant somehow....Anyway, the hipsters, whose music was bop, they looked like criminals but they kept talking about the same things I liked, long outlines of personal experiences and vision...full of hop...rumblings of a new soul...And so when Huncke appeared to us and said 'I'm beat' with radiant light shining out of his despairing eyes...a word perhaps brought from some Midwest carnival or junk cafeteria. (275)

The early members of the Beat movement are described as looking like "criminals" by Kerouac, showing the counter culture life in which they were involved. The Beats were exposed to many blues artists who sang about their time in prison. It is even likely that the Beats would have been familiar with the chain gang recordings that were circulating at the time. When arriving in the city, these Hipsters would have embodied the message the Beats had heard in African American music. The blues singers' criminal experience authenticated their music, which appealed to the Beats. Kerouac emphasizes that they shared "long outlines of personal experience" (Tarmoy 275). While time in prison is a negative thing, it at least suggests a brutal honesty since prison is a very humiliating experience. An authentic account of a life gone wrong is much more appealing to the Beats than a stale, scripted account of life in the suburbs or a story from *Time* magazine. The fact that the movement was labeled "Beat" shows the essence of the movement was centered on the tough day to day way of living that is so similar to that of blues artists.

The aforementioned account of the origins of Beat is just one of many provided by Kerouac throughout his career. The slipperiness of the term does not diminish its importance, but is instead a reflection of African American language from the culture in which the term was

founded. When Kerouac declares that he is “Beat,” it brings up a variety of meanings that range from the Beatitudes to being “beat” by society. Also, when combined with Yiddish to create “Beatnik,” the word goes in even more directions. This is an example of signifying, which is an important quality of African American art. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his work *The Signifying Monkey*, explains that signifying is “a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black’s purposes” (50). The use of signifying is found in the lyrics of blues songs, creating rich layers of meaning that are subversively below the surface. Robert Switzer, in his article “Signifying the Blues,” explains, “In the blues, the music and words, both of them “masked” and signifying, play off one another in apparent simplicity, while in fact exploding with awesome, subversive, and liberating power” (30). Blues artists were able to create a unique set of vocabulary by signifying, and much of this was recorded by government programs in an effort to preserve African American heritage, yet hidden beneath the blues argot the lyrics were critical of the very society preserving them. Outsiders to African American culture are deceived the “simplicity” of the songs when, in fact, there are very complex workings taking place that can only be understood from within the community. This tendency to label a work as “simple” occurs again with the spontaneous nature of Bebop and Beat writing. In actuality, there is a tremendous amount of skill necessary to produce these spontaneous expressions. Brown notes that “[s]ocially considered, then, the blues tell a great deal about one segment of negro life” (291). The “decolonization” of language as Gates refers to it as, is visible in the signifying of blues artists, who had taken the culture of the south and bent into a form that was unique to African American culture. Alan Lomax recorded many blues artists throughout the South, not only because they preserved African American culture, but because they also “served as a symbol of the melting pot of American folklore” (291). The language that was

unique to the blues helped to preserve African American culture through music and became very influential on American culture through the Beats. Signifying continues to be an important part of African American culture because it creates a sense of community with the common bond of language. The Beats were desperately searching for a sense of community outside of the mainstream. As a result, they naturally saw the value in signifying and incorporated it into their culture. The shared knowledge of a language that was unique to the African American community produced by signifying allowed African Americans to better explore their personal experiences without the fear of condemnation from society.

This almost coded quality of signification often serves a subversive purpose in blues lyrics. In order to be accepted by recording companies, the artists needed to make the content of their lyrics acceptable. With few exceptions, such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, blues artists depended on mainstream recording companies in order to make a profit from their music. Artists would use signifying to sing about sexually explicit subjects and drugs without the vast majority of the audience being able to realize the true meaning behind the jargon. The frequent use of signifying makes it very difficult for the average audience to identify both levels of meaning found in the blues. To most people, the lyrics appear to be simple and folksy. A common example of a sexual phrase used by artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Willie McTell, and Muddy Waters is “mojo.” “Mojo” refers to a spell having to do with love and is generally associated with sexuality. In Muddy Waters’ song “Got My Mojo Working,” he sings about visiting women in Louisiana and then goes back to the chorus, singing, “I got my mojo working.” These key words are used by several artists and are given their meaning by the community’s agreed significance of the phrase. Before being used in the context of blues, words like “mojo” did not have the same meaning. This is, once again, very similar to the way Kerouac

and the Beats used the word Beat. Another example of signifying is the phrase, “Let the deal go down.” The term refers to gambling, but without knowledge of gambling rules and tactics, this would not be clear. The meaning is not limited to gambling, though; because of act of signifying, the phrase also refers to life in general. The phrase can also represent a person’s death. Such a double meaning takes place when Blind Willie McTell uses it in his song “Delia” to signify both her gambling and her death: “Delia was a gambler, running all around / She was one girl who never let the deal go down,” and later the song reveals, “Kenny lookin' high, Kenny lookin' low, / Shot poor Delia with that hated .44 / Delia, Delia, wouldn't take no one's advice.” In a similar way, Charlie Poole uses the phrase in his song titled “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down” in which he talks about coming to a final home and repeating in the chorus, “Don't let your deal go down / 'Fore my last gold dollar is gone.” While the mentioning of home signifies heaven, the mention of the money connects the phrase to gambling. The context given by the artist creates a plethora of meanings for a phrase combined with the tradition of the community. If necessary, it also keeps a particular meaning veiled from a broad audience. The Beats readily incorporate this trait in an effort to strengthen their sense of community by creating a feeling of separateness from mainstream society.

The Beats internalized much of the vocabulary that came from the signifying in the blues community. Kerouac describes the origin of much of the Beat vocabulary: “It was a new language, actually spade (Negro) jargon but you soon learned it, like ‘hung up’ couldn’t be a more economical term to mean so many things” (qtd. in “Beat Generation: Beat: Beatnik” 275). The Beats were able to recognize that words from African American culture, like those used in the blues, have a variety of meanings. They also found that this jargon was more precise and enhanced their spontaneous expression. The traditional methods of language were no longer

effective for expressing their new message because these methods were not designed to accelerate free expression. Instead, traditional language stifled free expression with rules that constrained the speaker. In order to find a “new language,” the Beats looked outside of the mainstream and to the “other.” The gravitation toward blues signifying is also a sign of the stresses of society that are found in post-modernity. Fredrick Jameson, in his essay “Postmodernism in Consumer Society,” writes, “Hence once again, pastiche: in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum” (1965). Jameson’s critique is relevant to America’s consumer society and the political structure from which mainstream language was constructed. When the Beats used society’s language, they found it unable to keep up with the diversity they were witnessing in their community. While language in the mainstream has become “pastiche,” this is not the case for those groups outside of society. By turning to a non-Western form of language, one that focuses on innovation and spontaneity rather than history, the Beats are finally able to express themselves in a way that is relevant to their experiences.

Through the semi-autobiographical works of the Beats, it is possible to witness this process of the Beats encountering the language of African Americans. This is especially true of Kerouac in his Beat novel *On the Road*, which specifically mentions signifying and its relation to his world. The presence of signifying in the novel shows its importance to African American culture and also it being shared with the members of the Beat movement who are found in the novel. On Sal Paradise’s trip to Chicago, he encounters a man named Henry who “had just been released from Terre Haute federal pen” (256). As the two men share their stories, Sal learns of signifying: “He told me what it was to ‘signify.’ ‘Anybody that’s leaving jail soon starts talking

about his release date is ‘signifying’ to other fellas that have to stay. We take him by the neck and say, ‘Don’t signify with me!’ Bad thing to signify—y’ hear me?’ ‘I won’t signify, Henry’” (256). The fact that the man learned signifying in jail is important to show how the Beats came into contact with the blues culture and language. The gap between African American blues artists and upper middle class whites is bridged as the whites defy their role in society and end in places such as carnivals, the back of trucks hitchhiking, and prison. It is in these places that they are able to transcend cultural boundaries and even envy the ability to signify that is found in blues culture.

As signifying moves from rural south to carnivals and prisons, it eventually begins to appear in practice in Beat works. For example, the title of William S. Burroughs’ novel *Naked Lunch* exemplifies signifying. Burroughs explains the meaning of the title in the preface: “The title means exactly what the word says: NAKED Lunch—a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork” (XXXV). While Burroughs, in the same way blues songs are considered simple, portrays the title as straight forward and obvious, this is not actually the case. The two words normally do not relate and only take on meaning when used in the context that Burroughs chooses to place them. Burroughs injects meaning into the words “naked lunch,” making them part of the unique argot of the Beat community. By doing this, Burroughs is following in the blues tradition of signifying. Just as the true meaning of blues song lyrics were not fully understood by the public, the title of *Naked Lunch* created confusion for the United States Supreme Court when it held the book on trial for obscenity. The court asked fellow Beat poet Allen Ginsberg what he found the meaning to be:

The Court. You think the title, Naked Lunch, relates to capital punishment?

Ginsberg. No, no. It relates to nakedness of seeing, to being able to see clearly without any confusing disguises, to see through the disguise.

The Court. That is your interpretation of the title?

Ginsberg. Yes.

The Court. Or the meaning of the title?

Ginsberg. Of the word, 'Naked,' in the title; and 'Lunch' would be a complete banquet of all this naked awareness. (xxii)

Ginsberg was able to match Burroughs' meaning because he was part of the Beat community and able to communicate with the underground jargon; yet, in contrast, the establishment is not able to understand this culture and its jargon as exemplified by the confused court. The ability to disguise meaning from the establishment becomes especially helpful when hiding illegal activities.

