

# **BEATING RHETORIC: RHETORICAL THEORY IN THE BEAT GENERATION**

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The beat generation has been examined as a social movement, literary period, and political statement from many different scholarly perspectives. Through the method of rhetorical criticism I tease out an implicit theory of rhetoric from the writings of the principal beat generation founders – namely Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. Offering a rhetorical read of their major work along with analysis of their letters and journals I offer a theory of rhetoric from both thinkers. In the early chapters I discuss the history of poetic discourses and rhetoric to determine the connection between literary texts and rhetorical theory. I establish the rhetorical, cultural, and social environment of the post-war United States and its interpretation and assessment by both Kerouac and Ginsberg. I then establish linkages between Kerouac and the rhetorical sense of *kairos*, establishing his contribution to the beat theory by analyzing *On the Road*. Kerouac's contribution to beat rhetoric is developed through examination of the timely and appropriate. Next I turn attention to Allen Ginsberg and his poem "Howl" to demonstrate his implicit theory that the limits of the human body are a rhetorical commonplace. Ginsberg's contribution is established as finding great power of rhetorical invention in the limits of the human being's embodied condition. In the final two sections, I show applications of this rhetorical theory through examining Diane Di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" for elements of applied beat rhetorical theory, concluding that elements of the beat rhetoric are present in both.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: RHETORICAL BEATS, BEAT RHETORIC

The singular force of the beat writers is manifest in the fact that they did not merely reflect the audience of American Bohemia; they substantially altered that audience, and in so doing they liberated and clarified motives until then only imperfectly realized. The intensity of reaction to their work indicates that the motives embodied in Kerouac's *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans* strike some sensitive hidden nerve that is more important than, before the appearance of those works, many had cared to admit.<sup>1</sup>

For Thomas Parkinson, a Berkeley literature professor writing in 1961, the value of the beat writers is rhetorical, though he does not explicitly say so. That is, the single most important aspect of them is that they altered the audience rather than reflected what the audience already wanted. Parkinson's question opens the beat writers to investigation using a rhetorical lens. If the beats touched on "motives" that were present yet unrealized, it could be said that the beats achieved one of the ultimate aims of rhetoric – defined by Kenneth Burke as "consubstantiality."<sup>2</sup>

What is the rhetorical perspective? Parkinson does not directly invoke rhetoric as such. However, Parkinson's approach – considering the "motives" that the beat writers "clarified" in their audience – puts Parkinson's appreciation of the beats in line with Kenneth Burke's appreciation of rhetoric. "Whether they represented an entire generation or a spasm of revulsion, the beat writers attained symbolic status, as did the until-then little-remarked Bohemian communities of New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's North Beach," he writes,

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Parkinson. "The Beat Writers: Phenomenon or Generation," in *Beat Down to Your Soul*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 458.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 21.

focusing on the beat writers as achieving a symbolic presence through their action of writing.<sup>3</sup> Professor Parkinson's attribution of symbolic status to this group means they could stand in synecdochally for groups of people who felt there was little place for them in contemporary society. As Kenneth Burke begins his investigation into the principles of rhetoric, he examines Milton's poem "Sampson," and concludes that the poem is best understood as "literature for use," which "could give pretexts for admitting a motive which, if not so clothed or complicated, if confronted in its simplicity, would have been inadmissible."<sup>4</sup> The beat writers accomplish this by offering poetic works that clothe and complicate – or in Parkinson's term, "clarify" the "imperfectly realized motives" of the bohemians. This symbolic appreciation is one way to think about the beat writers as beat rhetors. Burke's "literature for use" idea quickly develops into an addendum to the classical, traditional conception of rhetoric as mere persuasion based on rational principles.

The rhetorical perspective, besides including motive and symbolic attribution, also considers audience as a central element. Parkinson does so as well when he refers to the way the media handled the beats: "When the San Francisco columnist Herb Caen dubbed the members of current Bohemia 'beatniks,' the derisive appellation stuck. Beatnik life became a subject of general interest, and that special nexus of jazz, Buddhism, homosexuality, drugs and squalor was graphed and discussed in a wide range of media that reached a large audience."<sup>5</sup> Here Parkinson argues that the beat writers have been established as a collection of the undesirable elements of American society. At the same time, Parkinson attends to audience again, perhaps hammering

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Parkinson, "The Beat Writers," 449.

<sup>4</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Parkinson, "The Beat Writers," 449.

home for his audience a persuasive reason that they should be studied as writers. Audience, like symbolic exchange, is another way to think about the beat writers.

Parkinson identifies the importance of the beat writers in articulating not only a vision for their audience, but the audience itself. The two interpretations Parkinson raised above, as to whether the Beats are an “entire generation” – that is, the beat writers are the source of inspiration toward radical politics - or a “spasm of revulsion” – a group that for a moment turned totally against the center of its society’s values - is a question of evaluation. Not an unusual question at all when considering the value of literature. But the way Parkinson approaches the question’s importance is through the audience. For Parkinson, the beat writers are worth careful study since they exerted influence over nearly an entire generation, and at the same time served as symbols for that generation’s attitude. Parkinson’s writing resonates with Kenneth Burke, who considers poetry “symbolic action” because it is “the dancing of an attitude.”<sup>6</sup> For Burke, poetics is a type of action, not description, and it is the symbolic action of poetics that allows humans to make, be and do.

Writing a half century later, Jonah Raskin makes a similar claim about the work of Allen Ginsberg:

The 1955 Six Gallery reading was bohemianism at its best. It was something ‘brave and honest’ – to borrow Tennessee Williams’s phrase – in the midst of a society that seemed cowardly and insincere, and it marked the start of the cultural revolution that would sweep across America in the 1960s . . . The Six Gallery reading was living proof that the First Amendment hadn’t been destroyed by McCarthyism and the committees that investigated artists, playwrights, Hollywood directors, and TV screenwriters. In America in the twentieth century there was no bigger bombshell than the Six Gallery reading.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, Third ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 6-7.

Although hyperbolic if considered from the historical perspective, the potential for a rhetorical reading is rather clear. Raskin's hyperbole is possible only because he reads Ginsberg's poem as a response. Seen as part of a larger dialogue or argument with the values of society, Ginsberg's poem becomes a marker, a similar articulation of a motive nobody seemed willing or able to express until this moment.

Reading Parkinson and Raskin together we find ample exigence for a rhetorical reading of the beats. The idea that the beats were valuable for putting into words a feeling, attitude, or sensibility of the time indicates the presence of the rhetorical. As Burke states, "Rhetoric as the speaker's attempt to identify himself favorably with his audience then becomes so transformed that the work may seem to have been written under an esthetic of pure 'expression,' without regard for communicative appeal."<sup>8</sup> Well written rhetoric may appear to be expression of an idea or emotion that pre-exists the moment of its constitution. Rhetoric makes the communicative appeal appear to be expression, thereby increasing its persuasive appeal. This is apparent in the fact that two writers examining beat texts with fifty years between them arrive at the same sort of opinion regarding the importance and power of the works – they name or clarify something not quite articulated among people, but present.

However, Parkinson makes even further revision in the scope of the value of the beat writers. Not all beat writing is valuable. Parkinson distinguishes the terms "Beat" and "Beatnik:" "The term 'beat' I take to be descriptive, and its primary reference is to a group of writers, especially, who participate in certain common attitudes and pursue common literary aims. . . The 'beatnik,' on the other hand, is either not an artist or an incompetent and nonproductive one . . .

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<sup>8</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 37.

He may write an occasional ‘poem,’ but he has no literary ambitions.”<sup>9</sup> The beat writers have persuaded many to try to produce poetic texts. Not many literary movements in history can be evaluated on such a standard. It might be important to examine the beat writers not as offering a product – poetry and literature for example – and perhaps also offering ways of making connections with words. The beat writers’ influence might be in offering more than just good texts, but how to craft connection between human beings. This indicates there might be an implicit, or latent theory of rhetoric within the beat texts.

Parkinson’s assessment of the beat writers is designed to draw the attention of the literary critic. But it also calls for attention from the rhetorical critic. Concerns of audience, symbolic value, and persuasive efficacy are shared by both literary and rhetorical criticism. The rhetorical critic differs from the literary critic because he or she seeks to judge the effectiveness of the discourse in gaining audience assent at the specific time and place of its distribution. Literary criticism, generally speaking, attends to a more internal looking manner in evaluating the work, although sometimes they do consider audience. Parkinson tends to focus entirely on audience as a reason to attend more critically to these beat writers.

It is a strange move for a literature professor to make. Although concerned with audience, in the height of New Criticism a literature professor should attend to the Beats’ texts instead of representations of who these people were. Further, popular media portrayed them as without positive value. Since the launch of Sputnik happened to coincide with the rise of the term “beat,” Herb Caen felt that “Beatnik” was more appropriate to describe these strange people who seemed

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<sup>9</sup> Parkinson, "The Beat Writers: Phenomenon or Generation," 452.

to be from space.<sup>10</sup> Parkinson's starting point in offering an interpretation of the Beats could also be read as an ending point.

Suggesting the rhetorical criticism of literature is nothing new. As Brian Vickers has pointed out, rhetorical devices in modernist writing such as Joyce gives a large amount of literary force.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Sloane has used rhetorical criticism to locate the moment in history where discourse shifted from highlighting controversy and argument to transmitting truths discovered in philosophy and science.<sup>12</sup> Rhetorical criticism in general has turned its attention to many objects of criticism, from storefronts in Pasadena to hate crimes – a far remove from appraising speeches.<sup>13</sup> Modern attempts to theorize rhetorical criticism see it as a fluid act that serves as an argument itself – or a text that one could critique and has obligation to do so once it is written.<sup>14</sup> The utility of rhetorical criticism to reveal and elucidate perspectives on meaning forged from encounters with a variety of texts means that rhetorical criticism of key beat texts will reveal new understandings of the beat writers' contributions.

In this study I will perform rhetorical criticism on texts written by beat authors. I hope to reveal new understandings about how the texts work and what they do in a Burkean sense, but what I strive to add is the development of a beat rhetorical theory by attending closely to their

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<sup>10</sup> Herb Caen, "Pocketful of Notes" *San Francisco Examiner*, April 2, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Vickers "Rhetoric and the Modern Novel" in Craig Kallendorf, Ed. *Landmark Essays in Rhetoric and Literature*, (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas O. Sloane *Donne, Milton and the End of Humanist Rhetoric*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> See Greg Dickinson "Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, 1 (1997); Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki. "The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5, 3 (Fall 2002): 483-505.

<sup>14</sup> See McKerrow, Raymie E. 1989. "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Praxis." *Communication Monographs* 56, no. 2: 91., and also Ono, K.A., and J.M. Sloop. 1992. "Commitment to *telos*--a sustained critical rhetoric." *Communication Monographs* 59, no. 1: 48-60.

works. I think that Parkinson's observations, specifically how audiences were driven to attempt to create their own poetic works, reveals the presence of at least an implicit theory of appropriate human communication – what I define as a rhetoric. The beat writers are not valuable for only creating poetry and novels, but an alternative way of communicating, one they felt was more appropriate to the position of human beings in the time and place they were writing. The beat writers – to re-address Parkinson's question of whether they were “spasm” or “generation” becomes much more clearly “generation” if the beat writers are considered the founders of a rhetorical theory that offers what they saw as a much more appropriate way to interact with others.

In this introduction I will explain what I mean by rhetoric and communication, as well as give more detail about the ideas of Kenneth Burke that I will draw upon for my study of the beats. The title of this dissertation – “Beating Rhetoric” – has a number of dimensions of meaning to it, and I chose it because of this depth. Jack Kerouac's naming of the generation also contains this plurality of meanings in one term – and might be exactly why he chose to call the movement beat. As Kerouac explains: “The word ‘beat’ originally meant poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways. Now that the word is belonging officially it is being made to stretch to include people who do not sleep in subways but have a certain new gesture, or attitude, which I can only describe as a new *more*. ‘Beat Generation’ has simply become the slogan or label for a revolution in manners in America.”<sup>15</sup> Kerouac traces the title's meaning from its origins with a particular group of people to the more “current” understanding of the term as something more symbolic. Here Kerouac, like Parkinson, connects the beat movement to the realm of human action. Parkinson discussed motive, Kerouac discusses attitude.

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Kerouac, “The Origins of the Beat Generation” *Playboy* 6, 6 (June 1959): 31, 42.

By defining beat as a “new attitude” or a “*more*,” Kerouac skirts Burke’s rhetorical theory, where symbolic action is the “dancing of an attitude,”<sup>16</sup> and motives are “shorthand words for situations.”<sup>17</sup>

Kerouac continuously and repetitively defines “beat” in the terms of symbolic action, or something “done” not something in a “state.” “Being bugged is not being beat. You may be withdrawn, but you don’t have to be mean about it. Beatness is not a form of tired old criticism. It is a form of spontaneous affirmation. What kinda culture you gonna have with everybody’s gray faces saying, ‘I don’t think that’s quite correct?’”<sup>18</sup> Placing beat as a form of affirmation opposed to the old criticism is directly tied to the holiness of the term. “Beat doesn’t mean tired, or bushed, so much as it means *beato*, the Italian for beatific: to be in a state of beatitude, like St. Francis, trying to love all life, trying to be utterly sincere with everyone, practicing endurance, kindness, cultivating joy of heart.”<sup>19</sup> “Beat” as a practice that is continuously and spontaneously in process places it in the realm of action, and perhaps even Kerouac’s writing about beatness is an act of affirmation in the same vein, done through the symbolic attribution of motives to a particular person, group of people, or, going even further, carving out a space for people to identify with and inhabit in order to become consubstantial with his ideas. That ancient rhetorical concept of *ethos* can be translated as “dwelling” which carries with it the sense of a comfortable, familiar place. “The *ethos* of rhetoric makes use of our inventive and symbolic capacity to construct dwelling places that are stimulating and aesthetically, psychologically, socially, and

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<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1941), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Kerouac, “Lamb, No Lion” in Donald Allen, ed. *Good Blonde and Others* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), 51.

<sup>19</sup> Kerouac, “Lamb, No Lion,” 51.



perhaps theologically instructive.”<sup>20</sup> Imperfectly realized motives can perhaps be fleshed out by articulating a comfortable place from where one can express these motives.

The idea of rhetoric carving out a space is also discussed by Burke as falling under traditional rhetorical ideas: “And both Aristotle and Cicero consider audiences purely as something *given*. The extreme heterogeneity of modern life, however, combined with the nature of modern postal agencies, brings up another kind of possibility: the systematic attempt to carve out an audience, as the commercial rhetorician looks not merely for persuasive devices in general, but for the topics that will appeal to the particular ‘income group’ most likely to be interested in his product, or able to buy it.”<sup>21</sup> Of course Burke is pointing out the application of rhetoric to sales in particular, but his general point is that an audience in the modern era is not necessarily a given, observable assembly at a particular place in time. An audience can be present through identification with a particular attitude or motive, as this example of targeting product advertising to those of a certain economic class demonstrates. What is most important here is the replacement of the pre-existing audience with one that can be brought into existence by the rhetor’s “calling out” of the audience by perhaps, in Parkinson’s words, “substantially altering” an audience by “clarifying” their motives that were “imperfectly realized.” Calling attention to and clarifying the motives of an audience is what Kerouac may be doing with his many clarifications and definitions of beat.

Kerouac’s definitions of “beat” serve to further clarify and underscore his sense of what beat is. What we are left with is a sense that “beat” is more of a shorthand for a situation, as Burke put it, or a motive for a way of being that one can identify with. “Beat,” read this way

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<sup>20</sup> Michael J. Hyde, “Rhetorically, We Dwell” in Michael J. Hyde, Ed. *The Ethos of Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 64.

becomes rhetorical, and the question of how rhetorical theory and criticism can access and elucidate alternative understandings of beat appears. In the next section, I introduce some of the concepts and theories that I argue are necessary for the articulation and understanding of beat rhetoric.

Jack Kerouac addressed what he felt were misconceptions or misunderstandings of the phrase “beat generation” in his 1958 *Playboy* article, “Origins of the Beat Generation.” Kerouac’s argumentative strategy in this essay is one of association – lining up the idea of a “beat generation” with seemingly innocuous or even pleasant figures from 1940s popular culture: “It goes back to the inky ditties of old cartoons (Krazy Kat with the irrational brick) – to Laruel and Hardy in the Foreign Legion – to Count Dracula and his *smile* to Count Dracula shivering and hissing back before the Cross . . .”<sup>22</sup> But even among these pop culture “roots” of beat thought lurk the holy dimensions of beat that Kerouac always returned to. In this essay Kerouac attempts to divide “beat” from the criminal and align it with the “acceptable,” as this passage demonstrates:

Yet it was as a Catholic, it was not at the insistence of any of these ‘niks’ and certainly not with their approval either, that I went one afternoon to the church of my childhood (one of them), Ste. Jenne d’Arc in Lowell, Mass., and suddenly with tears in my eyes and had a vision of what I must have really meant with ‘Beat’ anyhow when I heard the holy silence in the church (I was the only one in there, it was five P.M., dogs were barking outside, children yelling, the fall leaves, the candles were flickering alone just for me), the vision of the word beat as being to mean beatific.<sup>23</sup>

Kerouac departs from the busy, party atmosphere associated with “beat” and reduces the meaning to solitude, alone in a church meditating and listening to the world go by. There’s the indication of solitude and reflection as central to beat – as well as the obvious holy sanctity of the

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<sup>22</sup> Kerouac, “Origins,” 32.

<sup>23</sup> Kerouac, “Origins,” 42.

church. At the same time, the position that Kerouac occupies allows him to reflect and think about the world outside and perceive it differently, from a position outside of “normal” society. Placing beat’s meaning in the center of the church and in solitary reflection of a devout religious man could be read as an attempt to create a meaning for beat that is more central to society’s values.

Later in the same piece, Kerouac explicitly denounces interpretations of beat that associate it with criminal behavior: “When a murder, a routine murder took place in North beach, they labeled it a Beat generation slaying although in my childhood I’d been famous as an eccentric in my block for stopping the younger kids from throwing rocks at the squirrels, for stopping them from frying snakes in cans or trying to blow up frogs with straws.”<sup>24</sup> Kerouac embodies the definition of beat in these lines, connecting his own attitudes and actions as the living definition of beat in order to prove that violence could never be a part of it. He attempts to take beat back to its origins by re-defining beat as his own life, and his life events as the limits of what beat can mean. Kerouac tries to move the definition of beat to something of higher status in all of these examples – from the criminal margins of society to something central to spirituality and kindness.

The study of rhetoric, according to Robert Hariman, is the study of how status is attributed to discourse. “We determine what any of the arts of language is by stating how important it is. We define dialectic, or poetics, or dialogue or investigative reporting by both saying what it is and where it is in some social order.”<sup>25</sup> The term “beat” seems subjected to this sort of negotiation in Kerouac’s essay. Instead of defining beat in terms of textual production,

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<sup>24</sup> Kerouac, “Origins,” 42.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Hariman, “Status, Marginality and Rhetorical Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 72, no 1 (February 1986): 38-54. 40.

or grammatical considerations, beat is defined (or misunderstood) by association with societal elements – murder or kindness. The relegation of a type of discourse is a naming of its role and therefore its potential power in society: “[T]he attribution of status activates a pattern of thinking . . . it is the marking of symbols according to their centrality or marginality to the society of the thinker. And this marking gives the symbols their power within the society.”<sup>26</sup> This pattern of thinking, according to Hariman, can be understood by investigating the markings one group or society attributes to various symbols. The location of discourses in society provides attribution of value.

The beat writers provide other moments where one can see the attribution of status to the marginal. In 1960, poet Gary Snyder wrote “Notes on the Beat Generation” to introduce Beat poetry to a Japanese audience: “What we had discovered, or rediscovered, was that the imagination has a free and spontaneous life of its own, that it can be trusted, that what flows from a spontaneous mind is poetry – and that this is more basic and more revolutionary than any political program . . .”<sup>27</sup> Snyder identifies the Beat poetic production as the result of a pure, unmediated thought. He goes on to identify the characteristics of what he calls the “new American poetry”:

What is ‘new’ about the new American poetry? First, what is new about the poets? The most striking thing is their detachment from the official literary world. . . They earn their livings in a wide variety of ways, but feel their real work to be poetry –requiring no justification . . . They have kept out (or been kept out) of the comfortable middle-class life in America . . . they have rejected the academic and neoformalist poetry of the late thirties and forties.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hariman, "Status, Marginality and Rhetorical Theory," 45.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Snyder, "Notes on the Beat Generation," in *Beat Down to Your Soul*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 517.

<sup>28</sup> Snyder, "Notes on the Beat Generation," 522.

The historical accuracy of Snyder's statement is of little interest – what is important here is the framing of the poet as someone who, through denial of the comforts of average life, has realized an alternative occupation. The attribution of marginality on the middle-class trappings of status has come with it the counter of attributing status to the marginal, whether it's a marginal style or marginal existence. Snyder's construction of the "new poetry" is one beyond style or method, and refers instead to the attribution of status to poetry as a discourse by its practitioners.

Poetry is, for Snyder, "a combination of the highest activity of trained intellect and the deepest insight of the intuitive, instinctive, or emotional mind, 'all the faculties' . . . It is sensitive awareness to things as they are . . . it is history, and most of all it is Magic, the power to transform by symbol and metaphor, to create a world with forms or to destroy a world with chaos."<sup>29</sup> Snyder assesses the power and importance of Beat poetic production by a metaphor to spellcraft, or magic. Snyder works in contradictions through his entire definition – the new poet is a creator and a destroyer, yet bound by history. He or she is a builder of forms or the usher of chaos, but still sees things as they are. The poet as a powerful creator or destroyer of worlds is rooted to the poet's one action – writing or speaking. By comparing the poet to the wizard, Snyder's metaphor of Magic must refer to language. And it is through language one attributes status and marginality to the world, ordering it. One can read Snyder's capitalization of "Magic" as a reference to what he is doing rhetorically in his definition, attributing status to the marginal by metaphor to the sorcerer.

Kenneth Burke, thinking about the importance of the teaching of rhetoric in its argumentative and persuasive sense also invoked the metaphor of magic when discussing the power of language:

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<sup>29</sup> ———, "Notes on the Beat Generation," 522.

The magical decree is implicit in all language; for the mere act of naming an object or situation decrees that it is to be singled out as such-and-such rather than as something-other. Hence, I think that an attempt to eliminate magic, in this sense, would involve us in the elimination of vocabulary itself as a way of sizing up reality. Rather, what we may need is *correct* magic, magic whose decrees about the naming of real situations is the closest possible approximation to the situation named.<sup>30</sup>

Burke distinguishes between correct magic and an implicit “bad” magic, one that eliminates rhetoric’s role in the apprehension of situation, motive and context. Burke’s correct magic refers to his larger project of dramatism – a complete philosophy of the human person that would see human action as governed by motives in given situations. Burke’s “good” magic would be the pedagogy that might fit with Snyder’s “new poetry” – teaching a sizing up or down of the world that approximates situations, but also attributes values, either constructive or destructive. But through this very metaphor, Snyder casts attribution of status as well as marginality upon his own key term. For if only a select few can recognize the importance of poetry in their lives as a center term, what happens to those who can recognize the status of this act of recognition? From this we might get the beat writers that Parkinson doesn’t care for, those who scribble some bad verse at a coffee shop and think they got it.

For both Snyder and Parkinson, the Beat text is more than just a poem, it is a naming of what poetry is, and how that poetry fits into and functions for readers and writers. This poetry and the poet constitute a system for naming, approximating, judging and creating situations. The “magic” of the new poetry, the ability to constitute and transform audiences, create and eliminate belief and perspective, as well as symbolically fine-tune attitudes and motives are also the functions of rhetoric. Kenneth Burke’s theories come close when in his criticism of Milton’s “Sampson” he claims the poem is, “almost a kind of witchcraft, a wonder-working spell by a

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<sup>30</sup> Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, 4.

cantankerous old fighter-priest who would slay the enemy in effigy,” and is no “sheer poetic exercise” – Milton’s poem serves as “literature for use,” it is doing something, but “wholly in the order of ritual and magic.”<sup>31</sup> What Burke is trying to do is recover rhetoric for everyday use, and so are the beat writers – they approach the project from different directions.

With this in mind, it seems evident that even from within their own ranks the Beat writers were assessing themselves from a rhetorical perspective. Seen this way, the Beat writers are offering to their readers not only a “magical decree,” naming reality, but a “spell book” – a way of becoming magic users via the symbolic incantations and actions of their writing. As Jane Blankenship points out, “‘magic’ and ‘mystery’ can be considered synoptic terms around (under) which we can place much of Kenneth Burke’s work, particularly his theory of ‘entitlement’ and his treatment of ‘social mystery.’”<sup>32</sup> The idea of magic or incantation as a metaphor for poetic practice and a metaphor for Burke’s work as a whole is a connection that the beats share with Burke in the sense that both believe words have the power to create something from nothing.

In this study I will give rhetorical criticism of key beat texts. My rhetorical criticism will be primarily informed by the work of Kenneth Burke, since my argument will attempt to connect the trajectory of Burke with the trajectory of the beats in regard to rhetoric. While the beat writers I criticize are not overtly proclaiming the construction of rhetorical theory, I argue that implicit in their claims is a rhetorical theory which can be articulated. I will argue that the Beats developed a rhetoric in order to attend to eminent changes in communication styles and strategies that they felt were bad. Some of these “bad” modes of human interaction, the beats felt, were

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<sup>31</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Jane Blankenship, “‘Magic’ and ‘Mystery’ in the Works of Kenneth Burke” in Herbert W. Simons and Tervor Melia, Eds. *The Legacy of Kenneth Burke* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 128.

related to a rise in consumerism as well as limitations to personal expression brought about by the cold war. “This shared experience for the Beat writers was historical and political, based on the tumultuous changes of their times: the historic events that began with America’s dropping the atomic bomb on Japan to bring World War II to an end, and the political ramifications of the ensuing Cold War and wave of anti-Communist hysteria that followed in the United States in the late 1940s and the 1950s.”<sup>33</sup> There were many economic changes in society, such as the shift toward a consumer culture precipitated by the need to replace a wartime economy.<sup>34</sup> But even in the light of all of these political and social events, the beats were influenced by what they read, and also by a sense of community: “But the real key to tranquility would be found in a gentle tolerance toward all one’s neighbors, even the so-called criminals like Neal [Cassidy], who if treated with sufficient kindness would turn out to be merely backward saints. As Jack and Holmes envisioned him, the great American of the future would be ‘the hitchhiking Negro saint’ – an apotheosis of the Americans currently most despised.”<sup>35</sup> John Clellon Holmes and Jack Kerouac had conceived of a rhetorical subject that would “embody” their claims for a different mode of human interaction needed for the times. Attention to the neighborly seems strange as a central point for the beat generation, but it makes a lot more sense if the beat generation is read as offering a rhetorical theory rather than political rebellion.

The beat rhetoric – or “Beating Rhetoric” as I have titled this dissertation – is as much a return as it is a beginning. The beats can be seen as returning to a sense of rhetoric closely related

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<sup>33</sup> Anne Charters, “Variations on a Generation” in Anne Charters, Ed. *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1992), xvii.

<sup>34</sup> See Ewen, Stewart. *Captains of Consciousness : Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*. (New York: McGraw-Hill), 1977.

<sup>35</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 253.



to poetics. I will proceed with a rhetorical criticism of four figures – Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima, and Amiri Baraka. The first half of the study is on two “founding” figures – Kerouac and Ginsberg. I selected them for this study because of their concern for human beings as communicative beings. Other figures of the beat movement, such as William Burroughs or Gregory Corso – do not express such a concern in the same way that Kerouac and Ginsberg do. William Burroughs, reflecting on Jack Kerouac after his passing, draws the same conclusion by distinguishing Kerouac’s project from his own: “What are writers, and I will confine the use of this term to writers of novels, trying to do? They are trying to create a universe in which they have lived or where they would live to live. To write it, they must go there and submit to condition that they may not have bargained for. Sometimes, as in the case of Fitzgerald and Kerouac, the effect produced by a writer is immediate, as if a generation were waiting to be written.”<sup>36</sup> Echoing the sentiments of both Burke and Parkinson, Burroughs points to Kerouac’s writing as articulating a place or “world” in which a generation either takes place or discovers its own existence, as if it were waiting for the words. In the upcoming chapters dedicated to their thought and relationship to communication and rhetoric, I examine essays, letters, and journal entries that prove an interest in communication and rhetoric as a motive for their poetic and literary output. The second half of the dissertation focuses on two writers who applied the beat rhetoric but toward different ends. Diane Di Prima uses the beat rhetoric to construct an alternate position for women in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, using it to blur and interrogate conceptions of sexuality, body, and gender. Amiri Baraka, writing at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, uses the beat rhetoric to connect the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 to a larger pattern of atrocity

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<sup>36</sup> William Burroughs, “Remembering Jack Kerouac” in Anne Charters, ed. *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 63.

and violence perpetuated by hierarchy and greed. In the end, this study provides a picture of the beat rhetoric, both in theory and in application, and in doing so hopes to present a new perspective on the beats as engaged with and in rhetoric.

As I will argue in chapter 1, the beat rhetoric is a return in some ways to the times when the relation between poetic and rhetoric was not strictly defined. By going back by assuming the role of poetic as a way of making the world for oneself, the beats are directly invoking ancient roles for the poetic, roles that have much more to do with what we might call rhetoric today. Examining the root of the “poetic” takes us to the word *poesis*, which translates to “making.” In this sense, the beats could be seen as “beating” rhetoric back into its ancient form, or perhaps I am using the beats to beat out of rhetoric these dust clouds of poetic that are inside of it. It could also be read as the “beat” of rhetoric that has always been with it, and perhaps is the heart of the rhetorical – the aesthetic dimension. Although contemporary rhetorical studies has a strong line of focus on the reasoned and rational production of discourse, it could be argued that there is nothing but an aesthetic element present – “Orators summon appearances that are not and can never be ‘complete’ descriptions of phenomenal being –their speech amounts to an imposition of aesthetic form on being. This aesthetic form is not a poor image of the true reality of the world.”<sup>37</sup> Our meanings, in other words, do not come from separate reality, but are carved from phenomena that we perceive. We articulate this reality to each other and agree and disagree on these articulations. The beat rhetoric inserts itself into this by arguing for a different way of articulating these attributions.

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<sup>37</sup> Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, “Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 2 (May 1993): 131-145, 137.

After tracing some of the relationship between poetics and rhetoric, I examine some of the works of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg to elucidate the foundations of what I call the beat rhetoric. As the heart of the theory, both writers could be said to provide the “heartbeat” of the rhetorical theory. Kerouac, often called the father of the Beat Generation, wrote the novel *On the Road* (1958) and was met with popular and critical acclaim. Allen Ginsberg’s 1956 poem “Howl” – performed in San Francisco and published by City Lights Books – created a swarm of controversy and praise culminating in an indecency trial. Both of these men, through journal entries and letters, as well as interviews and other writings, display concern and frustration with the modes of communication and rhetoric that dominate their culture. This frustration, I argue, can be seen as an exigence for their literary production. Within their literary output are elements of concern with rhetoric and communication. I use the two most well-known works of Ginsberg and Kerouac – “Howl” and *On the Road* – in order to demonstrate the presence of these theoretical concerns. I argue through criticism that these concerns can be read as a rhetorical theory. At the end of the first portion of the dissertation, the beat rhetoric will be established from these critical insights.

The second half of the study focuses on Diane DiPrima and Amiri Baraka which show applications of the beat rhetorical theory. Much beat scholarship can easily become biographical celebration of the individual who wrote the text, or become attempts to locate the trauma in the author’s life responsible for such an output. Although biographies and histories are important, I attend more to the texts themselves in this study in order to articulate what I see as a latent theory. Since the theory is latent in Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s work, much of it develops after its initial appearance. Di Prima serves as an interesting case study in this vein since she uses the beat rhetoric in her writing. Furthermore, DiPrima’s status as a woman and her engagement with

beat rhetoric help to complicate the claim that the beat writers were a misogynist, temporary phenomenon centered around a particular group of young disaffected men.<sup>38</sup> In this section, I analyze Di Prima's *Memiors of a Beatnik* to see how she invokes the theory in order to craft her own arguments.

Finally, Amiri Baraka's recent poem "Somebody Blew up America" (2001) is investigated in the conclusion as a barometer of the beat rhetoric's status today.. Baraka has had a long history with the beat generation writers, responding to early critics of the movement.<sup>39</sup> Amira Baraka has adopted a number of philosophies and themes in his work over the years, but I will argue that he relies on the beat rhetoric to make his claims in this poem. I am not trying to argue that Baraka is consistently "beat" in his work, only that in this poem we find evidence that the beat theory still has salience for the contemporary moment.

My argument will proceed through six chapters. The arc of these chapters is to move from a general examination of rhetoric and the rhetorical environment of the beats to specific criticism of their work. The method for this study will be to use rhetorical criticism to examine beat texts for the presence of latent theoretical assumptions. Once these assumptions are elucidated, I will move to the criticism of the application in order to show how the rhetorical theory works in practice.

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<sup>38</sup> For the most recent deployment of this critique, see Manuel Luis Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomas Rivera* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2003). For additional complications to this kind of criticism of the beats, see Nancy M. Grace and Rona C. Johnson, Eds. *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, Eds. *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> See Norman Podhoretz "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" *Partisan Review* Spring 1958: 305-318 and the response by LeRoi Jones in a letter to the editor in *Partisan Review* Summer 1958.

In the first chapter, I examine the relationship between rhetoric and poetics in the context of the beats. In the second chapter, I investigate the rhetorical environment of the beats. Examining their discursive environment helps to prove how they can be read as latent rhetorical theorists. I will also discuss the ideas of Kenneth Burke and how they are relevant to the beats' rhetorical concerns. My criticism will focus on seeking out the presence of Burkean ideas about rhetoric as latent within their texts.

In the following chapter, I investigate Allen Ginsberg's latent theory of beat rhetoric. First, I examine Ginsberg's prose and public talks, as well as interviews to establish how he approaches rhetoric. Secondly, I argue how these concerns generate a latent rhetorical theory within his poetry. My argument will be that Ginsberg perceives a lack of comfort among most people with the human condition of embodiment to be responsible for the political problems of mid-twentieth century America. Ginsberg's solution to this problem is a reorientation toward the limits of the human body as a rhetorical commonplace from which to speak. Although Ginsberg went through many changes, ideas, and shifts in spiritual discourses through his long career, I think a persuasive case can be made that the human body, its discomfort, situated-ness and vulnerability were "master commonplaces" for Ginsberg. Commonplaces are, according to Richard Lanham, "common *sources* of arguments."<sup>40</sup> In the ancient world, these sources were a rhetorical resource that could be memorized to use in the arguing of many common issues that might arise in public disputation. However, commonplaces assume a certain static in the cultural and social environment. I use the term "master commonplaces" to indicate Ginsberg's seeking of a commonplace that *should* always be used, in order to bridge nearly any cultural or social

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Lanham *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 169.

difference. This discomfort with the body is a cultural and social production for Ginsberg. I argue that Ginsberg's work suggests re-orientation to the body as vital for the survival of human beings. Poetry, broadly conceived as the poetic, could reorient a failing society back toward the human body as *the* commonplace, a value that could be shared by any human being. Although this sounds metaphysical, it is highly rhetorical. The value of the human body, for Ginsberg, exists because it is limited. The embodied condition, therefore, must be made attractive through its limits in order to function as a "master commonplace."

The "Six at Six" Gallery reading, where "Howl" was read for the first time, was a moment of public address. The reading occurred on October 7, 1955, in San Francisco. The night promised a reading of the six most influential new poets of the younger generation, hosted by Kenneth Rexroth, a central intellectual figure in San Francisco. According to Jonah Raskin, "[t]he Six Gallery reading was a direct and deliberate response to the culture of the bomb and to American power and wealth."<sup>41</sup> Raskin's read of "Howl" as addressed discourse means it can be read as a moment of rhetoric. With both an actual and an audience in mind for the poem, the moment can be seen both as traditionally rhetorical (a rhetor addressing an audience for the purpose of moving them) and constitutively rhetorical as well. As Maurice Charland has argued, "theories of rhetoric as persuasion cannot account for the audiences that rhetoric addresses."<sup>42</sup> In order to address this gap, Charland proposes the idea of constitutive rhetoric, which creates the audience that it is addressing by interpolating it into being. Basing his theory on Burke and Althusser, Charland relies on Burke to explain why a pre-rhetorical sense of audience cannot be

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<sup>41</sup> Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>42</sup> Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the *Peuple Québécois*" *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73 2 (May 1987):133-150, 134.

a given: “Burke moves towards collapsing the distinction between the realm of the symbolic and that of human conceptual consciousness. From such a perspective we cannot accept the ‘givenness’ of ‘audience,’ ‘person,’ or ‘subject,’ but must consider their very textuality, their very constitution in rhetoric as a structured articulation of signs.”<sup>43</sup> This does not simply mean that the audience can be treated as a text as well, but that audience and text as separate entities that are combined, overlayed or mixed in some way is insufficient. The audience can be seen as a text as well, an articulation or a “speech” as such. The text is created for and by the audience, and the audience can be seen as created for and by the text.

Both Parkinson and Raskin seem to suggest that the importance of the beats is due to their ability to create the “beat” audience through the moment of address –whether making an argument or clarifying the group’s ideals. As a claim of importance by two scholars separated by field as well as distance, we can say that the beats are interesting because of their ability to not just represent, but constitute their audience.

As Ginsberg explains “Howl” while looking back on that night, one gets another sense of the uniqueness of the moment through its connection to the American poetic tradition:

The reading was delivered by the poet, rather surprised at his own power, drunk on the platform, becoming increasingly sober as he read, driving forward with a strange, ecstatic intensity, delivering a spiritual confession to an astounded audience – ending in tears which restored to American poetry the prophetic consciousness it had lost since the conclusion of Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, another celebrated mystical work.<sup>44</sup>

In Burkean terms Ginsberg identifies his poem as a part of the American poetic tradition by association with Crane’s work. In associating the two, he hopes that he makes his poem

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<sup>43</sup> Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric,” 137.

<sup>44</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*, Bill Morgan, Ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 241.

consubstantial with Crane's famous work. Consubstantiality, as Burke defines it, is the goal of rhetoric. "A doctrine of *consubstantiality*, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial."<sup>45</sup> Although we can argue that "Howl" is a unique moment, Ginsberg frames the uniqueness by associating it with a "mystical" work of American poetry. He makes his "new" work "old" by associating it not directly with a mainstream poetic tradition, but with "mystical" Hart Crane. It isn't so much a different work within the poetic tradition, but a work that accesses that tradition differently. It seems like a statement of expression, or fact, but at the same time it can be read that Ginsberg is arguing for a place among a particular type of poetry – "mystical" – for his own poem. In his discussion of the effects on the audience of his work as well as its location in a particular poetic tradition, he seems sensitive to a rhetorical reading of his poetry.

I will analyze "Howl" in the next chapter using several perspectives that both combine rhetorical theory and argumentation theory. "Howl" can be analyzed not just as a moment of constitutive rhetoric, but as a moment of rhetorical argumentation as well. As Christopher Tindale claims, "[A]n argument is the discourse of interest that centers, and develops in, the argumentative situation," that situation being "the dynamic 'space' in which arguer and audience interact, but interact in a way that makes them co-authors."<sup>46</sup> Although it seems like Tindale is defending a traditional, reasoned sense of argument, careful reading of his claim reveals the opposite. Tindale acknowledges that definitions of argument that assume it to be a "reason

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<sup>45</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher W. Tindale, *Rhetorical Argumentation* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 23.



giving use of language” and the employment of terms such as “soundness” and “validity” have been “seriously challenged” by scholars and in order to find a notion of argument that “changes how we perceive the world by changing the way we think about things” we need to “revise the notion of argument at its heart.”<sup>47</sup> His revision moves argument away from the traditional view that argument is some sort of exchange of reasons among a rational group. “Potentially argumentative situations are not restricted to overt disagreements. They include situations in which ideas are reinforced, proposals are introduced and explored cooperatively, and parties struggle to achieve understanding and agreement even when the starting position of each is virtually unrecognizable to others.”<sup>48</sup> As an example, Tindale draws upon *Alice in Wonderland* as an example of the inability for rational, reasoned discourse to make any headway in argumentative conflicts. As an alternative to more formal approaches, Tindale suggests “rhetorical argumentation” which “draws features from the rhetorical tradition and mixes them with newer innovations. . . the processes of rhetorical argumentation meld together these three bringing into relief, and inextricably wedding to one another in the argumentative situation, the arguer, audience and ‘argument.’”<sup>49</sup>

Tindale’s rhetorical argument seems apt for providing some critical insight into the situation of the Six Gallery reading where, “[I]n the process of reading the poem, he [Ginsberg] found himself forging a new identity as a public poet sharing his private thoughts and feelings with eager, admiring listeners. . . The poem created the poet. The audience was transformed too – indifferent spectators becoming energetic participants.”<sup>50</sup> As an argument, “Howl” offered

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<sup>47</sup> Tindale, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Tindale, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Tindale, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Raskin, *American Scream*, 18.

poem and poet as argument and arguer, as well as offered an alternative, rhetorical manner of addressing problems where traditional, rational reasons were deemed ineffective. “Howl” is both constitutive and argumentative – it offers itself as its own best evidence for the rhetorical theory it suggests for advocacy.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to Jack Kerouac, and his novel *On the Road*. In this chapter I provide a rhetorical criticism of *On the Road* in order to frame it as a contribution to the beat rhetoric. My claim is that *On the Road* is Jack Kerouac’s rhetoric of *kairos* – the ancient rhetorical concept of “timeliness.” Kairos has been interpreted in a broad valence of ways, from “a kind of immanent, rhythmic, embodied practice,”<sup>51</sup> to “the right time.”<sup>52</sup> *Kairos* is an important concept in the rhetorical tradition, usually understood as relating to the opportune or the appropriate. James Kinneavy defines it as the, “right or opportune time to do something, or right measure in doing something.”<sup>53</sup> For John E. Smith, *kairos* “points to a *qualitative* character of time, to the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen at ‘just any time,’ but only at *that* time to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur.”<sup>54</sup> These last two definitions come close to Kerouac’s understanding of time and its relation to writing. In his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” Kerouac states, “Nothing is muddy that runs in time and to laws of time – Shakespearean

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<sup>51</sup> Debra Hawhee, *Bodily Arts: Rhetoric and Athletics in Ancient Greece* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 76.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 33.

<sup>53</sup> James L. Kinneavy, “*Kairos*: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric” in J.D. Moss, Ed. *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 80.

<sup>54</sup> John E. Smith “Time and Qualitative Time” in Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, Eds. *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Praxis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 47.

stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue. . .”<sup>55</sup> It is incredibly important to recognize the opportune and the appropriateness of time, especially when one sees the opportunity to speak. For Kerouac here, nothing that “fits into” the moment is against the laws of time, but missing the moment means you cannot speak that same sense later – you must hold your tongue. In the novel, Kerouac suggests that America is a complicated tableau of motives, beliefs and attitudes, all of which can be understood, accessed, and articulated, but only if one is attuned and attentive to the *kairotic*. The novel becomes an inventory of different approaches to kairotic rhetoric, with each embodied in a particular character which is tested and tried out by the narrator, Sal Paradise. The end of the novel is somewhat ambivalent, as no particular rhetoric is favored over any other, except that one should make use of opportunity when one finds it, and not hang on to it permanently.

After establishing the beat rhetoric theory, I move to criticize Diane Di Prima’s novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik* due to its overt use of the term “beat” and its appearance as a memoir from someone inside of and influenced by the “beat writers” as Parkinson calls them. I do not rely on the novel for its historical accuracy or authenticity. Instead, I use the language theories of Bakhtin to reveal how Di Prima’s use of the beat rhetoric creates an alternative subjectivity for women, one where women can take control of meaning and craft their own identity. Bakhtin’s writings have been synthesized into a theory of language and meaning that focus on language’s

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<sup>55</sup> Jack Kerouac, “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” in Ann Charters, Ed. *The Beat Reader* (Penguin: New York, 1992), 57. For more scholarly analysis on this particular work of Kerouac’s see Justin Trudeau “Jack Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose: A Performance Geneology of the Fiction” Ph.D. Diss. Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College , 2006.

inability to stay fixed. “Language, Bakhtin reiterates, is always languages.”<sup>56</sup> This means that for Bakhtin, each word is permeated with its past associations and present connotations. Language is inherently unstable. Rhetoricians have incorporated Bakhtin’s ideas as a nearly accepted part of the canon.<sup>57</sup> The beat rhetoric concepts of *kairos* and the body as “master commonplace” are the starting points for Di Prima’s rhetorical intervention in her novel. Focus on the female body, as well as the *kairotic* are used to describe events and scenes that would otherwise be difficult to read in alternative ways. Di Prima’s work helps to complicate readings of the beat writers as misogynist, characterizing women as, “things to have sex with.”<sup>58</sup> Di Prima demonstrates that although there might be sexism or misogyny in beat writing, it is not endemic or necessarily a part of their project. Their latent rhetorical theory can be used to detach the social fixity of meaning and provide spaces for alternate conceptions of meaning.

In the conclusion, I move to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and analyze Amiri Baraka’s poem “Somebody Blew Up America.” Written about the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the poem uses the *kairotic* and the body as sites in which to dilute the idea that the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks were exceptional or unique. He crafts this argument relying on beat rhetorical theory, which I prove through rhetorical criticism. The poem received a violent reaction in the mainstream media, which prompted the State of New Jersey to convene a special session in order to remove Baraka from the position of New Jersey Poet Laureate. I take a selection of newspaper

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<sup>56</sup> Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 140.

<sup>57</sup> But not without some theoretical problems, see John M. Murphy, “Mikhail Bahktin and the Rhetorical Tradition” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87:3 (August 2001): 259-277.

<sup>58</sup> Swartz, Omar. *The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac*. (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

articles and reports from the mass media that interpret the poem and criticize them to get a sense of how the beat rhetoric fares against public interpretation.

The Beat Generation has produced an overwhelming amount of commentary, analysis, discussion, and ideas related to their poetic and literary output. Most of this corpus debates the literary merit, or seeks biographical grounding for a particular reading of a poem or novel. What is different about this study is that the beats will be read as developing theory, not offering only practice. The theory they developed could also be seen as rhetorical. Rhetorical theory includes not only how to engage audience and how to craft message for understanding, but also how to create meaning and engage with other people in the world. It is also a bridge to the political – rhetoric can offer or take away political options. This study argues that the Beats operated under a latent theory of rhetoric, and they tried to show how this rhetoric could and would work. Although they obviously produced poetry and literature, the beats cannot be solely appreciated on those aesthetic grounds. If the communicative and rhetorical dimensions of their ideas are left out, a key component of the understanding of what the beats attempted to accomplish is lost. Their work can receive a much fuller appreciation if linked to the theoretical development that they themselves were trying to work through. What is at stake is an active appreciation for the beats as theorists, along with the passive appreciation for them as crafters of nice literature. With this active appreciation, the beat rhetoric can be used as a tool to address concerns of human subjectivity – how people interact with one another, appreciate each other, and reach out for connections from other humans. A focus on a different rhetorical theory opens up new ways of appreciating human interaction, identity, politics and cooperation.

To begin, I open the study with a brief literature review of research conducted on the Beat Generation, which I categorize and assess. Then I will explain the rhetorical theories of Kenneth Burke who is central in my understanding of the function and scope of rhetoric.

## **2.0     ASSESSING THE BEATS**

Beat Generation scholars have approached studying the beats from many different perspectives. I don't attempt to represent those approaches in any sort of totality here. Rather, I think the best way to approach such an enormous body of literature is to examine the sources most closely related to the intersection of the beats with rhetoric.

Only a few studies examine the Beats as concerned with practicing an American rhetoric, one that calls into question the distinctions and boundaries between discourses. Scholarship has focused on the Beat writers for many different reasons, viewing their texts as objects of criticism and analysis from various theories and has yet to view their writing as the development of a rhetoric – a system of encountering the phenomena of the world, articulating their meaning and providing the criteria for judging them.

I begin by looking at some of the scholarly and biographical work on Kerouac and Ginsberg, then I move on to explain my own methods for assessing the Beats. At the conclusion of this chapter I hope to have clarified the differences between other scholarship on the beats and the work that this study offers.

## 2.1 UNDERSTANDING JACK KEROUAC

It is an understatement to say that Jack Kerouac has received a lot of attention from scholars. Kerouac is the subject of dozens of biographies, and occupies hundreds of pages in historical treatments of the 1950s. Many of these studies treat Kerouac as subject of biography, attempting to find the elements of his life that inspired, influenced or participated in his authorial importance.<sup>59</sup> This line of study of Kerouac focuses on a linear treatment of events and episodes in Kerouac's life as lived, with occasional connections of life events to his literary production. Ann Charters argues that, "[t]hrough most of his life Kerouac played games with himself, giving himself new roles and identities, vanities as he called them in his last years. His belief in himself as writer was his main identity, and in an essential way after he left Lowell it was the only identity that held him fast."<sup>60</sup> Charters' assessment is typical of biography, where the attempt is made to give as complete a picture as possible to the subject's life. Charters is not myopic in her treatment of Kerouac, giving a reason why he is a figure worth studying: "To this generation Jack Kerouac became a romantic hero, an archetypal rebel, the symbol of their own vanities, the symbol of their own romantic legend."<sup>61</sup> Charters underscores Kerouac's rhetorical importance to a generation as a rhetorical figure – perhaps a metonymy – of the feelings people shared. Kerouac was and stood for an attitude of a particular time, whether or not he intended to: "He couldn't understand how Jerry Rubin, Mitchell Goodman and Abbie Hoffman had evolved from

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<sup>59</sup> See Nicosia, Gerald. *Memory Babe* (New York: Fred Jordan and Grove Press, 1983); Charters, Ann. *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973); Amburn, Ellis. *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: Macmillan, 1998); Clark, Tom. *Jack Kerouac* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1984); Miles, Barry. *Kerouac – King of the Beats* (New York: H. Holt, 1998) and many others, however this list represents the key works that treat Kerouac biographically, as I develop in this chapter.

<sup>60</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, 21.



his work.”<sup>62</sup> Kerouac, in the end is portrayed as a tragic figure, someone who wrote brilliantly and, as a complex human being, had complicated and conflicting reactions to his fame as a writer. As Charters concludes her biography: “His books are evidence of his presence, the young Jack still alive on his pages to rush on to the next adventures as long as there are people who read the Legend of Duluo.”<sup>63</sup>

Charter’s biography is well-researched and gives a detailed as well as interesting account of Kerouac’s life. Her attention to literary details – such as what manuscript was being prepared when – is outstanding. I choose her work for detailed commentary because I feel that it is representative of biographies of Kerouac in general. Mostly, like Charters’ treatment, they attend to Kerouac as a person in relation to his literary production. Although significant attention is given to Kerouac’s work, it is always in relation to the individual’s life and times.

Although there is nothing wrong with this approach, the approach I take is significantly different. I attempt to use Kerouac’s ideas as the source for the creation of theory. Although I do attend to some of his biographical details, I am more interested in reading his work as a resource instead of reading his work as a way to understand him – or using moments of his life as a heuristic that helps interpret his work.

The literary treatments of Kerouac are more germane to the thesis that I explore here. I argue that Kerouac’s literary critics move through a few stages in the appreciation of his work. First is the read that Kerouac was a visionary – someone who could see ahead of his own time. These treatments range from connecting Kerouac to the larger American literary trajectory

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<sup>62</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, 365.

<sup>63</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography*, 367.

including Whitman, Twain, and others to claiming Kerouac was the first postmodernist.<sup>64</sup> The works most relevant to this study begin with Tim Hunt's treatment of *On the Road* – Kerouac's most famous novel which I analyze in chapter 4 – and Fiona Patton's analysis of *Doctor Sax* in her doctoral dissertation. Both studies are selected not due to their accuracy or their comprehensive treatment of the beat generation as a social movement; but are selected due to their relevance for my study which attempts to create a rhetorical theory. Both works attend to Kerouac's use of language, his style, and his attention to the malleability of cultural reality.

Tim Hunt argues that *On the Road* is significant because it illustrates the presence of the "author" within the work:

The manuscript history of *On the Road* is the history of Kerouac's development as a writer. It is in large part the story of Kerouac's attempt to resolve his conflicting sense of writing as a naturalistic and romantic activity, and to develop a way of writing that would simultaneously analyze the external world and celebrate the self's ability to transcend that world imaginatively.<sup>65</sup>

Hunt's study is a detailed examination of Kerouac's writing style, "spontaneous prose." Hunt is a defender of Kerouac's writing, and he points out that "mistakes," or "flaws" that other critics see in Kerouac's writing should be overlooked since Kerouac is creating a new literary aesthetic.<sup>66</sup> Hunt argues that Kerouac's writing can be viewed as the historical record of Kerouac's ideas

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<sup>64</sup> An indomitable amount of works could be listed here. The most interesting and comprehensive treatments of Kerouac and the beats are Tytell, John. *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Charters, Ann, Ed. *Beat Down to Your Soul: What was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin, 2001); McNally, Dennis. *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 1979); Newhouse, Thomas. *The Beat Generation and the Popular Novel in the United States, 1945-1970* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000). Although tough to distinguish, many of these works do not study Kerouac's work outside of the larger beat generation social phenomenon.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road : Development of a Fiction* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981), 78.

<sup>66</sup> Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road : Development of a Fiction*, 252.

about writing, literature and America. Hunt compares *On the Road* to *Huckleberry Finn* in that at the end of the journey, the main character is more informed than he was before the journey began.<sup>67</sup> Hunt's analysis, although insightful for understanding some of the context of the formation of both spontaneous prose and the term "Beat Generation," is a study focused on the literary value of Kerouac's work. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such a study (I would even argue this sort of work is beneficial and interesting), it necessarily places Kerouac's work against other works of literature (e.g., Twain) to understand its value. In this way, Hunt's analysis is using American literature as a hermeneutic to understand Kerouac's contribution to that body of discourse. It is a study that looks inward, not just to *On the Road*, but also American literature as the point of comparison and departure. In other words, it judges *On the Road* from within the discourses of the value of literature, not as a text that could be challenging the very basis for such a judgment. *On the Road* for Hunt is a book that lays bare the author's mind and artistic ability.

For Patton, Kerouac's authorial "presence" in the novel *Doctor Sax* is less as a great individual connected to other literary greats via his style, but more a rhetorician present in the text due to his complication of meaning through his mastery of language. Patton's primary project is to argue for a "cultural stylistics" which she sees as a merger between "rhetoric, cultural studies and linguistics" which can help literature "navigate the high-seas of postmodernism."<sup>68</sup> So it is no surprise that she focuses less on Kerouac's presence in the text and more of what the text presents to us. It could be argued that she is using Kerouac's work as supporting evidence for a theory that she inductively constructs.

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<sup>67</sup>Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road : Development of a Fiction*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Patton, Fiona. "Style and Subversion: Kerouac and the Cultural Cold War". Ph.D. diss., The Pennsylvania State University, 1999, 1.

Patton focuses nearly exclusively on the novel *Doctor Sax* for a couple of reasons. First, her interest is in the novel's relationship to the cold war environment within which it was written and secondly, Kerouac's prose in *Doctor Sax* is fantastic and radical – two of the elements that are necessary to blur the high/low cultural distinction she argues is clearly present during and an effect of cold war political rhetoric. What is most important in Patton's analysis is the idea that Kerouac and the beat literature he was producing are both incredibly complicated, and that oversimplified reads that favor the social or the author over other elements are non-starters. Kerouac offers a "rhizome" of complicated connections which are "intertwined with the very positions they seemed to be challenging."<sup>69</sup> The America he is supposedly interested in overturning is one that he is dependent upon. The "cultural stylistics" theory, in Patton's view, will tease out these complexities for the benefit of literary studies in the future.

Her attention to Kerouac's style is informed by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory sees language as something combined as well as combining, a heterogonous mixture of meanings that change given a situation.<sup>70</sup> Patton's take on this is to argue that Bakhtin is, "after a rhetorical approach to language that can accommodate the interplay of different utterances within specific contexts."<sup>71</sup> In the end analysis, it is Kerouac's spontaneous prose that she attends to most in her study, triangulating its origin between jazz, film and comics – all popular culture sources. Patton also suggests that Kerouac's "fluidity" of style is suggestive of a blend of racial and cultural modes of speaking.<sup>72</sup> All of this is moving toward a Bakhtin-informed critique of Kerouac's work *Doctor Sax*. Patton notes Kerouac's complex politics when she remarks,

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<sup>69</sup> Patton, "Style and Subversion," 6.

<sup>70</sup> For the most comprehensive attempt to use Bakhtin's theory, see Morson, Gary Saul and Caryl Emerson *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> Patton, "Style and Subversion," 9.

<sup>72</sup> Patton, "Style and Subversion," 129.

“Kerouac was in many ways challenging the hypocrisy of middle-class values , in other ways he reproduced those same values.”<sup>73</sup> Kerouac is struggling to find a rhetoric that advances the form of human communication he desires. However, that rhetoric, in order to work, must be connected to the discourses of the time and place of its use. It must be appropriate.

But Patton doesn’t go down this path with Kerouac; she explores his style in order to find the perfect proportions of linguistics, rhetoric and cultural theory to advance literary criticism. In *Doctor Sax*, she finds many examples of the cultural stylistics that she was talking about.

In addition to the literary vein of scholarship on Kerouac, there is a vein that treats Kerouac as a rhetorician.<sup>74</sup> This is a small group of works, but the most germane for this study as they could provide the most relevant analyses.

The first is Omar Swartz, whose work on Kerouac is tuned toward finding rhetorics of social justice. Swartz is interested in Kerouac’s rhetoricity as a potential model for a rhetoric that can offer and respond to questions about social justice in its myriad of interpretations and meanings. Most notably, Omar Swartz has argued that Kerouac should be viewed as a “cultural rhetorician” who, through *On the Road*, suggests methods of responding to contemporary society via the deployment of invitational fantasy themes.

For fantasy theme critics, shared fantasy becomes the object of study. Fantasy, in this context, has to do with the perception of reality by a rhetor (speaker and writer) in ways that create an alternative explanation for why or how things should be done. When this fantasy is shared, it becomes a drama, and other people behave in ways that support the vision’s basic assumptions. When people behave in this manner, they assume the

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<sup>73</sup> Patton, “Style and Subversion,” 172.

<sup>74</sup> See Casey, John. “Critical Analysis of Rhetorical Choices Made in the Creation of Two Differing Written Modes: A Biographical Sketch and a Historical Fiction”. Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1982; Trudeau, Justin. “Jack Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose: A Performance Geneology of the Fiction”. Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2006;

positions in the initial vision. In the case of Kerouac, the vision itself became absorbed by the media and exceeded the control of its original source.<sup>75</sup>

Swartz then defines three primary rhetorical visions that constitute *On the Road* as a cultural, invitational rhetoric. The first is “The Vision of Social Deviance,” which Swartz defines as, “a call to action, a questioning of motivation and a suggesting for a new social reality with a reordering of priorities.”<sup>76</sup> The next is “The Vision of Sexuality,” where Swartz points out the “faceless” impersonal female characters of *On the Road* as “things to have sex with.” These women primarily are the sexual conquests of Dean Moriarty, who engages in amazing sexual encounters one after another. Dean, in Swartz’s assessment, becomes the “holy messenger” of Kerouac’s vision due to the fact that he both engages in deviant behavior, and also has an unstoppable sex drive.<sup>77</sup> Finally, Swartz offers “Dean as Vision,” arguing that the character of Dean Moriarty himself is a vision of social deviance through a “vague, ideological commitment.”<sup>78</sup> Dean’s presence in the novel is read by Swartz to be an invitation to the reader to participate in the rhetorical vision offered by the combination of sexual conquest and social deviance.

Swartz’s analysis of *On the Road* is insightful as it is the only study to date that applies rhetorical theory to a Beat text to further our understanding of the value of that text. But Swartz’s analysis of Kerouac’s writing is limited through his search for these fantasy themes to the exclusion of other moments that are also important for the book’s rhetorical value. The search for Dean’s father, the months that Sal Paradise spends living with a Mexican girl on a

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<sup>75</sup> Swartz, *The View from on the Road*, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Swartz, *The View from on the Road*, 73.

<sup>77</sup> Swartz, *The View from on the Road*, 75.

<sup>78</sup> Swartz, *The View from on the Road*, 83.

cotton farm, and in the final moments of the book, Sal's *rejection* of Dean's invitation for another road trip in favor of settling down with a woman – all of these moments don't seem to fit the idea that readers are supposed to identify with Dean directly. As Fiona Paton, a Kerouac scholar, noted, "Swartz reduces the novel to the mindless celebration of any experience, at any cost, a reading that Kerouac himself vigorously resisted."<sup>79</sup> Paton believes that rhetorical criticism is necessary to understand the incredible complexities of Kerouac, as well as the "Beat generation" as a literary and social movement: "In this type of study, the text needs to be reconnected to other relevant social discourses of the moment; otherwise, one can only generalize about what seems to have been its cultural trajectory."<sup>80</sup> Situating the textual production and dissemination of Kerouac's work within the 1950s will reveal that not only are Kerouac and the other Beats developing a discourse, as Swartz contends, but they are providing the criteria for constructing such a discourse. Swartz's approach to Kerouac is important as it reveals that Kerouac's work has rhetorical implications that extend beyond the peculiarities of understanding his novels. Swartz wants to extend the implications of Kerouac's method to the political sphere, which is admirable even if he uses rhetoric more as a heuristic to view Kerouac's work and less as a result of examining Kerouac's work.

Fiona Paton's own work on the oft-overlooked Kerouac novel *Doctor Sax*, moves in a more robust rhetorical direction. Relying on the linguistic theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Paton argues that, "[A]ny novel will be dialoguing, to a greater or lesser degree, with the language, and hence the social forces, of its cultural moment." She looks at Kerouac's style, or the choices in syntax that Kerouac makes in order to understand the novel as a material object with aesthetic

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<sup>79</sup> Fiona Paton, "The View from 'On the Road': the Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac by Omar Swartz," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2000): 116.

<sup>80</sup> Paton, "The View from on the Road," 117.

appeal that is directly tied to the circumstances of its cultural moment: “The text is therefore part of a rhetorical exchange with the broader social sphere but in a much more fundamental way than historical scholarship typically represents, for this exchange is carried out at the level of the syntax itself, in the style of the text.”<sup>81</sup>

Patton’s analysis of *Doctor Sax* proceeds along a symbolic trajectory, where she deciphers the origins of many of the bizarre images of green-eyed heroes and giant snakes as rooted in anxieties about 1950s culture, as well as Kerouac’s drug habits. While her analysis is interesting, it uses Kerouac’s book as a way to prove that her incorporation of Bakhtin into stylistic analysis would be insightful. *Doctor Sax* is the experiment that demonstrates her theoretical innovation has merit. Her attention to Kerouac’s style in this novel proves an interesting point about Kerouac’s writing – “[T]he novel both critiques and affirms popular culture by internalizing certain of its thematic and formal elements in a deliberate deconstruction of the literary establishment’s rigid high-low binaries.”<sup>82</sup> Patton goes on to offer many examples of this deconstructive attempt. The importance of Patton’s work is the recognition that Kerouac’s style is also a part of the intervention into culture that is usually attributed to the content of his works. Patton points out that this is fairly obvious, as Kerouac himself authored several documents related to his own style which he named “spontaneous prose.”<sup>83</sup>

Attention to spontaneous prose is perhaps the closest scholars have come to providing detail on Kerouac’s rhetorical elements. Justin Thomas Trudeau, in his essay “Jack Kerouac’s

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<sup>81</sup> Fiona Patton, “Beyond Bakhtin: Towards a Cultural Stylistics,” *College English* 63, no. 2 (2000): 173.

<sup>82</sup> Patton, “Style and Subversion,” 206.

<sup>83</sup> For example see “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” in Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma* (New York: Penguin, 1997) as well as Kerouac’s list in Ann Charters, Ed. *The Portable Beat Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1992).



Spontaneous America,” seeks to analyze Kerouac’s “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” as “a cultural artifact that functions as a performance genealogy, one that highlights both past performance-based avant-garde practices and Kerouac’s own contemporaneously connected practices in this regard.”<sup>84</sup> Trudeau’s analysis is limited to Kerouac and to the “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” as “the only substantive site of textual praxis to come from its practitioner.”<sup>85</sup> Trudeau’s focus is on elucidating Kerouac’s prose method and the performative resources Kerouac drew upon to develop his prose method: “By displacing and transforming the imaginative techniques of a multitude of artistic genres into his own literary work, Kerouac becomes a symbolic substitute and an echo of these artists acting in part, as their historical double in the postwar avant-garde.”<sup>86</sup> Trudeau sees Kerouac’s writing method as an opportunity to trace a performance genealogy through American avant-garde movements. Although I agree that Kerouac was drawing on a number of ideas about performance to develop his rhetoric, he was also drawing on many other sources as well. Trudeau hits upon a very important aspect of the Beat rhetorical delivery and style in his essay, but is much more interested in finding the origins of Kerouac’s method throughout American performance theory.

Regina Weinreich’s book-length analysis of spontaneous prose goes in a nearly opposite direction from Trudeau’s. Weinreich argues that spontaneous prose is something new, on the level of discovery: “It [Kerouac’s composition technique] suggests a double movement in the act of composition, a movement that progresses and repeats at the same time. As Kerouac wrote

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<sup>84</sup> Justin Thomas Trudeau, “Jack Kerouac’s Spontaneous America: A Performance Genealogy of the Postwar Avant-Garde,” *Kaleidoscope* 3 (2004): 43.

<sup>85</sup> Trudeau, “Jack Kerouac’s Spontaneous America,” 43.

<sup>86</sup> ———, “Jack Kerouac’s Spontaneous America,” 59.

spontaneously, the elements of past experience were revised in the act of being recorded.”<sup>87</sup> Kerouac’s method of spontaneous prose was “in the language of the imagination; his creation of himself is a self writ large in the Whitmanesque sense.”<sup>88</sup> Weinreich sees spontaneous prose as not only the method but affected the results of Kerouac’s literary ambitions: “The creation of a new literary ethic was, in fact, the ultimate goal of Kerouac’s artistic quest, and also its demise.”<sup>89</sup> For Weinreich, Kerouac was attempting a blurring of language, meaning and genre that is still difficult to accept on face, but provides an American subject that uses the “language of ascension” to describe what is a “down-journey” filled with “despair.”<sup>90</sup> Kerouac did have an untimely end to his own life brought on by alcoholism, something which Weinreich discusses, she decides to link his lifestyle to his prose directly, claiming, “A national character is projected in Kerouac’s singular voice.”<sup>91</sup> Weinrich’s study is concerned with locating how spontaneous prose developed Kerouac’s voice in his work, and how that voice is a reflection of Kerouac’s personal life and views. Although difficult to separate Kerouac’s life from his works – the majority of which are based on shared experiences between he and his friends – I believe that Weinreich’s read is too reductive to provide a full appreciation of Kerouac’s work. Reading spontaneous prose as more Kerouac’s instrument for his own unique subject position pushes away understandings where spontaneous prose could be seen as a method that anyone could use. My analysis will show that Kerouac’s concerns in his diaries and letters can be linked to the

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<sup>87</sup> Regina Weinreich. *Kerouac’s Spontaneous Poetics: A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1987), 5.

<sup>88</sup> Weinreich, 148.

<sup>89</sup> Weinreich, 148.

<sup>90</sup> Weinreich, 155.

<sup>91</sup> Weinreich, 148.

formulation of spontaneous prose as a solution to a perceived communication problem he saw in the 1950s.

