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## The reception in the United States: current reception

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## 5 THE RECEPTION IN THE UNITED STATES: CURRENT RECEPTION

Over five decades after the major Beat publications of the fifties, the consensus on the Beats has changed significantly. Previously seen by many as controversial figures whose literary output generally did not have much literary value, the Beats are now viewed as greatly affecting American literature and American culture as a whole. Writing in 1999, Allan H. Kurtzman, a donor of a substantial collection of Beat archival texts to University of California, Los Angeles, notes the following:

Eleven years ago, when I offered my collection of Beat material to the UCLA University Library, I received several polite notes of thanks. I also seemed to perceive some embarrassment at the thought of including such a collection in a “serious” library. Yet today, influential observers everywhere recognize the unique contributions of the Beat Generation to late 20th century culture and particularly the creative spontaneity of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in helping to define those contributions.

Thinking fifty years ago that one might eventually be able to donate a Beat collection to a university library, one would probably be faced with scornful looks if not outright dismissal. After all, it was the age when Podhoretz and many other critics were waging an all-out war against the Beats and when a large segment of the public was being fed sensationalized beatnik images by the shovelful. Contrary to what John P. Sisk suggested in the late 1950s, it turns out that the Beats are not just a subject for “desperate Ph.D. candidates” after all (194).

The political and social climate is vastly different than in the fifties: the Cold War is over, the Berlin Wall was torn down decades ago, and the Internet allows an unprecedented proliferation and sharing of information. The plight of the civil rights movements of the fifties and sixties – the fight for the rights of women,

homosexuals, or people of color – has greatly affected the mindset of the following generations and is generally understood as one of the cornerstones of modern democracies. Importantly, Beats are seen as one of the factors which helped in the fight for human rights, and this interpretation has subsequently permeated the general understanding of the writers. Furthermore, unlike in the time period first examined, the acceptance of the Beats is nearly unanimous. The Beats are acknowledged by both popular and academic audiences as having survived the test of time, therefore belonging to literature in what is known – as well as criticized – under the often vaguely characterized term “the Western canon.” Finally, Beat scholarship is by no means mainstream, yet Beat scholarship is a growing and thriving field and is larger than ever before, sometimes to the surprise of Beat scholars themselves.

The fact that Beat authors are viewed as important American writers of the twentieth century can be illustrated by the placement of *On the Road* and *Naked Lunch* in *Time* magazine’s “All-TIME 100 Novels” list of English language novels. The list, which considered all novels published since 1923, described *On the Road* as a “culture-changing novel” that “launched a thousand trips” (Grossman and Lacayo). Conversely, the description of *Naked Lunch* accentuates its controversial status upon publication; Burroughs is “the depraved scoutmaster for generations of would-be hipsters” who “traffics in the utmost degradations.” These annotations simplify rather, but still make an important point – the Beats have stood the test of time and are popular with a general readership. Burroughs, whom an article in *The Guardian* on the centenary of his birth called “American literature’s most notorious son,” was extremely influential on many other artists in his later years (Irvine). While writers such as Thomas Pynchon or J. G. Ballard name Burroughs as making a lasting impression on their writing, Burroughs’s presence was especially felt in music. Not only is the term for the music genre “heavy metal” derived from Burroughs’s work, but he also influenced many famous musicians or music bands, most notably R.E.M., Lou Reed, and Nirvana (*A Man Within*). During his stay in New York, Burroughs lived close to the legendary CBGB, the music bar that was the center of punk and new wave bands, and many musicians, for example Patti Smith, consider him to be the father of the punk scene (Miles, *El Hombre* 217).

Yet the impact is felt even outside popular representations of the Beats. The auction of the scroll on which Kerouac wrote *On the Road* is a revealing example of the popularity of the Beats. In 2001 the scroll sold for \$2.43 million, which was not only almost \$1 million more than the expected price, but also a record for the highest price of a novel sold at auction (“Kerouac Scroll”). Subsequently, this not only led to the publication of the novel’s original scroll version in 2007, but also to other Beat discoveries and publications. Kerouac, undoubtedly the most prolific of the Beats, thus gained numerous additions to his bibliography. For

instance, the manuscript to his novel *The Sea is My Brother*, which was written during Kerouac's time as a merchant seaman, has been discovered and subsequently published. Another vital discovery, a letter from Neal Cassady to Kerouac, was found in 2012 after being considered lost for over 60 years. The letter, generally known as the "Joan Anderson letter," inspired Kerouac in developing his prose style and until its discovery only a few fragments had been published, thus it represents a valuable addition to existing Beat texts.<sup>32</sup> Finally, Kerouac has had four collections of his works published by Library of America. Describing itself as a "champion of America's great writers and timeless works," Library of America thus ranks Kerouac alongside William Faulkner or Herman Melville ("Unknown Kerouac").

In other words, the Beats have had a lasting impact on American culture, and their influence is perhaps stronger now than ever before. However, a question needs to be raised: how exactly are they understood by the public, and what are the scholarly approaches to the Beats most commonly applied by contemporary academia?

## 5.1 Popular Culture and the Mythology of the Beats

In popular representation, the Beat Generation is usually rendered as a social movement which challenged the normativity of McCarthy-era America rather than a small group of artists. For instance, the somewhat comical entry for the Beat Generation in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* explains that the Beats were an "American social and literary movement originating in the 1950s... Its adherents, self-styled as 'beat' ... and derisively called 'beatniks,' expressed their alienation from conventional, or 'square,' society by adopting an almost uniform style of seedy dress, manners, and 'hip' vocabulary borrowed from jazz musicians" ("Beat movement"). Similarly, Josh Rahn's article for the online portal *The Literature Network* describes them as "a new cultural and literary movement [which] staked its claim on the nation's consciousness." Rahn argues that the visibility and influences of the Beats were unprecedented, which allowed them to challenge conformity, capitalism, and consumer culture. Ultimately, the impact of the Beat Generation on the structure of modern American society was immense: censorship was ended, ecology and environmentalism started to be discussed, Eastern philosophies permeated the American consciousness, and the "stuffy" formalism of Modernist poetry was subverted in favor of a new, relaxed structure.