A reoccurring theme in the blues is that of drug-use, which remains hidden from the mainstream as a result of signifying. One drug in particular that is often found in blues lyrics is heroin. Heroin was commonly injected, which would first involve heating the mixture in a spoon. Blues artists used the imagery of the spoon to signify their drug addiction. An example of heroin use is found in Howlin' Wolf's song "Spoonful," in which he lists a number of things that could be a spoonful, but declaring that none of them compare to his lover's love. The use of "spoonful" by Howlin' Wolf is an example of signifying because even though he mentions a variety of things in the spoon, the imagery is strongly linked to heroin within the context of the blues community. The song serves as both a love song and also a commentary on drug addiction. Charlie Patton, in his song "Spoonful Blues," shows the extreme desire that is felt by

the addict, willing to trade anything in order to enjoy the pleasure of heroin. The song features two singers; one asks the other a series of questions trying to gauge what he would be willing to trade for a “spoonful.” The song culminates with the question, “Would you kill a man?” to which the speaker responds, “Yes I would.” The song is a striking confession into the depth of addiction and its destructive nature in the addict’s life, even though heroin is never explicitly mentioned. The message is lost to many listeners, but the message would be quite clear to those who are involved in the same drug culture that many blues artists were. William S. Burroughs uses some of the exact same jargon to describe heroin-use in his novel *Naked Lunch*. The addicts found in the fictional world of *Naked Lunch* demonstrate the desperation found in Charlie Patton’s “Spoonful Blues.” The characters continually fall deeper into depravity as the world is consumed with a variety of chemical addictions. In the introduction to *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs nearly echoes the words of Patton, explaining the depth of loss the heroin junky experiences: “A dope fiend is a man in total need of dope. Beyond a certain frequency need knows absolutely no limit or control. In the words of total need: ‘Wouldn’t you?’ Yes you would. You would lie, cheat, inform on your friends, steal, do anything to satisfy total need” (xxxvii). Burroughs goes on to describe the junky as “a rabid dog [who] cannot choose but bite” (xxxvii). The drug-use jargon from blues songs is brought to life in Burroughs’s narrative. His narrative matches the descriptions of the blues artists showing the two cultures colliding with a common problem: a desire for relief from the pressures of society that leads users to drugs. Burroughs explores the drug addictions of the blues artists in the context of a post-modern world. Their familiarity with drug culture both further separated them from mainstream culture while bringing them closer to elements of African American culture at the same time.

The common thread of drug use allowed the Beats to enter into the underground community of African American culture. The jargon associated with drugs was a central part of signifying for both groups, though the Beats certainly learned this jargon from the blues tradition. In the introduction to *Junky*, Rodney King, who was former band mate of Charlie Parker, comments that “[h]eroin was our badge...it was the thing that said, ‘we know. You don’t know.’ It was the thing that gave us membership in a unique club, and for this membership we gave up everything else in the world” (xvii). This intense feeling of belonging to a community brought on by drug use offers a glimpse at why the Beats chose to engage in harmful lifestyle. With a strong sense of alienation from society, they were drawn to the unconditional acceptance shared by junkies. While Burroughs is aware of the rich argot of drug terminology and slang, his knowledge of counter-cultural jargon does not end there, but extends to the wide range of signification found in African American culture. Harris, in his introduction to *Junky*, explains that drug argot was only one part of the sub-culture of which Burroughs was aware of: “Alert to the decline of old subcultures and the emergence of new ones, late on in *Junky*, Burroughs reports news of changes in the New York scene since he was last there, to suggest how a shift in key terms can define an existence, and, like passwords, admit entry into it” (xxvii-xxviii). The Beats were familiar with the same “secret” language that was found in the blues. Despite being separated by racial differences, the Beats were still able to be accepted into the marginalized culture of African Americans because of their ability to learn the language of the streets. The street jargon that dominated the blues and the street is central to *Junky*, so important that Burroughs included a glossary at the end of the novel to explain some of the language. In the introduction to his glossary, Burroughs explains the connection between African American “jive” talk and the lingo of the drug culture in which he was caught: “In the past few years,

however, the use of junk has spread into ‘hip,’ or ‘jive talking’ circles, and junk lingo has, to some extent, merged with ‘jive talk’” (129). With a counter-cultural basis, the language used by Burroughs is very similar to that of blues artists, and this language continued to evolve. This ever-changing nature of blues or “jive” language was able to maintain an authentic language that was separate from the mainstream. Burroughs comments on the evolving nature of this language with a final note to the reader: “It should be understood that the meanings of these words are subject to rapid change, and that a word that has one hip meaning one year may have another the next”...“not only do the words change meanings but meanings vary locally at the same time” (132-33). The counter-mainstream nature of the Hipster is not easily constrained by society, but is instead constantly changing in an effort to avoid the conforming into the mainstream. One must be a part of the culture if they are to be able to keep up with the jargon.

The Beats included other themes aside from drugs to connect their writing to the blues tradition, such as the image of transportation. Transportation is another major theme that occurs in the lyrics of blues songs. The mode of transportation most commonly referenced in the blues is that of the train. Imagery surrounding the railroads features signifying, with the railroad standing as a symbol for a variety of themes as well as being a real mode of transportation that was depended on. In the traditional folk blues song “Freight Train Blues,” the lifestyle of hopping trains is detailed:

Well, the only thing that makes you laugh again
 Is a south bound whistle on a south bound train
 Every place I want to go
 I never can go because you know
 Because I got the freight train blues.

The “freight train” is described as a central part of life for the blues singer. In contrast to the stable and concrete lifestyle of the suburbs, the rambling blues artist lives a life of constant flux. The artist is continually on the move from town to town in an effort to escape the pressures of society. There is a sense of regret offered in the song. The artist hints at desiring to settle down, but is driven by the “freight train blues” to continue moving. Society will not accept these marginalized men; instead, they are forced to continue. In a sense, they are constantly fleeing society and create culture around this lifestyle. It made the blues distinctive and influenced the transitory lifestyle of the Beats. It was from these original “freight train hoppin’” artists that the Beats learned how to ride the rails. The concept of constantly being on the move while searching for a place in society ties into a larger theme of a journey, which is found throughout literary traditions and religions. From the lyrics of blues artists, one notices they are searching for both a spiritual home and also a place of belonging to alleviate their suffering. This same restless search for meaning also underlies the traveling of the Beats.

The tremendous amount of searching for meaning and identity conducted in the personal lives of the Beats is nearly matched by the actual traveling that takes place in their works. There is a correlation between the two journeys, both an internal and external journey, which anchored their literature. In Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*, the characters experience transportation through the railroad in a similar way that it is described in blues songs. This, along with the ever-moving nature of the Beat lifestyle, suggests a strong influence by blues culture. In *On the Road*, Kerouac captures the unique American style journey that runs through blues culture and which the Beats embraced. It is in New Orleans, a city that is famous for harboring blues and jazz cultures, that the characters of *On the Road* encounter the rails in a blues like way, learning from a New Orleans native the workings of riding trains. This lesson comes from “Old Bull,” a

blues-like native of New Orleans. This character represents Burroughs who spent time in Louisiana and southern Texas. This demonstrates an example of how blues culture was able to come in contact and then subsequently influence the Beat movement. Kerouac describes the process of jumping onto trains that is mentioned in so many blues songs and practiced by the artists:

He and I and Ed Dunkel ran across the tracks and hopped a freight at three individual points; Marylou and Galatea were waiting in the car. We rode the train a half-mile into the piers, waving at switchmen and flagmen. They showed me the proper way to get off a moving car; the back foot first and let the train go away from you and come around and place the other foot down. They showed me the refrigerator cars, the ice compartments, good for a ride on any winter night in a string of empties. (154)

The Beats learned lessons that would aid them in living on low income, such as using trains for free transportation from those in the blues culture. By doing so, it influenced their literature. African Americans knew how to subvert the system in order to be less reliant on society. The Beats could gain independence from the financial constraints of society by adopting these methods. This ability to function without ties to society would show Kerouac in his cross country trip a unique view of America, which would fascinate the public. Journeying throughout America using the rail system is filled with danger, but also stands as a unique tradition. Hopping a ride on passing train meant joining a long line of pilgrims in search for an authentic America.

Movement, while being a central theme to the Beat novel, is also a quality of Postmodernism. Fredric Jameson writes in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society"

that themes in Postmodernism “can only be represented in motion” (1972). He goes on to explain that motion is necessary for conveying meaning in Postmodernist works because of a “new and virtually unimaginable quantum leap in technological alienation” (1971). The rapid developments in technology as a result of the growth of capitalism and globalization have created a society that must stay alert to new changes. If one slows down or becomes too comfortable, then he will be left behind. This was already affecting language, as was previously mentioned by Burroughs when he described the necessity of keeping up with the constantly changing street lingo. In *On the Road*, Sal makes several trips across the country by hitch hiking, sometimes with friends, sometimes alone. The trips in which he is accompanied by Dean are the most energy filled and rapid moving. Sal retells the events of one of these trips, saying, “[w]ith frantic Dean I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it” (206). Dean takes advantage of the technology of the automobile, often running them to the point of disrepair in order to reach a new group friends or one his former or current wives. The trips are frequently packed with activity to go along with rapid pace. In one trip, Sal explains that it was “inside four days, with innumerable adventures sandwiched in” (117). By taking advantage of the possibilities that transportation provides, the characters are able to escape society. The fast-paced nature of life on the road demands a language to properly express it. It was a reflection on post-modern life that pushed Charlie Parker to play his blistering riffs in Bebop and Kerouac to write with his spontaneous method.

Along with a quickly moving lifestyle and form of expression, concepts and ideas are often blurred together. In both the blues and the Beat movement, there is a mixture of the sacred and the profane. This unique paradox is a staple quality of African American literature, and is also found in the blues. Toni Morrison explains in her essay that African Americans mix the

two: “We [African Americans] are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within the practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things” (2288). Despite their counter-cultural views, the Beats were also an extremely spiritual group, yet their spirituality featured eclectic views that were sometimes contradictory; similarly, African Americans held a belief system of Christianity mixed with folk beliefs. Kerouac struggled to reconcile his family’s Catholic faith with his new interest in Buddhism, and Ginsberg also sought to mix Buddhism with his Jewish heritage. Even beyond conflicting religious views, the Beats would include obscene subject matter with in the same work that addresses deep spiritual themes. Baker explains the role of profane and obscene subject matter in the blues by analyzing Richard Wright, who employed the blues tradition in his writing, much like the Beats:

Literature, reduced to ‘zero degree writing,’ becomes in Wright’s canon a language in which ‘ambivalent’ words such as obscenities, parodic utterances, inversive or ironical phrases function as reductive junctures. The conventional orders of language are reduced to dialogical (two discourse ‘yoked,’ sometimes ‘violently,’ together) symbolic occasions. The result is language of startling misalliances, sacrilegious punning, scandalous repudiations. (150)

This unusual pairing of the obscene and sacred is visible in the blues with a mixture of traditional spirituals, alongside songs about drugs, gambling, and sexuality on the same recording.