Furthermore, Kerouac is covered in a variety of other treatments that are important to mention for the parameters of this study. Stephen Davenport wants to make sure that although Kerouac's road mystique gets most of the attention, "tied to his ethnic and modernist inheritance of loss, it is also personal and familial."<sup>92</sup> Davenport argues for a broader reading of Kerouac than just the transient, live-the-moment, road life figure he is sketched to be in the popular imagination. Davenport persuasively contends that Kerouac's prose can be read "as expressions, not evasions, of woundedness and grief."<sup>93</sup> He does this by examining Kerouac's "overlapping family narratives" through Kerouac's work, and determines that they can be and should be read as "a valuable midcentury melodrama of beset sonhood that might help us situation Kerouac's road cure within a network of family practices that will, in turn, improve our reading of other wounded-son road narratives."<sup>94</sup> Davenport's method is a re-reading of Kerouac that seeks out a familial rhetoric. He describes this rhetoric as the creation of a "social space" where Kerouac can "find surrogates for his father and brother" who both died when Kerouac was a young man.<sup>95</sup>

In the end, Davenport concludes that Kerouac used his writing to "fill holes" left by the passing of his father and brother. Davenport's argument, although only appreciates Kerouac's work for what it could mean to him, does offer a reading of Kerouac's work that allows for it to make and do rather than just report on events between he and his friends. Davenport ends up

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<sup>92</sup> Stephen Davenport, "Road Work: Rereading Kerouac's Midcentury Melodrama of Beset Sonhood," in *Boys Don't Cry? Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.* Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis, Eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 167.

<sup>93</sup> Stephen Davenport, "Road Work," 168.

<sup>94</sup> Stephen Davenport, "Road Work," 168-9.

<sup>95</sup> Stephen Davenport, "Road Work," 176.

limiting the read of Kerouac, but the idea that his writing was created with the idea of “filling a hole” is rather Burkean: “”. The text remains as a construction that was meant to do, not to reflect, culture. Davenport does a good job of relating Kerouac in this way to other canonical American authors who attempted the “sonhood” story – notably Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller – and gives credibility to the Burkean interpretation by suggesting that both stories can be used to craft similar space. Of course, Davenport doesn’t take it as far as I do in this interpretation, but I do want to show the potential for a rhetorical interpretation rather than an interpretation that uses rhetoric in order to craft a reading of a text.

Paul Maltby’s treatment of Kerouac in his book *The Visionary Moment* is the most clear example of this sort of use of rhetoric that I am reversing. Maltby’s book is an investigation into “the flash of insight” that can “deliver spiritually redeeming knowledge.”<sup>96</sup> Maltby seeks to unravel why this line of thinking still has purchase in the contemporary worldview. He concludes that the visionary moment is “enmeshed in metaphysical and ideological assumptions . . . that by the standards of postmodern critique are theoretically untenable,” as well as, “irreconcilable with progressive political thinking.”<sup>97</sup> Maltby proceeds by articulating what types of visionary moments there are, and divorces them from “real life” experiences, claiming that only through literature are we able to understand visionary moments as such: “[W]e must reckon with the possibility that literature itself supplies the forms that enable us to encode certain subjective experiences as visionary.”<sup>98</sup> Maltby wants to prove that there is no understanding of an actual visionary moment (with the exception of religious mysticism) outside of the description

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<sup>96</sup> Paul Maltby, *The Visionary Moment* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 2002),

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<sup>97</sup> Maltby, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Maltby, 24.

of such a vision. “[W]e are most often acquainted with real-life visionary moments in narrated form. That is to say, we know them less through direct personal experience than through their narration by ‘visionary’ subjects,” which subject these moments to “distortion.”<sup>99</sup> Maltby wants to ensure that we realize we are getting a mere device here and not access to an actual visionary experience.

Although we will see Maltby critique Kerouac’s work in the next paragraph, this understanding of the visionary moment and its power is an important consideration if we are to consider Kerouac as crafting a rhetorical theory. That is to say, accepting Maltby’s premise that we cannot know a visionary moment outside of the communication of one might also be accepting one of Kerouac’s premises about appropriate communication. More will be said about this later in the detailed analysis of Kerouac’s work I will provide.

Maltby’s critique of Kerouac is divided into three sections – rhetoric of instantaneousness, rhetoric of eternity and rhetoric of spontaneity. Maltby understands these to be Kerouac’s three techniques used to convey visionary spiritual truths in his work. The rhetoric of eternity is characterized as, “the point where eternity intersects with clock time.”<sup>100</sup> The rhetoric of instantaneousness is marked with the use of words such as “suddenly” and “immediately” and pushes the belief that, “the instantaneous acquisition of knowledge is a hallmark of its transcendence and purity.”<sup>101</sup> And the rhetoric of spontaneity is marked by moving knowledge outside of a normal relationship to time: “Thus the reader is prompted to feel that the knowledge gained has its origin outside of standard, chronological time, in some autonomous time zone.” The value of the vision there is propped up by identifying it as a type of

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<sup>99</sup> Maltby, 22.

<sup>100</sup> Maltby, 104.

<sup>101</sup> Maltby, 100.

knowledge that would be impossible to apprehend under a more “capitalist” understanding of the temporal.<sup>102</sup>

Maltby makes it very clear that he sees Kerouac’s rhetoric as clearly anti-capitalist:

Here, then, is a form of experience whose timing cannot be managed. where the purpose of time management is to regulate production by the clock and increase the efficiency with which labor is exploited, that which occurs outside the zone of manageable time acquires value by virtue of belonging to an alternative, unexploitable mode of time. Accordingly, the spontaneity of Kerouac’s visionary moment may be said to enhance the status of the moment’s insight by purging it of any association with the managed time of capitalist production.<sup>103</sup>

Maltby concludes his study of Kerouac’s technique fairly clearly – “[T]he invocation of the spontaneous amounts to yet another rhetorical prop for visionary truth claims.”<sup>104</sup> As in the paragraph above, Maltby seems to see his critique as a reveal that truth is not present in visionary experiences; that all we have are conventions and techniques. To this, many rhetoricians would quickly assent. However, where Maltby and I differ is that Maltby sees Kerouac as an unwitting participant in some sort of deception that is harmful to progressive politics. I see Kerouac as a direct participant in an attempt to re-write the rules of appropriate utterance and engagement between human beings – this is my understanding of rhetoric. Maltby marks these moments of persuasion in his critique of Kerouac as moments where visionary purity and superiority collapse. To critique his own rhetoric, Maltby uses the term “persuade” or “persuasion” of the reader in the same way as he critiques Kerouac’s use of the terms “immediately” or “instantly” – they are a device used to persuade the reader of a truth claim. Maltby uses “rhetoric” and “persuasive” in the same manner, to persuade the reader of the truth claim that no eternal truth claims exist within narratives of visionary moments.

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<sup>102</sup> Maltby, 107.

<sup>103</sup> Maltby, 109.

<sup>104</sup> Maltby, 109.

For my study, Maltby's insight that Kerouac uses rhetorical devices in his work is not only a given, but an essential part of a text being identified as such. However, the interesting relationship he highlights between Kerouac's spontaneous prose and time is one that I will engage directly. I argue that Kerouac is very attuned to time in his rhetoric, and his use and relationship to time is a key factor in the rhetorical theory that he offers.

My treatment of Kerouac builds upon these studies in the sense that all of them are attentive to the importance of Kerouac's production of texts. My analysis of Kerouac will depend upon some insights from these scholars on what they broadly refer to as Kerouac's "style." My treatment differs in the sense that I am reading Kerouac as a theorist of rhetoric, which departs from most of these scholars, albeit not very far from some. The important difference is the construction of a theory from Kerouac's work, which only Patton comes close to articulating.

## 2.2 ALLEN GINSBERG'S SCHOLARLY IDENTITY

The amount of material on Allen Ginsberg is staggering. Ginsberg's work and life have been the subject of numerous critical and biographical as well as treatments from American and cultural studies.<sup>105</sup> Ginsberg's importance as a poet and a cultural figure cannot be understated. As Barry Miles put it, writing about Ginsberg in 1989, "[H]e has become the most famous living poet on

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<sup>105</sup> The most comprehensive biography of Ginsberg is Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994); Jane Kramer, *Allen Ginsberg in America* (New York: Random House, 1969); Thomas Merrill, *Allen Ginsberg* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1969); Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin, 2006); for the "Howl" trial see Bill Morgan and Nancy Peters, Eds. *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2006).

earth, one of America's best-known cultural ambassadors, his poetry translated into virtually every language. . . he changed the world a little."<sup>106</sup> Offering more along the same lines is biographer Michael Schumacher who states that, "[i]t is possible that Allen Ginsberg is the most widely traveled literary figure in history."<sup>107</sup> Schumacher goes on to claim that, "Ginsberg has evolved into as sort of living symbol of kindness and generosity, an artist who has dared to make his own life a form of literature, open to judgment and interpretation but never failing in its basic human honesty."<sup>108</sup> Ginsberg's importance is as much as a symbol of himself ("Ginsberg") as he is the author Ginsberg. For these two biographers at least, Ginsberg's importance is always tied to his status as a symbolic figure, a living representation of the ideology of "counterculture" – for whatever time period Ginsberg might symbolize.<sup>109</sup> For many scholars, the idea of Ginsberg's figuration becomes larger than life.

From a communication and rhetoric standpoint, surprisingly little attention has been paid to Allen Ginsberg. One of the only studies of Ginsberg is by Jonah Raskin, who seeks to, "explain what it was like for Ginsberg to write *Howl* – how he felt, what he was thinking, why he

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<sup>106</sup> Miles, Barry. *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 533.

<sup>107</sup> Schumacher, Michael *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 678.

<sup>108</sup> Schumacher, 686.

<sup>109</sup> In this study I have little interest in addressing the beats as "counterculture" mostly because the term is not critical for rhetoricians – the only close reference would be Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). For the defining work on "counterculture" and its heuristic value see Dick Hebdige *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1969). More interesting is the idea of "contraculture" as suggested by J. Milton Yinger, "Contraculture and Subculture" *American Sociological Review* 25, 5 (Oct 1960): 625-635 which attempts what might be called a rhetorical understanding albeit from the sociology discipline. For Ginsberg specifically, see Anne Hartman, "Confessional Counterpublics in Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg" *Journal of Modern Literature* 28 4 (2005) 40-56.



wrote it and who influenced him.”<sup>110</sup> Raskin is much more interested in a personal and narrative history of *Howl* than discussing its rhetorical dimensions. However, Raskin provides some interesting insight into the *topoi* that Ginsberg included from his life and insights from fellow travelers he met before, during and after the initial public reading of *Howl* in 1956.

Additionally, Raskin not only attends to the composition of *Howl*, but the reception of it as cultural myth. This is an investigation into how *Howl* is read along with and through the rhetoric circulating at the time. Raskin focuses his study on the invention and influence of *Howl*, although he never references it as rhetoric. Raskin seems to be searching for a rhetorical way of describing the creation of *Howl*, but does not draw on rhetorical theory or criticism at all for his account. Instead, he articulates the cultural and historical circumstances expertly.

Most importantly, Raskin examines *Howl* as a cultural moment instead of a literary one. He likens it to the discovery of a language – “In the act of writing *Howl*, he discovered the very language he needed – a language of everyday and of Judgment Day – a language of the mundane and the apocalyptic.”<sup>111</sup> Raskin’s study indicates a rich amount of material for communication scholars to investigate, and he makes a strong early attempt at framing what communication scholars can say about a figure such as Ginsberg. However, this study focuses mainly on the historical exigencies of the development of *Howl*, and little attention is paid to the rhetorical workings of the text. Kenneth Burke’s observation that, “we in cities rightly grow shrewd at appraising man-made institutions – but beyond these tiny concentration points of rhetoric and traffic, there lies the eternally unsolvable Enigma, the preposterous fact that both existence and nothingness are equally unthinkable,” makes rhetoric inevitable seems related to Ginsberg’s

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<sup>110</sup> Raskin, *American Scream*, xxii.

<sup>111</sup> Raskin, *American Scream*, xxi.

attempt – at least in “howl” – to grapple with the unthinkable as it manifests itself in the everyday actions and reactions of society.<sup>112</sup>

Some scholars are not as positive or vocative as Raskin. Ben Lee argues that there is little new and a lot old in Ginsberg’s work: “To the extent that Ginsberg’s great poems of the 1950s, *Howl* above all, are prophecies of emergent movements and collectivities, they are also elegies for cherished pasts at risk of receding irretrievably, of being inconspicuously transformed and finally erased by narratives of progress that manage— by dint of historical victories—to limit the possibilities of the future.”<sup>113</sup> Lee is concerned that a full picture of where Ginsberg’s work stands might be obscured by flatly celebrating him as a visionary. Anne Hartman makes the same claim from the perspective of literature. She wishes to situate Ginsberg as a confessional poet, and points out that the influence, “exerted by the category needs to be situated within the context of a critical tradition linking confession with a form of transcendent lyricism associated with Romanticism.”<sup>114</sup> There’s a lot of old literary ideas as well as political in Ginsberg which cannot be dismissed in favor of the new or visionary potential of his work.

For a broader understanding of Ginsberg, one has to look at the assessments from scholars of the Beat Generation as a whole. Allan Johnston seeks to explain the connections between the Beats and the 1960s counterculture via a system of shared economic and social theories between the writers. Drawing on both the New York and San Francisco poetic and artistic movements of the 1950s, Johnston argues:

From this perspective, an east-coast-centered, need-focused, secular vision of economic

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<sup>112</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, Third ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 272.

<sup>113</sup> Ben Lee, “‘Howl and Other Poems’: Is there Old Left in these New Beats?” *American Literature*, 76, 2 (June 2004), 367.

<sup>114</sup> Hartman, “Confessional Counterpublics,” 41.

realities—a viewpoint most strongly brought out in the writings of William S. Burroughs—transforms into a spiritualized attempt to escape from economic realities that reflects a more west-coast-centered, Buddhist-anarchic synthesis that perhaps receives its clearest philosophical expression in the writings of Kenneth Rexroth. These two perspectives create a dialectic that challenges popular economic and cultural assumptions, and the continuance of this dialectic into the 1960s and beyond forms a major part of the Beat link to the counterculture.<sup>115</sup>

Johnston clearly sees two distinct beat groupings here in relation to how they approach the economic realities of their time and place. The beats provided a dialectic of two different responses to the economic realities of the 1950s that extended at least for the next 10 years in the public sensibility, according to Johnston.

Johnston concludes these shared economic and social theories were not realized by the Beats until the 1960s, since “Beat culture by its very nature lacked the theoretical and social underpinnings to develop the clarified economic or political oppositional stances that appeared in the 1960s counterculture. Only in retrospect, if at all, did the Beats see their lifestyle (including the alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and petty thievery that it often involved) as a reaction against a seemingly aggressive and stifling social ethos.”<sup>116</sup> Since the Beats, according to Johnston, did not have a political conception of their work, it is an after-effect of their lifestyle that led their ideas to be significant in the 1960s:

Thus in spite of the fact that in the 1950s the Beats muted their specific political positions, their writings helped establish the grounds for an implicit ‘critique of the organized system’ that, as Paul Goodman wrote as early as 1960, ‘everybody in some sense agrees with.’ The Beat rejection of consumerist aspirations and the existing economic order helped open the way for a critical perspective on modernity that still influences those who feel alienated from the dominant culture. The frankness and honesty of this critique goes a long way toward explaining why Beat writing continues to resonate with those who react against our era of globalized marketing and encroaching

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<sup>115</sup> Allan Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation," *College Literature* 32, no. 2 (2005): 104.

<sup>116</sup> Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision," 104.

environmental holocaust.<sup>117</sup>

For Johnston, the Beats' system of values succeeds only through a 1960s enactment of hidden and politically muted personal opinions. He traces back the politics of the 1960s counterculture in the statements, interviews, poems and texts of the primary Beat writers.

Thinking of the language of the beats, Oliver Harris offers an economic perspective of the beats as writers through their letters. He argues that the longer view of the epistolary – something he feels has been understudied by scholars – complicates the public and private distinction of discourse in ways that make the “free-wheeling” view of the beats recalcitrant: “To say that the Beats – to prolong another generalization – invaded a well-policed public world with their wildly spontaneous private writing is to reify a categorical distinction that will not hold.”<sup>118</sup> He points to the Rosenberg's private letters to each other while awaiting death in prison as the prime example that demonstrates how the public operates upon the private construction of discourse, and how the private read back through the public confirmed the public suspicions that they were communist agents. To argue that the beats are something new because they brought private voices into the public sphere is naïve.

Harris is important for this study because of his observation that, “The Beats' autobiographical impulse of self-expression therefore coincided with and was sustained by the epistolary dynamic of close communication.” This dynamic, writing in the 1950s where the epistolary was perceived as being quickly eclipsed by alternative communication technologies,

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<sup>117</sup> Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision," 122.

<sup>118</sup> Oliver Harris, “Cold War Correspondents: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and the Political Economy of Beat Letters,” *Twentieth Century Literature*, 46, 2 (Summer 2000):171-192, 173.

“such practices become archaic, anachronisms informed by a certain nostalgia. . .”<sup>119</sup> The Beats were as influenced as anyone else in their read of various communicative methods. They were not offering a pure point from which one could escape the pitfalls of the dominant communicative technologies or methods. They were, as I argue, attempting to carve a path between the old and the new, and offer a rhetorical method for speaking, communicating and engaging with people. Other fields, such as the social sciences however, approach the beat phenomenon from the other direction – not from the beats but from the audience.

From the perspective of sociology, Mel van Elteren offers an amazingly thorough review of the ways in which the Beat Generation has been conceived as a social phenomenon. Most interested in the socio-economic positioning of those members of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. society who called themselves “Beats,” van Elteren is not inattentive to the complexities of representation, dissemination and identity that the mediation of the Beats presents. “It [The Beat Generation] entailed, in other words, a counterculture that was “jointly” produced by its members in tandem with the communications media and subcultural industries involved, aimed against mainstream mass culture in America.”<sup>120</sup> Van Elteren’s argument that the “authors” of the movement are a blend of individual contributions and interpretations is much more insightful and rich than the attribution of the Beat Generation’s political or social values as derivatives of the individual authors associated with the movement. This is accomplished by stretching the notion of “author” from the literary conception to the cultural one – that producers of media exist in a mediated environment, acting and reacting to the swirl of messages around them. The “authors” of the Beat Generation then are not acting, but reacting when they produce texts that

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<sup>119</sup> Harris, “Cold War Correspondents,” 177.

<sup>120</sup> Mel van Elteren, “The Subculture of the Beats: A Sociological Revisit,” *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 3 (1999): 71.

define “generation.” Van Eleteren is after the most complex and rewarding understanding of the members of the Beat Generation, but does not ignore the role of the various texts produced by Kerouac, Ginsberg and others: “The Beats were also creative in practicing and popularizing avant-garde styles like free-form ‘spontaneous writing,’ cut-ups and other forms of *bricolage*, as well as in their attempts to syncretize oral and literate forms of expression. In their writings, they entertained a visceral relationship to literature, trying to reconnect language to the body, to the physiology of the writer.”<sup>121</sup> This will become an important insight in the beat rhetoric as the body becomes a key source of invention in the theory.

This study gets very close to the important rhetorical elements of the Beat Generation, noting their incredible self-reflexivity in their invention and delivery of their rhetoric: “The Beats were involved in creating and generating mass-mediated images about themselves and, in return, responded to these depictions.”<sup>122</sup> The Beat Generation acts and reacts then to the “Beat Generation” as a symbol or symbolic system that, although partially created by the Beat writers, is also a shared authorship with society. The symbol then can serve as a site for the creation of new Beat texts: “Despite the Beats’ avowals of individuality, the Beat spirit was very much a communal affair. It distinguished itself by a strong intertextuality, manifested in the forms and media of dissemination that the Beats chose. This also entailed self-celebration; the beat generation ended up spectacularizing itself, and offering itself to a larger audience. The beat sensibility was characterized as well by a mixing of the senses, and various manifestations of multimediality.”<sup>123</sup> Van Elteren comes closest to appreciating the Beats as practitioners of rhetoric, but does not reference the rhetorical tradition at all. His interest is in the economic and

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<sup>121</sup> van Elteren, “The Subculture of the Beats,” 95.

<sup>122</sup> ———, “The Subculture of the Beats,” 95.

<sup>123</sup> ———, “The Subculture of the Beats,” 95.

social differences between youth who self-identify through interviews as being “Beat.” This is helpful, but at a bit of a distance from the consideration of the beats’ work as rhetorical theory.

Each of these studies highlight an interesting or valuable understanding of the Beats, but all fall short of providing the understanding that the Beats were developing a rhetorical system for articulating meaning in the nexus of the ideology and anxiety of the 1950s. In this study, I will argue that they offer this rhetoric through their poetic and literary production, generating a system to arrange and articulate belief within a society that seemed to deal with this anxiety by offering limited rhetorical options.

### **2.3      APPROACHING THE BEAT GENERATION RHETORICALLY**

As stated previously, I approach the beat writers Kerouac and Ginsberg from the perspective of rhetoric. What I hope to do is not to unseat or dismiss any of the work mentioned in this chapter, but to contribute to it. For leaving out the rhetorical dimension of Kerouac and Ginsberg is to leave out the primary motivating factor for both of these men to create poetic work. Both of them, as I will argue in later chapters, were deeply concerned with the state of human communication and rhetoric in the 1950s U.S. I choose Kerouac and Ginsberg as a starting point because many other scholars have attended to them as central figures within the “beat generation.” Another reason is that Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s work – “Howl” and *On the Road* – are considered as central texts to the beat generation by scholars and audiences alike. This is not to dismiss the contributions of other beat writers, but to begin the process of analysis with rather uncontroversial, centric texts to the movement. Selection of other figures within the movement might foreground the debate about the beat generation “club” and not the idea that

there is a theory being developed here. The basics of the theory, constructed around central figures to the movement, can then be tested with and against the writings of numerous texts labeled “beat” to further understanding.

I will attempt to sketch out the alternative rhetoric that the writers suggest through their work. This alternative rhetoric is best understood through highlighting key terms or central ideas around which the beat rhetoric orbits. The first term that the beat rhetoric is concerned with is “mediation.” The beats are deeply concerned that the communicative experience be authentic. The rhetoric developed from Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s works will show worry that human beings are not connecting with one another and are instead relying on artificial discourse, politeness, and material objects to substitute for this connection. The beat rhetoric attempts to structure and craft a method for reaching authentic communication.

Of course, there is a certain amount of irony and naiveté to the idea of structuring a method to reach a moment of authentic connection. This is not lost on the beats. They are not completely oblivious to the complexities involved in such an undertaking, as many of the scholars above have noted. What they offer is careful attention to utterance under the guise of inattention and free-wheeled rambling. Key to this element of the Beat rhetoric is the strategic rejection of conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation, as well as the conventions of traditional genre. The Beats, as will be seen, play with genre, often marking their texts with strong elements of different genre while signaling from the onset that the text belongs to one particular genre. All of this is in order to call attention to alternative modes of arguing, communicating and conversing, which although are not “pure” communication, are argued as better modes of interaction than the status quo.



The second term for the beat rhetoric is “experience.” Beat rhetoric’s “subjects” are the material and subjective lived experiences of the authors, or every day people. The canon of invention is located in the lived moment. Kerouac and Ginsberg both believed that “sketching,” or writing down moments, impulses and surroundings as they went through their daily lives were the way to approach the “doing” of literary creation. The function of the beat rhetoric is then to answer the question, “How do I bring you somewhere where you can’t be?” – the rhetor finds the stuff of arguments in his or her experiences, then later is required to bring those experiences across “as experienced.” Not an easy task, but the beat rhetorical theory offers some additional *topoi* to the traditional modes, as well as refigures some of the more familiar.

On the level of the more familiar, Jack Kerouac refigures *kairos*, the sophistic idea that “there can never be more than a contingent and provisional management of the present opportunity,” or “discovers in every new occasion a unique opportunity to confer meaning on the world.”<sup>124</sup> The Beat rhetoric is the art of finding the everyday lived moments of experience and articulating, without adding to, the experience for those who will listen. As John Poulakos puts it:

The rhetor who operates mainly with the awareness of *kairos* responds spontaneously to the fleeting situation at hand, speaks on the spur of the moment, and addresses each occasion in its particularity, its singularity, its uniqueness. In this sense, (s)he is both a hunter and a maker of unique opportunities, always ready to address improvisationally and confer meaning on new and emerging situations.<sup>125</sup>

However, if the meaning conferred upon an emerging situation is new, the rhetor must also prepare the audience for the *kairotic* moment – the audience must be ready to see and recognize

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<sup>124</sup> Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia: On the Will-to-Invent* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 13-14.

<sup>125</sup> John Poulakos, *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 61.

a moment as emergent, and then be able to recognize the rhetor's handling of the moment as an appropriate, and hopefully masterful, grappling with the event. The rhetor's words must be, in every sense of the phrase, well-spoken:

If what gets said on the spur of the moment happens to fall on receptive ears and make unexpected sense, it will eventually find its place in the audience's standard linguistic currency, and thus become part of their storehouse of appropriate responses, ready to be recalled at some future occasion. In other words, what is spoken in and through the awareness of *kairos* can, in time, turn into one of the categories of *to prepon*.<sup>126</sup>

There are, of course, other understandings of *kairos* that should be considered. James Kinneavy tracks *kairos* from pre-sophistic understandings in Hesiod and Homer through to modern understandings of it in Aristotle. For Kinneavy, the concept is centered around "right timing" and "proper measure." This gets re-interpreted through the ancient world into the senses of "timeliness" and "appropriateness."<sup>127</sup> Additionally, Roger Thompson locates the idea in an American context when he describes Emerson's work as, "articulating the need for *kairos*, a moment of spiritual insight and propriety, in the rhetorical and literary arts."<sup>128</sup> Emerson, according to Thompson not only called for this moment, but saw himself as the leader of the moment. *Kairos* as a concept for the beats is best defined as an awareness that any moment could be "momentous," so careful and cautious attention should be taken to all surroundings. Jack Kerouac's writing highlights the importance of this concept in *On the Road*. In that book, each

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<sup>126</sup> Poulakos, *Sophicstical Rhetoric*, 62

<sup>127</sup> James Kinneavy, "Kairos in Classical and Modern Theory," in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Praxis*, Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, Eds. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 60.

<sup>128</sup> Roger Thompson, "Ralph Waldo Emerson and the American *Kairos*," in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Praxis*, Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, Eds. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 187.

moment, if not properly attended to, could become disastrous in the larger project of making meaning out of life experience.

The importance of “experience” as a key term for the beat rhetoric exists not only as an analogue to the traditional canon of invention, but also with delivery and style as well. The beat text’s creation is “an experience” worthy of its own accolades, and the engagement with the text is a moment of deep revelation, as will be shown in the analysis. “Experience” though, and the moments of “experience” are not moments that come, but are created moments. This is the way I argue that the *kairotic* plays in the Beat rhetoric. As it will be shown, many of the Beats edited and attended to their work, and did not present it as a “raw” draft. But the signs, and the articulation of the “draft” were carefully crafted. A consideration of *kairos* as a rhetorical move, and not a supernatural or “apparent” phenomenon outside of the boundaries of the narrative, will show how the Beat writers were quite savvy about attending to their moment as well as crafting the “moment-ness.” This approach, once linked to the sketches of the everyday as inductive traces of the “profound,” consist of the basic compositional elements of their rhetoric.

The final term I want to consider is “body.” The beat rhetoric is very attentive to the limits of the human body as a cite of productivity instead of restriction. Emotions, sickness, and states of emotional or sensory ambiguity are all accepted as valid modes of creating and understanding. As I said earlier, the beat rhetoric strategically rejects the traditions of grammar and genre. Part of that strategic rejection is to replace those conventions with those of the body.<sup>129</sup> A “body” of text would conceivably have analogous limits as a human body. For

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<sup>129</sup> Rhetoric and the body consists of a copious amount of scholarship. See Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) for the creation of body metaphors from the Enlightenment; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) for an analysis of how the body, not subordinate to the mind,

example, the appropriate (*kairotic*) length of an utterance would be a human breath instead of the grammatically correct sentence -- composed for the apprehension of the ear instead of the eye. This opens events such as Kerouac's famous typewritten "scroll" of *On the Road* as central to the construction of his novel as much as his spontaneous prose. In the beat rhetoric, the rhetor and the text blur, the limitations of the body or the profundity of overwhelming emotion being central to not only the meaning, but the crafting of the meaning explicitly.

Since the "grammar book" of the Beat rhetoric is the human body, and the appropriate subject matter is the *kairotic* apprehension of the true human subject in everyday material existence, the expression of this moment cannot appear to be edited, but must be directly communicated, it appears that the beat rhetoric is a fairly anti-intellectual theory of discourse production. However, what the beat rhetoric ends up doing is transforming the audience. Instead of everyone being a potential audience member, everyone is also a potential rhetor. The tenets of the Beat Generation's rules of appropriate textual production are a perceived stripping away of things such as skill, talent, and careful wording. Of course, these elements are still there, but are strategically blanked in favor of an "absence" of particular method. It is a popularization of an art that, in the 1950s, was the province of the University elite. According to Edward Brunner, the concurrent rise of both G.I. Bill University students as well as the first M.F.A. poetry graduates teaching in Universities pushed the New Criticism not just as one way of understanding a poem, but as the method of poetic "packaging" and audience "unpacking" complicated coded meanings in each stanza. "The packaging of formalist devices openly

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becomes a site for the rethinking of dichotomies; Gail Weiss, *Body Images* (New York: Routledge, 1999) for examination from multiple theoretical perspectives as to the influence of the image of the body on daily thought and action. In my chapter on Ginsberg I will offer more in depth discussion of rhetoric and the body.

displayed the poem as labor-intensive, an exquisitely balanced verbal machine crafted by specialists in the language arts.”<sup>130</sup> The Beats, therefore, can be easily seen as hedging against this type of poetry with their own poetic production, but more importantly returning to an understanding of poetry as a persuasive, argumentative discourse, not just the plaything of the verbal elites.

The method that I will use to inductively construct the beat rhetoric will be rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism as a method is, to say the least, difficult to pin down. As Jennifer DeWinter puts it, “everyone seems to have a slightly different version, and that difference is both necessary and significant.”<sup>131</sup> She follows this up with a definition that appears as circular as it is conservative – “criticism that attends to rhetoric.”<sup>132</sup> What she means is that rhetorical criticism is the critical act of revealing the rhetoricity, or the rhetorical moves, modes and understandings that make a text “mean.”

Of course this means that rhetorical criticism isn’t bound to many specific methods. Rhetorical critics have relied on everything from Aristotle to Lacan for theoretical tools to unpack and critique the functioning of a text.<sup>133</sup> Some of the overarching understandings of what rhetorical criticism is are best reached by rejecting the question of “what is” in favor of “what does it seek?” Contemporary rhetorical criticism and rhetorical critics use a variety of methods

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<sup>130</sup> Brunner, *Cold War Poetry*, 6.

<sup>131</sup> Jennifer DeWinter, “A Bibliographic Synthesis of Rhetorical Criticism,” *Rhetoric Review* 25, 4 (2006):388-407, 389.

<sup>132</sup> Jennifer DeWinter, “A Bibliographic Synthesis,” 390.

<sup>133</sup> For the former see Herbert A. Wilchels, “The Literary Criticism of Oratory,” in *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism*, Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), also Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, *Speech Criticism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1948). For the latter see Barbara A. Biesecker, “Rhetorical Studies and the ‘New’ Psychoanalysis: What’s the Real Problem? Or Framing the Problem of the Real,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84 (1998): 222-259.

and critique myriad objects but seek an understanding of the meaning of the text that would give the author no particular privilege over the possible meanings of the text. Since rhetorical criticism's definition is by definition contingent upon what the critic thinks rhetoric is, it might be best if I locate my understanding of the method within some of the scholarship.

The method of looking at texts and then determining how to criticize them has been referred to as "Generative Criticism" and is described as finding an interesting text that seems to defy a straightforward, simple explanation for the reaction the text apparently generates. "This kind of criticism is generative in that you generate units of analysis or an explanation from your artifact rather than from previously developed, formal methods of criticism."<sup>134</sup> Therefore, generic criticism begins with the text, and attempts to find answers to the questions surrounding the meaning, or readings of the artifact in question.

This form of criticism attempts to come to terms with the values that brought the critic to the text, and made the critic feel that it would be valuable to criticize the text: "One discovers that a particular object holds interest over against any number of other potential objects; one tries to understand both the object and one's interest in it; and one decides what to say about it. The complete effort we call criticism."<sup>135</sup> In the case of this project, the interest lies in understanding how these works could be understood as theoretical. The works are not only to be read and enjoyed as they are, but they also offer a method for creating texts as well.

Rhetorical criticism is the most apt method to approach the creation of the beat rhetoric because it not only calls attention to the rhetoricity of the texts in question – "It can work to

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<sup>134</sup> Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*, Third ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2004).

<sup>135</sup> Philip Wander and Steven Jenkins, "Rhetoric, Society and the Critical Response," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, no. 4 (1972).

understand components of rhetoric and how they work in conjunction with or against one another” -- but also can serve as an argument for how a text should be viewed.<sup>136</sup> Rhetorical criticism does not just criticize, but advocates for a reading. “[U]seful rhetorical criticism, whatever else it may be, must function as an argument.”<sup>137</sup> What is most important about this understanding of rhetorical criticism is that it brings to the forefront the idea that humans are involved in any critical appraisal of meaning: “One should never forget that it is a *person* who makes an inferential leap, perceives a rationale, makes a choice, regulates an uncertainty, and risks a confrontation.”<sup>138</sup> This posits the understanding of meaning as a negotiated process between human beings, who can and will view meaning differently and will justify their understandings. Rhetorical criticism can be seen then as criticism that attends to the rhetorical (meaning-making) elements of the text, and argues how to best understand how they work given the context, text and situatedness of the text.

I will rhetorically criticize several key texts in order to advocate for a reading of the beat texts as more than contributions to American literary production, but contributions to the ideas of communication and rhetoric. I will advocate a reading of Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s most well-known works as not only descriptive but prescriptive – they offer a way to approach and make meaning of the world.

I will investigate Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” as well as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Diane DiPrima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik* and Amiri Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America.” These texts are chosen for a few reasons. The first reason is that each of these texts has been

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<sup>136</sup> Jennifer DeWinter, “A Bibliographic Synthesis,” 391.

<sup>137</sup> Wayne Brockriede, “Rhetorical Criticism as Argument” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60, 2 (April 1974): 165.

<sup>138</sup> Wayne Brockriede, “Rhetorical Criticism as Argument,” 166.

studied before by other scholars as representative of “beat literature.” The second reason is that these texts are arguably the first beat texts, the ones that established the paradigm for the creation of other beat texts. There is a lot of debate about the attribution of this term, and in this study I do not wish to engage with any dispute about authenticity. I want to focus on these texts because of their perceived centrality to the beat movement. This does not mean that there will be or could be beat texts that offer different or similar rhetorical theories. I will argue that some of these texts (such as Baraka’s) are influenced by the rhetorical theory offered by the texts I am analyzing. The importance of this analysis is that texts that are considered to be centric to the beat movement can be read theoretically. And that is important for a couple of reasons.

Seeing beat writing as theoretical points to an understanding of these writers as concerned with not only social norms and values, but the way these social norms and values are constructed. Attention to these societal assumptions, usually hidden from direct enunciation via shared ideology, is important for those interested in the role of rhetoric in our society. Such information is crucial for those interested in making political interventions – those who must choose how and to whom their intervention will be addressed. In the next section I will sketch a short history of how intertwined poetry and rhetoric are as discourses in order to lay the ground for a fuller appreciation of what Kerouac, and Ginsberg are up to in their work.

## **2.4 A BRIEF HISTORY OF POETICS AND RHETORIC**

Jeffrey Walker’s *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* is the most comprehensive examination of the development of rhetoric and poetics from ancient Athens to the beginnings of modernity in the middle ages. Walker’s argument is as simple in its formulation as it is revolutionary in its



implication: The oft-held distinction between poetry and rhetoric does not obtain along historical and textual lines. Walker understands rhetoric, “in more or less sophistic terms as centrally and fundamentally an art of epideictic argumentation /persuasion that derives originally from the poetic tradition and that extends, in applied versions of itself, to the practical discourses of public and private life.”<sup>139</sup> Rhetoric did not rise out of the democratization of Athens, nor did poetry rise from the need to beautify or celebrate knowledge produced via other discourses. Poetry and rhetoric are branches of the same discursive practice, a public argumentative and suatory discourse that has its roots in ancient epic poets such as Homer and Hesiod. “[T]he conventional poetry/rhetoric distinctions of the modern mind are more likely to confuse than to illuminate our understanding of oral and archaic discourse practices. We can gain a much more intelligible understanding by instead thinking broadly in terms of epideictic and pragmatic eloquence – as I have defined those terms here – and by considering the relationship between them.”<sup>140</sup> For Walker, the role of rhetoric is one that has always been public and argumentative, but alters its approach to the culture and the situation at hand.

Compare this understanding of rhetoric with another classical rhetorician, Charles Sears Baldwin, who argues, “[r]hetoric and poetic connoted two fields of composition, two habits of conceiving and ordering, two typical movements. The movement of the one the ancients saw as primarily intellectual, a progress from idea to idea determined logically; that of the other, as primarily imaginative, a progress from image to image determined emotionally. This distinction is more fundamental than that of so-called literary forms.”<sup>141</sup> Baldwin argues that this difference

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<sup>139</sup> Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), viii.

<sup>140</sup> Walker, 11.

<sup>141</sup> Charles Sears Baldwin, *Ancient Rhetoric and Poetic* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 3.

in the two forms of invention was more habitual than generic, and thought of as a semi-permeable membrane. Audiences and authors understood that texts of one type could easily blur to become texts of another type, because the “habitual movement” between the two forms was accepted by ancient rhetors and audiences.

Walker, on the other hand, argues that in early Greece, the discourse that we call poetic did not exist separate or apart from the discourse we call rhetoric. The best distinction, he argues, was between a form of discourse known as *epidiktikon* and *pragmatikon*. “[T]he distinction between the *epideiktikon* and the *pragmatikon* comes down to this: the *epideiktikon* is the rhetoric of belief and desire; the *pragmatikon* the rhetoric of practical civic business, a rhetoric that necessarily depends on and appeals to the beliefs/desires that epideictic cultivates.”<sup>142</sup> This has the effect of reversing the traditional understanding of rhetoric as an art or practice of civic engagement, and places rhetoric as the primary mode of engagement with the swirl of apprehendable phenomena we commonly call “the world.” Walker explains this distinction as it was for Hesiod using his categories of the *aoidos* – the eloquence necessary at a festival or public gathering, and the *basileus*, that discourse which is used in assemblies, councils, and courts, and which depends on the cultural store of the *aoidos* for its eloquence:

In Hesiod’s world, the *aoidos*’ poetic/epideictic discourse is the mode of suasion that both establishes and mnemonically sustains the culturally authoritative codes of value and the paradigms of eloquence from which the pragmatic discourse of the *basileus* derives its ‘precedents,’ its language, and its power. The poetic/epideictic discourse of the *aoidos* is, in sum, what might be called the ‘primary’ form of ‘rhetoric’ in that world, while the pragmatic discourse of the *basileus* is an applied, ‘secondary’ projection of that rhetoric into the particular forums and dispute occasions of civic life.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, 10.

<sup>143</sup> Walker, 10.

It is this ancient traditional distinction that is transformed in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries by the development of society toward the *polis*, and the development of writing. During this transformation, more modern conceptions of poetry and rhetoric developed. According to Walker, this distinction came as a result of poetry engaging with the cultural concerns of life in a *polis*. Poets engaged modern problems using the well of traditional forms and altering them to suit their needs: “[T]he elegiac, iambic, melic, and dramatic poets of the seventh to fifth centuries B.C. were what we might call the ‘modernists’ of their time – appropriating, altering and redefining the tradition they had received from ancient *aoidoi* like Hesiod and Homer and projecting that redefined tradition as a new poetry into the cultural debates and epideictic forums of the developing *polis*.”<sup>144</sup> The distinction between the ancient forms and the modern of the poetic was a cause of the rise of the term *poiêsis*, which means a “making” or a “doing,” and, as Walker points out, is an easy slide into the idea of “making up” something – anything from a story to perhaps a lie.<sup>145</sup>

It is this distinction between discourses where the beat rhetorical theory can be situated. It isn’t that the beats have found some new and unique literary formula, as a simplistic read of their work might indicate. The beats return to this very discursive distinction and blur it – they offer serious “makings” within the form that is habitually recognized as the “makings” of something fantastic, non-pragmatic, and not political. The beat rhetorical theory offers the style of the non-serious making, but offers arguments about serious pragmatic and political concerns within it. It is one of the key elements of a “canonical” read of the beat rhetoric that will be seen.

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<sup>144</sup> Walker, 20.

<sup>145</sup> Walker, 19.

Walker argues that key interpretations of this ancient tradition along the lines of dialectic and grammar are responsible for our contemporary understandings of what counts as poetry and what rhetoric is “good for.”<sup>146</sup> Before I follow Walker to the more contemporary understandings of poetry and rhetoric, I would like to spend a few pages engaging in my own analysis of Plato’s idea of the role of poetics, and Cicero’s arguments about the relationship between the “Orator” and the poet. Walker does not spend any time analyzing the *Republic*, in which Plato is quite specific as to what poetry is, and what it should be, which I will later argue appears in the cultural sense of poetry in 1950s America. Walker does spend quite a good amount of time on Cicero, but focuses primarily on Cicero’s understanding of the complicated relationship between poetics and rhetoric. I would like to attend to the relation between the poet and the Orator, as this becomes part of the conception of the poet’s appropriate place in society.

Plato’s engagement with poetry is often ham-handed into a complete rejection of poetry due to poetry’s lack of fidelity to truth or reality. But as Gene Fendt and David Rozema point out, Aristotle claimed we should read Plato’s work as if it were a kind of poetry.<sup>147</sup> Examination of Plato’s *Republic*, in which Socrates creates a utopian state in a discussion with his interlocutors, reveals a much more complex relationship of poetry to other types of discourse. In Plato’s estimation, poetry is not to be excommunicated from society but refigured in order to tap the benefits of its mimetic powers. This refiguring involves a complicated and deeply critical reading of *Republic* as well as some of Plato’s other dialogues. What is at stake is a notion of poetry that is essential to understanding human relations – a reading of poetry that the beats share.

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<sup>146</sup> Walker, 311.

<sup>147</sup> Gene Fendt and David Rozema. *Platonic Errors* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1998), 7.

For example, in Book Two, Socrates begins a discussion of the proper training and education of the Guardians, the class of people who will protect the Republic via soundness of mind and body. After establishing that traditional education always should begin with training in the arts, and that there are two major categories of discourse – the true and untrue, Socrates then critiques poetry focusing on the ability of the poetic to influence and shape the mind: “The young cannot distinguish what is allegorical from what is not, and the beliefs they acquire at that age are hard to expunge and usually remain unchanged. That may be the reason why it is most important that the first stories they hear should be well told and dispose them to virtue.”<sup>148</sup> Since the poetic can shape belief, we must be cautious with it, as it can lay the groundwork for a virtuous being.

In Book Ten of *Republic*, Socrates addresses what sort of poetic content is appropriate, and turns his attention to the content of poetic arts – imitation. Socrates argues that poetry, along with painting is primarily an imitative art that displays only the image of the thing it makes, not the thing itself. “Imitative art, then, is far removed from the truth and that is why, it seems, it can make everything, because it touches only a small part of each thing, and that an image.”<sup>149</sup> Much like a man wandering about with a mirror and claiming to have created plants, buildings and animals by reflecting them, the poet is a simpleton who “cannot distinguish between knowledge, ignorance and imitation.”<sup>150</sup>

Socrates suggests that if the poet knew his subject matter, that he would choose not to write imitative poetry about it, but instead “devote himself to actions than to the imitation of

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<sup>148</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), 378e.

<sup>149</sup> Plato, 598b-c.

<sup>150</sup> Plato, 598d.

them,” and “leave behind many fine actions as memorials of himself and be eager to be the subject of a eulogy rather than the author of it.”<sup>151</sup> Plato is pushing the now familiar distinction between action and “mere” words that is to haunt our understandings of rhetoric and poetry well beyond ancient Athens. The move made here seems to push the poetic discourse to a lower importance than human action, or the discourse of good human action that Socrates is offering philosophically.

The relationship here is more blurred and difficult than it appears. *Mimesis*, which is defined by Plato to be “the activity of the representational artist,” is a serious threat to the stability of the state.<sup>152</sup> Plato has Socrates argue against it pretty forcefully. Socrates warns that any representational art can easily lead to imitations in the political sphere which threaten the stability of the state. “Plato’s theory of mimesis is very much a theory of political life. The imitator is not just a bad craftsman but a danger to the health of the republic; mimesis is not just a matter of stories and pictures but a problem for the nature of humanity itself.”<sup>153</sup>

It is this same concern from 4<sup>th</sup> century Athens that was present in the beats’ political environment. Fears of communist spies that “imitated” Americans, prodded by the anxiety driven by the power of the atom bomb and sustained by the McCarthy hearings, made people skeptical of appearance. It was not just the public, but the beats as well who expressed concern with “mere” appearance and sought something deeper out of 1950s America. “People never talk of the

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<sup>151</sup> Plato, 599b.

<sup>152</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28.

<sup>153</sup> Potolsky, 29.

things, the time and night and bigness, that separate them,” wrote Jack Kerouac in his journals as he puzzled over how to write to his alienated audience.<sup>154</sup>

But Plato was more saavy about the relationship than he is given credit for. Another way of reading concerns with imitation in *Republic* is that it is a ruse, designed primarily as a demonstration of the type of internal discipline that would make hierarchical government unnecessary: “The usual authoritarian interpretations of *Republic* completely disregard the literary cues, pedagogical technique, poetic effect and ethical import of Socrates’ discussion and so are perfect misreadings.”<sup>155</sup> What is suggested instead is that *Republic* is an example of what sort of critical approach would be necessary in thinking and teaching to make an anarchy functional. “This text is a model of his [Socrates] constant internal dialogue, which both empowers his peculiar way of teaching and is the source and goal of his anarchic politics.”<sup>156</sup> If this interpretation is accepted, what is the role of mimesis and poetics in *Republic*? The answer is that Plato is practicing a poetics himself as a demonstration of its power.

Why is Plato’s understanding of the poetic important to the establishment of the beat rhetorical theory? Plato’s view not only relegates the poetic to a particular place because of its danger as a discourse, but also realizes that it is inevitably going to exist. His attempts to weaken it, or to put poetry in a subordinate role to human action are replicated in his attacks on rhetoric. Poetry and rhetoric are therefore united together in a different way than what Walker indicated. I’m not saying that Walker’s assessment is wrong, but that perhaps the relationship of rhetoric and poetry was and is still confusing. A variety of arguments and social beliefs keep them

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<sup>154</sup> Jack Kerouac *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*. Douglas Brinkley, Ed. (New York: Viking, 2004), 256.

<sup>155</sup> Fendt and Rozema *Platonic Errors*, 40.

<sup>156</sup> Fendt and Rozema, 40-1.

propped up as distinct and definite entities, but upon closer examination, the discourses blur. What we find in the beat rhetoric is an acceptance of discursive instability. This acceptance is conveyed through delivery practices, inventional practices, and a number of other specific approaches that will be detailed in the analysis. An attempt to construct a beat rhetoric might allow us to see the beats as returning to this early notion of the poetic, and help us understand their writing in a different light.

Another example from the classical canon worth considering due to his influence on rhetoric is Cicero. Cicero's *De Oratore* is an investigation along much more pragmatic lines than Plato as to the condition, capabilities and status of the rhetor. For Cicero, the poetic becomes a key element in the education of the good orator/statesman. As Cicero argues, even the concerns of an attorney require the sensibility of a poet in their execution:

Where other things of greater importance are concerned, fidelity, duty to our clients, and earnestness in discharging that duty; we are so much moved by such considerations, that even while we defend the merest strangers we can not regard them as strangers, if we wish to be thought honest men ourselves. But, as I said, that this may not appear surprising in us, what can be more fictitious than poetry, than theatrical representations, than the argument of a play? . . . I have often heard that no man can be a good poet . . . without ardor of imagination and the excitement of something similar to phrensy. [sic]"<sup>157</sup>

Even the client, who one might barely know in a fiduciary relationship, requires a particular passion in the stage of a court of law to be successful honestly and ethically with representing them before the jury. The good poet, in order to convey his representations, must employ the same energies. As John Dugan notes, this was not a simple matter of class or desire on Cicero's part to have an aesthetically pleasing understanding of the rhetor. "Cicero's use of the epideictic mode stands as an exemplary case of how a literary form could interact with Roman political

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<sup>157</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Oratory and Orators*, trans. J.S. Watson (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 136.



reality to reveal the potentialities and limitations of attempts to shape politics through cultural means.”<sup>158</sup> Cicero was interested in combining different forms of discourse to either reject or advance changes in the political or cultural spheres. Since one of the goals of the beat rhetoric might be to develop such ends, Cicero’s claims about the nature of rhetoric and its relationship to the poetic should be investigated.

As Jeffrey Walker persuasively argues, “Cicero’s perfect orator is one who knows the discourse of philosophy – though he need not follow the school philosophers into their abstruse speculations, which he, like Isocrates, considers useless, and he is more likely to focus on questions of moral and civic wisdom. But what chiefly distinguishes this perfect orator from the philosopher is his possession of a virtually poetic stylistic power.”<sup>159</sup> The poets get a key mention in the list that Cicero, through one of his characters in *De Oratore*, voices as the curriculum for the good orator:

The poets must also be studied; an acquaintance must be formed with history; the writers and teachers in all the liberal arts and sciences must be read, and turned over, and must, for the sake of exercise, be praised, interpreted, corrected, censured, refuted; you must dispute on both sides of every question; and whatever may seem maintainable on any point must be brought forward and illustrated. . . A certain intellectual grace must also be extracted from every kind of refinement, with which, as with salt, every oration must be seasoned.<sup>160</sup>

Poetic, therefore is the source of the orator’s ability to refine his words, making them “palatable” as every oration must contain some seasoning – a reversal of the Platonic desire to rid discourse of any seasoning. It does seem reasonable to see the poetic as the site of eloquence for the

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<sup>158</sup> John Dugan, “How to Make (And Break) a Cicero: “Epideixis,” Textuality, and Self-Fashioning in the Pro “Archia” and “In Pisonem” *Classical Antiquity* 20, 1 (April 2001), 35-77,36.

<sup>159</sup> Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, 83.

<sup>160</sup> Cicero, *On Oratory*, 44-5.

orator; a “spice cabinet” where one can choose pinches of language to flavor one’s oration. But Cicero does not limit the poetic to only the auxiliary when it comes to rhetoric:

What reason is there why an orator should not speak most eloquently on those matters of which he shall have gained a knowledge for a certain purpose and occasion? For the poet is nearly allied to the orator; being somewhat more restricted in numbers, but less restrained in choice of words, yet in many kinds of embellishment his rival and almost equal, in one respect, assuredly, nearly the same, that he circumscribes or bounds his jurisdiction by no limits, but reserves to himself full right to range whenever he pleases with the same ease and liberty.<sup>161</sup>

Cicero separated poetry from rhetoric, of which he distinguished “the parade of declamation” from “oratory,” which one could participate in after, “having been instructed in all liberal knowledge.”<sup>162</sup> However, after closer examination it appears that the poet and the rhetor are engaged in the same sort of action – offering eloquent words upon human actions, affairs, and situations bound by occasion and incident. Both arts offer understanding, framing, and sense to phenomena for human beings with little difference: “[t]hough employed about the same thoughts and words, yet admits of the greatest variations; and not so that some speakers are to be censured and others commended, but that those who are allowed to merit praise, merit it for different excellences. This is fully exemplified in poets, who have the nearest affinity to orators. . . .”<sup>163</sup> Poets, like orators, are praised for differences in their abilities, yet still constitute the same whole. No one praises an orator for the purity of their copy, but instead, for the fidelity of their words to the occasion, the time and the situation. Poets are never praised for mimicry, but instead for capturing a moment, scene or feeling in words “much like” a previous poet might

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<sup>161</sup> Cicero, *On Oratory*, 24.

<sup>162</sup> Cicero, *On Oratory*, 24.

<sup>163</sup> Cicero, *On Oratory*, 199.

have. Jeffrey Walker takes this portion of Cicero's argument to further unite Ciceronian rhetorical theory with the poetic:

There is an undercurrent in Cicero's argument suggesting that epideictic discourse is the realm of highest eloquence – where the rhetor can engage most fully with grand conceptions, and can approximate most nearly the 'supreme' poetic power of rhythmic eloquence, while performing upon the stage of public, civic *mores*.<sup>164</sup>

Walker's assessment of Cicero indicates that poetry and rhetoric at their best is as a fusion – a public, performed art of language that allows for the re-conceptualization of societal values while standing upon their brilliance. The concern for misrepresentation, an argument we examined earlier in Plato's fears of mimetic poetry and rhetoric, is dismissed by Cicero through the strength of rhetoric-poetic's emotional power. As Cicero remarks,

And that it may not appear to you extraordinary and astonishing that a man should so often be angry, so often grieve, and be so often excited by eery [sic] passion of the mind, especially in other men's concerns, there is such force, let me assure you, in those thoughts and sentiments which you apply, handle, and discuss in speaking, that there is no occasion for simulation or deceit; for the very nature of the language which is adopted to move the passions of others moves the orator himself in a greater degree than any one of those who listen to him.<sup>165</sup>

The act of misrepresentation or misdirection could happen in someone who was not an "orator," but in oratory the power of language itself as delivered from the position of the Orator makes misrepresentation impossible. There can be no disconnect between the speaker and his powerful words – he must believe them in order for them to have suasory power in the first place.

Cicero though was not myopic in his studies. He was interested in a great many of the arts, and attempted to write some poetry of his own, as well as translate some of the Greek epics

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<sup>164</sup> Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, 83.

<sup>165</sup> Cicero, *On Oratory*, 135.

into Latin. Although his techniques and skill with the translation of the poems is good technically, overall his poetry was “intellectually empty” and failed “not because he was a bad poet, but because he was a good Roman.”<sup>166</sup>

What’s the connection between Cicero and the beat rhetoric? First, we still see the presence of concern in Cicero with the power of poetic discourse. Its status is not clear. It has some of the powers of oration, and some of its own powers, but they do blend. The fear of misrepresentation is linked with poetics. It is these gaps and fears about the role of poetic discourse that are still present in the beats’ work. This connection is not an attempt to argue for a direct lineage. It is only an attempt to indicate how deep the confused position of poetic discourse runs. It is this confusion that the beats saw as a place from which to speak their view of what America and American should be.

I offer this broad-brush historical survey as a backdrop for the American poetic and rhetorical dynamics that I will cover in more detail in the next chapter, where I discuss Allen Ginsberg’s contribution to the Beat Generation’s rhetorical praxis. This broad historical context will help demonstrate a different understanding of the beat writers. It was not that they supported an “anything goes” philosophy of human action and belief; a complete upending of the cart of poetic or literary understanding. It was quite the contrary: The Beats were embracing a poetic tradition that included the rhetorical, making them much more conservative in a larger historical sense – putting Ginsberg and Kerouac as “conservative” if one considers a view of poetic discourse more in line with Hesiod than the 1950s view. This view of poetry is one that

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<sup>166</sup> Sander M. Goldberg, *Epic in Republican Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 156-7.

we can use productively to understand how poems are encountered and understood by readers and listeners.

For a more modern approach to the relationship of rhetoric and poetry, I turn to the work of Charles Bernstein, whose book *A Poetics* provides a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century view of the rhetorics of poetry. I am not claiming that the Beats influenced Bernstein's view – he is himself a poet. I am only using his idea to get a more modern sense of the continued struggle for identity between these two discourses. The question remains: Is poetic discourse still easy to confuse with rhetoric? Bernstein attempts to answer this question by offering a theory of how poems come to “mean,” writing it in verse himself:

A poetic *reading* can be given to any  
piece of writing; a ‘poem’ may be understood as  
writing specifically designed to absorb, or inflate  
with, proactive – rather than reactive – styles of  
reading. ‘Artifice’ is a measure of a poem’s  
intractability to being read as the sum of its  
devices & subject matters.<sup>167</sup>

Arguing that poetry should be seen as epistemic, Bernstein is concerned with both poetry and rhetoric. The subjects blur when one becomes interested in how the text one encounters is understood through what name is given to it. Bernstein's belief that all texts can be given poetic readings, if the text is seen as having a relationship between the proactive style of reading and an inability to be read as *just* a text that transmits information or shows off interesting linguistic devices such as meter, rhyme or alliteration. Artifice resists absorption at a particular point, and vice versa. The relationship between both will frame the potential meanings of the poem, or the poetry's inability to simply mean – it will always have meanings. Poetry's ability to interrupt

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<sup>167</sup> Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9.

potential meanings garnered from other epistemic frames makes it more like a frame and less like a discourse. The conclusion is that Bernstein's poetic is also rhetoric. The rhetorical considers questions of how meaning is made, how to properly construct that text to reach that meaning, and how to deliver it appropriately for an audience. The poet and the rhetor have a shared goal, even if the poet only wants the reader to enjoy the poem for its own sake.

This is not to say that Bernstein sees artifice and absorption as binary opposites or in opposition at all times. While this can be the case, he argues that artifice – the technical elements of the text on the page that allow or resist easy reading and absorption – the ability of the poem to mean something – sometimes work in what appear to be cross purposes but allow for an understanding that can challenge societal meanings. This is, for Bernstein, poetry at its highest form, when it serves as an epistemology – a way of knowing the world, instead of reflecting or commenting on it.

The epistemic is a complicated notion that has been deeply considered in rhetorical theory.<sup>168</sup> The debate about rhetoric's relationship with the epistemic is ongoing and inconclusive. The beats – at least Kerouac and Ginsberg – seem to think their methods provide a way of knowing the world and the people and things in it. In the analysis I provide a more detailed account of the epistemic nature of beat rhetoric and how concerns about knowing, the

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<sup>168</sup> See Robert L. Scott. "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic." *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967): 9-17; Bruce McComiskey. "Neo-Sophistic Rhetorical Theory: Sophistic Precedents for Contemporary Epistemic Rhetoric." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 24 (Summer-Autumn 1994): 16-24; Daniel J. Royer "New Challenges to Epistemic Rhetoric." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983): 35-48; Ayotte, Kevin, Poulakos, John, and Steve Whitson. "Mistaking Nietzsche: Rhetoric and the Epistemic Pest." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 1 (February 2002): 121.; Cherwitz, Richard A., and Jannes W. Hikins. "Irreducible Dualisms and the Residue of Commonsense: On the Inevitability of Cartesian Anxiety." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 23, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 229-241.

known and the scope of the knowable motivate both Kerouac and Ginsberg to offer an alternative way of writing and creating meaning in the world.

## 2.5 RHETORICAL CRITICISM: SQUARE OR HIP?

Why proceed from the position of rhetorical criticism when examining the beats? So far I have investigated the slippery barrier between rhetoric and poetic through several different culturally distinct texts. The differences in rhetoric and poetic can be investigated as the result of a rhetorical production themselves through the application of rhetorical criticism to beat texts.

Kenneth Burke states, “is it not true, that whatever their differences, they also have an area of overlap, since either Poetry or the exercising of Rhetoric can be enjoyed for their own sake?”<sup>169</sup> For Burke, rhetoric and the poetic have what he calls an identifying function – which is to say that both alter attitudes within the audience. “The principles of Rhetoric, Poetics, and Dialectic (and the corresponding dynamics of form, or order) are to be found, *mutatis mutandis*, within the modes of symbolic action generally.”<sup>170</sup> Burke points out that poems, when considering questions of form, are asking the questions of rhetoric, while rhetors, interested in the limits of what speech can do to move an audience, are looking at poetics. Burke warns against a hard and fast distinction between the two arts. Critics who do so are eliminating a wealth of critical tools and understandings that can help them unpack a text’s potential meanings, as well as, “The full history of the subject has necessarily kept such a distinction forever on the

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<sup>169</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 296.

<sup>170</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 306.

move.”<sup>171</sup> This continual movement of the line throughout history is the moment of opportunity for the beats to craft their rhetoric upon seemingly unstable ground.

To tease out what this theory may look like I turn to rhetorical criticism. However, my argument is limited to extrapolating the specific rhetorical considerations and praxis of the Beat writers I have selected for analysis – I do not purport to offer a full and complete understanding of the texts that could be labeled “Beat Generation,” nor do I seek the final word on the subject. I will use rhetorical criticism of major beat texts in order to establish the foundations for a beat theory of rhetoric, one that they advanced to readers as an alternative method of communication with other human beings during the postwar years.

Primarily I will be using the theories of Kenneth Burke to highlight and indicate the rhetorical practice of the Beats in a number of ways. There are a couple of central ways the beats and Burke are connected. The primary connection between Burke and the Beat writers is one of deep concern over the view of the human subject as primarily mechanical and animal. For Burke, this manifested itself through criticism of behaviorism, and for the Beats, a deep distrust of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, and a praise of spiritual unity through Buddhism and Eastern thought. Burke’s theories of terministic screens, representative anecdotes, the action motion distinction and the idea of attitude, motive and symbol are all useful ideas for unpacking the beats’ writing as something that offers a prescription rather than just the vision of an artist.

Quoting Kenneth Burke:

The treatment of the poem as act would not, by any means, require us to slight the nature of the poem as object. For a poem is a *constitutive* act – and after the act of its composition by a poet who had acted in a particular temporal scene, it survives as an objective structure, capable of being examined in itself, in temporal scenes quite different

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<sup>171</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 307.



from the constitution, we can inquire into the principles by which this constitution is organized.<sup>172</sup>

Said another way, the poem as a constituted object gives us ways to understand principles of constitution. We can see them as acts within and responding to temporally and culturally situated scenes. Insight into the poem's state can give insight into how to state a poem. Under Burke's idea the beats could be seen as offering a guide or a way to put together, or constitute messages. This method of production can properly be called rhetoric, as it is a productive and pragmatic art of making sense of the world.

Burke's definition of rhetoric is clear. He defines rhetoric as the dual act of identifying and dividing: "Terms for identification are wider in scope than terms for killing. We are proposing that our rhetoric be reduced to this term of wider scope, with the term of narrower scope being treated as a species of it."<sup>173</sup> Identification – either with people, ideas, ideology or what have you is his definition. In this case killing something is a way of identifying with it. At the same time, one divides from "not killing." It is an example of a larger mode of human relations – people identify and divide in a dual movement to constitute the most basic relations with each other.

For Burke, "[t]o identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B."<sup>174</sup> This notion of consubstantiality is key for understanding Burke's rhetoric. Consubstantiality is not a Freudian identification – it is not a perfect correspondence. Instead, Burke explains it as a coming together closely of attitude, motive and desire. As Burke states, "[A] way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas,

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<sup>172</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 482.

<sup>173</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 20.

<sup>174</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21.

attitudes that make them *consubstantial*.”<sup>175</sup> At the same time, the move to identify comes with the move to divide, or separate from. So any identification carries its division. And often times, a rhetorical identification may carry with it a number of divisions, to which the Beat rhetoric is no exception.

Burke’s theory of framing – both tragic and comic – applies to Beat rhetoric in the context of the 1950s. Burke sees history as a compendium of different attitudes, embodied in poetic works that serve as equipment for making judgments on the quality of life. Burke’s definition of the tragic frame associated “crime” with human limitations.<sup>176</sup> The comic frame, by contrast, associated human limitation with being “mistaken.”<sup>177</sup> Burke argues that the “comic frame” has little to do with humor – its primary characteristic is that of an ambivalent attitude. “It also makes us sensitive to the point at which one of these ingredients becomes hypertrophied, with the corresponding atrophy of the other.”<sup>178</sup> The comic frame, for Burke, is focused on ambivalence, but that does not mean the frame is incapable of providing criteria for judgment. It offers a maximized reflexive position from which to judge human successes and errors: “The comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would ‘transcend’ himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the nonrational.”<sup>179</sup> Instead of the frame of tragedy, where one is at the mercy of perceived wrong,

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<sup>175</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21.

<sup>176</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, Third ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 39.

<sup>177</sup> Burke, *Attitudes*, 41.

<sup>178</sup> Burke, *Attitudes*, 167.

<sup>179</sup> Burke, *Attitudes*, 171.

under the ambivalent comic frame, people can move others from their errors instead of punishing them for those errors.

The difference between comic and tragic framing for Burke is one of corrective. If things are framed from the comic perspective the politics are summed up in the term “mistake.” But if things are framed tragically, the politics are that of murder. Consider the explanation of the impact of tragic framing from Ott and Aoki’s Burkean analysis of Matthew Shepard’s murder in Wyoming:

The shortcoming of tragic framing is that it brings about symbolic resolution without turning the event into a lesson for those involved. By projecting its iniquity upon McKinney and Henderson and attacking them, the public achieves resolution *in this instance*, but does not substantively alter its character as to insure that future instances are less likely. On the contrary, this mode aggressively perpetuates the status quo, cloaking but not erasing the public’s homophobia (and we do mean the politically loaded term “homophobia”) so that it can return another day.<sup>180</sup>

The conclusion of the tragic frame is one where elimination of the instance of the problem solves the whole problem. This ironically allows the problem to occur again. The comic frame differs by connecting the flaw to the larger society through the common and deeply human act of the mistake – this allows for more group culpability for the problem and also more of a chance to address the underlying flaws in the structure that led to it.

For the beats, the idea of the mistaken appears constantly in their rhetorical theory. Instead of tragic moments, often characters find themselves mistaken or poetic narrators make mistakes and then speculate on the correctives available to the group hearing or reading the poem. The beat rhetoric draws upon a framing that prefers the comic to the tragic, a point that will be proven in the more full rhetorical criticism and theory construction to come in later chapters.

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<sup>180</sup> Ott and Aoki. 496.

## **2.6 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have offered the idea that the beats can be read as offering a rhetorical theory. I argue that the use of rhetorical criticism within the context of some of the scholarship done on the relationship of rhetoric and poetics, as well as Burkean rhetorical theory will be able to provide new insights about the beats and the importance of their works. In the next chapter I will start the analysis by providing a historical and cultural frame for the beats, including some of the specifics of the time period that are important to understanding the beats as prescriptive of what to write in their time, not just descriptive of how they felt about their time.

### 3.0 THE RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE BEATS

In this chapter, I will frame the beat rhetoric within the rhetorical environment of the 1950s in the United States. The beats have been situated within that decade culturally, socially and literarily.<sup>181</sup> In this chapter, I position the beats within and alongside the rhetoric that was surrounding them and influencing them. I do this in order to bring relief to the exigence that the beat rhetoric addresses, which is the perceived lack of human presence in communicative moments. “Exigence” has a loaded and controversial history within rhetorical studies, most notably the debate between Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz about the priority of the term in moments of rhetoric. Bitzer argues that there are “three constituents” in any rhetorical situation – exigence, audience and constraints – and defines exigence as, “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be.”<sup>182</sup> Not all exigencies are rhetorical; only ones that can be modified by rhetoric count: “An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse.”<sup>183</sup> Richard Vatz disagrees, arguing that exigencies are not distinct from the rhetoric used to modify them: “Bitzer argues

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<sup>181</sup> See John Clellon Holmes, “This is the Beat Generation,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 1952; James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Matt Theado, Ed., *The Beats: A Literary Reference*, (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2001).

<sup>182</sup> Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, 1 (winter 1968): 1-14, 6.

<sup>183</sup> Bitzer, “Situation,” 7.

that the nature of the context determines the rhetoric. But one never runs out of context. One never runs out of facts to describe a situation.”<sup>184</sup> The determination that exigence is itself rhetorical means that rhetors not only have the power to shape the situation, but choose the situation they are shaping, positing it as necessary, inevitable, or the most critical need at the moment. “We have ‘leaders’ or ‘bosses,’ ‘organizations’ or ‘machines,’ and ‘education’ or ‘propaganda’ not according to the situation’s reality, but according to the rhetor’s arbitrary choice of characterization.”<sup>185</sup> Scott Consigny partially agrees with this assessment when he writes, “The rhetor cannot create exigencies arbitrarily, but must take into account the particularities of each situation in which he actively becomes engaged.”<sup>186</sup> Hoping to resolve a missed commonplace between the two scholars, Consigny argues that rhetoric should be considered an “art,” a position that inhabits a space between objective conditions and fully crafted conditions for rhetoric. “The real question in rhetorical theory is not whether the situation or the rhetor is ‘dominant,’ but the extent, in each case, to which the rhetor can discover and control indeterminate matter, using his art of topics to make sense of what would otherwise remain simply absurd.”<sup>187</sup> It is this sense of rhetoric as a creative engagement with the indeterminate to make sense of it for the rhetor and audience that I will follow in this chapter.