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32 The discovery of the letter might have a profound impact on current Beat Studies. As Christopher Graham Challis notes in 1979: "If the 'Joan Anderson letter' should come to light many questions about Cassady's creativity and his influence on Kerouac would be answered, but there seems to be little chance of this" (122).

Naturally, neither of the articles should by any means be considered an authoritative source on the Beats. Yet the (un)reliability of these and similar sources does not matter that much. What truly matters, however, is the act of creating, maintaining, and proliferating a certain discourse on the Beats. These sources create a somewhat “abridged,” bare-bones version of the subject in question, and while the descriptions thus created would show cracks when under scrutiny, these types of sources can frequently be one’s first exposure to the Beats, thus for the uninitiated ultimately representing *the* image of the Beat Generation. Therefore, these sources also help document the transformation the Beats have undergone in the public discourse. Effectively, both articles are examples of the discursive acceptance of the Beats, thus further contributing to seeing the Beats as an important *social* milestone in twentieth century America. Ultimately, this points to the changes taking place in American society and therefore its readers; as Stanley Fish explains, interpretive communities can change because canons of acceptability can also change (“Acceptable” 349).

The above does not mean that the Beats do not deserve their reputation as opposing the social norms of their time. After all, many of their accomplishments, such as protesting censorship or advocating the acceptance of homosexuals, have significantly changed American society. As a result, Peter Hartlaub writes in 2015 for *The San Francisco Chronicle* that “the Beats themselves turned out to be positive ambassadors of their time and their movement. . . In 2015, the Beats are beloved, a symbol of what San Francisco has become. Tolerant, with a social conscience. Recognizing the potential of people who think different.” Even in the 21st century, the Beats can be at the center of a controversy, as when in 2007 the New York radio station WBAI-FM did not run Ginsberg’s “Howl” for the 50th anniversary of the obscenity court ruling, because they were afraid of a possible legal backlash from the Federal Communications Commission (Cohen). Yet the question is which aspects of the Beats – the Beats as experimental writers, artists continuing the tradition of American individualistic writing, or artists challenging contemporary esthetic norms – are ignored during such reading?

Insight into common representations of the Beats can be found among reviews of various critical re-editions of canonical Beat texts or biographies. In a review of *Spontaneous Mind*, a collection of interviews with Ginsberg, William Deresiewicz emphasizes the poet’s “frank and vivid voice” as well as his talent for improvisation and being present in the moment. Ginsberg’s poetry is “a risk-seeking, ecstatic spontaneity flung in the face of the cold war mentality,” Deresiewicz writes. After commenting on how the stereotype of Ginsberg as a “semiliterate primitive” is far from the truth, Deresiewicz points out the poet’s activism, which often addressed issues acknowledged by society to be relevant only decades later. Notably, Deresiewicz also emphasizes that Ginsberg was portrayed by many of his interviewers – and therefore seen by both his critics and supporters – in a different manner:

Just as he never let himself get stuck in an intellectual position, neither did he allow himself to be trapped in an image. Each interviewer tries to elicit the Ginsberg of his or her imagination – William F. Buckley Jr., the dangerous radical; *Playboy*, the homosexual crusader; fellow dropouts, the mocker of squares – and each time, Ginsberg performs judo flips on their expectations, handing back complex, nuanced versions of the attitudes with which they’ve tried to saddle him.

While Deresiewicz focuses on Ginsberg’s substantial efforts to elude being represented in a particular fashion, he somewhat understates the other side of the representation process – that there are numerous public images of Ginsberg and therefore of other Beats as well. The varying portrayal is a crucial point. The images are not necessarily separate, yet different sources accentuate one or more images over others.

For instance, Gregory Stephenson explains the lasting interest in the Beats by their genuineness – the fact that they have truly experienced what they write about: “[T]he continuing appeal of the works of the Beat Generation is ascribable ... to their quality of *authenticity*. We respond to the truth of their writings because we feel that they were created out of real pain and hope, out of absolute personal necessity” (14–15, emphasis mine). The Beat Generation is then often viewed as embodying particular values and ideas – an ethos. However, this ethos is frequently trivialized by emphasizing adventurous traveling and self-indulgence. Such an approach to the Beats is evident in numerous popular accounts such as the report from Allen Ginsberg’s reading at Chapman University. Noting that the auditorium of the reading held a large number of young people who were virtually grandchildren to Ginsberg, Jess Bravin notes that many of the attendees were drawn by “the countercultural spirit they felt the writer embodied.” Some of the young fans explained their attendance by expressing their fascination with “the whole ‘60s thing” (qtd. in Bravin). As a result, a large portion of them would like to experience the “fascinating” period of the Beats themselves. Other attendees for example see similarities between Ginsberg and the band Metallica or the singer Billy Joel. Ginsberg told Bravin that he hoped his young audience would learn respect for others or tolerance toward homosexuals. However, the audience also desired to experience the long-gone era of “women, booze and drugs” when being able to hitchhike across the country without any money was not out of the question. In other words, the “spirit” of the Beat Generation – with its connotation of uninhibited sex, drug use and traveling – is what comprises a portion of the Beats’ appeal to some of their readers.