Encountering these shocking contradictions is troubling to mainstream culture since the sacred and profane are traditionally kept very far removed from each other. By aligning the sacred and profane, African Americans were able to deconstruct the language of the dominant culture, creating upheaval and confusion. The spiritual element of life is mixed in with the profane for

the Beats, much like in the blues, serving a subversive purpose against mainstream culture. Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* contains explicit imagery of homosexuality, but also "alludes to exaltation and what Catholics term the Beatific Vision" (Peter Tamony 277). Even more famously known for his controversial content, Burroughs's novels were surrounded in controversy for their apparent obscene content, yet even within his works there are Christian references. The practice of signifying is able to explain much of this odd mixture. Often profane language is only used to subvert or to shock, while the Beats still have genuine spiritual feelings. Beyond signification, the paradoxical relationships within Beat writing can also be attributed to the deeply personal style of prose they practiced. The Beats sought to expose the human soul in their writing, without any editing to put it back neatly together. This meant leaving apparent contradictions that exist. The Beats were able to mimic the counter-discourse style of the blues in their writing, adding a rich layer of complexity that shocks mainstream culture.

The deeply personal nature of the blues and Beats was largely due to an emphasis on individuality, which is a key part of African American culture. Baraka describes the individual voice found in blues singers: "Each man had his own voice and his own way of shouting—his own life to sing about. The tenders of those thousands of small farms became almost identified by their individual shouts" (61). From the beginning of the blues tradition, there is a strong connection between the voice and one's life experience. Kerouac sought to replicate this connection in his own writing. As African Americans began to migrate throughout the country, the array of individual styles found in the blues began to multiply. Baraka expands on the concept of individuality in the blues and notes some of the most influential artists: "Each man sang a different blues: the Peatie Wheatstraw blues, the Blind Lemon blues, the Blind Willie Johnson blues, etc. The music remained that personal because it began with the performers

themselves and not with formalized notions of how it was to be performed” (67). This determination for personal expression that was found in the blues tradition also influenced the writing of the Beats. Individuality is a key element of Kerouac’s theory on prose, urging writers to avoid stifling their thoughts. In “Belief & Technique for Modern Prose,” Kerouac recommends, “Write what you want bottomless from bottom of your mind...the unspeakable visions of the individual” (483). Good writing for Kerouac is deeply personal and ignores the limitations and expectations of society. For Kerouac, writing is a form of expression, not a form of craft; his view of writing is like that of the blues singers who used songs to find relief from the struggles of life.

The Beat writers shared a lifestyle on the margins of society much like blues artists, and this common lifestyle produced a language to reflect it. The voices found on hundreds of blues recordings offer an authentic American voice and musical expression to go along with it. It is a voice of the past, at times resembling the hollers of slaves and chain gang prisoners, yet is ever changing to keep up with society. Since the blues tradition began in the harsh oppression of slavery, it had mastered the art of subverting a dominant force in society. The unique jargon made it possible to veil meanings from a large audience while at the same time bringing the community closer together. Similar to the blues tradition, the Beats used language to subvert the mainstream for a more multi-cultural and diverse view. The Beats gained access to the blues culture in their journeys to the outskirts of society in their search for meaning. Whether conversing in a bar or hopping onto a train, the Beats intermingled with African Americans, developing an affection for the African American mindset. Because of this connection, the Beats were able to borrow aspects of the blues in their writing to help develop their voice. The Beats

used elements of this voice and culture in their writings to articulate a view that represented a wide segment of American society.

Chapter Three: Influence of Jazz on the Beats

Norman Mailer suggests in his essay, “The White Negro,” that if there were to be a wedding band between the white Hipster and African Americans in the city, it would be marijuana; however, it seems that Mailer is wrong and that the clear and stronger tie that binds is surely jazz (243). Jazz, in the form of Bebop, was a vital aspect of Beat culture, influencing the way that the Beats viewed their world—and especially how they approached writing literature. The Beatniks were a product of bop, and in turn, the Beats developed bop into an inter-cultural movement that expanded beyond the limits of music into prose. Jazz was able to assist the Beatniks in their writing because of its spontaneous nature. There is a frantic energy to the bop that the Beats heard that was reflective of the way that the Beats viewed their world. Bop was a counter-cultural movement from jazz in the 1940s, making it even more fitting for the Beats to embrace in their struggle against the mainstream. Both bop music and Beat literature rely on incredible skill with language in order to produce a seamlessly executed, spontaneous expression of a deeply personal message.

The Beats were exposed to this African American form of music as jazz permeated the cities that the Beats occupied and across the air waves to which their radios were tuned. Kerouac was able to access African American culture through jazz before even leaving his blue collar home in Lowell, Massachusetts. Though Kerouac had not stepped into the music clubs found in the large cities while still in his hometown of Lowell, he was exposed to jazz thanks to the radio and record player. In fact, Kerouac even wrote a jazz column for his high school newspaper (*Understanding Jack Kerouac* 10), which furthers the claim that Kerouac had an interest in jazz as a youth. More importantly, jazz was present as the Beats were writing their famous works. In *Ghostlier Demarcation: Modern Poetry and the Material World*, Michael Davidson notes the importance of identifying cultural connections to poetry from “the use of pens or typewriters, the

kinds of paper they preferred, whether or not they liked to have music in the background, the type of music” (231). Davidson mentions that background music can influence a poet’s writing process, which becomes incredibly important in one of Kerouac’s experiments, “The San Francisco Tapes.” In these recordings, Kerouac chooses to include jazz music in the background, and the musician even becomes part of the conversation. Kerouac details the events behind his novel *On the Road* in “The San Francisco Tapes” to offer a glimpse at the cultural influences on Kerouac and other Beats in their most famous moments. Transcripts, in the form of dialogue, of “The San Francisco Tapes” are found in Kerouac’s novel *Visions of Cody*. During Kerouac’s conversations with Cody, he seeks to recount the events they both shared near the time of *On the Road*, and he also refers to stories of old friends who appeared in the novel. At one point in the story, Kerouac is frantically searching for a record in order to revive memories from a trip through Texas:

JACK. (Laughing) I was trying to find Billie Holliday’s record of “Body and Soul” and put it on that jukebox there, plugged in—

JACK. Yeah, but purpose ... of playing it at this moment was to evoke the musical sound—

CODY. Oh, yes ...

JACK. —of the Texas that we were talking about last night

CODY. Texas, why—

JACK. See, that’s what I was doing over there

CODY. Yeah man, I know you were, you’ve been—see, all the time I’ve been talking, every minute I’ve been speaking here about this subject, why you’ve been picking up and putting down those records and you went through the entire case

of fifty ... three times! So that means looking at both (laughing with Jack) sides of the record. (135)

The music of African Americans has been interwoven into the Beat consciousness. In order for Kerouac to recreate an accurate account of his life, he needs the voice and music of African American jazz.

Jazz music is such an integral part of Beat literature that at times that it becomes almost a character within the story, adding new dimensions. Kerouac eventually finds the Billie Holiday record for which he is looking among his collection. The tape has the voice of Billie Holiday from the record player whose reference is interspersed throughout Kerouac's conversation with Neal Cassady. Eventually, Kerouac gives the music a role of a dialogue as the old friends recount past cross country trips and Billie becomes part of the story:

BILLIE. SINGING...you old gloomy sight...

JACK. What do you think of that?

BILLIE. SINGING...you old gloomy sight...

CODY. Man, she just sits there...

BILLIE. SINGING...good morning heartaches...

JACK. Wow

BILLIE. SINGING...thought we said goodbye last night..." (136).

The two Beats converse with this African-American blues singer through the mechanism of the record player. It is as though Billie Holiday is actually there with them. This provides a concrete view of how the Beats interacted with African Americans. Kerouac integrates African American-derived music into his Western-derived written discourse to create a new multi-culture aesthetics. Here, the Beat writer's initial and often lonely act of written conversation is

reinforced and enriched by the complimentary artistic skills of the African American jazz artist. While they may not have been involved in a circle of jazz musicians to flesh out their ideas, they were able to encounter African American culture through their radios and record players thanks to changing technology. As the Beats utilize the technology of sound as the primary medium of textual dialogue, it is more than just a reflection of the current electronic age, or what Walter Ong calls secondary orality—the orality of radio and record players. Instead, the use of technology of sound makes Beat literature in form and context a relevant art form of its time. Kerouac's decision to include Billie Holliday as a character shows the influence that black music had on the Beats—so much that he holds the voice of Billie Holiday at the same level of friends who were present during the events of his life. As Kerouac explores his memories, the jazz Singer is as real a presence in his life as is his friend Neal Cassady. Audience for this new multicultural piece is crucial, because it eliminates the usual spatial and temporal gaps among writer, musician, reader, listener, black, and white. The text is set in an artistic frame that evokes a marriage of Western and African American music that energizes the text and lifts it from the printed page into a spirited experience.

Ginsberg also reflects the presence of jazz in his life experiences and in his writing. In his poem “Kaddish,” written upon his mother's death in the tradition of a Jewish poem of mourning, Ginsberg again shows the influence of African American music on his life: “I've been up all night, talking, / talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph / the rhythm the rhythm—and your memory in my head three years after” (217). Ginsberg is coping with his mother's death by listening to Ray Charles, another artist who combines the blues voice with jazz music to create a uniquely African-American style of music. Again, technology—the phonograph—has brought African-American

culture—through music—into the daily life of a white man and in a very intimate way. The jazz rhythm mixes with Ginsberg's memories of his late mother, allowing him to engage in the therapeutic elements of jazz, which are able to move across cultural lines. Ginsberg imitates the song by creating rhythm within his own poem. At the same time, Ginsberg demonstrates the cultural interchanges taking place as he blends his Western writing tradition with Jewish poetry and then finally with an audible Ray Charles from African American culture.