I will show what sort of discursive and textual environment the beats found themselves and how they came to explain the environment to themselves and others. I do not seek here to offer a complete historical account of the 1950s, or represent all of the lines of discourse that

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<sup>184</sup> Richard E. Vatz “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 6 3 (Summer 1973): 154-161, 156.

<sup>185</sup> Vatz, “Myth,” 157.

<sup>186</sup> Scott Consigny, “Rhetoric and its Situations,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 7 3 (Summer 1974):175-186, 176.

<sup>187</sup> Consigny, “Rhetoric,” 185.

were present in that decade. Instead, I offer a limited view of the situation as the beats engaged it, specifically Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the beats saw their situation, and how they attempted to intervene to make sense of the world through the art of rhetoric.

### 3.1 BEAT MOTIVES

In the postwar world both Kerouac and Ginsberg – the two beats who I argue are advancing this rhetorical theory – were influenced in many ways by this environment, and also hoped to influence it. The beats were interested in significantly altering their rhetorical environment. By this I mean that they sought to change the perceived communicative practices, habits and assumptions of other people – practices that they thought were harmful and had to be changed. What they believed to be at stake was healthy human interaction – or the roots of a desirable society.

The beats can be viewed as “connected critics” – defined by Michael Walzer as a critic who, “agitates, teaches, counsels, challenges, protests *from within*.”<sup>188</sup> These critics do not seek to establish themselves as outside, distinct, or above the groups that they seek to change. For the beats, the changes necessary are within human communication and rhetoric. As an example, consider the following passage from Jack Kerouac’s novel *Dharma Bums*, published in 1961, and the first novel to be published after the runaway success of *On the Road*:

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<sup>188</sup> Michael Walzer *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 26.

Everything was fine with the Zen Lunatics, the nut wagon was too far away to hear us. But there was a wisdom in it all, as you'll see if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking; silence in the yards; dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of on wheels. You'll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way and the Zen Lunatics have long joined dust, laughter on their dust lips.<sup>189</sup>

The fear expressed in this passage by Kerouac of “nobody talking” and dogs upset because you pass on “human feet” point out the changes that communication technology – in this case the television – brought to the minds of the beats. But the “zen lunatics” recognize the problem and walk within the world in order to fix it. The reference is to Kerouac's association with Gary Snyder, where he “foresaw the ‘rucksack revolution’ that would lead to millions of hippies abandoning industrial America a decade later.”<sup>190</sup> But instead of seeing this moment as some sort of premonition to a political reality to come, I want to highlight the rhetorical concerns in this paragraph.

The rhetorical vision here is bleak – a world without human interaction. Bodies moving down the street are unfamiliar in a world of cars. Neighborly conversations are replaced by a blue glow of the television – keeping people inside and looking inward instead of looking outward. The human body and the human being are becoming separated and de-naturalized in favor of compartmentalizing machines. Ray Smith, the narrator of *Dharma Bums* comments on the character Japhy Ryder, who suggests in the novel the need for an alternative way of life apart from these technologies: “I see him [Japhy] in future years stalking along with full rucksack, in suburban streets, passing the blue television windows of homes, alone, his thoughts the only

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<sup>189</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 104.

<sup>190</sup> Gerald Nicosia *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 496.



thoughts not electrified to the Master Switch.”<sup>191</sup> Through such images, the reader is encouraged to identify with Japhy, and therefore divide from the “Master Switch,” an image of homogenous thinking and being.

This quote serves as a representative anecdote for the situation the beats perceived in the 1950s. The beats saw the 1950s communicative situation as a dire one. They perceived technologies of representation – such as the television and other media – as threats to human communication. And therefore, these were threats to humanity. Appropriate human interaction for the beats is critical to understanding their perspective, as well as their works. In this chapter I will examine some of the theories about mass culture that were contemporary with the beats, and some of the literature they were examining in order to provide a full picture of the beats as rhetorical. Although many of the mass culture theories that I will discuss did not directly influence the beats, the exigencies of these scholars are based on similar exigencies – most notably concern about making the world intelligible and valuable for others. Their concern for appropriate human communication led to the development of a latent rhetorical theory for the preservation of human society.

Presence is a word that I will use to describe the beats’ concern. For the most part, many of the critiques that both Kerouac and Ginsberg make of the modern situation is that the human presence is absent. This means that interactivity is replaced with some intermediary element, be it technology, distance, or the illusion of immediacy. The critique is long-ranging, and covers a number of different works from each author.

For example, there is a long chapter on television in Kerouac’s novel *Pic*. In the novel, the young African-American Pic is taken from his life with sharecroppers in South Carolina to

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<sup>191</sup> Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 108.

live with his brother in Harlem. In Times Square shortly after his arrival, Pic encounters a street-corner preacher who offers his views on television:

“Ladies and gentlemen of the world, I have come to tell you about the mystery of television. Television is a great big long arm of light that reaches clear into your front parlor, and even in the middle of the night when there ain’t no shows going on that light is on, though the studio is dark. Study this light. It will hurt you at first, and bombard your eyes with a hundred trillion electronic particles of itself, but after awhile you won’t mind it no more. Why?” he yelled way up loud and Slim said “Yes!” The man said, “Because while electricity was light to see by, *this* is the light comes not to see by, but to *see* – not to read by, but to *read*. This is the light that you *feel*.”<sup>192</sup>

Pic’s brother Slim is caught up in the passion and energy of the preacher as Pic reports to us the reactions and words of the speech. Pic’s full name is Pictorial Review Jackson, so perhaps it is appropriate that someone named for the magazine that privileged visual media itself provides us an image of this scene. Pic brings us the comments of the preacher mediated through his observations, almost as if the older media were viewing a critique of the newer media. The preacher notes prominently that the light from the television is information, not just a neutral passageway for information to reach audiences.

The comments of the street corner preacher dovetail nicely with Marshall McLuhan’s observation that light itself is a communicative medium:

The instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the content of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, ‘What is the content of speech?,’ it is necessary to say, ‘It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal.’ An abstract painting represents direct manifestation of creative thought processes as they might appear in computer designs.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris & Pic: Two Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 214.

<sup>193</sup> Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential Mcluhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 151.

Although not completely contemporaneous with the time of Kerouac's writing, the observations by McLuhan in 1964 seem apparent within Kerouac's book, which he started writing in the 1950s. Although McLuhan and Kerouac clearly disagree – McLuhan was celebrating the new medium, while Kerouac's characters are either negative about it, or at least ambivalent toward it – there are some analytic points in common. Most central is the idea that the machinery itself changes the way information is processed. McLuhan suggests that there is no bottom to a medium. The closest one can get is abstract thought. Light from the television – which the preacher wants us to study – is information. Exposure to it is enough to expose oneself to the important realization of TV, that it creates feelings among the viewers:

It means that man has discovered light and is fiddling with it for the first time, and has released concentrated shots of it into everyone's house, and nobody yet knows what the effect will be on the mind and soul of people, except that now there is a general feeling of nervousness among some, and sore eyes, and twitching of nerves, and a suspicion that because it has come at the same time as the A T O M there may be an unholy alliance betwixt one and the other, and both are bad and injurious and leading to the end of the world, though some optimists claim it is the opposite of the atom and may relax the nerves the atoms undid. Nobody knows!' he moaned way out loud, and looked at ever'body frank. Well, ever'body was innerested and paid no attention to the speeches about *repentance*, and Slim agreed, most amazed.<sup>194</sup>

Anxieties about the new technologies of the television and its effects on people are tied in this instance to the rise of the most overt and obvious destructive technology from the post war era, the atomic bomb. The prose here is suggestive of connection, but the direction remains ambivalent. According to Pic, everyone in the crowd, stopped paying attention and thought about the relationship of the new technologies, unconcerned about the more traditional religious message that followed. This is another representative anecdote about the period – the fear of

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<sup>194</sup> Kerouac, *Satori in Paris & Pic: Two Novels*, 215.

unobserved and dangerous connections – which I call “connection anxiety.” There are several layers to this anxiety, and many of them center on mass culture and mediation.

The connection of the rise of television with the atom bomb and the anxiety both produce by altering the “nerves” and threatening the “end of the world” have rhetorical significance. Most importantly, the lack of “knowable” conclusions about the effects of television or its connections to other technologies of war produces an exigence that could be defined as a rhetorical situation. “Let us regard rhetorical situation as a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance.”<sup>195</sup> This sense of rhetorical situation is not purely outside of the rhetor’s control, as Consigny argues. But it does raise the question of whether or not Bitzer’s article establishing the idea of a rhetorical situation might also be an attempt to overcome this same anxiety. But casting television as one of the potential exigencies that constitute a rhetorical situation is helpful in identifying the beats as responding to this exigency.

Of course, television only represents a small proportion of the mass mediation of the period. The confluence of mass media technologies and anxiety about their connections created an exigence that demanded explanation. As early as 1953, Dwight MacDonald saw the period as a new direction for mass culture, which he defined as, “solely and distinctly an article for mass consumption, like chewing gum.” He further argues that mass culture, “is imposed from above,” and is a “vulgarized reflection of High Culture.”<sup>196</sup> Mass Culture was not something particularly new, but it was being distributed and accessed in a new, fast, and very accessible manner. For

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<sup>195</sup> Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25 (January 1992): 1-14, 4.

<sup>196</sup> Dwight MacDonald, “A Theory of Mass Culture” in John Durham Peters & Peter Simonson, Eds. *Mass Communication and American Social Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 344-5.

people such as MacDonald, this was a problem that should spark concern and worry. For other scholars writing around the same time, like Marshall McLuhan, the period represented a change in the manner of information transfer and production. “Much of the vivid energy of American speech and writing in the twentieth century is the result of the movement away from book-culture toward oral communication. . .Radio in particular has encouraged the return to the panel discussion and the round table.”<sup>197</sup> McLuhan differs from MacDonald in the sense that he does not advocate some sort of value judgment on the quality of the transition, but notes the differences in how we communicate and how those values are changing.

I think that the beats can be seen as discussing some of these changes as well. The rhetors that I am discussing as the sources of the beat rhetorical theory, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, attempted in many works to point out the forms and meaning offered by mass culture, attempting to account for dangerous linkages. Looking for “origins” of the rhetoric of the beats is the same for the rhetorician as seeking out exigence. The exigence is always a combination of shared events in the society and culture as well as internal choices and positioning by the rhetor. As Consigny points out, the rhetor can be evaluated by how well he or she moves the fixities of the situation around through the contingency of the moment. Through rhetorical criticism we can identify where these influences stem, and what might be some of the influence for the Ginsberg, in his 1956 poem “America,” can serve as an example for this larger concern:

I’m addressing you.

Are you going to let your emotional life be run by time Magazine?

I’m obsessed by Time Magazine.

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<sup>197</sup> Marshall McLuhan, “Sight, Sound, and Fury,” in John Durham Peters & Peter Simonson, Eds. *Mass Communication and American Social Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 355.

I read it every week.

Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.

I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.

It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious.

Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me.

It occurs to me that I am America.

I am talking to myself again.<sup>198</sup>

In this section from the poem “America” Ginsberg portrays one element of the mass society through characterizing *Time* magazine as simultaneously problematic and unavoidable. He “slinks” past the watchful eye of *Time* Magazine on the corner newsstand, as if *Time* were some “big brother” always watching his movements, then later we find him in the basement of the public library – a nice blending of the traditionally thought of hidden space inside one of the most open and accessible public buildings available -- reading the pages filled with “seriousness.” Here we face “connection anxiety” characterized as a scene from daily life – the dual moment of recognizing dependence and desire for the content of these new media forms while at the same time being suspicious, distrustful and hateful. *Time* is characterized as being something desired but also something dangerous as the speaker “obsesses” over it but also worries that it is controlling our lives. The entire stanza is direct address at America, and ends with self-criticism, furthering the anxiety about the effects of mass mediation – not even the previously obvious distinctions between speaker and audience seem to hold steady.

Although the speaker warns about our “emotional life” being controlled by *Time* magazine, he also freely admits his constant examination of every issue. At the end of the stanza

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<sup>198</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).

we are mired in confusion, both in how to feel about *Time* magazine (and maybe dependence on mass media for information) as well as how to know whether we are to identify with the speaker, learn from his mistakes, or join the chastised audience of “America,” which is also the speaker.

While it is important to note particular aspects of the poem’s form and how it might be referring to or referencing other literary forms and traditions, in this study the focus is on crafting a rhetorical theory from these works, not a literary appraisal. The critic cannot be attentive to every aspect of the text. Any inclusion is an exclusion, ad infinitum. All the rhetorical critic can do is indicate how well the text identifies, conveys and speaks to the exigence that is chosen. In this case the poem highlights and brings forward the anxieties of dependence on mass mediated sources. The poem might also offer implicit critiques or ironic reads of other poetic styles, however the concern in this study is not poetic form, but rhetorical theory. Instead of limiting one’s criticism by attending to the type of discourse that the text purports to be, I agree with Charles Altieri’s assessment that poetics and rhetoric perform a return of the repressed elements of each other when they try to remain distinct. “Rhetoric has to worry about how we frame ends as well as how we negotiate agreement about them. And it has to preserve terms for honoring the sheer exemplary impact of distinctive eloquent performance.”<sup>199</sup> Rhetoric’s attempts to shore up its own unique value expose the repressed kernel of reliance on the other form. In rhetorical criticism, the critic can and should seek out these moments.

David Zarefsky points out somewhat unintentionally that rhetorical criticism is also about such returns in his comments on Herbert Wilhelms’s 1925 call for a criticism of rhetoric distinct from the literary:

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<sup>199</sup> Charles Altieri “Rhetoric and Poetics: How to Use the Inevitable Return of the Repressed” in Walter Jost & Wendy Olmsted, Eds. *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 491.

It seems unlikely that this is what Wichelns was trying to encourage. His concern, after all, was with criticism, not empirical measurement. Focusing criticism on effects meant that the questions critics were to ask were about the relationship between the text and its possible effects. What does the text reveal about the effects its author might have been seeking? How does the construction of the text invite certain reactions and discourage others? What frame of reference does the text assume and how does this compare with the frame attributed to the audience? What role might this specific text play in a more comprehensive campaign to modify attitudes or behavior? Who are the various possible audiences for the speech? These are examples of critical questions that relate to effects. They involve interpretation and judgment, not measurement. They are answerable not by empirical observation but by reasoned argument. The critic's task is to make claims on a reader's judgment and to support those claims by argument, and this is as true of rhetorical criticism as of any other kind.<sup>200</sup>

Here we have an attempt to argue for rhetorical criticism by effects, which is a very clear but somewhat limited view of rhetorical criticism. If it is only limited to the effect that it has on the audience, we can lose implications in the text such as relations to discourses that have come before it, are contemporaneous with it, or are implicitly drawn upon. I do agree with the idea that rhetorical criticism is an argument, but it should not be limited to merely effects that the audience embodies. Instead, the argument should be a construction of the importance of a reading of the text, which connects rhetorical criticism to hermeneutics.

In their essay calling for a re-assessment of the hermeneutic tradition and rhetoric, Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith argue that "from the hermeneutical situation originates the primordial function of rhetoric."<sup>201</sup> This primordial function, they write, is understanding. Rhetoric is the working out of understanding, as they trace from the hermeneutic tradition through life lived in language. "The development of understanding is how human beings work

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<sup>200</sup> David Zarefsky. "Reflections on Rhetorical Criticism," *Rhetoric Review*, 25.4 (2006):383-387, 384.

<sup>201</sup> Michael J. Hyde and Craig R. Smith "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen But Unobserved Relationship" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65.4 (December 1979): 347-363, 347.



out the linguistic possibilities that constitute and are projected in understanding.”<sup>202</sup> The role of rhetoric in relation to hermeneutic is to make meaning from this understanding. “Rhetoric’s ontological relationship with hermeneutics occurs when understanding becomes meaningful, when interpretation shows it ‘as something.’ This showing of understanding by interpretation, such that meaning is made known, is rhetoric in the purest sense; it is how rhetoric originates as a fundamental condition of human existence.”<sup>203</sup> If our ontological condition as humans is one of understanding things, then rhetoric is making those understandings known to others and ourselves.

If this understanding of the hermeneutic and rhetoric is combined with the understanding of exigence and rhetoric that I argued earlier, a sense of the function of criticism can be established. Criticism can be seen as advocacy of meanings from within a text based upon the understanding of the text. This activity can be extended quite far – as Burke would have it to all living things – but rhetorical criticism has a more narrow focus. Rhetorical criticism is the passing of judgement on this meaning making, not just effect-iveness as Zarefsky indicates, but qualitative judgment as well. This is what Edwin Black is getting at when he argues, “The implied author of a discourse is a persona that figures importantly in rhetorical transactions. What equally well solicits our attention is that there is a second persona also implied by a discourse, and that persona is an implied auditor.”<sup>204</sup> Black accepts that his observation is not new, but argues its implications for criticism are vital. Instead of arguing that texts are crafted for particular, given audiences, Black argues that the meanings within a text craft and create the

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<sup>202</sup> Hyde and Smith, “Hermeneutics and Rhetoric,” 351.

<sup>203</sup> Hyde and Smith, “Hermeneutics and Rhetoric,” 354.

<sup>204</sup> Edwin Black “The Second Persona,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56.2 (April 1970): 109-119, 111.

ideologies and positions held by the implied auditors. This “second persona” of a text allows a critic to judge the text on a moral level by arguing what sort of politics follow from that sort of meaning making. “The critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become. What the critic can find projected by the discourse is the image of a man, and though that man may never find actual embodiment, it is still a man that the image is of. This condition makes moral judgment possible, and it is at this point in the process of criticism that it can illuminatingly be rendered.”<sup>205</sup> What Black seeks is rhetorical criticism that can be used to judge the value of potential interpretations that could be made from the text.

Using this idea of criticism, one can expose the implicit theories about who or what the rhetoric pushes the auditor (or reader) to be. Once that can be identified, then I believe a theory of rhetoric can be extrapolated from it. This is not a universal claim about criticism, but more a method for studying the beat rhetoric. Some of the Ginsberg poem that I have been discussing in this chapter can be read through my understanding of criticism to get a sense of what I will do in future chapters.

Ginsberg produced a lot of prose in the form of essays that specifically reference the exigence of mass media. Ginsberg is much more up front with his appreciation of the mass society: “Suppression of sensory awareness, alteration of ratio of sense, stereotyping of conscious awareness in language formulae, homogenizing of communal imagery via mass-media, creation of mass hallucinations (headlines) are present condition of megalopolis.”<sup>206</sup> Clearly this is more in line with the sort of “knee jerk” criticism of mass media that we might

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<sup>205</sup> Black, “The Second Persona,” 113.

<sup>206</sup> Allen Ginsberg *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995*, ed. Bill Morgan (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 49.

expect from a “beat.” What I will show in more detail in the chapter on Ginsberg is that his mass media sensibility roots the problem with massification within the media’s relationship to language. That is, Ginsberg critiques the mass media for limiting discursive options. This is a critique of the rhetoric of mass media, which Ginsberg responds to with his own poetic-rhetoric, as can be seen in the stanza discussed above. The poem and the essay both, through a mixed combination of style, and oddly combined concepts seem to push the reader not so much toward a particular political position, but a re-evaluation of political positions that are available. Ginsberg and Kerouac were questioning not the position people took about issues such as mass culture, but instead how those positions were formed. They brought into question the manner in which people judged these issues.

In order to read the beats as rhetorical theorists, an appreciation for some of their rhetorical environment should be established. The beats were writing in a complex period which hosted a huge number of discursive trajectories, from civil rights to mass media, and from consumer society to international nuclear politics. I don’t propose or even suggest that I will be comprehensively examining all of these lines. What I will examine are the lines that are closely related to what Kerouac and Ginsberg were writing about, as well as some of the lines of rhetoric influencing them from other avenues.

To begin I will examine the limits of the discursive, and what counts as discourse for the purposes of this study, as well as the terms communication and rhetoric. All three terms and their understanding have important implications for this study.

### 3.2 COMMUNICATION, DISCOURSE, RHETORIC

The terms communication, discourse, and rhetoric I seem to throw around quite loosely, but the meanings of these terms do have important distinctions. These distinctions are important because they provide a structure for the understanding of culture, society, and human motivation. It is my contention that Ginsberg and Kerouac wrote as an intervention into rhetoric and communication as they saw it in the 1950s.

The study of communication has a very long and complicated history that I do not propose to wrestle with here. Suffice it to say that for this study, I agree with scholars such as Amardo Rodriguez and John D. Peters who have argued that the study of communication suffers from an overemphasis on its “economy” and not other dimensions of human communication. According to Rodriguez, “human beings are assumed to have no spiritual striving that communication constitutes. We assume that the origins of communication reside in necessity and utility.”<sup>207</sup> Peters offers a study that traces the development of the term communication in order to provide a historical grounding of how communication has been seen as, “a problem of power, ethics and art.”<sup>208</sup> Like these scholars, the beats were interested in a richer, non-machnaistic model of communication.

John D. Peters avoids giving a specific definition of communication, labeling it instead as “a registry of modern longings,” that invokes a variety of meanings from religious (“communion” is “an act of receiving, not of sending; more precisely, it is to send by receiving”)

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<sup>207</sup> Amardo Rodriguez, "On the Spiritual Nature of Communication," in *Essays on Communication and Spirituality: Contributions to a New Discourse on Communication*, ed. Amardo Rodriguez (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 147.

<sup>208</sup> John Durham Peters *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 268.

to a “blanket term for the various modes of symbolic interaction.”<sup>209</sup> Peters believes that communication is a deep concept, bound with notions of membership, exchange, performance and representation. Careful not to dismiss all the variety of meanings lodged in the term’s etymology, Peters does narrow the scope of communication to speech and language: “Although I am skeptical that the word ‘communication’ can ever fully shake the ghosts of wordless contact, the term marks out a marvelous zone for inquiry: the natural history of our talkative species. Communication theory claims this zone.”<sup>210</sup> Peters limits his study to this understanding of communication in order to flesh out what communication can bring even though the possibility of knowing the mind of others perfectly is illusory.

Communication in the bulk of Peters’s study is not a panacea and not a complete enigma either. His central argument is that although communication is a perennial problem, it still sparks human thought and creativity:

“Communication,” whatever it might mean, is not a matter of improved wiring or freer self-disclosure but involves a permanent kink in the human condition. In this James was right. That we can never communicate like the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one. A sounder vision is of the felicitous impossibility of contact. Communication failure, again, does not mean we are lonely zombies searching for soul mates: it means we have new ways to related and to make worlds with each other. My emphasis on the debt that the dream of communication owes to ghosts and strange eros is intended as a corrective to a truism that is still very much alive: that the expansion of means leads to the expansion of minds.<sup>211</sup>

This “permanent kink” is something the beats were puzzling over in their work as well as in their concerns about how and why to produce their work. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg left copious notes on their ideas about process, problems, and approaches to the art of getting what you mean across to others. In this study the term communication will refer to this rich and

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<sup>209</sup> Peters, 7-8

<sup>210</sup> Peters, 9.

<sup>211</sup> Peters, 29.

complex term as laid out by Peters, especially the notion that the inability of perfect communication drives human beings to craft new ways of interacting and thinking together. I argue that these various modes of interacting and thinking, driven by the need to communicate, are rhetoric. Rhetoric, in its earliest definition from Aristotle is, “not to persuade, but to see the available means of persuasion in each case . . .”<sup>212</sup> Aristotle is discussing the function of rhetoric here, which is not exactly a definition, but more a description of what rhetoric does. In a modern interpretation of Aristotle’s functional assessment, Thomas J. Farrell offers that rhetoric, “is the art, the fine and useful art, of making things matter.”<sup>213</sup> Farrell is most interested in developing a system of commonplaces for discussing magnitude, but does offer a sense of rhetoric important to this study – “to challenge and change the normative content in any system of criteria is, of course, a distinctly rhetorical undertaking.”<sup>214</sup> Rhetoric is not only the art of effectively engaging other minds within the social and cultural interpretation of what communication is understood to be, but can challenge that normative sense of the communicative. To challenge what is found to be good human interaction and good persuasion is itself rhetorical. It could be argued that Peters’s book is a study of how these norms become challenged and changed.

The beats saw humans as communicative beings, fundamentally and centrally pressed to express their spirits and minds through expression, both performative and textual. Their concern in the 1950s was the evaporation of what they felt were necessary human means of interaction and communication. For John Lardas, this idea provides the exigence for the rise of the beats as a response to communicative corruption. “According to the Beats, the crises of America and self

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<sup>212</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36 (1355b).

<sup>213</sup> Thomas J. Farrell, “The Weight of Rhetoric: Studies in Cultural Delirium” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41 4 (2008): 467-487, 470.

<sup>214</sup> Farrell, “The Weight of Rhetoric,” 478.

had been initiated, in part, by a growing appetite for abstraction in expression and communication. They believed that language, the substance of reality, had been corrupted.”<sup>215</sup> The beats’ criticism of their period is coupled with an alternative method of language use. It should be made clear though that the Beats were not “doomsday” critics of mass media – on the contrary, some of it they directly participated in, making recordings of poetry readings, broadcasting readings on the radio, and marketing and publishing inexpensive paperback books of poetry and stories. Still, the beats were cautiously optimistic that if a more conservative and human focus was given to mass communication it had the potential to save humanity from self-destruction. Although not complete rejecters of the mass society, they participated only as a way of connecting with broader audiences.

They were also not “anything goes” spiritualists. Kerouac had a deep commitment to Catholicism, although he read his belief through an autodidactic Buddhism. Lardas is interested in tracking the beats’ spiritual roots and their understanding of spirituality. For him, Kerouac’s religious belief is an unstable mixture of spiritual understandings. “Kerouac’s religiosity was constant in focus yet unstable, complex, and even contradictory in mood and motivation. His interest in Buddhism was a continuation and rejection of his past beliefs, both Spenglerian and Catholic.”<sup>216</sup> Ginsberg remained somewhat loyal to his Jewish roots throughout his spiritual explorations of the 1960s, although his spiritual explorations went well beyond Kerouac’s.<sup>217</sup> The influences and motives of the beats defy a simple, straightforward explanation.

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<sup>215</sup> Lardas, John. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 138.

<sup>216</sup> Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse*, 245.

<sup>217</sup> See Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 194-198 and Barry Miles *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 174-176 for more detail on Ginsberg’s early studies of Buddhism.

The complexity of explaining the Beats rests partially on the fact that they were deeply immersed in their own complicated questions. The Beats were interested in literature, art, and poetry but also politics, issues of class, sexuality and gender. The beats saturated themselves with philosophy and literature of all kinds. One way that rhetoricians can seek to understand connections between all of these different interests is to examine them using the concept of ideology. Ideology, as understood by rhetoricians specifically, is very helpful in providing a place upon which the beats' ideas about rhetoric and communication can be explicated.

What is ideology? This question has been examined from literary and philosophical perspectives by several influential theorists.<sup>218</sup> In this study, I limit my interest in ideology only to those most communicative and rhetorical in scope. Michael Calvin McGee noted that most scholars of rhetoric use ideology, "innocently, almost as a synonym for 'doctrine' or 'dogma' in political organizations; others use the word in a hypostatized sense that obscures or flatly denies the fundamental connection between the concept and descriptions of mass consciousness."<sup>219</sup> McGee sought a deeper theoretical connection between the insights into human activity garnered by rhetoric and the explanatory power of ideology in human history. He defines ideology as, "a political language, preserved in rhetorical documents, with the capacity to dictate decision and control public belief and behavior."<sup>220</sup> He saw the suggestion that "mythical" or "symbolic" articulations of the origins of human behavior as an alternative to ideology a mistake. "Errors arise when one conceives 'myth' and 'ideology' to be contraries, alternative and incompatible

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<sup>218</sup> See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Study of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1968); Louis Althusser, *Early Writings: The Spectre of Hegel* (New York: Verso, 1997) as well as *For Marx* (New York: Verso, 2005); Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>219</sup> Michael Calvin McGee, "The 'Ideograph': Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66, no. 1 (1980): 1.

<sup>220</sup> McGee, 5.



theoretical descriptions of the same phenomenon. . . I do believe, however, that each of us has erred to the extent that we have conceived the rubrics of symbolism as an *alternative* rather than *supplemental* description of political consciousness.”<sup>221</sup> What he was eager to see was a mix of both perspectives, which would bring strength not to any particular politics within a theory, but to the explanatory power of both rhetoric and ideology. To this end, McGee proposes a rhetorical sense of political truth and political falsity: “The falsity of an ideology is specifically rhetorical, for the illusion of truth and falsity with regard to normative commitments is the product of persuasion.”<sup>222</sup>

What I gain from McGee is an understanding of rhetoric and ideology as intertwined. Ideology and rhetoric are nearly inseparable in their function. The ideograph is an operationalized unit of ideology for the purposes of doing larger rhetorical criticism of society and cultural norms. In this study, McGee’s theory of the ideograph will be used to identify key moments in Beat texts that use the ideographic moment to argue for alternative modes of being. The beats, seen through ideographic moments, can be seen as rhetorically creating sites of contested meaning in order to bring attention to the problems they perceive in contemporary communication.

McGee’s blending of ideology and rhetoric in the ideograph is useful, but in order to engage the rhetorical and ideological situation in 1950s America further theoretical investigation is required. Davi Johnson builds upon McGee’s idea with special concern for the materialist aspects of the ideograph. “[C]ritical applications of the ideograph have tended to privilege the historical, or diachronic, aspects of the concept, in some cases neglecting its material dimensions

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<sup>221</sup> McGee, 3.

<sup>222</sup> McGee, 4.

almost entirely.”<sup>223</sup> Johnson seeks to reconceptualize the ideograph around the idea of the meme, or “surface” materiality, which broadens the analytic unit to be inclusive of more than representational language. “[T]he meme is both a supplement and an alternative to McGee’s ideograph. . . . critical deployment of the ideograph exhibits an *historical* trajectory that is thrown into bold relief when contrasted with the *geographical* meme.”<sup>224</sup> The meme includes “flat” practices, as Johnson argues, that don’t engage in the rich symbolic depth that the ideograph gravitates toward. I blend both concepts in my method because the beats were very conscious of the material. Kerouac highlights the geography of America in his writings, often using materiality or the trace of material practices around him in order to develop his work. Allen Ginsberg relies heavily on the geography and materiality of the human body, connecting the flatness of the “meme” with the richness of “ideographic” articulation.

I would like to situate these rhetorical understandings of ideology with Sacvan Bercovitch, who offers a unique formulation of the relationship between rhetoric and ideology within the United States. Bercovitch is interested in the particular operation of ideology, language, and literature in the United States. This is not toward exceptionalist ends per se, but more toward the ends of how and why exceptionalism rises as a discursive form in America.

For Bercovitch, the primary motivating force in human affairs is ideology. For him, ideology serves as the terrain in which culture can be best understood:

In its usual meaning ideology precludes dialogue. It implies a programmatic exclusivism, a closed system developed in opposition to alternative explanations and militantly committed to its particular set of truths. To deny the links between ideology and art is one such form of exclusivity. To see the problematic inescapability of those links may enable

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<sup>223</sup> Johnson, Davi. “Mapping the Meme: A Geographical Approach to Materialist Rhetorical Criticism.” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4, 1 (March 2007): 27-50,33.

<sup>224</sup> Johnson, “Mapping the Meme,” 28

us to use ideological analysis to precisely the opposite ends: to turn the current barbarism of critical debate into a dialogue about common conflicts.<sup>225</sup>

Instead of ideology being an ending point, or the thing uncovered by critical work, Bercovitch seeks to make ideology the starting point for understanding human conflicts and motives. This, as we shall see, puts Bercovitch in conversation with Kenneth Burke, and also with the Beats. The common link is rhetoric – as Bercovitch explains, the way ideology holds its key place of exclusivity is through defining the alternatives out via persuasive framing:

Ideology, we have seen, arises out of historical circumstances, and then re-presents these, rhetorically and conceptually, as though they were natural, universal, inevitable, and right; as though the ideals promulgated by a certain group or class . . . were not the product of history but the expression of self-evident truth. The act of representation thus serves to consecrate a set of cultural limitations, to recast a certain society as Society, a certain way of life as utopia in process.<sup>226</sup>

Ideology and rhetoric go hand-in-hand. For it is framing that leads to the success of any ideology. Ideology must portray itself as fact, truth, or nature or else it allows for a space of reconsideration. Ideology is at its best when it does not appear to be ideology. Ideology, similarly, is never concerned with itself, but perhaps concerned with its negative – for the negating idea is most often exposed as ideology, something unnatural or counter to the “natural” or “true” system of belief that the dominant ideology frames itself as.

Bercovitch argues here that the currency of ideology is the symbolic – that is, the realm of the standing in for, standing up for, or standing in place of. A rhetorical understanding of the “symbolic,” provided by Kenneth Burke, defines it as a key aspect of the rhetorical: “For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It [rhetoric] is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the

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<sup>225</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 376.

<sup>226</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rights of Assent*, 356.

use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.”<sup>227</sup> Here we see Burke and Bercovitch fitting nicely together – ideology requires cooperation for its continuation, and to achieve cooperation it relies on symbols, which in turn, require rhetoric in order to provide reasons and motives for human adherence. The rhetorical critic identifies and explicates these connections by attending to both ideographs and memes as they emerge in practices and texts.

Bercovitch argues that ideology, as he defines it would be at the heart of the symbol-using-animal, as Burke calls human beings:

In each case, freedom is a function of consensus. And lest I seem to have exempted myself from that process, I would like to declare the principles of my own ideological dependence. I hold these truths to be self-evident: that there is no escape from ideology; that so long as human beings remain political animals they will always be bounded in some degree by consensus; and that so long as they are symbol-making animals they will always seek to persuade themselves and others that in some sense, by relative measure if not absolutely, the terms of *their* symbology are objective and true.<sup>228</sup>

Rhetoric works to maintain ideology by framing it as natural, good and true. Rhetoric also works to expose ideology as “mere,” and tout other ideologies in its place. In the United States, the symbol “America” is the key rhetorical battleground around which the human drama of persuasion, debunking, agreeing and believing occurs. The key to understanding the function of rhetoric in the United States is “America,” as symbol and rhetorical trope. Serving as both, “America” provides both opportunities and restrictions upon the rhetor.

In the previous quotation Bercovitch points to literary and poetic texts as the exemplars of ideological thought and action. In America, according to Bercovitch, traditional hermeneutics

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<sup>227</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 43.

<sup>228</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 356.

were “inverted,” providing a rhetoric that used history as material for the interpretation of spiritual desires.<sup>229</sup> This allowed for an interpretation of the American identity that could be adapted to the events of the moment in order to continue to provide a vision of the American individual as prophetic and leading the world into spiritual improvement. These connections for Bercovitch connect Puritan governance with Emerson’s more “prophetic” view of the American:

Colonial hermeneutics bridges the considerable gap between christinic auto-machia and Promethean self-creation in several important ways. It secularizes the scope and direction of the auto-machia; it recasts self-creation in terms of exegesis; and it obviates the traditional dialectic between secular and sacred selfhood by fusing both in the framework of auto-American-biography. For both Edwards and Emerson, the image of the New World invests the regenerate perceiver with an aura of ascendant millennial splendor.<sup>230</sup>

For Bercovitch, the role of hermeneutics becomes, for Americans, the methods of reading their geography, place, and existence in order to make themselves the agents of spiritual global improvement. This is a connection throughout American history since colonization. This rhetoric is deployed through the model of the American jeremiad – a “political sermon” that “inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause.”<sup>231</sup> The jeremiad, as a discursive form, not necessarily a specific format, became the groundwork for a national mission in place of a national identity. “The American Puritan jeremiad was the ritual of a culture on an errand – which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process.”<sup>232</sup> This initial model of the jeremiad is not the one that Bercovitch runs with through his entire analysis. He argues instead that it serves as the prototypical social ritual performed to make sense of situations for Americans. The jeremiad

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<sup>229</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 112.

<sup>230</sup> Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins*, 157.

<sup>231</sup> Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 6-7.

<sup>232</sup> Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 23.

serves as a standard rhetorical model which itself transforms in order to keep articulating the national mission of America in the world: “It is a long way . . . to the flowering of civil religion in America, and we shall see that the jeremiad was considerably affected by a variety of social and intellectual changes. But through all change the persistence of the rhetoric attests to an astonishing cultural hegemony, one that the rhetoric itself reflected and shaped.”<sup>233</sup> The rhetoric adapts itself to the situation to adapt the “mission” to the situation. This is the way Bercovitch sees rhetoric – as the maintainer of cultural beliefs and a cultural practice in itself.

In Bercovitch’s sense of America, the contradictions in the meaning of “America” co-exist as a part of the normal operation of ideology. If the superstructure of ideology is used to support contradictory ideas, why doesn’t the entire system fall apart? The answer is in the special status of American ideology, an ideology constructed upon and around consensus to argue:

*The American ideology suggests something almost allegorical – some abstract corporate monolith – whereas in fact the American ideology reflects a particular set of interests, the power structures and conceptual forms of liberal society in the United States, as these evolved through three centuries of conflict, upheaval, transformation, and discontinuity. So considered, ‘America’ is not an overarching synthesis, *e pluribus Unum*, but a rhetorical battleground, a symbol that has been made to stand for diverse and sometimes mutually contradictory outlooks.*<sup>234</sup>

The role of “America,” as ideograph/meme in American discourse is as a middle manager for rhetorical struggle. The fight over the good is mediated in American discourse by a solid grounding in what would be good for “America.” In Bercovitch’s analysis, the ideology is not universal, but there is consensus among struggling ideologies as to what terms are central to the conflict.

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<sup>233</sup> Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, 28.

<sup>234</sup> Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 355.

Even though the American ideology is one that functions counter intuitively, Bercovitch makes sure to point out that even with the entire ideological struggle over the key terms supporting the ideals of “America,” the consensus-based model of ideology has been very effective: “I would urge that, in spite of all that diversity and conflict, the American ideology has achieved a hegemony unequalled elsewhere in the modern world. For all its manifold contradictions, it is an example par excellence of the successful interaction between restriction and release.”<sup>235</sup>

Restriction and release, for Bercovitch, are counterparts in the function of ideology. The American consensus model works so well, he argues because there is discursive play between key words. No matter if a text is conservative or radical, the consensus model of ideology means that both sides will use the same terminology at the root of the difference. Both sides, for example, will claim to be returning to “America’s roots” which have been abandoned by the opposition side. Within this frame, even the most radical positions wind up conserving the limits of the American ideology – for they are always going to value freedom, democracy or other central terms for understanding “America.”

It is within this rhetorical conception of ideology that the beats should be understood. The beats are writing and working within a rhetorical environment that will terministically limit their project. Although my argument will be that the beats are struggling to reorient the way terms function on the rhetorical level – that is, how do we best communicate with one another – the beats have to “beat back” the overwhelming rhetorical sediment of the culture of consensus, where even uniquely created terms such as “beat generation” will be read within the consensus ideology.

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<sup>235</sup> Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 355-6.

Compare Norman Podhoretz's understanding of beat to Kerouac's. Podhoretz (1958) argues, "Being for or against what the Beat Generation stands for has to do with denying that incoherence is superior to knowledge; that the exercise of mind and discrimination is a form of death. It has to do with fighting the notion that sordid acts of violence are justifiable so long as they are committed in the name of 'instinct.' It even has to do with fighting the poisonous glorification of the adolescent in American popular culture. It has to do, in other words, with being for or against intelligence itself."<sup>236</sup> Podhoretz lines up the beat generation values with the larger and more consensus conflict of the role of intellectuals in the United States. Russell Jacoby describes the period as replacing the idea of a rebellious youth with one of the "delinquent" – "The persistent mourning for the passing of rebellious youth has to be set against its opposite, the national mobilization against juvenile delinquency. For the public of the 1950s, 'juvenile delinquency' supplanted a memory of a rebellious, even unconventional youth. A thousand conferences, agencies, committees, and newspapers alerted the country to the danger. Juvenile delinquency was the only rebellion around, and it had to be stopped."<sup>237</sup> By associating the beats with juvenile delinquency, Podhoretz is able to rhetorically constrain what the beats are up to within the accepted categories of the controversial. To contrast, here is Kerouac explaining what it means to be beat: "Maybe since I'm supposed to be the spokesman of the Beat Generation (I *am* the originator of the term, and around it the term and the generation have taken shape) it should be pointed out that all this 'Beat' guts therefore goes back to my ancestors who were Bretons who were the most independent group of nobles in all old Europe and kept fighting

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<sup>236</sup> Norman Podhoretz, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" in Matt Theado, Ed. *The Beats: A Literary Reference* (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2001), 81.

<sup>237</sup> Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 62-3.



Latin France to the last wall . . . Breton, Wiking, Irishman, Indian, madboy, it doesn't make any difference, there is no doubt about the Beat Generation, at least the core of it, being a swinging group of new American men intent on joy . . . Irresponsibility? Who wouldn't help a dying man on an empty road?"<sup>238</sup> Here Kerouac anchors beat in both family and national identity, a far cry from delinquent juvenile behavior or anti-intellectualism. Kerouac tries to connect his definition to the valuable concepts of family heritage, pride in national origin, and the somewhat contradictory yet acceptable "blending" of these identities in to American-ness. Perhaps the Podhoretz definition could be contrasted with Kerouac's as being a debate about what responsible behavior means for Americans. Either way, Kerouac attempts to push through the consensus toward a recognition of a seeming selfless joy at the same moment of pride in national origin can become "flattened" into a more comfortable consensus debate about intellectualism by Podhoretz.

As an example of this not related specifically to the beats, Bercovich analyzes some of Ralph Waldo Emerson's work from the perspective of consensus ideology:

The appeal of Emersonian dissent lies in an extraordinary conjunction of forces: its capacity to absorb the radical communitarian visions it renounces, and its capacity to be nourished by the liberal structures it resists. It demonstrates the capacities of culture to shape the subversive in its own image, and thereby, *within limits*, to be shaped in turn by the radicalism it seeks to contain.<sup>239</sup>

Emerson's rhetoric functions within the American ideology for Bercovitch because it is flexible. The pliability of his call, since it is rooted in the consensus-driven American ideological discourse, allows some play to more radical notions – such as communitarianism – but only if they remain within the confines of the American consensus ideology. Scholars such as Richard

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<sup>238</sup> Kerouac, "Origins," 32.

<sup>239</sup> Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 348.

Teichgraeber see Bercovitch's view as "reductive" even though it attempts to re-read Emerson as a transformative thinker.<sup>240</sup> Teichgraeber argues that Emerson, as well as Henry David Thoreau can and should be read as "connected critics." Emerson, in Teichgraeber's view had "a conscious determination to locate his ideals within social practices and institutions he criticized and then to persuade his contemporaries to recognize those same ideals as their own."<sup>241</sup> Thoreau is a "connected critic" through a careful and clever strategy of parody and stylized self-inclusion in his own criticism.<sup>242</sup> Both understandings rely on Michael Walzer's argument that social criticism as a practice must necessarily be connected to the society from which it emanates.<sup>243</sup> Kerouac's inclusion of his family history as well as his popular culture references and personal anecdotes in his defense of beat point to a read of Kerouac as a similar sort of connected critic, with the exception that instead of criticizing social issues, his target is rhetorical practices.

I've said much about American ideology being driven by consensus. How radical, individualistic notions of the American subject could be motivated at the root by an implicit decision as to what is central and important seems paradoxical. Here Bercovitch clarifies how consensus works to raise the fences of the American ideology. And, there should be little surprise that rhetoric is involved:

Hence the importance of the *rhetoric* of consensus. It served then, as always, to blur such discrepancies. But in doing so, the rhetoric provides us with a map of social reality that is no less accurate in its way than any quantitative chart. It locates the sources of social revitalization and integration. It helps explain how the majority of people kept the faith despite their day-by-day experiences. It reminds us that although the concept of hegemony involves the dialectics of change, the directions of change

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<sup>240</sup> Teichgraeber, Richard. *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market*. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5-6.

<sup>241</sup> Teichgraeber, 5.

<sup>242</sup> Teichgraeber, 57.

<sup>243</sup> Walzer, Michael. *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 5-6.

are in turn crucially affected by the terms of hegemonic constraint. And in this case the effect was demonstrable in the way that the rhetoric of consensus molded what was to all appearances the most heterogeneous 'people' in the world into the most monolithic of modern cultures.<sup>244</sup>

Bercovitch here taps into the idea that the study of rhetoric, both formal and daily practiced discourse can yield a map of the ideological constraints and permissions available in society. He suggests a complex model of ideology and rhetoric as a sort of feedback loop: Ideology sets the limitations and the constraints of permissible action within the society. Rhetoric frames these limits persuasively as natural, good, or even paradoxically as revolution, revolt or escape. Rhetoric supplies the necessary pliancy within the grip of ideology that prevents the complete turnover of the ideology of the society on a daily basis. For without it, the cracks in the ideological regime would provide stark inconsistencies, contradictions and impossible limitations that would prohibit people from getting on with their day. In short, this would lead to the destabilization of society and the inability for community to form at all.

To extend on the power of rhetorical framing to keep order and stability within the American ideological system, Bercovitch turns to "revolution" for a clear example of the extent of the power of rhetoric:

I refer to the uneasy association in the United States of revolution with America. Americans honor their Revolution as the shaping influence in their history, yet they shrink from accepting revolution as a defining American characteristic; or more typically, they accept it by contrasting the American Revolution with other modern revolutions. It is as though the term 'American' altered the very meaning of revolution, while the term 'revolution' conferred some special honorific status on the meaning of America.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 47.

<sup>245</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 170.

The challenge, therefore, facing those who wish to challenge dominant ideology or offer new modes of engagement between people and the material reality comes from the unique position of rhetoric and ideology in America. Bercovitch argues later in his book that the key move for radicals is to dispense with having the debate or discussion come down to consensus-driven American values. In his example of early feminist argument, Bercovitch points out that it is nearly impossible to bend the key terms away from the superstructure of ideology no matter how the argument is offered:

Probably some of these feminists believed that they were merely *using* patriotism, manipulating the rhetoric of the republic for ulterior radical ends. But if so, they were miscalculating the relation of ends and means. In effect (as events proved), they were conforming to a ritual of consensus that defused all issues in debate by restricting the debate itself, symbolically *and substantively*, to the meaning of America.<sup>246</sup>

Restricting the debate via the choice of substantive terms to those that clarify and are clarified by the term “America” is a failing proposition for radical change in the ideology. This is a problem we will see when it comes to what the Beats offer. However, the Beats come up in what is quite literally a discursive stew of rhetorical commonplaces in the discursive stew of explanations and accounts in the post-war U.S. The importance of the ideograph/meme “America” was the subject of several influential monographs.<sup>247</sup> This rise of large amounts of justification, grounding, and explanation of the role of America is a sign of the ideological crisis that appeared post-war.

This is the point where Bercovitch’s model of American consensus ideology breaks down – the point where the ideology itself is in the state of near complete refiguring. David Harlan

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<sup>246</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 49.

<sup>247</sup> See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960) and David Potter, *People of Plenty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

argues that Bercovitch's entire approach of rhetorical typology to explain American history flattens and removes any relief from the map of the conflicts that make and shape America: "Bercovitch does not think of American culture or American texts as pluralistic, many-layered, multi-vocal conversations; nor does he think of them as overpopulated with a multiplicity of voices, past and present; it does not occur to him that in their hidden spaces and interstices he might find traces of other books, other speakers, other voices."<sup>248</sup> Harlan's critique does point out that Bercovitch's theory can be seen as too closed a circuit. However what Harlan misses in Bercovitch's argument that the jeremiad is a rhetorical typology – not a template. The typology serves as unavoidable influence for American discourse since the Puritans – the hermeneutic reversal of Bercovitch offers an argument as to why America's most radical writers were never able to spur the revolutionary sentiment that they seemed to advance:

None of our classic writers conceived of imaginative perspectives radically other than those implicit in the vision of America. Their works are characterized by an unmediated relation between the facts of American life and the ideals of liberal free enterprise. Confronted with the inadequacies of their society, they turned for solace and inspiration to its social ideals. It was not that they lacked radical energies, but that they had invested these in a vision which reinforced (because it emanated from) the values of their culture. Their quarrels with America took the form of intracultural dialogues – as in Thoreau's *Walden*, where 'the only true America' beckons to us as a timeless images of the country's time-bound ideals (minimal government, extravagant economics, endless mobility, unlimited self-aggrandizement); or in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which offers the highest Romantic tribute, the process of poetic self-creation, as text-proof of America's errand into the future. In these and other key instances, the autonomous act that might have posed fundamental alternatives, imaginative or actual, became instead a mimesis of cultural norms.<sup>249</sup>

The strategy of trying to "re-claim" America from an America that has gone off the rails, so to speak, is a failing strategy in Bercovitch's mind. The reason why, as he elucidates in this

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<sup>248</sup> David Harlan. "A People Blinded from Birth: American History According to Sacvan Bercovitch," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 3 (Dec 1991):949-971,965

<sup>249</sup> Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 59.

paragraph, is because America's great writers inescapably end up having an intracultural dialogue – that is, the value of the culture and the ideology of the American culture at large is never a question that can come to the table. Instead, only surface ideological conflicts come under examination, and one can never work around the pervasive rhetorical typology Bercovitch identifies.

What I turn to now is to examine the 1950s as a point where there is much discourse produced about “America,” justifying and explaining the place of the country by using the ideograph. Bercovitch's study only covers American rhetoric and ideology up to the Civil War. Although I don't propose to make such an investigation in this study, perhaps the 1860s might have served as another moment where Americans and America as an ideology needed re-framing and re-examination. The post-war crisis of American rhetoric, identity and ideology was the moment where two of the founding members of the Beat Generation articulated their ideological vision for America, Americans and humanity within the technological, cultural and social whirlwind that the United States found itself in after 1945.

### **3.3 THE DISCURSIVE STEW OF THE 1950S**

In the 1950s, particular historical and material conditions arose that offered rhetorical exigency.

As Gerald Nicosia frames the situation from the perspective of Jack Kerouac:

On a ride to Grand Island, Nebraska, listening to an old rancher talk about men who rode the rails during the Depression, Jack noted that his own life was falling in with another American tradition, that of the man who moves on out of necessity, when living conditions in one place become unbearable, or when the land itself can no longer support life. The rancher told him about the great dustclouds that choked the Great Plains during

the thirties. Jack's generation was fleeing a different cloud, made of atomic particles and shaped like a mushroom – a cloud so powerful that even the *threat* of it was stifling.<sup>250</sup>

The fear and threat posed by the presence of the atomic bomb was a very extant and real problem to the minds of post-war Americans.<sup>251</sup> According to Margot Henriksen, the presence of the atomic bomb was fundamental to the re-thinking of America's position in the world:

What the expansion of the atomic program did assure to Americans was the changed nature of America's place in the world. Slowly and somewhat grudgingly, Americans absorbed the first lesson of their atomic age education: this was a very different world from that which had existed before the war, a world in which preparation for peace became indistinguishable from preparation for war, a world in which atomic bombs were considered 'weapons for peace.'<sup>252</sup>

Atomic weapons permeated many facets of American discourse, and discourse about America. The power of the atomic bomb made America both great and threatening. Atomic weapons were not just for anyone, they required containment; likewise one's discourse about America had to be "contained" as well. "The battle waged internally by so many during the cold war – between spiritual and forensic testimony, public and personal loyalty, recounting and recanting, speech and silence – created a test of character. No matter how complex and self contradictory the social text, the individual was supposed to read it and choose correctly."<sup>253</sup> The scene was one of

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<sup>250</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*. (New York: Grove Press, 1983).

<sup>251</sup> For more on the influence of atomic weapons and culture, see Paul S. Boyer *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) and Alison M. Scott and Christopher D. Geist, eds. *The Writing on the Cloud: American Culture Confronts the Atomic Bomb* (New York: The University Press of America, 1997).

<sup>252</sup> Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 15-16.

<sup>253</sup> Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 84.

complex social texts that required careful hermeneutic practices in order to properly place oneself within the culture.

The atomic bomb could be seen as the ultimate of these contradictory rhetorical commonplaces. The bomb ensured peace by guaranteeing ultimate destruction. The building of extremely efficient weapons of death was seen as only appropriate to preserve American purity and goodness against external threats:

The chaos of a world threatened by disease, poverty, and an expanding Soviet sphere of influence impelled America toward interventionism and military preparedness. The postwar Soviet Union with its vast army of soldiers, its large territorial gains and potential for further conquest, and its alien ideology and totalitarian form of government stood as the only power that could knock America off its perch at the top of the world, the only power that could seriously threaten America's vision of a postwar world shaped in its own image. A war-torn world swarming with displaced and destitute persons was perceived as vulnerable to the revolutionary doctrines of Soviet communism, and such vulnerability imperiled America: the only way to preserve the security of a free and pure American way of life in an era of lost geographic isolation was to create a world amenable to American ideologies.<sup>254</sup>

This environment required rhetorical finesse to craft a way of speaking, framing and understanding America. People faced a situation where it was necessary to praise the destructive as the thing that would prevent devastation. As Henriksen explains, the Truman administration was quite good at developing the foundations of this rhetoric:

Truman crafted an American conception of the cold war world which precluded any other response than the one he offered: a limitless American defense of freedom whenever and wherever it was threatened by the enslaving forces of communism. Truman spoke gloomily of a world frighteningly and dangerously but clearly divided between the purveyors of good and evil, light and darkness. Conjuring all the drama of this universal struggle, Truman made it imperative that every nation 'choose between alternative ways of life.' . . . Having cleaved the world into diametrically opposed camps, Truman committed America to a policy of containing the communist camp and defending the democratic camp against contamination; in this world there was no middle ground, and Truman reiterated his pledge to brook no compromise with evil.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Henriksen, 16.

<sup>255</sup> Henriksen, 17.



No overarching description of the era will suffice to account for how the atom bomb was read. Some saw it as a great evil, others as a great protector. The only suitable conclusion is to identify the atom bomb as a central exigence for the rhetoric of the period. As an exigence, atomic weapons served as a point of contest in the development of an appropriate vocabulary for the period. According to Burke, “Men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality.”<sup>256</sup> As a natural element of this, a representative anecdote is present from which the meanings of the vocabulary stem or derive. Burke believed that if you can find the representative anecdote, you can critique the entire vocabulary. “If the originating anecdote is not representative, a vocabulary developed in strict conformity with it will not be representative. This embarrassment is usually avoided in practice by a break in the conformity at some crucial point; this means in effect that the vocabulary ceases to have the basis which is claimed for it.”<sup>257</sup> This critique targets the amount of the deflection and whether or not that deflection leaves out too much for the vocabulary to remain useful.

The rhetoric of daily life represented one of these breaks. Youth were trained from an early age to be excellent consumers. “The culture had accommodated itself (although not without guilt) to luxurious affluence and to the corporation. Public school had also achieved this accommodation. It became less and less the place to train the mind, and ever more the place

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<sup>256</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 59.

<sup>257</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 59.

where the culture's managers and consumers were prepared."<sup>258</sup> However, the schools did not work in isolation, nor were they homogenous in what they presented – all aspects of society functioned to create a norm of consumerist behavior among youth:

The values that would turn most of these youths into highly manageable consumers, of course, did not come purely from school. Rather, the educational system was one of several mainlines for this ethos. Other contributing institutions included the family and the mass media (particularly the new marketing-obsessed medium, TV). Church, too, grew in its shallow materialism in this period . . . All these institutions were the membranes passing cultural messages to the young. The main currents of witch hunting, of nuclear terrorism, corporate bureaucracy, sexual doublethink, surrender to authority, and loss of individualism all vibrated through these means.<sup>259</sup>

The representative anecdote of American individuality lost its stability in the face of the move to mass consumer materialism pushed by all sectors of the society. The loss of individualism as “individualistic” is a contradiction that the beats attempt to expose about this representative anecdote. The merging of all discourses of the society toward this sort of stability was seen as a problem for the beats.

One of the larger changes, as hinted at earlier was the television. “One of the most powerful of all postwar entertainments – the television set – sat squarely in people's living rooms. By the 1950s, televisions were selling at a rate of over five million a year.”<sup>260</sup> Television was not just a new way of receiving old entertainment – it was a participant in re-writing the American post-war life. Television helped persuade Americans as to what was normal and acceptable in the post-war economy:

As historian George Lipsitz noted, situation comedies in the postwar years, especially those aimed at ethnic or working-class audiences, eased the transition from a depression-

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<sup>258</sup> Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 273.

<sup>259</sup> Miller & Nowak, 275.

<sup>260</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 172.

bred psychology of scarcity to an acceptance of spending. In shows like “I Remember Mama,” or “The Honeymooners,” the dramas of daily life revolved around the purchase of consumer goods for the home. Characters in these programs urged each other to buy on installment, “live above your means – the American way,” and spend rather than save.<sup>261</sup>

Although many scholars were addressing the concerns of mass culture, television, and the rise of consumer society, I will examine the idea of mass culture briefly. “Mass Culture” as a term is contemporaneous with the beats, as they were writing in an environment where the term had taken on some new meanings. As one scholar has noted, there is an exigence around the term “Mass Culture” as an object of study:

Until the 1930s, there were few instances where the words ‘mass’ and ‘culture’ were used together in English. The phrase ‘mass culture’ became part of common parlance only after World War II, and then, chiefly with a negative connotation. In such a brief span, ‘mass culture’ had come to designate a system of popular leisure practices and arts that were considered wholly new to urban and industrial society. And the system was believed to be almost synonymous with social corruption and decay.<sup>262</sup>

The appearance of “Mass Culture” as a phrase is not new, but the appearance of it in the daily language as a negative is a notable shift. What matters is not the actual, historical accounting of the history of the phrase, but rather the transformation of something innocuous, via rhetoric, to something dangerous. The motives of why people were engaged in such practices needed accounting – the new practices of consumption and engagement of arts and information required a rhetorical bent that brought it under and into the larger discussions of what America and Americans’ value to the world would be in the post-war era. Part of that accounting happened in the altering meaning of “mass culture.” The phrase can be read as a trope for what unhealthy communication looks like, but implies a normative sense of healthy communication through it.

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<sup>261</sup> May, 172.

<sup>262</sup> Paul R. Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2.

Since it is my argument that the beats are pushing for a rhetoric that advances healthy communication, they can be considered as participating in the mass culture discussion.

For rhetoricians, the shift of meaning in a phrase indicates a need to persuade, account, and normalize practices that defy contemporary explanation – that is, the frame, language and usual motives for human behavior seemed inadequate to make a persuasive account for why people were behaving in this manner. For Burke, this shift can indicate a problem with the logic of the representative anecdote upon which the larger economies of the language are based.

Mass Culture as a rhetorical turn in the consensus-driven American ideological stew of the 1950s should help explicate the rhetorical environment that produced the Beats, as well as the way they were received, discussed, admired, and criticized. As I examine their ideas, I may gesture toward linkages that will be seen in later chapters when I critique Kerouac's and Ginsberg's work from the assumption that they can be read as rhetorical theorists.

### **3.4 MASS CULTURE: TROPE FOR COMMUNICATION**

As suggested above, “mass culture” was undergoing a flip in meaning during the postwar years through the 1950s. However, this does not mean that scholars and theorists did not have a foundation from which to work. Scholars since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have attended to the idea of “mass communication” which, for various reasons, held the same attention and concern of thinkers for a number of reasons. As Peters and Simonson note, the twentieth century holds particular interest because it was the “heyday” of the biggest mass communication forms still

with us – “radio, film, television, newspapers and magazines.”<sup>263</sup> Other scholars have provided studies of the historical grounding of the term and its emergence from the perspective of history.<sup>264</sup> What I investigate here is the use of the term as a trope in discourse about the place of America.

It is these forms that were and continue to be “genuinely mass media in every context: in their content, which was aimed at middle-range cultural tastes; in their audiences, ranging in the millions; and in their mode of production, which was industrialized, bureaucratized, and organized in output.”<sup>265</sup> This flow of information needed naming and summary in order to provide a way of attributing value to it. The phrase “mass culture” began to stand in for this complicated phenomenon among scholars and laypeople alike.

The change was present in almost every avenue of print. In the field of publishing, less expensive and more easily available reading and listening material was precipitated somewhat by the war effort, which required rationing in everything used for the production of books and newspapers, giving Americans a taste for the paperback book once the war was over.<sup>266</sup> For Lawrence Ferlinghetti, this allowed him to open his own printing press to publish inexpensive translations of modern foreign poetry in America.<sup>267</sup> For others, it allowed the publication of seemingly valueless works that were seen as anti-intellectual and dangerous. Outside of the

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<sup>263</sup> John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 1.

<sup>264</sup> “Mass Culture” has had a rigorous treatment outside of rhetoric as a historical phenomenon. See David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) for the 19<sup>th</sup> century origins; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1997) for the continued emergence of “mass culture” up and through the 1930s in the United States.

<sup>265</sup> Peters & Simonson, 1.

<sup>266</sup> James West, *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace since 1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 130.

<sup>267</sup> See Barry Silesky, *Ferlinghetti: The Artist in his Time* (New York: Warner Books, 1990).

world of print, the rise of television, popular film, and the distribution of music was celebrated by some scholars, and feared by others. As Dwight Macdonald argued, the existence of mass culture was not to be feared per se, but the particularities of American society mean that mass culture has distinct advantages when it appears to be high culture:

Masscult is not merely a parallel formation to High Culture, as Folk Art was; it is a competitor. The problem is especially acute in this country because class lines are especially weak here. If there were a clearly defined cultural elite here, then the masses could have their *Kitsch* and the classes could have their High Culture, with everybody happy. But a significant part of our population is chronically confronted with a choice between looking at TV or old master, between reading Tolstoy or a detective story; i.e., the pattern of their cultural lives is 'open' to the point of being porous. For a lucky few, this openness of choice is stimulating. But for most, it is confusing and leads at best to that middlebrow compromise called Midcult.<sup>268</sup>

Macdonald argues that the openness of culture in America of the 1950s is such that it gives enormous opportunity to the individual to access the best works of all time, but as a double-edge, the individual has equal opportunity to dive into culturally repulsive works as well. Not wanting to completely discredit the masses as completely foolish, he articulates a middle position of "Midcult" – works that appear to be high culture, but only contain signs of the form, possessing none of the content of a work of High Culture. Macdonald can be read here as Socrates talking to Phaedrus, warning him of confusing mere ornamental speech with the type of speech pleasing to the Gods. Richard Weaver believes the dialogue to be about the question, "if truth alone is not sufficient to persuade men, what else remains that can be legitimately added?"<sup>269</sup> Stretching a bit here, perhaps the question facing Macdonald and other concerned intellectuals of the period, what can be legitimately added to High Culture if its existence is not enough to warrant attention to it? Macdonald is thinking of the issue this way, and arrives at the unacceptable

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<sup>268</sup> Dwight MacDonald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962), 34.

<sup>269</sup> Richard Weaver, *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (Davis, CA: Hermagoras Press, 1985), 15.

commercialization of the tropes of High Culture in order to forward an inferior cultural product. Like Plato, Macdonald is nervous about allowing any and all expressions to be valuable, but recognizes that some persuasive addition must be made to High Culture to get people who have nearly unlimited choice interested in it. Thinking along these terms can help reveal the communicative anxieties within the Mass Culture debate.

The concerns about mass culture have a long history. As Peters and Simonson note, “the specter of democracy turning sour and breaking up into a society of masses is an old concern within American thought, raised in one way by Founding Father James Madison in the *Federalist Papers* and noted by the distinguished French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville in his *Democracy in America*. The coming of television simply gave a new urgency to old themes.”<sup>270</sup> In many ways, the concerns over democracy and the mass society could be seen as a key point of contention where Bercovitch’s American consensus ideology is played out. I will examine a few “massification” critics and scholars in order to support the claim that “mass society” or “mass culture” serves as a trope for the discussion of human communication and rhetoric at large. The discussion of appropriate, effective and essential communicative practices is the central theme of almost all mass culture and mass society critique.

The gamut runs the extreme around “mass culture.” Max Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School represent probably the most well known critics of massification. Their concerns circulate around the elements of commodification and commercialization in mass culture. As early as 1941 Horkheimer railed against mass culture, arguing it had usurped true art and replaced it with an infantile and dangerous alternative:

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<sup>270</sup> Peters and Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*, 265.

The generation that allowed Hitler to become great takes its adequate pleasure in the convulsions which the animated cartoon imposes upon its helpless characters, not in Picasso, who offers no recreation and cannot be 'enjoyed' anyhow. Misanthropic, spiteful creatures, who secretly know themselves as such, like to be taken for the pure, childish souls who applaud with innocent approval when Donald Duck gets a cuffing. There are times when faith in the future of mankind can be kept alive only through absolute resistance to the prevailing responses of men. Such a time is the present.<sup>271</sup>

Clearly Horkheimer saw direct connections between violence and the popular choice of entertainment over proper artistic production. What is more specific is his claim that the massification of culture threatens vital human communication. "Today art is no longer communicative," argues Horkheimer, and he points out that in the past people had access to an "inner life."<sup>272</sup> This inner life, now usurped by the "pleasures of the ball park and the movie, the best seller and the radio," allowed people a power to "conceive a world different from that in which he lives. This other world was that of art."<sup>273</sup> Horkheimer here represents a view that perhaps does not recognize the long term issue of mass culture, and perhaps focuses on the recent "bubbling up" of the problem from the perspective of institutions of higher education. Horkheimer speaks from a position of immediacy – recognizing the mass culture problem as an acute issue in society, when some of what he recognizes as a problem go back a bit farther. His contribution to the mass culture discussion is different from Macdonald, who recognizes some compromise must be made, but that the current compromise is unacceptable. Horkheimer would perhaps categorize Midcult as Masscult, not recognizing its rhetorical saavy.

Contemporary art for Horkheimer reverses the ability of art to serve as the communication conduit for ways of re-arranging the world. This is the place where Horkheimer

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<sup>271</sup> Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in *Mass Communication and American Social Thought*: ed. Peters and Simonson, 161.

<sup>272</sup> Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," 160.

<sup>273</sup> Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," 160.



is most clear about the function of high culture. "To the extent that the last works of art still communicate, they denounce the prevailing forms of communication as instruments of destruction, and harmony as a delusion of decay."<sup>274</sup> The last, proper works of art could help communicate another way of life, but in the current climate, "the gulf between art and communication is perforce wide in a world in which accepted language only intensifies the confusion. . . ." For Horkheimer, the public opinion is "determined. . . always by their representatives in other social strata," and the individual person "within humanity is as solitary and abandoned as humanity with in the infinite universe."<sup>275</sup> Still, perhaps communication should still be attempted as the best-case scenario for the future is layed out by Horkheimer:

One day we may learn that in the depths of their hearts, the masses, even in fascist countries, secretly knew the truth and disbelieved the lie, like katatonic patients who make known only at the end of their trance that nothing has escaped them. Therefore it may not be entirely senseless to continue speaking a language that is not easily understood.<sup>276</sup>

Horkheimer's argument via analogy to a "katatonic" patient is not the most hopeful image one would like to see, but it is an effective one. It seems that for him mass culture's highest crime is the dissolution of human communion through the elimination of people's communication with humanity. It effaces the necessary rhetorical connection to a larger, more timeless humanity with a very shallow, immediate connection to the contemporary. Mass culture distracts, disconnects, and disrupts the human ability to imagine a better world and share that image with others. In the world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this was possible because people still had an inward capacity to critique and imagine a better world. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that better world is external, and realized

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<sup>274</sup> Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," 161.

<sup>275</sup> Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," 165.

<sup>276</sup> Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," 165.

through the pure pleasures of sports, cartoons and radio dramas. Art cannot compete with such distractions, and at best, merely forces people to seek out more “enjoyment.”

What is interesting about Horkheimer’s critique is the central role human communication takes in an essay that is supposedly about the failures of popular art forms. The term “mass culture” is how it often serves as a trope, or a rhetorical stand-in for the larger, and much more slippery subject of human communication. I believe that most of the critics of mass culture, Horkheimer included, were using mass culture as a point of contention from which to argue for better communicative and rhetorical practices in society as a whole. The phrase “mass culture” then serves as a trope that unites these concerns into one, and uses it as a way of articulating the need for better communicative practices. As Lynn Spillman argues, “the commonsense meanings of culture still current today echo the history of the idea.”<sup>277</sup> The idea of High Culture, extending from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is the one that Horkheimer is pushing in his references to a pure or higher form of art, music or literature. “When we talk about art, or popular culture, or folk culture, or even mass culture, we are echoing an idea which first emerged to help map the massive social changes occurring within European societies as modern economic and political institutions were born.”<sup>278</sup> Of course, Horkheimer is not only speaking from this vocabulary which attempts, in Burkean terms, to deflect a particular (maybe dangerous) access to art by lower classes, but reflect a different way of speaking and communicating about the values of a culture. Coming out of the tradition of George Simmel and Max Weber, his analysis indicates a view of a highly structured order to society, perhaps to the point of forcing these cultural changes into that

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<sup>277</sup> Lynn Spillman *Cultural Sociology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 4.