Viewing the Beats as embodying a rather hedonistic ethos is somewhat understandable. Nevertheless, such interpretations risk becoming simplifications which in turn can become almost mythological in their accounts and scope. This simplification process is best seen in the way current filmmakers adapt the works

and lives of the Beats to the silver screen, as Jordan Larson's discussion of recent additions to Beat film adaptations makes clear. Larson begins by explaining that two recent films, *Kill Your Darlings* and *Big Sur*, both released in 2013, join the previously released *Howl* (2010) and *On the Road* (2012) in portraying the lifestyles of the Beats as rebellious, adolescent fun.<sup>33</sup> However, what made the Beats so influential in the first place, Larsen argues, was their individualistic desire to push the boundaries of artistic expression rather than as adolescents looking for new ways of spending their free time. Ultimately, this revival "arguably goes too far with its re-imagination of the Beat writers' livelihoods as simple adolescent goofing around." According to Larson, the main problem with these films is that they diminish what was truly radical about the Beat Generation – their iconoclastic approach to life which continued well into the Beats' old age. This simplification is further compounded by the larger attention the seemingly more innocent lives of Kerouac and Ginsberg receive; Burroughs, whose life was significantly darker and more complicated, has not shared the recent resurgence of the Beats in popular culture. His troubled life and multifaceted work, Larson continues, are substantially more difficult to present as a "harmless and youthful adventure," as David Cronenberg's "disturbing and gritty" adaptation of *Naked Lunch* shows. Larson further comments on the issue of representation:

One could argue that these films are only trying to honor the spirit of the Beat Generation, but can you separate the "essence" of a story or a movement from what its progenitors really said and did, and at what point in their lives? Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac were grown men who were also alcoholics, misogynists, and womanizers who killed themselves with substance abuse. Pretending Kerouac's life was some sort of consequence-free dream not only does a disservice to viewers, but to the Beats, as well.

Larson warns against such refashioning and diluting of the Beats to make them more suitable for the mainstream, because it is dangerous in its depoliticization. By portraying the lives of the Beats as mere joyrides in search for sex – even though they at times may have looked that way – the mainstream is missing out on a substantial aspect of the Beats, mainly why exactly they were described as rebellious.

The effort to avoid the mythologizing of the Beats and their lives that often stems from such portrayals is further complicated by the autobiographical nature of many Beat Generation texts. Several Beat texts profess to be strictly autobiographical when in fact they describe numerous fictional events, thus the Beats

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<sup>33</sup> *Kill Your Darlings* deals with the murder of David Kammerer by Lucien Carr, while *Big Sur* is based on Kerouac's novel of the same name documenting Kerouac's struggles with newly gained fame after the publication of *On the Road*.

themselves participated in their mythologizing. For example, Burroughs's *Junky* is a somewhat fictionalized account of his life in the 1940s. Similarly, his *Queer* can be traced to the letters Burroughs sent to Ginsberg in the early 1950s during his effort to locate the drug ayahuasca in South America. Nevertheless, it is Kerouac's work which contributes to the mythologizing of the Beats the most. While it is widely understood that his most famous works such as *On the Road* or *Dharma Bums* are fictionalized retellings of real-life events including Cassady, Ginsberg, or Burroughs, it is only rarely acknowledged that his entire oeuvre is essentially a mythologized cycle of memoirs (Barnett). This mythologizing then makes it even easier to reduce the Beats to a simple symbol such as a "counterculture icon" or "visionary prophet."

The way mythologizing informs the popular image of the Beats is illustrated by various advertisements from major companies featuring the Beats. One of the best examples of this process is the photo of Kerouac used by the multinational clothing company Gap in its 1993 advertising campaign. The slogan of the advertisement – "Kerouac wore khakis" – tries to summarize Kerouac's life and work into a straightforward symbol in order to "portray a particular set of ideas relevant to [its] target market (Nash 57)."<sup>34</sup> As Nash further explains, to Gap the Beats symbolize "freethinking individualism," rather than "a threat to American society" (58). Similarly, as Burroughs's gaunt, erudite persona was more than well-known at that time, Burroughs was featured in a Nike advert (Johnson, *Lost Years* 7).<sup>35</sup> By choosing Burroughs to promote their sneakers, Nike wishes the audience to associate Burroughs – and therefore the advertised product – with ideas of rebelliousness or rugged individuality; their goal certainly was not to remind people of his drug addiction or the accidental shooting of his wife. These advertisements thus show that the Beats can become "stamps of approval" on a commercial product – recognizable symbols which signify the product's individualism, rebelliousness, or anti-consumerism – by appealing to the same qualities in the authors.

## 5.2 Obituaries

Ginsberg and Burroughs both died in 1997 only a few months apart. Their obituaries generally tried to summarize their lives and work, thus trying to encapsulate the whole image of the Beats in a single text. As such, these obituaries provide a valuable insight into current reception as well as the ways the Beats are mythologized.

34 The advert can be viewed online at <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Images/jksm.gif>; accessed on 1 February 2018. Other artists or known public figures featured in the campaign were Ernest Hemingway, Andy Warhol, Pablo Picasso, James Dean, or John Wayne.

35 Unlike Kerouac, Burroughs was still alive and actively participated in the making of the advert.

The general sentiment of the obituaries is markedly different from the texts written in the fifties and sixties. Describing Ginsberg as the “master poet of the Beat Generation” in the headline, Wilborn Hampton depicts *Howl* as “a manifesto for the sexual revolution and a *cause célèbre* for free speech” and Ginsberg himself as being ubiquitous for the counterculture movement of the sixties. Ginsberg is a rebellious protester who shocked Eisenhower’s America with his celebration of homosexuality and drugs, but also as one heavily involved in numerous civil rights campaigns throughout the second half of the century. Nevertheless, this does not stop Hampton from stating that Ginsberg was “known around the world as a master of the outrageous.” Most of the article describes the poet’s life until the publication of *Howl*, and Ginsberg’s later life is mostly reduced to his travel experiences. Hampton makes an important point by emphasizing that Ginsberg’s *Collected Poems* published in 1985, “firmly established the poet in the mainstream of American literature.” In other words, Ginsberg has become “respectable” – a term Ginsberg himself used in interviews mentioned by Hampton – and therefore a vital part of American culture.