For William S. Burroughs, jazz music played a prominent role in his life, even acting as a therapeutic cure for his early heroin addiction. Burroughs, in his largely autobiographical novel *Junky*, writes of the therapeutic power of jazz and its importance in his life: "At night, I would take two strips of Benzedrine and go out to a bar where I sat right by the jukebox. When you're sick, music is a great help. Once, in Texas, I kicked a habit on weed, a pint of paregoric and a few Louis Armstrong records" (23). As seen with the other Beats, Burroughs is also experiencing African American music as a result of technology. The fact that Burroughs is able to experience the full effect of jazz music suggests that technology is a successful medium that is able to provide an unfiltered sampling of African American culture. Jazz music is able to accomplish for Burroughs what years in rehabilitation centers were not able to do. Burroughs is connecting with jazz at its most basic level: a therapy for the troubled soul. Given the history of jazz, it is should be no surprise that the music influences Burroughs in healing way. Black music was born out of the turmoil of slavery, providing relief for the weary souls that were crushed under oppression.

A history of persecution and struggle from slavery to the Jim Crow era is a defining element of African American culture and one with which the Beats identified. American public policy and ideology marginalized and rendered them voiceless. Just as they found a voice

through spirituals and work songs during the slavery era and blues during the Harlem Renaissance, jazz became their voice during the fifties and sixties. Amiri Baraka views music as the central element of the African American voice. Baraka explains in *Blues People* that the harsh slave life stifled African Americans' ability to find their voice at first, even in music. He notes, "The emotional limitations that slavery must enforce are monstrous: the weight of this bondage makes impossible for the slave a great many alternatives into which the shabbiest of free man can project himself" (60). The stifling effects of slavery limited the ability of slaves to respond, but it did not silence them. The infant stages of African American music were basic, yet it still fulfilled its purpose of providing a relief from the toil of slavery. Baraka attributes the plainness of early African-America music, which he identifies as the "work song," to a lack of individuality within the slave's consciousness (*Blues People* 60). The brutal system of chattel slavery sought to deprive African Americans of any sense of identity beyond work, a concrete symbol of the worker whose only value is as commodity. Just as the slaves felt like commodities, being bought sold and traded, the Beats also felt like commodities. The slave work songs, which Baraka describes as "shouts and hollers," and which Dubois also calls "sorrow songs," served as basic expressions of turmoil and as "strident laments, more than anything. They were also chronicles, but of such a mean kind of existence that they could not assume the universality any lasting musical form must have" (*Blues People* 60). While these early songs were basic, after the Civil War, this rudimentary form of expression would begin to flourish into the blues before becoming jazz.

After the Civil War, African Americans began to move about the country, particularly to cities, thus allowing for cross cultural exchanges and the beginnings of a stronger, more cohesive identity within African American culture. While there was a certain level of liberation and

freedom in day to day life, most African Americans were still forced to toil and were very much ~~still~~ on the margins of society. With their new-found, though limited leisure, African Americans began to expand their musical repertoire, most significantly by adding instruments. Baraka notes that while African instruments, such as drums, jawbone scrapers, and banjos, were scarcely present in slave work songs, musical tools became more prominent after the Civil War with blues artists trading banjos for the guitars, which are very similar in nature to the banjo (*Blues People* 69). While the guitar is generally not included in jazz, especially not in Bebop, the essential aim, philosophy, or purpose of the guitar in blues serves as a foundation to jazz. Baraka explains that the spread of instruments in African American music did contribute to the music because they used the instruments to fit their needs so that unlike in “classical or ‘legitimate’ guitar: the strings had to make vocal sounds, to imitate the human voice and its eerie cacophonies” (*Blues People* 69-70). African Americans were able to take traditional musical instruments and then subvert them to fit into the intimate style of the Negro work song, which so poignantly expressed their sorrow and frustration with society. David Ake notes in jazz cultures that African Americans were not well regarded by their Creol counterparts in New Orleans because “they incorporated a number of instrumental effects (blues-inflected slurs, ‘growls,’ etc)” (18). By adding vocals, they were radically changing European music. Rather than conforming to the Western standard, these early jazz musicians ignored the traditional “musical notation” and instead changed the music to fit their needs. The Beats would act similarly by ignoring grammatical rules in an effort to achieve more personal expression. African Americans began to adapt traditional instruments to fit their highly vocal style. Baraka wrote on the vocal presence found in jazz, saying that “[e]ven much later in the jazz tradition, not only were instruments made to sound like the human voice but a great many of the predominantly instrumental songs were still partially sung” (*Blues*

People 70). This intersection between language and music that was explored by African Americans is taken even further by Kerouac as he records jazz poetry. By doing so, Kerouac was following in the footsteps of African American musicians who were constantly manipulating music to fit their needs. Due to its innovative nature, Negro music is able to provide a uniquely African American voice within traditional music by transforming it into a less technical and more personal technique. When Kerouac later used Bebop style jazz as a model for writing, it was a perfectly natural view of music from an African American perspective. Kerouac and his fellow Beats would encounter this African American perspective on music as jazz spread throughout America, especially the counter-cultural boom of Bebop in America's big cities. These early glimpses of African American music show the important element of innovation, which was especially important to Bebop. Innovation was also a vital part of Beat writing as the Beats were constantly trying to find better forms of expression.

Despite its tremendous influence on American culture, the origins of jazz cannot be entirely traced. While jazz and blues share many of the same qualities, it was the influence of European brass instruments that set jazz apart from the blues. While Baraka asserts that jazz cannot be traced to one geographical location, he does use New Orleans as an example of how jazz was formed:

The black man must have been impressed not only by the words and dances of the quadrilles and minuets he learned from the French settlers of New Orleans, but by the instruments of the white Creoles employed to play them. So New Orleans Negroes became interested in the tubas, clarinets, trombones and trumpets of the white marching bands, which were also popular in New Orleans as well as in many other Southern cities. (*Blues People* 73)

African Americans adapted these new European instruments after being introduced to them by the Creoles. Ake notes that at first Creoles viewed African American musicians as “unschooled” because they were not “attached to the European art-music tradition” (18). However, the Creoles eventually “grudgingly acknowledged the superiority of Uptown musicians’ [African American] improvisational ability and expressive fire” (19). There are striking similarities between the way African Americans subvert European language through signifying and their acquisition of European music. Baraka draws from historical accounts to provide a glimpse at the Negro mastery of brass instruments: “One example of the way Negroes used European rhythms in junction with their own West African rhythms was the funeral procession. The march to the cemetery was played in slow, dirge like 4/4 cadence...but made into a kind of raw and bluesy Napoleonic military march” (*Blues People* 74). This innovation found during the funeral is further expanded after the event: “After the burial, the band, once removed some good distance from the cemetery, usually broke into the uptempo part of the march at some approximation of 2/4 quadrille” (*Blues People* 74). The 2/4 quadrille would have been faster paced than the 4/4 cadence performed at the funeral, creating a more energetic feeling. This more energetic style would emerge in jazz to the point of almost seeming uncontrolled. African Americans were able to successfully play mainstream tunes, which were accepted by society, but developed their unique style that better expressed their American experience at the same time.

Major innovations began taking place within jazz as a result of the changing socio-economic make up of America after World War I propelled the status of jazz to a new place in society. As African Americans moved to the cities in large numbers, the already-thriving “Negro Middle Class” experienced growth. Baraka notes that the African American middle class began to encompass not only “professional men and educators, but after the move to the north it also

included men who worked in the factories” (143). This influx of African Americans from the South exposed the North to African American culture, most importantly their music. The exposure to white middle class culture also influenced African Americans who sought to achieve a middle class style that mimicked their white counterparts. This is lamented by Baraka who says that the “Negro middle class wanted to become simply white Americans” (143). This movement toward assimilation also led African American jazz to try to appeal more to a broader audience. This new style attempted to be “smoother,” abandoning much of the improvisational blues tradition. Baraka comments on jazz’s distancing from the blues and its significance: “The Negro middle class would not have a music if it were not for jazz. The white man would have no access to the blues. It was a music capable of reflecting not only the Negro and black America but a white America as well” (*Blues People* 148-149). jazz began a cross culture dialogue that was not previously available in America, but there was a loss of African American culture or what Baraka even calls a “cultural breakdown.” Jazz was gradually removed from its African American context, which was solidified as white musicians began to play jazz, molding it into a new style called Swing (*Blues People* 149). African Americans were no longer able to hear their unique voice within jazz music because it was gradually “stolen,” and then manufactured by corporate white America. As jazz grew in popularity in the 1920s, it also became less authentically African American and, instead, simply American.

The mainstream acceptance of jazz would have been positive if it were not for the fact that the Negro was marginalized from his own music. The music became more detached from the African-American culture that was heralded by jazz. White musicians even ceased to learn the music from authentic African Americans. Baraka affirms this claim, stating, “In many cases, the most profound influence on young white musicians was the music of other white [jazz]

musicians” (*Blues People* 151). As white musicians brought jazz to the masses, it was not a pure form of jazz and was in many ways different from the jazz played by black musicians. Baraka emphasizes that the difference between white and black musicians would not be visible when considering their music, but instead is noticeable in the attitude behind the music (*Blues People* 153). Baraka expands on this thought in *Black Music* where he points out the importance of the attitude of the jazz artist by noting that “[a] printed musical example of an Armstrong solo, or of a Thelonius Monk solo, tells us almost nothing except the futility of formal musicology when dealing with jazz. Not only are the various jazz effects almost impossible to notate, but each note *means something* quite in adjunct to musical notation” (14-15). The essence or attitude of the musician, particularly the soloist, was a quality that could not be translated, copied, or mass produced by the recording industry of corporate America. This commercialization of jazz through the rise of the recording industry led to the need for fewer African Americans compared to the era of live bands. However, they did attempt to re-create the genuine spirit of jazz, but instead they temporarily stifled jazz in the process. The record labels contributed to the intrusion of commercialism into African American music through its exposure to the mainstream. The only voices that were heard were those that conformed to the white Swing jazz or Big Band style, which had largely neglected the Negro roots of the music. As a result, the commercial sector of music began to phase out African Americans from jazz as Baraka explains:

The prominence of radio had also created a new medium for this new music, and the growing numbers of white swing bands automatically qualified for these fairly well paying jobs: “The studio work was monopolized by a small group of musicians who turn up on hundreds of records by orchestras of every kind. One of the least admirable characteristics of the entire arrangement was that it was

almost completely restricted to white musicians and it was the men from the white orchestras getting the work.’ (Samuel Charters qtd. in *Blues People* 163-64)

As African Americans gained acceptance into the middle class, they were forced to surrender their ownership of jazz and allowed it to be distorted by the demands of mainstream white society through the recording industry as a consequence. This did have benefits such as a new-found wealth. Gene Santoro, author of *Highway 61 Revisited: The Tangled Roots of American Jazz, Blues, and Country Music*, points out such as case with the famous jazz musician Louie Armstrong. He notes that “entertainment was an indispensable aspect of [Armstrong’s] art; he enthralled a mass multiracial audience, which made him forever synonymous with jazz as well as rich” (1). This is just one example of how commercialization changed jazz.