<sup>278</sup> Spillman, 3.

hierarchical view, instead of at least acknowledging some fluctuations to at least the appearance of the structure, as Macdonald did.<sup>279</sup>

C. Wright Mills offers another perspective on mass culture and communication. Patricia Cormack argues that Mills is seeking to redefine sociology as a middle term in the gap between meaning and daily existence. “Mills claims that sociology drives a wedge between the promise of popular utterances and the nihilism of mass culture.”<sup>280</sup> In his book, *The Power Elite*, Mills argues that mass is distinct from the traditional sense of a public:

At the opposite extreme, in a *mass*, (1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. (2) The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (3) The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action. (4) The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion.<sup>281</sup>

Here we see Mills’s chief concern could be called communicative. The problem with the mass is the restriction of sharing of ideas to a receiving of them, and a restriction of discussion between members, which leads to a loss of autonomy in decision making. As we will see, the lack of shared engagement between people is a concern of the beats as well. The perceived replacement of the personal with impersonal in the “mass” means we lose a lot. To spell out the changes in even greater detail, Mills uses communication as the litmus test to prove the acidity of the mass society:

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<sup>279</sup> For more on Georg Simmel, see David Kim, ed. *Georg Simmel in Translation: Interdisciplinary Border Crossings in Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar’s Press, 2006), and for more on Max Weber, see Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber: Collected Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>280</sup> Patricia Cormack, *Sociology and Mass Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>281</sup> Mills, 304.

The public and the mass may be most readily distinguished by their dominant modes of communication: in a community of publics, discussion is the ascendant means of communication, and the mass media, if they exist, simply enlarge and animate discussion, linking one *primary public* with the discussion of another. In a mass society, the dominant type of communication is the formal media, and the publics become mere *media markets*: all those exposed to the contents of given mass media.<sup>282</sup>

The mass media's unidirectional, reception oriented model of the public is a clear break from previous conceptions of the relationship of the public to the media and to the society at large. The effect of this mass culture on the individual is a stunning detachment from political and personal engagement with society:

In a curious adaptation, 'the public' often becomes, in fact, 'the unattached expert,' who, although well informed, has never taken a clear-cut, public stand on controversial issues which are brought to a focus by organized interests. . . . What the public stands for, accordingly, is often a vagueness of policy (called open-mindedness), a lack of involvement in public affairs (known as reasonableness), and a professional disinterest (known as tolerance).<sup>283</sup>

This model of the public is seen by Mills as an unhealthy communicative situation. Kerouac and Ginsberg were highly disturbed by the shift that Mills is chronicling here. They both discuss it in their own work, as we shall see in later chapters. For now though, Mills articulation of the mass society is one that can help us understand the level of concern about the new mediation and the effects it has not only on the public, but on the way we think and speak about the public in the United States. Sounding like the stereotype of the "Beat," Mills explains the rise of disinterest among people in political engagement:

It is because they do not find available associations at once psychologically meaningful and historically effective that men often feel uneasy in their political and economic loyalties. The effective units of power are now the huge corporation, the inaccessible government, the grim military establishment. Between these, on the one hand, and the family and the small community on the other, we find no intermediate associations in which men feel secure and with which they feel powerful. There is little live political

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<sup>282</sup> Mills, 304.

<sup>283</sup> Mills, 306.

struggle. Instead there is administration from above, and the political vacuum below. The primary publics are now either so small as to be swamped, and hence give up; or so large as to be merely another feature of the generally distant structure of power, and hence inaccessible.<sup>284</sup>

For Mills, the concern was access to the social structure, and the influence that people could have on their society. The rise of the mass in mass culture means that people are less able to participate in the power structure. For the beats, the same exigence is at play. Ginsberg and Kerouac were sensing the same sort of exigence, but responded to it differently. Mills' understanding, seen along side Macdonald and Horkheimer displays the differing reactions that the same exigence can cause. It also shows how each thinker is ultimately concerned about communicative issues. This places the beats as both connected to these thinkers and distinct. They are connected because the same exigence – mass culture – necessitated for each a reconsideration of the relationship people have with culture, and how culture is understood. Secondly, the beats are distinct because they address the issue as a rhetorical one – that is, instead of centering their concern on the quality of culture or the loss of power due to a refiguring of the cultural, they find the issue to be one of how to evaluate quality or how to connect with other people in society. Their answers lie in how our speech and writing are figured, and how that figuration constructs the valuable.

As a final figure responding to mass culture, Marshall McLuhan is an important one for this study. McLuhan reads poetry and other forms of literary production as mediation. This insight allows us to understand the beats as offering an implicit rhetorical theory in their work.

McLuhan is a theorist of media and how different media influence different understandings. Here he argues that blank verse can be read as a broadcasting medium:

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<sup>284</sup> Mills, 309.

What is especially significant is the discovery of blank verse as a broadcasting megaphone and the consciousness that jiggling rhymes cannot provide the sweep and volume of public utterance that is resonating in the new age. Blank verse to the Elizabethan was as exciting a novelty as the 'close up' in a Griffith's movie, and the two are much alike in the intensity of amplification and exaggeration of feeling. Even Whitman, impelled by the new visual intensities of the newspaper of his time, did not devise a louder vehicle for his barbaric yawp than blank verse.<sup>285</sup>

This will be interesting for this study, as Ginsberg – an avid admirer of Whitman's poetry – also saw poetry as the most appropriate vehicle for the rhetorical and communicative. Blank verse is compared to film here on the rhetorical level – that is, the medium of blank verse has tropes and turns unique to it as a form of communication that separate it from other forms. At the same time, these unique tropes and turns to the medium irreversibly change the content, adding elements to it that would not be present if the message was articulated within an alternative medium. Of course, I am not arguing that the beats were composing blank verse, or that blank verse is the only type of poetry that could be read this way. If poetry is conceptualized as a type of media in one case, can it not be generalizable to all cases? McLuhan explains this effect by comparing sixteenth century blank verse to the alternative, verse poetry of the time:

But the paradox is that the blank verse, being one of the first kinds of "spoken," as opposed to sung, poetry is very much faster than song, or perhaps even than speech itself. It is very safe, however, to commence with the consideration that blank verse, unlike rhymed poetry, answered the new need of the vernacular to have recognition and implementation as a public address system.<sup>286</sup>

Blank verse as public address was an effect of the rise of the vernacular, but also didn't take the place of speech. It was like public address, and also like poetry, but had the effect of neither. It filled a need within the culture for a new rhetorical form with which to convey feeling, idea and aesthetic sensibility. It was like film or television, a new technology of communication due to

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<sup>285</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 197-8.

<sup>286</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 198.

the rhetorical abilities it had that other forms did not. It wasn't better or worse; just different. McLuhan is trying to get across the idea that changes in media require new ways of thought and explanation, and reliance on the old ways causes us to miss important features of the new rhetoric, or worse, ignore the potential dangers. This is clear when he moves blank verse into the 1950s, showing what the newest changes in mass media bring: "Blank verse was a means to make English roar and resonate in a way suited to the new extension and consolidation of the vernacular by typography. In our own century as the vernacular has met the non-verbal competition of photo, film and television, a reverse effect has occurred."<sup>287</sup>

The rise of television and film have caused the vernacular to cease roaring. This is one of the major effects of print for McLuhan:

Everybody is familiar with the phrase, 'the voices of silence.' It is the traditional word for sculpture. And if an entire year of any college program were spent in understanding that phrase, the world might soon have an adequate supply of competent minds. As the Gutenberg typography filled the world the human voice closed down. People began to read silently and passively as consumers. Architecture and sculpture dried up too. In literature only people from backward oral areas had any resonance to inject into the language – the Yeats, the Synge, the Joyce, Faulkners, and Dylan Thomases.<sup>288</sup>

McLuhan adds a final piece to my attempt to understand mass culture as concerned with communication and rhetoric. In his final analysis, different forms of media offer and remove particular ways of understanding the world. In the rise of print, as he argues here, the importance of public address diminishes. Blank verse and its power as a broadcast medium is lost in the turn toward typography. McLuhan provides a theoretical position on mass culture that allows a read of the beats as challenging the shift in understanding brought about by mass culture. Within the context of mass culture as exigence, the beats can be seen as offering a different medium in

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<sup>287</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 198.

<sup>288</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 250.

which to appropriately communicate with people. Although they do not address the issue of mass culture specifically as these scholars did, the beats feel the same exigence as a need to offer their writing.

In the next chapter I begin with this idea, examining Kerouac's letters and journals for evidence of his interest in the communicative problems posed by massification. Then I will examine *On the Road* for its implicit rhetorical theory, revealing the rhetorical assumptions of the text through criticism.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I examined communication as a concept and how that term could be understood in the 1950s. I examined communication, discourse and rhetoric, providing understanding from Peters that communication is a “kink” that inspires human beings to interact with each other in varied ways in order to make contact. Rhetoric, from Kenneth Burke, is a complicated notion of meaning, persuasion, and human interaction centered around identification. Rhetoric has also been theorized as an important part of ideology, and ideology has been theorized as containing rhetorical implications. I examined the work of Michael Calvin McGee and Sacvan Bercovitch in order to forward the sense of ideology that I will be using when discussing the 1950s and the discourses of the period. These terms are central to understanding beat writing as rhetoric – situated discursive strategies for changing attitudes in other people. Rhetorical criticism, my method for revealing the implicit rhetorical theory of the beats, was explained as not only a study of effects, but also analysis of the text for the implicit auditor. It is my contention that this sort of criticism can sketch out an implicit rhetoric among the work of the beats. For the beats to be



offering a rhetoric they need an exigence, and in the 1950s, a key exigence was that of mass culture. I offered the views of Dwight Macdonald, Max Horkheimer, C. Wright Mills and Marshall McLuhan as examples of the varied response the “massification” of culture had during the period. In closing, I suggest that the beats have their own unique response to this exigence in the implicit rhetorical theory they offer in their poetry and prose, and how communication and rhetoric were concerns in their journals, letters and essays.

#### 4.0 THE KAIROTIC RHETORIC OF JACK KEROUAC'S *ON THE ROAD*<sup>289</sup>

“How would you define Beat?”  
“Sympathetic.”  
- Steve Allen and Jack Kerouac, *The Steve Allen Show*, 1959

Jack Kerouac always seemed uneasy with the fame that accompanied his success. After the publication of *On the Road* in September of 1957, he achieved nearly instant fame. As Ann Charters explains, “the interviews he gave the press or on television were so candid, so personal, that he became a ‘personality’ as immediately recognizable as a movie star.”<sup>290</sup> This created a cycle of self-perpetuation where Kerouac would often find himself in front of the cameras or before the reporter’s notebook. “In order to face the interviews and public appearances he inevitably got drunk, and when he was drunk he was usually a shamble: out of control, maudlin, sentimental and childish,” Charters writes. “Even among other writers where he could have been taken more seriously, he panicked and turned himself into a clown.”<sup>291</sup>

Part of the reason might have been that, “Kerouac’s fans mistook him for the Dean Moriarty character, and didn’t realize he was the timorous Sal Paradise.”<sup>292</sup> This identification meant that Kerouac was seen as a symbol of rebellion against authority and society by his fans. Kerouac had great difficulty in attempting to correct this misconception due to his increasing

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<sup>289</sup> There is no substantive relation between this chapter and my M.A. thesis.

<sup>290</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1974), 298.

<sup>291</sup> Charters, *Kerouac*, 299.

<sup>292</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 277.

alcoholism, which started years before *On the Road* was published. “[f]ame didn’t change his behavior; it just made him feel guilty about his actions because of their increased visibility.”<sup>293</sup>

Kerouac’s inability to handle his mistaken identity (or identification) can be seen as a communication problem. The best example is a television interview he gave shortly after the publication of *On the Road*, where Hunter Thompson and other fans gathered at the West End Café in New York to watch the interview. They saw Kerouac as a “‘Spokesman’ for everyone in the fifties.” Kerouac thought differently since he brought liquor to the interview and “did not suspect that he was changing people’s lives.”<sup>294</sup> Kerouac was completely disheartened by his inability to convey his beat vision to others. He remarked as early as February of 1958 that he no longer liked *On the Road*.<sup>295</sup> Amburn believes this is because the audience could not separate the novel from its author – both were “read” as synonyms. But the argument could be made that *On the Road* failed to accomplish one of the things Kerouac hoped it would – addressing the disconnected human experience by providing a new way to “write” and “read” our relationships with one another.

His anxiety over his own media appearances speak to a more general anxiety about mediation and communication present in post-war America. In his later novel *Big Sur*, Jack Duloz comments on an appearance on the Steve Allen show from where the opening quotation of this chapter is taken:

remembering that awful time only a year earlier when I had to rehearse my reading of prose a third time under the hot lights of the Steve Allen Show in the Burbank studio, one hundred technicians waiting for me to start reading, Steve Allen watching me expectant as he plunks the piano, I sit there on the dunce’s stool and refuse to read a word or open my mouth, ‘I don’t have to REHEARSE for God’s sake Steve!’ – ‘But this last time, I’ll

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<sup>293</sup> Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac*, 279.

<sup>294</sup> Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac*, 279.

<sup>295</sup> Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac*, 278.

let you off the dress rehearsal' and I sit there sweating not saying a word for a whole minute as everybody watches, finally I say 'No I can't do it' and I go across the street to get drunk) (but surprising everybody the night of the show by doing my job of reading just fine, which surprises the producers and so they take me out with a Hollywood starlet who turns about to be a big bore trying to read me her poetry . . .<sup>296</sup>

The distaste Kerouac's narrator expresses with being under the lights, rehearsing (in all capital letters, no less), leaving to go to the bar, and the eventual surprise of the producers that the job is done right on the first go, reveals a tension surrounding the demands and requirements of mediation. This mediation, the requirements of television production, is made to look torturous and foolish, while at the same time Kerouac (or his novelistic stand in) is able to (or at least portrays himself as able to) prepare for his televised moment by relaxing at a bar.

This is not to say that this one moment is able to convey the entire communication anxiety of the era. In fact, it is a fairly common reaction for authors, musicians and other artists to distrust or even recoil from mediated moments. What I use this story to convey is Kerouac's rhetoricity through the use of what Burke would call a representative anecdote.

According to John Durham Peters, communication in the twentieth century is wrought with concerns about fragmentation – of bodies as well as messages. "The dream of communication is the dream of identical minds in concert. Media of transmission and recording, however, drove a wedge between the copy and the original by inadvertently revealing everything that the copy had missed. . ."<sup>297</sup> Kerouac, as someone immersed in this environment that Peters is describing, becomes frustrated with the dislocating and disorienting process of rehearsal and seeks communion with other humans directly in the bar. As a representative anecdote, the story,

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<sup>296</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Bantam Books, 1962), 19.

<sup>297</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 240.

whether true or not, points out the flaw in the dominant theory that keeps the idea circulating. As Burke explains, “The informative anecdote, we could say, contains *in nuce* the terminological structure that is evolved in conformity with it. Such a terminology is a ‘conclusion’ that follows from the selection of a given anecdote. Thus the anecdote is in a sense a *summation*, containing implicitly what the system that is developed from it contains explicitly.”<sup>298</sup> The story of the television interview, read as a representative anecdote, points out the flaw in the televised form - it is a medium designed to convey personal interaction with large numbers of people, but this production requires an alienating, stressful and bizarre alienation. The communication doesn’t allow for communion between individuals, and Kerouac’s story illustrates this absence nicely.

Such anxiety about proper communication is apparent in Kerouac’s work. This is not a reason why Kerouac’s work is individual, unique or special. It is an argument that Kerouac’s work can be productively read as a rhetoric which can engage some of the communication problems he perceived as acute and dangerous in his time. I argue in this chapter that Kerouac’s concerns are rhetorical ones, about appropriate ways of communicating meanings to other minds. Taking the definition of rhetoric established earlier as Burkean identification and division, this chapter will show how Kerouac’s novel can be read as a book of strategies of how to accomplish consubstantiality in the American 1950s. As John Durham Peters points out, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is awash in concerns about these very questions, with the rise of mass culture through technologies of dissemination such as television threatening the traditional understanding of identity. “Our faces, actions, voices, thoughts, and transactions have all migrated into media that can disseminate the indicia of our personhood without our permission. Communication has become

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<sup>298</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969), 60.

disembodied.”<sup>299</sup> The rise of these new ideas about communication was read as a threat to the human condition by Kerouac, and he attempted to offer “equipment for living” through his book *On the Road*. It will be argued that Kerouac’s rhetoric is a Burkean rhetoric, structured around the idea that literature serves as “equipment for living,” by providing us with situations and corresponding motives. The central idea at work in his rhetoric is the idea of *kairos*, which can be defined as the opportune or appropriate moment, opposed to a sense of time that is linear and progressive. *Kairos* is situational and responsive – the rhetor must take advantage of it when present.

Kerouac’s story about preparation for television can be read as communicative anxiety such as Peters talks about. The producers’ concern for rehearsal indicate their awareness of the fragmentary and incomplete picture presented by the television. Kerouac disagrees: The intimacy of other people in the environment of the bar is superior preparation for the communication of ideas to other people, even against the disembodiment forced by television. Of course, this is just one potential reading. What I am trying to do is demonstrate how a reading informed by rhetorical criticism can bring new perspectives to Kerouac’s work pushing it as an interaction and reaction to the communicative situation arising in the 1950s.

I propose reading Kerouac as working with propriety and style in response to the assumed communicative frame of the 1950s. In this chapter I argue that Kerouac’s writings suggest an interest in rhetorical concerns and communicative breakdown that Peters identifies. Kerouac’s work is best understood as a rhetoric – an attempt to offer the means of proper and appropriate words to establish effective communication. Given the situation of mass media, television and the proliferation of new communication technologies, *On the Road* can serve as a

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<sup>299</sup> Burke, *Grammar*, 228.

guide to readers' attempts to become consubstantial with other people. As I discussed previously, the beat rhetoric circulates around the key terms of body, experience, and mediation. It is these three central concepts that, through rhetorical criticism, the beat rhetoric can be constructed.

Kerouac's letters, private journals, and works indicate that he thinks about communication and rhetoric, albeit implicitly. Even though he was not a scholar or had any exposure to the works of Burke, Richard Weaver, or others working on the questions of rhetoric, the existence of these moments in his journals and letters suggest that a rhetorical read would be productive. Kerouac's writing was heavily influenced by a lacunae in human relations related to our ability to communicate, specifically in the ability of people to offer each other compelling stories that inspire and cement notions central to identifications of Americans. He perceived this absence as a serious concern, and attempted to address it in his writing. I argue that *On the Road* can and should be read as an engagement with these concerns, implicitly offering a theory of rhetoric.

I will make this argument by offering some of Kerouac's journal writings as evidence, and then analyze Kerouac's most famous book, *On the Road*, showing how it can be read as an offer of a rhetoric for 1950s America. In the conclusion to this chapter I will review some of Kerouac's argumentative rhetoric in a 1958 *Playboy* article about the proper way to understand the "beat generation" – as a rhetorical mode instead of a state. This might help us be able to understand the written production of the Beats as Kerouac did, "A revolution in manners in America."<sup>300</sup> But before that, I want to clarify some terms and give some perspective to this work so that the criticism can be better understood.

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<sup>300</sup> Jack Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation," *Playboy*, June 1959.

#### 4.1 THE RHETORICAL AND COMMUNICATIVE ENVIRONMENT OF THE '50S

As discussed earlier, the 1950s were a time of communicative anxiety. In this section, I would like to highlight how the 1950s were an era not only of change in economics, foreign policy and family life, but in rhetoric as well. What I mean by this is a central rhetorical assumption – that when conditions change, people must explain these alterations. The decade of the 50s was an era of rhetorical instability where new explanations had to be created to account for and justify the differences in daily life that surrounded them.

The first major change I want to discuss is the presence of the atomic bomb. Many scholars believe that the bomb is the most significant change of the post-war era. As Miller and Nowak argue, “By 1950, the nuclear bomb was an integral part of American culture. It was much more than the underpinning to an international cold war. From the first it was a power so huge and raw it obliterated any and all moral trappings. Systems of good and evil, sensitivity to cruelty or the ridiculous, all became distorted to the wielder of atomic arms. Moral, ideological, even pragmatic concerns weakened. The American mind was reshaped in many ways. For with the bomb the cold war was not a conflict over ideology nor over maintaining any global power balance. It was about upsetting that balance.”<sup>301</sup> For Miller and Nowak, the presence of atomic weapons in U.S. and in Soviet hands meant that the U.S. government must “convince people both to trust the bomb and to be in terror of it, a most interesting contradiction.”<sup>302</sup> In order to accomplish this, new vocabularies were introduced – a new rhetoric for discussing the place of such deadly weapons in daily life: “Nuclear bombs were depicted as casual, even friendly.

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<sup>301</sup> Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 44.

<sup>302</sup> Miller and Nowak, 46.



Nuclear euphemisms sprang up: the ‘sunshine unit’ as a measure of Strontium-90 levels, small nuclear bombs affectionately dubbed ‘kitten bombs.’”<sup>303</sup> Not just mere semantics – they conclude that such changes are more than just clever vocabularies. “These examples are not merely the clever word games of big business and government. Such bland semantics reveal a very real process: the violence being wrought upon language as upon the minds of its audience.”<sup>304</sup> They would agree that these rhetorical changes are metrics of social changes. For them, the potential violence the bomb represented created the need for linguistic violence upon minds.

They are not alone in this judgment. The shifts of the era of communist fear not only necessitated a change in how one used rhetoric, but how one understood rhetoric. The era called attention to the slippery nature of words and meanings. As Alan Nadel argues, “Since social contracts rely upon rhetorical contracts, the problem is one of language. But communism, according to its accusers, acknowledged neither the same social nor rhetorical contracts. . . because no court recognizes a contract binding on only one party, in dealing with those outside the social and rhetorical contracts the traditional constitutional rules no longer applied.”<sup>305</sup> The limits of who can produce meaning, and who gets access to the ability to create meaning in a legal sense were key questions with regard to “loyalty oaths” and other public expressions of identification or division with communist ideas. The idea of who, or what, sort of creature can create meaning became a matter of national security and constitutional interpretation. The idea that the Soviets were evil and also possessed the greatest weapon ever developed was such an impossible situation, even top leaders had difficulty accepting such a fact: “Truman never

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<sup>303</sup> Miller and Nowak, 47.

<sup>304</sup> Miller and Nowak, 47.

<sup>305</sup> Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 77

completely accepted the fact that the Russians had the bomb; in 1953 when his presidency was over, he told a group of reporters, 'I'm not convinced that Russia has the bomb. I'm not convinced that the Russians have achieved the know-how to put the complicated mechanism together to make an A-bomb work.'"<sup>306</sup> The difficulty of accepting the bomb both as greatest protection and greatest threat was an important and central rhetorical struggle of the time.

Other aspects of American life were also affected by the rhetorical struggle over the atomic bomb. According to Elaine Tyler May, the rise of nuclear families can be linked to fear of atomic war: "Americans were well poised to embrace domesticity in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age. A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation. Children would also be a connection to the future and a means of replenishing a world depleted by war deaths. Although baby boom parents were not likely to express conscious desires to repopulate the country, the devastation of thousands of deaths could not have been far below the surface of the postwar consciousness."<sup>307</sup> The decision to marry and raise a large family – a definite difference between this generation and the previous – might have been influenced by the threat of atomic destruction. May argues that the reason this generation was so keen on marriage and family even though birth control was increasingly more available than ever seem to indicate that the ideal home life was linked to the perceived dangerous circumstances as a way of showing public commitment to civic values.<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 26.

<sup>307</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 23.

<sup>308</sup> May, *Homeward Bound*, 136.

The pressures of altering a war-driven economy toward a consumer-driven economy created the need for persuasive discourses identifying consuming, shopping, and purchasing with being American.<sup>309</sup>

Most of these reactions were not overtly known to the participants as direct engagement with the rhetorical struggle the atom bomb created. However, there were many who saw the changes throughout culture and responded with dissent. Margot A. Henriksen argues that a “culture of dissent” confronted the changes in American propriety ushered in by the contradictory reliance and fear of atomic weapons: “Whether relying on deadly and apocalyptic A-bombs for its power, allying with former enemies against former friends, or scrutinizing citizens’ lives in order to gauge loyalty, the United States seemed to be paying a high ethical price for its fight against evil. The culture of dissent saw the figures and symbols of American authority as tainted and the American way of life as no longer innocent. Success and supremacy bought at the cost of morality and idealism appeared hollow; the crisp distinctions between innocence and guilt, good and evil, had blurred, and ‘knowing sin’ became the disillusioning way of life in the America envisioned by the culture of dissent.”<sup>310</sup> The uprooting of the rhetorical norms of good, bad, moral, and immoral as perceived by some inspired them to produce texts that highlight this murky environment. Henriksen relies mostly on film to prove her point that the “culture of dissent” worked to highlight the flaws in the rhetoric of the time. Although she doesn’t reference Burke, it could be argued that the “culture of dissent” sought through the device of “perspective by incongruity” to highlight the serious flaws they saw in the

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<sup>309</sup> See Elizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post War America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) for the conflation of the rhetoric of good citizen with good consumer.

<sup>310</sup> Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 20.

new justifications and defenses of American life. Kuznick and Gilbert take issue with the idea that the threat represented by atomic war was a singular cause. However, they find the frame of the Cold War responsible for the deepest influences of the period:

We take strong issue with those observers who have found the Cold War to be responsible for every change and cultural distortion occurring during these years. Nevertheless, the vividness of the perceptions suggests that the principal effect of the Cold War may have been psychological. It persuaded millions of Americans to interpret their world in terms of insidious enemies at home and abroad who threatened them with nuclear and other forms of annihilation. Seeing the world through this dark, distorting lens and setting global and domestic policies to counter these fanciful as well as real threats was and is, then, the largest impact of the Cold War.<sup>311</sup>

The Cold War, for these scholars could be said to serve as a Burkean “terministic screen” by which he means that “any nomenclature necessarily directs the attention into some channels rather than others.”<sup>312</sup> Burke chooses to define the phrase “terministic screen” with reference to the phrase “believe that you may understand”:

The ‘logological,’ or ‘terministic’ counterpart of ‘Believe’ in the formula would be: *Pick some particular nomenclature, some one terministic screen.* And for ‘That you may understand,’ the counterpart would be: *That you may proceed to track down the kinds of observation implicit in the terminology you have chosen, whether your choice of terms was deliberate or spontaneous.*<sup>313</sup>

The Cold War, therefore, served as a terministic screen, a limit not just on the potential responses, but on the potential ways of seeing the world and the people in it. In this way, the Cold War becomes a frame for the entire era, although some scholars disagree: “The Cold War was fought primarily at an elite level. It pervaded and shaped the experience of ordinary

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<sup>311</sup> Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert, “U.S. Culture and the Cold War” in Kuznick and Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 10-11.

<sup>312</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 45.

<sup>313</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 47.

Americans far less than historians would have us believe. Although government leaders, social-science experts, and media commentators set the terms of public discourse – and also of public policy – most citizens to a surprising degree defined their world in personal terms.”<sup>314</sup> Although Filene is right to warn of oversimplifying the era, the idea of the terministic screen risks no such causal fallacy. What it attempts to show is how the choice of description of environment leads to the depiction of that environment within the terms set by the description. Certain options for thinking and perceiving are simply unavailable.

Others suggest that the rise of an easily identifiable enemy in Communist Russia led intellectuals, civic and government officials to persuasively spread the need for conformity and silent similarity as our first and best defense from Communist takeover. The rise of McCarthyism is a good index of the rhetorical changes this fear initiated. As David Halberstam puts it, “McCarthyism crystallized and politicized the anxieties of a nation living in a dangerous new era. He took people who were at the worst guilty of political naiveté and accused them of treason. He set out to do the unthinkable, and it turned out to be surprisingly thinkable.”<sup>315</sup> Concerns over corruption from within sparked Americans to place vigilance against communism above most other values. “In recent years the anticommunism impulse has been toned down, though it still profoundly affects American attitudes and policies. But the fact that hysterical belief in the Red menace reached its historic heights at mid-century makes it most important to the decade of the fifties. Its impact on that era can be seen in a variety of ways: the conformity, the search for security, the sizable return to religion, the celebration of the family and middle-class virtues, the absence of an effective left, the docility of labor unions, the ‘silent generation’

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<sup>314</sup> Peter Filene, “Cold War Culture Doesn’t Say It All” in Kuznick and Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, 157.

<sup>315</sup> David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 52.

of college students, the widespread political apathy, the cold war, the arms race, the reliance on nuclear supremacy.”<sup>316</sup> Miller and Nowak here point to the power of the anti-communist belief within most of the larger political decisions of the time, and how the beliefs of that time still effect contemporary thought.

The communist “threat” was a powerful persuasive force in all aspects of daily life. Joseph McCarthy’s rhetoric is explained in simple terms by David Halberstam: “China had fallen, not because the forces of history were against the old feudal regime, which was collapsing of its own weight. Rather, it was because of Soviet military and political hegemony. If events in the world were not as we wanted them, then something conspiratorial had happened. . . . Our control of events was limited because sinister forces were at work against us.”<sup>317</sup> A rhetoric based on sinister enemies and corruption from within is what Richard Hofstadter identified in the 1960s as the “paranoid style” in political rhetoric – “The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values.”<sup>318</sup> I don’t seek to redo or repeat Hostadter’s brilliant analysis of McCarthy’s rhetoric here. What is significant is the ability of one style of rhetoric to create an unfortunate political reality.

W.T. Lahmon reminds us, “because they diminish complexity, consensus agreements about an era are themselves serious problems. Like any other time, the decade of the fifties had

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<sup>316</sup> Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 38.

<sup>317</sup> Halberstam, 53.

<sup>318</sup> Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 229:1374 (Nov 1964): 77-86, 82.

many parts, none of them dammed for long.”<sup>319</sup> Lahmon finds the 1950s an “oppositional” culture at every turn, and marking the center of the era the rise of civil rights in 1955.<sup>320</sup> The rise of civil rights was another site of rhetorical struggle in the 1950s, both celebrated and feared. The rise of popularity of black popular culture through jazz and other music during the era was punctuated with the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that the country should integrate with all “deliberate speed.” Lahmon sees the phrase as emblematic of the decade. “The real importance of the phrase is how it caught and crested a welling American mood. . . risen from a larger momentum running deep in the national life at mid-century. In many ways the state was catching up with and codifying the already deliberately speeding society – which in its turn was cuing off black culture.”<sup>321</sup> Lahmon’s analysis points to the hard work occurring under the public image of civil rights in the period to orchestrate protest and call national attention to the plight of black people. But for the purposes of this study, the civil rights movement functioned as another ambivalent site of meaning, where the acceleration of the culture was not reflected in the legal status of the people providing much of the impetus for new cultural forms.

Each of these moments serve to highlight the rhetorical struggles of the time. Although other factors are no doubt involved, the struggle over how to articulate the appropriate and normal is the struggle that gives salience to reading *On the Road* as rhetorical theory. Rhetoric, seen as a style, or manner of engagement appropriate to situated events, is not a new idea. As Robert Harriman suggests:

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<sup>319</sup> W.T. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>320</sup> Lhamon, 28.

<sup>321</sup> Lhamon, 33.

Traditionally, the search for the ability to achieve power by speaking led to an inventory of the techniques of verbal composition, and the recognition that discourse has to be appealing if it is to be effective led to an account of the aesthetic economies available to speakers in particular situations. From this perspective, style ultimately is a significant dimension of every human experience. More commonly, it is a particular expertise disposed, like any *technē*, to displace any other kind of intelligence.<sup>322</sup>

*Technē*, as discussed previously, was a term surrounded by a lot of discussion and interest by the ancient Athenians. Here Hariman takes the view that *technē* is a type of expertise that becomes normalized and displaces alternatives. This means that rhetoric, as a *technē* of style, reaches into most areas of human life. Style becomes the expertise of particular sets of aesthetic conditions that make certain words recognizable as appealing, and thereby, increases their effectiveness. Such uses of style are not just wanton grabs for power, but complicated systems of speaking, acting, and writing that set up the conditions for being appropriate, normal, and equal. As Hariman sees it, “As style succeeds, it articulates specific rules of usage for the composition of self and others in relations of equity and subordination. We then face certain choices. . . . We need to be aware that by weakening modernist discourses . . . one can place some peoples at grave risk.”<sup>323</sup> As I discussed above, these moves for naming, explaining, and justifying the relationship of America to the world, or Americans to atomic weapons, privilege and exclude those who are not persuaded by the explanations.

Hariman argues that our political experience is “relations of control and autonomy . . . negotiated through the artful composition of speech, gesture, ornament, décor, and any other means for modulating perception and shaping response.”<sup>324</sup> Thinking of rhetoric this way, and in

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<sup>322</sup> Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>323</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 7.

<sup>324</sup> Hariman, *Political Style*, 2.



the light of the rhetorical struggles of 1950s American life, perhaps Kerouac's novel – which led to him being named the father of the Beat Generation – can be seen as another attempt at developing a system of appropriate actions and interactions for a confusing era. Using Kenneth Burke's theories of rhetoric, and also keeping in mind Harriman's discussion of the relationship between rhetoric and style, I seek to read *On the Road* as a book that establishes a rhetoric for Americans in the 1950s, establishing style as well as motives for achieving consubstantiality in a very murky rhetorical environment.

## **4.2 KEROUAC'S EXIGENCE AND THE COMMUNICATION PROBLEM**

With Hariman and Burke influencing my understanding of rhetoric, how does Kerouac fit in as a developer of rhetorical theory? Using a combination of these ideas, I will argue that *On the Road* is an attempt to create a system of identification and accounting for motives rooted in style and propriety. *On the Road* can therefore be seen as a sourcebook for living properly in 1950s America. In this section I will examine some of Kerouac's letters and diary entries to show that the rhetorical drift of the period frustrated him as he sought to become a writer. The way Kerouac saw daily human interactions shows a man who is frustrated at a perceived lack of "real" communication going on between others around him.

The 1950s phenomena generated great anxiety for Kerouac that I characterize as about appropriate communicative frames. His letters and journal entries up to the publication of *On the Road* indicate Kerouac's deep concern with problems of human communication. I will analyze Kerouac's notebooks to indicate his interest in what he perceived as problems with daily communication. More specifically, Kerouac's rhetorical contribution to solve this perceived

issue is best understood as a concern with *kairos*, or the timely, opportune and possibly fleeting moment. I will first turn to Kerouac's journals to develop this argument.

Kerouac is concerned with the problem of "serious understanding" of the world and how to live in it. He expresses this concern in his journals: "Is this the way the world is going to end? In *indifference*? Where are the serious, consequential, undeniable true fires? Where are the old prophets and scribes of the Scriptures? Where is the Lamb? Where are the little ones? What has happened to parable? – to the Word? – even to mere tales and seriousness?"<sup>325</sup> Kerouac feels that there is a lack of rhetors – the serious prophets, who apparently spread the message of the Christian gospel. Kerouac's entry, titled "Lamentations" can be read as despair about the absence of appropriate rhetoric to combat the dangers of indifference, an indifference that Kerouac blames "social science" for: "Everybody in America sitting in the movie, avidly watching the crazy-serious gray screen – for what it has to show. It is so much better to explore things like that than silly imaginary questions like 'Should teenage girls marry?' – better and more intelligent, the 'social scientists' to the contrary."<sup>326</sup> The idea of indifference of people to important issues suggests a rhetorical reading of *On the Road*. Here Kerouac criticizes the detachment of "social scientists" from immediate human activity – mass culture, in this case the film industry. Kerouac is much more interested in the reasons behind why, in his view, everyone likes the movies, rather than the more abstract, and somewhat detached, generic questions of what people should or should not be doing. Kerouac's interest here is one of particular versus general, indicated by his use of "imaginary" to describe the abstract imperative question of appropriate marriage age. Kerouac expresses some disdain for research questions that don't

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<sup>325</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Windblown World :The Journals of Jack Kerouac, 1947-1954*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Viking, 2004), August 1949, 205.

<sup>326</sup> Kerouac, June 28, 1949, *Journals*, 200.

appear to him to be directly attached to the here and now of human experience. Indifference in lived human activity becomes a focal point for Kerouac in his journal writing.

His concern about indifference and dullness in the world also extends to his faith: “If only the devil *did* exist! Nothing of the sort can exist in such a dull, sensual, absentminded world, and would be laughed at.”<sup>327</sup> Kerouac, a devout Catholic even through his years of studying Buddhism, is not questioning the existence of the devil here. Rather, he is questioning how to get the contemporary audience to accept and believe in such a concept in his time. The world is too dull to even entertain the possibility of such a belief, and it frustrated him. Kerouac’s thought here can be characterized as rhetorical – a doubt that the devil, in all of the important symbolic power that figure represents – is not nearly enough to get attention from the dull, indifferent contemporary masses.

The tyranny of human indifference and lack of attentive minds was the problem Kerouac hoped to address in his writing: “And all we have left is details – pfui! This is why I say I don’t care for naturalism, or that is, *why I should write*.”<sup>328</sup> The existence of a fragmented world of details in his view necessitated explanation, or writing, as a solution. This decision spelled out in the pages of his journal was a decision to commit to a “fever of understanding. . . which will bridge and transcend from this life to the others, some serious, final and unchangeable sight of the universe.”<sup>329</sup> The “fever of understanding” is in opposition to, or at least a necessary addition to the scientific factual world: “Reason and the body of facts, science and truth, do not make me feel and do not bridge eternity, and in fact choke me like stale, close air.”<sup>330</sup> Indifference, he

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<sup>327</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 207.

<sup>328</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 207.

<sup>329</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 208.

<sup>330</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 208.

figures, is too bland and has no heat behind it. Reason, facts, and scientific truth have replaced “understanding,” and Kerouac hopes to write in order to contract – perhaps spread – this “fever” to others. This suggests that Kerouac saw limits in the scientific style of his time and wanted to create an alternative to the elements of indifference. It seems here that indifference is opposed to understanding, and understanding cannot be achieved without a perspective that reaches beyond accepted facts, scientific truth and reason.

Kerouac posits a vibrant if not clear conception of “understanding” that he wishes to advance against what could be called absent-minded existence:

I feel that I’m the only person in the world who doesn’t know the feeling of calm irreverence – the only madman in the world therefore – the only broken fish. All the others are perfectly contented with pure life. I am not. I want a pure understanding, and then pure life. What is that woman thinking on the doorstep across the street? She wants a husband. To understand love and the consciousness of love with him? – to enter into a conspiracy concerning eternity with him?

No – to absentmindedly, greedily screw in bed; and absentmindedly raise children; and absentmindedly die; to lie in an absentminded grave – *and let God worry about the rest.*

Not for me.

I’m going to decide the thing myself, even if I have to burn in the attempt.<sup>331</sup>

Kerouac goes on to state at the end of this passage in parenthesis, “So now I’m a psychotic finally.” How do we read such a quote? I suggest that in this quote we find that Kerouac’s great fear is that we are interacting with others, even in our romantic relationships, absent-mindedly. Although fully from his own subjective perspective, and also a bit pompous for putting thoughts into the head of another person, then judging them, we can still get a sense of the motives at play here. He, in a rather sophomoric way, decides that he must be the only person who is not content with life as it is. Echoing thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau and Immanuel Kant, Kerouac

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<sup>331</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 206.

sees other's lives as "quiet desperation" that he can perceive, and account for if he had "pure judgment." The important element here is that Kerouac expresses the idea that he can create an alternative system of decision making that is outside of what he sees as mainstream. He marks this idea in two ways as being outside the norm: First, he calls himself broken, as well as psychotic, and secondly he, perhaps unfairly, accounts for the motives of others by using the woman across the street as a metonymy for all women, and maybe even people, in society. He attributes his understanding of the contemporary rhetoric upon her and then uses it as a foil for his own ideas.

Kerouac's sense that something is seriously wrong in mainstream thought, leading to the problem of indifference, leads him to the conclusion that he must create text to solve it. He feels that his writing will reclaim a missing agency from human thought. To "decide the thing myself" even if he "burns in the attempt" is the recognition that his writing should be in stark opposition to the values of the world. In claiming to "decide the thing" for himself, Kerouac points out the danger he perceives in crafting an alternative rhetoric. Explained in Burkean terms, it could be said that without recourse to accepted means of attempting consubstantiality with others, he risks losing the ability to identify at all. Of course, for Burke we are never in a place where we do not identify and divide. Kerouac here is attempting to divide completely from what he perceives as the norms of judgment for his time. In doing so, he is identifying with ways of thinking outside his time and place, and begins to reference some of the things he has read that are influencing his thinking.

For example, Kerouac spends much time considering what symbolic action would be most effective: "No matter what one may say about pure life and joy, I don't believe it is enough,

I just don't believe any of it . . . the insouciance."<sup>332</sup> He questions "Why were these workingmen digging great holes?" in reference to the opening moments of this journal entry. He watched a construction project while pondering "the adolescent question of 'why do men go on living,'" thinking about the purpose, "and wondered why. That's enough."<sup>333</sup> The threat indifference brings is to devalue "wonder" – Kerouac points out the question is considered adolescent – but "wonder" is enough of a reason to keep on living. The idea of "wonder" is linked to the term "contact" – Kerouac vows to "be in contact with as much of this world (through means of variety of sensuality, i.e., experience of loves of all kinds) and I must be in contact with the Holy Final Whirlwinds that collect the ragged forms into one Whole Form."<sup>334</sup>

Kerouac's use of the term "contact" comes from a quote of Balzac that he uses in his journal in order to establish a theory as to why he feels he is psychotic, depressed, and doesn't belong. The Balzac quote, as Kerouac interprets it, discusses how human thinking power may be best understood as electrical at its root: "Men of science will recognize the great part played by electricity in human thinking power."<sup>335</sup> Kerouac makes much of this idea, theorizing as to why he feels the way he does:

When I am on the verge of suicide (as today), perhaps it is just something like a power failure because I have lost *contact* with the whole of the Universe? Why do I lose contact? And why, after years of depressions and moods like these, have I not come up with an answer to it?

Life is not enough if you lose contact with the other world, which is simply the perspective we have never seen but which apprises us of the intention of the whole of the universe – which is eventual contact among all things, the electrical togetherness of actual eternity.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 207.

<sup>333</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 206-7.

<sup>334</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 211.

<sup>335</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 210.

<sup>336</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 210.

For Kerouac, contact with eternity is the normal state of the healthy human mind, because it helps us stay in tune with the universe. Without this connection, without being “plugged in” to the current of the whole, one would feel there is no place for him or her in the world. The solution then would be to find a way to stay “plugged in.” “When I say I want to burn and I want to feel and I want to bridge from this life to the others, that is what I meant: -- to go to the other world, or that is, keep in contact with it till I get there. . . my happiness depends on the recognition of the other world while I am in this one, or I cannot stand this one.”<sup>337</sup>

Sounding a bit like a Catholic esthetic mystic, Kerouac taps into the ideology of his faith in order to describe his vision of the ultimate goal of his writing. Kerouac’s Catholic faith was part of an assemblage of religious tropes that informed not only his writing, but perhaps other Beats as well. Robert Ellwood described the Beat relationship to religion as a sort of underground economy of many symbols, which fits this quote from Kerouac:<sup>338</sup>

I shall keep in contact with all things that cross my path, and trust all things that do not cross my path, and exert more greatly for further and further visions of the other world, and preach (if I can) in my work, and love, and attempt to hold down my lonely vanities so as to contact more and more with all things (and kinds of people), and believe that my consciousness of life and eternity is not a mistake, or a loneliness, or a foolishness, -- but a warm dear love of our poor predicament which by the grace of Mysterious God will be solved and made clear to all of us in the end, maybe only.<sup>339</sup>

Here Kerouac’s higher purpose is a mix of holy vision and proselytization of a very Christian message of conversion through love. He sees his position as one of explanation and correction through “preaching” if possible the importance of connection between all people and things. He

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<sup>337</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 211.

<sup>338</sup> Robert Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997). Also see Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology, Aesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) for more on Kerouac and Catholicism.

<sup>339</sup> Kerouac, August 30, 1949, *Journals*, 211.

believes this task is an important one for the eradication of the belief that life is foolishness or a mistake. It is through a faith that existence is a mystery that will be revealed one day that Kerouac places the importance of his writing.

It can be seen that Kerouac is concerned with one of the great issues of the twentieth century: “The possibility of communication is the twentieth century’s version of the mystery of faith.”<sup>340</sup> Kerouac’s solution is to combine the two: Communication is necessary to preserve the value of life in the face of indifference, as it keeps one connected to one’s place in the universe.

At around the same time, Kenneth Burke was writing about the significance of symbolic action as necessary for human beings who are by nature always at a distance from one another. Burke’s engagement with the problem of communication is, like Kerouac’s, rhetorical:

Identification is compensatory to division. . . . If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man’s very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it now is, partly embodied in material conditions and partly frustrated by these same conditions; rather, it would be as natural, spontaneous, and total as with those ideal prototypes of communication, the theologian’s angels, or ‘messengers.’<sup>341</sup>

Kenneth Burke’s observation of the necessity of rhetoric is similar to Kerouac’s understanding of the importance of writing. Burke’s ideal communicators, the angels, have no need of explanation, rhetoric or justification – they simply know each other’s minds. Kerouac feels that the mystery of existence will be revealed only if people wonder and avoid the dangers of indifference, which is possible if they wonder and write. Kerouac and Burke are both concerned with the question of how to get across meaning, identity and value in a world that materially frustrates the contact of minds, hearts and souls. *On the Road*, analyzed from a Burkean rhetorical perspective, is Kerouac’s attempt at a solution to the recalcitrance of embodied

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<sup>340</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 251.

<sup>341</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 22.



humans attempting to forge relationships together in society. According to Burke, society is an amalgam of “manifestations of the creative impulse” in human beings, and that collectively we could, “go from any point in the series to any other point in the series without ellipsis,” although we “might arrange our steps.”<sup>342</sup> This arrangement has taken on many forms depending on who is doing the writing, but for Burke, the dramatic or poetic arrangement (taken in the loose etymology of poetic from the Greek “poesis” or “creating”) is the one that cannot only account for human motives and interests, but can account for arrangements of those interests as well. In his concluding remarks of an earlier book, *Permanence and Change*, Burke offers reflections on the thesis that to believe thoughts and acts are affected by interests is to bring up an overwhelming amount of implications:

The conclusion we should draw from our thesis is a belief that the ultimate metaphor for discussing the universe and man’s relations to it must be the poetic or dramatic metaphor. Many metaphors are possible. . . And though any of these simplifications can serve as a postulate from which important and useful considerations (usually called ‘proof’) will follow, we suggest that the metaphor of the poetic or dramatic man can include them all and go beyond them all.<sup>343</sup>

Burke’s argument attempts to solve the gaps in disembodied communication attempts by grounding them rhetorically. He sees the poetic metaphor as containing a vocabulary “of tropes (as formulated by the rhetoricians) to describe the specific patterns of human behavior.” This does not mean that human existence and behavior is a purely imagined or verbally created enterprise – many times humans come up against material resistance, or recalcitrance. Burke feels that the world is crafted through a poetic and dramatic negotiation of our motives with the world, which produce attitudes, or responses among people. This world-building is not a pure

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<sup>342</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 262-3.

<sup>343</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 264.

social construction idea, but one that incorporates and understands material limits as a part of ethics. “It [the idea of universe building through statements] does not imply that the universe is merely the product of our interpretations. for the interpretations themselves must be altered as the universe displays various orders of recalcitrance to them. We are emphasizing the fact that the ethical bent from which one approaches the universe is itself a part of the universe, and a very important part.”<sup>344</sup>

Given this notion of the recalcitrant world and human attitude as the elements involved in creating reality, Burke’s idea of the poetic metaphor as the master trope for explanation of human motives makes sense. It is the rhetorical idea of adaptation – that people are always adapting their statements in hopes of gaining adherence from interlocutors – that is forgotten when more simplistic metaphors are used to account for human action. As Burke explains:

Social life, like art, is a *problem of appeal*, the poetic metaphor would give us invaluable hints for describing modes of practical action which are too often measured by simple tests of utility and too seldom with reference to the communicative, sympathetic, *propitiatory* factors that are clearly present in the procedures of formal art and must be as truly present in those informal arts of living we do not happen to call arts.<sup>345</sup>

Burke believes that since life requires appeal in order for it to be conducted, an art such as poetry can give assistance to understanding the twists and turns of human behavior in life that are not present in alternative metaphors. This assistance comes from an appreciation of the formal methods the art has developed in order to answer the question of appeal. The poetic metaphor emphasizes the “participant aspect of action rather than its competitive aspect” which permits a, “prompt basis of objection” when economic motives “force us to overstress competitive

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<sup>344</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 256.

<sup>345</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 264.

attitudes.”<sup>346</sup> Most importantly, the poetic metaphor would lead to a new understanding of communication as something humans are posited within, and not a tool of their own design and mastery: “A study of communication which necessarily emphasizes the *social* nature of human adjustment, should combine these methods, considering men as *possessed*, and men as the *inventors of new solutions* – but these two frames would be subdivisions in a larger frame, *men as communicants*.”<sup>347</sup>

Burke’s specific definition of rhetoric as a broad frame to understand human interaction has several points in common with Kerouac’s ideas on the problems of the 1950s. Kerouac’s larger goal appears to be finding a way to reach others who he perceives as totally indifferent to the importance of wonder and connection to larger purpose. Burke’s larger goal, that of the purification of war, or finding ways around violent confrontation is through inducement via the symbolic. This is Burke’s definition of rhetoric. *On the Road*, critiqued from the perspective of Burkean rhetoric, can give an appreciation of the book as a source of alternative strategies for identification and symbolic interaction.

### 4.3 KEROUAC’S METHOD

Earlier I suggested a dual understanding of rhetoric – concerned with both style and Burkean identification. In this section I will explain Kerouac’s method of “spontaneous prose” and how it factors into understanding style, propriety and rhetoric as interconnected.

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<sup>346</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 266.

<sup>347</sup> Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 267.

Kerouac's writing method of spontaneous prose has been examined by many scholars, but few from the perspective of rhetoric. Spontaneous prose for Swartz is, "the vehicle of this freedom's expression and vision," which "enacts a merger between content and experience."<sup>348</sup> Justin Trudeau analyzes Kerouac's "Essentials for Spontaneous Prose" as a pivotal moment in the culmination of American performance theory and methods. Trudeau argues that Kerouac is best understood as understanding writing as a culmination of a long history of American performance traditions.<sup>349</sup>

Kerouac realized that the problem of understanding American communication was a problem of multiple voices. Writing to Neal Cassidy in 1950, he states, "The modern young writer is now faced with the problem of many voices in America. A book always has a voice . . . Well, since Mexico, I've been trying to find my voice."<sup>350</sup> Kerouac argues that the best writing is the writing that allows voices to exist without artifice and construction on the part of the author: "My important recent discovery and revelation is that the voice is all. Can you tell me Shakespeare's voice per se? – who speaks when Hamlet speaks? HAMLET, not Will Shakespeare, whose voice we've never really heard."<sup>351</sup> Kerouac's solution is to let each of these voices speak for themselves through a particular style of writing:

You, man, must write exactly as everything rushes into your head, and AT ONCE. The pain of writing is just that. . . physical cramps in the hand, nothing else, of course. . . What I'm going to do is let the voices speak for themselves. I'm going to write one book in nigger dialect, another in bum dialect, another in hip-musician dialect, another in French-Canadian dialect, another in American- Mexican dialect, another in Indian

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<sup>348</sup> Omar Swartz, *The View from on the Road : The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 9-10.

<sup>349</sup> See Justin Trudeau, *Jack Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose: A Performance Geneology of the Fiction*. Ph.D. Diss. Louisiana State University, 2006.

<sup>350</sup> Jack Kerouac, "To Neal Cassidy, Oct 6," in *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Viking, 1995), 232.

<sup>351</sup> Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, 232.

dialect, another in cool dialect, and I might one day write a slim little volume narrated by an effeminate queer.<sup>352</sup>

This sort of observation for us today is easy to dismiss as rather sophomoric. However, it is important to take seriously for understanding Kerouac's rhetorical theory. This sentiment expressed in the quote can be compared to the nineteenth century senses of communication as an "electrical connection between distant individuals."<sup>353</sup> Kerouac saw writing as a way of contacting distant minds by pretending to speak as those minds. This is a formidable rhetorical challenge, and one that might be considered impossible given the inability of escaping one's distinct positionality in the world. However, he seems to think that he can channel these attitudes and voices by merely writing without editing.

Kerouac's laundry-list of projects is a roll call of 1950s marginalized perspectives, peoples whose voices Kerouac felt he could channel by enduring "physical cramps of the hand." There was no concern in his method for the effects of mediation. Kerouac's dream of speaking for these others in an attempt to identify with them directly has been the dream of pure communication since at least the nineteenth century: "The dream of communication only upped the longing for an escape from the morally intractable condition of plurality, that is, of life among other creatures whose perspectives are both hidden from us and never exactly our own."<sup>354</sup> Kerouac felt he could establish a connection via the *technē* and technology of writing, and spontaneous prose was the method he developed in an attempt to reach these other minds. *On the Road* is the end result of this development, passed on to the reader not only as an electric engagement with the multiple voices of America, but as a persuasive moment. *On the Road* can

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<sup>352</sup> Kerouac, *Selected Letters*, 233.

<sup>353</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 94.

<sup>354</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 108.

be seen through a Burkean lens as a metaphor, or a perspective by incongruity that he hoped would make Americans more mindful of how they speak to each other. As Burke states, “Metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this.”<sup>355</sup> *On the Road* could be summarized with the phrase, “That is how America communicates, and *this* is how it should communicate.” In between, one finds the similarity through the difference; the consubstantiality of American voices. This is very similar to how Jeffrey Murray reads Burke’s master trope of irony – “Ultimately, irony depends upon the perspectives of Others— of other symbol users—and is thus an explicitly dialogical rather than rhetorical trope. Moreover, this inclusion of the voices of Others in the construction of ‘truth’ distinguishes irony as *ethical*.”<sup>356</sup> Kerouac hoped to bring other voices in by avoiding the potential pitfalls of mediation in representing their voices. Spontaneous prose can be seen as a rhetorical device that hoped to avoid the problems of mediation and speaking for others by circumventing editing. Spontaneous prose was a method Kerouac felt would give him access to the other – or realize the dream of perfect communication.

#### 4.4 THE PRODUCTION OF *ON THE ROAD*

Kerouac’s solution to the problem of a world of unseemly rhetoric led to his development of a writing style he called spontaneous prose which attempts to leave nothing out of the final product. It is unlikely that Kerouac “spontaneously” wrote *On the Road*, as many of the

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<sup>355</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 503.

<sup>356</sup> Jeffrey W. Murray, “Kenneth Burke: A Dialogue of Motives,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 35, no. 1 (January 2002): 22-49, 22.

passages correspond with pages from his earlier journals, and the fact that Kerouac never codified his spontaneous prose technique until well after *On the Road* had been published.<sup>357</sup> But Gerald Nicosia once again offers a nice framing for Kerouac's ideological method of writing:

He didn't write to know the world, but to know *his visions* of the world, to examine the various stages of his awareness of things. On the simplest level, he was trying to find the mental components that added up to a writer's personality. 'Sketching' put the writer at the very center of the composition. Plot and theme were reduced to the passage of perceptions across his sensorium. Thus, the focus of the writing was narrowed to a single, sharply delimited point of view: this particular writer's peephole into reality. Nevertheless the technique also granted an incredible freedom, since there was no longer any reason to exclude from one's writing any detail that came to mind.<sup>358</sup>

As Nicosia sees it, Kerouac's writing technique was deeply concerned with perspective and the opportunity writing gave to achieve knowledge and understanding. Beat political style, as Hariman might call it, involved great attention to detail as the writer, or rhetor, perceived it – placing fidelity to the objective and neutral reality second, at best.

Analyzing *On the Road* is a difficult and selective matter. The novel is dizzying in its complexities of characters and events. As Nicosia argues, "Any attempt to merely enumerate themes would not do *On the Road* justice, for the book operates on many levels. It also provides a comprehensive social criticism of post-World War II America. This criticism ranges from a mild satire of greed. . .to a serious concern with conformism . . . to a horror at the increasing violence, repression of healthy pleasure, and militaristic mania. . ."<sup>359</sup> My analysis will not

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<sup>357</sup> See Matt Theado, "Revisions of Kerouac: The Long, Strange Trip of the *On the Road* Typescripts," in Hillary Holladay and Robert Holton, eds., *What's Your Road, Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009) and Howard Cunnell, "Fast This Time: Jack Kerouac and the Writing of *On the Road*" in Howard Cunnell, ed. *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (New York: Penguin, 2008) for more detail on the legend surrounding the writing of the novel.

<sup>358</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 359.

<sup>359</sup> Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 348.

attempt to extract the central or even key themes of *On the Road*. Instead, what I will do is provide a rhetorical criticism of the novel from the Burkean understanding of rhetoric to implicitly craft Kerouac's contribution to a beat rhetoric. The beat rhetoric is an implicit theory, and my analysis will extract rhetorical concepts and ideas from the text, and argue for their position within a larger theory of rhetoric. I also hope that thinking of Kerouac as offering a rhetoric or a system of understanding, speaking, writing and engaging, opens up a new way of appreciating his work, as well as a new way of understanding the appeal of the Beat Generation.

#### 4.5 ON THE ROAD: A COMPARATIVE AMERICAN RHETORIC

First is the question of the character of Dean Moriarty. Dean could be seen as the focus of the book and its main character. *On the Road* centrally concerns the characters of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise. Sal narrates the story and records his first impressions of Dean when he meets him in New York:

To him [Dean] sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life, although he had to sweat and curse to make a living and so on. You saw that in the way he stood bobbing his head, always looking down, nodding, like a young boxer to instructions, to make you think he was listening to every word, throwing in a thousand "Yeses" and "That's rights." My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry – trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent – a sideburned hero of the snowy West.<sup>360</sup>

Dean, already described as a hero – specifically described as if he walked out of a Western movie – by Sal indicates that he already admires him, and we will see that admiration come through primarily through Dean's choices of framing and response, both, I argue, key elements

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<sup>360</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, Viking Compass ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 2.



of the rhetoric Kerouac is forwarding. Here he has Sal describe Dean through the rhetorical commonplace of a celebrity, as well as from the West, which functions as an American trope for discovery, adventure, and individuality in the imaginary. Sal goes on to explain that Dean's "nature" is one of the reasons that he admired him so:

I wanted to know Dean more, and because my life hanging around the campus had reached the completion of its cycle and was stultified, but because, somehow in spite of our difference in character, he reminded me of some long-lost brother; the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic. His dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a custom tailor but only earn it from the Natural Tailor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses.<sup>361</sup>

Here Sal highlights that the markings of Dean's body – his physical appearance and clothing, indicate Dean is quite different from Sal. However, the differences seem to spark a mutual desire to identify. Jennifer Luongo argues that this mutual identification can be read as a to the United States as it transitioned from the Fredrick Jackson Turner thesis that frontier defined America, but with one key difference: "Sal can see his own social past when he looks at Dean much as Turner's frontiersman is able to view the untamed land that gives way to the society in which he lives. However, unlike the wild American land that eventually gave way to settlements, Dean's character is like an ever receding frontier line; ultimately he remains untouched by 'civilization.'"<sup>362</sup> Dean's distance from civilization coupled with the familiar and happy moments he sparks in Sal evoke the Burkean moment for the appearance of rhetoric: "Put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and

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<sup>361</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 7.

<sup>362</sup> Jennifer Luongo, *Memory, History and the Journey West in the Twentieth-Century Novel*. Ph.D. Diss., Fordham University, 2006, 128.

the other beings, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric.”<sup>363</sup> Identification for Burke means being “substantially one with a person other than himself.”<sup>364</sup> Identification in Burke’s sense is always paired with its “ironic counterpart,” division. Sal seems to recognize this right away in his interaction with Dean. Dean has clothes from the tailor of “Natural Joy,” yet like a young boxer, Dean has had to fight to get everything. Dean looks like Gene Autry, but also reminds Sal of his Patterson boyhood, when he played on the Passaic riverbank. The ambiguity of Dean’s familiarity with his foreignness sparks Sal to engage with Dean in order to “place” him as similarly motivated.

For Burke, rhetoric is the study of competitive struggle, when man “surrounds himself with properties that name his number or establish his identity, man is ethical.” This construction is always at risk of being in conflict with other structures of identity: “Its relation to other entities that are likewise forming their identity in terms of property can lead to turmoil and discord.” It is this unavoidable situation that for Burke must be studied by rhetoric: “Here is *par excellence* a topic to be considered in a rhetoric having ‘identification’ as its key term.”<sup>365</sup>

So in the meeting of Dean and Sal we have an invitation to rhetoric, or a struggle of how identification and division work to create stable relations out of something nearly unintelligible, yet cannot remain that way. The relationship of Dean and Sal serve as a template for identification and division. As Sal and Dean identify and become consubstantial – as well as the moments when they divide from each others’ motives – inventories of motives are created for the reader and serve as an index of rhetorical options. In short, rhetorical options are strategies of

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<sup>363</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 25.

<sup>364</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21.

<sup>365</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 21-25.

how to identify with others and reach consubstantiality within a particular discursive environment.

Dean serves as the primary figure of identification in the novel. A key moment is when Dean arrives at Sal's house in order to learn how to write. "He came right out to Patterson, New Jersey, where I was living with my aunt, and one night while I was studying there was a knock on the door, and there was Dean, bowing, shuffling obsequiously in the dark of the hall, and saying, 'Hel-lo, you remember me – Dean Moriarty? I've come to ask you to show me how to write.'"<sup>366</sup> Here Dean is divided from Sal, but wants to learn from him the very thing that divides them – Dean perceives Sal as much more "intellectual," while Sal finds Dean's lack of intellectual-ity the most interesting thing about him. In this quote, Dean is further "identified" via Sal's nice division of Dean from everyone else who is in his circle of friends at the time of their introduction:

All my other current friends were 'intellectuals' – Chad the Nietzschean anthropologist, Carlo Marx and his nutty surrealist low-voiced serious staring talk, Old Bull Lee and his critical anti-everything drawl – or else they were slinking criminals like Elmer Hassel, with that hip sneer; Jane Lee the same, sprawled on the Oriental cover of her couch, sniffing at the *New Yorker*. But Dean's intelligence was very bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his 'criminality' was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons, but Dean just raced in society, eager for bread and love; he didn't care one way or the other, "so long's I can get that lil ole gal with that lil supin down there tween her legs, boy," and 'so long's we can *eat* son, y'ear me? I'm *hungry*, I'm *starving*, let's *eat right now!*" – and off we'd rush to *eat*, whereof, as saith Ecclesiastes, 'It is your portion under the sun.'<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 3

<sup>367</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 7-8.

Dean is clearly positioned as valued for his anti-intellectualism and wild appreciation for the embodied pleasures of life, such as sex and food. Sal is not interested in critiquing American society, but being a part of it; being in society instead of above it. He finds himself consubstantial with Dean because he believes Dean to have the proper relationship to society – Dean is not dividing himself from American society, but living in it; being American.<sup>368</sup>

These moments proliferate in the book. Sal, near the end of the novel, offers some concern that perhaps Dean's rhetoric of constant movement might be unsustainable:

'I want to marry a girl,' I told them, 'so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can't go on all the time – all this frantiness and jumping around. We've got to go someplace, find something.'  
'Ah now, man,' said Dean, 'I've been digging you for years about the *home* and marriage and all those fine wonderful things about your soul.' It was a sad night; it was also a merry night.<sup>369</sup>

Here is a great example of Kerouac's savvy approach to the anxieties surrounding communication in 1950s America. Sal muses that perhaps the idea of having a home and a traditional family will be the end result of their constant going. Dean makes the interesting response that he has appreciated these aspects of Sal's approach to life, but he stops short of agreeing with him. For Sal, there is recognition of happiness and sadness due to this exchange: Happiness because they both identify with each other, but sadness because the gap between them is reified by the exchange. Dean and Sal cannot be each other – the source of sadness. However, through a rhetorical response of "digging" the other's perspective, the night can still be happy. Steve Wilson makes a similar observation about *On the Road*, noting that, "Kerouac's search for

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<sup>368</sup> See George Mouratidis, "*Into the Heart of Things*": Neal Cassidy and the Search for the Authentic in Howard Cunnell, ed. *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 69.

<sup>369</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 117.

truth would involve ‘digging’ the lives of the dispossessed - not merely studying Blacks, Mexicans, criminals, but attempting to *become* them for a time, as Buddha sought to contain all walks of life within the Self.”<sup>370</sup> Unfortunately, as Wilson points out, there are serious limits to such a project that he links to Kerouac’s future disappointment and depression with the book: “In the end, then Kerouac’s direction in these two early autobiographical works [*On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*] will be to trace his increasing awareness, and deepening despair, that life as a writer will make him only at best a Bodhisattva – one guiding others to possible enlightenment – always describing what he can never himself obtain.”<sup>371</sup> Wilson’s comparison of Kerouac’s project to Buddha’s philosophy has interesting insights for my analysis – if we think of Buddha as representing perfect communication, then a Bodhisattva, someone who postpones enlightenment in order to enlighten others – we can see the distinction between perfect communication and rhetoric. Perfect communication doesn’t need rhetoric, as rhetoric is the process of making one’s motives consubstantial with others in order to form relationships. Kerouac cannot achieve transmission through rhetoric – so perhaps Wilson is right. But he can achieve consubstantiality, which is as good as identification gets in Burke’s view.

Some of the more interesting moments of the book are when communication and rhetorical practices take center stage. In one scene, Dean and Carlo Marx – an intellectual poet and friend of both Dean and Sal - conduct a series of “communication experiments” where they attempt to reach, in Burkean terms, “perfect communication.” They want to know the content of the other’s thoughts purely, like mind reading. These interactions between characters in *On the Road* I read as persuasive demonstrations of the failure of alternative methods to connect to

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<sup>370</sup> Steve Wilson, “Buddha Writing: The Author and the Search for Authenticity in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and . . .” *Midwest Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 302, 303.

<sup>371</sup> Wilson, “Buddha Writing,” 303.

others, and Kerouac's humorous tone seems to point out the impossibility. Dean comes to Carlo's apartment late at night and the two characters attempt to know each other's minds in a direct and pure way. Carlo offers this description of the experiments to Sal:

'Dean and I are embarked on a tremendous season together. We're trying to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness everything on our minds. We've had to take Benzedrine. We sit on the bed, crosslegged, facing each other. I have finally taught Dean that he can do anything he wants, become mayor of Denver, marry millionaires, or become the greatest poet since Rimbaud. But he keeps rushing out to see the midnight auto races. I go with him. He jumps and yells, excited. You know, Sal, Dean is really hung-up on things like that.' Marx said 'Hmmm' in his soul and thought about this.<sup>372</sup>

Carlo, like Old Bull Lee who I will discuss later in this chapter, serves as a representative of the type of discourse that Sal rejects as "intellectual" and pokes fun at in comparison to the attitude that he and Dean forge together on the road. Carlo's statement here is a clear parody of American egalitarian educational discourse which asserts that the young American can "do anything if they put their mind to it." Carlo's liberation of Dean is clearly a preparation for him to achieve normal visions of success, which Dean tosses to go watch late night car races. Carlo believes he can accomplish all this through a specialized form of communication intrigues Sal, who decides to go to Carlo's apartment to observe one of these late night sessions:

It was like the room of a Russian saint: one bed, a candle burning, stone walls that oozed moisture, and a crazy makeshift ikon of some kind that he had made. He [Carlo] read me his poetry. It was called 'Denver Doldrums.' Carlo woke up in the morning and heard the 'vulgar pigeons' yakking in the street outside his cell; he saw the 'sad nightingales' nodding on the branches and they reminded him of his mother. A gray shroud fell over the city. The mountains, the magnificent Rockies that you can see to the west form any part of town, were 'papier-mâché.' The whole universe was crazy and cock-eyed and extremely strange. He wrote of Dean as a 'child of the rainbow' who bore his torment in his agonized priapus. He referred to him as 'Oedipus Eddie' who had to 'scrape bubble gum off windowpanes.' He brooded in his basement over a huge journal in which he was keeping track of everything that happened every day – everything Dean did and said.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 41-2.