Yet Hampton’s primary focus on Ginsberg’s life and his social achievements is revealing for another reason – the common emphasis of the Beats’ social importance. The role of Ginsberg as a historical figure is also the basis for the obituary written by James Campbell for *The Independent*. Describing the poet as “the exemplary avant-garde figure of the post-war world,” the article can be separated into two parts (“Obituary”). The first part concerns Ginsberg’s early life, again ending with the publication of *Howl*; that is the poetry collection through which Ginsberg “achieved a nakedness in poetry that reflected his soul,” as Campbell puts it. The second part deals with Ginsberg’s life since the poem’s publication up until his death; although he mentions some of the poems written during this era, the second part is mostly concerned with Ginsberg’s social struggles, stories of his outrageous behavior and comments on the poet’s personality. Campbell’s and Hampton’s articles are thus quite similar in what they decide to highlight. Both begin with a brief characterization of Ginsberg’s personal life rather than his achievements as an artist, then continue with a short biography – informing readers about Ginsberg’s mother being kept in a mental institution, for example – only to culminate in the publication of *Howl and Other Poems*. The various events from the poet’s final decades are then mostly an afterthought. Importantly, these events seem to be mostly comprised of “Ginsberg anecdotes,” that is stories that further illustrate the poet’s eccentricity.<sup>36</sup> Such treatment is to a degree expected in obituaries; after

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36 For instance, Campbell writes the following about the FBI keeping a file on the poet: “Though profoundly indignant at the intrusion, Ginsberg delighted in taunting the organization. When J. Edgar Hoover insidiously let it be known that the Bureau possessed photographs of Ginsberg in the nude with other men, perhaps scheming to blackmail him, Ginsberg asked for permission to use one of them on the cover of a book.”

all, it is essentially a retrospective literary genre. Yet the glaring omission of the vast majority of Ginsberg's work, as well as the preferential treatment that Ginsberg the man rather than Ginsberg the poet receives, is certainly noteworthy.

As Richard Severo's obituary on William S. Burroughs shows, such treatment was not limited to Ginsberg. The bulk of the text is concerned with Burroughs's life leading up to the publication of *Naked Lunch*. Severo describes Burroughs "as a renegade writer of the Beat Generation who stunned readers and inspired adoring cultists with his 1959 book *Naked Lunch*." The image of Burroughs as a renegade or an outlaw is common in Burroughs articles, and this also includes his obituaries: while no Ginsberg obituary seems to be complete without at least one humorous Ginsberg anecdote, those covering Burroughs usually include accolades such as "the hard man of Hip," "the godfather of punk" or "the original junkie" (Campbell, "Struggles"; Ciabattari; Self). Campbell in his Burroughs obituary describes the writer as an artistic revolutionary who "became an icon late in life," also pointing out the cult status that he attained among rock stars like David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Frank Zappa, or Patti Smith. While the journalist does talk about some of the important features of Burroughs's writing, such as his "routines" or the cut-up technique, most of the text focuses on his early life and on his iconic status. Similarly, Ciabattari's emphasis on the more shocking aspects of Burroughs's life can be seen in his description of the Beat as a writer who "scandalised literature with books like *Naked Lunch*," a novel that "shocked Eisenhower-era Americans" with "its graphic sex, drugs, violence and slashing satire of consumerism." Ciabattari's text also includes memories of the late writer shared by various Burroughs associates from his biographer Barry Miles to Denis Low, former Kansas poet laureate; importantly, these selected recollections again reduce Burroughs to a "literary outlaw," as Burroughs's biographer Ted Morgan famously dubbed him in his biography of the same name.

In contrast, the novelist J. G. Ballard offers a more insightful commentary into Burroughs's life and work. A few weeks after the Beat's death, Ballard writes that Burroughs was well-aware of the ability of language to be "manipulated to mean absolutely the opposite of what it seems to mean" and that this knowledge can be traced in all his work. For Ballard, Burroughs's work is the counterpoint to the bourgeois novel which to Ballard is "the greatest enemy of truth and honesty that was ever invented." Burroughs did not care about moral judgment, Ballard claims; on the contrary, he tried to simply tell the truth:

I think [Burroughs]'s a writer of enormous richness, but he had a kind of paranoid imagination. He saw the world as a dangerous conspiracy by huge media conglomerates, by the great political establishments of the day, by a corrupt medical science which he saw as very much a conspiracy. He saw most of the professions, law in particular but also law enforcement, as all part of a huge conspiracy to keep us under control, to keep us

down. And his books are a kind of attempt to blow up this cozy conspiracy, to allow us to see what's on the end of the fork.

Ballard thus tries to shy away from the popular image of Burroughs as a “renegade” or “literary outlaw” and instead offers an analysis of the author’s writing. The novelist Will Self approached Burroughs in a similar manner on the centenary of his birth. While Self uses the moniker “original junkie” throughout the text, he focuses on Burroughs’s first novel *Junky* instead of presenting yet another summary of the author’s life. Self warns against “the post hoc mythologizing of the writer and his life from the very grim reality of active drug addiction that constitutes the action of *Junky*” and offers a unique reading of the novel: “It is Burroughs’s own denial of the nature of his addiction that makes this book capable of being read as a fiendish parable of modern alienation.”

Popular narrative, whether obituaries or recent films based on the Beat Generation, thus proves to be revealing in its characterization of the Beats. It often emphasizes the Beats as individual persons rather than writers and as a result often focuses on their personal lives and controversies. It is not then their texts but their unconventional lives against the backdrop of the socially conservative fifties that seem to be the main point of such representations, and therefore interest in the Beats. While understandable, this celebratory nature of the Beats also contributes to the mythologizing of the Beats as stereotypical social activists. Their “mini-mythologies,” such as Ginsberg being the “visionary artist” or Burroughs, the “original junkie,” shooting his wife in a game of William Tell, show that their lives represent more than just their lives. They represent an attitude, a stance toward society, and an ethos which can be extracted from the Beats and possibly even emulated. Importantly, such depictions can result in a hagiography in which the work of the Beats is only secondary to the ideas they symbolize.