A new style of jazz began to arise in the 1940s, which sought to remove itself from mainstream Swing. This new form was termed “Bebop,” which was derived from the “onomatopoeic” sound to simulate the music. Bebop musicians were not simply counter-cultural and anti-mainstream, but also challenged the bourgeoisie found within the African American community. The counter-culture nature of the Bebop had an extraordinary effect not only on the African American community, but perhaps even more so on the Beats. The opposition to a society that sought to stifle the individual was a common frustration. Baraka emphasizes the centrality of Bebop as a counter-culture movement: “The *beboppers* showed up to restore jazz, in some sense, to its original separateness, to drag it outside the mainstream of American culture again” (*Blues People* 181). Swing had turned jazz into an ineffective mode of expression for African Americans. Scott Yanow, author of *Bebop*, explains that “big band swing was in a bit of a rut. Many of the orchestras had similar sounds and were playing interchangeable (and often commercial) material using predictable chord changes. Most of the sidemen were restricted to

brief solos” (3). The individual voice in jazz was tightly constrained within the context of Swing, leading some African Americans to look outside of jazz for a new voice. By finding a truer, more primordial black voice, the Bebop movement returned to early African American culture while at the same time carving out new space in society with their music. The Bebop musicians were able to separate themselves from mainstream jazz rather than continuing to fit into a constrained space in society. Jack Kerouac, in an essay on bop, comments on the misplaced location of jazz in white society and the bop movement’s realization of this mistake: “The band realized the goof of life that had made them be not only misplaced in a white nation but mis-noticed for what they really were” (“The Beginning of Bop” 556). To Kerouac, jazz artists like Louis Armstrong who viewed themselves as entertainers rather than artists had gone astray. Yanow notes that “bop musicians felt that their main allegiance was to the music itself, which they considered an art form rather than merely a part of the entertainment world” (4). This shift to a more artistic view of jazz also allowed jazz to be more personal. This was much closer to the origins of the blues tradition when music fit the need of the performer with no intended audience present. The Beats, following in the steps of bop, would assert that the traditional academic poetic voice was also misplaced and would seek to carve out a new voice for American poetry.

In order to produce this authentic voice and space in their music, Bebop artists created a radically new style of music. Jazz, or what it had evolved into as Big Band and Swing, posed a threat to African American culture because of the limitations it had adapted. Swing, which had been subsumed by white culture, with white critics who dictated the standards and prescribed formula for jazz, left little room for individuality or for exploring the marginalized African American voice. The lack of authentic space within Swing posed a problem for restless bop

musicians. Robert Holton notes in his essay, "Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity," the importance of space, saying, "In the absence of an alternative space structured by some alternative set of conventions, language, and so on, alienation can only lead to an uninhabitable void" (14). This was a similar problem that the Beats experienced as they struggled to find a place to express themselves in a positive manner. This led them to crime and drugs before discovering a space through spontaneous prose. However, the bop movement was able to overcome this absence of space by returning to early African American roots. The bop movement, though still following many of the tenets of jazz, did so, but with a good deal of improvisation informed by its African American roots. Holton goes on to mention that "[i]t is important to emphasize the sense that these anomic spaces [such as bebop and the Beats] were valuable not solely as spaces of individual eccentricity, but more importantly as sites of reconstructed community" (23). Both the Beat writing and bop began to recover elements from the past. In the case of the Beats, they rejected modernism and instead reached back to the Romantic poets and early African American culture. For bop, this involved looking past modern Swing for inspiration. While jazz provided a framework for bop musicians within which to work, their individualistic expression more closely resembled the early African American blues tradition. Baraka comments on how bop drew from the blues tradition by noting, "Be-bop re-established blue as the most important African American form in Negro music by its surprisingly contemporary restatement of the blues impulse" (*Blues People* 194). Rather than create a totally new voice, bebop reconstructed the African American voice of the past and placed it within a modern context. Yanow points out that with a renewed interest in the blues by bop musicians, "the blues reappeared in many titles" (3). The importance of this blues-centered African

American voice was a renewed sense of authenticity that was achieved by returning to its heritage for direction rather than to the mainstream, which used constraining formulas.

Refusing to accept formulas and avoiding the mainstream, Charlie “Bird” Parker stands as one of the most respected bop musician in Beat literature. Parker acted as an emissary of bop, extending it beyond the African American community and making it “hip.” Parker has many of the Beat qualities. He is a clear predecessor to the Beat movement and is viewed as almost a spiritual instructor or even Buddha, as Kerouac refers to him in his “239th Chorus,” from *Mexico City Blues*. Richard Quinn, in his article “Jack Kerouac, Charlie Parker, and the Poetics of Beat Improvisation,” describes Parker as he was found at his death, in a very “Beatific” way: “On March 12, 1955, the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswater found her houseguest’s dead body sprawled across the sofa ... Legend has him dying in front of the television, laughing at jugglers on the Dorsey Brothers Show. The death certificate estimated his age at between fifty and sixty, but Charlie (“Bird”) Parker was only thirty-four years old” (152). Parker was “beat,” dying in an unfamiliar place while on the road. More than likely, he was traveling for the endless touring that was associated with his status as a musician. The traveling lifestyle of a musician is very similar to the transient lifestyle of the Beats, both spreading their art in new places. Parker avoided the mainstream, unlike contemporary jazz musicians of his time. In fact, his appearance very much meets the description of an early Beat. Billy Eckstine describes the first time he met Charlie Parker in the early 1950s in New York: “We were standing around one morning when a guy comes up that looks like he just got off a freight car, the raggedest guy you’d want to see at this moment” (qtd. in *Charlie Parker: His Music and Life* 14). His appearance and lifestyle stand in contrast to the mainstream Jazz musicians who were earning large salaries and making television appearances. Parker would have been a sore sight for any television audience at the

time. He was unable to enter the mainstream because of his dedication to his own personal art, which did not fit with mainstream standards that were geared for entertainment. Parker instead played at bars within cities, appealing to those on the margins, just as the Beats centered their lives on traveling and seeking marginalized groups. The Beats and Parker also shared other aspects of their lifestyles, such as destructive habits. A self-destructive addiction to heroin took years off Parker's life, causing him to die early and leaving his body unrecognizable for its real age. Many of the Beats met a similar fate, such as Kerouac, dying in his forties from alcoholism. In his essay "Thrivin' From a Riff: Charlie Parker as a Multicultural Icon," Brian Flota explains how Parker's counter-cultural lifestyle broadened his appeal across cultural lines. He states, "But it was Parker's greatest weakness that made him so endearing, rebellious, dangerous, and 'authentic' to his many fans—his addiction to heroin. This greatly contributed to the image of the black jazz musician as outlaw, risking incarceration by indulging in illicit drug use for the betterment of one's art" (110). The Beats were drawn to Parker's individual spirit, which resisted conformity and pushed experiences to their limit. While the Beats and Parker were not actually part of the same community, similarities in lifestyle are clearly visible and their philosophies are almost identical.

Jack Kerouac's personal philosophy of prose was largely informed by the music of Charlie Parker. Kerouac's writing theory is mostly clearly outlined in the "Belief & Technique of Spontaneous Prose," and later with more clarity in the "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" where Kerouac records the basic tenets of writing prose. Ann Charters, in her introduction to Kerouac's prose, notes that Kerouac put his prose theory into writing at "the request of Allen Ginsberg and Williams S. Burroughs in the fall of 1953, after he had shown them the manuscript of *The Subterraneans*. His friends were so impressed by the fact that he'd written the entire

book in three nights sitting at a table” (481). Kerouac’s introduction would not find the same welcome that he received from his friends as he presented his spontaneous method to the mainstream public. Publishers sought to over edit *The Subterraneans*, diminishing the effect of his spontaneous prose. Theado notes that Kerouac fought to preserve the text as it was written from those three nights: “He had to fight with the strength of his artistic convictions when he had very little going for him as a professional author” (*Understanding Jack Kerouac* 114). Much like Parker, Kerouac was unwilling to sacrifice his art for mainstream success. In a letter to an editor for *The Subterraneans* in 1957, Kerouac writes: “I can’t possibly go on as a responsible prose artist ... if I let editors take my sentences, which are my phrases that I separate by dashes when ‘I draw a breath,’ ... & riddle them with commas, cut them in half, in threes, in fours, ruining the swing, making what was reasonably wordy prose even more wordy and unnaturally awkward (because castrated)” (114). When Grove finally published the novel, Kerouac spent “five additional nights” in the effort of “restoring the prose to what he felt was its original swing” (*Understanding Jack Kerouac* 114). Just as bop was looked down upon by critics for its frantic style, Kerouac’s prose was also accused of being too unruly. Kerouac was carving a new style with his spontaneous prose, one that followed the human voice rather than established rules of writing. In order to capture the rapidly occurring events, Kerouac needed to record them in a quick fashion (three nights on Benzedrine) with a language that could keep up with his experience. It is fitting that Kerouac’s prose theory would first appear alongside a subject matter that was inspired by the bop culture. Kerouac would continue to perfect his spontaneous prose method, reaching a mastery of it in novels like *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*. He would also set out instructions for following his method.