<sup>373</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 47.

Sal offers an interesting picture of Carlo's life in Denver, most notably disbelief at his rhetorical framing of the world. Sal seems amazed that the "magnificent" Rocky Mountains, the landscape of America are merely paper mâché in Carlo's words. The magnificent geography of the United States, so important to Sal, is artificial in Carlo's rhetorical frame. Sal seems not to understand Carlo's work, but perhaps Kerouac is doing some spoofing of romantic poetry here. There is an apt argument from Wayne Booth that captures the relationship between Sal Paradise, Kerouac and the reader. In his discussion of types of narrators in fiction that are effective, Booth identifies one type where, "though the narrator may have some redeeming qualities of mind or heart, we travel with the silent author, observing as from a rear seat the humorous or disgraceful or ridiculous or vicious driving behavior of the narrator seating in front. The author may wink and nudge, but he may not speak."<sup>374</sup> The quote is a good description of the sincere but perhaps naive or faulty picture we get of characters or moments during the book from Sal. The quote becomes even more eerily apt when examining the driving scenes, as Dean always drives the car and Sal carries on silent reflection or critique of the way Dean drives. Although many scholars interchangeable swap Kerouac for Sal Paradise (Wilson notes this), Booth indicates what might be lost in such an easy exchange. We might lose the deliberate misdirection of the narrator as a part of the creation of the story. In our case, we might lose a vital part of the subtle rhetorical strategies that Sal's motives can provide.

In the first scene with the communication "experiments" between Carlo and Dean, we see Sal's narrative "driving" as a potential moment of Kerouac ribbing. Carlo broods in a dark bare

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<sup>374</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 300.

room fit for medieval religious martyrs and dutifully collects data on the phenomena of daily life. Carlo's approach to the world is at a distance, distinct from the world of Dean and Sal from the beginning of the experiment. Carlo is the consummate intellectual, who Dean and Sal attempted to break from at the beginning of the book. As it starts, Sal sets up the scene:

"Then they got down to business. They sat on the bed cross-legged and looked straight at each other. I slouched in a nearby chair and saw all of it. They began with an abstract thought, discussed it; reminded each other of another abstract point forgotten in the rush of events; Dean apologized but promised he could get back to it and manage it fine, bringing up illustrations."<sup>375</sup>

The experiment begins with the tone and style of a business meeting, or professional interaction. Sal considers the points "abstract," a nice wink from Kerouac that Sal does not get the point of what's going on. The discussion continues, and Sal lets us hear some of the conversational experiment in progress:

"Of course that isn't it! Because you forget that – But I'll stop accusing you. Yes is what I said. . ." And on, on into the night they talked like this. At dawn I looked up. They were tying up the last of the morning's matters. "When I said to you that I had to sleep *because* of Marylou, that is, seeing her this morning at then, I didn't bring my peremptory tone to bear in regard to what you'd just said about the unnecessariness of sleep but only, *only*, mind you, because of the fact that I absolutely, simply, purely and without any whatevers have to sleep now, I mean, man, my eyes are closing, they're redhot, sore, tired, beat . . ."

"Ah, child," said Carlo

"We'll just have to sleep now. Let's stop the machine."

"You can't stop the machine!" yelled Carlo at the top of his voice. The first birds sang.

"Now when I raise my hand," said Dean, "we'll stop talking, we'll both understand purely and without any hassle that we are simply stopping talking, and we'll just sleep."

"You can't stop the machine like that."<sup>376</sup>

The "machine" of direct mental knowledge, to Carlo, is beyond the control of either of them. It is not something that can be put off even for biological needs, such as sleep. Carlo's rhetoric is

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<sup>375</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 48.

<sup>376</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 49-50.



beyond the needs of the “now.” For Dean, it is appropriate to attend to the needs of the moment based on situational exigency. For Carlo, the “machine” must press on no matter what the situation; it is inappropriate to try to stop something larger than ourselves. This scene seems to offer a criticism of mainstream ideas about communication, mechanistic and operating in spite of the limits of human biology. In Burke’s terms, Carlo’s communication theory is unethical as it fails to adjust its parameters for the recalcitrance of sleepiness. As Sal chimes in, the critique is somewhat clarified:

“Stop the machine,” I said. They looked at me.

“He’s been awake all this time, listening. What were you thinking, Sal?” I told them that I was thinking they were very amazing maniacs and that I had spent the whole night listening to them like a man watching the mechanism of a watch that reached clear to the top of Berthoud Pass and yet was made with the smallest works of the most delicate watch in the world. They smiled. I pointed my finger at them and said, “If you keep this up you’ll both go crazy, but let me know what happens as you go along.”<sup>377</sup>

The machine analogy is extended and offered as a superimposed watch atop the geography of Colorado. Sal attempts a permutation of ideas, one that shows how their machine can be beautiful and fit into America’s geography at the same time. However, Sal does jokingly warn that they may “go crazy” pursuing this, but requests details of the trek into insanity. The “amazing maniacs” impress Sal but they are also engaged in something that seems trivial to him, although beautiful. It’s not as serious or as good a model as being out on the road and engaging American others directly. It’s hard to read Sal’s reaction. One moment we think that Sal sees the experiment as beautiful, but ill-suited for its goal. Another interpretation is that Sal is perhaps lampooning the experiment as about as useful as a watch the size of Colorado. Sal becomes much more interested in Dean as the model rhetorician, praising Dean’s ability to account,

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<sup>377</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 50.

describe and articulate the most complicated phenomena they encounter on their road trips. Although Sal certainly likes Carlo, he looks upon Carlo's style as silly and possibly naive. Reading the scene from the rhetorical critic's perspective, Sal sees the combination of their rhetorical styles as a potentially beautiful machine, but questions its utility. Comparing rhetorics, Sal prefers Dean's approach, since he characterizes Carlo's as stemming from an ancient, monastic ethos.

As Sal continues his relationship with Dean, it is apparent that what interests Sal the most is Dean's sense of timing. I will now compare Dean's timing to the ancient concept of *kairos*, defined as timing, appropriateness, and opportunity, to name just a few of the interpretations scholars have offered.<sup>378</sup> Dean is primarily concerned with the time throughout the book, and what they are going to do at what time. Dean is overly concerned with accurate time and frustrated when he feels that time is being wasted. *Kairos*, as multiple scholars have argued, is an essential concern of any rhetorical practice. As I discussed in a previous chapter, *kairos* is best understood as a situational timing or opportunity not just for appropriate words, but for the identification of a situation of invention. Kerouac places timing and timeliness throughout his book, indicating its situational, cultural and specific nature again and again. Dean arrives in New York City from Colorado to meet Sal, and immediately his sense of timing and timeliness is the first moment where Sal gives us incredible detail about Dean:

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<sup>378</sup> *Kairos* is a rich concept that has been studied across multiple fields. The trajectory I am using stems from its treatment in rhetoric. See James Kinneavy, "Kairos in Classical and Modern Theory," and John Poulakos, "Kairos in Gorgias' Rhetorical Compositions," both in Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, Eds. *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory and Praxis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); and for more theological background see Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

All this time Dean was telling Marylou things like this: “Now, darling, here we are in New York and although I haven’t quite told you everything that I was thinking about when we crossed Missouri and especially at the point when we passed the Boonville reformatory which reminded me of my jail problem, it is absolutely necessary now to postpone all those leftover things concerning our personal lovethings and at once begin thinking of specific worklife plans . . . “ and so on in the way that he had in those early days.<sup>379</sup>

Here Dean displays a sense of timing related to notions of appropriateness and location, or scene. Dean is concerned about things such as “worklife” plans over concerns about “lovethings,” since the demands of the situation of being in New York require a concern with getting a job and making money. Dean is also keenly aware that the moment is shaping these needs, but that he is in control of shaping the needs of the moment with his words. For example, he determines what is “absolutely necessary” in this moment by referring to a past moment with his girlfriend where he chose not to fully discuss an even more distant moment. The moment is again characterized with time by Sal who adds that this is how Dean behaved in “those early days,” again marking his discourse as momentary. Dean seems the embodiment of Eric White’s understanding of *kairos* as a combination between the arts of archery and weaving. White takes the ancient view of these arts to argue that the meaning of *kairos* is understood best through its relationship with contingency -- “that there can never be more than a contingent and provisional management of the present opportunity.” He argues that *kairos* is an art of recognizing beginnings – “As a prescription concerning the basis on which thought can begin to intervene in the world, *kairos* is offered with the understanding, then that thought must always be willing, as circumstances change, to begin *again*.”<sup>380</sup> Dean, through the course of the book, is the master of seizing

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<sup>379</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 2.

<sup>380</sup> Eric Charles White, *Kaironomia: On the Will to Invent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 13, 17.

opportunity to begin again, often in the style that Sal displays for us early in the book. Sal's attention to the detail of exactly how Dean delivers his words – marking visually the signs of accent and hesitation – show that the verbal intervention is as important as the moment of its delivery. Sal is attuned and fascinated by Dean's *kairotic* sensibility.

Dean is often characterized in the book as someone obsessed with time and timing, and doing things when they are the most opportune. As Sal describes an interaction Dean has with his girlfriend, explaining why he must go out in the middle of the night:

“It is now” (looking at his watch) “exactly one-fourteen. I shall be back at exactly *three-fourteen*, for our hour of reverie together, real sweet reverie, darling, and then, as you know, as I told you and as we agreed, I have to go and see the one-legged lawyer about those papers – in the middle of the night, strange as it seems and as I tho-ro-ly explained.” (This was a coverup for his rendezvous with Carlo, who was still hiding.) “So now in this exact minute I must dress, put on my pants, go back to life, that is to outside life, streets and what not, as we agreed, it is now *one-fifteen* and time's running, running . . .”<sup>381</sup>

Dean's attentiveness to the exact minute of departure and return, as well as scheduling his lover as if she were a laborer, speak to the characterization of time that Dean Moriarty comes to represent at the beginning of the novel. As Sal says, “There was always a schedule in Dean's life.”<sup>382</sup> Dean's concern with timing could be seen as his desire to never miss moments of opportunity. Dean's deception of his girlfriend under the guise of seeing a lawyer about divorcing his wife for her is a cover for engaging in communication experiments with Carlo Marx in his basement apartment. Dean's concern with timing is linked to concern for opportunity, and his words are crafted in order to maximize his own perceived opportunities. Dean has little concern with the time or opportunities of others, unless it is connected to his own.

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<sup>381</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 43.

<sup>382</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 42.

In another example, Dean comes to see Sal in Denver, Colorado, in order to take a trip to Mexico. As soon as Dean arrives, he begins to plan the trip and experiences with an urgent eye toward the clock:

“Yass, yass. Well, Sal old man, what’s the story, when do we take off for Mexico? Tomorrow afternoon? Fine, fine. Ahem! And now, Sal I have exactly sixteen minutes to make it to Ed Dunkel’s house, where I am about to recover my old railroad watch which I can pawn on Larimer Street before closing time, meanwhile buzzing very quickly and as thoroughly as time allows to see if my old man by chance may be in Jiggs’ Buffet or some of the other bars and then I have an appointment with the barber Doll always told me to patronize and I have not myself change over the years and continue with that policy – kaff! Kaff! At six o’clock *sharp!* – sharp, hear me? – I want you to be right here where I’ll come buzzing by to get you for one quick run to Roy Johnson’s house. . .”<sup>383</sup>

Dean’s obsession with precise timing could also be seen as a mockery of discourses of punctuality and responsibility in the 1950s. His concern with punctuality might be seen as a concern with how to “waste time” properly, having fun and being irresponsible, which would be an inversion of the values of the dominant discourses of time during the 1950s. As Erik Mortenson argues, the post-war success of corporations such as U.S. Time and the Timex watch indicate that Americans were developing and enjoying a new relationship to time: “United States Time’s success is telling because it demonstrates the degree to which post-war America was becoming time-conscious. This company’s name alone conjures up images of monolithic proportions, of a standard time that all Americans could set their lives by. In a booming post-war economy, such an attention to time was indeed necessary to ensure that everything ‘ran smoothly.’ After all, Benjamin Franklin’s dictum still rang true: Time is money.”<sup>384</sup> Mortensen sees Kerouac’s book as “an attack on the corruption of time by capitalism.” Along with this, Dean could also be read as a characterization of all of the appropriate rhetorical options of the

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<sup>383</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 261.

<sup>384</sup> Erik Mortensen, “Beating Time: Configurations of Temporality in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*” *College Literature* 28, 3 (2001): 51-67, 51-52.

1950s pushed to their logical extreme. Joshua Kupetz argues that Dean's obsession with time is an attempt to escape from its demands by conforming to them. A close cooperation with the demands of time might provide some degree of liberation from the system: "Cassady's techniques for operating outside of time, however, rely upon his strict adherence to it. In representing Cassady's timetables and ubiquitous schedules, Kerouac illustrates what Michel Foucault calls the 'exhaustive use' of time, a technique that subjugates the actor to time while promising emancipation from it."<sup>385</sup> This analysis is good, and there are some moments where Dean appears to be doing exactly as Kupetz argues, becoming more a prisoner to the demands of the temporal even as he tries more vigorously to extract more freedom from them. However, Booth's concept of the role of the narrator is lost on Kupetz. He uses Cassady and Kerouac as synonymous with the characters of Dean and Sal. By substituting the actual people for the characters, an important dimension of reading the text is lost – the "wink" from the author, as Booth put it. It is impossible to read the nuances of Sal in his quest for finding identification with Dean if we read him as simply Kerouac.

Additionally, the importance of timing is lost in this read. Dean is not simply obsessed with accounting for every minute. If he were, this would give a lot of credibility to Kupetz's analysis. Instead, Dean's obsession with the clock is one symptom of a much larger goal to seek opportunity for experiences. Dean's obsession with the temporal, opportunity and timing increases throughout the book. One of the places where Dean's concern with *kairos* really stands out is in moments where Sal details Dean's ability to drive, creating opportunity in the face of death:

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<sup>385</sup> Joshua Kupetz, "'The Straight Line Will Take You Only to Death:' The Scroll Manuscript and Contemporary Literary Theory," in Howard Cunnell, ed., *On The Road: The Original Scroll* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 93.

At a narrow bridge that crossed one of these lovely little rivers he shot precipitately into an almost impossible situation. Two slow cars ahead of us were bumping over the bridge; coming the other way was a huge truck-trailer with a driver who was making a close estimate of how long it would take to negotiate the bridge, and his estimate was that by the time he got there they'd be over. There was absolutely no room on the bridge for the truck and any cars going the other direction. Behind the truck cars pulled out and peeked for a chance to get by it. Dean came down on all this at 110 miles an hour and never hesitated. He passed the slow cars, swerved, and almost hit the left rail of the bridge, went head-on into the shadow of the unslowing truck, cut right sharply, just missed the truck's left front wheel, almost hit the first slow car, pulled out to pass, and then had to cut back in line . . . all in a matter of two seconds, flashing by and leaving nothing more than a cloud of dust instead of a horrible five-way crash with cars lurching in every direction. . . I couldn't get it out of my mind, also, that a famous bop clarinetist had died in an Illinois car-crash recently, probably on a day like this.<sup>386</sup>

Dean is able to maneuver the car with the finest sense of *kairos* imaginable. Dean is not just quick, or fast, but he is quick and fast *at the exact right moment*. Sal is very clear to divide Dean's ability from mere luck, pointing out that this is Dean's skill at work here. Dean has a sense beyond most anyone else of the *kairos* of the car. Sal's mind wanders to a jazz musician after this maneuver not by accident. Sal sees this sort of fine timing in Bop jazz as key to understanding the world. Even a jazz musician, someone with impeccable timing in Sal's mind, can still die in an auto accident. Dean exhibits mastery of this timing in his driving just as the jazz clarinetist exhibited fine timing in the rhetoric of his music.

Dean also continuously mentions the limits that time holds upon human beings. He is aware of the importance of time, but not in a simplistic, managerial way as Kupitz suggests. Conversely, Dean suggests that the power of time is rhetorical. Time serves as a terministic screen, filtering out possibilities of being via constricting language. Constantly through the novel, Dean states that he "knows time," usually in reference to some desirable activity that remains unaccomplished:

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<sup>386</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 237.

“And we’ll all go off to sweet life, ‘cause now is the time and *we all know time*”” He rubbed his jaw furiously, he swung the car and passed three trucks, he roared into downtown Testament, looking in every direction and seeing everything in an arc of 180 degrees around his eyeballs without moving his head. Bang, he found a parking space in no time, and we were parked. He leaped out of the car. Furiously he hustled into the railroad station; we followed sheepishly. He bought cigarettes. He had become absolutely mad in his movements; he seemed to be doing everything at the same time. It was a shaking of the head, up and down, sideways; jerky, vigorous hands; quick walking, sitting, crossing the legs, uncrossing, getting up, rubbing the hands, rubbing his fly, hitching his pants, looking up and saying “Am,” and sudden slitting of the eyes to see everywhere; and all the time he was grabbing me by the ribs and talking, talking.<sup>387</sup>

Dean’s fury of behavior indicates his almost panicked condition due to his “knowing time.” This could be read as concern with the limits of time, but Sal is careful to point out how Dean is constantly acting – always doing something. It takes Dean literally “no time” to find a parking spot, and can see 180 degrees around him, almost like magic. This is not the ability of someone who is concerned about micromanaging the clock, but someone who, in the words of Paul Tillich, “Time is an empty form only for abstract, objective reflection, a form that can receive any kind of content; but to him who is conscious of an ongoing creative life it is laden with tensions, with possibilities and impossibilities, it is qualitative and full of significance.”<sup>388</sup> Dean seems to meet Tillich’s understanding of *kairos* as a primarily qualitative understanding of time – that is, time is ours to manipulate and use for our benefit. Dean’s panic over using every minute is not a passive submission to time, but an awareness that time is not a fixed quantity, that time is significant if people work to make it so.

Not everyone is as impressed with Dean’s timing as Sal is. His obsession with time is questioned by other characters in the middle portions of the book quite frequently; in this example Carlo Marx confronts Dean’s *kairotic* panic in his alternative rhetoric, his new “voice”:

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<sup>387</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 114.

<sup>388</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 33.



In these days Carlo had developed a tone of voice which he hoped sounded like what he called the Voice of the Rock; the whole idea was to stun people into the realization of the rock. "You pin a dragon to your hats," he warned us; "you're up in the attic with the bats." His mad eyes glittered at us. Since the Dakar Doldrums he had gone through a terrible period which he called the Holy Doldrums, or Harlem Doldrums, when he lived in Harlem in mid-summer and at night woke up in his lonely room and heard "the great machine" descending from the sky; and when he walked on 125<sup>th</sup> Street "under water" with all the other fish. It was a riot of radiant ideas that had come to enlighten his brain. He made Marylou sit on his lap and commanded her to subside. He told Dean, "Why don't you just sit down and relax? Why do you jump around so much?" Dean ran around, putting sugar in his coffee and saying, "Yes! Yes! Yes!"<sup>389</sup>

Dean's rhetoric of "rushing around" is juxtaposed by Carlo's focus on the body. Carlo believes it to be unnatural to rush around and constantly be active as Dean appears to be to him. Here we can read the confrontation through Sal's eyes as two different rhetorical strategies for identification – Dean's focus on pure *kairos* contrasted with Carlo's attentiveness to the recalcitrance of human biology. At the end of this scene, Dean's concern with temporality is directly challenged by Carlo's alternative approach. Carlo prefers a stronger sense of absolute time, with fixed points:

Carlo watched this silly madness with slitted eyes. Finally, he slapped his knee and said, "I have an announcement to make."  
"Yes, Yes?"  
"What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Wither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?"  
"Whither goest thou?" echoed Dean with his mouth open. We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go.<sup>390</sup>

Sal quickly identifies with Dean's confusion by interpreting the answer to the question as an obvious imperative – "let's go!" However, there is more here than what Sal interprets. What is offered here is a clash of two terministic screens – Dean's *kairos* and Carlos's alternative rhetoric. For Carlos, the group is identified as "America," and he clearly wants to hear an

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<sup>389</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 130.

<sup>390</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 120.

articulation of the purpose and point of their trip. This question is totally lost on Dean, and Sal believes it to be a conversation ender. The two perspectives are incompatible. Carlo divides himself from the *kairotic* in favor of a more static and consistent notion of time. For Dean, the question makes little sense if the only way of knowing the point of the trip is through crafting moments of opportunity via experience.

After getting back on the road, there is a passage which I think could serve as an answer to Carlo's question:

"And of course now no one can tell us that there is no god. We've passed through all forms. You remember, Sal, when I first came to New York and I wanted Chad King to teach me about Nietzsche. You see how long ago? Everything is fine, God exists, we know time. Everything since the Greeks has been predicted wrong. You can't make it with geometry and geometrical systems of thinking. It's all *this!*" He wrapped his finger in his fist; the car hugged the line straight and true. "And not only that but we both understand that I couldn't have time to explain why I know and you know God exists."<sup>391</sup>

Dean's explanation comes from the moment. Only at the moment of the gesture is the understanding of life possible. For Dean, the moment in the car apprehending the gesture is proof enough of the existence of God for him. Sal makes sure to point out that the car stays the course even though Dean takes his hands from the wheel – perhaps indicating that Sal is not as completely "in the moment" as Dean is.

Knowing time, in this case, seems to refer to the knowledge that time, as a terministic screen, sets the course for failed predictions. *Kairos*, as I'm describing Dean's perspective, is to recognize within these limits the moments of opportunity for a more "pure" understanding. Dean's rhetoric is based on taking advantage of the momentary as the source of meaning. This is similar to Kenneth Burke's argument that rhetoric should be included as a type of action. "We do

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<sup>391</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 120.

make a pragmatic distinction between the ‘actions’ of ‘persons’ and the sheer ‘motions’ of ‘things.’ The slashing of the waves against the beach, or the endless cycle of births and deaths in biologic organisms would be examples of sheer motion. Yet we, the typically symbol-using animal, cannot relate to one another sheerly as things in motion. Even the behaviorist, who studies man in terms of his laboratory experiments, must treat his colleagues as persons, rather than purely and simply as automata responding to stimuli.”<sup>392</sup> The motion/action distinction discussed here by Burke is similar to Dean’s *kairotic* rhetorical practice. For Dean life consists of making certain that one doesn’t miss timely opportunities to live. Carlo’s question, focused as it is on goals for the journey, misses Dean’s perspective, which is that the goals will be crafted out of opportunity, as long as he is there to recognize and capture those moments.

As the novel progresses we get more moments where Dean is given a chance to articulate his theory. Of course, this theory cannot be articulated plainly, as was demonstrated in the confrontation with Carlo earlier. When Dean does talk about his perspective, it is to Sal, and what he says is fragmentary at best. What happens though is a sort of mystification of Dean’s perspective, as is clear in this quote: “I’ve decided to leave everything out of my hands. *You’ve* seen me try and break my ass to make it and *you* know that it doesn’t matter and we know time – how to slow it up and walk and dig and just old-fashioned spade kicks, what other kicks are there? *We* know.”<sup>393</sup> Dean attempts to avoid the dangers of mediation of his perspective. Explaining the “kicks” is not necessary at all - Sal already knows everything. Dean proclaims that he is not going to control his life anymore, because he “knows time.” He tells Sal they can slow things down and enjoy a life of experiences. This is Dean’s *kairos* - a recognition that

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<sup>392</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 53.

<sup>393</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 251.

planning and control are not necessary if you can look around in your present moment. There is plenty of joy if one can slow down and see the opportunities around.

The reference to “spade kicks” again indicates the unusual position the African-American experience has for Kerouac, highlighting that perhaps Dean feels he has reached the level of understanding the special communicative abilities of African-Americans. Some of this attitude Dean expresses has been traced in American history by Kevin J. Mumford as “slumming,” which he defines as “travelling to foreign, exotic, supposedly inferior cultures,” within one’s own culture.<sup>394</sup> These slums were the products of racist policy, poverty and the rise of urban areas at the turn of the twentieth century – Mumford calls them “interzones,” and his study argues that since the Harlem Renaissance, interzone sites have been seen as objects of erotic or otherized fantasy by bohemian whites. “White authors also relied on blackness to draw distinctions, dramatize differences, and eroticize their contexts. Whether a form of leisure or a literary expedition, and usually both, ‘urban slumming’ became critical to the rise of American sexual modernism.”<sup>395</sup> Later we will see this operationalized in Sal’s mind as he reflects for the reader on what he is missing out on in life by not being a part of the eroticized, urban other. In short, Dean here indicates that he is after all experiences, for any of them could provide good opportunities to get IT.

Dean’s *kairotic* approach is so attractive to Sal because Sal is himself possessed with questions of time, timing and opportunity. This comes out when Sal gives us exposition and images of the world from his perspective:

At this time, in 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. The fellows at the Loop blew, but with a tired air, because bop was somewhere between its Charlie Parker

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<sup>394</sup> Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 135.

<sup>395</sup> Mumford, *Interzones*, 135.

Orinithology period and another period that began with Miles Davis. And as I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about.<sup>396</sup>

Sal connects his group of friends and bop, a style of jazz music as an analogy. The music makes Sal think of the rushing around of his friends all through the country, and he realizes that in all of their separation and isolation, the “rushing about” connects them all. What seems disconnected and fragmented, like bop, is actually a unity with its own harmony. The connection is through timing, and the opportunity Sal has at the moment of hearing the music to recognize the harmony in the discordant way his friends are moving about the country. Sal perhaps realizes they are consubstantial, engaged (in Burkean terms) in the Scramble in the same human backyard (or barnyard).<sup>397</sup>

The spontaneity of jazz music, especially the bop that inspires Sal, is another layer to the *kairotic* rhetoric found in *On the Road*. Kerouac’s method of “spontaneous prose” borrows from the idea that this music is of the moment, with little attention to correction, editing, and planning. Regardless of the actual amount of editing and changes, this belief in spontaneity is a part of the *kairotic* rhetoric offered in *On the Road*. George Dardess connects Kerouac’s belief in the powers of spontaneity to the work of Thoreau and Emerson: “For both Emerson and Thoreau spontaneous writing is a comprehensive act; it is for them the energetic attempt to summon together during the moment of inspiration all their functions, psychological, intellectual, and moral, as if the truth about the world cannot be uttered unless the source of utterance contains the world’s complexities. Because they do not make a distinction in kind between the writer and his

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<sup>396</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 12.

<sup>397</sup> See Kenneth Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 23.

subject, both Emerson and Thoreau speak about writing in the same hortatory tone as they do about other conduct; they are moral even towards the act of moralism itself. In this respect, Kerouac is much like them.”<sup>398</sup> This also seems to be the theory that Sal and Dean support, that life experiences are not a fixed set, but something crafted through careful apprehension of the moment. This is what I call the *kairotic* rhetoric being offered in *On the Road*.

Furthermore, John Shapcott argues that the surviving tape recordings of Kerouac and Neal Cassady reading and discussing writing serve as material evidence for the importance of spontaneity in Kerouac’s writing:

Bebop's emphasis on immediacy and spatial intimacy promotes those spontaneous outbursts of expression of appreciation or encouragement during the course of performance that are replicated in the tapes. The linear and referential structure of the taped speeches resembles that of improvised jazz solos, providing meaning, both for the receptive listener}reader and for the performer. Whereas bebop’s nuances of rhythm, tone and timbre could not be transposed readily into printed musical notation, and therefore made aural transmission of primary importance, Kerouac nevertheless undertook the exploratory task of representing the spontaneity of everyday conversation in a print that bore the speaker's distinct psychological signature.<sup>399</sup>

Although Shapcott’s work does not include *On the Road*, his research using the surviving tapes of Kerouac and Cassady discussing writing and reading drafts to each other display the importance of improvised sound in the process of creating texts for Kerouac.

Recognizing the opportunity to gain insightful experience and communicate it to others is one aspect of how *kairos* functions in the novel. The idea of *kairos* is also tied to the idea of consubstantiality, the Burkean concept of identifying with another’s motives. Seeing *kairos* as much more than just a speaker taking advantage of an audience through keen perception of

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<sup>398</sup> George Dardess, “The Logic of Spontaneity A Reconsideration of Kerouac's Spontaneous Prose Method”. *boundary 2*, 3(Spring 1975):729, 731.

<sup>399</sup> John Shapcott, “‘I Didn’t Punctuate It’: Locating the Tape and Text of Jack Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* and *Doctor Sax* in a Culture of Spontaneous Improvisation” *Journal of American Studies* 36, 2 (August 2002): 231-248, 236.

opportunity, Sheard argues that Burke's conception of rhetoric is founded on a notion of *kairos* that places people as the center and the limit of potential meaning:

And like Gorgias, Burke is not a blind optimist. Rather, he is acutely aware of the limits of language and the extent to which all argument is 'false' because it is grounded rhetorically, governed by *kairos*. Burke's theory of dramatism submits that all meaning is relational and that ultimately experience is comprised of *dissoi logoi*; Hence tragedy lurks about the fringes of comedy, war about the fringes of peace, ignorance about the perimeter of knowledge, change on the horizon of stability. Rather than see these paradoxes as disturbing or threatening, however, Burke embraces them as sources of ambiguity and uncertainty that provide the very opportunity -- as well as the necessity -- for rhetoric.<sup>400</sup>

Burke's rhetorical theory is based on the contingency of human experience and therefore is always mired in ambiguity. However, rhetoric is necessary to clarify and call for understanding - and to create commonality among individuals - this is what he calls consubstantiality. It is mostly in Sal's discourse that a sense of *kairos* as this complicated idea of "managed contingency" comes out. Kerouac offers many moments where the activities of music and celebration end up as *kairotic* moments where Sal reaches for identification and consubstantiality with others. In this example, Sal attends a party that spontaneously forms in an abandoned miners' shack:

There was no music, just dancing. The place filled up. People began to bring bottles. We rushed out to hit the bars and rushed back. The night was getting more and more frantic. I wished Dean and Carlo were there – then I realized they'd be out of place and unhappy. They were like the man with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining.<sup>401</sup>

Sal makes rhetorical moves to distance himself from the people at the party. He wishes for his friends to be there, but realizes they would not fit in or even enjoy this type of celebration. They are up to something else, something different from the identifications going on between

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<sup>400</sup> Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard, "Kairos and Kenneth Burke's Psychology of Political and Social Communication" *College English* 55, 3 (March 1993): 291-310, 303.

<sup>401</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 53-4.

those at the party. For Sal, the party is empty, it has no meaning; it is misplaced. He mentions that he is joining a “new beat generation,” a reference to one of the many definitions of “beat” offered by Kerouac - “being beat and down in the world.”<sup>402</sup> Sal seems almost satisfied in his division/identification, but the contingency of the moment complicates his position:

Great laughter rang from all sides. I wondered what the Spirit of the Mountain was thinking, and looked up and saw jackpines in the moon, and saw ghosts of old miners, and wondered about it. In the whole eastern dark wall of the Divide this night there was silence and the whisper of the wind, except in the ravine where we roared; and on the other side of the Divide was the great Western Slope, and the big plateau that went to Steamboat Springs, and dropped, and led you to the western Colorado desert and the Utah desert; all in darkness now as we fumed and screamed in our mountain nook, mad drunken Americans in the mighty land. We were on the roof of America and all we could do was yell, I guess – across the night, eastward over the Plains, where somewhere an old man with white hair was probably walking toward us with the Word, and would arrive any minute and make us silent.<sup>403</sup>

Sal’s realization that he is joining a new beat generation is assaulted almost immediately by the contingency of his moment. Surrounded by laughter emanating from everywhere and nowhere, as well as the history of his location and the hint of pagan spirits threaten any clear or simple identification. Sal has to use rhetorical resources to “pan out” in order to make the situation meaningful to himself. After placing the party as in the center of America, the continental divide (from his view anyway) he then makes the point that sense is both difficult and certain - difficult because being on the “rooftop of America” the only thing they could do (or did) was incoherent yelling, and that silence either through death or some revelation of transcendence would arrive at any minute. Sal seems hopeful that the moment is pregnant with meaning, but he seems unable to find it, or to make it (not the disappointed “I guess” about the yelling).

Compare this vision to an earlier geographic vision from the start of the novel:

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<sup>403</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 55.



I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the Susquehanna showed me different. No, there is a wilderness in the East; it's the same wilderness Ben Franklin plodded in the oxcart days when we was postmaster, the same as it was when George Washington was a wildbuck Indian-fighter, when Daniel Boone told stories by Pennsylvania lamps and promised to find the Gap, when Bradford built his road and men whooped her up in log cabins. There were not Great Arizona spaces for the little man, just the bushy wilderness of eastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, the backroads, the black-tar roads that curve among the mournful rivers like Susquehanna, Monongahela, old Potomac and Monocacy.<sup>404</sup>

Here Sal has a very clear and permanent vision of the West and America. There is no confusion here about the meaning of wildness or of American for Sal. The party though in Colorado - identified as the borderland of the West by Sal - threatens his earlier read with contingent variables that he could not predict. It could be that Sal is struggling to identify with “the West” as a pungent rhetorical *topos* of identity, and having little success finding consubstantiality with this image of America. As Gregory Clark argues, “The national culture teaches Americans to experience certain places in their homeland rhetorically – to encounter for themselves those places as potent symbols of a concept of national community they are to claim as their own.”<sup>405</sup> Sal has an imaginary sense of “the West” but when he is in Colorado he fails to find identification with those at the party. His mind drifts to his separated friends who constitute a “whole” by their action, not their location. It is this moment where Sal begins to constitute he and his friends as a beat generation – a group that through their similar activities, not geography, create meaning. But, Sal is not Dean and cannot fully live the implications of the moment. He wonders about the approach of chronological time, which eventually renders everyone silent.

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<sup>404</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 105-6.

<sup>405</sup> Gregory Clark, *Rhetorical Landscapes in America* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 5.

What the party scene shows is Sal attempting to embrace Dean's *kairotic* rhetoric and facing the difficulties of apprehending it in a contingent world.

Sal attempts to embrace different rhetorical perspectives throughout the book. When Sal first goes west, he's enamored with the idea of it, and finds very simplistic examples of the western sensibility: "Then Omaha, and, by God, the first cowboy I saw, walking along the bleak walls of the wholesale meat warehouses in a ten-gallon hat and Texas boots, looked like any beat character of the brickwall dawns of the East except for the getup."<sup>406</sup> He begins to see similarity, and then difference as he spends more time in the west. The party in Colorado pushes Sal to search for a more complete rhetoric of America than a simple geographic deterministic model. Sal begins to struggle with his identification with America, as well as with Dean.

Sal and Dean can be seen as testing out many ways of life in the novel, trying to never miss a moment of *kairotic* experience. After a party at Rollo Greb's house, one of Sal's eccentric New York friends, Dean indicates his own desire for identification with Greb:

"That's what I was trying to tell you – that's what I want to be. I want to be like him. He's never hung up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he's the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it."

"Get what?"

"IT! IT! I'll tell you – now no time, we have no time now."<sup>407</sup>

The pursuit of "IT" takes up a considerable amount of the middle of the novel and is not well described or discussed in specific detail by any of the characters. IT's relationship to time is two-sided: First, IT is so important that it must be pursued immediately and without delay. Secondly, IT is so important that to describe it would be to violate it – the time would be better

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<sup>406</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 17.

<sup>407</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 127.

spent in pursuing IT or working toward acquiring IT. In the back of a car, while hitchhiking, Dean finally has a chance to explain IT in detail to Sal:

“Now, man, that alto man last night had IT – he held it once he found it; I’ve never seen a guy who could hold so long.” I wanted to know what ‘IT’ meant. “Ah well” – Dean laughed – “now you’re asking me impon-de-rables – ahem! Here’s a guy and everybody’s there, right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yea, yea, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it* – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom straining, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT” – Dean could go no further; he was sweating telling about it.<sup>408</sup>

For Ben Giamo, IT represents a mixture of Christian and Buddhist beliefs about the cycle of life. Life in these two faiths is punctuated by fleeting moments of joy and sorrow. “The oscillation between ecstasy and suffering -- elation and rejection -- appears to be the maxim of the novel.”<sup>409</sup> Giamo discusses IT as a moment where the pressure of regular temporal existence is relieved through transcendent awareness of the now. “The only reprieve from the terminus of chronological time is a high-octane mixture of speed and desire embodied in IT. IT, a transcendent state of pure excitement, stops the felt experience of linear time screeching in its tracks.”<sup>410</sup> Giamo’s understanding of IT is that it is a sought after state by the characters, a place that they want to occupy and live within.

My interpretation differs from Giamo’s as I read IT to be necessarily a temporary moment that provides a moment of recognition of contingency that allows for identification and consubstantiality. Here “IT” becomes the theory of *kairos* in the beat rhetoric. Dean describes a

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<sup>408</sup> Keroauc, *On the Road*, 207-8.

<sup>409</sup> Ben Giamo, *Kerouac the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>410</sup> Giamo, *Kerouac*, 29.

scene of jazz improvisation where the musician, much like a rhetorician, approaches his or her audience with the familiar and then develops it based on what people “get.” But after a successful moment of identification in his jazz rhetoric, the musician must rise beyond that moment in order to bring the audience the substance of their lives. This leads to a moment where time stops, and the unification of the audience, moment and musician is complete and universal. The connection is merely temporary, and can only be reached and comes from a very personal place - the musician “blows” from the depths of his body and the substance of his old memories and experiences. This “tune of the moment” has to end, and as suddenly as we see a glimmer of what IT can be, Dean stops speaking. He appears to be overcome with emotion, and unable to continue his description - almost as if he hit and then lost the moment of unity that he was describing. Dean not only describes a *kairotic* moment in jazz, but then performs one in speech, physically drained from the intensity. Kerouac too performs a beat *kairotic* moment textually, choosing to keep the full expression of IT from us verbally by limiting Dean’s description. IT becomes somewhat clear, but remains murky due to what IT is - the contingent moment, expressible only then and with fitting words.

*Kairos* is fleeting, momentary and bound by time, but even so it feels like a moment of cosmic connection to Dean where everything becomes one. Sal gets caught up in the pursuit of IT as well: “Then I began talking, I never talked so much in all my life. . . We were telling these things and both sweating. We had completely forgotten the people up front who had begun to wonder what was going on in the back seat.”<sup>411</sup> Hitchhiking, they become caught up in the moment of conversation and physically it drains them — they are laboring together to maintain the momentary connection they have reached.

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<sup>411</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 209.

One of the most rhetorically stunning and strange moments of *On the Road* celebrates *kairos* in an unusual way. Instead of simply seeing it as the recognition by a rhetor of a unique opportunity, this moment celebrates *kairos* as a way of recognizing the contingent nature of reality as a commonplace among all human beings:

I walked around picking butts from the street. I passed a fish-‘n-chips joint on Market Street, and suddenly the woman in there gave me a terrified look as I passed; she was the proprietress, she apparently thought I was coming in there with a gun to hold up the joint. I walked on a few feet. It suddenly occurred to me this was my mother of about two hundred years ago in England, and that I was her footpad son, returning from gaol to haunt her honest labors in the hashery. I stopped, frozen with ecstasy on the sidewalk. I looked down Market Street. I didn’t know whether it was that or Canal Street in New Orleans: it led to water, ambiguous, universal water, just as 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, New York, leads to water, and you never know where you are. . . And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiances shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven.<sup>412</sup>

This passage moves from a very specific, time-bound, narrated encounter from the perspective of Sal to a disembodied, universal experience out of knowable time and space. Giamo reads this scene as “another form of ecstasy, an enlightened sense of IT, one that, though not a controlling principle in the novel, works momentarily to suggest what is missing from the first definition, that is, the ‘ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being.’”<sup>413</sup> Giamo’s limitation of IT as a state or feeling misses the rich moment of invented connection Sal has for the stranger in the shop. IT seen as *kairos* allows for the interpretation of the scene as exploring the possibilities of

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<sup>412</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 172-3.

<sup>413</sup> Giamo, *Kerouac*, 31.

consubstantiality if one is aware and willing to recognize fleeting moments of meaning within the contingencies of daily life.

Sal's recognition that the woman in the shop could be his mother from the past opens an opportunity for him to recognize that all streets are the same, then all water, and finally, all time and existence. He recognizes the power of recognition to shape beliefs about relationships, status and being in the world, and he identifies it as the moment holding us back from communion with each other. The angelic visions of unity at the end of the passage indicate, for Sal, the transcendence is necessarily temporary, but that is what makes the moment important, and pushes him ahead on his journey in the book.

Of course this is only one part of the potential rhetorical theory offered in *On the Road*. And like all the other rhetorical styles that Kerouac displays for Sal, Dean's multivariate rhetoric of IT has flaws as well. Dean is called to account for his rhetoric near the end of the novel by the women who were his friends, or in relationships with his friends due to his lack of responsibility:

"I think Marylou was very, very wise leaving you, Dean," said Galatea. "For years now you haven't had any sense of responsibility for anyone. You've done so many awful things I don't know what to say to you."

And in fact that was the point, and they all sat around looking at Dean with lowered and hating eyes, and he stood on the carpet in the middle of them and giggled – he just giggled. He made a little dance. His bandage was getting dirtier all the time; it began to flop and unroll. I suddenly realized that Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot.

"You have absolutely no regard for anybody but yourself and your damned kicks. All you think about is what's hanging between your legs and how much money or fun you can get out of people and then you just throw them aside. Not only that but you're silly about it. It never occurs to you that life is serious and there are people trying to make something decent out of it instead of just goofing all the time." That's what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 194.

In this, one of the most famous passages in the book, Sal realizes that the reason he cannot understand his friend sometimes is because Dean is a saint. Sal categorizes him this way not just to praise him, as is the obvious interpretation, but more to account for the failure of his, up to this point, fairly effective rhetorical frame. Dean always had women, friends, and “kicks,” but was now on trial with a jury of those very people he used to persuade, Sal interprets the scene as one of misunderstanding between the terrestrial jury and the holy defendant:

There were earlier days in Denver when Dean had everybody sit in the dark with the girls and just talked, and talked, and talked, with a voice that was once hypnotic and strange and was said to make the girls come across by sheer force of persuasion and the content of what he said. This was when he was fifteen, sixteen. Now his disciples were married and the wives of his disciples had him on the carpet for the sexuality and the life he had helped bring into being.<sup>415</sup>

We are far removed from a novel that suggests “anything goes,” and wild parties are the way to live your life. Here we are confronted with the unanticipated results of effective rhetoric, and the material consequences of persuasion. Dean’s rhetoric of American *kairos* cannot persuade everyone to overcome the *chronos* of American society. He is rejected by the very people who used to praise him, except for Sal who dutifully records the incident for the reader.

Occasionally Dean tries to drop his rhetorical view in favor of blending into the dominant rhetorical discourses of American life, but fails miserably. It is at these moments that Sal becomes frustrated with Dean and wants nothing to do with him. Here’s an example from life in San Francisco where Dean, Sal and Dean’s girlfriend are living together:

Dean did the most ridiculous thing of his career the few days I was there. He got a job demonstrating a new kind of pressure cooker in the kitchens of homes. The salesman gave him piles of samples and pamphlets. The first day Dean was a hurricane of energy. I drove all over town with him as he made appointments. The idea was to get invited socially to a dinner party and then leap up and start demonstrating the pressure cooker. . .

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<sup>415</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 194-5.

‘Keep it up, Dean,’ I said. ‘Maybe someday you’ll be mayor of San Francisco.’ He had the whole cookpot spiel worked out; he practiced on Camille and me in the evenings.<sup>416</sup>

An overtly rhetorical and persuasive moment in the book is termed “ridiculous” by Sal, due to the fact that Dean is entering the dominant discursive modes of persuasion for consumerist purposes. Sal even makes fun of Dean in an ironic way, praising him and indicating that one day he could be Mayor, a position that would be more like a prison sentence for the rhetor of the *kairotic*.

Dean’s rhetoric is not the only one offered in the novel; Kerouac has Sal encounter many different rhetorical frames in America. Sal tries many of them on, and compares them to the rhetoric Dean offers. Examination of some other rhetorical options drives Sal toward and away from Dean.

Kerouac advocates for his rhetoric by comparing Dean and Sal not only against each other, but against other potential rhetorical frames. One significant example is during the portion of the book where Sal lives with Terry, a Mexican woman who is a migrant worker. After meeting her in a bus station, he travels with her to meet her family where he believes that he will be able to find work:

Rickey had a bottle. “Today we drink, tomorrow we work, Dah you go, man – take a shot!” Terry sat in back with her baby; I looked back at her and saw the flush of homecoming joy on her face. The beautiful green countryside of October in California reeled by madly. I was guts and juice again and ready to go.

“Where do we go now, man?”

“We go find a farmer with some manure laying around. Tomorrow we drive back in the truck and pick it up. Man, we’ll make a lot of money. Don’t worry about nothing.”

“We’re all in this together!” yelled Ponzo. I saw that was so – everywhere I went, everybody was in it together. We raced through the crazy streets of Fresno and on up the

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<sup>416</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 176.



valley to some farmers in back roads. Ponzo got out of the car and conducted confused conversations with old Mexican farmers; nothing, of course, came of it.<sup>417</sup>

Sal notices that everyone is “in it together” but at the same time points out he realized that the work would not materialize – “of course” nothing came of it. The approach of relaxing, drinking and enjoying the day is fantastic in Sal’s view for making people consubstantial. The problem is the division from the ability to make ends meet.<sup>418</sup>

The consubstantiality of the migrants with the rest of America is also evident to Sal, as he spends a Sunday with Terry, her brother, and his friend. Again, in this example, Sal points out the near perfect identification, but also understands the serious implications of a rhetoric that ignores the recalcitrance of material conditions:

“What we need is a drink!” yelled Rickey, and off we went to a crossroads saloon. Americans are always drinking in crossroads saloons on Sunday afternoon; they bring their kids; they gabble and brawl over brews; everything’s fine. Come nightfall the kids start crying and the parents are drunk. They go weaving back to the house. Everywhere in America I’ve been in crossroads saloons drinking with whole families. The kids eat popcorn and chips and play in back. This we did. Rickey and I and Ponzo and Terry sat drinking and shouting with the music; little baby Johnny goofed with other children around the jukebox. The sun began to get red. Nothing had been accomplished. What was there to accomplish? “*Manana*, man, we make it; have another beer, man, dah you go, *dah you go!*”<sup>419</sup>

Sal begins to be persuaded by this approach to American life as he wonders what exactly does need to be accomplished in the course of a day. Furthermore, Sal’s own experience indicates this trip to the bar reminds him of very American practices that he has witnessed all over the U.S. At the same time, Sal experiences division from the pressing need to work, to produce, to

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<sup>417</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 92.

<sup>418</sup> For a visual representation of these differences, see Christine Celano “A Typographic Visualization of the Narrative Structure of *On the Road*” *Design Issues* 9, 1 (Autumn 1992): 45-55.

<sup>419</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 92-3.

accomplish things in the day. Sal is further persuaded by this perspective through his relationship with Terry:

Guitars tinkled. Terry and I gazed at the stars together and kissed. “*Manana*,” she said. “Everything will be all right tomorrow, don’t you think, Sal-honey, man?”  
“Sure, baby, *manana*.” It was always *manana*. For the next week that was all I heard – *manana*, a lovely word and one that probably means heaven.<sup>420</sup>

Sal’s ignorance of the meaning of the Spanish word for tomorrow allows the reader some amusement due to the ironic twist of the distance of this rhetorical approach from the more familiar anxiety that one might be “wasting time.” Of course, in a way tomorrow is heaven, a place without consequences and without problems, for it never takes place. The rhetoric of Terry’s brothers is a nice and comfortable way of living a life of infinitely deferred responsibility. Sal enjoys it, but then the fall comes, and the limits of this rhetoric are exposed. Unfortunately for Sal, he begins to notice the change in the temperature and realize that there is nothing but starvation in his future unless some work can be found.

The experience that Sal has with Terry is ignored in much analysis of *On the Road*. Swartz doesn’t mention it in his study, and most skim past it. It is easy to avoid analysis on something that seems like a pause in the action of the book, a waiting period between trips. However, this supposed interlude serves as important contrast between various rhetorical approaches. Terry and her family have the attitude and approach to life that is, as Sal proves, American. How does it measure up? Unfortunately, even stability of family and celebration of such cannot avoid the need to eat and work. Additionally, Kerouac uses the strained relationship between Sal, a white man, and Terry, a Mexican woman, to highlight the difficulties of communication across cultural boundaries:

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<sup>420</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 94.

We drove to Terry's family's shack. It was situated on the old road that ran between the vineyards. It was dark when we got there. They left me off a quarter-mile away and drove to the door. Light poured out of the door; Terry's six other brothers were playing their guitars and singing. The old man was drinking wine. I heard shouts and arguments above the singing. They called her a whore because she'd left her no-good husband and gone to LA and left Johnny with them. The old man was yelling. But the sad, fat brown mother prevailed, as she always does among the great fellahin peoples of the world, and Terry was allowed to come back home. The brothers began to sing gay songs, fast. I huddled in the cold, rainy wind and watched everything across the sad vineyards of October in the valley. My mind was filled with that great song 'Lover Man' as Billie Holiday sings it; I had my own concert in the bushes.<sup>421</sup>

Sal finds solace in singing to himself a traditional jazz song in an African-American style while he experiences the segregation and exclusion that most minorities experienced in 1950s America. As Terry's family seeks to understand why she abandoned her familial duties and involved herself with a white man, Sal provides his own interpretation as to what happened through the lens of Spengler's *Decline of the West* – a very influential book for Kerouac. As Robert Holton argues:

Adapting the term *fellahin* from Spengler, Kerouac employs it very generally to designate all those peoples-in North America and throughout the world-who appeared to him to be culturally situated outside the structures and categories, the desires and frustrations, of modernity. Whatever their own problems, problems of which he seems for the most part unaware, Kerouac's fellahin appeared to exist in a more authentic, more real and vital space beyond the confines of a consumer culture.<sup>422</sup>

It seems at least to Sal that the mother wins the approval of the family in accepting Terry into the family because of her connection to a more authentic mode of being. However, what is clear is that they have not accepted Sal, as they begin a celebration with happy songs, and Sal is left on his own, singing his own song in his head. The fellahin have a more authentic access to communication, but even that access cannot bridge certain divides. Sal is left out of their

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<sup>421</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 98.

<sup>422</sup> Robert Holton, "Kerouac among the Fellahin: *On the Road* to the Postmodern," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41, no. 2 (1995): 266-7.

experience, and, as Holton notes, Kerouac is left at a distance from the authentic communication that he really desires: “Rather than offering a renewed sense of the authentic reality, this fascination with the fellahin tends instead to obscure in nostalgia and cliché the real historical conditions of their lives.”<sup>423</sup> Kerouac’s use of Spengler allows him to pick up their rhetoric and deploy it for his own comfort, without any critical reflection of his own position of privilege and power in society. Once accessed, their culture is for him to use.

Holton’s critique is applicable if we buy that Sal *is* Kerouac and that Kerouac, as a writer, has no rhetorical savvy. He just simply transplants his perspective into the novel, and this perspective is over simplistic in its engagement with others. Assuming this, why did Kerouac write fiction instead of journalism? By placing them in the frame of fiction, Kerouac can expose for the reader what’s really at stake in authentic experience – the way that experience is communicated. Sal, often times, changes his mind, gets confused, and misunderstands while being misunderstood by the other characters. Such complexity seems to indicate that Holton’s critique fails to take into account the dissonance between character attitudes and Kerouac’s attitude. I believe a more useful understanding of Kerouac’s work can be found if we distance the man’s attitude from the attention to attitude he conveys to us through his works.

I have two examples to back up my claim. The first is when Sal naively thinks to himself, in a moment of loneliness, that things would be better off for him if he were an African-American:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27<sup>th</sup> and Welton in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night. I stopped at a little shack where a man sold hot red chili in paper containers; I bought some and ate it, strolling in the dark mysterious streets. I wished I

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<sup>423</sup> Holton, “Kerouac Among the Fellahin,” 277.

were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions; that was why I'd abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley. I passed the dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes; soft voices were there, occasionally the dusky knee of some mysterious sensual gal; and dark faces of the men behind rose arbors. Little children sat like sages in ancient rocking chairs. A gang of colored women came by, and one of the young ones detached herself from motherlike elders and came to me fast – "Hello Joe!" – and suddenly saw it wasn't Joe, and ran back, blushing. I wished I were Joe. I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America.<sup>424</sup>

At first glance this seems simple desire for the eroticized other. Sal believes things would be much better for him if he didn't follow "white ambition" anymore, and therefore connect with people who really understand what it is like to be happy. Examining it closer, Sal could also be seen pining for rhetorical stability. Instead of a simple correspondence with racial attributes, the focus is on the social – "ambition" is the culprit here. Sal attributes his failure and disappointment to following white ambition – and feels a life apart from white ambition would be better. The young woman who runs up to him, mistaking him for Joe, is not necessarily black, but Sal wishes he was Joe – someone who had exchanged ambition. Sal wishes to transplant the motives of whiteness with another set of motives. This scene is an example of Sal's naive perspective and perhaps Kerouac is again letting Sal drive the story in order to prove a point. Kerouac's wink might be that Sal is still hopeful to gain some way of finding his identity, or a mode of identification. He wants to identify with the happy "colored women" but lacks the means. Sal has not had the full experience of Dean's *kairotic* perspective yet.

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<sup>424</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 180.

To further demonstrate this complex assessment of Kerouac, there is a fascinating passage where Sal and Terry walk among the citizens of Los Angeles, and Sal offers his assessment of the people:

South Main Street [LA], where Terry and I took strolls with her dogs, was a fantastic carnival of lights and wildness. Booted cops frisked people on practically every corner. The beatest characters in the country swarmed on the sidewalks – all of it under those soft Southern California stars that are lost in the brow halo of the huge desert encampment LA really is. You could smell tea, weed, I mean marijuana, floating in the air, together with the chili beans and beer. That grand wild sound of bop floated from beer parlors; it mixed medleys with every kind of cowboy and boogie-woogie in the American night. Everybody looked like Hassel. Wild Negroes with bop caps and goatees came laughing by; then long-haired brokendown hipsters straight off route 66 from New York; then old desert rats, carrying packs and heading for a park bench at the Plaza; then Methodist ministers with raveled sleeves, and an occasional Nature Boy saint in beard and sandals. I wanted to meet them all, talk to everybody, but Terry and I were too busy trying to get a buck together.<sup>425</sup>

Sal's desire to commune, to *know* each of these characters contrasts with his fast and loose assessments of the motives and attitudes of every type of person they saw. Of course, Sal points out that real friendship and knowing is impossible, because the material demands of money and survival interfere. There is no possibility of a pure communication, fantasized of by Sal (and many of the readers in 1950s America) as a pure knowing of the authentic person behind the initial encounter. Everyone looks like "Hassel," a friend, but they also are "brokendown" and "rats" – a mixture, just like the music that mixes melodies along with the odors of intoxicants and food. It is perfect in its overwhelming mix of stimuli and types of different people, as well as the unseen demands for material resources. Sal is struggling to find what motivates them, and his solution, aside from being able to commune with them, is to find an adequate way to express

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<sup>425</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 56-7.

his desire for communication – a detailed, momentary sketching of the people he encounters. He does not commune with them, and finds himself distant and unreachable due to fiscal concerns.

Another rhetorical frame that Sal ends up rejecting is the rhetorical perspective of Old Bull Lee, a friend of both Dean and Sal who lives in New Orleans. Old Bull Lee is introduced to the readers by Sal as they drive to meet him at his house:

Bull had a sentimental streak about the old days in America especially 1910, when you could get morphine in a drugstore without prescription and Chinese smoked opium in their evening windows and the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone. His chief hate was Washington bureaucracy; second to that, liberals; then cops. He spent all his time talking and teaching others. Jane sat at his feet; so did I; so did Dean; and so had Carlo Marx. We'd all learned from him. He was a gray, nondescript-looking fellow you wouldn't notice on the street, unless you looked closer and saw his mad, bony skull with its strange youthfulness – a Kansas minister with exotic, phenomenal fires and mysteries. He had studied medicine in Vienna; had studied anthropology, read everything; and now he was settling to his life's work, which was the study of things themselves in the streets of life and the night.<sup>426</sup>

Bull is presented as a throwback, someone who has great nostalgia for the America of old. Bull is also a teacher, and a talker – someone who has a persuasive goal, or at least a desire to make sure that others see America from his point of view. Sal says everyone has learned from him in the past. Bull can be seen as a mysterious character, a scholar of American ways of being, and that is how Kerouac will contrast Bull to Dean – the mysterious and the mystic rhetorics will be contrasted. Old Bull Lee represents a nostalgic discourse, or a rhetoric that attempts to “see beyond” the problems of the contemporary by wishing for a return of the “good old days.” This rhetoric will be tested against Dean's vision of constant movement toward the next opportunity – the *kairotic* versus the chronic.

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<sup>426</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 145.

Sal's first observations are about the geography of the place Bull lives, with emphasis on how different familiar sights appear: "And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up."<sup>427</sup> Here we are going to be exposed to a raw, almost unsanitary "washing up" of what America is in the presence of Old Bull Lee. Almost immediately, Dean and Sal find themselves in conflict with Bull's perspective on the appropriate:

Dean and I were yelling about a big night in New Orleans and wanted Bill to show us around. He threw a damper on this. "New Orleans is a very dull town. It's against the law to go to the colored section. The bars are insufferably dreary."

I said, "There must be some ideal bars in town."

"The ideal bar doesn't exist in America. And ideal bar is something that's gone beyond our ken. In nineteen ten a bar was a place where men went to meet during or after work, and all there was a long counter, brass rails, spittoons, player piano for music, a few mirrors, and barrels of whiskey at ten cents a shot together with barrels of beer at five cents a mug. Now all you get is chromium, drunken women, fags, hostile bartenders, anxious owners who hover around the door, worried about their leather seats and the law; just a lot of screaming at the wrong time and deadly silence when a stranger walks in."

We argued about bars. "All right," he said, "I'll take you to New Orleans tonight and show you what I mean." And he deliberately took us to the dullest bars.<sup>428</sup>

Sal suspects foul play on the part of Old Bull Lee, who is apparently stacking the deck and making sure that he proves his point to Dean. Sal can't accept that things might be the way Old Bull Lee describes them, or perhaps Sal is not convinced by Bull's position on the lapse of the ideal bar. Either way, it is a fascinating contrast between Bull's rhetoric – that America's ideal moment has passed (even in the excess of the perfect bar) and Dean's rhetoric, that America exists in the seizing of the momentary opportunities for human communion. Bull feels the scenes or locales for such interaction no longer exist; Dean feels that these can be created.

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<sup>427</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 13.

<sup>428</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 146-7.



Bull hopes through his words and actions to almost suspend *chronos*. This also contrasts with Dean, who realizes that *chronos* cannot be suspended, but instead must be accounted for. That is to say, chronological time will always haunt you, so you'd better make good use of the present moment. As an example of this, examine Bull talking to Sal about his wish to suspend the advancement of time. In this scene, Bull has found some wood that he believes to be sturdy enough to allow for the transcendence of aging and decay:

“When I get these nails out of this I’m going to build me a shelf that’ll last a *thousand years!*” said Bull, every bone shuddering with boyish excitement. “Why, Sal, do you realize the shelves they build these days crack under the weight of knick-knacks after six months or generally collapse? Same with houses, same with clothes. These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last *forever*. And tires. Americans are killing themselves by the millions every year with defective rubber tires that get hot on the road and blow up. They could make tires that never blow up. Same with tooth powder. There’s a certain gum they’ve invented and they won’t show it to anybody that if you chew it as a kid you’ll never get a cavity for the rest of your born days. Same with clothes. They can make clothes that last forever. They prefer making cheap goods so’s everybody’ll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow.” He raised his big piece of rotten wood. “Don’t you think this’ll make a splendid shelf?”

It was early in the morning; his energy was at its peak. The fellow took so much junk into his system he could only weather the greater proportion of his day in that chair with the lamp burning at noon, but in the morning he was magnificent.<sup>429</sup>

Here Sal praises the magnificence of Bull’s rhetoric – how great it sounds in the morning at the start of the day. Sal also, again, ironically critiques Bull’s rhetoric by indicating that Bull is holding up “rotten” wood and discoursing about its permanence and ability to pass a thousand years as a bookshelf. Bull’s listing of all the perfect products that have been made and shelved for profit is an obvious critique of capitalism through the notion of “planned obsolescence,” an

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<sup>429</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 149-50.

idea rooted in the rhetoric of conspiracy theory as well as business conspiracy sense.<sup>430</sup> Bull feels that decay and corruption by the march of time has already been overcome by science, yet capitalism forces people to continue to toil their lives away. Sal undercuts the brilliance of his analysis by limiting it only to the start of the day – this rhetoric ingests so much heroin by afternoon that it no longer has persuasive force. Indeed, in order to keep sane under the constant march of unstoppable *chronos*, Bull must drug himself to make it through the rest of the day. The raw body of American nostalgia is washing up at the mouth of the Mississippi river.

Sal takes a moment during the stay at Bull's house to try to communicate with the Mississippi river one night:

Doors kept opening around the crooked porch, and members of our sad drama in the American night kept popping out to find out where everybody was. Finally I took a walk alone to the levee. I wanted to sit on the muddy bank and dig the Mississippi River; instead of that I had to look at it with my nose against a wire fence. When you start separating the people from their rivers what have you got? 'Bureaucracy!' says Old Bull; he sits with Kafka on his lap, the lamp burns above him, he snuffs, *thfump*. His old house creaks. And the Montana log rolls by in the big black river of the night. 'Tain't nothing but bureaucracy. And unions! Especially unions!' But dark laughter would come again.<sup>431</sup>

As if an embodiment of evidence for Bull's position, a fence separates Sal from communing with the river, the same river that "washes up" the entire body of America. Split by material restrictions from direct communication with the raw body of America, Sal is frustrated. His mind immediately goes to Bull's rhetoric to help him account for and frame what he considers to be an abomination – the separation of Americans from the most American river, or metaphorically, the separation of Americans from the American flow of bodies, ideas and of

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<sup>430</sup> For more on this term see Vance Packard, *Waste Makers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978) and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>431</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 148.

course, communion with one another. Bull blames a generalized bureaucracy and unions, apparently, for the fence that separates communication between the body of America and Sal (presumably the American body via synecdoche). Bull's accusation though is rhetorically unsound, as his house creaks and some interaction is happening (A log from Montana comes down the river during this fantasy). Sal realizes the depressing nature of the accusation with no solution, so indicates that "dark laughter" will return soon. As to what this dark laughter might be, we are left wondering. Perhaps the alternative mode of address in Bull's rhetoric of America is just to laugh in the darkness as a type of either comfort or response to the ridiculousness of a system that puts fences around rivers. Alternatively, it could also be a sign of positive change, shrouded in unpredictability.

However Bull's views on communication and the rhetoric he develops in order to provide for effective communication has elements worth celebrating. Sal and Bull decide to drive out to the racetrack to gamble on horses one afternoon, and Sal has a sense of what horse to bet on:

We examined the *Racing Form*. I hadn't played the horses in years and we bemused with all the new names. There was one horse called Big Pop that sent me into a temporary trance thinking of my father, who used to play the horses with me. I was just about to mention it to Old Bull when he said, "Well I think I'll try this Ebony Corsair here."

Then I finally said it. "Big Pop reminds me of my father."

He mused for just a second, his clear blue eyes fixed on mine hypnotically so that I couldn't tell what he was thinking or where he was. Then he went over and bet on Ebony Corsair. Big Pop won and paid fifty to one.

"Damn!" said Bull. "I should have known better, I've had experience with this before. Oh, when will we ever learn?"

"What do you mean?"

"Big Pop is what I mean. You had a vision, boy, a *vision*. Only damn fools pay no attention to visions. How do you know your father, who was an old horseplayer, just didn't momentarily communicate to you that Big Pop was going to win the race? The name brought the feeling up in you, he took advantage of the name to communicate. That's what I was thinking about when you mentioned it. . ." [my ellipsis] "Ah, let's go. This is the last time I'll ever play the horses with you around; all these visions drive me to distraction." In the car as we drove back to his old house he said, "Mankind will someday realize that we are actually in contact with the dead and with the other world, whatever it is; right now we could predict, if we only exerted enough mental will, what is

going to happen within the next hundred years and be able to take steps to avoid all kinds of catastrophes. When a man dies he undergoes a mutation in his brain that we know nothing about now but which will be very clear someday if scientists get on the ball. The bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world.”<sup>432</sup>

Bull, like Sal and Dean, hopes for a world of pure communication between individuals at the spiritual level. Bull views the importance of the communicative at a broader political level, involving over political institutions, such as nuclear scientists, into his exigence for the need to change the way we communicate. For Bull, the stakes are the survival of future catastrophes which we can learn about by developing a communication with the dead. As John Durham Peters notes, this is the dream of communication from its inception – to really capture what another person means, to commune with their soul. Sal’s thought that the horse reminds him of his father is seen as a communicative act from the spiritual world by Bull, complete with intent and meaning. For him its evidence that communication goes beyond extant people and beyond lived lifetimes. For Sal, it is an eerie moment where Bull’s rhetorical posture overlaps with Dean’s – Bull feels he lost “the moment” where Sal’s father “took advantage” of a similar name to communicate a belief to him.

The visit must end at some point, and while leaving Old Bull Lee and his wife at their house Sal is overwhelmed again by the swirling phenomena of existence: “It was sad to see his tall figure receding in the dark as we drove away, just like the other figures in New York and New Orleans: they stand uncertainly underneath immense skies, and everything about them is drowned. Where go? What do? What for? – sleep. But this foolish gang was bending onward.”<sup>433</sup> Pressing on is the only common response to the unintelligible mass and size of the world as

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<sup>432</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 153.

<sup>433</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 166.

perceived by human beings. As Sal leaves behind the rhetorical perspective of Bull, he feels adrift again, but somehow knowing that eventually moving forward would offer him the solution he seeks. The momentary panic of seeing the size and disconnected “drowning” of individual human lives makes Sal think the only result of all of this living is death, or “sleep.” But as fools, they continue on in an attempt to avert this inevitability. What we end with is a sense of Sal’s partial dissatisfaction with these comparative frames, and he continues to go back to Dean and his sense of the *kairotic*. But Dean has some challenges ahead to his rhetorical perspective that do not stem from alternative rhetorics, but from technology.

#### 4.6 TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNĒ IN ROAD

In addition to the comparative rhetorical frames that we find in *On the Road*, Kerouac has Sal comment on multiple technologies of memory and communication throughout the book. I argue Kerouac does this in order to forward his *technē* of immediacy in his rhetoric over the competitive *technē* of the 1950s. Sal offers commentary on moments when he and Dean or others encounter technologies of communication and often Sal critiques them, sometimes implicitly.

In Long Island, Dean shows Sal pictures of Camille and his baby, as well as other pictures of his loved ones on the other side of America:

I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered, stabilized-within-the-photo lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, or actual night, the hell of it,

the senseless nightmare road. All of it inside endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance.<sup>434</sup>

Dean shows these pictures to Sal to communicate his love and caring for his family, but all Sal sees is disconnection, a failed communication without proper memory of the disorder, feeling, and loss of the experiences. Omar Swartz reads this passage as Kerouac's realization that his rhetorical vision, like any, "Pressed to their limits, the visions become abusive and ruinous and fall apart in the disparity between the ideal world of a seldom-maintained euphoria, on the one hand, and the constrictions of the larger social system on the other."<sup>435</sup> I argue that Sal might feel that way, but Kerouac, having Sal react to these photographs, is indicating the limits of a particular type of communication technology.