### 5.3 The Beat Generation and Contemporary Academia

As with popular reception, the position of the Beats in academia has also changed drastically when compared to their initial reception. An important shift in the Beats’ acceptability in academia took place in 1982 with the first major Beat Generation conference at the Naropa Institute: while the occasional journal article was published even before, it was only after the conference that Beat scholarship became to grow substantially (Theado 1). Currently, many revised and critical editions of primary texts as well as book-length studies and collections of scholarly essays are being published. Together with other events such as the formation of the European Beat Studies Network in 2012, it is therefore safe to say that Beat scholarship is stronger than before. And while Beat scholarship is certainly not

a large field of interest in academia, it still has a substantial presence and, what is perhaps more telling, acceptance among academics. For instance, Ginsberg's *alma mater* not only possesses a sizeable collection of Ginsberg's papers, but also featured the poet during the celebration of its 250th anniversary in 2004. Being included in the section "Columbians Ahead of their Time" depicting the university's most notable alumni, Ginsberg is described as the "[q]uintessential Beat, countercultural prophet, Buddhist-Jewish adventurer, distinguished professor ... [who] played a highly visible role in a number of protest movements, including those in support of gay rights and against the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, and U.S. policy in Latin America" ("Allen Ginsberg"). Similarly, Stanford University houses another major archive of Ginsberg's papers and other memorabilia, which it acquired in 1994. In an article describing the talk held in 2013 on the occasion of an exhibition of some of the items in the collection, Ginsberg is described as "the iconic figurehead of the Beat Generation," and later in the text Stanford literary critic Hilton Obenzinger calls the acquisition of the archival material for the Allen Ginsberg Papers collection "a brilliant decision" and Ginsberg himself "one of the great American poets of the 20th century" (Goldman). It would then be easy to assume that the Beats have been accepted into academia with open arms.

However, this acceptance was not without obstacles. It has grown substantially only in the last few decades, and even in the 1990s the situation was not wholly supportive. The coverage of Stanford University's acquisition of the material is quite revealing in this regard. Titling his report "An Unlikely Home for Ginsberg's Archive," David Margolick writes for *The New York Times* that Stanford University's decision to actually purchase Ginsberg's archives is "the latest twist" in the Beat poet's exceptional life, thus indicating that only few would expect Stanford to be interested in the Beats' work. Margolick then quotes Ginsberg who claims that Stanford had not only been very conservative in the 1950s, but that the university had never invited him for a reading, despite the poet's numerous tours across other universities in the nation. What is more, the English Stanford professor Marjorie Perloff who backed the purchase of the collection makes it clear that even in the 1990s the Beats were not exactly welcome at America's major universities: "If he came down tomorrow, nine-tenths of the English department wouldn't turn out for him" (Margolick). Perloff's comment then echoes Allan H. Kurtzman's sentiment that in the late 1980s academia was rather reluctant to accept the Beats. Academia's change of heart then started sometime in the 1990s, and it was not until the mid- to late 2000s that the Beats experienced a generally supportive environment. As Kurt Hemmer further comments on this paradigm shift in Beat scholarship, "[l]iterary historians in the future may refer to the beginning of the twenty-first century as the heyday of Beat scholarship. The Beats are not being embraced in all quarters and probably never will be, but the recent appearances

of several estimable scholarly texts ... should be a harbinger of things to come” (“Barbarians” 81).

Without doubt, the state of the Beats in academia is drastically different from their position in the 1950s. This change in perception is deftly summarized by Matt Theado:

Until recently, most people seemed to know of [Kerouac] more as a pop-culture icon that represents youth movements, quests of the spirit, and satiation of the senses with fast cars, jazz, drugs, and the pursuit of kicks. [...] Still, with his resurgence in popularity, recently published work, and new academic momentum in support, Kerouac’s work may seem paradoxically more ungainly than before. Now that he avoids the easy labels (“Beat Bard,” “Daddy of the Hippies,” “a literary James Dean”) scholars, critics, and most of all new readers are continually reevaluating or discovering for the first time their takes on Kerouac. (1)

In other words, the easily-remembered monikers applied to the Beats are mostly a thing of the past. Yet academia’s support of the Beats is not entirely without complications even today. For example, Emory University, another top research institution in the United States, recently opened an exhibition showcasing its collection of rare Beat Generation memorabilia titled “The Dream Machine: The Beat Generation & the Counterculture, 1940–1975.” The exhibition aims to celebrate the Beats, yet as the name of the exhibition suggests, the focus is on their social and political importance rather than their writing. Writing for the Emory News Center, Maureen McGavin introduces the Beats with the following: “The Beat Generation emerged as a key part of the U.S. counterculture in the years following World War II. The exhibition showcases the Beat spirit of exploration and experimentation around practicing politics, making art and building community.” This description then resembles those found on Columbia’s or Stanford’s webpages – the Beats matter for their social importance and the role they played in the development of the counterculture; their writing, as a result, is lessened by such descriptions. Still, this is a major victory for the Beats and their acceptance in academia.

This trend of increasing academic interest in Beat Generation authors is further paralleled by a thriving industry in the release of previously unpublished works, especially Kerouac’s (Dittman 122). Archival research, text restoration and publication of previously unpublished material constitutes a sizeable portion of Beat scholarship, and as Dittman notes on the example of Kerouac, although the author fell out of favor by his death in the late sixties, Kerouac’s work as well as numerous biographies and critical studies were back in print by the beginning of the 1990s (125). Yet the focus of Beat scholarship goes beyond new archival mate-

rial. While many new biographies of various Beat figures are being released, many of these often focus on previously uncharted territories – areas ignored by other scholars. For instance, *The Voice is All: The Lonely Victory of Jack Kerouac* (2012) by Joyce Johnson, Kerouac’s girlfriend, highlights the Beat’s French-Canadian identity as one of the most important aspects forming Kerouac’s future writing; similarly, David S. Wills in *Scientologist!: William S. Burroughs and the ‘Weird Cult’* (2013) emphasizes the role of Scientology in Burroughs’s life and work. Burroughs scholars frequently draw on post-structuralism to comment on his challenging writing, as seen in several of the essays found in *Naked Lunch@50: Anniversary Essays* (2009), edited by Oliver Harris and Ian MacFayden and released for the novel’s 50th anniversary. The presence of post-modern theory in Beat scholarship has been especially palpable since the 1990s. Joanna Pawlik notes that the increasing interest in the Beats occurred partly due to the influence of French theory as a hermeneutic for Beat texts; this influence of French theory replaced the biographical readings frequent in the 1980s and 1990s and resulted “in a significant re-framing of Beat writers’ dialogues with Europe, away from their engagement with modernism, Surrealist or otherwise, and toward their intersections with French intellectual history” (104). Current scholarship thus often re-evaluates the Beats by focusing on those Beats and Beat-associates who previously stayed at the margins – women writers and people of color. Lastly, the frequent travels abroad of the Beats are mirrored by the scholarship emphasizing the Beats’ transnational identity and their substantial cultural impact across the globe, as found in *The Transnational Beat Generation* (2012) edited by Nancy Grace and Jennie Skerl.