Within the “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” clear parallels can be found between Kerouac’s style of writing and the bebop style of jazz authored by Parker. Richard Quinn analyzes the influence of Parker on Kerouac’s writing by commenting that “Kerouac’s ‘Belief & Techniques for Modern Prose’ is a collaboration not because he and Parker sat down and developed the work together but, because without Parker’s sound, Kerouac’s text seems incomplete” (152). In order to describe his new method of writing, Kerouac finds it necessary to use jazz terminology to express his method. While there are tremendous differences between music and language, Kerouac believed that the fast-paced and unrestrained method of bop was perfectly suited for explaining this new uninhibited form of writing. It was not necessarily a technical construction of bop from which Kerouac draws. Instead, the essence of bop is found in his writing. In the “Editor’s Introduction,” Robert Creeley explains this important connection to Parker in Kerouac’s rules of prose: “both [Kerouac and Parker] wanted to do and did was to ‘take in’ all that the senses apprehended, to move with the complexity of the moment’s demand, to be ‘with it,’ as jazz was, not ‘about it’ as authoritarian writing and criticism then argued ... No precedent ‘form’ or preconception could ever there in the same way. Jazz was the parallel” (qtd. in *The Portable Jack Kerouac* 482). By creating a literary parallel to jazz, Kerouac was able to expand African American culture to new places in society and improve American literature with an influx of diversity.

Rather than trying to translate each bop technique into a parallel writing approach, Kerouac instead looks for the heart of bop. This is evident in his seventh rule of “Belief & Technique For Modern Prose,” which is, “Blow as deep as you want to blow” (Kerouac 483). While there is certainly no way for the writer to blow his poetry, it is possible for him to express himself with the same intense passion of Charlie Parker blowing long and deep into his

saxophone. In his “29th Chorus,” Kerouac provides imagery of the jazz musician blowing:

“Man, now, you won’t let me talk’ / Gripes the irreligious feline cat— / That cat has no trumpet / But bubblegum to blow” (*Mexico City Blues* 29). Here, the trumpet is associated with the communicative voice. Furthermore, in this verse, Kerouac seems to be hinting at the author’s—or musician’s—true voice. In *Visions of Cody*, Neal Cassady is impressed by the jazz musician’s ability to blow his instrument:

CODY. Now Coleman comes in...listen to Coleman. (Coleman comes in low toned, fast) Hee hee hee way down there (gesturing low at waist)

JACK. Yeah

CODY. Hear it? (they laugh and gloat) See? he keeps blowin. Now here comes Benny, Benny plays like he did first only he backs off more, listen...hear it?

Hear?

CODY. (Laughing ecstatically) Blows that sonumbitch does. Of course (changing his tone) near the ending he falls apart here. (143)

Cassady and Kerouac are impressed with the jazz musician’s ability to carry the note for an extended amount of time. This would have required tremendous strength, emotion, and dedication to the craft. Eventually, the musician begins to lose the note as he continues to blow. Kerouac’s interest in the authentic self is consistent with his fascination with the musician arriving at exhaustion for the sake of his art. Kerouac sought this raw and personal style within poetry with the poet reaching deep inside of himself to bring out emotions. He even thought this may at times be detrimental to the poet’s work; however, the method is still authentic and real, not fabricated from American commercialism.

Unlike commercial jazz, Parker aimed to engage his audience on a personal level instead of merely being entertaining. This participatory quality of bop would later influence Kerouac's writing philosophy. Parker's bop style of music borrowed from European musical tradition, but he also created a unique spin and manipulated the music. This made his music noticeably different. Quinn details several distinctive qualities of Parker's music, using the 1945 recording of "Koko," performed by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie: "Phrases begin and end unexpectedly, and asymmetrical accentuation ignores traditional song beat/weak beat distinctions...Gillespie comps asymmetrically and sparsely with occasional subtle chords, seemingly appearing out of nowhere at unpredictable points. The overall effect on listener is one of angularity, swooping, motion, aural disruptions and intellectual disorientation" (161). The listener is forced to become an active participant in order to enjoy the music, which is in constant fluctuation. This irregular and exciting style can be seen as a reflection of the unorthodox lifestyle bop musicians inhabited in the margins of society. While the post-war world seemed chaotic and lacking a strong definition or standard, a sense of order can be found in Parker's music. Despite the asymmetrical style of bop, the music is not chaos; in fact, Parker has a mastery of the music that allows him to do these unconventional motifs. Impressed by this, Kerouac employs similar motifs in his poetry. For example, in his "159th Chorus," he uses similar sounds to draw the reader in:

Blook Bleak.

Bleak was book,

Blook on the Moutaintop,

Bleak;

Blake by the Mountainside,

Baah! (*Mexico City Blues* 159)

The repetition of similar words creates a feeling that is very similar to musical instruments being played. The reader can identify a rhythm to the text, yet it is interrupted, much in the same way that bop is. Quinn notes the bebop quality in Kerouac's "159th Chorus": "Some poems, like chorus 159, display brief motifs with slight variations ... A sense of improvised semantics, the intelligent selection of a poetic structure coming into being through the combination of articulate language ('Blake by the Mountainside') and alliterative sound ('Bleak was Book') is the dominant motif" (161). Kerouac's poetry is a mixture of personal experience with traditional themes that create a complex structure. This alternating style between traditional and spontaneous sound is a close reflection of language based on Parker's bop style.

In order to pursue a pure and uninhibited style of writing that mimicked bop, the Beat writer would have to abandon traditional rules of writing. Michael Hrebenaik, in his book *Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form*, notes the obstruction that traditional prose rules posed to Kerouac: "Such challenges to what Kerouac terms the 'gray faced Academic quibbling' and 'dry rules ... set down' by Eliot and the New Critics complement an impromptu strain in the nation's poetics initiated by Whitman" (183). Very similar to how bop musicians looked back to early African American slave songs for a voice, the Beats also looked back to Romantic writers, such as Whitman, rather than following modern rules. Romantic authors did influence the spontaneous style of the Beats, yet the Beats were able to find a freedom in their poetic voice from the influence of bop. John Tytell explains that it was the influence of Parker that gave Kerouac the inspiration to ignore the rules of grammar to instead pursue the rhythm and style of bop:

The [removal of] arbitrary barriers of conventional punctuation, sentences could correspond to rhetorical breath notations, and to the actual inner flow of

experience as recorded by the mind. In the early forties Kerouac had been listening to the bebop of Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk, and their music formed the basis of a new sense of rhythm which he adapted to his own prose line. (143-44).

Kerouac mimicked bop to find a system of punctuation that fit a more natural human voice rather than the rigid traditional system. As he says, “tap yourself the song of yourself, blow!—now!—your way is the only way” (“Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” 485). Kerouac suggests that bop or jazz is a more natural expression of the human voice than traditional prose technique and should be followed to create a more genuine poetry. Prose for Kerouac was not merely recounting events or arranging words to create an effect, but instead was a deeply personal recreation of events as the author perceived them. There is a feeling of intensity associated with the image of a musician blowing into an instrument. Just as the musician blows out the air from deep inside his lungs so does the prose writer exhausts himself by blowing out feelings from his soul into his type writer. This makes sense as jazz was derived from a deeply personal and suffering voice found in African American work songs that were created during slavery.

The sometimes subtle, yet still highly important, elements of bop within Beat literature are brought to full focus in Jack Kerouac’s jazz-poetry recordings. In these recordings, Kerouac combines his poetry with jazz musicians. His first jazz poetry recording, *Poetry for the Beat Generation*, was released in 1959 with little acclaim. However, Kerouac had more success in his next recording, *Blues and Haikus*, which featured poems from *Mexico City Blues*. Barry Wallenstein, in his article “Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding,” believes that Kerouac’s recordings are more reflective of his jazz influences. He writes that “Jack Kerouac, with his love for jazz and his own expansive style of composition, was a fine jazz poet—much

better, I think with the music than on the page—, through his novels, especially the early ones, did much to promulgate the jazz mystique” (610). The presence of jazz music is able to further elevate Kerouac as a jazz poet. He is able to make connections that were not possible through the medium of the written word. Through the recordings, the aural nature of Kerouac’s poetry is enhanced, revealing even more of Kerouac’s attempt to create a real and authentic voice within his writing. The recordings also show Kerouac’s effort to find new ways of expression and a willingness to incorporate technology and combine mediums.

The evolving nature of Beat poetry, drawn from the oral tradition of African American culture, required new methods of expressions. This search for fresh avenues of expression is evident in the use of a tape recorder in *Visions of Cody* and even more so in Kerouac’s jazz recordings. Kerouac was not alone in combining poetry and jazz as others followed his example, such as Ginsberg who released a jazz-poetry album and Amiri Baraka who released *New York Art Quartet* in 1965. Wallenstein comments on the effectiveness of Kerouac by writing, “The connection of voice to music is handled differently on *Blues and Haikus*, Kerouac’s record with Zoot Sims and Al Cohn. In keeping with the call-and-response tradition, the saxophonists answer each line of poetry with a line of music” (611). Kerouac was able to extend the reach of jazz into a new medium and also added a new dimension to it by combining his poetry with the music. While jazz had already been accompanied by the blues singer, adding poetry provided a more academic range for jazz. In Barry Wallenstein’s article, “The Jazz-Poetry Connection,” Warren Tallman is quoted as saying, “in the jazz world of the bop generation where Charlie Parker is king and founder, Jack Kerouac, in a different medium, is heir apparent” (129). With a remarkable exchange in culture, Kerouac was able to bring jazz to a new level by creating new meaning as poetry both comments and compliments the music. The spontaneous style of bop

was combined with a spontaneous language to match it. With this new style of expression, the human voice is represented in even more ways. Although *Blues and Haikus* is not generally considered successful and is rarely mentioned in relation to Kerouac's career, it does show Kerouac's affinity for jazz music and his view that jazz and poetry were interconnected.