Susan Sontag argues, "To photograph is to confer importance. There is no subject that cannot be beautified; moreover, there is no way to suppress the tendency inherent in all photographs to accord value to their subjects."<sup>436</sup> It might be this automatic valuing without explanation, or more importantly, without a connected moment of importance that Kerouac's critique of the photograph makes sense. Perhaps the photograph's special ability to potentially obscure history from viewers is also part of the critique. Sal and Dean go to great lengths to have experience, and here are photographs that stand-in for such moments. The photograph's *techne*, is one of the mark of pure equality and, like its medium, a flattening one. "In the mansions of pre-democratic culture, someone who gets photographed is a celebrity. In the open fields of American experience as catalogued with passion by Whitman and sized up with a shrug by

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<sup>434</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 254.

<sup>435</sup> Omar Swartz, *The View from on the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 98.

<sup>436</sup> Susan Sontag *On Photography* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 28.

Warhol, everybody is a celebrity. No moment is more important than any other moment; no person is more interesting than any other person.”<sup>437</sup> Dean’s photographs could be shown to anyone, at any time, making them a perfect chronology, and making Sal a bit suspicious and depressed by their existence.

Kerouac displays how his spontaneous writing can capture and offer experience in a superior form to the photograph. He does this through Sal’s realization that perhaps more than photographs will be needed to communicate effectively the meaning that Sal feels must be conveyed. “raggedy madness” cannot be conveyed through a photograph, but perhaps writing about it might. The other consideration that lurks in Sal’s suspicion of the photos is that they are crafted in a way to leave something out – that the photographer manipulates the image by selecting (thereby deflecting) elements of the moment that might be vital to its meaning. “Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience. . . . In deciding how a picture should look in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects.”<sup>438</sup> Sontag here points out that the photographer’s selection of a subject is not just a simple recording, but a manipulation of it to fit the idea of what they want the picture to look like in the end. Sal prefers writing without thought as it allows him to capture the moment in all its detail, and is suspicious of photographs that are planned, limited, and by virtue of technology, exclusionary.

There is a second example of photography in the book that Swartz passes over, but I feel is important to understanding *On the Road’s* importance not just as a novel that offers a rhetorical vision, but as a novel that makes an argument for an alternative rhetorical approach to

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<sup>437</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 28.

<sup>438</sup> Sontag, 6.

communication. Dean and Sal have just been kicked out of Camille's apartment in San Francisco, and they stand on the street determining what to do next:

Out of the tenement next to Camille's house filed eleven Greek men and women who instantly lined themselves up on the sunny pavement while another backed up across the narrow street and smiled at them over a camera. We gaped at these ancient people who were having a wedding party for one of their daughters, probably the thousandth in an unbroken dark generation of smiling in the sun. They were well dressed, and they were strange. Dean and I might have been in Cyprus for all that. Gulls flew overhead in the sparkling air.<sup>439</sup>

In a moment of instability and insecurity, Sal and Dean witness an act of firm resolution and confidence in the future. Sal notes that these people are both "well dressed" yet "strange," again letting the contradictions of identification/division invite readers to rhetoric. Images of the unbroken dark generation smiling under sunlight further the contradiction. Dean and Sal are foreigners in their own country, unable to participate or even understand the point of photographing the event. At once, the familiar is permeated with the unfamiliar. Familiar in the sense that the action is a common one, but unfamiliar to the way Dean and Sal approach the world, one without such connections to stability. The stability of the generation that remains dark and unbroken, even in sunlight, is solidified by the act of the photograph. The photograph is necessarily incomplete; it cannot ever note the presence of Dean and Sal just outside the frame, gaping at unrecognizable stability in this performance of family.

The moment of photography, however, also indicates the presence of a rival frame of understanding, that of Kerouac's rhetoric. Sal indicates all of these things about the photograph that the photograph cannot – he and Dean's gape, the indeterminacy of geography (they might as well be in Greece, for nothing indicative of America is present in the image), the family's

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<sup>439</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 190.



military precision of assembly for the photograph – all are conveyed through the “sketch” of spontaneous prose, and implicitly argued against: The prose captures that which the camera cannot, and therefore is a better *technē* of communication than the photo will be. Experience drops out in the photograph but can be saved (and maybe savored) through the *technē* of writing.

Kerouac doesn't have a complete hatred for photography. This makes the argument in *On the Road* a bit ambivalent. In his introduction to Robert Frank's book *The Americans*, Kerouac offers more insight into the role he feels photography can play: “That crazy feeling in America when the sun is hot on the streets and music comes out of the jukebox or from a nearby funeral, that's what Robert Frank has captures in these tremendous photographs taken as he traveled on the road around practically forty-eight states in an old used care (on Guggenheim Fellowship) and with the agility, mystery, genius, sadness and strange secrecy of a shadow photographed scenes that have never been seen before on film.”<sup>440</sup> Kerouac's praise of Frank's work is rooted in the spontaneity the photos suggest. To Kerouac, it appears that the photos were taken in secret, without any planning, orchestration, or set up. “What a poem this is, what poems can be written about this book of pictures some day by some young new writer high by candlelight bending over them describing every gray mysterious detail, the gray film that caught the actual pink juice of human kind. whether 't is the milk of humankind-ness, of human-kindness, Shakespeare meant, makes no difference when you look at these pictures. Better than a show.”<sup>441</sup> Here Kerouac indicates that the photos are starting points for poems, because they capture unedited moments of real life – the sort of experiences that Sal and Dean seek for their own rhetorical exigencies.

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<sup>440</sup> Jack Kerouac, “Introduction to *The Americans*: Photographs by Robert Frank” in *Good Blonde & Others* Donald Allen, Ed. (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>441</sup> Kerouac, “Introduction to *The Americans*,” 20-1.

How do we reconcile Kerouac's positive view of Frank's photos and the ambivalent, negative leaning reaction of Sal to the photographic moments of *On the Road*? Perhaps the resolution is in the idea of staged photos versus spontaneous photos. Of course, we can never know if Frank's photos were completely unplanned shots or not. But the appearance of the photos as spontaneous is the reason that Kerouac likes them so much. Sal shows ambivalence to the photos because they are planned, or crafted in some way, and therefore the encounter with the photo is as flat as the image. Something is missing for Sal.

Opposed to such technologies is the *technē* of writing. Not mentioned very much in *On the Road*, it is generally overlooked for the road trips, parties, and other moments of the book. It is easy to forget that the reason Dean wants to befriend Sal and hang out with him is that Sal is a professional writer, and Dean wants to learn how to write from him:

He came right out to Paterson, New Jersey, where I was living with my aunt, and one night while I was studying there was a knock on the door, and there was Dean, bowing, shuffling obsequiously in the dark of the hall, and saying, "Hel-lo, you remember me – Dean Moriarty? I've come to ask you to show me how to write."<sup>442</sup>

Sal's advice to Dean is to "stick to it with the energy of a benny addict," because Dean, according to Sal's early impressions, "didn't know what he was talking about; that is to say, he was a young jailkid all hung-up on the possibilities of becoming a real intellectual, and he liked to talk in the tone and using the words, but in a jumbled way, that he had heard from 'real intellectuals. . .'"<sup>443</sup> Dean is obviously in need of some rhetorical training, a method of putting the words in the appropriate order – an order that would allow for identification with "intellectuals." Sal points out that Dean's supposed deficiency is not mental, but attitudinal: "he wasn't so naïve

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<sup>442</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 3.

<sup>443</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 3-4.

as that in all other things, and it took him just a few months with Carlo Marx to become completely *in there* with all the terms and jargon.”<sup>444</sup> Dean might want to learn how to write in order to expose and explore more *kairotic* moments in daily life. That is, the writing, unlike the planned photograph, captures the moment and all of its *kairotic* opportunity in a superior manner.

The desire to learn to write might be considered as a desire for a *technē* in a world that disparages art for the superiority of technology:

He watched over my shoulder as I wrote stories, yelling, “Yes! That’s right! Wow! Man!” and “Phew!” and wiped his face with his handkerchief. “Man, wow, there’s so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even *begin* to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears. . .”

“That’s right, man, now you’re talking.” And a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his excitement and his visions, which, he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the ‘overexcited nut.’ In the West he’d spent a third of his time in the poolhall, a third in jail, and a third in the public library.<sup>445</sup>

In this passage, Dean admires Sal’s ability to write stories that push through convention, that manage to capture the momentary importance of the event without being bogged down with grammatical restraint. Likewise, Sal admires Dean’s dismissal of social norms in his torrential rhetoric in public which marks him in the eyes of others as crazy. Sal attributes this ability to Dean’s identity as a product of three American institutions: bars, prisons and libraries. These three institutions name Dean’s number as the perfectly imperfect American subject, crafted completely from public institutions. Dean is the subject who at once is exemplar and distinct from his own identity. As the book develops we will see the full Burkean implications of Dean Moriarty as the ideal subject not, as has been said, to identify with, but instead *to divide from* and

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<sup>444</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 4.

<sup>445</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 4-5.

in so doing, create a compulsory identification and eventually a consubstantial relationship with America.

This appreciation for *technē* over technology in writing is important for this understanding. It extends beyond the admiration Dean has for Sal's writing ability. Sal, after returning from a long trip out west with Dean returns to New York City during rush hour:

Suddenly I found myself on Times Square. I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream – grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City. The high towers of the land – the other end of the land, the place where Paper America is born.<sup>446</sup>

Here Sal makes a distinction between the America he has just been traveling in and around, and “Paper America,” which, as a term, remains meaningfully vague. It should be no surprise by now that Sal does not criticize or disparage New York City; he calls it fantastic and mad, both positive terms in his rhetoric. However, he does convey a certain sadness that the people of Times Square are rushing around just to be buried in awful cemeteries. This is tempered with the realization that they are pursuing their own “mad dream.” There is a comparison of rhetorics here: One being the pursuit of “Paper America” – the chase for American Dollars, and the other being the Paper America of the written page, perhaps a reference to publication and its concern for profit, rather than the concern for writing and capturing the opportunities hidden in momentary experience. One is a conception of chronological time, the other of *kairotic* time. “Paper America” is clearly associated with a society obsessed with chronological time, but also

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<sup>446</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 107.

is ambivalent — it leaves a space open for identification and division, as such a complex text like New York City probably would.

It has been argued that these pages demonstrate the “death tinge of stationary urban life,” which is inferior to the “frantic mad dream of Dean and the road – even as lonesome, tiring, and depressing as it could be. . .”<sup>447</sup> What is left out is that Sal leave it somewhat open, seeing Times Square with “innocent road-eyes” provided him with a different perspective on life in the city. Instead of one being favored over another, Sal shows how stance plays into meaning, and different meanings are revealed through different experiences. Kerouac’s rhetorical approach here to contrasting the differences of being out on the road with the return home. It indicates the rhetorical complexities of being the American subject. It is not a simple comparison, as Henriksen argues, but an insight into the Burkean operations of identification/division, and how perspective, framing, and attitude can reverse a division into an identification, and the subsequent loss of consubstantiality with those who share in the divided-from perspective. As Burke argues, it is not possible to have perfect identification between human beings, and that is why we must depend upon rhetoric. This is why it is difficult to read Sal’s relationship with Dean as the book progresses — but easier to see the rhetorical theory of *kairos* offered.

As an example, I will analyze a few of the more direct exchanges surrounding the idea of *kairos* between Dean and Sal. Sal’s last interactions with Dean in California prove to be instructive, as Dean has advanced to the status of “mystic” in Sal’s eyes:

Furthermore, we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do. We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side.’ There was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant to say was somehow made pure and clear. He used the word ‘pure’ a great deal. I had never dreamed

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<sup>447</sup> Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, 176-7.

Dean would become a mystic. These were the first days of his mysticism, which would lead to the strange, ragged W.C. Fields saintliness of his later days.<sup>448</sup>

This mysticism is ironically represented through Sal's perspective, who freely admits that what Dean is saying doesn't make a lot of sense, but it uses the words "pure" and "clear" frequently. This rhetorical wink indicates to us that Sal wants Dean to be a mystic – "somehow" what Dean says is made understandable, but he's not sure how.

Dean's advancement through Sal's eyes can be read as Sal's attempts to come to understand and accept Dean's rhetoric. When they first become friends, Dean's early rhetorical position is one that could serve as a representative anecdote of several alternative American discourses. Here is an example that is rather lengthy, but also a good example of how Sal sees Dean as someone who is a rhetorical model:

"All right now, children," he said, rubbing his nose and bending down to feel the emergency and pulling cigarettes out of the compartment, and swaying back and forth as he did these things and drove. "The time has come for us to decide what we're going to do for the next week. Crucial, crucial. Ahem!" He dodged a mule wagon; in it sat an old Negro plodding along. "Yes!" yelled Dean. "Yes! Dig him! Now consider his soul – stop a while and consider." And he slowed down the car for all of us to turn and look at the old jazzbo moaning along. "Oh yes, dig him sweet; now there's thoughts in that mind that I would give my last arm to know; to climb in there and find out just what he's poor-ass pondering about this year's turnip greens and ham. Sal, you don't know it but I once lived with a farmer in Arkansas for a whole year, when I was eleven. I had awful chores, I had to skin a dead horse once. Haven't been to Arkansas since Christmas nineteen-forty-three, five years ago, when Ben Gavin and I were chased by a man with a gun who owned the car we were trying to steal; I say all this to show you that of the South I can speak. I have known – I mean, man, I dig the South, I know it in and out – I've dug your letters to me about it. Oh yes, oh yes," he said, trailing off and stopping altogether, and suddenly jumping the car back to seventy and hunching over the wheel. He stared doggedly ahead. Marylou was smiling serenely. This was the new and complete Dean, grown to maturity. I said to myself, My God, he's changed. Fury spat out of his eyes when he told of things he hated; great glows of joy replaced this when he suddenly got happy; every muscle twitched to live and go.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 121.

<sup>449</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 113.

Dean has matured and is now capable of producing his own rhetoric, not merely copying the sounds of the “intellectuals” he associated with the first time they met in New York. No longer willing to be purely *mimetic*, Dean now was able to articulate his own understandings of phenomena he encounters in the world instead of relying on the framework of those intellectual others.

Sal’s admiration for Dean is neither pure nor constant throughout the book, and many moments with Dean are punctuated with tension injected from Sal’s perspective. Here we see tension from Sal watching Dean interact with a jazz musician in a nightclub:

Dean was in a trance. The tenorman’s eyes were fixed straight on him; he had a madman who not only understood but cared and wanted to understand more and much more than there was, and they began dueling for this; everything came out of the horn, no more phrases, just cries, cries, ‘Baugh’ and down to ‘Beep!’ and up to ‘EEEEEE!’ and down to clinkers and over to sidewasy-echoing horn-sounds. He tried everything up, down, sideways upside down, horizontal, thirty degrees, forty degrees, and finally he fell back in somebody’s arms and gave up and everybody pushed around and yelled, “Yes! Yes! He blowed that one!” Dean wiped himself with his handkerchief.<sup>450</sup>

In this scene, we see Dean reduced through Sal’s eyes to almost pure essence. Dean becomes a part of the jazz composition, moving around like the notes under the jazzman’s control. Sal notes that phrases are reduced to cries – there is no longer a higher structure to the communication, we are now more in a moment of communion between the two figures. Dean, at his best, has bridged through his rhetorical practice the very limits surrounding communication, becoming one with his interlocutor on a primal level of noise.

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<sup>450</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 198-9.

Dean is often a chameleon, someone who is best described to us through Sal's reference to popular culture. Visiting Dean in California, Sal encourages him to take another road trip, and within moments Dean begins to transform in his preparations to journey with Sal:

I heard Dean's maniacal giggle across the house, together with the wails of his baby. The next thing I knew he was gliding around the house like Groucho Marx, with his broken thumb wrapped in a huge white bandage sticking up like a beacon that stands motionless above the frenzy of the waves. Once again I saw his pitiful huge battered trunk with socks and dirty underwear sticking out; he bent over it, throwing in everything he could find. Then he got his suitcase, the beatest suitcase in the USA. . . That thumb became the symbol of Dean's final development. He no longer cared about anything (as before) but now he also *cared about everything in principle*; that is to say, it was all the same to him and he belonged to the world and there was nothing he could do about it.<sup>451</sup>

Dean had hurt his thumb before Sal arrived, and Sal uses the injured thumb, poorly bandaged, as a synecdoche for Dean as a rhetorical figure. The poor bandage job shows Dean's usual lack of specific attention to detail, but that he cares in a broader sense of the term. Sal's reference to Dean taking on the characteristics of Groucho Marx is a comic framing of Dean's attitude, and one that helps us see his rhetorical positioning of himself toward the world. Dean's acceptance, in Sal's mind, is that he is a part of the world, not apart or external from it or above it. However, this is Sal's vision of Dean's final development, and the other characters (perhaps even readers) are not so easily persuaded that Dean is rhetorically savvy. In defending himself and his desire to travel with Sal, leaving his girlfriend and new baby alone, the limits of his rhetorical form are exposed:

Then a complete silence fell over everybody; where once Dean would have talked his way out, he now fell silent himself, but standing in front of everybody, ragged and broken and idiotic, right under the lightbulbs, his bony mad face covered with sweat and throbbing veins, saying, 'Yes, yes, yes,' as though tremendous revelations were pouring into him all the time now, and I am convinced they were, and the others suspected as much and were frightened. He was BEAT – the root, the soul of Beatific. What was he

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<sup>451</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 188.



knowing? He tried all in his power to tell me what he was knowing, and they envied that about me, my position at his side, defending him and drinking him in as they once tried to do.<sup>452</sup>

Sal frames this last confrontation with the San Francisco crowd as a moment of jealousy where only he can understand Dean's great thoughts. Again, Dean's body is highlighted as the sign that deeper things are going on in his mind than we can understand. But from a rhetorical point of view, the importance and greatness of this knowledge cannot be communicated. Sal suspects that the other people in the room recognize and understand that Dean is receiving superior spiritual knowledge. However, all of Dean's power is not enough to convey properly the realizations that he is having. Sal classifying this moment as the "soul" of Beatific has a dual rhetorical purpose as well – it communicates to the reader that just reading about Beat and knowing about it is not enough; it is something that should be directly experienced. Here Sal serves as Kerouac's rhetorical vehicle for his initial motive for the book – to chronicle experiences and maintain the connection to the universe as a whole. Leaving part of the rhetorical positioning of Beat mysterious might be a sign to the reader that description might not be enough to teach the perspective of Dean.

As the book closes, Sal meets a girl and decides he wants to settle down with her, turning down Dean's last offer for a final trip. Dean has clearly reached the end of his rhetorical effectiveness, as Sal aptly demonstrates in this scene where Dean has shown up weeks before Sal was expecting him:

As in a dream I saw him tiptoe in from the dark hall in his stocking feet. He couldn't talk anymore. He hopped and laughed, he stuttered and fluttered his hands and said, "Ah-ah-you must listen to hear." We listened, all ears. But he forgot what he wanted to say.

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<sup>452</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 195.

“Really listen-ahem. Look, dear Sal – sweet Laura – I’ve come – I’m gone – but wait – ah yes.” And he stared with rocky sorrow into his hands.<sup>453</sup>

Dean who once was able to explain eloquently everything to Sal now has trouble even finding the basic words with which to communicate with him. Sal is beginning to move into a more normalized rhetoric, one of settling down with a partner and not constant travel as Dean would have it. At the end of the book, Sal watches Dean walk away, “ragged in a motheaten overcoat he bought specifically for the freezing temperatures of the East, walked off alone, and the last I saw of him he rounded the corner of Seventh Avenue, eyes on the street ahead, and bent to it again.”<sup>454</sup> Sal remarks to his worried girlfriend Laura that Dean will “be all right,” a marked difference from Sal’s earlier attempts to follow and identify completely with Dean’s attitude. Now Sal places Dean via his own identification with the more normalized relationship he has developed without Dean.

However, the identification is not without division, as Sal points out when “the sun goes down and I set on the old broke-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it,” he keeps Dean in mind. “I think of Dean Moriarty” is the last line of the book. Sal may have stopped engaging in Dean’s rhetorical style, but he is conscious of it. At the end of the book, Sal becomes the rhetorical model for the reader – keep Dean in mind when you try to make sense of America because it is so vast and immense you must have a frame in which to encounter it. Sal is able to have a stable relationship and a stable life in New York due to his encounter and engagement with the variety

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<sup>453</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 304.

<sup>454</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, 306-7.

of rhetorical approaches to America available. In the end, he has to reject Dean's style – or divide with it, in order to identify more fully with America on his own terms.

In this chapter I have analyzed *On the Road* from the rhetorical perspective, arguing that it can be seen as a rhetorical guidebook to America for readers if seen as a site of competing discourses about how to be American. In the next chapter I will further prove this position by examining Kerouac's later defense of the Beat Generation, arguing that Beat is not a state but a practice, and best understood as a rhetorical practice.

#### 4.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that Jack Kerouac was deeply concerned with questions about human communication. Like Kenneth Burke, Kerouac felt modern rhetoric inadequate to the task of accounting for and recognizing the human condition. *On the Road* can be seen as an implicit rhetorical theory, or a way of engaging in communication with other human beings. In the novel an implicit rhetorical theory of *kairos* is explored, enacted in the seeking of opportunities for identification and division in momentary experiences that do not follow chronological time. This rhetorical theory helps individuals connect and become consubstantial in an environment that appeared contingent, hostile and confusing for many.

Kerouac and Burke both felt that attribution of motives is central in the understanding of why people do what they do. Kerouac felt that exploring this question was central to the understanding of American life post-war. In order to provide a new understanding, he gave readers a comprehensive rhetorical study of American motives and attitudes encapsulated in ways that people speak to each other about the world.

Kerouac's novel *On the Road* seen as a collection of various rhetorical approaches makes sense in the climate of the 1950s anxiety about new technologies and fears. Kerouac's exploration of the various American rhetorical approaches to time becomes a sourcebook that readers could use to perform their own American sensibilities. At the end, Kerouac concludes that being "beat" is a particular awareness of or for the moment, or in Burkean terms, the situation allows for the appropriate rhetorical response. Attention to *kairos*, is key as well as understanding forged through explorations of style and dichotomy are also central to his rhetorical contribution.

As John Durham Peters notes, "To live is to leave traces. To speak to another is to produce signs that are independent of one's soul and are interpreted without one's control."<sup>455</sup> Kerouac's attempts at defending the Beat rhetoric are indeed noble and his passion is profound. However, most readers have probably noticed that Kerouac's view, for what is represented in *On the Road* can be read as naive. Peters is instructive in this regard, pointing out that whether or not one believes in the pre-communicative status of an individual or not, the utterance is always independent and should be interpreted as such. In the end, Kerouac's difficulty is one inherent in the communicative situation to begin with – we cannot lay our souls bare for the other's inspection. Kerouac was at the same time mystified and frustrated by this recalcitrant fact of existence. In his novel, *kairos* serves as a tool that allows Dean and Sal to identify with others who would remain at a distance from them, separate and unknowable. Kerouac could be seen as trying to "solve" what Peters posits not as problem, but as status. With the *kairotic* rhetoric offered by Dean, Kerouac implicitly suggests a rhetorical strategy that can help people apprehend and deal with this communicative distance. Like Sal at the end of the novel, we are

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<sup>455</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 118.

often left with the image of the interlocutor, still mystified as to who or what he or she really is – left only with traces, all we can do is ponder their authentic identity.

Jack Kerouac relied on timing and opportunity to unite others he saw as needing unification and connection. Allen Ginsberg proposed a focus on the innate human state of embodiment as a resource for bringing distinct and different human beings together on the plane of meaning. In the next chapter, I investigate Ginsberg's contribution to the beat rhetoric – the human body and its productive limits.

## 5.0 ALLEN GINSBERG'S POETIC-RHETORIC OF EMBODIMENT

In 1959, Allen Ginsberg wrote his opinion about poetry in the *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*. The article was not solicited, but the editor felt that the work should be published due to Ginsberg's *ethos* on the issue of proper poetry: "While we feel it is a curiosity piece rather than a profound social or literary criticism, it is nonetheless a revealing statement by the most publicized, and perhaps most talented, of the younger poets practicing under the avowedly 'Beat' banner." Ginsberg's opinion carried significant rhetorical weight due to one poem still at the center of controversy in San Francisco and the United States – "In effect, it is another *Howl* from Ginsberg."<sup>456</sup>

The debate in the paper over poetry was about authentic poets and inauthentic poets, much like the distinctions drawn by Thomas Parkinson that I discuss in the introduction. Whatever the context or supposed purpose of the debate, Ginsberg's "second *Howl*" can help us to understand the first *Howl* – the poem published by City Lights Books that, in the words of one scholar, "played a small part in changing the world itself by collapsing cultural boundaries at the height of the Cold War and by encouraging cultural rebellion around the world – from San Francisco to Havana, New York to Mexico."<sup>457</sup> Two years previous to this publication, San

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<sup>456</sup> Matt Theado, ed., *The Beats: A Literary Reference* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2001), 255.

<sup>457</sup> Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), xx.

Francisco was the site of an obscenity trial against *Howl*, which Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the publisher, ended up winning. The memory of the controversial event was not that old when Ginsberg's argument appeared in the city newspaper. But instead of taking one side or the other, Ginsberg offered a new position – that poetry's authenticity comes from mass mediation, not in spite of it. He begins his argument sweepingly, with a characterization of history:

Recent history is the record of a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind and exterminate all manifestations of that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator. The suppression of contemplative individuality is nearly complete.<sup>458</sup>

This mechanical consciousness is the mass media, which through technology and pervasive scope are able to sever the more natural state of consciousness of human beings. The mass media, for Ginsberg, distorts reality in an undetectable and universal manner. “The only immediate historical data that we can know and act on are those fed to our senses through systems of mass communication. These media are exactly the places where the deepest and most personal sensitivities and confessions of reality are most prohibited, mocked, suppressed.”<sup>459</sup> For Ginsberg, reality is not accessible outside of mass communication. This is the only conduit to “immediate” history that is available due to mass media's colonization of communication. This pushing down, or elimination of natural or healthier means of communication and epistemic function can only spell disaster. For without access to these realms of communication, the future looks grim. For Ginsberg, the mass media of 1950s America is literally causing American identity to suffer from psychological pathology: “Because systems of mass communication can

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<sup>458</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

<sup>459</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

communicate only officially acceptable levels of reality, no one can know the extent of the secret unconscious life. No one in America can know what will happen. No one is in real control. America is having a nervous breakdown.”<sup>460</sup>

The nervous breakdown, for Ginsberg, is his growing sense that the technologies of mass communication and mass culture were presenting a post-war vision of America that was in conflict with daily lived experience. The inability of mass communication to fill the gap is where poetry can express its superiority as a discourse: “Poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul of the individual, and, because all individuals are One in the eyes of their Creator, into the soul of the World. The world has a soul.”<sup>461</sup> The tension between the power of the individual and his or her importance and the connection to the divine universal is striking, but it indicates how central the individual body is for Ginsberg. The individual, although distinct and secret, forges a connection to the universal through this distinct status. Therefore, access to the individual soul is a matter of divine, universal connection.

Poetry as a “record of individual insights” has a distinct advantage in Ginsberg’s view. Poetry gives one access to the “soul of the world” – not a giant, metaphysical Truth we must all follow, but instead, the simple truth that human beings are all in the same place – we are all connected through this thing we have in common: insight.

“Insight” is not well explained by Ginsberg. His rhetoric indicates that everyone has insights, but not everyone can see that all people have insights – the soul of the world – and therefore, only small communities of individuals have made this realization: “San Francisco is one of the many places where a few individuals, Poets, have the luck and courage and fate to

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<sup>460</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

<sup>461</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.



glimpse something new through the crack in mass consciousness.”<sup>462</sup> His reference to what has been called the San Francisco renaissance clearly limits who can see through the mass media screen, but also locates this ability in their actions. They are poets, and this is why they have been able to crack through the mass consciousness. These individuals are lucky, but they are also threatened by those who do not have full insight:

Those of the general populace whose individual perception is sufficiently weak to be formed by stereotypes of mass communication disapprove and deny the insight. The police and newspapers have moved in, mad movie manufacturers from Hollywood are at this moment preparing bestial stereotypes of the scene.<sup>463</sup>

Ginsberg’s argument is that the system has a nuanced and multivariate way of shutting down the insights provided by poetry. Not only does it stop these insights by force with the police, but the newspapers are a part of the police. This combination is a strange one, but rhetorically clever. Associating the police and the newspapers in the same breath forces the readers to think of how newspapers and police could be identified, at least as far as their interests are the same – shutting down a revelation that indicts both the traditional forms of mass mediation and the larger governmental structure that endorses those forms. Those who cannot share in the insight will dismiss it, having been brainwashed by the mass mediated environment. And the film directors have come in to “manufacture” (as opposed to create) films that will be used to further that deception. These are not the artists; they are the creators of “bestial” texts that “stereotype.” Although his immediate focus is to call attention to the San Francisco poets’ uniqueness, hopefully sparing their work from media corruption, I generalize here in order to call attention to the implicit theory Ginsberg offers of mass media, poetry and rhetoric. He paints a society in

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<sup>462</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

<sup>463</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

deep conspiracy that has a circumference as wide as the broadcast strength of any TV tower, and is as intimate as a conversation. Yet, poets are the ones who have the potential to uncover this conspiracy, no matter the breadth of its power.

What is the result of being one of the people who is experiencing these deep communications with the soul of the Earth?

The poets and those who share their activities, or exhibit some sign of dress, hair or demeanor of understanding, or hipness, are ridiculed. Those of us who have used certain benevolent drugs (marijuana) to alter our consciousness in order to gain insight are hunted down in the street by police. Peyote, an historic vision-producing agent, is prohibited on pain of arrest. Those who have used opiates and junk are threatened with permanent jail and death. To be junky in America is like having been a Jew in Nazi Germany.<sup>464</sup>

Ginsberg's rhetoric classifies hallucinogenic drugs as a part of the American and human spiritual tradition by couching them as the commonplace technologies of self-discovery. That is, these drugs can be used to understand the soul – communicate with the depths of one's own self. Through the argument, we move from ridicule to the death camps of Nazi Germany – a hyperbole to be sure, but a powerful one from the perspective that drug use is a part of spiritual practice, and to ban that practice would be to extinguish the holy communicators – the poets – from society. It is also a nice turn on the idea that America, which envisions itself as saving the world from the threat of the Nazi holocaust, is now practicing that same holocaust on members of its own society, at least through the means of social control.

Ginsberg's assertion that the police and the newspapers, generally considered to be distinct institutions by most readers of the time, are two halves of the same whole is an application of the rhetorical *topos* of contrast. It could also be what Burke names "perspective by

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<sup>464</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

incongruity,” which “is powerful because, if successful, it jars people into new perceptions about the way reality can be constructed and may encourage people to question their pieties. Perspective by incongruity encourages people to reclassify their outlook on the social world; as Burke argued.”<sup>465</sup> Ginsberg’s depiction of institutions usually seen as distinct as deeply connected offers such incongruity. He contrasts this association of institutional power with a power derived from individuals interacting. Both are systems of “communication” in one sense – they are methods or ways of establishing order and meaning. However the distinction that Ginsberg offers is that the poets’ communication – established through the contact of individual bodies – is not only superior, but a direct threat to the hierarchical modes of communication represented by newspapers and the police.

The use of drugs is apparently common among this group of poets and it is one of the causes of their persecution. Ginsberg places drug use not only in a context of mere “inspiration” but also as a part of the history of human religious inspiration. The poets are being hunted down, therefore, because of their consistency with human history in the ways they seek inspiration. It is a productive rhetorical move, especially in a society where drug use is a crime in itself as well as established as the motive for criminal acts. For the poets, it is as natural and accidental as being Jewish in this argument.

Ginsberg begins an association of poetics with mass communication as an oppositional relationship. Networks of communication derived from individual poets sharing measured words are compared to the hierarchical and state-authorized systems of mass communication throughout the rest of the piece: “A huge sadistic police bureaucracy has risen in every State,

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<sup>465</sup> Naomi R. Rockler, “Overcoming ‘It’s Just Entertainment’: Perspective by Incongruity as a Strategy for Media Literacy” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 30 1 (Spring 2002): 16-23, 18

encouraged by the central government, to persecute the illuminati, to brainwash the public with official Lies about the drugs, and to terrify and destroy those addicts whose spiritual search has made them sick.”<sup>466</sup> The primary function of the police is to spread “official” lies about drugs, destroy those who have become sick from their “spiritual search” (addicts) and to make sure the public has no sympathy for drug users. Ginsberg is beginning the crescendo of the argument here, one that ends in what appears to be an enthymeme:

Deviants from the mass sexual stereotype, quietists, those who will not work for money, fib and make arms for hire, join Armies in murder and threat, those who wish to loaf, think, rest in visions, act beautifully on their own, speak truthfully in public, inspired by Democracy – what is their psychic fate now in America?  
An America, the greater portion of whose Economy is yoked to mental and mechanical preparations for War?<sup>467</sup>

The enthymeme here doesn’t exactly fit the mold of the proper enthymeme due to the run-up of *progressio* or perhaps *auxesis* – the phrases rise in intensity as Ginsberg describes two ways of being in America. The difficulty of pinning down the figures at use here characterizes Ginsberg’s poetic argumentative style. He has more in common with what Jeffrey Walker has identified as the argumentative style of early Greek poets in the “enthymematic cap” – a phrasing that is not quite properly enthymeme, but more properly *en thymos*; the argumentation hitting you aesthetically as well as reasonably.<sup>468</sup> The cap here is the question left open at the end as perhaps the implicit answer to the question right before it - that the fate of these beautiful truth-speakers is somewhat set. The argumentative structure itself, in its poetic dimension, makes a case for a poetic sensibility in its own construction.

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<sup>466</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

<sup>467</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 255.

<sup>468</sup> Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 172-173.

Ginsberg makes these sentiments known not only through his overt argument, but also his own argumentative style:

Literature expressing these insights has been mocked, misinterpreted, and suppressed by a horde of middlemen whose fearful allegiance to the Organization of mass stereotype communication prevents them from sympathy (not only with their own inner nature but) with any manifestation of unconditioned individuality. I mean, journalists, commercial publishers, book review fellows, multitudes of professors of literature, etc., etc. Poetry is hated. Whole schools of academic criticism have risen to prove that human consciousness of unconditioned Spirit is a myth. A poetic renaissance glimpsed in San Francisco has been responded to with ugliness, anger, jealousy, vitriol, sullen protestations of superiority.

And violence. By police, by customs officials, post office employees, by trustees of great universities. By anyone whose love of Power has led him to a position where he can push other people around over a difference of opinion – or Vision.<sup>469</sup>

Ginsberg uses the long lists of those who are opposed to the revolution in poetic sensibility as a contrast to the simplicity of the realizations of the poets. Capitalized words almost set concepts up as arch enemies in this section – we have Power and Vision struggling over the technologies of poetry and literature for the control of human consciousness. Containing such a grand conflict in such a small amount of text requires a rhetorical finesse – which Ginsberg displays here by making his argument sound and look more like a poem than an opinion piece. Ginsberg plays with the dominant discourse of the newspaper and the result is more performed and aesthetic than rational. The paragraph shift between the reactions of “vitriol” against the San Francisco poets, “And violence,” does nothing short of force the reader to pause and consider the categorical distinction between those two different universes of reaction. It almost seems as if Ginsberg would like this piece read aloud by those holding the newspaper – he seems to force their voice.

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<sup>469</sup> Theado, *The Beats*, 256.

Finally in this essay, Ginsberg ends with a claim to the inevitability of the spiritual insight revealed via poetry – “And all men at one time or other enter that Spirit, whether in life or death.” Placing America in denial, Ginsberg closes with a series of questions –

When will we discover an America that will not deny its own God? Who takes up arms, money, police and a million hands to murder the consciousness of God? Who spits in the beautiful face of Poetry which sings of the Glory of God and weeps in the dust of the world?<sup>470</sup>

Clearly, the solution is the embracing of Poetry which not only connects with the highest of sacraments – we’ve seen it not only in the pure service of God, but also the communicative technology that unites all human beings with the soul of the world – but it is a humble concept as well, weeping in the lowest form of matter on the planet, dust. The last line is a phrase directly from the Bible. What exactly is Ginsberg advocating in this essay? What is his understanding of the relation of poetry to society as a whole?

On the one hand, Ginsberg’s critique of the mass media is not very complex, nor nuanced. It is a popular and rather expected critique – mass mediated forms of communication are dangerous; they prohibit more natural, or “present” interactions between human beings. Such fears have been around, and have been expressed, in unusual and interesting ways, such as spirits and undead voices being carried through electric transmissions during the birth of the telegraph.<sup>471</sup> On the other hand, Ginsberg in this piece displays a rhetorical sensitivity and finesse that comes out in his carefully constructed argument, resting on aesthetic enthymematic connections and broad gestures toward the infinite possibilities located in human communion.

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<sup>470</sup> Theado, *The Beats*.

<sup>471</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 138.

Ginsberg's critique, as I developed it from his "second Howl" is that institutions within society work together to establish an official opinion and reading on human nature. Ginsberg is not optimistic on the role of these institutions such as universities and newspapers; he sees mass mediated communication as interrupting and destroying basic human functions. And from this I move to my larger argument: Ginsberg is concerned with human connection as Kenneth Burke saw it - identification and division.

As I previously discussed, Kenneth Burke defined rhetoric as the always present dual move of identification and division in any human attempt to connect.<sup>472</sup> Rhetoric, defined as "identification/division" is central to beings who lack the biological ability to connect to other minds – we are all distinctly separate and autonomous nervous systems – but we are beings that have the innate drive and desire to use symbols to induce action or belief in others. Ginsberg's essay suggests that this process is being interrupted with a too easy surrogate, and ruining the processes of communication – in Burke's terms, a quest for consubstantiality.

In this chapter I will analyze Ginsberg's writing via rhetorical criticism to reveal his contributions to the beat rhetoric. Ginsberg's contribution to the beat rhetoric will be one of embodied communication – what I mean by that is a focus on the body as both limit and resource of effective, meaningful rhetoric. The term I borrow from Kenneth Burke, "consubstantiality," which, previously explained, is the alignment of one person's motives, or views of the world, with another's. For Burke, this is the realm of rhetoric, and rhetoric is essential for human cooperation. Ginsberg sees the limits of the body as a commonplace from which we can identify with others, and divide from those things that deny our bodily limits. Also, he sees the

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<sup>472</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 21.

recognition of the human body as a limit on our abilities to be the very thing that will allow for the best sort of human relations.

Ginsberg's contribution is one not only to the Beat philosophy, but one also to rhetoric as a whole. He is focused mainly on embodied beings, including the nastiness, frustration, desires and discomfort which an embodied state brings. His attempts to reveal the problems with his contemporary communicative environment also highlight his trouble speaking from a recognized position in his society as a homosexual. His turn toward poetry as the way to argue his position was a way of placing himself in a recognizable position as a rhetor, while at the same time deflecting criticism of his words and beliefs. In this way, Ginsberg is a rhetorical theorist and practitioner of a new American rhetoric that attempts to solve problems with reaching consubstantiality in the 1950s. Ginsberg, seen as a theorist and practitioner of a new American rhetoric, has more in common with massification theorists and Kenneth Burke than with other contemporary poets.

Placing Ginsberg alongside other thinkers on this issue could be productive by providing new ways to read his poems. I conclude this chapter by suggesting an outline of Ginsberg's rhetorical theory – its main components and theoretical assumptions, and then I will turn my attention to examining "Howl" in the next chapter for a more concrete explanation. In this chapter I examine the prosaic and more overt political prose that Ginsberg produced during his life.



## 5.1 GINSBERG'S RHETORICAL ENVIRONMENT

Allen Ginsberg, throughout his young life, was confronted with the material horror that comes with possessing a human body. As Peters notes, communication technologies rising from the nineteenth century – the telephone especially - at their core mask the horrors of the embodied interlocutor, making it easy to avoid “the uncanniness of proximate bodies, the ickiness of the other, the recognition that there are hair and moles on the arms and perhaps sweat in the armpits and that the person is breathing, metabolizing, and secreting even as we speak.”<sup>473</sup> We can see Ginsberg through his rhetorical work attempting to find comfort with the body, as the twentieth century continues the pattern of communication technology effacing the body.

Ginsberg's most discussed moments of his youth involve his relationship with his mother, and his homosexuality. Both require some further analysis so that the importance of Ginsberg's rhetorical contributions can be understood.

Ginsberg's mother Naomi was in and out of psychiatric treatment for all of Ginsberg's young life. Before Ginsberg's birth, Naomi, “suffered a nervous breakdown, manifest from her hypersensitivity to light and sound.” She tried to overcome this illness by, “lying in a dark room and hoping that whatever afflicted her would pass.”<sup>474</sup> Unfortunately, it never permanently went away, and Naomi was institutionalized several times in hopes to treat her. During her time at home she regularly accused family members of engaging in conspiracies against her, held pots to her ears to keep voices from influencing her, and regularly walked around in front of her son

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<sup>473</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 188.

<sup>474</sup> Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 6.

naked.<sup>475</sup> She attempted suicide while Allen was in high school and was again institutionalized. Most significant in Ginsberg's mind were two specific incidents: One involved a seizure his mother had which he witnessed and wrote about, another occurred when he attempted to persuade his mother that her concerns were unfounded. Ginsberg's experience in persuading his mother that her concerns were merely a paranoid symptom ended in disaster as Ginsberg learned the recalcitrance of human situations to reason. After sitting her on the bed to ask her "specifically what she was complaining about," she responded by detailing her paranoid belief that doctors were poisoning her and controlling her movements through electronic sticks in her back. Ginsberg attempted to reason with her that her concerns could not possibly be true:

Instead of arguing with her, Allen tried to prove her fears unfounded. When Naomi complained that the painful sticks were located near her shoulder blades, Allen rubbed her back, as if trying to find them; when she asserted that she could not specify the names of her would-be assassins for fear of being overheard, Allen handed her a pad and a pencil and asked her to write down the names. As Naomi told him that the apartment had been bugged by the government, that wires in the ceiling were transmitting their conversation to her enemies, Allen stood on a chair and tapped the ceiling with a broom handle. "There's no place for wires," he suggested. "They're smarter than you are," Naomi replied, rejecting all of Allen's attempts to reason with her.<sup>476</sup>

Ginsberg, in an attempt to solve her unsolvable issues, took her on a long trip to a rest home where she was soon evicted due to her paranoid condition. In many poems Ginsberg attempted to make sense of these teenage experiences using his poetic as an epistemic frame in order to uncover, structure, or explain these events with his mother to his satisfaction. Eventually, Naomi Ginsberg was lobotomized, and it was Allen Ginsberg who authorized the

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<sup>475</sup> Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 10-11.

<sup>476</sup> Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 18.

procedure.<sup>477</sup> The impossibility of reason and rational discourse to sway Naomi to see her concerns as unfounded haunted Ginsberg, and perhaps motivated his turn toward the study of human interaction through words.

There were, of course, other influences on Ginsberg. Not much needs to be said about his relationships with Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. Burroughs was a resource for Ginsberg in the same way he was for Kerouac – he was a touchstone of the canon of thoughtful, important books that, through Burroughs’ *ethos*, became a canon for Ginsberg. For example, Ginsberg tempers his embrace of the body as the root of healthy human interaction with a warning from Burroughs:

If you consider sex from a Hindu, Buddhist, Hare Krishna, even Christian fundamentalist viewpoint – a warning about the body and warning about attachment itself – it becomes interesting. Burroughs has actually written about it at length in a way which hip people and even radicals have found very interesting: the sex ‘habit’ – sex as another form of junk, a commodity, the consumption of which is encouraged by the state to keep people enslaved to their bodies. As long as they’re enslaved to their bodies, they can be filled with fear and shock and pain and threat, so they can be kept in place.<sup>478</sup>

Even the naturalness of the body can be twisted and turned into a commodity instead of an end-in-itself as Ginsberg would have it. The pleasure of the body, of being in harmony with the embodied state can also be used to keep people docile just as mass mediation can. Ginsberg’s appropriation of Buddhism here as well as Burroughs’s famous rhetorical use of terms like “habit” and “junk” to criticize addiction to bodily processes are used by Ginsberg to set limits and restrictions on proper uses of the body. Properly, the body as an accident of existence concurs with body as the totality of existence, i.e. I cannot imagine existing in an un-

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<sup>477</sup> Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 89.

<sup>478</sup> Allen Young, “Interview on September 25, 1972,” in *Allen Ginsberg Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958-1996*, ed. David Carter (New York: Perennial, 2002), 311.

bodied state. Ginsberg cuts through the accident/totality problem with a correlative: The body can be used itself as a medium or *topos* that can provide insights about this dilemma. We will see more about how this becomes the center of his rhetorical theory when I analyze “Howl” in the next chapter. For now, I will explore Ginsberg’s theory through his prose, interviews and essays in order to provide the grounding for the rhetorical analysis of his poem.

## 5.2 GINSBERG THE POET OR GINSBERG THE THEORIST?

How can Allen Ginsberg, one of the most famous American poets of the twentieth century, be re-read as an architect of a complex new rhetorical system? Much evidence from his personal life and public activity testifies to a Ginsberg who is a master of direct and effective communication:

One of his friends has called Ginsberg the central casting office of the underground. He enters the name, address, and phone number of anyone he meets who plays, or is apt to play, a part in what he things of as the new order – or has information that might be useful to it – in the address book that he always carries in his purple bag, and he goes to considerable trouble putting people he likes in touch with each other and with sympathetic and influential Establishment characters who might be helpful to them. In this way, Ginsberg has managed to create a network of the like-minded around the world. . . . Ginsberg’s passion for an entirely *comunicado* underground has made him the most practically effective drop-out around.<sup>479</sup>

Ginsberg apparently believed that effective contact between people – though attempts at communication between them – was the way to establish the kind of political and social change he wanted to see in the world. Ginsberg also spent a considerable amount of time thinking and writing about communication and rhetoric. One only has to attend to his interviews, lectures and

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<sup>479</sup> Jane Kramer, *Allen Ginsberg in America* (New York: Fromm International, 1997), 17.

personal notes to see that Ginsberg was deeply concerned with questions that are at the center of the rhetorical tradition, although he was unaware of the tradition as we might understand it.

Ginsberg's rhetorical perspective takes the human body as its focus. Ginsberg is at once awed by and also horrified by the embodied condition of the human subject. Whatever the cause – and I have suggested two potential influences – Ginsberg adapts words and rhetorical concepts in order to address this need. In a lecture, Ginsberg addresses this concern of embodiment by associating those concerns with questions often pondered by rhetorical scholars. He turns to the questions of identity and audience:

The problem of being the center of attention, like now, or being famous is an identity problem no different from anybody's identity problem because of the vastness of all of our identity problems: 'Who am I,' like 'Who're you?' What's the actual identity, what's the actual inner person, *is* there even an inner self, is there any identity? Anybody's identity problem is the entire universe, it's as vast as the entire universe. Yours as well as mine. So actually in the grand scale with which we're dealing, my identity problem is not any bigger than yours.<sup>480</sup>

The deep concern over identity is one of the foundational questions Ginsberg uses to construct his need for a poetic approach to the universe. The “universal” question of identity is one that is clearly slippery – being famous raises the question just as being “anybody” because the question is ultimately unanswerable. It is a set part of the universe as a whole, and it's a question that everyone must encounter. At the root of it is a contradiction – the one thing that makes us all compatible, at first, is that we all have the exact same problem: None of us know how to identify ourselves. We are bodies that quite literally bump into each other, and we require explanation, justification and reasons to frame our encounters.

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<sup>480</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. Gordon Ball (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 3.

With this as the starting point, the crisis of identity as I will call it, human beings almost naturally wish to reach out to each other. This brings us to considerations of audience – who or what is an audience of people with identity as their primary motivation? Ginsberg reveals his sense of audience through a question and answer exchange:

Q: Isn't there a difference though in the awareness which you have of your audience and the balance of awareness coming back to you?

AG: Uh, I don't know. I assume, actually, that there is one consciousness that we all share on the highest level, that we are all one Self, actually, that we are all one Self with one being, one consciousness.

Q: So the awareness between you and other persons is virtually the same as between me and us?

AG: Yes. When we all address ourselves to the highest awareness possible, to the highest awareness that we can conceive of among ourselves. So in a situation like this I try to address myself to that one consciousness, I try to pay attention or keep it in mind at least, conceptually if not heartwise, as much as possible, try to keep my body in a condition of the highest possibility of awareness, or keep that as the touchstone of the relationship, and so *can't* go wrong – trusting, however, that others do recognize this gleam in themselves.<sup>481</sup>

Amazingly similar to the concept of the Universal audience put forth by Chaim Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, Ginsberg could be seen as agreeing that the best way to address the audience is to compose arguments for, “a universality and unanimity imaged by the speaker, to the agreement of an audience which should be universal. . .”<sup>482</sup> The rhetoric in question is to be formulated with support that ensures anyone understanding it should assent to it: “The individual, with his freedom of deliberation and of choice, defer to the constraining force of reason, which takes from him all possibility of doubt. Thus, maximally efficacious rhetoric, in

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<sup>481</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 5.

<sup>482</sup> Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 31.

the case of a universal audience, is rhetoric employing nothing but logical proof.”<sup>483</sup> Of course, this is not to be confused with logic as developed in the discipline of philosophy. This logic is culturally and contingently bound, not metaphysical, timeless, and consistently applicable. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, after reviewing some philosophical arguments with an eye toward finding a universal standard of adherence, decide it would be better to flip the question: “Instead of believing in a universal audience, analogous to the divine mind which can assent only to the ‘truth,’ we might, with greater justification, characterize each speaker by the image he himself holds of the universal audience that he is trying to win over to his view.”<sup>484</sup> Said another way, instead of seeking a universal standard of adherence from which to characterize arguments, find a standard of adherence within the characterization of the arguments from a particular author. “The study of these variations would be very instructive, as we would learn from it what men, at different times in history, have regarded as *real*, *true* and *objectively valid*.”<sup>485</sup> Each speaker or writer, in other words, constructs arguments with a rhetoric that attempts to, upon being understood, compel adherence. It does this by properly sorting existing categories of ideas into proper places for the audience, relying on observations, facts, and information that the audience believes to be beyond interrogation.

Of course, the universal audience theory can easily be manipulated into a justification for unethical or immoral ends. The concept of the undefined universal audience is used to check this potential harm. “[The undefined universal audience] is invoked to pass judgment on what is the concept of the universal audience appropriate to such a concrete audience, to examine, simultaneously, the manner in which it was composed, which are the individuals who comprise

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<sup>483</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 32.

<sup>484</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 33.

<sup>485</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 33.

it, according to the adopted criterion, and whether this criterion is legitimate. It can be said that audiences pass judgment on one another.”<sup>486</sup>

This structure of audience has some similarities to what Ginsberg is advancing. The central question facing them is similar – what is the proper mode of addressing the audience? Both answer with the idea that a proper mental construction of who the members of the audience are is a prior act. Ginsberg’s construction is quite rhetorically sophisticated, positing the audience that one should address as essentially consisting of one universal being. This is the idea of “contemplative individuality” that the media is flattening with their one-size-fits-all approach to communication, as he mentions in his defense of contemporary poetry I cited at the beginning of this chapter. Ginsberg’s rhetoric is a way of not only addressing the audience, but doing it in an ethically consistent way. One reflects upon incredibly local ethical standards – since one thinks of one’s own human experience in order to formulate messages, then thinks of the implications to the one/universal being. Of course, Ginsberg does note that this depends on the audience “recognizing the gleam in themselves,” which Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note as a valid rhetorical strategy of division for those audience members who don’t agree: “If argumentation addressed to the universal audience and calculated to convince does not convince everybody, one can always resort to *disqualifying the recalcitrant* by classifying them as stupid or abnormal. . . . There can only be adherence to this idea of excluding individuals from the human community if the number and intellectual value of those banned are not so high as to make such a procedure ridiculous.”<sup>487</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca then recommend, if the

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<sup>486</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 35.

<sup>487</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 33.



numbers of recalcitrant audience members are high, to align one's argumentation with the "elite" or highly enlightened discourse of those who have a special understanding:

If this danger exists, recourse must be had to another line of argumentation, and the universal audience must be set against an elite audience, endowed with exceptional and infallible means of knowledge. Those who pride themselves on possession of a supernatural revelation or mystical knowledge, as well as those who appeal to the virtuous, to believers, or to men endowed with grace, show their preference for an elite audience; this elite audience may even be confused with the perfect Being.<sup>488</sup>

In outlining his ideas about audience, Ginsberg is masterful on this point. He excludes by including – the members of the audience who do not "get it" are those who are not in tune with the idea that many are one. In Burkean terms, Ginsberg "divides by identifying," placing those outside as inside, but clueless. Ginsberg's attitude toward these individuals is also worth noting, they are not evil; they just misunderstand. Ginsberg's attitude is a comic one, as the audience is assumed to be in tune with at least the sliver of universal identity within them.

Ginsberg's attentiveness to his universal audience as embodied fragments of a universalizing consciousness or "Being" extends to his understanding of language use. Ginsberg clearly delineates a difference between language and voice, which he attempts to distinguish by embodying one and disembodying the other. This distinction also helps him negotiate the audience problem of misunderstanding by placing some of the responsibility on the rhetor's choices of how to broadcast that message.

To explain this, we must understand that meaning for Ginsberg comes primarily from the embodied production of speech from one human being to another:

Most public speech is pseudo-event in the sense that it is not the product of a literal human being; it's literally non-human. It's passed through so many hands and so many machines that it no longer represents a human organism inspiring and expiring, inhaling

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<sup>488</sup> Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 33.

and exhaling, rhythmically. The sentence structure no longer has any relation to any affect that could be traced along the lines of inhalation and exhalation – in other words, sad to say, the voice can finally be separated from the body. If the voice is completely separated from the body, it means that the rhythm will be fucked up, it means the affect will be fucked up, it means it no longer has any human content, actually. It probably means it doesn't mean anything, even, finally – by *mean*, anything that could be connected back to the physical universe or the human universe.<sup>489</sup>

The transmission of speech via mediation, including the reporting of one's speech to another, destroys the important element of what makes meaning possible to begin with. Is this a simple defense of intention? Not exactly, as Ginsberg is critiquing the invention of the public speech rather than its transmission. For Ginsberg, the physical creation of the speech, the breathing, rhythm and other signs of human presence are as critical as word choice in the making of meaning. This is evident through Ginsberg's own reflection on his poetry, which he describes as an attempt at catalyst with the reader by mirroring breathing patterns, and hence mental patterns in his poetry:

MA: Has your own use of mantra done anything that you can be very specific about in your poetry?

AG: Yea a lot, *now*. Mainly it's made me conscious of what I had been doing with long lines in 'Howl.' And . . . made me conscious of what I'd been doing with breathing as in the Moloch section of 'Howl,' or parts of 'Kaddish' — that the . . . rhythmic. . . units . . . that I'd written down . . . were basically . . . breathing exercise forms . . . which if anybody else repeated. . . would catalyze them in the same pranic breathing . . . physiological spasm . . . that I was going through . . . and so would presumably catalyze in them the same affects or emotions. that's putting it a little bit too . . . rigorously, but . . . that's the direction.<sup>490</sup>

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<sup>489</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 28.

<sup>490</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Michael Aldrich, Edward Kissam, and Nancy Blecker November 28, 1968" in David Carter, Ed. *Allen Ginsberg Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958-1996* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 141.

Ginsberg reflects here on his intent in the composition of “Howl,” and how he tried to create consubstantiality via the patterns of his own breathing and voice. The reader, he assumed, would naturally pick up on these patterns and enter a similar mental state as the poet, therefore not interpreting the meaning of the poem, but experiencing something similar to the state of mind during poetic invention. Amy Hungerford notes in her article about Ginsberg’s search for a supernatural poetic language, “Interpretation was far from Ginsberg’s notion of how poetry worked. Though one could certainly talk about poems (and Ginsberg did, at great length) that talking would never be the equivalent of the specific syllables of the poem itself—endowed, as they were, with Ginsberg’s ‘white magic.’”<sup>491</sup> Ginsberg saw his poetry as a way of reaching a level of identification that was beyond mediated explanation. It was, as I will argue, an ideal of consubstantiality. The “white magic” she refers to in this quote is Ginsberg’s belief that the oral production of peaceful chanting can set up peaceful mindsets in others just by vibration.

This puts Ginsberg’s sense of the importance of vocalized discourse in line with Steve Whitson and John Poulakos’ Nietzschean-based aesthetic rhetoric: “When a subject speaks, it does so not to announce what it knows about things, but where it stands in relation to them.”<sup>492</sup> For Whitson and Poulakos, language use is always rhetorical, for it is always the creation of signs that point to a preferred understanding of reality. For them, as for Ginsberg, this is best shown through the bodily production of language:

Aesthetic rhetoric puts on its best face in oral performance. Its charm and impact cannot be greater than when the human voice, in all its resonances, its tempi and rhythms,

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<sup>491</sup> Amy Hungerford, “Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the Search for a Supernatural Language” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 18 2 (Fall 2005): 269-298, 289.

<sup>492</sup> Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, “Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 2 (1993): 134.

allows. Even in its written dress, it follows the rules of speaking as dictated by the physiology of the ears, the larynx, and the lungs.<sup>493</sup>

Ginsberg is in partial agreement with this sentiment – that proper rhetoric orients humans to a proper life. He is in complete agreement that the oral register is the place where rhetoric is in most mimetic harmony with the biological production of speech. Of course, he doesn't see speech as a biological operation – seen in simple correspondence to the human being is to see language in an improper way. Language is actually very disconnected from reality, and to believe that language can replace real experience is to impede healthy understanding.

Ginsberg offers an example of how language might get in the way of meaning (which comes from embodied vocalization):

What might be a big color event to us wouldn't be nuthin' to a dog 'cause dogs see black and white. And a bee sees more myriad facets. So it's our particular sense that collaborate with whatever's going on outside to make an event to begin with. And then when we reduce everything from whatever went on outside, plus whatever we could pick up of it with our scanning patterns, with our senses, plus the further remove of what we reduce it to when we say 'It was an explosion,' or 'It was a music concert,' or 'It was a big bust, a big university bust' – by the time we've reduced it to just a word description it's so far removed from anything that might have ever happened in eternity that we can't claim to be talking about anything coherently real.<sup>494</sup>

Ginsberg notes that a description is not the event, but merely references the existence of the event. Rhetoric is always one step removed from sensory experience. The human state is to always be one step removed from knowable, true reality. Reality, in this sense, is always an arm's length away from knowledge. Although this seems a commonplace assumption, I am establishing Ginsberg's ontology here. In order to understand Ginsberg's rhetorical theory his assumptions about the nature of reality and language must be investigated.

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<sup>493</sup> Whitson and Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," 141.

<sup>494</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 26.

Since language is removed from the event, the next best thing for the verification of the authenticity of language is the signature of vocal production. Here is where Ginsberg fully embraces one of his rhetorical ideals – that language marked by the effects of production can generate clues to how to understand that discourse:

Another aspect of language is not generally taken up in discussing the use of language to communicate knowledge, is not generally considered when we try to dissect and analyze what language is, how it's functioning and what it's being used for: the tone of voice or affect with which it's pronounced (if the language is pronounced aloud), because that makes it different from when it's just eye-read. You can use the same words and say them with different tones, from 'I love YOU?' to 'I *love* you.' Two people can say exactly the same thing with the same intention and one person really mean it and the other not mean it and you can tell the difference by whether the voice comes from the center of the body or whether the voice is just a little superficial weakened yak from the top of the larynx center.<sup>495</sup>

Immediately one is reminded of Kenneth Burke's sense of inflection being connected with attitude. However, Ginsberg roots the ability to determine meaning based on the markings of production from the center of the body (a traditionally held seat-of-the-soul) and the "top of the larynx center," back of the throat or dangerously close to the seat of the intellect, the head, where also one conceives of ways to deceive. Much has been said about the human body as a prototype for hierarchy. Stallybrass and White argue that, "cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic . . . also those of the physical body and geographical space, are never entirely separable."<sup>496</sup> They argue that arrangements of geography, cities, festivals, and other bodies (distinctions between the clean and the dirty body for example), as well as distinctions in literary canon, purview and importance all stem from assumptions about the "proper" orientation of the "proper" human body. They explain in greater detail:

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<sup>495</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 27.

<sup>496</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 2.

The high/low opposition in each of four symbolic domains – psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order – is a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense making in European cultures. Divisions and discriminations in one domain are continually structured, legitimated and dissolved by reference to the vertical symbolic hierarchy which operates in the other three domains. Cultures ‘think themselves’ in the most immediate and affective ways through the combined symbolisms of these four hierarchies. Furthermore . . . transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order in any one of the domains may have major consequences in the others.<sup>497</sup>

Stallybrass and White argue that the base mechanisms for judgment – an activity associated with rhetorical faculties throughout the history of at least the Western world – derive from assumed orders of high and low in apparent material conditions. For example, the head is above the genitals, therefore intellect is “purer” than sex, or the head is generally clean while the genitals are generally considered dirty.

Strategically, cultures work to reify their patterns of appropriate and inappropriate social expression and interaction by allowing and forbidding particularities of practice. For example, the practice of the carnival, associated with religious observances, was something controlled, then permitted and then banned in order to generate a new relationship between society, the individual and the body. The exploration they offer of the carnival and its importance in understanding transgression is based on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin is of particular importance due to his theory of language, which has been influential in the field of rhetoric.<sup>498</sup>

Language, for Bakhtin, is a living thing, deeply permeated with all possible societal meanings. The fundamental unit of language, the utterance, is a unique act, as each speaker will

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<sup>497</sup> Stallybrass and White, 3.

<sup>498</sup> See John M. Murphy, “Mikhail Bakhtin and the Rhetorical Tradition” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001): 259-277; Charles I. Schuster, “Mikhail Bakhtin as Rhetorical Theorist” *College English* 47 (1985): 594-607; James P. Zappen, “Bakhtin's Socrates” *Rhetoric Review* 15 (1996): 66-83; James Thomas Zebroski, “Mikhail Bakhtin and the Question of Rhetoric” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 22 (1992): 22-28; William McClellan, “The Dialogic Other: Bakhtin's Theory of Rhetoric” *Social-Discourse* 3 (1990): 233-249.

utter, intonate and speak in his or her specific “alien discourse.” In our daily lives we regularly shift discourses to talk to friends, family, authority figures and subordinates. The novel is the place where these discourses can be *dialogized*, that is, put into the wrong situations, situations that compare and clash particular types of utterances, and from these collisions new understandings of meanings can emerge. As he puts it:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance; the utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. And this active participation of every utterance in living heteroglossia determines the linguistic profile and style of the utterance to no less a degree than its inclusion in any normative-centralizing system of a unitary language.<sup>499</sup>

Bakhtin attempts to get us to understand that the meaning of a word, or an utterance – a statement that is made – is more than just a matter of simple correspondence to denotation. The utterance exists in a universe of all the previous uses, as well as the universe of all attempts to control, reduce, expand, or limit the meaning of the utterance. These forces act upon the possible interpretations available to interlocutors based on time, geography, culture and experience. In short, the quest for meaning is also the quest to understand a living organism, one with a complex and elusive system of organs allowing it to function.

It is this theory that Stallybrass and White base their own theory of transgressive politics upon. For them though, the situation is much more complex than Bakhtin’s analysis indicates. For example, the carnival – a site of ambivalence regarding social and cultural value hierarchies – is a place where these values are for the most part maintained. The carnival functions as a site

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<sup>499</sup> Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 272.

for transgression if the dominant order becomes unstable: “The most that can be said in the abstract is that for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*.”<sup>500</sup>

We will see more of Stallybrass and White’s theory of transgression in the next chapter where I will give a rhetorical analysis of “Howl,” and will draw on these theoretical similarities between Ginsberg and the theories mentioned above. For the next part of this chapter, I want to attempt to solidify some of the clearer elements of Ginsberg’s rhetorical theory. Now that we see Ginsberg as a rhetorical theorist who foregrounds the role of the human body in communication and rhetoric, what critical vocabulary can be garnered from his ideas?

### 5.3 GINSBERG’S KEY THEORETICAL TERMS

Ginsberg relies on certain terms in his discussions of language, the body, and the production of what I am calling rhetoric. One of the terms used frequently is “rhythm.” Here, Ginsberg details some of the important elements of rhythm and its relation to language:

So there’s tone, or affect, or feeling of the voice, and that’s connected very much with the rhythm of the language – whether it’s a natural rhythm of language or whether it’s a forced artificial bureaucratic dry rhythm affected by multiple machinery, affected by its being passed through many typewriters, whether it’s an authentic human personal voice talking, or whether it’s a voice that has been filtered through so many machines that the human rhythm has been lost.<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 14.

<sup>501</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 27-8.



Rhythm is a key component to language, and the human rhythm is in danger of being lost via mechanical circulation and distribution of language. For Ginsberg, rhythm is always present in language, and can be manipulated. Human beings give a relief to their utterances that can contain signs of sincerity, belief or presence. What worries Ginsberg is the replacement of those stylistic trappings with those of machines, a rhythm that eliminates or flattens the marks of a body-made discourse with one that is machine made.

This change of rhythm in language, for Ginsberg is something that deserves attention. Alteration of the rhythm of language from the human body to the machine skews human focus from embodiment to other concerns:

The Hindu proposition is that there are faculties for body sound language that have atrophied in the transient and very recent temporary cultures that substitute mechanical reproduction of imagery for interpersonal communication of imagery. Sort of in McLuhan's terms, the very nature of reading and linear thinking and reproduced language – language images reproduced and read silently – has tended to abstract language communication and thin it out, actually, give it less body, less meaning. And so faculties of body sound and rhythmic deep-breathed language behavior have atrophied.<sup>502</sup>

Ginsberg links embodied rhetoric with cultures that are ancient, such as the “Hindu culture,” and temporary, mechanical-language cultures with our own. Ginsberg believes that abstracting language from the body provides less meaning to the utterances, and actually eliminates categories of meaning that are available only by recognizing language as a part of the human body. Once the connection is severed between language and the human body, one loses capacity to properly “mean.” Types of embodied meaning making are lost to cultures that abstract language from the body and put it in print form. Ginsberg is setting up a theory of language here that requires a serious alteration of the norms of genre and discourse. There doesn't seem to be

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<sup>502</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 28.

any indication that Ginsberg was familiar with the work of Eric Havelock or Walter Ong on the differences in how oral cultures and literate cultures communicate or make meaning. The reference to McLuhan does indicate that Ginsberg is thinking about language along the same line as these scholars, the central question being: Do modern technological changes in communication affect how we communicate?<sup>503</sup> For Walter Ong, the question was undoubtedly centered around the human body:

The spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as person, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker. If the speaker asks the audience to read a handout provided for them, as each reader enters into his or her own private reading world, the unity of the audience is shattered, to be re-established only when oral speech beings again.<sup>504</sup>

Ong argues that the connectedness provided by the human voice during speech is shattered by the rise of literacy, and again changed by the rise of print culture. These changes for Ong are about the place of the body, of human embodied experience. For cultures that do not have writing or print, the role of spoken language deeply defines existence:

In a primary oral culture, where the word has its existence only in sound, with no reference whatsoever to any visually perceptible text, and no awareness of even the possibility of such a text, the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings' feel for existence, as processed by the spoken word. For the way in which the word is experienced is always momentous in psychic life. The centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread out before me but is all around me) affects man's sense of the cosmos.<sup>505</sup>

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<sup>503</sup> "What has it meant for societies and their cultures in the past to discard oral means of communication in favor of literate ones of various sorts?" Eric Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 24. Although published in the 1980s, Havelock traces this question back to the 1950s in his excellent exploration of the research on distinctions between oral and literate cultures.

<sup>504</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 73.

<sup>505</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 72.

The relationship of sound to the body, and the human psyche is responsible for helping to define the ontological, according to Ong. Since sound envelops the body, and writing “lays it all out” in front of the body, the relationship of the human to the universe differs between cultures. “The ancient oral world knew few ‘explorers,’ though it did know many itinerants, travelers, voyagers, adventurers, and pilgrims.”<sup>506</sup> The orientation, as Burke would call it, is not only brought about by a terministic screen, but by the terminus in the access to language as well.