Nevertheless, not even Beat scholars can completely avoid the confines of the discursive formations characterizing the Beats as being important for their role in the development of the counterculture, and therefore representing certain attitudes and beliefs. This is manifested in two ways: first, a sense of nostalgia in various Beat scholars’ accounts; second, the lasting portrayal of Beat scholarship as an underground pursuit which lies outside general academia. Importantly, these commonly act in concordance and are therefore inseparable.

The sense of nostalgia in several scholars’ personal accounts of their relationship to the Beats mirrors the biographical approach of early Beat critics, yet with one crucial difference. Instead of focusing on the lives of the Beats, the lives of the critics are the center of attention, thus the critic serves as a stand-in for anyone who would find the Beats appealing. For instance, Jonah Raskin begins his Ginsberg biography by providing a short narrative about his own relationship to the Beats, thus mirroring the biographical approach of early Beat critics: “In 1957, at the age of fifteen, I bought for seventy-five cents a copy of the City Lights paperback edition of *Howl and Other Poems* with the trademark black-and-white cover. . . *Howl* was underground poetry, outlawed poetry. Ginsberg made it seem as though it was cool to be a teen and that teens, not adults, knew what was cool” (xi). There

often seems to be an unwritten rule in writing about the Beats, whether for popular media or for scholarly publications, to include a short anecdote; frequently, it depicts the author's first contact with the Beats. Since these anecdotes often refer to the rebelliousness or countercultural nature of the Beats, they further emphasize the understanding of the Beats as a symbol embodying certain attitudes.

The nostalgic value of these comments is evident when merged with a meta-commentary on the state of Beat scholarship and its position within academia. A few established Beats scholars object to the way academia approaches the Beats. Yet these voices do not oppose what they view as an unfair treatment or approach to the Beats, but rather the incorporation of Beat scholarship into academia as a whole. This criticism stems from the understanding of the Beats as being in direct opposition to the institutionalization of research, and therefore the institutionalization of the Beats. As a result, the argument concludes, the Beats are being appropriated for corporate use, and provide a profit to the industry which shunned them from the beginning. Analyzing such discourse then provides meta-commentary on the issue or representation, as these arguments essentially fight for a certain representation of the Beats.

Writing in 2015, Jed Birmingham aims a rather scathing attack at *The Transnational Beat Generation* for the reasons outlined above. Emphasizing the Beats' critique of consumerism and capitalism, Birmingham denounces the essay collection for being a "self-congratulating narrative" which lies "within an institutional structure and publishing culture that may be as corrupt and exploitative as any Fortune 100 corporation" ("DIY"). Birmingham demands a more hands-on approach to the Beats: rather than applying "spicy theory all over everything like the hot pepper relish on a tasteless Subway sandwich," a true Beat scholar should roll up "his sleeves and [get] busy uncovering some forgotten sources" as well as do some "blue-collar work in the archives." Beat scholarship, Birmingham further argues, should also be more politically-conscious – rather than promoting yet another reading of a Beat text, Beat scholars should try to promote Beat scholarship by comparing and contrasting important social and political milestones of the Beat Generation period with current events. One should thus focus on the student revolts of the 1960s, on the responses of the Beats to these revolts, or on the university machinery of labor, publishing and corporate structure. Birmingham then continues by commenting on the current status of Beat scholarship in academia as a whole:

There are numerous reasons why the Beat Generation gets little respect in the university. Many of them stem from embarrassment. Such as the Beats' less than progressive views on race, gender and sexuality. Much serious Beat Criticism corrects and critiques these views thus placing Beat square pegs within the circle of acceptable academic discussion. Yet a Beat Criticism that voices racial, ethnic, and gender issues along the

party lines of progressive (and supposedly transgressive) theory is not about difference or plurality at all. It is a processed criticism; it is homogenized not heterogeneous. Beat scholars in the university are just another brick in the wall.

The Beats are also a guilty pleasure. Beat books such as *On the Road* and poems such as “Howl” provide enjoyment to a general public of “uneducated” readers. Academic criticism hates nothing more than “uneducated” people having a good time. (“DYI”)

Birmingham’s criticism then echoes the anti-academic ethos of the Beats and other artists of the 1950s and 1960s. His solution to this conundrum emphasizes archival work and text restoration as a way of resisting the institutional nature of academia. Instead of focusing on literary theory – and thus guaranteeing a constantly growing archive of criticism based on new readings of a text – Birmingham calls for filling in the blanks of Beat literature and focusing on the margins: making sure women poets such as Diane di Prima or Anne Waldman are established as crucial Beats is one of his proposed solutions.