Just as other Beat writers followed him with recording jazz-poetry, Jack Kerouac was not alone among the Beats in using bop style in his literature. In fact, Allen Ginsberg reflects this bebop influenced style of poetry by repeating similar motifs throughout his poetry. Gordon Ball, in his article "Wopbopgooglemop: 'Howl' And Its Influences," comments on the presence of jazz in Ginsberg's poetry:

At the heart of Ginsberg there's Kerouac: Ginsberg was inspired to write spontaneously (and frequently) by Kerouac's example, as well as by his manifest, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,' and his *Book of Dreams*. Equally important he was inspired by the sound of Kerouac's prose and poetry, the 'wopbopgooglemop,' which Kerouac derived in part from his eclectic mix of interests. (93)

It was Kerouac who studied bebop and its relationship to writing, but he was sure to pass on his knowledge to his fellow Beats. Ginsberg was largely influenced by Kerouac's enthusiasm for jazz and incorporated it into his own poetry. Bop themes are noticeable in Ginsberg's early poem, "Bop Lyrics." As signaled by the name, bop was an important element of Ginsberg's poetry. "Bop Lyrics" was written early in Ginsberg's career, showing the influence of bop on the young Beats as they were finding their poetic voice. Ginsberg uses a repetitive motif with the chorus through the poem: "Smart went crazy / Smart went crazy" ("Bop Lyrics" 50). The rhyming in the poem revolves around sanity, reflective of a counter-culture topic of challenging

the status quo. Ginsberg continues this theme through the poem writing: "All the doctors think I'm crazy; / The truth is really that I'm lazy; / I made visions to beguile 'em / Till they put me in th'asylum" ("Bop Lyrics" 50). The lyrics have a rhythmic flow that is very similar to bop music with a swooning emphasis. This was common in music by Charlie Parker. The incorporation of bop style provided Ginsberg poetry with a "hip" feel that would have fit with the African American neighborhoods in which he was living. His poetry does not hinge on these elements, but they make a significant contribution to the sound and style of his poetry. While direct elements of jazz are not always as visible in Ginsberg's poetry as in Kerouac's, these elements are still present. Ginsberg's poem, "Howl," contains stylistic and thematic elements of bop. Ginsberg most notably combines bop lingo with traditionally Jewish phrases. He refers to "bop kabbalah," and then toward the end of part one of "Howl," Ginsberg writes: "the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio" (139). He places the words of Christ into a new context, which resembles bop lyrics. This is an interesting context for the incorporation of jazz culture and an example of the sacred and profane appearing in Beat poetry. This mixture of jazz terminology might appear sacrilegious because of its exclusive emphasis on the human suffering of Christ. Ginsberg provides the voice of Christ with a wailing instrument, which blows out the pain from deep inside his soul. Ginsberg's representation of existence is highly influenced by a bop mindset, which he uses for both interpretation and expression. However, it is likely that Ginsberg would not have been aware of bop theory in relation to his writing without the work of Kerouac to first draw out possible connections.

One of the most important and well known tenets in Beat literature and bebop music is the shared emphasis on spontaneity. Kerouac describes this in his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” urging writers to begin from a spontaneous point. He writes, “Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment* of writing, and write outwards swimming in the sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion” (485). Rather than drawing from the outside world or society, Kerouac urges the writer to look within himself to a fresh and spontaneous idea. Kerouac recognizes the difficulty of language and instead advocates a spontaneous method that does not rely on language, but draws on images and music. In “Belief & Technique For Modern Prose,” Kerouac suggests, “struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in your mind ... Don’t think of words when you stop but to see the picture better ... No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge ... Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it” (483). This style of writing is deeply personal and seeks to convey emotions that go beyond words. They are more similar to emotions produced through music such as jazz. In advocating the need for a deeply personal art, Kerouac draws from the philosophy of Charlie Parker. Parker suggests, “Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn. They teach you there’s a boundary line to music, but, man, there’s no boundary line to art. I lit my fire, I greased my skillet, and I cooked” (*Charlie Parker: His Music and Life* vii). Parker emphasizes that art should be personal and the most important influence on the artist should be his soul. In an era in which music had become extremely formalized and constrained into a box, Parker wished to explode this idea. Kerouac echoes this call for unrestrained expression in prose: “Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better” (“Belief & Technique For Modern Prose” 483). This uninhibited style

of art allowed those on the margins to have a voice without having to be approved by society's measure of good or bad. They denied the very value of conventional literary standards. By doing so, the Beats allowed their writing to be unhindered by them. To have absolutely no standards would have made for incredibly bad art, but the Kerouac insisted on a higher standard, which was to remain accountable to one's own personal art. Kerouac writes on the purpose of following one's own standard, saying, "your way is the only way—'good'—or 'bad'—always honest, ('ludicrous'). Spontaneous, 'confessional' interesting, because not 'crafted.' Craft is craft" ("Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" 485). Kerouac's writing goal was true expression, not fitting into the mold of preconceived standards. To follow conventional standards only resulted in "craft," which was cold and calculated rather than a glimpse into the human soul. Kerouac and Parker were both searching for a form of expression that was not simply following tradition, but instead deeply intimate, relatable, and unrestrained.

In order to achieve spontaneous expression, whether in bop or prose, it is necessary to break or defy traditional rules. Kerouac closes his "list of essentials by urging writers to begin, "Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better" ("Belief & Technique for Modern Prose" 483). There was the risk of becoming incoherent and meaningless while trying to produce such unorthodox writing. With instances such as with Ginsberg and Burroughs being labeled obscene and even banned, many felt the writers did step over the line of art. However, Kerouac was deeply concerned with his art being both true and expressive. In Kerouac's "The First Word: Jack Kerouac Takes a Fresh Look at Jack Kerouac," he demonstrates that he was aware of the danger of spontaneity producing meaningless prose: "I'd gone so far to the edges of language where the babble of the subconscious begins ... I began to rely too much on babble in my nervous race away from cantish clichés, chased the proton too

close with my microscope, ended up ravingly enslaved to sounds, became unclear and dull as in my ultimate literary experiment.” He then goes on to add that “[t]here’s a delicate balancing point between bombast and babble” (487). The fact that Kerouac recognizes and corrects himself from this possible pitfall is evidence of the intellectual framework that supports spontaneous prose. While spontaneous prose may appear to be wild and uncontrolled, there is an underlying standard from the artist that restrains the art. Robert Quinn refutes the notion that spontaneity reduces intellectual prowess. He writes, “bebop employs spontaneity as a significant element, but equally important is an intellectual mixture of past and present in which improvisers call upon musical traditions and practiced riffs” (153). Bop is sometimes portrayed as talentless practice that relies on emotion, but this view ignores the complexity required for improvisation. Bop musicians were able to utilize a broad base of knowledge in order to employ these two modes in a spontaneous manner when on stage or in the recording studio. This knowledge touches on both early African American style and the best of contemporary jazz. Quinn emphasizes this point by noting that “Parker first understood white popular song forms before converting them into improvisational experiences of complex meaning” (154). Parker understood that one must have a proper understanding of skill before manipulating it in new and unexplored directions. This is also true of Kerouac who, as Tytell mentions, had a foundation in Joyce and aimed to write a body of literature to match that of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. It was the Beats’ extensive knowledge that allowed them to move beyond traditional boundaries and incorporate useful devices from other cultures in the process. Quinn comments on the parallels of adaptability of the two artists: “Parker needed knowledge of musical traditions and established techniques in order to perform ‘Koko,’ and Kerouac needed knowledge of modernist literary traditions and African American music in order to mold his unique prose

style” (154). Kerouac is in many ways a predecessor to Parker’s unique innovativeness by adapting the African American tradition through Parker’s music and then combining it with traditional literary technique. To label spontaneous prose as simple and uncontrolled ignores the level of mastery taking place by the Beat authors to combine both new and old traditions while expressing an authentic internal voice.

Spontaneous prose and music seems deeply individualistic as the author or musician pulls from creativity from a uniquely personal internal point, yet it actually promoted community rather than making the artist a recluse to his subconscious feelings. Robert Quinn draws from correspondence between Kerouac to Neal Cassady to explain that “Kerouac turns to ‘impulse’ not as a means of reviving individual value and excluding others but to discover the interpersonal force of affection that drives a life ‘full of loving’” (156). When Kerouac expresses himself in a spontaneous fashion, he is connecting to the greater consciousness of humanity. This is part of the appeal of the Beat writers. The reader is able to identify with a personal voice behind the text. Societal limitations, especially in the form of traditional and academic rules, serve as obstructions to reaching the masses and connecting with others. The artists must follow their impulses in order to escape these unnecessary boundaries that leave the artist alienated from the audience. Quinn comments on the counter-cultural nature of spontaneous art by noting that “[l]ike conformity, improvisation dissolves the individual personality, though not as a means of segregating and manufacturing suburban hyper-consumers. Rather, improvisational processes subvert the organizing self in order to further intersubjectivity. Improvisational activity removes the process of meaning-making from the isolated individual and hands it to an interactive collectivity” (156). The audience is brought into the music or prose because the spontaneous

style makes the art exist within the moment. Spontaneous art is not constrained by traditional rules or music on a page, but rather is being created in front of the audience.

The Beats created highly interactive literature. Part of the appeal of Kerouac's *On the Road* is the openness that allows for the readers to imagine their own cross-country journey, which many were inspired to do after reading the novel. The importance of the audience is also visible in the frequent public readings the Beats held. Perhaps most famously is the reading of Ginsberg's *Howl*. This interactive nature of Beat literature was directly inspired by African American culture, which places an emphasis on communal understanding. For example, in Kerouac's depiction of Parker in *The Subterraneans*, Kerouac emphasizes the important characteristic of engaging the audience through spontaneous music. Kerouac describes the intimate connection between Parker on stage and his audience: "Up on the stand Bird Parker, with solemn eyes who'd been busted fairly recently and had now returned to a kind of bop dead Frisco but had just discovered or been told about the Red Drum, the great new generation gang wailing and gathering there, so here he was on the stand, examining them with his eyes as he blew his now-settled-down-into-regulated-design 'crazy' notes" (*The Subterraneans* 13). Kerouac shows Parker at the end of his career looking for a new generation to whom to pass his spontaneous method. It seems that Kerouac is eager to stand at the forefront of that generation by creating a new form of writing. Jon Panish comments on the importance of Kerouac's emphasis on Parker's relation to the audience, saying, "Parker is depicted not as playing the Red Drum simply because he has been booked into another jazz club where he can work and earn some money, but as being interested in this particular club because of the audience that would be seeing and hearing him ... the connection between Parker and his bohemian audience is made personal and momentous in this way and is enhanced through the image of his eyes" (113).