Ong waffles on whether oral or literate or print culture is superior to the other. All he argues is that we should be aware of the differences in thinking made possible (or impossible) due to the presence (or absence) of print or literacy. Ginsberg, on the other hand, offers his position through his usual enthymematic approach:

Whether our system’s an advantage or not I don’t know. As it stands, it seems to be ruining the planet. The very nature of our power of abstraction dooms us to lose touch with detail. And therefore the very roots of the trees are shriveling, withering, and the oceans are being polluted simply because we have reduced everything to a language which can be passed through machines. Obviously machines aren’t sophisticated enough to take account of all variables, aren’t as sophisticated as men and women in that sense. We’ve lost our world by pursuing our kind of language specialization.<sup>507</sup>

Absence of grounding for language in the body’s productive origin allows us to abstract language to a point where the initial reference of language to material reality is completely effaced. Language as a completely uprooted machine allows for a particular type of ignorance of the limits and fragility of the embodied existence on the material plane. This abstraction, brought about by mechanistic communication, further separates the limits of the body from our purview. This in turn separates us, in Ginsberg’s estimation, from the limits of what the environment can handle. In Burkean terms, we avoid accepting recalcitrance of the world because we no longer

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<sup>506</sup> Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 72.

<sup>507</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim*, 29-30.

center our communication between human bodies. The distance in the communicative act has distanced us not only from ourselves, but from the limits of ourselves and our world.

Similarly developed is the next term in Ginsberg's rhetoric – spirituality. One of the most significant influences on Ginsberg was the poetry of William Blake. The so-called "Blake Vision," which has been commented on by every biographer or critical study of Ginsberg's work, would seem to not need any new analysis.<sup>508</sup> But examining the Blake vision through a rhetorical perspective allows a total re-framing of Ginsberg's entire poetic project along the lines of rhetorical theory. Ginsberg's vision allowed him to identify with previous divisions, allowing him to craft a poetics that he hoped would facilitate universal understanding of the world and humanity's place in it. By seeing Ginsberg through a Burkean lens, an alternative understanding of his writing can emerge.

The "Blake vision" as it is most frequently referred to occurred in 1945. Ginsberg apparently heard the voice of Blake reading to him after masturbating while reading Blake's poetry in his Harlem apartment. Ginsberg describes the incident in rich detail in an interview with *The Paris Review*:

So anyway – there I was in my bed in Harlem . . . jacking off. With my pants open, lying around on a bed by the windowsill, looking out into the cornices of Harlem and the sky above. And I had just come. And had perhaps hardly even wiped the come off my thighs, my trousers, or whatever it was. As I often do, I had been jacking off while reading [. . .] And just after I came, on this occasion, with a Blake book on my lap – I wasn't even reading, my eye was idling over the page of 'Ah, Sun-flower,' and it

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<sup>508</sup> Important academic treatments of the "Blake Vision" include: Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Reality Against Society: William Blake, Antinomianism, and the American Counterculture" *Common Knowledge* 13 1 (Winter 2007): 98-112; Robert Genter, "'I'm not His Father': Lionel Trilling, Allen Ginsberg, and the Contours of Literary Modernism" *College Literature* 31 2 (Spring 2004): 22-52; Tony Trigilio, "'Strange prophecies Anew': Rethinking the Politics of Matter and Spirit in Ginsberg's Kaddish" *American Literature* 71 4 (December 1999): 773-795; Justin Quinn, "Coteries, Landscape and the Sublime in Allen Ginsberg" *Journal of Modern Literature* 27 1/2 (Fall 2003): 193-206.

suddenly appeared – the poem I’d read a lot of times before, overfamiliar to the point where it didn’t make any particular meaning except some sweet thing about flowers – and suddenly I realize that the poem was talking about me. [. . .]Now, I began understanding it, the poem while looking at it, and suddenly, simultaneously with understanding it, heard a very deep earthen grave voice in the room, which I immediately assumed, I didn’t think twice, was Blake’s voice; it wasn’t any voice that I knew, though I had previously had a conception of a voice of rock, in a poem, some image like that – or maybe that came after this experience.<sup>509</sup>

This vision rocked Ginsberg, and allowed him, according to his own narrative, to divide from his former distinctions he held between the outside world, his physical existence, and his conception of spirituality:

Simultaneous to the voice there was also an emotion, risen in my soul in response to the voice, and a sudden visual realization of the same awesome phenomena. That is to say, looking out at the window, through the window at the sky, suddenly it seemed that I saw into the depths of the universe, by looking simply into the ancient sky. The sky suddenly seemed very *ancient*. And this was the very ancient place that he [Blake] was talking about, the sweet golden clime. I suddenly realized that *this* existence was *it*!<sup>510</sup>

Ginsberg goes on at great length describing the realization that his reality and Blake’s are simultaneous – that is, temporally concurrent with no distance between them. He recognizes this through an identification/division move: Realizing that the ancient sky he is seeing is the same sky Blake wrote about, and that sky was ancient for Blake as well. The time dividing them is bridged through the rhetorical identification with the sky; both authors are consubstantial in their realizations.

The power of this new identification allowed Ginsberg to recognize the spirituality behind all phenomena:

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<sup>509</sup> Tom Clark, “The Art of Poetry No. VIII,” in *Allen Ginsberg: Spontaneous Mind, Selected Interviews 1958-1996*, ed. David Carter (New York: Perennial, 2001), 35.

<sup>510</sup> Clark, “The Art of Poetry,” 37.

I began noticing in every corner where I looked evidences of a living hand, even in the bricks, in the arrangement of each brick. Some hand placed them there – that some hand had placed the whole universe in front of me. That some hand had placed the sky. No, that's exaggerating – not that some hand had placed the sky but that the sky was the living blue hand itself. Or that God was in front of my eyes – existence itself was God.<sup>511</sup>

Ginsberg's perspective becomes one where the world is rich in motive and expression, not mere contingency. The conclusion is that the expression of the world is the living God. Immediately, Burke's assessment of the rhetorical positioning of Spinoza comes to mind: "The philosophy of the whole could thus be considered as an enterprise for so changing our attitude towards the world that we can be in the direction of peace rather than in the direction of war. The change is to be prepared by vigorous intellectual means rather than by a mere 'change of heart.' And to grasp the quality of the freedom of action aimed at, I think it relevant to remember that in the mediaeval terminologies of motives contemplation is an act. And although Spinoza's ideas of action are close to the Baconian knowledge-power equation, they are much nearer to the mediaeval ideals of contemplation than to the notions of action that go with our current political, commercial, and technological pragmatisms."<sup>512</sup> Burke identifies Spinoza's terminology of contemplation as being in the realm of action, therefore political. Ginsberg's freedom to re-imagine the content of the world through the contemplation of Blake works in a similar way. Ginsberg attempts to free contemplation as a re-imagining, and a way of finding evidence for connection everywhere. The change in terms from a contingent, separate world to one which is an expression of a living being means that humans can attempt to find identification with that expression and become consubstantial with it.

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<sup>511</sup> Clark, "The Art of Poetry," 38.

<sup>512</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1969), 142.

Ginsberg concludes by announcing this vision as a powerful rhetorical exigence for his writing: “My first thought was this was what I was born for, and second thought, never forget – never forget, never renege, never deny. Never deny the voice – no, never *forget* it, don’t get lost mentally wandering in other spirit worlds or American or job worlds or advertising worlds or war worlds or earth worlds.”<sup>513</sup> This was to be Ginsberg’s mission, and it is apparent that it has a decidedly rhetorical dimension – to make certain that this understanding of place in the universe was communicated: “[T]hat’s the way I began seeing poetry as the communication of the particular experience – not just any experience but *this* experience.”<sup>514</sup> Ginsberg then began to root his practice within the terministic screen offered by this experience – to never leave the interconnected understanding that was revealed to him through the “Blake Vision.” Ginsberg’s poetic-rhetoric he extracted from the “Blake Vision” allowed him to see poetry as a conduit between moments in time. Poetry, imagined in this way, then becomes a way of reaching audiences well beyond one’s own lifetime.

The “Blake vision” has been treated by a number of scholars, but the insights of Alicia Ostriker are of particular importance to my investigation of Ginsberg’s rhetoric. Tracing the connection of Blake and Ginsberg through the terms “prophet” and “shaman,” Ostriker argues that, “the idea of the prophetic role clearly forms the core of Blake’s influence on Ginsberg, and he is the only one of Blake’s modern disciples who publicly assumes such a mantle or burden.”<sup>515</sup> Such a role must be seen as a rhetorical one, since the prophet or the shaman require an audience in order to hear their prophecy or experience their cures or palliatives. The

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<sup>513</sup> Clark, “The Art of Poetry,” 37.

<sup>514</sup> Clark, “The Art of Poetry,” 41.

<sup>515</sup> Alicia Ostriker “Blake, Ginsberg, Madness, and the Prophet as Shaman” in *William Blake and the Moderns* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 113.

interpretation of their work then becomes one of understanding persuasiveness, or how each writer attempted to engage with others in order to move people toward acceptance of their visions:

To say that William Blake and Allen Ginsberg are poet-prophets means a few rather precise things. First, it means that they experience personal visions of a potential divine life for humanity, while in a state which normal persons in our society would call trance or hallucination, and which in other ages has been called revelation or illumination; second, that they commit themselves as writers to the establishment of such life on earth, and dedicate their work to this end rather than to what is usually understood as literary success.<sup>516</sup>

Ostriker establishes her criteria for evaluating prophetic writers with these three categories, separating her analysis from what might be done to understand a writer interested in traditional literary success. She believes that understanding these prophetic poets requires understanding their work as having the aim of transformation, or alteration of attitude in order to make the world fall in line with their visions of perfection.

Ostriker's analysis therefore brings into focus the rhetoric of the two poets in order to better grasp what their visions are and how their poems make an argument for those visions. She concludes that they both depart from the traditional mode of the prophet and end up more as healers, seeing their work as shamanistic:

The prophet of Old Testament tradition and the shaman of primitive culture have in common the capacity for visionary experience and the gift of verbal expression of it. Blake and Ginsberg alike deviate from the role of the prophet in their avoidance of the rhetoric of curse and punishment, their rejection of a god of wrath. By the same token, they approach the pattern of the shaman in their stress on healing which appears to be magically accomplished through the ecstatic personal engagement of the poet, and , finally, in their willingness to identify with the ills which they attempt to cure, even to the point of madness.<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> Ostriker "Blake, Ginsberg, Madness," 113.

<sup>517</sup> Ostriker "Blake, Ginsberg, Madness," 127.



For Ginsberg and Blake, the relationship is one where both want to cure a society perceived as full of ills. The cure, in this case, is deeply intertwined with the sickness, risking madness for anyone who attempts to craft medicine. Ostriker concludes that Ginsberg's discourse is heavily influenced by Blake, but at the same time both poets have their own particular illnesses and cures they prioritize.

Seeing Ginsberg as a disciple of Blake is helpful for grasping how a poem functions for Ginsberg. One way is that it allowed him to see poetry as an instrumentality, something that can "do." In this case, it is a communicative tool:

The thing I understood from Blake was that it was possible to transmit a message through time which could reach the enlightened, that poetry had a definite effect, it wasn't just pretty, or just beautiful, as I had understood pretty beauty before – it was something basic to human existence, or it reached something, it reached the bottom of human existence. But anyway the impression I got was that it was like a kind of time machine through which he could transmit. Blake could transmit, his basic consciousness and communicate it to somebody else after he was dead – in other words, build a time machine.<sup>518</sup>

Ginsberg sees poetry arranged around his key terms as a technology that is capable of transcending the limits of the present age and its communicative limits. This observation is one that is shared. The application of Blake to forms of communication that compress time and space was also shared by cultural critic Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan's observations on what Blake was up to are surprisingly similar to Ginsberg's:

Newton, in an age of clocks, managed to present the physical universe in the image of a clock. But poets like Blake were far ahead of Newton in their response to the challenge of the clock. Blake spoke of the need to be delivered 'from single vision and Newton's sleep,' knowing very well that Newton's response to the challenge of the new mechanism was itself merely a mechanical repetition of the challenge. Blake saw Newton and Locke

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<sup>518</sup> Clark, "The Art of Poetry," 27.

and others as hypnotized Narcissus types quite unable to meet the challenge of mechanism.<sup>519</sup>

Seeing other brilliant minds of his time corrupted by one-dimensional, poorly modeled understandings of a brilliant and complicated universe upset and worried William Blake. As a counter, Blake used a recognizable form of media in a new way to directly counter the mechanistic vision of the universe as well as implicitly counter that vision by avoiding the trap of wording the alternative in the master rhetoric of the problem. Blake's vision of an organic universe simply cannot be articulated in the language of mechanics advanced by Newton. Likewise, Ginsberg's organic communication theory cannot be articulated in the sterile mechanical forms of American mass media. Ginsberg sees poetic-rhetoric as the healthier alternative to mechanistic-rhetoric, what might be called Newtonian communication, that separates and disjoints human communion into fragments.

As a final observation on Blake, McLuhan points out the correlatives between Blake's time and our own:

Blake's counterstrategy for his age was to meet mechanism with organic myth. Today, deep in the electric age, organic myth is itself a simple and automatic response capable of mathematical formulation and expression, without any of the imaginative perception of Blake about it. Had he encountered the electric age, Blake would not have met its challenge with a mere repetition of electric form. For myth is the instant vision of a complex process that ordinarily extends over a long period. Myth is contraction of implosion of any process, and the instant speed of electricity confers the mythic dimension on ordinary industrial and social action today. We live mythically but continue to think fragmentarily and on single planes.<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* in Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, Eds., *Essential McLuhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 163.

<sup>520</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 163-4.

McLuhan flips the prospects of resistance to the contemporary mechanistic mass media on its head. Instead of arguing for a mythic response to a mechanical discourse, McLuhan suggests that we should adapt to the mythical situation in our thought processes. When the mundane has achieved the mythic, speaking in those terms only replicates the same problems faced by Blake in his project to critique Newton. Ginsberg understood this, and his response – a communicative theory based in poetics – responds to McLuhan’s call to think beyond the fragmentary while avoiding the electric trap of instant communication. Electric communication confers mythic status on the everyday by simplifying it. Poetry, especially as a basis for a rhetoric, avoids the simple in favor of the ambivalent, the complicated and most importantly, the slow.

Ginsberg’s spiritual component to his rhetoric also comes from the influence of Zen Buddhism. This is, as Allan Watts reminds us, merely an influence and not a transformation or expression of the religion itself: “Beat Zen is a complex phenomenon. It ranges from a use of Zen for justifying sheer caprice in art, literature, and life to a very forceful social criticism and ‘digging of the universe’ such as one may find in the poetry of Ginsberg and Snyder, and, rather unevenly, in Kerouac. But, as I know it, it is always a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident to have the flavor of Zen.”<sup>521</sup> Watts doesn’t discredit Ginsberg’s poetry; he writes to indicate differences in the Zen tradition and American reads of that tradition. Ginsberg’s interest in Zen Buddhism blossomed in April of 1953 where he “embarked on an ambitious study plan and took out more than seventy books on the subject from the Columbia University library alone.”<sup>522</sup> Ginsberg’s study led him to Chinese painting and inspired him to

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<sup>521</sup> Allan Watts, “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen” *Chicago Review* 12, 2 (Summer 1958):3-11, 8.

<sup>522</sup> Barry Miles *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 153.

write a different form of poetry. Ginsberg's study of Buddhism reinforced ideas he held about the nature of proper communication: "I think probably the meditation experience just made me more and more aware of the humor of the fact that breath is the basis of poetry and song – it's so important in it as a measure. Song is carried out on the vehicle of the breath, words are carried out through the breath, which seems like a nice 'poetic justice,' (*laughs*) – that the breath should be so important in meditation as well as in poetics. I think that must be historically the reason for the fact that all meditation teachers are conscious of their spoken breath, as poets are. That's the tradition, the Kagu tradition, that the teachers should be poets. . . because they can't teach unless they're poets – they can't communicate."<sup>523</sup> The link between breath, poetry and communication is a certain link for connection and identification in Ginsberg's rhetoric.

With rhythm and spirituality as key terms, the third should be poetry. Poetry for Ginsberg is something as complicated as the rhetorical situation which deeply concerned Ginsberg. Ginsberg throughout his career posited poetry and poetic invention as a more natural form of communication than the technologies of mass communication:

The Hindu proposition is that there are faculties for body sound language that have atrophied in the transient and very recent temporary cultures that substitute mechanical reproduction of imagery for interpersonal communication of imagery. Sort of in McLuhan's terms, the very nature of reading and linear thinking and reproduced language – language images reproduced and read silently – has tended to abstract language communication and thin it out, actually, give it less body, less meaning. And so faculties of body sound and rhythmic deep-breathed language behavior have atrophied.<sup>524</sup>

Ginsberg's turn to the East for alternative ways of understanding led him to conclude that harmony with one's embodied state was crucial to the essential communicative act – realizing

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<sup>523</sup> Allen Ginsberg, "Paul Portages and Guy Amirthanyagam, July 1, 1976" in David Carter, Ed. *Allen Ginsberg: Spontaneous Mind, Selected Interviews 1958-1996* (New York: Perrenial, 2001), 399.

<sup>524</sup> Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, 28.

*this* existence. Relating the effective poetic stanza to the breath, and the limits of the body instead of the page produced less a poem and more a rhetoric – a way of putting symbols forward in an attempt to reach consubstantiality with fellow human beings. If one were to find a place for humans to have common ground, the pleasures a body affords might be an effective starting place.

As John Durham Peters has noted, communication technologies directly affect the way we perceive of communication's limits and importance. In the twentieth century, communication was characterized by an acute lack of physical presence: "The chief challenge to communication in the twentieth century is contact with beings that lack mortal form."<sup>525</sup> Peters sees the twentieth century as wrought with anxiety for situations where communication was not impossible, but omnipresent, available to beings beyond the human. "Communication has become disembodied. More precisely, the rise of the concept of 'communication' is a symptom of the disembodiment of interaction. The intellectual history of this notion reveals a long struggle to reorient to a world in which the human is externalized into media forms."<sup>526</sup> The struggle, as Peters sees the large debate about the limits and purpose of communication throughout the twentieth century is, "the very field on which to sort out the place of the human in the great network of being."<sup>527</sup> Some of the examples of such disconcerting communication technologies were the telephone, the radio and the television.

Ginsberg fits very well into this period, imagining disembodied hands arranging the entire phenomenological world around him, and lamenting the inability to "commune" with these beings who have arranged the universe with such obvious care and compassion. His

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<sup>525</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 227.

<sup>526</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 228.

<sup>527</sup> Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 229.

solution is to develop an art of communicating these realizations with others, and perhaps, to ensure that his hands do not wind up disembodied. Apparently, Blake's "time machine" of poetry can overcome this identity crisis. Ginsberg's influence from Blake clearly extends well beyond liking his poetic imagery. Ginsberg wants to travel through time and space, but he does not want to leave his body behind. The way to accomplish this for Ginsberg was to make poetry a vehicle for effective rhetorical overtures.

The major move Ginsberg makes to this end is that he sees poetry as a superior form of mass communication than the technologies of the time. His setting of the world in the realm of action requires a rhetoric that assumes unity not fragmentation. Ginsberg sees technologies as fragmenting the world, separating speech from human bodies. Basing his ideas on the Sunflower Sutra experience, Ginsberg theorizes that Blake's poetry allows his ideas to travel through time and encounter us, or perhaps as Ginsberg would argue, Blake's consciousness travels through poetry to reach us under our similar ancient sky. To conceive of poetry as a device for communication is perhaps not new, but it is certainly a break from the ways poetry was perceived by Ginsberg's audience. This means Ginsberg is more appropriately understood as a theorist of communication who forwarded poetry as mass medium.

What is Ginsberg's conception of this new poetry? How can it be characterized? It is clearly not the 1950s literary object, a poetry that depends upon a "middle style": "a style that is adjectivally unadorned, restricted to a diction of familiar words, and straightforward in its syntax."<sup>528</sup> Ginsberg broadens the understanding of poetry to that of a rhetoric which serves as the alternative to the fragmenting nature of mass media technology.

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<sup>528</sup> Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 48.

The broad category of the poetic is seen by Ginsberg as a way of articulating and accounting for human motives, in the Burkean sense. Ginsberg believes poetic writing allows for a connection between people that is not possible through other forms of mediation. This is how it is able to facilitate identification/division. When that happens, the rhetorical dimensions of the poetic act can be fully seen – one can reframe the universe, and therefore know the nature of governments, the world and God. This act of reframing the universe is only possible through poetry, and only then, is a mere glimpse of an alternative ordering of things, places and people. In short, poetry is invaluable because it serves the rhetorical function of making and remaking the world. It creates places for meaning to be made, re-made, and reconsidered.

To take the analysis further, allow me to examine a bit from an interview where Ginsberg is asked about the influence of Walt Whitman on his work:

AG: So Whitman, then, is defining or articulating democracy as based on adhesiveness, tender comradeship, and says it cannot succeed without it.

Q: In a way, though, that's just a nice, soft thing to believe. It's never been like that, after all.

A: Well, of course we're in an especially difficult age of materialism in the sense that we are really surrounded by machines and electricity and wires and are sitting in cars in drive-ins and to some extent are isolated from direct contact we might have that comes from living in large families and farmhouses and country dances and adventures in the haybarn. But because of overpopulation and because of this highly centralized network of artificial communications it becomes increasingly necessary to have a breakthrough of more direct, satisfactory contact that is necessary to the organism.<sup>529</sup>

Ginsberg finds within Whitman a potential corrective to the overabundance of isolated, communicative experiences that Americans have – alone even when they are together at places such as the drive-in theater. Ginsberg believes that the contemporary world is full of unsatisfactory contact that is not direct – that is, one person to another, without mechanical

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<sup>529</sup> Barry Farrell, "On the Road near Lawrence, Kansas February 11, 1966," in Carter *Spontaneous Mind*,

intermediaries. Ginsberg could be seen as someone who is arguing that *Gesellschaft* is overcoming *Gemeinschaft*, to use the terms of the social theory originated by Ferdinand Tönnies. In the United States, this idea developed into “Modernization Theory,” which argued “the progressive movement of history involved the replacement of community and communal ways (those orientations labeled by Parsons ascriptive, affective, particularistic, and diffuse) by modern ways.”<sup>530</sup> However, I believe that Ginsberg is not arguing that communal interaction has been replaced, but that it has been altered in a significant way. He believes that poetic discourse, his rhetorical theory as I am calling it, is the necessary breakthrough in order to make sure authentic contact remains in the world where people are surrounded and engulfed by mechanistic communication. In fact, this is a much more reasonable interpretation of Tönnies’s idea: “Tönnies formulated his *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* distinction at a time when men and women were intensely conscious of being involved in two kinds of human interaction. His terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* were not places; they were forms of human interaction.”<sup>531</sup> Ginsberg sees the interaction between the two requiring a different way of communicating in order to provide elements that mechanical communication leaves out of the interaction.

In addition to this, Ginsberg’s reference and obvious desire to be consubstantial with Walt Whitman further flesh out his view of human communication. Alessandro Portelli argues that Whitman’s central characteristic is his intense embodiment of the power of oral discourse. “‘You conceive too much of articulation,’ says Whitman, figuratively addressing language itself, Liquids are always continuous, never discrete or articulated, Whitman’s prearticulated voice is the culmination of an American dream of a communal, egalitarian Eden free from divisions and

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<sup>530</sup> Thomas Bender *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978), 23.

<sup>531</sup> Bender *Community and Social Change in America*, 33.



articulation.”<sup>532</sup> Whitman, seeing language as a liquid substance, naturally wants to wind up divided, distinct – perhaps in the separate containers of individuality. Whitman’s dream of language is for it to preserve its fluid form, and perhaps individuality could be immersed within it, instead of containers for it. The conclusion is one for Portelli that merges Whitman’s theory of language with his politics: “The formal implications of the dialogic openness of oral discourse frequently merge with its thematic and symbolic suggestions. Whitman’s blurring of textual boundaries becomes a figure of the manifest destiny of a boundless, democratic, imperialistic America with movable borders in fluid and perennial expansion. The unfinished continuity of oral discourse suggests metaphors of the nation’s weak and thus inexorable form.”<sup>533</sup> Related to Whitman’s historical moment, the limits of the United States, both geographically and politically, seemed without fixity to him. The influence for Ginsberg here is one where the personal limits of humanity, facing a new era after World War II, had that same weak form to them. Ginsberg saw consubstantiality giving way to individuality, as his quote suggests.

But Whitman’s theory of language and political view are unsatisfactory for Portelli as they have a tendency to ignore the material reality of social systems: “Whitman’s resistance to articulation and his attack on ‘linguistics and contenders’ – against, that is, those whose task it is to articulate language and discriminate ideas – express his yearning for the deep organic unity that makes democracy meaningful; yet they also represent his inability to perceive democracy as a historically given form of organization of complex, diversified societies.”<sup>534</sup> Portelli sees Whitman as unable to see what actual democratic practice might look like. Whitman hovers in

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<sup>532</sup> Alessandro Portelli *The Text and the Voice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 132.

<sup>533</sup> Portelli *The Text and the Voice*, 88.

<sup>534</sup> Portelli *The Text and the Voice*, 132.

the world of the ideal democratic sensibility without indicators that he understands it must be limited in order to be practiced. Ginsberg's view is a bit different, seeing this sort of connection as essential to the human organism's existence. Ginsberg has no problem conceptualizing the practice of democracy with its limits, but seeks a rhetorical practice that recognizes the need of such organically unifying understandings of language within a world where the material and technological limits are historical, clear, and unavoidable.

Ginsberg is not naive; he does understand that personal communications between living human beings are not always possible. The question from the interviewer is one that associates American ideal life with fiction. Ginsberg doesn't disagree directly, but calls attention to the fact that society has changed, that technologies of communication, dissemination and information have materially altered our interactions. The fear is that these interactions excise healthier forms. There is nothing particularly wrong with the new technologies of communication except for the fact that they are replacing human to human communication. What is lost is the attention to the interlocutors' embodiment. This, for Ginsberg, is not mere inconvenience or just a matter of quality. Sustained periods without embodied communication will lead to breakdown and the destruction of the healthy human organism. Ginsberg's criticism of the "massification" of society can be characterized as a critique from the communicative standpoint. That is, Ginsberg believes that the technologies of mass communication directly conflict with the technologies of communication available from and in the body. This conflict leads to the suppression or withering of these embodied abilities. What is needed for the modern era is a technology of broadcasting that can avoid the problems of stripping human communication of its most healthy components – the spiritual and the embodied, familiar and common nature that is central to all human beings.

These three central terms: rhythm, spirituality and poetry, compose the three major ideas behind the theory of rhetoric that Allen Ginsberg is advancing. Rhythm highlights the advantages of a human-produced speech, and how the mediation of the production of the human voice strips vital elements from the communion portion of the communication process. Spirituality is one of these key elements, the idea that you are interconnected and involved in the larger project of human existence, as well as the larger questions that have frustrated and inspired fellow human beings throughout time and special restrictions. And finally there is the term poetry, which is the unrecognized mass media form that overcomes the deficiencies of processed, mechanized communication, allowing the human voice with its perfect imperfections to transcend space and time to connect deeply to audiences infinitely distant. To summarize, Ginsberg has constructed a rhetorical theory that confronts and attempts to solve the limitations and fears surrounding the human rhetorical situation of the 1950s.

I am not advocating here that Ginsberg's rhetorical theory is perfect, nor do I advocate that it really does all of the things that he suggests. What I want to call attention to is the complexity, depth and intellectual nature of what Allen Ginsberg was attempting to do with his poetics. I want to point toward a more theoretical understanding of Ginsberg as someone deeply engaged in questions of effective rhetoric and effective communication instead of someone interested in effective poetry. For Ginsberg, these questions are the same, whereas they might not be the same for the contemporary literary critic. There is an understanding of Ginsberg that is left out when we consider him as the producer of poems rather than the theorist of communication who produced poems as his rhetorical efficacy.

There is one final perspective that must be considered to fully appreciate the Ginsberg flavor of the Beat's rhetoric. This would be his sexuality, which is not just inconvenient or out

of place in 1950s America, but deeply dangerous to signal to the public. Ginsberg's sexuality influenced his rhetorical understanding of communication as well as his poetic, and through some analysis I hope to expand the appreciation of this part of his life to his rhetorical theory.

#### 5.4 SEXUALITY IN GINSBERG'S WORK

There has been a lot of scholarship that tries to place the importance of sexuality to Ginsberg's work, or to the philosophical idea of the subject. Ginsberg's sexuality is something he was very open about and discussed many times with interviewers.<sup>535</sup> Examining Ginsberg's sexuality within the rhetorical environment of sexuality of the time gives a more complex and enriching picture of the role it plays in the rhetorical theory I am advancing. In many cases, Ginsberg's sexuality is treated over simplistically if addressed at all in critical work:

Despite the programmatic use of his homosexuality, sometimes disguised as bisexuality on the model of Walt Whitman, as both subject matter in itself and a spring-board to wider political questions, a number of critical essays on him manage somehow to run their course without reference to it. Others mention it only reluctantly, and by indirect means. But, of those that deal with it directly, most classify what they call his indiscretion as no more than an instrument with which to shock the bourgeoisie, perversely, and without good reason.<sup>536</sup>

The homosexual scene of New York was well established when Ginsberg decided to move there from his native New Jersey to attend Columbia University. "Throughout Ginsberg's oeuvre, New York serves as an indispensable nexus between his poetry and his sexuality, providing the literal

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<sup>535</sup> See particularly Allen Young, *Allen Ginsberg: Gay Sunshine Interview* (New York: Grey Fox, 1974).

<sup>536</sup> Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 195.

terrain which he mines for poetic imagery and for the terms with which he comes to understand his own sexual identity.”<sup>537</sup> This rich resource for rhetorical invention is central to understanding Ginsberg’s work, and therefore becomes a site of investigation for the rhetorical critic in order to provide insight into how texts were constructed and the potential rhetorical theory at work behind them.

The influence of New York culture on Ginsberg must be understood through the complex communicative environment of homosexuals at the time. The metaphors used to understand gay culture at the time were very different from the current discursive choices:

Before Stonewall (let alone before World War II), it is often said, gay people lived in a closet that kept them isolated, invisible, and vulnerable to anti-gay ideology. While it is hard to imagine the closet as anything other than a prison, we often blame people in the past for not having had the courage to break out of it (as if a powerful system were not at work to keep them in), or we condescendingly assume they had internalized the prevalent hatred of homosexuality and thought they deserved to be there. Even at our most charitable, we often imagine that people in the closet kept their gayness hidden not only from hostile straight people but from other gay people as well, and, possibly, even from themselves.<sup>538</sup>

The metaphor of the closet provides a set of judgments derived from its use. With the closet metaphor, an incomplete and very inaccurate picture of sexuality after World War II in New York emerges:

Given the ubiquity of the term today and how central the metaphor of the closet is to the ways we think about gay history before the 1960s, it is bracing – and instructive – to note that it was never used by gay people themselves before then. Nowhere does it appear before the 1960s in the records of the gay movement or in the novels, diaries, or letters of gay men and lesbians. The fact that gay people in the past did not speak of our conceive of themselves as living in a closet does not preclude us from using the term

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<sup>537</sup> Jeffrey Erik Jackanicz, “Three Gay New Yorks: the City as Heuristic in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg, James Merrill, and Mark Doty” Ph.D. Diss., the University of Texas at Austin, 2000, 21.

<sup>538</sup> George Chauncey *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 6.

retrospectively as an analytic category, but it does suggest that we need to use it more cautiously and precisely, and to pay attention to the very different terms people used to describe themselves and their social worlds.<sup>539</sup>

The terminology in use, far from describing a “closeted” and therefore secret, potentially self-hating gay society was not the New York that Ginsberg encountered. The vocabulary used by homosexuals themselves at that time provide an alternative to the closet metaphor which indicate a separate, distinct social world in parallel to regular society: “Gay people in the prewar years, then, did not speak of coming out of what we call the gay closet but rather of coming out into what they called ‘homosexual society’ or the ‘gay world’ a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies.”<sup>540</sup> After World War II, the vocabulary begins to transition into a less distinct but still very real “gay world,” but not to a point where gay men can feel comfortable advertising their sexuality in public. This “gay world” lives within instead of along side the “regular world,” and is full of many dangers to its members. A culture of highly coded rhetorical moves expands to where gay men could communicate with one another in ways that would make sure they would not be identified or threatened with job loss, ostracism, or violence from mainstream society:

Many gay men, for instance, described negotiating their presence in an often hostile world as living a double life, or wearing a mask and taking it off. Each image has a valence different from closet, for each suggests not gay men’s isolation, but their ability – as well their need – to move between different personas and different lives, one straight, the other gay, to wear their hair up, as another common phrase put it, or let their hair down. Many men kept their gay lives hidden from potentially hostile straight observers (by ‘putting their hair up’), in other words, but that did not mean they were hidden or isolated from each other – they offered, as they said, ‘dropped hairpins’ that only other gay men would notice.<sup>541</sup>

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<sup>539</sup> Chauncey *Gay New York*, 6-7.

<sup>540</sup> Chauncey *Gay New York*, 7.

<sup>541</sup> Chauncey *Gay New York*, 6-7.

Ginsberg's encounters with the gay culture of New York City most likely introduced him to these highly coded moments of communication where the risks involved with being identified as gay came with a heavy price. The highly coded environment, as the quote indicates, made gay men feel that they were "masked" most of the time, and could only reveal their true selves by, ironically, dropping coded hints at other men.

This rhetorical practice was so successful because it communicated the appropriate meaning for multiple audiences. It kept gay men hidden from the threat of public violence yet still permitted them to live their sexuality. "Given the risks involved in asserting a visible presence in the streets, most gay people chose not to challenge the conventions of heterosexual society so directly. But they resisted and undermined them nonetheless by developing tactics that allowed them to identify and communicate with one another without alerting hostile outsiders to what they were doing."<sup>542</sup> It was the ultimate rhetorical self defense strategy. The practice was so finely detailed that it appeared as if it were working by extra-sensory inducement:

Whereas fairies used codes that were intelligible to straights as well as to gays, such as flashy dress and an effeminate demeanor, other gay men (the "queers") developed codes that were intelligible only to other men familiar with the subculture, which allowed them to recognize one another without drawing the attention of the uninitiated, whether they were on the street, in a theater, or at an predominantly straight cocktail party or bar. They were so effective that medical researchers at the turn of the century repeatedly expressed their astonishment at gay men's ability to identify each other, attributing it to something akin to a sixth sense.<sup>543</sup>

Such a highly developed rhetoric for a very specific audience would appear "invitational" to that audience, but an outside audience might interpret it as "mind reading." Ginsberg's presence in

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<sup>542</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 187.

<sup>543</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 187-188.

such an environment could do nothing but indicate to him the power of coded messages, as well as the power of messages that all audiences interpret the same way.

But even within this atmosphere that required detailed, coded messages, things were changing for gay culture in major cities. The “gay world” received a boost from the conditions that the war placed upon individuals. World War II brought a number of servicemen and women to major cities where they saw and interacted with gay culture for the first time, or placed them in situations where they could act on their sexuality. “By freeing men from the supervision of their families and small-town neighborhoods and placing them in a single-sex environment, military mobilization increased the chances that they would meet gay men and explore their homosexual interests. Many recruits saw the sort of gay life they could lead in large cities and chose to stay in those cities after the war. Some women who joined the military, as well as those on the homefront who shared housing and worked in defense industries with other women, had similar experiences. As a result, the war made it possible for gay bars and restaurants to proliferate and for many new gay social networks to form.”<sup>544</sup> This climate of increasing venues for gay social networking most likely impacted Ginsberg as he explored the city with Jack Kerouac during his time at Columbia University. More importantly, such codings say less about the gay culture and much more about how regular culture selects its norms and standards: “The process by which the normal world defined itself in opposition to the queer world was manifest in countless social interactions, for in its policing of the gay subculture the dominant culture sought above all to police its own boundaries. Given the centrality of gender nonconformity to the definition of the queer, the excoriation of queers served primarily to set the boundaries for

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<sup>544</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 10-11.



how normal men could dress, walk, talk, and relate to women and each other.”<sup>545</sup> The exclusion of “gay culture” as abnormal restricted heterosexuals’ behavior as much as it restrained the discursive and performative practices of the homosexual community. It is this policing of the boundaries of normalcy that is the discourse which Ginsberg is responding to through at least his early work, such as “Howl.” The restrictions on behavior are enforced through discursive norms, and Ginsberg can be seen as challenging these norms with his own implicit theory of appropriate discursive practice. This discursive policing is crucial as it often spills over into the material practices of enforcement as Woods points out: “The police maintain the sexual, as well as the political status quo, in their consistent and aggressive opposition to love. Law always interferes with the expression of love.”<sup>546</sup> This sentiment could serve as the representative anecdote for the relationship of the gay culture to the normal culture in New York at this time. This discursive policing and material policing controlled all expressions of affection no matter the sexuality.

Ginsberg’s sexuality has been used by a few scholars as a heuristic from which to understand his poetics. Most point out that without discussing his sexuality, analysis of Ginsberg fails to include one of the most central characteristics. As Woods argues,

It is necessary, then, to accept that Ginsberg’s programme includes his sexuality to the extent to which his sexuality has a bearing on his life, either literally, insofar as he writes down his thoughts as they occur to him and refrains from extensive correction and alteration (like Lawrence); or metaphorically, insofar as the concept of spontaneous poetry is more important in what it stands for, than in that each poem should be spontaneously composed. We must also accept that he highlights his sexuality by verbal and tonal means no more than he highlights, say, his politics or his family history.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 25.

<sup>546</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 199.

<sup>547</sup> Woods, *Articulate Flesh*, 198.

The common tone of sexuality in Ginsberg's work for Woods is one of normalcy. That is, Ginsberg discusses his sexuality in a very matter-of-fact tone in the same way political views or relationships with family are discussed. However, there is a bit more here than just proof that sexuality is central to Ginsberg. Articulating his sexuality in the same tone as familial relations or political views violates the highly coded nature of alternative sexuality in the period, and radically re-associates homosexuality and bisexuality to the level of normalcy of relatives or political views. This is a rhetorical move, and a radical one given the rigid discursive policing of sexuality at this time.

Ginsberg's sexuality should also be considered from the perspective of "gay camp," which is a rhetorical response by artists to an environment that restricts expression: "Camp is an outgrowth of the particular historical and cultural environment in which gay artists and readers have had to function, and it has served as a means of giving gay people a larger space in which to move, loosened from the restraints of the dominant society."<sup>548</sup> How does "camp" rhetoric do this? One of the ways is that gay camp provides a space where violations of the norms of society are not only permissible, but expected, as a sort of comic expression. This is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, which he argues is a liminal place where established hierarchies and official orders of value may be questioned: "Carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions."<sup>549</sup> Such suspension in a venue of liberation allows for the questioning of such assumptions, something that gay camp provides:

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<sup>548</sup> David Bergman, "Strategic Camp: The Art of Gay Rhetoric" in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 92.

<sup>549</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. trans. Helene Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 109.

Camp and the carnivalesque occupy many of the same cultural positions. For example, Bakhtin argues that the carnivalesque has three basic forms: the ritual spectacle, comic verbal composition, and various forms of abuse such as curses and oaths. Camp takes such equivalent forms as the drag show, the queeny repartee, and the gay put-down. Like the carnivalesque, it merges the sublimely grand with the heartily ridiculous.<sup>550</sup>

These rhetorical strategies indicate that there is a similarity between camp rhetoric and the carnivalesque. The techniques of gay camp open a space where gay sexuality can be displayed, but perhaps only because it is performed in an environment recognized by the audience as completely ridiculous, and outside the bounds of so-called “normal” society. “The carnivalesque is always visible, an open provocation of the dominant culture; while camp frequently separates gay culture from straight culture.”<sup>551</sup> It appears that Bergman is willing to admit that there are similarities between the carnivalesque and camp, but camp is not a complete moment of carnivalesque liminality. Perhaps the restrictions placed upon gay sexuality make it a special case that doesn’t quite fit Bakhtin’s assumptions. In any event, Ginsberg’s work should be scrutinized for elements of this camp rhetoric. Bergman identifies six elements that are present in camp rhetoric: “(1) both the author and the reader wear disguises – the disguise of heterosexuality; (2) the masquerade enforces an intimacy even as it distances the participants in the masquerade; (3) it is maintained with a buoyant humor (lacking in Symonds), the “camp” laugh; (4) the entire affair is conducted in an elaborate style which while seemingly superficial, reveals to the initiated an unspoken subtext.”<sup>552</sup> However, we cannot forget that Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* was put on trial for obscenity after being seized by the postal police. If it were

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<sup>550</sup> Bergman, “Strategic Camp,” 101.

<sup>551</sup> Bergman, “Strategic Camp,” 100.

<sup>552</sup> Bergman, “Strategic Camp,” 99.

in the tradition of camp rhetoric, the carnivalesque scene of such rhetoric would have allowed it to exist as a moment of ridiculousness. In the analysis of “Howl,” I will look for elements of camp rhetoric. With these qualifications in mind, perhaps Ginsberg’s rhetorical mode is not campy, but an alternative to camp rhetoric – an addition to the rhetorical options available for the performance of non-normative sexualities.

This is how William Patrick Jeffs sees Ginsberg’s poetics – an invitation to reject the pressures of mid-twentieth century conformity: “Ginsberg’s law-breaking and language-breaking seek to dismantle pressures that urge Americans to conform to certain behavioral norms that limit their social and political freedoms.”<sup>553</sup> Ginsberg’s resistance to conformity did not just exist in the political sphere, but began as a critique of literary standards of the era. “Ginsberg associates the monolithic social norms of the Cold War with the narrow vision of the New Critics of the forties and fifties who believed in the literary text as a work unto itself apart from biographical and political concerns.”<sup>554</sup> Jeffs argues that the way this happens is through the strategic use of obscene language to rupture the adhered-to standards of society. “The poet employs slang and obscene words to deflate society’s norms and to reshape its consciousness. The works of the Beats, especially Ginsberg’s poetry. . . fuse sexual honesty with a lack of shame, thereby opening up literature and society’s consciousness to explorations into new subject matters.”<sup>555</sup> Jeffs is convinced that the source for these arguments comes from Ginsberg’s sexuality. “His homosexuality, certainly a source of guilt for him as an adolescent, becomes a source of strength as the poems in *Howl* and *Mind Breaths* attest. His sexual otherness

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<sup>553</sup> William Patrick Jeffs, *Feminism, Manhood, and Homosexuality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 72.

<sup>554</sup> Jeffs, *Feminism, Manhood, and Homosexuality*, 73.

<sup>555</sup> Jeffs, *Feminism, Manhood, and Homosexuality*, 75-6.

lies behind his pleas for new kinds of men; it also lies behind his calling into question the masculinity of men in positions of power.”<sup>556</sup> What was once a disadvantage becomes a source of inspiration; what once was perceived as an ill has become part of the cure through the “madness” of Ginsberg’s rhetoric.

The common denominator of all of these aspects is a connection to the human body, and the perils and pleasures of being embodied. The attention Ginsberg paid to the embodied condition was well summed up by one commentator:

I think Allen could sing to those assembled teachers about his usually-not-discussed-in-company body parts with such élan, and be accepted so freely, because everybody understood that on some level it wasn’t really his ass he was talking about anyway. It was an attitude toward the world and toward the body, a sweet-natured, laughing acceptance of earthliness that existed, for Ginsberg, as a means to get off the earth plane. As bodily as his work may be, it usually tends upward and outward, away from gravity, moving through the fact of flesh toward other arenas. Amazingly, his most famous poem invented a new cultural category – neither homo nor straight, quite, but the ‘angel-headed hipster,’ the beat whose transcendent sexuality lifts him out of the familiar categories, knocking the binary off its high horse, setting himself loose to sing.<sup>557</sup>

Doty notes some of the most important rhetorical elements of Ginsberg’s work, specifically the importance of attitude. Doty argues this attitude allows for a transcendence of the sexuality binary plaguing America in the 1950s (and still today). More importantly, I think this can be understood as a rhetorical theory. The idea that the poem interrupts normal binaries and creates a new position to occupy from which to transcend the binary is offering a new rhetorical position. Here one can identify with the speaker of “Howl” and identify with that person. Doty pushes toward this view in further remarks that point out the limits of *Howl*’s revolutionary potential:

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<sup>556</sup> William Patrick Jeffs, *Feminism, Manhood, and Homosexuality*, 89.

<sup>557</sup> Mark Doty, “Human Seraphim: “Howl,” Sex, and Holiness,” in *The Poem That Changed America: “Howl” Fifty Years Later*, ed. Jason Shinder (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 18.

“It seems as if American’s willful denial of queer sexuality might simply have crumbled in the face of it, and that a generation of gay men might have taken it as a clarion call to freedom, but neither of those things happened. Of course, this may simply have been because it was a poem, a form that tends to be a far advance scout of culture rather than an actual agent of change.”<sup>558</sup>

Doty’s problem is not his analysis of poetry, Ginsberg or *Howl*, but more his understanding of “change.” One view is that the poem, being a harbinger of change did not directly result in political action, so therefore it had little influence in the political moment. If poetry is considered symbolic action, as Burke argues, then we have political action on the level of the rhetorical. As the speaker attempts to identify and divide in order to find a place for himself, he offers a new political position for the reader. This is the contribution to beat rhetoric that Ginsberg makes, and it focuses on the human body. I argue that this was influenced primarily by Ginsberg’s struggles with his sexuality. Ginsberg realized that to provide the sort of revolutionary sentiment that Doty is discussing, one needs to start at the roots – identification/division. Without a new way of speaking about the commonplaces of humanity, there would be no hope of reaching a common identity that could be shared as the start of a new way of speaking about the political and the sexual.

Many scholars have weighed in on Ginsberg’s sexuality and its influence on his work. Gwen Brewer argues that Ginsberg’s “open proclamation” of his sexuality in poems and other writings was a “moving force in encouraging other gays and lesbians to come out of the closet, if sometimes only to indicate that not all gays and lesbians were like him.”<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> Doty, “Human Seraphim,” 14.

<sup>559</sup> Gwen Brewer, “Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997): On His Own Terms” in Vern L. Bullough, ed. *Before Stonewall* (Binghamton NY: Haworth Press, 2002), 310.

The purpose of poetry is the Burkean understanding of rhetoric – to help human beings become consubstantial, to situate their own motives with those of others. Understanding Ginsberg's work this way broadens the appreciation of his work as an implicit rhetorical theory.

Kerouac's basic rhetorical principles which I explored in earlier chapters gave Ginsberg the perspective from which to address his position, gain recognition as a speaking subject by an audience, and to participate in public address as a homosexual. Ginsberg, unlike Kerouac, needed to resolve his sense of place in a more direct manner than Kerouac. As Foster put it, "Kerouac's work was rarely political, at least explicitly so; it was left to Ginsberg to show how Kerouac's expressionistic aesthetic could be used for political ends."<sup>560</sup> Foster is using the term political in its overt sense, as Kerouac's political importance can hardly be ignored. Many of the overtly political aspects of the beat rhetoric are derived from Ginsberg's work. Ginsberg had a much more pressing and critical need to establish a place from which to be in society than Kerouac, who was performing heterosexuality, unquestionably at least for most who interacted with him. Allen Ginsberg was never comfortable in passing as a heterosexual. For him, his homosexuality was something that had to be expressed, performed and lived, although in cautious ways. He was no fool and was not ignorant of the dangers of his environment.

Ginsberg's inability to reconcile his sexuality and society's demands arguably landed him in psychiatric care. The lack of a proper way of achieving order of the symbols that constitute society was more the cause than an inability to "follow the rules" or understand them. Ginsberg required a new way of making, changing and ordering the universe, and his poetic practice became that necessary rhetoric. Ginsberg needed a way of identification with a society that only

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<sup>560</sup> Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 85.

offered division. Without the necessary counterpart to that division – a manner of recognizable identification as a part of society – Ginsberg had no method or ability to speak, demand, argue or engage with larger societal forces. He had to innovate an identification that both satisfied him and the larger demands of 1950s American society.

## **5.5 BURKE AND GINSBERG: BUCKING THE SYSTEM THROUGH BURKING**

Allen Ginsberg's poetry often overshadows his contributions to literary criticism. Through his life, Ginsberg was asked to write reviews, introductions and commentary for many published books of poetry, novels, collections and albums. Aside from this, Ginsberg occasionally delved into literary criticism. It is within these critical pieces that rhetorical criticism can reveal some of Ginsberg's deeper concerns about rhetoric, literature and the human being.

Ginsberg's essay on William Blake, whose importance cannot be underestimated in Ginsberg's poetic practice, has a section where he argues for the importance of Shakespeare. Ginsberg follows John Keats, who argues that Shakespeare is great because of "negative capability." Ginsberg goes on to explain in his own words what he thinks negative capability means:

Which is to say, the possibility of seeing contending parties, seeing the communists and Capitalists scream at each other, or the Buddhists and non-Buddhists, or the Muslims and Christians, or the Jews and the Arabs, or the self and the not-self, or your mommy and daddy, or yourself and your wife, or your baby and yourself. You can see them all screaming at each other, and you can see as a kind of comedic drama that you don't get tangled and lost in it, you don't enter into the daydream fantasy of being right and being one side or the other so completely that you go out and cop somebody's head off. Instead you just sort of watch yourself, you watch them in and out of the game at the same time, both in and out of the game, watching and wondering at it. That is to say, the ability to



have contrary ideas in your head at the same time without it freaking out, without ‘an irritable reaching out after the fact’ or conclusions.<sup>561</sup>

Why is Shakespeare or Blake important? It is not because they provide works that others could not hope to match in quality. It is because these authors provide abilities to the readers. These authors provide a method for individuals to step outside of the conflicts and see them both without either being overcome with the din of the noise or the force of the conflict. They provide a way to enact what he calls “wonder” which requires a frame of “comedic drama” in order to avoid being overwhelmed with the conflict and “freaking out.” In short, the authors provide “equipment” for coping with conflict on multiple levels – Ginsberg does not leave out any level of potential conflict in his articulation.

Ginsberg continues his discussion of negative capability by explaining the benefits. For Ginsberg, the result of negative capability is a better, more complex understanding of the roots of the conflict:

Naturally, you reach out and want to know more, but you don’t get mad, crazed, say ‘I gotta know the answer, there is one answer and I, me, I have to have the one answer,’ maybe the question has no answer, maybe there is not even a question, though there may be perturbation and conflict. So, you could apply that, say, to the present Cold War situation where everyone wants to destroy the world in order to win victory over the Wrong (either side).<sup>562</sup>

Ginsberg applies the desire for knowledge to the idea of negative capability in the context of the Cold War. Negative capability does not put one in the position of inability to act, on the contrary, it allows for a more thorough examination of the question. Ginsberg shows the danger

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<sup>561</sup> Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose*, 294.

<sup>562</sup> Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose*, 295.

of misunderstanding quite well in the Cold War – the drive to be right over the desire to understand literally risks the destruction of the Earth.

This “negative capability” is something that not only avoids ultimate destruction, but also creates, “a kind of exquisite awareness that intensifies,” providing a position where one can be “both in and out of the game, watching and wondering at it which is the best we can do actually.”<sup>563</sup> Negative capability provides space for the politics of “wonder,” which is, “the best thing we can do . . . it’s so amazing.” The result of the position of wonder is only expressible by Ginsberg poetically: “If you take that attitude and open yourself up and allow yourself to admit everything, to hear everything, not to exclude, just be like the moon in the old Japanese haiku: ‘The autumn moon/ shines kindly/ on the flower-thief,’ or like Whitman’s sun which shines on the common prostitute in his poem ‘To a Common Prostitute.’”<sup>564</sup>

This level of openness and acceptance is in line with Burke’s idea of the comic frame, which he describes in detail in his book *Attitudes Toward History*. Burke is concerned with what he calls “debunking,” which “can disclose material interests with great precision. Too great precision, in fact.”<sup>565</sup> The revelation of material interest as the goal of critique is too narrow for Burke as it risks a dangerous reduction: “For though the doctrine of *Zweck im Recht* is a veritable Occam’s razor for the simplification of human motives, teaching us the role that special material interests play in the ‘impartial’ manipulations of the law, showing us that law can be privately owned like any other property, it can be too thorough; in lowering human dignity so greatly, it

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<sup>563</sup> Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose*, 295.

<sup>564</sup> Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose*, 295.

<sup>565</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 166.

lowers us all.”<sup>566</sup> The reduction of human motives to pure material interests is the problem with the precision of debunking. However great the revelation that material interests extend even to the application of the law, this revelation risks a reductive view that all human action is materially motivated. If this “lowering” of human dignity is allowed to occur, it limits the possible motives ascribable to human actions only to material desires, which is unsatisfactory for Burke.

Burke suggests an alternative mode of criticism that will avoid this reductive calculus: “A comic frame of motives avoids these difficulties, showing us how an act can ‘dialectically’ contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both ‘service’ and ‘spoils.’”<sup>567</sup> Burke sees a certain amount of ambivalence as necessary to a complete account of the motives at play in any situation. The complexity of human action combined with the inability to know all the factors at work in any given situation mean that there must be some degree of uncertainty in the criticism. “One might say of the comic frame: it also makes us sensitive to the point at which one of these ingredients becomes hypertrophied, with the corresponding atrophy of the other. A well-balanced ecology requires the symbiosis of the two.”<sup>568</sup> What Burke is arguing is that a comic frame, as opposed to the reductionist, materialist view of debunking, provides a healthier view of human motives for it makes one aware when the criticism becomes too one sided.

Burke believes that the comic approach to understanding human relations is not only better than debunking, but provides for a balanced approach to other people, allowing relationships to form:

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<sup>566</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 166.

<sup>567</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 167.

<sup>568</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 167.

In the motives we assign to the actions of ourselves and our neighbors, there is implicit a program of socialization. In deciding *why* people do as they do, we get the cues that place us with relation to them. Hence, a vocabulary of motives is important for the forming of both private and public relationships. A comic frame of motives, as here conceived, would not only avoid the sentimental denial of materialistic factors in human acts. It would also avoid the cynical brutality that comes when such sensitivity is outraged, as it must be outraged by the acts of others or by the needs that practical exigencies place upon us.<sup>569</sup>

Each decision that we make about why someone does something is an attribution, according to Burke. These attributions are not only important to our understanding of the people that surround us, they also frame the possible relationships we can have with others. The entire political or social map, therefore, is written with these vocabularies of motives. Burke's argument here clearly demonstrates why he feels the comic approach is best as it seeks a balance in attribution, allowing future relationships to be constrained but not determined through an over-simplistic attribution of motives from a past encounter with another. This also benefits the individual since reductionism is minimized in any encounter, a positive result can be extracted from most encounters: "The comic frame, in making a man the student of himself, makes it possible for him to 'transcend' occasions when he has been tricked or cheated, since he can readily put such discouragements in his 'assets' column, under the head of 'experience.' Thus we 'win' by subtly changing the rules of the game – and by a mere trick of bookkeeping, like the accountants for big utility corporations, we make 'assets' out of 'liabilities.'"<sup>570</sup> Such a change in perspective allows for a more reflective and constructive assessment of one's own motives and desires, helping people discover a path for positive action rather than a defeatist view of unchangeable motion – the sense that people never change.

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<sup>569</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 170.

<sup>570</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 171.

In the end result, the comic frame suggests a new democratic subject for Burke. “In sum, the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves, while acting. its ultimate would not passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would transcend himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational.”<sup>571</sup> Burke thinks the comic frame provides reasons as well as a way of being rational or non-rational, instead of leaving those ideas in the field of motion. Burke believes attention to one’s own thinking and consciousness is a superior alternative to attributing human behavior to a passive system. Burke’s comic frame is a critical instrument that people can use to restructure the world around them in terms of their own action, giving them some political power to alter the conditions of their existence via changing their attitudes toward and about others.

There is a good example of Ginsberg applying the comic framing to his own life as he recounts in an interview an injury he received based on his attitude toward others. He was responsible for caring for a number of dogs that he did not want to take care of, and he slipped and fell on the ice. He details his reaction to the incident:

I was carrying their water and food, but I was really irritated and angry – stomping out angrily, and I stomped right out on the ice and slipped and fell. As I was walking I was thinking – resentfully – ‘Why did they leave those dogs with me, rah, rah, rah. . .’ So I wasn’t watching where I was going. I wasn’t being mindful of the fact that I had slipped on the ice because of these slick tennis shoes I was wearing. I should have been slower and more deliberate, and enjoyed what I was doing; or, at least, been aware of what I was doing, and put some good boots on to go out there on the slippery ice. . . It was a direct object lesson that while the mind was clouded with resentment and anger, I could get hurt! I mean it was totally direct. There was no way out.<sup>572</sup>

Ginsberg chalks up an accident to his experience column by becoming an “objective observer of himself” freeing his attribution of the accident not to the selfish individuals who left him to care

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<sup>571</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 171.

<sup>572</sup> Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 401.

for too many dogs, but to himself and his inability to concentrate on his surroundings due to his anger. His “clouded mind” prohibits him from seeing the whole situation and understanding the need for balance and responsibility for his own attitude toward the situation.

Furthermore, Ginsberg attributes the act of comic framing– making sure to pull benefit out of ambivalence and not immediately simplify the situation – as an inventional resource for his poetic-rhetoric:

I have to really go back to the ground of the situation, get back to the fact and say what it is I’m resenting, and write that down as an image. ‘Dogs barking in the barn calling for their food in the icy hay,’ or something like that. Is that something to get angry about? Otherwise I might have said, ‘Having to go out and feed the dirty dogs of reality’ or something rather than, ‘the dogs lonesome in the barn barking in their icy hay.’ When you have to go back to the ‘icy hay’ you come up with poetry. I mean the ‘icy hay’ is much better than ‘dirty dogs.’<sup>573</sup>

Keeping mindful of the situation and not immediately reducing it to the terms available easily in the debunking attitude provides the better inventional resource for poetry. Ginsberg believes that the more ambivalent “icy hay” is better poetry than the reductionist-derived “dirty dogs,” for one conveys a very limited, personal attitude and the other allows for more interpretation of the scene. As Burke would point out, “It [the comic frame] considers human life as a project in ‘composition,’ where the poet works with the materials of social relationships.”<sup>574</sup> Ginsberg, instead of blaming his friends for selfishly leaving him with the “dirty dogs” changes the attitude toward one of sympathy for the dogs, surrounded by “icy hay.” This is done through re-framing his injury as his own fault for allowing himself to purely paint his situation as unfair, and getting angry about it. His rhetorical frame of choice – to blame his reductionist view of the situation for his injury – allows him to criticize the incident poetically, allowing for a larger and more

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<sup>573</sup> Ginsberg, *Spontaneous Mind*, 403.

<sup>574</sup> Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 173.

sympathetic interpretation involving the dogs. Ginsberg's framing also defines the rational and irrational viewpoint, positing his attitude of victimage and anger as irrational as it led to his senseless injury on the ice. The rational view is to "enjoy" even labor that might seem unfair or thoughtlessly assigned.

There are other connections between Burke and Ginsberg on the line of comic framing that will be investigated. In this section I will argue that Kenneth Burke's comic correctives are the explicit goal of Ginsberg's poetic practice of "inversion within inversion" as I argued above. Ginsberg's contributions to American poetic practice are not his final purpose. He seeks to offer a new way of framing, thinking, and speaking about the world. His alternative is a stark contrast to dominant ways of thinking and speaking of his time as his is rooted in the complexities and messiness of the human body. In the next chapter we will see through my examination of "Howl" that Ginsberg's association with Burke is very close, as the notion of framing as well as inversion and Burke's sense of the socioanagogic will come into complementary play.

Clearly this is what Ginsberg admires from the poets he praises in his criticism. He is attempting, I argue, to offer a new way of attaining this position through a new rhetoric which includes methods of framing, inventing, and understanding the world rooted primarily in the common material condition of being an embodied human being. Now I will turn to "Howl" to see how this rhetoric plays out in its first invitational form.

## 6.0 “HOWL” AND BEAT RHETORIC

In this chapter I offer a rhetorical criticism of the poem “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg in order to further explain his contributions to the beat rhetoric. I examine the poem looking for the key elements to Ginsberg’s contribution, circulating around the terms body, spirituality and poetry. These terms represent the critical vocabulary around which Ginsberg’s implicit rhetorical contributions can be understood.

Allen Ginsberg, as I argued in the last chapter, sought relief from his discomfort with the dominant modes of rhetoric and communication of his own time by returning to the limits of the human body as a productive rhetorical *topos*. This allowed Ginsberg to structure a rhetoric that placed the limits and advantages of being in a human body as the centerpiece of a theory of human communication. As I argued in the previous chapter, Ginsberg saw the fragmented, mechanistic communicative norms of the 1950s as destructive and dangerous. Seeing the limits of the human body as necessary recalcitrance, Ginsberg celebrates the limits of the human form as providing a better mode of consubstantiation for society. Using Kenneth Burke’s ideas of recalcitrance and comic framing, we can see Ginsberg as being interested in offering an alternative rhetoric for a healthier mode of communication between people. In this chapter I will argue that “Howl” can be seen as both an argument for the alternative rhetorical mode



Ginsberg advocates as well as being a demonstrative act, composed along the principles of the rhetoric that he advances.

First, I will examine some analysis that has been done on “Howl,” then I will review some of the important rhetorical insights of Kenneth Burke that can help make “Howl” understandable as a demonstration and argument for a different rhetoric. Finally, I offer my own analysis of “Howl” and explain why I consider this great American poem a central part of an implicit rhetorical theory for the beats.

## 6.1 PREVIOUS SCHOLARS ON “HOWL”

Tony Trigilio argues that, “Ginsberg's language in *Howl* combines transcendent and immanent modes of representation, creating what he calls in his 1986 *Howl* annotations a "mystical" and "commonsensical" language for prophecy.”<sup>575</sup> He is not alone among critics who seem to gravitate toward “Howl’s” language and communicative properties as the richest element of the poem for criticism. Trigilio concludes that, “The madness of the protagonists of *Howl* is a divine language of "mercy" and "affirmation" that represents eternal "gaps" in consciousness through an attention to border conditions: boundaries between West and East, representation and nonreferentiality, immanence and transcendence, psychiatry and antipsychiatry, and individual authority and communality. The lives of these "best minds" seem non-narratable in *Howl* because dominant juridico-medical discourses of the era rely on language incapable of exploring

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<sup>575</sup> Tony Trigilio, “‘Sanity a Trick of Agreement’: Madness and Doubt in Ginsberg’s Prophetic Poetry” *Poetry Criticism* 47 (2003): 125-127, 125.

gaps in the blurred boundaries inhabited by these protagonists.”<sup>576</sup> The failure of the commonplace languages of the time to account for the drives, desires and lives of the people Ginsberg writes about require a new language, something that Ginsberg attempts in Trigilio’s estimation.

Paul Portugues seeks the origins of Ginsberg’s prophetic and messianic style through his whole canon. He argues that “Howl” represents the contributions of the physical body to Ginsberg’s poetic style:

By 1955, when Ginsberg had reached the mature style of “Howl,” he had mastered the technique of using his physical surroundings as both a thematic and a structural foundation. He had also learned how to add to walking and pills various techniques of controlled breathing, each of which enabled him to prolong and plumb the prophetic illuminative seizure. He drew these techniques from an interesting configuration of sources: experiments in breathing that induced a mild euphoria of hyperventilation; the rhetorical cadences in the prophetic poetry of Jeremiah and Christopher Smart; and the saxophone riffs of Lester Young. All gave lift to his images, creating the ‘singability’ that he had said was essential to durable prophetic poetry.<sup>577</sup>

For Portugues, Ginsberg’s reliance on breath and natural speaking cadence were tools that helped Ginsberg realize his goal of creating poetry that gave the desired and effective meaning to his poetry that he wanted. All of these breathing experiments were attempted in order to give Ginsberg’s poetry the ability to communicate the prophetic message he wanted to get across to his readers and listeners.

In addition to language, scholars also note the importance of the body to Ginsberg’s poetry. Examining Ginsberg’s poetic corpus, Bradley J. Stiles remarks, “In much the same spirit as Kerouac, Ginsberg replaces the natural landscape with the popular culture terrain; for

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<sup>576</sup> Trigilio, “Sanity a Trick of Agreement,” 126.

<sup>577</sup> Paul Portugues, “Allen Ginsberg’s Visions and the Growth of His Poetics of Prophecy” *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, ed. Janet Witalec (Detroit: Gale, 2002): 157-173, 158.

Ginsberg, however, the spaces between the images are more important than the images themselves. Artists, he says, must place themselves within those gaps, creating the ‘poem of life butchered out of their own bodies.’”<sup>578</sup> Although Stiles’ examination of Ginsberg is focused mostly on his later work, Stiles argues that Ginsberg’s attention to the human body as inventional resource for his poetry was germinating since the 1940s. “It is only beginning with ‘The Change,’ however, that Ginsberg’s poetry is characterized not only by its intense attention to the particular details of each moment and the internal reactions of the consciousness within the body he inhabits to the passing, moment-by-moment occurrences, worries, joys, and desires – qualities he had demonstrated since before *Howl* – but also by a new freedom from self-recrimination and guilt.”<sup>579</sup> Stiles argues that Ginsberg’s change in perspective was one of attitude toward his own embodied state from one of recognition and struggle with the limits to one of acceptance of the limits and chronicling them without guilt. The shift for Ginsberg’s acceptance of his embodied state comes in the 1960s according to Stiles. “Ultimately, he found that the only way to transcend the concerns of the body was to immerse his attention wholly in the body experience, to become completely involved in all matters of the body, from sex to politics to death, and allow his detached soul to watch the reactions of his ego-self to these experiences.”<sup>580</sup> This period is much later than “Howl,” occurring after his journey to India and encounters with spiritual practitioners and thinkers.

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<sup>578</sup> Bradley J. Stiles, *Emerson’s Contemporaries and Kerouac’s Crowd* (Madison NJ: Farleigh Dickinson Press, 2003), 104.

<sup>579</sup> Stiles, *Emerson’s Contemporaries and Kerouac’s Crowd*, 104.

<sup>580</sup> Stiles, *Emerson’s Contemporaries and Kerouac’s Crowd*, 94.

Some scholarship on “Howl” points to it as potentially altering the idea of language as a whole. Preston Whaley, Jr. exemplifies this when he writes:

‘Howl’ liberates sound-images from meanings. Of course, just as nets swipe butterflies from their flight, interpretations snatch words from theirs. Certainly, I am a butterfly catcher, if only to let the butterfly go after saying an important thing. Both ‘Howl’ and *A Love Supreme* show that social, psychological, and artistic bondage result from ‘imaginary walls.’ Art can imagine a loving freedom even as it calls cold realities to account.<sup>581</sup>

Whaley points out that “Howl’s” rhythms and scheme are based on the natural human breath, and that the patterns of the poem are similar to John Coltrane’s improvisational jazz masterpiece *A Love Supreme*. Whaley self-identifies as a butterfly catcher who, through his analysis, strips words from meaning. “Howl’s” meaning is meaninglessness. It is “art for art’s sake,” in the same way a butterfly does not exist strictly for human pleasure. Unfortunately what is lost through such assumptions is the perspective of the poetic act as a rhetorical one – the creation of a text for the purpose of teaching, pleasing or moving an audience. Whaley argues that “Howl’s” meaning stems from its separation of meaning from words, and exists on a level of engagement somewhat beyond normal semantics. It identifies the walls of real limitation while offering a way to transcend those walls by separating meaning from words, and perhaps re-attaching it to the experience of the poem.

Other scholars approach “Howl’s” meaning in a more static sense. On Howl’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary many commentators wrote essays to examine why it was such an important poem. According to one commentator:

The announcer voice of the poem keeps folding all those lives in as preview of the spectacle the poem will produce, meanwhile it’s producing it *now*, and so much of the

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<sup>581</sup> Preston Whaley, Jr., *Blows Like a Horn: Beat Writing, Jazz, Style, and Markets in the Transformation of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 181.

excitement of 'Howl' is its capacity to produce those two effects at once. You're rubbing your hands as you read – ooh, this is going to be really good – but the experience is already happening.<sup>582</sup>

In this interpretation, the experience of "Howl" is in the reading of "Howl" – one knows that the poem is good because reading it gives one an expectation of "goodness" just around the corner. This is done, apparently, by the expectations produced by the "announcer voice." To produce this dual effect so well one would need to be a master rhetorician. The voice creates the expectation for the reader while delivering the result.