For Birmingham, Beat scholarship should be truly “Beat” in its anti-academic stance and refusal to follow the latest trends in literary scholarship: the worst thing about many contributions to Beat Criticism is the elitism of the scholars and the fact that, as Birmingham puts it, it is “just another fucking job” (“DYI”). Birmingham’s stance is quite radical, yet the distrust toward academia and its attitude toward the Beats can be felt across Beat scholarship. As has been already mentioned, in 2001 Kurt Hemmer expressed his surprise at the sheer amount of Beat scholarship and therefore the wide-reaching support for the Beats in academia: “There was a time not too long ago when the idea of multiple, high-quality, academic books on the Beats appearing within a few years of each other was absurd” (“Barbarians” 87). Yet surprisingly, two decades on from Hemmer’s comment, this astonishment regarding Beat acceptance is still present in current Beat scholarship. For instance, one of the latest (as of February 2018) and clearly high-profile additions to Beat scholarship is *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* (2017). The collection is a part of the Cambridge Companions to Literature series which aims to be the entry point for readers into the subject’s criticism and is described on its website as covering “major writers, artists, philosophers, topics and periods”; the essays, the description continues, have been commissioned for the publication and constructed so that they “appeal to student readers” (“Cambridge Companions”). In other words, the series ultimately represents the canonization of the collection’s subject matter, yet *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* is introduced by its editor Steven Belletto with the following:

Fans of irony will appreciate that *The Cambridge Companion to the Beats* now exists. Cambridge University Press, the world’s oldest, telegraphs a certain seriousness and – to

some readers – the imprimatur of the academy. And yet, if you know anything about the Beats, you probably know that they were “antiestablishment,” that they wrote against conformity, consumerism, and the values of mainstream culture. (1)

Granted, Belletto then continues by explaining that the division between the Beats and academia was never as large as it has frequently been portrayed, and that the sheer amount of Beat scholarship currently available indicates that the Beats have finally been welcomed by academia at large (1-2). Still, Belletto adds that the current relationship between the Beats and “the academy ... remains vexed on many levels,” which seems rather unfounded in light of recent acquisitions of Beat manuscripts and memorabilia by Stanford or Emory.<sup>37</sup> Yet such a precaution on Belletto’s part – taking the more “traditionalist” position on Beat scholarship within academia – did not preclude the criticism eventually leveled at Belletto’s collection.

R. J. Ellis’s critique of the collection of essays begins with a pattern common in Beat scholarship, as it starts by – yet again – pointing out that the Beats were disapproved of by academia and that students in literature programs would hear that they “just won’t get a lecturing post” if their graduate studies focused on the Beats. Similarly, Oliver Harris also begins his interview with Belletto by stating that the collection being released in the Cambridge Series is a “paradox,” as the university ultimately represents the very institution which initially dismissed the Beats as irrelevant and not possessing any artistic value. Ultimately, however, Ellis’s overall argument is not without merits – he faults the collection for frequently providing broad brushstrokes where more detail was needed – and is valuable for a few reasons. First, academic responses to the Beats sometimes cannot avoid stereotyping the Beats, and this includes not only the representations by institutions such as Stanford University, but also individual Beat scholars who may “constantly repeat the mantra that the Beats pursued/sought/found freedom of expression during an era of growing repression ...” without commenting on the issue in a detailed manner (Ellis). Second, Beat criticism clearly follows a pattern set by current literary scholarship as a whole. In other words, when Ellis complains that the Cambridge collection is too inclusive in its approach – since it stretches the line between the Beats and Beat-associates too thin – this only means that Beat scholarship has not only long been part of Academia, but also has for long used current academic approaches. Simply put, Beat scholarship is – and has certainly been for a few years now, to the dismay of some Beat scholars – a part of academia and therefore the whole industry of cultural production it represents. The collection of critical essays *Reconstructing the Beats* (2004), edited by Jennie Skerl,

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<sup>37</sup> In addition, another contribution to Beat scholarship, David Stephen Calonne’s *The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats*, was published by the same Cambridge University Press a few months later.

serves as an example of Beat scholarship as yet another small field found in academia. In the introduction to the collection – which is quite tellingly separated into three chapters, namely “Re-historicizing,” “Recovering,” and “Re-visioning” – Skerl writes the following:

This collection has several purposes: to re-vision the Beats from contemporary critical perspectives, to reassess their place in mid-century American history and literature, to recontextualize Beat writers within the larger arts community of which they were a part, to recover marginalized figures and expand the restricted canon of three to six major figures established from 1956 to 1970, and to critique media stereotypes and popular clichés that influence both academic and popular discourse about the Beats. (2)

One of the collection’s main aims is then to insert the female voice into the history of the Beat Generation movement and emphasize the importance of African-American and other minorities in the Beat Generation (3–4). Skerl points out that there were numerous female poets and artists associated with New York and San Francisco bohemia, artists such as Ruth Weiss or Joanne Kyger, while African Americans Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans were household names of the West Coast and East Coast scenes. *Reconstructing the Beats* thus not only represents the renewed scholarly interest in the Beats and the modern approaches used in Beat Studies, but it also represents the changes in academia in general – changes in the way scholars read and subsequently critique literature and culture. Consequently, Beat scholarship is no longer on the “skid row” of academic production. Beat Studies is a “comparatively small but deep” field of scholarly pursuit, Belletto explains in an interview with Oliver Harris. While the studies’ role in the total field of production is small overall, it can no longer be considered as not being part of academia as a whole by virtue of constantly producing newer and newer readings in the same manner as virtually any other field of literary studies.

Some of the practices of Beat scholars, namely Birmingham’s lament over the “standardized” approach to research or the constant need of Beat scholars to highlight academia’s attitude toward the Beats in the 1950s and 1960s, are then to a certain extent unfounded. Nevertheless, they are also revealing, as they tell something about the scholars themselves and therefore about the Beats, albeit indirectly. Therefore, Birmingham’s rant on the loss of “Beatness” in current Beat Studies – the slow disappearance of a “down and dirty” approach in research – indicates the qualities found in the Beat Generation (“DYI”). To Birmingham, the Beats represent authenticity and beating one’s path outside of the established routes. Similarly, the references to the relationship between the Beats and academia are not merely factual statements, but on a meta-discursive level are also inherent parts of an established narrative possessing specific connotations – a sense

of exclusion, which is by definition linked to a notion of exceptionality, of being the Other in relation to the monolith of academia. A sense of “Beatness,” therefore, impregnates some of the contributions to Beat Studies. As a result, even Beat scholars can possess a Beat ethos and identity in their criticism.