Parker's message is counter-mainstream, and he is able to identify with this new audience that is becoming increasingly dissatisfied with society. While Parker is known for emphasizing the personal nature of art, he is also eager to share this with others, even across cultural boundaries.

Parker becomes an important symbol of frustration with societal tradition. Kerouac exemplifies this by surrounding Parker with Christlike imagery. The way Parker views the audience is reminiscent of a teacher ready to pass his skill on to his disciples. The new generation of bop will bridge beyond just music, into language and Kerouac will be the guide for this task. In his "242 Chorus," Kerouac responds to the gazing eyes of Charlie Parker and answers his call to carry the torch:

Charley Parker, forgive me—
 Forgive me for not answering your eyes—
 For not having made an indication
 Of that which you can devise—
 Charley Parker, pray for me—
 Pray for me and everybody
 In the Nirvanas of your brain. (*Mexico City Blues* 143)

Kerouac, with his French-Canadian Catholic heritage, petitions Parker for forgiveness and salvation as he would Christ or Mary. Once again, Kerouac turns to the eyes of Parker to find his message; perhaps his eyes provide a clear view of his vision of creative expression passed on to Kerouac. To further demonstrate his view of Parker as a spiritual teacher, Kerouac compares him to religious leaders outside of Christianity as well. Kerouac admires the mind of Parker, a creative genius, referring to it as Nirvana. In Kerouac's "239th Chorus," he first presents an image of Parker as the religious teacher Buddha, saying that "Charley Parker, Looked like

Buddha...And his expression on his face / Was as calm, beautiful, and profound / As the image of Buddha” (241). Kerouac identifies Parker as a teacher again, one who has come to show others the way to enlightenment. This analogy is even more fitting for Parker. Buddha is often portrayed as a silent teacher, communicating without words in cases such as the Lotus Sutra. The form of enlightenment that Parker came to bring was that of art that reached across boundaries and this enlightenment was offered to Hipsters:

Wail Wop—Charley Parker burst
 His lungs to reach the speed
 Of what the speedsters wanted
 And what they wanted
 Was his Eternal Slowdown. (“Chorus 241”)

Kerouac alternates between imagery of Buddha to the suffering image of Christ, providing enlightenment to an ungrateful crowd. Kerouac makes it clear that if there were going to be an advance in prose, then it would be from the influence of Charlie Parker as the imagery in his “240th Chorus” suggests: “And soon the whole joint is rocking / And everybody talking and Charley/ Parker / Whistling them on to the brink of eternity” (*Mexico City Blues* 242). Parker’s unique improvisational style of music is viewed by Kerouac as the essential element needed to guide the Beat generation through the chaos of society.

Ginsberg, in his poem “Howl,” also describes a savior-like figure who restores prose through a close relationship with jazz. In the highly biographical poem, Ginsberg seems to be referring to poetic savior of jazz. Although it is not entirely clear who the figure is, Kerouac stands as a likely subject due to the references in the poem. Ginsberg describes the figure as one who sought “to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you

speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head” (138-39). The imagery in this passage is similar to the imagery used by Kerouac in his description of Parker in his “242nd Chorus,” suggesting a connection between the two. Ginsberg recreates Kerouac standing before his poetical mentor, Parker, feeling shame for his inability to carry on Parker’s work. Ginsberg goes on to further the imagery of Kerouac as a leader in spontaneous prose: “And rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies” (“Howl” 139). This unknown figure, presumably Kerouac, is ascribed qualities of savior again with images of Christ on the cross. This supports the image of the suffering artist, which Kerouac identified with Parker and even himself. Continuing the jazz tradition would entail accepting the suffering of the African American tradition, with which the Beats associated themselves.

Kerouac does accept the torch from Parker, creating a literature movement—the Beats—which crossed cultural boundaries that had not been explored. Quinn notes that Kerouac listened carefully enough to “participate in ... cross cultural and counter-hegemonic interaction with Parker’s vision” (163). Kerouac was able to extend Parker’s aesthetic philosophy beyond music to encompass literature and influence other cultural groups. The innovative nature of jazz allowed African Americans to adapt mainstream culture to fit their needs. In particular, they subverted both European language and music to reflect their unique voice. The Beats were influenced by this innovation and used traditional language to produce a deeply personal form of expression. The advent of bop made African American culture especially relevant to the Beats.

This was due to its counter-cultural nature and emphasis on spontaneity. Bop musicians like Charlie Parker were able to make jazz personal without sacrificing technical skill. Kerouac learned from Parker that art should be concerned with the personal and not with constraining rules of the craft. In the spirit of jazz innovation, the Beats began to push the limits of expression. Just as African Americans adapted instruments to match the inflections of their voices, the Beats similarly used of technology to better express themselves. By using audio technology, they were able to reach their audience on multiple means and expand the written word. Without pioneers in jazz such as Charlie Parker, the Beats would have lacked the inspiration to expand their voices in new directions to represent a multicultural American voice.

Conclusion

The Beats offer a glimpse into American culture at a tumultuous time for the nation. The people of America were experiencing a crisis of both image and purpose. While the vision of the Beats was at times imperfect—struggling with alcoholism, drugs, relationships, and the law—there is a sense of purity and hopefulness to their “Blake-like visions” for America. The Beats made connections from the past to the present and from culture to culture to show the reality of America’s mosaic despite the divisions of America. These divisions are quite recognizable as Kerouac traversed the country before Eisenhower had created the interstate highway system. The back alley jazz joints that many Americans had yet to see were brought to life through Beat literature and introduced to mainstream America. Charlie Parker is aligned with literary greats in Beat literature and given an equal voice among the Beats in the discussion of the direction of literature. In tearing down the old hierarchy of canonized literature, the Beats made room for new voices to be explored.

African Americans, though arguably the most influential force on the Beats, are certainly not the only culture group to influence the Beats. Kerouac often talks of the “fellahin,” which both literally refers to the Indian group, but Matt Theado argues in a lecture on Kerouac that this also pertains to all “people of the earth,” including Mexicans, Native Americans, European immigrants, and African Americans. It is the downtrodden location of these groups that interested the Beats and caused the Beats to admire them. Kerouac speaks of his yearning to be any ethnicity but white in *On the Road*: “I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned” (180). It is important to note that Kerouac wrote this lament of his white status while walking through a multi-cultural neighborhood. The America that the Beats sought to convey was one found in

downtown neighborhood baseball fields on a Friday night and in the back alleys of the city where many cultures mingled.

The Beats sought to express the multi-cultural voice that composed America, and it often seems that the African American voice was the most comfortable voice for the Beats. This is illustrated in Kerouac's writing with his final work, *Pic*, which was written in 1971 and published posthumously. The novel is narrated from the perspective of an African American boy living in rural North Carolina. This novel actually attempts to give the "other" a voice in a way that Kerouac's previous novels only touched. Theado explains that Kerouac had hoped to capture a variety of ethnic voices in each of his works. He writes that Kerouac "wrote to Cassady in 1950 that a major problem facing young writers is the selection of a voice for the narrator, and the chief concern should be that the voice be authentic. Kerouac announced that he was going to write seven or eight books, each featuring an ethnically distinct first-person letter" (*Understanding Jack Kerouac* 172). Kerouac realized that in order to capture the voice of the future, the Beats must look outside of their own culture to a more diverse voice. He shared this realization with other Beats such as Cassady through letters and conversation. The incorporation of other cultural voices broadened American literature beyond just the Western tradition, but also represented the rich diversity of American culture.

The Beats were able to see the value of other cultures, even marginalized ones, because of a belief in the equality of all mankind. The influence of religion—especially from Christianity—is often ignored by scholars when analyzing the Beats who are typically portrayed as hedonistic. While they certainly did have many faults, there is also a sense of respect and awe for the sublime that runs through their lives and influences their work. Kerouac was informed a great deal by Christianity and sought to reconcile it with Buddhism. Ann Charters notes that it is

important to keep in mind that “Kerouac was of course born a Catholic, raised a Catholic, and died a Catholic” (*Understanding Jack Kerouac* 123). After encountering an African American street preacher, Kerouac felt inspired by her words, but this feeling was not shared with his friend, Japhy, who represented Beat poet Gary Snyder in *The Dharma Bums*: “‘Yeah,’ says Japhy. ‘But I don’t like all that Jesus stuff she’s talking about.’ ‘What’s wrong with Jesus? Didn’t Jesus speak of Heaven? Isn’t Heaven Buddha’s nirvana?’ ‘According to your own interpretation, Smith’” (114). The last line of the conversations suggests that this is ~~in fact~~ Kerouac’s view, which he further suggests, saying, “I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make?” (114). It was the basic message of compassion and sympathy found in religion with which Kerouac sought to align the Beats. Theado notes that the common ground between the African American street preacher and Kerouac is that of sympathy: “A woman street preacher approaches Smith [Kerouac] and tells him that she recognizes his sympathy for her message” (*Understanding Jack Kerouac* 155). The concept of divine inspiration for writing is a common thread among the Beat writers. Ginsberg claimed to have received a “Blake-like vision” that urged him to write *Howl*. At the conclusion of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac describes a vision in which he is told that he will be “empowered to remind people that they are utterly free” (239). This sense of freedom was able to traverse race and demanded sympathy for all people.

Ultimately, the Beats responded to a chaotic period in history with compassion. Rather than alienating their neighbor, they embraced them and sought to create a more inclusive American voice, which extended beyond ethnic lines. The multi-cultural voice with which the Beats experimented would have long ranging effects on American literature. The canon itself began to reflect the diverse voices found in society and those in the margins; writers such as

Amiri Baraka were strengthened and affirmed for their own natural voice through the Beats. African Americans, with their music being streamed across the air waves and played in jazz halls throughout America, offered an important voice for the Beats and others. It was a voice accustomed to suffering and marginalization, yet strong and different. This voice allowed the Beats to join other cultures as they resisted American societal conformity. The Beats composed a loud, resounding voice that was unlike any other at the time and reverberated throughout American literary and cultural history.

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