## 5.4 Critiquing the Beats

As Skerl’s *Reconstructing the Beats* shows, one of the central issues surrounding the Beats – what the Beat Generation is and who belongs in it – is then frequently being reframed by current scholarship. However, the notion of a Beat identity is in less direct terms addressed by some of the critics of the Beats. Importantly, this criticism goes beyond Birmingham’s disdain for the arbitrary application of literary theory currently in vogue to the Beats.

Finding detractors of the Beat Generation is a far more difficult task than in the fifties; still, one can hear occasional voices of dissent. One such voice is that of Harold Bloom, who in the introduction to the *Jack Kerouac’s On the Road*, a part of his Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations series, starts with the following: “I have not reread *On the Road* during the near half-century since its first publication, and I am not happy at encountering it again” (1). Bloom’s criticism resembles that of the 1950s: the novel is, he claims, a “Period Piece,” a work of art that has little artistic merit outside of the context of its period. Bloom argues that the elements of social protest in the novel have now, in the age of “mediaversities” and “corporate robber barons” who rule society, faded away. As a result, *On the Road* then emerges most unfavorably when compared to “the masterpieces of Classic American fiction” such as the works of Steinbeck, Melville, or Twain. There is “no literary value whatsoever” in the novel, the critic further claims; the work sorely lacks the “delicate nuanced artistry of our father, Walt Whitman,” and is merely a self-indulgent evasion of the American quest for identity (1–2). Unsurprisingly, Norman Podhoretz took offense in 1987 when he found out that the city of Lowell, Kerouac’s hometown, had decided to honor the Beat by building a new park bearing his name. He claims that Kerouac wrote books “heaping abuse on the way of life lived in” small-town America such as Lowell and Kerouac’s “gift” was, in Podhoretz’s reading, his ability to produce “narcissistic monologues” (“Monument”). Yet Podhoretz is not ultimately surprised by such news; he sees the park as another move by both critics and publishers to pay “retroactive homage” to the Beats, as when Harper & Row published a large collection of Ginsberg’s poems. For Podhoretz, this development is ultimately a symptom of the degradation of values in America, and the Beats are to blame.

Harold Bloom is an idiosyncratic figure in American literary criticism known for his disdain of the current trends in literary theory; similarly, Norman Pod-

horetz effectively prizes his spats with the Beats or his former associates such as Trilling or Mailer. Others Beat critics are better at accentuating what exactly they dislike about the Beats. Bruce Bawer, looking in 1985 at Allen Ginsberg and the criticism and controversies surrounding him, describes Ginsberg as a phenomenon. Similarly to Podhoretz, he considers the recently published collection of Ginsberg's poems, *Collected Poems 1947–1980*, a testament to the canonization of the poet by the mainstream press (2). However, he then draws attention to the numerous “Ginsberg anecdotes” that many Ginsberg critics include in their reviews or essays, which leads him to claim that the persona of Ginsberg rather than his poems is what truly lies behind his success; in other words, it is the idea of Ginsberg that is of value to the critics and subsequently being celebrated (1–2). Bawer advances his argument of Ginsberg's past as a marketing research consultant and considers the success of *Howl* a combination of shock tactics, Ginsberg's knowledge of his audience, and his ability to package and market the product in an appealing if unconventional manner; for Bawer, Ginsberg had been relying on these tactics ever since the public reading of “Howl” in the Six Gallery (7). Even though the poems that followed are only variations of the same messages relying on the same tropes and development, Ginsberg successfully developed a “personality cult” around himself (12). The cult members, Bawer continues, consider him a “messianic poet” whose poetic faults can be ignored precisely because of his messianic qualities of authenticity. Ultimately, his main point is that people are attracted to Ginsberg the “polemical performance artist” rather than the poet; as a result, these people live through Ginsberg's persona their own versions of liberalism (2, 13).

Bawer is unable to avoid some of the old arguments about the Beat Generation made in the 1950s: he claims that the Beats romanticize poverty and crime while representing anti-intellectualism, and that Ginsberg has done “considerable damage to both American society and American literary culture.” Nevertheless, the bottom line of his criticism, that Ginsberg is popular because of the *idea* of Ginsberg, touches upon some of the representations of the Beats common even today. It is the idea of the Beats – that is, what they signify – which is appealing to the audience. It does not necessarily have to be the only appealing aspect of the Beats, nor is it usually so, yet the values the Beats represent, their “Beatness,” should also be taken into account when dealing with the Beats' reception and status. Importantly, this notion addresses the seeming focus of Stanford University or Emory University on their lives and their social impact: readers do not only value the Beats as writers, but also as cultural figures – as icons – and some readings simply accentuate this aspect over their literary achievements.

Finally, this notion of a Beat ideal is also present in discussions on the methods and directions of Beat Studies. Being “beat” means encompassing certain principles, and these can inadvertently manifest themselves at any time. However,

the hierarchy of said principles and their importance in one's reading of the Beats can again vary depending on the specific nuances of the given reading. The Beats and academic discourse thus inform one another; by accentuating certain aspects of the Beats, the resulting scholarship reshapes the Beats into a different mold, thus provoking a reaction from future interpretations. Thus, Birmingham disavows current literary criticism of the Beats – “It is a processed criticism; it is homogenized not heterogeneous. Beat scholars in the university are just another brick in the wall.” – in favor of more independent research focusing on the “little magazines” of New American Poetry (“DYI”). Yet this process of informing and reinforcing does not occur in an enclosed loop but rather in an uneven, perhaps somewhat misshapen, spiral. There is a development in the understanding of the Beats; the core remains mostly the same, yet the boundaries veer and shuffle, and at times coalesce to recenter the core. In this case, on his quest to understand the Beats, Birmingham is drawn in one direction while Skerl in *Reconstructing the Beats* in another.

Ultimately, this contest over “Beatness” then mirrors the one happening in popular culture: while some readings emphasize the work of the Beats, others promote them for their impact on American society.