Other essays point to "Howl's" importance as a commodity, a site to make meanings, of many varieties:

'Howl' still helps young people realize their actual ambitions: not to become a poor poet living in a dump but maybe to become a physical therapist when you are expected to become a lawyer, or maybe to become a lawyer when everybody expects you to fail at everything. 'Howl' transforms the losers into winners by offering a process of permission handed down from Blake and Whitman.<sup>583</sup>

This understanding of "Howl" brings it in line with the classic American trope of "be who you are, no matter what they say." This reading of "Howl" gives the poem the sense of granting permission to the reader to act on ambitions that they might not feel are appropriate. This critic offers the closest reading to "Howl" as rhetorical as it can be used by the readers in order to justify their decisions of what to pursue in their lives.

Furthermore, Foster discusses "Howl" strictly as a commodity:

In 1986 Barry Miles published his annotated facsimile edition of 'Howl,' prepared with Ginsberg's assistance. Incorporating drafts, and offering footnotes and extensive appendices, Miles's edition looks like a sourcebook for dissertations and scholarly essays

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<sup>582</sup> Eileen Myles, "Repeating Allen," in *The Poem That Changed America: Howl Fifty Years Later*, ed. Jason Shinder (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), 85.

<sup>583</sup> Bob Rosenthal, "A Witness," in Shinder, 45.

– an odd packaging, to say the least, for a poem and a poet who were once poorly served by critics and the academy.<sup>584</sup>

Now Ginsberg's poem, "poorly served" at one point can be served with culinary gusto, properly prepared and seasoned for the waiting consumers. One does not have to stretch too far here to call up associations between cooking and rhetoric, used as a pejorative interpretation of rhetoric, the art of tasty appearance. Moving "Howl" into the realm of the consumable, arid academic object of study is another vein of interpretation that is usually coupled with the predictable transgressive reading.

Another move in interpreting "Howl" is to associate it with the tradition of literary modernism. As Vivian Gornick put it in her assessment of the poem: "Like *Leaves of Grass*, it is an ingenious experiment with the American language that did what Ezra Pound said a great poem should do: make the language new."<sup>585</sup> Pound's famous goal of poetry is a bit ambivalent, as "new" could mean a number of potential flavors of success (or failure). But Gornick continues her praise of "Howl" as new by indicating its traditional heritage: "'Howl' as I have been suggesting, is in many respects a poem that honors the principles of Modernity – *le mot juste*, the objective correlative, the use of complex semantic and rhetorical figures – even though the critics, put off by its 'bad taste,' didn't see how fully Ginsberg was working within the tradition."<sup>586</sup>

If "Howl" is traditional but at the same time offering the new, it could fit into what Burke called "casuistic stretching," which is where, "one introduces new principles while theoretically

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<sup>584</sup> Foster, Edward Halsey *Understanding the Beats* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1992), 100.

<sup>585</sup> Vivian Gornick, "Wild at Heart," in Shinder, 9.

<sup>586</sup> Gornick "Wild at Heart," 40.

remaining faithful to old principles.”<sup>587</sup> Through this method, Burke argues that many complex ideas in language are robbed of their ambivalence because they are not seen as containing opposites. “Our language is somewhat haphazard. Sometimes we have the words for the opposites, without the ‘higher’ abstraction that would unite them. Sometimes we have the ‘higher’ abstraction, and believe so thoroughly in its pristine unity that we don’t even seek for the antithesis subsumed in it.”<sup>588</sup> Casuistic stretching causes this departure of language from ambivalent meaning to flattened, clear meaning. But Burke does not dismiss it as a purely negative thing: “We believe that dissociative trends can be arrested only by a return to integrative thought (the over-simplification of which is manifested in adherence to a ‘party line’).”<sup>589</sup> “Howl” makes the language new by working fully within the poetic tradition. It is very high praise for a sophist or a rhetorician as well as a poet. The rhetorical nature of “Howl” is what gives it such a double-edged character – traditional and grounded as well as new and radical. It is indeed one of the faculties of rhetoric, to “prove opposites.”<sup>590</sup> As Michael Leff argues, “Rhetorical arguments generally deal with confused notions, with ideas and concepts that do not admit of a single, unequivocal meaning.”<sup>591</sup> “Howl” seems well-suited to a rhetorical reading since it seems to be hovering between near opposites in the scholarship. A rhetorical criticism of “Howl” can provide a reading that elucidates the rhetorical dimensions of the poem and how it can be seen as a part of a larger rhetorical theory.

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<sup>587</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 229.

<sup>588</sup> Burke, *Attitudes*, 231.

<sup>589</sup> Burke, *Attitudes*, 232.

<sup>590</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35.

<sup>591</sup> Michael Leff, “The Topics of Argumentative Invention in Latin Rhetorical Theory from Cicero to Boethius” *Rhetorica* 1:1 (Spring 1983):23-44, 23.

“Howl” as an object of attention and meaning-creation is closest to the reading that I suggest, but strictly viewing “Howl” as a commodity that can “mean” for different audiences allows for perhaps too broad of a range of meanings. A balance of attention to poet and reader is optimal, as well as a balance between poem as object and poem as rhetorical act. Before we get into “Howl,” I should establish a reading of Ginsberg as the rhetorical theorist and practitioner, a man concerned with the relationship of the embodied human being, language, and the resulting political situation that extends from this often volatile mixture.

In my reading, I offer another voice to the conversation: consideration of “Howl” as a blueprint for a rhetorical mode. I see “Howl” as a poem that blurs the distinction between poetry and rhetoric. It attempts to use the traditional poetic tropistic forms in order to indicate a problem with communication in general in the 1950s. This general problem in communication can be solved, Ginsberg argues, by adopting a poetic-rhetoric much the way Howl is constructed. In the end, Howl serves as a rhetorical template for proper human communication. It problematizes standard relationships within the culture, then offers a critique of them. Before I can offer that read, I must take inventory of the tools for analysis offered by Kenneth Burke to understand poetry as human communication.



## 6.2 BURKE, POETRY AND THE SOCIOANAGOGIC CRITIC

“By the ‘principle of courtship’ in rhetoric we mean the use of suasive devices for the transcending of social estrangement.”<sup>592</sup> Kenneth Burke’s project to offer a full slate of modes of identification, communication and persuasion that could be understood as based on poetry. Burke begins his investigation into rhetoric with the story of Samson, rendered poetically by Milton. He ends with investigation of “pure persuasion” where his examples and advice are drawn from many texts. But what specific tools can Burke offer the critic interested in specifically engaging a poem to say something critical about it?

Burke’s quote above is an attempt to establish a rhetorical principle for identification where social structures require transcendence in order to provide for consubstantiality. Burke is interested in modes of censorship that are more implicit and cultural than explicit and governmental. As an example, Burke offers his criticism of *Venus and Adonis* by William Shakespeare, where he lines up the participants in the romantic or seductive drama of the poem with the social classes of the time. His argument is that “sexual courtship is intrinsically fused with the motives of social hierarchy.”<sup>593</sup> If this is true, then the poet can offer a mode of offering arguments that challenge the existing social order in ways not only permissible, but perhaps more socially effective than a mere statement of political belief:

Thus, when this poem is viewed ‘socioanagogically,’ it will be seen to disclose, in enigmatically roundabout form, a variant of revolutionary challenge. By proxy it

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<sup>592</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 208.

<sup>593</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 217.

demeans the old order, saying remotely, in sexual imagery, what no courtly poet could have wanted to say, or even have thought of saying, in social or political terms.<sup>594</sup>

These elements are difficult to discern, but Burke warns the critic of an oversimplistic approach where the critic assumes that the poet deliberately places sexual imagery in a poem in order to achieve connection with overtly political expressions:

We do not assume that the poem's concealment of a social allegory in a sexual enigma was consciously contrived. True, scholars who favor the 'fustian' theory are tirelessly examining pure poetry for evidence of disguised allusions to prominent contemporary personages. But even where such allusions were deliberately inserted by poets and discerned by readers, such tactics would not argue deliberateness in the sort of expression we are here studying. These identifications can be implicit, and 'unconscious.'<sup>595</sup>

What Burke is saying here is somewhat similar to the analysis of social inversion that I explained in the last chapter offered by Stallybrass and White, based on the theories of language proposed by Bakhtin.<sup>596</sup> The similarity is the idea that social hierarchies are implicit within all aspects of human existence, not just the overtly political. These hierarchies can be blurred and contrasted within language, which can offer a critique of the larger more obvious social order. This occurs because of incongruity noticed in the inappropriate ordering of the "natural" order of things.

Burke's critic seeks out the implicit identifications between the sexual, the hierarchical and the social through socioanagogic criticism. He offers some guidelines on how to engage in socioanagogic critique:

To get at the sort of thing we are here considering, one must first reject all speculations in keeping with the typical empiricist question: 'What do I see when I look at this object?' A poetic observation involves no naked relation between an observed object and the observer's eye. The topics that the poet uses are 'charismatic.' They glow. . . [T]he poet's

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<sup>594</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 217.

<sup>595</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 219.

<sup>596</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Eric White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

symbols *are* enigmatic, they stand for a *hidden* realm, a *mystery* (though its ‘divinity,’ like that of the Roman Emperor or “Pontifex Maximus” of a secular realm, may be derived from a social hierarchy).<sup>597</sup>

The “glowing” that Burke attributes to the meanings that a socioanagogic criticism finds in a poem are linked with the word charismatic, presented in scare quotes. What are we to make of this as the start of a method that supposedly will link hierarchies related to the human body with hierarchies in society as a whole? The answer is surprisingly simple – the charismatic glow is the association with poetic discourse and mystery. That is, that the creation of poetry involves a sort of mystification process already, and the connection between the social and the body are bound up with the poetic due to the poetic’s invitation that the symbols and mystery surrounding it involve status and importance. “Even the world of natural objects, as they figure in poetry, must have secret ‘identification’ with the judgments of status . . . By ‘socioanagogic’ interpretation we mean the search for such implicit identifications.”<sup>598</sup> The critic seeks to unravel those identifications and point to the re-arrangement of hierarchy that the poem implicitly suggests due to its intertwining of more “natural” hierarchies.

Burke further defines the socioanagogic as the search for social mystery, as opposed to the search for celestial mystery that medieval critics were looking for in Biblical allegory. Instead of interpreting the presence of God in daily life, Burke wants to seek out the presence of social hierarchies in mystical, or hidden formulations:

The new equivalent of ‘moral’ or ‘tropological’ criticism would probably be found in a concern with the poem as a ritual that does things for the writer and reader: re-forming, stabilizing, heartening, purifying, socializing, and the like. Any sense in which one order

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<sup>597</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 219.

<sup>598</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 219.

is interpreted as the sign of another would probably be the modern equivalent of the 'allegorical.'<sup>599</sup>

Burke's sense of what this criticism would look like and what it would accomplish sounds like it would reveal the relationships between the assumed "natural order" of the society and the "natural." The terms remain in scare quotes as a sign that the natural is possibly never reached; that hierarchy can be critiqued, rearranged, and evaluated critically, and that the best criticism should leave a space behind for reconsideration of its insights. Having said that, the socioanagogic criticism that I will employ here will be to seek out moments where Ginsberg's poem points at the social and socioanagogically suggests that it might be out of line with the natural – the embodied condition. It will be these moments where the unhealthy condition of the body might serve as a way of rhetorically indicating the belief in an unhealthy society, further reinforced by the relations between the high and low within that culture, as per Stallybrass and White and their notion of contradiction always and already apparent within the high/low hierarchies in any social ordering. "The primary site of contradiction, the site of conflicting desires and mutually incompatible representation, is undoubtedly the 'low,' they write. "Again and again we find striking ambivalence to the representations of the lower strata (of the body, of literature, of society, of place) in which they are both reviled and desired."<sup>600</sup> The use of the socioanagogic perspective in rhetorical criticism will reveal how Ginsberg points at these orderings and offers an alternative rhetorical mode of engagement between people, their society, and their culture.

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<sup>599</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 220.

<sup>600</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 4.

Kenneth Burke's idea of the comic frame will also inform this analysis. For Burke, the framing of an event as either tragic or comic has serious implications for the reaction to the event. The attitudes will have correspondence to the frame. As Ott and Aoki note in their criticism of news reports surrounding the murder of Matthew Shepherd, "When social injustices such as the anti-gay beating of Matthew Shepard are framed in tragic terms, naming McKinney and Henderson as vicious, the public finds expiation externally in the punishment of those identified as responsible. Framed in comic terms, however, one can identify with the mistaken, become a student of her/himself, "'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles," and learn from the experience."<sup>601</sup> Instead of a forgetting through blame and punishment, we instead have a self-investigation, where one sees the events as human and correctable.

How does the Beat rhetoric fit into Burke's comic frame as well as the socioanagogic? By placing the natural social order in question by juxtaposing it with its opposite, the Beat rhetor has the opportunity to condemn society for poor judgment and stupidity, since they cannot possibly understand the insights of the Beat perspective. But this is not what happens. Instead, the Beat rhetor establishes the scene as comic – not necessarily humorous, but mistaken – and therefore any member of society can potentially see space for alternative ways of living alongside their own correct (natural) ways.

As far as criticism goes, Burke sees the critical act as a balance between examining elements of the life of the poet for information as to how the poem works as symbolic action:

The text, as a particular instance of symbolic action, should be closely studied for its implicit and explicit equations, plus their transformations. Its internal relations would be studied as though 'anonymous.' But the text should also be analyzed from the standpoint

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<sup>601</sup>Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5 3 (2002): 483-505.

of ‘symbolic action in general,’ ideally with the knowledge of the author as citizen and taxpayer, of his ailments, of his ‘property in’ the economy of his times, of all and any contextual bits of ‘factacity’ that might be shown to bear upon his text, considered as a symbolic act.<sup>602</sup>

Burke believes that the meaning of the text operates on its own terms, but also operates as symbolic action based on the ills and the beliefs of the author as well. Understanding the text is an act that reveals possible meanings by knowing something about the author helps the critic offer meanings by arranging the terms in ways that illustrate the symbolic action of the text.

My analysis of “Howl” will hopefully reveal some of the elements of the Beat rhetoric at work. Using Burke’s sense of the socioanagogic, the implicit identifications that will be revealed will link the social with the natural in ways that either critique or reinforce those hierarchies. “Howl” is a complicated work, and this analysis seeks to complicate that complication.

### **6.3 COMPLICATING AN ALREADY COMPLICATED POEM: ANALYZING**

#### **“HOWL”**

Gordon Ball seems to understand that the need for a complicated reading of “Howl” must begin with a complicated reading of Ginsberg as the poem’s architect. Ball argues that, “each of the long lines of Part I of ‘Howl’ is ideally a single long breath: Ginsberg’s locating a poem in human tongue and breath, as well as his linking it to music, has helped give us verse with a much greater emphasis on oral delivery and performance, mixing artistic media.”<sup>603</sup> Focusing on the

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<sup>602</sup> Kenneth Burke, “Methodological Repression and/or Strategies of Containment” *Critical Inquiry* 5, 2 (Winter 1978): 401-416, 412.

<sup>603</sup> Gordon Ball, “Wopbopgooglemop: ‘Howl’ and Its Influences,” in Shinder, 96.

“blur” that “Howl” is produced from is a move toward understanding “Howl” as a significant contribution to a rhetoric. Ginsberg’s fusion of distinct discursive styles and boundaries could be considered a powerful argument about how to alter communication just below the surface of a poem that hopes to politically alter society.

Ginsberg’s poetics are well described as a “mix,” and it is this unique fusion of embodiment and the poetic tradition that he adds to the Beat Rhetoric. If Kerouac is the Beat of *kairos*, then Ginsberg is the Beat of embodiment. By embodiment, we see how Ginsberg calls attention to the material limits of being an embodied human being while at the same time using those limits as a source of invention, style and delivery for his rhetoric. Ginsberg’s rhetoric begins with the limits of the human body. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ginsberg sees appropriate human communication as defined by the limits of being human.

Ginsberg’s theory of poetic production is based directly on the human voice:

So that’s what I understand of projective verse: the lines are scattered out on the page pretty much the way you would break them up in your own breaths if you were actually pronouncing them aloud. They were written to be spoken. As if they were actually spoken. You could score the poem on the page to give an indication of what rhythm you’d be using, what phrases would be all in one breath, and what phrases would be in short breaths; what single words like ‘O’ might be all by themselves in single breaths taking all that weight and time. The breath of the poet ideally is reproduced by the breathing of the reader.<sup>604</sup>

This might explain the repetitions and meanderings of “Howl” since Ginsberg is attending to a writing that attempts to replicate the nuances of oral discourse. “One reason for the use of cumulative iteration and incremental repetition is orality is the unilinear direction of discourse. Once uttered, words cannot be called back or erased by only amended by additional words, in the

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<sup>604</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), 161-2.

form of variation, specification, or repair. Oral discourse is a work in progress that includes its own drafts and revisions. Literature, in turn, adopts repetition and repair to stage a discourse steeped in the forms and timing of orality.”<sup>605</sup> This literary method to simulate a somewhat natural element of human speech, present in “Howl” further confirms the idea that “Howl” can be read for an implicit rhetorical theory that centers on the human body as its source and limit.

In “Howl” we can see a concern for the embodied condition from the very start. The opening lines set the exigence for the poem:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by  
madness, starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn  
looking for an angry fix, . . .<sup>606</sup>

We are introduced to a rhetorical event in the most traditional sense of the phrase – someone is testifying to his or her experience. What has been seen has all the earmarks of a tragedy. Those who were at the top of the speaker’s generation are now destroyed, seeking out “angry” drugs in a state of hysteria. Madness is cited as the cause of their destruction, and we are left thinking that perhaps addiction is the root of their condition at this point.

Here we see Ginsberg drawing on the inversion strategies noticed by Stallybrass and White – he combines the bodily notions of high and low with geographic ones in an attempt to set high and low from two different social aspects together. The best minds are naked in the street and starving; they are hysterical and dragging themselves through the streets for an “angry fix.” Stallybrass and White note: “the body cannot be thought separately from the social formation, symbolic topography and the constitution of the subject. The body is neither a purely

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<sup>605</sup> Alessandro Portelli *The Text and the Voice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 93.

<sup>606</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), 9.



natural given nor is it merely a textual metaphor, it is a privileged operator for the transcoding of these other areas. Thinking the body is thinking social topography and vice versa.”<sup>607</sup> This is not a case of individual or group prosecution, but a rhetorical re-mapping of the valences of society. Stallybrass and White argue here that the body is the site for operatively defining and coding social values and their signs. In “Howl” we begin with a body that has the greatest mind, but crawls on the street at the wrong time of day in the wrong part of town looking for the wrong thing. The wrecked body with the greatest mind will serve in the poem as the operator of an attempt to comically and anagogically re-write these codings for the reader.

The bodies of the “best minds” are lacking in serious ways, but at the same time what’s missing from the appropriate social positioning is recoded to advantage:

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly  
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,  
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat  
up smoking in the supernatural darkness of  
cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities  
contemplating jazz,<sup>608</sup>

Here is a listing of hierarchical oppositions, each of which serves a socioanagogic function, questioning the relationship between the terms. First we have “hipsters” who, in 1950s American society were definitely not anywhere near the top of the social order, “burning.” The ambivalence allows for an association to something illegal, perhaps, but the implication is that they desire connection to the rest of the universe, even though we are given the sense that they have a deeper connection already, supernaturally floating near the rooftops and “contemplating” jazz.

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<sup>607</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 192.

<sup>608</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, 9.

Additionally, they live in poverty, their clothes are tattered, and they stay up all night. Although they are violating almost all of the highest order values of 1950s American society, they still “float” above the cities, somehow above it all. This could be a gesture toward the unrooted nature of these “best minds,” which would be another re-coding of societal value. They are above the tallest man-made geographical structures by being at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. This inversion of social status and geographical placement calls into question the value of such things as wealth, nice clothes and good apartments. One must give up these markers of high status to achieve a higher level of being – contemplation. This has many connections to Ginsberg’s study of the aesthetic tradition – St. John of the Cross in particular, which is also a current of the time, discernible in the work of Thomas Merton.<sup>609</sup> Ginsberg’s interest in St. John’s work was a part of what Barry Miles calls the religious vocabulary Ginsberg gained while at Columbia.<sup>610</sup>

This is also a nice comic picture, where in an amusing way the reader can imagine the tortured geniuses literally floating through the night air over the buildings, smoking and using their great minds to think about popular music instead of something perhaps more important, or literary. It can also be read as an absurd scene, whereas the combination of low, in the terms of social place – and high, quite literally floating, but more symbolically out of and above the important domain for the body to produce meaningful discourse, the reader might have to “go from a principle to a principle of principles (from the dialectical order to an ultimate order of

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<sup>609</sup> See Claire Hoertz Badaracco, “The Influence of ‘Beat’ Generation Poetry on the Work of Thomas Merton” *Merton Annual* 15 (November 2002):121-135 for the influence Ginsberg and other beats had on Merton’s work.

<sup>610</sup> Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 99.

terms) – and such ‘incommensurability’ may be called a ‘leap’ from morality to religion.”<sup>611</sup> Such a leap requires an absurd scene in order for the move to be made. This means, for Burke, that there is a contradiction that requires violation of a moral precept from another vocabulary. “Often the attempt to obey one moral injunction may oblige us to violate another.”<sup>612</sup> I believe this to be the rhetorical motive of “Howl” as Ginsberg takes all of our presuppositions about the body and its appropriate places as a site of identity and discourse and inverts them. This inversion creates the need for such “leaps” by violating the socioanagogic connections between the secular and the sacred.

As the poem progresses, the things the “great minds” engage in become more and more associated with the extremities of the lower body, departing quickly from the normal social admiration that should be given to their higher body strata, the mind. The ambivalence such a pairing (or a contradiction) suggests is explained by Burke: “The forbidden (of either holy or obscene sorts) can become identified with the magic experiences of infancy, the tabus [sic] of the excremental, which are established along with the first steps in language, and fade into the prelinguistic stage of experience. Thus, ironically, the very ‘seat of highest dignity’ can become furtively one with the connotations of the human posterior, in a rhetorical identification between high and low, since both can represent the principle of the tabu.”<sup>613</sup> Since both identifications of high and low are present in the extremes of any hierarchy’s rhetoric, there must be a lot of discursive control, or “policing” of the appropriate relationships between body and language. The errors of childhood association – pointed at by Burke – are corrected through the

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<sup>611</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 253.

<sup>612</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 253.

<sup>613</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 256-7.

construction of appropriate place for appropriate bodies. As Stallybrass and White examine exhaustively, the creation of the bourgeoisie as a class relied heavily on establishing new meanings and ways to symbolically identify the “poor” – through smell, distinguishing the suburb from the city, and hygiene. “The reformation of the senses *produced*, as a necessary corollary, new thresholds of shame, embarrassment and disgust. And in the nineteenth century, those thresholds were articulated above all through specific *contents* – the slum, the swer, the nomad, the savage, the rat – which in turn remapped the body.”<sup>614</sup> Although they specifically investigate the rise of the bourgeois class through symbolic re-coding, the same principles are applicable here. Shame, disgust and other reformations are directly confronted by “Howl” which, if these moments are to be admired, require some abstract “leaping” between hierarchical vocabularies.

As the poem continues, the confrontation of these abstract moments become increasingly direct, as Ginsberg uses adjectives with nouns that don’t necessarily follow or are even assumed by readers to associate at any level:

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery  
dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops,  
storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon  
blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree  
vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brook  
lyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind,  
who chained themselves to subways for the endless  
ride from Battery to holy Bronx on Benzedrine  
until the noise of wheels and children brought  
them down shuddering mouth-wracked and  
battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance  
in the drear light of Zoo,  
who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford’s  
floated out and sat through the stale beer after-  
noon in desolate Fugazzi’s, listening to the crack

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<sup>614</sup> Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 148.

of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,<sup>615</sup>

The notion of a “peyote solidity” alone is a contradiction that blurs the status of the hallucination with reality. If we are in a world where visions become solid, there’s little out of bounds. In the last chapter I argued that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time where disembodiment was the nature of communication. “The question remains what sort of creatures we communicating beings have become. The power of ‘comunication’ lies in its ability to extend human interaction across the expanses of space an time; its pathos lies in its transcendence of mortal form. Communication suggests contact without touch.”<sup>616</sup> Ginsberg seems to highlight this question as we follow the presence of the great minds through familiar, yet disconnected surroundings. Each location has a value judgment that radically shifts our relationship to the place or the object that would normally spark some sense of comfortable familiarity. Using his notions of proper rhetoric, each line is a powerful exhaled vision – an utterance that points to a moment that blurs the assumed difference between reality and illusion. Here we also see the Whitmanic long lines, which Glen Burns argues contain transformative properties of meaning: “As with Whitman, by the time we have traversed the stretch of one of these long lines, we have experienced a rapid set of transformation. And like Whitman again, the process of organizing these lines into poems is accumulative.”<sup>617</sup> I would add that the accumulation of many unexpected associations transforms not the denotative meaning of any of the words, but the position of that object, name, or place in

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<sup>615</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, 10-11.

<sup>616</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 228.

<sup>617</sup> Glen Burns, *Great Poets Howl: A Study of Allen Ginsberg’s Poetry 1943-1955* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1983), 333.

the social hierarchy. Without its usual associations, the reader is forced to try to figure out how the two, usually opposite things are related.

For example, the phrase “backyard green tree cemetery dawn” has the ambivalence of watching the “dawn” in a “cemetery” which is also a “backyard,” eroding associations of geography and appropriateness as well as hierarchies of beginning and ending. “Holy Bronx” – a combination of terms that would never be heard together except for contradiction and opposition – serves as one of the destinations of the benny subway ride “to nowhere” that ends at a Zoo with the “best-mind” exhausted and passing out on the ground. In these examples, an absurd conflict is revealed by the poet’s seemingly random associations revealing the ambivalence between holy and foul in the secular hierarchy by forcing the reader to follow along in his “leaps” from one vocabulary to another.

This section of the poem contains the famous “hydrogen jukebox” construction, which is clearly an example of Burkean “perspective by incongruity.” This device is suggested by Burke as one that “appeals by exemplifying relationships between objects which our customary rational vocabulary has ignored.”<sup>618</sup> It is not only one of Ginsberg’s most well known constructions, but exemplifies the hierarchic confusion of “Howl.” Glen Burns calls the phrase “meaningless in itself,” only valuable because it “forces our attention on the gap between the two words when read in context.”<sup>619</sup> The jukebox, a technology of entertainment that seems miles away from the horrors of atomic warfare, is placed inside the desolate establishment. The implication is that one cannot separate the horrors of the technology of atomic weapons from the pleasures of

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<sup>618</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 90.

<sup>619</sup> Glen Burns, *Great Poets Howl: A Study of Allen Ginsberg’s Poetry 1943-1955* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1983), 373.

technology. The association makes both the atomic weapon and the jukebox ambivalent, throwing their value into question – something that could not be done as well without this device. The use of perspective by incongruity forces ideas of compatibility and connection where none are obvious. This can lead to absurd “leaping” between vocabularies if the tension between the two ideas is high. For Burke, the presence of poetry itself can be read as a perspective by incongruity: “Poetry, broadly defined, is a locus for perspective by incongruity, a place for incongruous metaphors can be pushed together to create new ways of viewing the world – a counter-gridlock, a hypertext (in contemporary metaphors).”<sup>620</sup> Poetry, through this analysis of Burke, is a place where metaphor, and perspective by incongruity in particular, can be deployed to create alternative orderings of the world.

Other oppositions that are offered in the poem are less tame. As the poem progresses the oppositions become more embodied, and also, at the same time more stark in their implications:

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly  
motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,  
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim,  
the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean  
love,  
who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose-  
gardens and the grass of public parks and  
cemeteries scattering their semen freely to  
whomever come who may,<sup>621</sup>

These inversions of the dominant or accepted natural order of things in society are more complex than they appear to be. Instead of a mere celebration of sodomy, there are also other celebrations occurring – for example, the combination of the seraphim with the sailors as well as the sexual

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<sup>620</sup> Deborah Hawhee, “Burke and Nietzsche” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 129-145, 139.

<sup>621</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, 13.

encounters creates a dizzying play of illicit associations that throw into controversy the accepted place of each participant and act. The association of the angelic and the sexually profane raises questions about the profanity of the act and the sanctity of the act. The distribution of something as sacred as intercourse freely in the public park (a place usually associated with the profane, or at least the dirty masses) is not only questionable on a legal basis, but raises questions about the distinctions between public spaces and private spaces by placing the park and the human body together. This association makes one question the relationship of the usually private body with the clearly public park.

Overtly displaying the queer body in the midst of sexual activity and the throws of passion is a very raw image for the time. This imagery, far from shocking, is delivered in what Gregory Woods defines ironically as a uniform tone:

That they are in the vernacular, makes no more of them than what they say: that members of his generation – and he does not specify percentages – found anal intercourse with motorcyclists pleasurable, fellated and were fellated by sailors, indulged in indiscriminate sexual activity in parks and Turkish baths, lost their lovers, and promiscuously formed sexual bonds with women. In the light of Kinsey's revelations of 1948, these (of 1956) are unexceptional. Given the terms on which the poem presents itself – terms of Whitman-like candor and inclusiveness, and of social disaffection – the sexual passage is in tonal, formal and ideological keeping with the others, neither more nor less emphatic than they. The manner of the whole poem dictates the manner of its parts. If its sexual content is hysterical – an arguably appropriate epithet – Its hysteria does not stand out in any way from that of the other pages.<sup>622</sup>

The controversial content for Woods is not sexual, but the tone and style in which the sexual is revealed. The poem has a hysterical tone, but there is no alteration of this tone when homosexual intercourse is discussed. The hysterical tone is uniform – which could be read as a perspective by incongruity writ large. The poem provides an even, hysterical tone for any of the transgressive

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<sup>622</sup> Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh Male Homo-eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987), 196.



acts depicted. This “ambivalent hysteria” is the rhetorical mode in which “Howl” encourages reconsideration of the distinctions between forbidden moral and legal actions, making its style a perspective by incongruity which radicalizes, as Woods puts it, “unexceptional” revelations. The radical nature of “Howl” then might not be the content, but the rhetorical choices made with that content and how to deliver it to the audience. As Burns puts it, “It is a communal joy, a movement to the outside, a serial arrangement of lines disrupting the little stabilizations continually supplied by the formations of society.”<sup>623</sup> Here Burns suggests that “Howl” provides something communal that is outside stable society. “Howl” manages to accomplish a sense of the communal but not societal in a couple of ways.

First are the blurrings of societal organization accomplished through use of comic framing. There is no condemnation or even names associated with the “incorrect” ordering of society – but at the same time the beat figures in the poem are not perfect, they commit a lot of questionable acts that they could be blamed for. Instead, the beat rhetoric leaves all situations comically ambivalent, so that the reader wonders if they should judge or even if judgment is possible of the strange situations that they find in the poem.

Later in the poem we encounter moments that appear less comic, and more like the tragic frame. In part 2, we encounter Moloch, the being responsible for all tragedy in the world:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open  
their skulls and ate up their brains and imagi  
nation?  
Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unob  
tainable dollars! Children screaming under the  
stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men  
weeping in the parks!  
Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the

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<sup>623</sup> Burns, *Great Poets Howl*, 376.

loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy  
judger of men!<sup>624</sup>

Moloch sounds more like a concept or an attitude than a guilty person in this long list of charges and negative associations. The Whitmanic use of the exclamation point is apparent, which speaks to the influence Whitman's style had on Ginsberg. Some of the associations are said almost as if they were identifications – “Moloch!” followed by “Filth!” and then later “Children screaming under the stairways!” and other terrible scenes seems to indicate that Moloch is completely transitive with these situations. Moloch is both the cause of and the situation itself. The question that opens this section asks about the “sphinx” made of construction materials that “ate up their brains and imagination,” referring to the “best minds” from the first part of the poem. This suggests that the industrial, modern constructed world is somewhat responsible for the destruction of the imagination that was investigated in the first part of the poem. Moloch is not only the evil to blame, but is also the blame in the world. Moloch is consubstantial with the motives of the modern construction of the world. Moloch is also the evil produced by these motives.

The evil of the world appears throughout this section of the poem in images of people expressing raw emotion without much complex communication. It appears that humans are rendered into a state of complete despair due to Moloch. Even the toughest, the soldiers, weep due to Moloch. Moloch is also “unattainable dollars” at the same time as “ashcans.” This indicates a consubstantial relationship between that which is most desired and sought after, and that which is garbage. Moloch exists as and within both concepts.

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<sup>624</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, 21.



the “tons” to the heavens, which is still happening (“lifting” as opposed to “lifted”). Self-sacrifice is also an element of making Moloch and his city heavenly; it is backbreaking work. Hard work, a socially valuable idea in the contemporary vocabulary is somewhat lampooned here, making it look foolish and dangerous for people to work so hard to bring something so evil to such a great height.

The problem of Moloch is a problem that seems so vast that no force could combat it. Moloch is given a litany of identities in this section of the poem, so much so that no part of society is clean or free from evil influence. The purpose of Moloch and his great evil is to represent a real political problem for Ginsberg. “The first line that came to Ginsberg was ‘Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows.’ This was the informing image out of which the rest of the poem was generated.”<sup>626</sup> Without Moloch, “the behavior of the hipsters would seem arbitrary without a clearly defined social context.”<sup>627</sup> This context, for Burns, is defined by Moloch – the reason that the characters in the poem behave the way they do. Burns explains the coherency of the actions in part 1 through the lens of part 2 in a sort-of causal relationship:

Without our being completely aware of it, we have been presented a whole mapping of a certain group of people as they make their way through the city, pressing the excitement that it already possesses into a more cleansing ecstasy but also a more destructive one. The map is already quite large and a number of figures appear in it — figures of place, emotion, actions, visions, all of them concretely tied to the material density of their being. Each line is a little story, one more cross on the figure of the roof-top, one more angry fix in junk hunger, one more ashcan ranting at the skull of Moloch.<sup>628</sup>

Moloch exists as the target of ecstatic, excited people as they become more and more destructive.

At the same time though, Moloch is where these people exist and act. I do not agree that part 1 of the poem moves into a more destructive vein, instead I see the amplification of each part a

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<sup>626</sup> Glen Burns, *Great Poets Howl*, 380.

<sup>627</sup> Glen Burns, *Great Poets Howl*, 378.

<sup>628</sup> Glen Burns, *Great Poets Howl*, 349.

stronger push on the reader to “leap” symbolically above the rooftops like the “great minds” and the increasing amplification of the poem, culminating in the accusatory and exclamatory litany of charges against Moloch in part 2. The “destructive” nature of the poem comes from re-associative possibilities in the many metaphors that through incongruity, force absurd choices in value upon the reader.

In Part 3, we see another response or reaction to Moloch: mental illness. The narrator of the poem begins by praising Carl Solomon, Ginsberg’s friend he met in a mental hospital. “Solomon’s friendship helped Allen survive one of the most difficult periods of his life and, in all probability, he was largely responsible for helping Ginsberg retain his sanity.”<sup>629</sup> Solomon introduced Ginsberg to many French writers and conversed with him in the hospital about literature, thoughts, and the world. Most importantly, “Solomon taught Ginsberg much about unconventional behavior.”<sup>630</sup> It is this unconventional behavior that might be the subject of the vocative praise for Solomon we find in the poem:

Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland  
where you’re madder than I am  
I’m with you in Rockland  
where you must feel very strange  
I’m with you in Rockland  
where you imitate the shade of my mother  
I’m with you in Rockland  
where you’ve murdered your twelve secretaries  
I’m with you in Rockland  
where you laugh at this invisible humor  
I’m with you in Rockland  
where we are great writers on the same dreadful  
typewriter.<sup>631</sup>

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<sup>629</sup> Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 117.

<sup>630</sup> Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion*, 116.

<sup>631</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, 24.

This section, like section one, provides a full torrent of increasingly amplified absurdities that force the reader into a space of ambivalence. Some moments of horror, such as when Solomon has murdered twelve secretaries, are immediately diffused by the speaker laughing at “invisible humor.” This moment of perspective by incongruity calls the whole section into question as humorous or serious, as for something to be funny it has to be perceived in some way. “Invisible humor,” much like “hydrogen jukebox” invites a leap into the gap between the words. This leap is not into nothingness, but into the implicit value association with each term. Like metaphor, each term implicates the meanings of the other one, and suggests new ways of perceiving each term separately through the combination.

The stanza also suggests pathways to consubstantiality even within the restrictive environment of institution. Although the repetition seems at first glance to be the move toward identification, “Rockland” is always a signifier for the mental hospital. To be “with someone” in “Rockland” is to be “without” society. This ambivalence is further complicated with the notion that Solomon is “madder than I am” and “must feel very strange.” The complications in this section of the poem must be read in terms of Ginsberg’s own experience with “madness” in his life and work.

The repetitive claim of “madness” and the supposed evaluation that Solomon is “madder than I am” yet “imitates the shade of my mother” clearly reference Ginsberg’s personal experiences. But instead of being purely autobiographical, these moments point out the contradictory difficulty and ease he finds in relating to Solomon. Easy because he reminds him of his mother, but hard because the reminder is linked to madness. These instances, occurring in the same person, are not easily split. They are so close together that to dismiss one is to remove the other. I’ve already mentioned in an earlier chapter Kenneth Burke’s notion that rhetoric is

characterized when one places identification and division so closely together that they are nearly impossible to distinguish. This is an exemplar of what Burke means, but how does its appearance in poetry differ from the appearance of identification/division in a political speech?

Burke believes the difference to be between representation of material object and connection to symbolic value: “The ‘poetic’ image of a house is also an ‘idea’ of a house, insofar as it has purely dialectical significance, allowing for verbal manipulations that transcend the empirical or positive. You can’t *point to* the house that appears in a poem; even if the poet may have had a particular house in mind. For his word ‘house’ will also *stand for* relationships alien to the *concept* of house as such. The *conceptual* house is a dwelling of such-and-such structure, material, dimensions, etc. The *poetic* house is built of *identifications*.”<sup>632</sup> The distinction Burke offers can help the interpretation gain some critical distance from the biographical details of Ginsberg’s commitment in a mental hospital and ask what the “poetic madhouse” comes with as far as his rhetoric is concerned. What is offered here to the reader is a confused sense of why Carl Solomon is being praised. Is he praised for exceptional behavior in resisting the madhouse, or is he praiseworthy because of his madness that keeps him there? As the section moves on a broader sense of the identification/division is revealed:

I’m with you in Rockland  
    where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing  
    the final stanzas of the Internationale  
I’m with you in Rockland  
    where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United  
    States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep<sup>633</sup>

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<sup>632</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 84-5.

<sup>633</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, 25.

The stanza pushes not only identifications between Solomon and supposedly Ginsberg, but divides clearly as well. The communists and communist sympathizers are there, but “mad” – perhaps excluded from both society and the communist party, but it also suggests that “we” as the “United States” are there as well, making out with Solomon and the narrator under the sheets. The trouble that started just for Ginsberg and Solomon, or the narrator and Solomon has now expanded to implicate the United States, including even its “dark side” of communist sympathizers. The blur is expanded through images of embodied activities, singing and kissing, but also through ideological terms like “Internationale” and “United States” – certainly “poetic houses” as they function in the poem, more associative than delineating. Many readers might identify with “United States” but not want to be present in the madman’s bed making out with him. The implication of praise for such contradictory activities necessitates some absurdist “leaping” from sexuality to ideology to mental health in order to figure out why Solomon is praiseworthy.

Connecting madness to all of this requires a return to William Blake’s influence on Ginsberg. “Blake, for whom rock was a symbol of mental barrenness, would doubtless smile at the invisible humor of the name of New Jersey’s state mental hospital.”<sup>634</sup> Reading Ginsberg through Blake, or as a disciple of Blake as Ostriker suggests brings a different relief to the mapping of the poem. Ostriker argues that madness is a process in the poem, a process by which Ginsberg accepts the understanding of everything as it comes to him. Instead of struggling to fit it into absolute categorical classifications, he shatters the walls:

While the litany-structure and the long accretive periods imply, by association with liturgy, that the poet is a sacred figure, we have no sense of him as a controlled being

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<sup>634</sup> Ostriker, “Blake, Ginsberg, Madness,” 121.



apart, capable of observing, interpreting, judging, explaining. Instead of shaping, he appears to let himself be shaped, spontaneously and irrationally, by his visions. In other words, Ginsberg “becomes what he beholds.” The madness of this reveals itself as a manic rush of language without logic, a dramatic violation of rules of prosody, punctuation, grammar, and syntax (e.g. “paint hotels,” “purgatoried their torsoes”), and a violent (or casual) yoking together of elements which our reasonable mental habits keep asunder: the sacred and the profane, the realistic and surrealistic, a sense of comedy and a sense of tragedy.<sup>635</sup>

This “yoking together” of what Ostriker lists as opposites is for her what madness represents in the poem. Madness then is an interpretive frame, a way of thinking that permits an alternative politics to rise out of the categories offered from the accepted, normative hierarchy. The mechanism of madness is what Burke would call “the characteristic invitation to rhetoric,” which is “putting identification and division ambiguously together so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins.”<sup>636</sup> Yoking together, or “identifying” things with each other that perhaps spark a sense of “division” as the stronger of the yin-yang pairing forces interpretive leaps by the reader which might not change their mind in relation to the value hierarchy they have, but at least it exposes to them the implicit, hidden values linked to words, phrases, or ideological terms. This is what Burke is calling for when he argues for a socioanagogic criticism – a method of figuring out the sacred within the secular orderings of vocabularies in a society.

Instead of the frustrating and impossible task of direct communion, Ginsberg embraces consubstantiality as the best solution – using identification/division in its inherently contradictory relationship as a means of establishing deeper connections. Ginsberg offers his experiences with Solomon in the poem as an example and also as a means of establishing consubstantiality with the reader in hopes of establishing within them the same rhetorical mode

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<sup>635</sup> Ostriker, “Blake, Ginsberg, Madness,” 120.

<sup>636</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 25.

of understanding that he uses in “Howl” to argue for an alternative relationship between people, things, and ideas.

## 6.4 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I analyzed “Howl” as an example of the consubstantial, socioanagogic rhetorical strategy that Allen Ginsberg advocates. His theory of rhetoric, as constructed from my criticism of “Howl,” uses the Burkean ideas of perspective by incongruity and socioanagogy to create absurd moments that force recognition of the dominant society’s value structures. Ginsberg’s poem, through many devices, offers a vision of human communion that accepts and acknowledges the limits of an embodied human being, but turns those into productive limits. Kenneth Burke’s ideas of consubstantiality, identification and socioanagogic criticism were employed to make these connections stand out in the poem “Howl.” In the next chapter, I move to synthesize the contributions to the beat rhetoric offered by Ginsberg and Kerouac by studying the work of Diane Di Prima as an applied case of beat rhetoric. In Di Prima’s novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, examples of applied beat rhetorical principles from both of these theorists work together to craft persuasive expression.

## 7.0 DIANE DI PRIMA AND THE GROTESQUE BEAT RHETORIC

I was a poet, I had a work to do. And that work included an old resolve that I had expressed to Dean Cobb at Swarthmore, and that she had given me back as a Latin proverb. *I am human, therefore nothing is foreign to me.* It came to me still as a resolve, a vow: There was nothing that I could possibly experience, as a human in a female body, that I would not experience. Nothing I would try to avoid. No part of human life I would turn my back on. To me this was obviously just part of the job, part of what one as a writer set out to do.<sup>637</sup>

This quote from Diane Di Prima's autobiography indicates that she sees her role as a poet to not avoid experiences of any type. Di Prima's vow sounds a lot like the *kairotic* rhetoric offered by Jack Kerouac I examined in a previous chapter. Her understanding that her point of examination comes in the limits of a "human in a female body" connect her to Allen Ginsberg's understanding that the limitations of the human form are a *topos* of great potential. Because she is restricted as a human in a female body, no experience could possibly be foreign to her. This means that she can understand any human experience not in spite of, but because of these limits. With attention to opportunity, timing and "avoiding avoidance" she becomes poet.

Looking back from 2001, Diane Di Prima saw her work in as a rejection of 1950s values: "In the striving, get-ahead thrust of America 1950, where nothing existed beyond the worlds of the senses, the clearest way to turn from materialism was to turn to the arts. To be an outcast, outrider was the calling. Not fame, or publication. Keeping one's hands clean, not engaging. By

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<sup>637</sup> Diane Di Prima, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 161.

staying on the outside we felt they weren't our wars, our murders, our mistakes."<sup>638</sup> This attitude, she eventually recognizes, is untenable as an alternative to the political regime she saw herself in opposition to: "Like my father continually washing his manicured hands, we struggled to keep clean. I didn't then see the painful similarity."<sup>639</sup> The creation of poetry and art was a bit more complicated than an Archimedean lever that would remove practitioners from the complications of the system. It can be argued that the entire decade was one of mixed messages and unclear political options for women. "Appearance (in all its meanings) and façade run through many teenagers' and young women's stories; they struggled to conform, often through approximating acceptable beauty standards, dissimulating and curious at the same time. These themes surface repeatedly in memoirs and literature of the period. Girls' discontent was articulated, as it was for others in the society, as a hidden longing for meaning, for something more real than the middle-class lives set out for them."<sup>640</sup> In the spirit of Socrates' condemnation of rhetoric as dealing with mere *doxa*, or appearance and not *episteme*, or truth, the era was one of ambivalent and opposite messages for women as to what they should want to be or could become in life.<sup>641</sup> The contradictory invitations are an invitation to rhetoric, as Burke reminds us – "But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric."<sup>642</sup> It is an invitation that I investigate in this chapter, looking for contributions to the Beat rhetorical theory

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<sup>638</sup> Di Prima, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, 101-2

<sup>639</sup> Di Prima, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, 102.

<sup>640</sup> Wini Breines, "Beats and Bad Girls" in Joanne Myeerowitz, Ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 391.

<sup>641</sup> For a detailed discussion on *doxa*, see Takes Poulakos, "Isocrates Use of *Doxa*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 34,1 (2001): 61-78.

<sup>642</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 25.

that so far has only included the ideas of men. In this chapter I will examine Diane Di Prima's book *Memoirs of a Beatnik* for elements of beat rhetoric. Although Di Prima's work has much in common with the implicit rhetorical theories of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, I approach her work using Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque and carnival in order to detail the particularities of her work from theirs. Although she is using the ideas of *kairos* and the body as *topos*, Di Prima's fiction gives a position of subjectivity to women understood via Bakhtin's theories of inversion, the grotesque, and the power of the carnivalesque. These elements are present to some extent in the works of Kerouac and Ginsberg, which will be noted as the criticism progresses. Suffice it to say for now that although the carnivalesque and grotesque are not the major parts of the rhetorical theory of Kerouac and Ginsberg, they are present, and Di Prima capitalizes upon them in her application and augmentation of beat rhetorical theory. This can be seen as her contribution to the beat rhetoric via her application of it in her writing. In this chapter I hope to present clearly what she offers and develops. To do that I will first set up the rhetorical situation of women in the fifties, focusing mainly on middle class, American white women and then explain how the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin work in the method of rhetorical criticism. Of course, Di Prima would probably argue that her work could apply to women of many different intersections, and I am not denying that possibility. I narrow my exposition of women in this manner in order to detail the radical possibilities of Di Prima's rhetoric.

Finally I will perform a rhetorical criticism of Di Prima's novel *Memoirs of a Beatnik* to show the rhetorical theories and ideas at play in her work. First I will engage the extant literature on Di Prima, specifically on *Memoirs of a Beatnik* to see what critical or scholarly attention has been paid to her and what insights have come from it. Di Prima's status as a "beat" is well

established.<sup>643</sup> As Tim Hunt argues, “We must now consider the whole range of Beat voices and Beat experience, not just the work and lives of the small set of men whose implications of the cultural and social transformations that the 1940s incubated and that the 1950s and 1960s realized.”<sup>644</sup> Hunt believes that examination and investigation of the work of those inspired by or parallel to the principle, male beats completes the picture of the beat literary project. “It is that Kerouac, Di Prima, and Frazer wrote in ways that subverted what the novel had been and toward new modes of creative discourse.”<sup>645</sup>

Anthony Libby’s investigation of Di Prima’s poetry and writing is a quest for how to place her work as a product of her politics and societal views, as many studies of literature can easily become. For Libby, Di Prima is worth study due to her role in society: “She is the rebel who was immersed in three major American cultural revolutions of the century.”<sup>646</sup> Libby believes that an investigation into the contradictions within her writing and poetry of different times will give us a clearer picture of Di Prima’s politics. Libby’s study is important to reveal the gaps in perspective on Di Prima’s work. “Di Prima has received comparatively little critical attention for several reasons: maybe gender is still an obstacle, as well as the admitted unevenness of her work as whole, to say nothing of her identification with the still not

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<sup>643</sup> See Ann Charters, Ed., *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 116; Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 336 for details on Ginsberg and Di Prima’s presence in contemporary publications, 409 for their joint efforts on free expression; Diane Di Prima, “Knowing Allen Ginsberg,” *Patterson Literary Review*, 35, (2006): 13-19.

<sup>644</sup> Tim Hunt, “Many Drummers, a Single Dance?” in Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, eds. *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 259.

<sup>645</sup> Hunt, “Many Drummers, a Single Dance?” 259.

<sup>646</sup> Anthony Libby, “Diane Di Prima: ‘Nothing is Lost; It Shines in Our Eyes’” in Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace, Eds. *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 45.

academically respectable Beats. But perhaps there is also the perception that she is a difficult case.”<sup>647</sup> Libby’s argument is that Di Prima’s difficulty in being categorized as a writer and a poet mean that many do not attend to her works critically. Libby develops his claim by comparing her literary production with the political movements of the eras in which she is writing.

Libby’s investigation reveals several important implications. First, through a rereading of many of her texts, Libby identifies Di Prima as someone who “values experience that breaks out of the usual categories, as she values a conception of self that breaks out of the usual groupings, groupings which form the basis of progressive politics now.”<sup>648</sup> Libby feels this is her strength, her ability to avoid all groupings and exist solely on the margins at all times. Libby argues this quality is “the source of her strength as a poet in her most productive years.”<sup>649</sup> Libby investigates two texts, including, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*. His examination focuses on identifying how Di Prima through texts displaces conventions and offers a critique of patriarchy through images that blend memoir and pornography.

Libby’s study closely examines Di Prima through a thorough analysis of her style. This study is not interested in linking back her style in her prose to her intent as a radical or a revolutionary, or what her intent was behind her writing. For example, Libby argues that opposition is the trademark of Di Prima’s style: “This combination of opposites is not unusual in Di Prima’s poetry. In fact, it could be said to be the defining characteristic of her work, both in aesthetics and in more general habits of mind, from her earliest publications onward.”<sup>650</sup> Libby

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<sup>647</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 49.

<sup>648</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 48.

<sup>649</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 49.

<sup>650</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 52.

sees this style of combining opposites allows her to communicate a sense of anger through her work, as “rage is cut with comedy, just as their treatments of love blend romance with squalor, appropriately voicing these mixtures in language and imagery that themselves mix radically different tones, figures, or levels of style.”<sup>651</sup> The mixture of opposites, for Libby, allows the poems to become appropriate. This combining opposite, for Aristotle, was the purpose of rhetoric. “Here is a major reason why rhetoric, according to Aristotle, ‘proves opposites.’ When two men collaborate in an enterprise to which they contribute different kinds of services and from which they derive different amounts and kinds of profit, who is to say, once and for all, just where ‘cooperation’ ends and one partner’s ‘exploitation’ of the other begins?”<sup>652</sup> Likewise, Libby is struck with the ambivalence of Di Prima’s rhetoric since the style blends the opposite voices in such a way that many different levels of the expression of anger, as well as other emotions, are apparent.

Libby’s focus is to give a portrait of Di Prima through her texts. He concludes that she is nearly impossible to pin down into a definitive political reading. In his analysis of *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, he argues that the text is “divided by many oppositions: most conspicuously the genre opposition between convincingly recounted memoir and pornography.”<sup>653</sup> The pornographic scenes are rich in detail and description, which Libby argues are central to pornography as a genre. However disgusting the eroticism of pornography is politically to Libby, he still praises Di Prima’s use of it. The oppositional strategy of the entire book strikes Libby as an example of how Di Prima is progressive even when it appears she is serving conservative, patriarchal interests: “Even here, though, in serving one of the least respectable needs of the patriarchy, she

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<sup>651</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 52.

<sup>652</sup> Burke, *Rhetoric*, 25.

<sup>653</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 54.



is also progressive in her own way, introducing unusual elements into the usually rigid genre of male-centered pornography, elements that threaten the neat gender hierarchies that form the basic pornographic conventions.”<sup>654</sup> He is amazed and a bit bewildered at her abilities, and concludes that “she may be engaged in a rebellion deeper than that of her critics.”<sup>655</sup> As we shall see, the style that Libby struggles to identify politically may garner its politics from its ambivalence. As Stallybrass and White note, discourses about the body are significant because they contain within them the stabilizing factors that provide order to society at large: “The ‘carnavalesque’ mediates between a classical/classificatory body and its negations, its Others, what it excludes to create identity as such. In this process, discourses about the body have a privileged role, for transcodings between the different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality are affected through the intensifying grid of the body.”<sup>656</sup> Identification, as offered by society comes under threat by combinations involving the high and low related to the human body. My criticism of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* using Bakhtin’s theories will clarify how Di Prima does this, how her work is carnivalesque, and how comic and grotesque ambivalence can offer a space for the reorientation of political subjectivity. All of this is done via the beat rhetoric – using notions of *kairos* as a sense of timing and the limits of the body as commonplaces to advance the possibility of reorientation. The contribution Di Prima makes is to advance the grotesque, using the limits of the human body in sexual situations as a commonplace for her readers. The *kairotic* can be perceived as an interruption in a temporality seen as set and fatalistic, and the body can be seen as unclean and inappropriate, but still a place from which

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<sup>654</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 54.

<sup>655</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 66.

<sup>656</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Aaron White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 26.

meaning can be constructed. But in order to understand what is being transgressed, some orientation to the scene of women's subjectivity in the fifties is required.

## 7.1 WOMEN IN THE FIFTIES

The best characterization of women's position in the fifties is one of ambivalence. Women were expected to fulfill contradictory roles and had limited economic and material power. "For women, the postwar era represented a dramatic retreat from the trends of previous decades. From the twenties through World War II, women had been steadily expanding their sphere by going to college and going to work in growing numbers. The war years brought huge numbers of women into the work force doing jobs that had been previously open only to men. It was a turbulent time when everyone's life seemed to change practically overnight."<sup>657</sup> This broadening of opportunity under the banner of necessity was seen as temporary. After the war, these changes were not so easily rolled back. New, persuasive roles were imagined for women that sometimes pitted them against themselves. "'Insecurity' and 'self-doubt' were our buzzwords. We worried about not being clean enough, or womanly enough, about not finding husbands, about not being good enough mothers. We were afraid of 'getting a reputation,' of 'being a cocktease,' and we were terrified of getting pregnant. We made our life decisions on the basis of safety and security."<sup>658</sup> At the same time, women were experiencing a broadening of opportunity and increase in potential roles in society. "A few middle-class women began to think about the nature of their own educations – the source of their strengths, the reasons they accomplished less, if in fact they

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<sup>657</sup> Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), xiv.

<sup>658</sup> Harvey, *The Fifties*, xv.

did, and the way accomplishment an achievement had been constantly defined by men. On the surface the 1950s seemed to suggest a decade of glorification of motherhood, but in fact mothering was so denigrated that women who gave their serious energies to it for any period of time were considered unfit to do anything else.”<sup>659</sup> Perhaps the experience during the war could be reconfigured by having women relegated to more menial jobs, but the spirit of individual accomplishment was always just under the surface. “Perhaps the greatest shift in attitude that grew out of the war was the way women began to see themselves. Many married workers realized that they must be quite capable to hold down two jobs at once. Being paid for what they were doing – even if the pay was less than men were taking home, in a society dedicated to the cash nexus – could only enhance self-esteem. Self-assurance built up on the job managed often to overcome nagging doubts about whether their children would suffer. The paychecks women took home not only gave them an immediate sense of security but also helped sustain a sense of independence in a legal establishment that in some places still saw women archaically as their husband’s property.”<sup>660</sup> Dan Horowitz complicates the situation by arguing that many different motivations were present in the 1950s which required different rhetorical responses. His case study is that of Betty Friedan’s toning down of her left-wing labor union past in favor of a conversion narrative in order to avoid accusations of communist sympathy and more effectively mobilize middle-class women to the cause of feminism.<sup>661</sup> The position of women after the war was characterized by such ambivalence. Activities such as holding down a regular job provided both liberation and concern, an apt invitation for the construction of rhetorical positions women

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<sup>659</sup> Eugenia Kaledin, *Mothers and More: American Women in the 1950s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 48.

<sup>660</sup> Kaledin, *Mothers and More*, 68.

<sup>661</sup> Daniel Horowitz, “Rethinking Betty Friedan and the Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America,” *American Quarterly*, 48, 1 (March 1996): 1-42.

could (or should) inhabit. Many of these rhetorical responses hovered around the areas key to the beat rhetoric, as I will show with some examples.

First, frustration over appearances and the appropriate role for women expressed itself in many ways during the fifties. “Disaffected teenage girls longed for something significant in their lives. ‘Authentic,’ ‘genuine,’ and ‘real’ were word used repeatedly. The 1950s did not provide them with a sense of being real. They felt that being sheltered, virginal, and female (the first two adjectives equivalent to the third for middle-class white girls) precluded the experience of meaningfulness. The sense that the culture was rife with hypocrisy, everyone keeping up appearances in one form or another, generated a yearning for genuine feeling.”<sup>662</sup> Di Prima’s eighteen-year-old sense of the role of the poet is her construction of agency within this general feeling of social artificiality. She does offer a hint though that the quest for real experience is nearly the same activity, as the metaphor to her father cleaning his well-kept hands shows.

A good case study for this ambivalence is the rhetoric of mothering. It seems very clear that in the 1950s women were expected to be mothers. “In fact, motherhood couldn’t really be described as a ‘choice’ in the fifties. For one thing, the ideology that equated womanhood and motherhood was powerful and ubiquitous.”<sup>663</sup> Describing motherhood as a “drift,” many women found themselves as mothers without much critical thought to the role. But, much like many other positions for women in the fifties, motherhood is marked with ambivalence. “Motherhood can be experienced as a powerful and creative act and in the fifties, powerful and creative acts were hard for women to come by. The project of rearing children was touted as the ultimate challenge to women’s skill, resourcefulness, organization, and even scientific talents. It was also

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<sup>662</sup> Breines, “Beats and Bad Girls,” 390.

<sup>663</sup> Harvey, *The Fifties*, 89.

her exclusive domain, the one area in over which she could exercise complete control. Adding to the complexity was the fear of the “devouring other,” inspired by readings of Freud and applied by critics such as Leslie Fiedler to indicate the destructive potential of mother-son relationships that became too close.<sup>664</sup> Compared to what awaited her in the job market, motherhood presented itself as an alluring career with pleasant working condition, opportunities for creativity, and good job security.”<sup>665</sup> The ambivalence arrives at the point where women are seen as the expert and sole individual responsible for the child’s well being. This often came with the contradictory viewpoint that the mother is to blame for any problems the child might have: “Although seemingly contradictory, the two theories, of maternal deprivation and overprotection, had one thing in common: the notion that mothers had accumulated an almost unlimited power. Paradoxically, this idea gained currency at a time when women had virtually no real economic power, despite the advertising industry’s attempts to set them up as purchasing decision-makers in the home.”<sup>666</sup> This limitation of power through an apparent specialization and unique “empowerment” of women extended from sewing to cooking to the cleaning of the home. Ultimately, the 1950s found women in the position of “home economist,” the target of advertising and decision making, but only within the limited sphere of the grocery list or the kitchen needs. “The advertisers attempted to attract whoever did the deciding. Although their ultimate decision to advertise most products to the woman consumer undoubtedly bolstered the development of the consumer role, creating that role and establishing a new function for the household in the world of mass production and mass distribution was, for them, a means to their

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<sup>664</sup> See David Ketterer, “In [Mutant] Dreams Awake,” in Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds. *Leslie Fiedler and American Culture* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1999).

<sup>665</sup> Harvey, *The Fifties*, 92.

<sup>666</sup> Harvey, *The Fifties*, 107.

clients' financial ends. The home economists, on the other hand, consciously created and defined a place in the new economic order of the private home and for the married women who stayed in it."<sup>667</sup> The combination of restriction and ultimate authority, plus the mixed messages of decision maker and obedience placed the fifties woman in the situation best described by Kathleen Hall Jamison as the "double bind."<sup>668</sup> Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) offered a radical rhetoric far away from motherhood, suggesting how and why a "girl" should remain single and work to please all men by being "the Girl."<sup>669</sup> Liberation for women from the confines of marriage and homemaker was cast as perpetual servitude to "men" as a category. Such seemingly liberatory discourses that offer an escape from the ambivalence of motherhood offer nothing more than another role in the service of men, yet with hints of potential power. In the end, the broad valence of discourses suggest a situation that could be inviting for many rhetorical responses.

As society was shifting its opinion on the true role of women, the struggle created confusion as well as frustration. The struggle for the truth about this situation is one rhetoricians would characterize as *doxastic*. From the perspective of rhetoric, *doxa* is the only social "truth" that can be had: "*Doxa* is manifested through prudence because society in general does not engage in cooperative critical inquiry. Instead *society possesses* the 'truth'-this is its *doxa*-and prudence allows for ethical and agent-oriented critique of the manner in which the 'truth' is transmitted and transmuted. Here 'truth' is created by rhetors that interact with and re-constitute their selves and society; the possession of 'truth' is then time-bound and societally contingent.

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<sup>667</sup> Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 245.

<sup>668</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>669</sup> Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade, 1962), 12.

This "truth" changes over time through a collective reinterpretation that is a result of both a contingent prudential praxis and the collision of cultural fragments."<sup>670</sup> In other words, truth understood via *doxa* is always being determined and re-determined by rhetors in all avenues of society. For women in the situation of the double bind, one way out was to express themselves creatively. Diane Di Prima saw poetry as a way of expressing her human subjectivity, or of presenting a human subject in a female body to which no experience of this world could be alien. This position she establishes through her rhetorical production. This alternative mode of expressing the position of the subject – not from official positions of authority – means that Di Prima is engaging in rhetorical production that the field of rhetoric would consider feminist. In the next section I will outline some of the ways rhetorical theorists have approached feminist theory and rhetorical theory in order to provide approaches and tools for critics who wish to understand the complexity of such texts.

## 7.2 FEMINIST APPROACHES TO RHETORICAL THEORY

Current work in communication theory and feminist theory identifies women working in areas directly outside of the field proper and draws upon their works for the formulation of theory.<sup>671</sup> These efforts problematize traditional theory making assumptions, placing the starting point of theory within other texts and philosophies. This work also expands the traditional realm of

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<sup>670</sup> Jim A. Kyupers, "Doxa and Critical Rhetoric: Accounting for the Rhetorical Agent through Prudence" *Communication Quarterly*, 44,4 (Fall 1996):452-462, 459.

<sup>671</sup> Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss, and Cindy L. Griffin *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999); Krista Ratcliffe, *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions: Virginia Woolf, Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).

rhetoric from persuasion and single-actor speech events to virtually any text, film or treatise. The implications of this move do not stop at just canon expansion – rather, the development of feminist rhetorical theory expands the boundaries of inclusion as to who can speak and who can serve as the audience for such speech.<sup>672</sup> Expanding the possibilities of theory only serves to expand the possibilities of what we are able to understand about rhetoric and its function in the world. It is within this theoretical context that I approach Diane Di Prima's work *Memoirs of a Beatnik* as rhetoric.

The place for feminist criticism of texts that are not of a theoretical or philosophical genre has been addressed. Several scholars have examined texts and unpack multiple dimensions in texts for feminist theory as well as rhetoric, and the intersection of the two fields.<sup>673</sup> The ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin can be used to identify those moves occurring in Di Prima's work. Through Bakhtin, a new reading of Di Prima occurs, highlighting the feminist rhetoric of the text. This criticism places her novel as both contribution and application of beat rhetorical theory.

Helene Cixous's *Laugh of the Medusa* is considered by Barbara Biesecker as a rhetorical theory. Biesecker approaches Cixous's work as able to answer two striking aspects in modern conceptions of women and rhetoric. Biesecker identifies Cixous's essay as a work that provides women strategies which to use to intervene in the traditional province of male rhetoric. She

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<sup>672</sup> Barbara Biesecker, "Towards a Transactional View of Rhetorical and Feminist Theory: Rereading Helen Cixous's *The Laugh of the Medusa*," *Southern Communication Journal*, 57 (1992): 86-96.

<sup>673</sup> See Bonnie Dow and Celeste M. Condit, "The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication" *Journal of Communication*, 55, 3 (September 2005): 448-478; Bonnie Dow "Review Essay: Reading the Second Wave" *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 91,1 (February 2005): 89-107 and "Feminism, Difference(s), and Rhetorical Studies," *Communication Studies*, 46 (Spring 1995): 106-117; Lester Olson, "Liabilities of Language: Audre Lorde Reclaiming Difference," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84,4 (November 1998): 448-470.



states, “I think it is necessary for feminists to notice that the recovery and analysis of ‘great orations’ by women is operated by a double gesture, a gesture that simultaneously writes ‘sexual difference’ into and out of history.”<sup>674</sup> The alternative to this approach relies too much on scholars who exist outside the discipline, so for Biesecker, the “implications for rhetorical theory and directly to the issues she raises about the gaps in current feminist rhetorical scholarship:

Rhetorically, the problem for women is this: How do women effectively intervene in the space of the symbolic, given that the conventional modes of the enterprise as such – what Aristotle has called ‘the available means of persuasion’ – have historically effected their silence and thus have circumvented their force? Put another way, how and where are women to begin speaking and writing since the only language available to them constitutes ‘woman’ as that which must be excluded as the other in order to conserve the identity of the same?<sup>675</sup>

Biesecker is interested in how a feminist intervention in rhetoric can occur within a language that automatically marks them as passive outsiders to it. By intersecting the study of rhetoric and feminism in her analysis of Cixous’s text, Biesecker hopes that feminists will “be able to read their own manifestos differently.”<sup>676</sup> Biesecker hopes that this new dimension to rhetoric will enable women to accomplish more political and social change.

Feminist rhetorical criticism has attempted in multiple ways to answer the question posited by Biesecker. Critics have focused on a number of various texts, with important implications for the scope as well as the direction of feminist rhetorical criticism. Catherine Palczewski offers a rhetorical analysis of writings of Gloria Anzaldù’s letters, arguing for their rhetoricity. Palczweski argues that Anzaldù’s letter form of writing, “offers a counterweight to

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<sup>674</sup> Biesecker, “Toward a Transactional View,” 82.

<sup>675</sup> Biesecker, “Toward a Transactional View,” 91.

<sup>676</sup> Biesecker, “Toward a Transactional View,” 94.

the discipline's focus on the finished speech as the primary object of study."<sup>677</sup> Palczewski sees a de-centering of rhetoric's traditional concern with the speech as the only genre as a way to bring in feminist texts as objects of rhetorical criticism. "Stylistically the letter is a distinctive use of the form because of the way it positions audience. Hence, the letter deserves a place in the history of public address."<sup>678</sup> Palczewski believes that criticism can question and open the usually tight borders of rhetoric to new texts. These moves in criticism are essential to further development of feminist rhetorical scholarship.

Susan Zaeske offers rhetorical theory through an analysis of the Book of Esther as a strategy for feminist rhetors. Her analysis focuses on a text that does not explicitly claim to be rhetoric or feminist: "It is my hope that engaging Esther in this way will contribute to efforts move beyond a unitary, male-dominated history of rhetorical theory through the recovery and recognition of a work that does not announce itself as rhetorical theory, but has operated as such."<sup>679</sup> Zaeske's theory prescribes a rhetorical strategy by tracing a history of the uses of rhetoric by various feminist speakers and their effective employment of rhetoric. Exploring the utilization of rhetoric historically and devising a theory from this text allows a different perspective on the function and scope of rhetoric: "Its goals are not success in the assembly or courtroom, but survival and resistance in a foreign land. Its ethical ideals are not valid decision making or justice, but balancing personal integrity with the welfare of community."<sup>680</sup> In this way, Zaeske's rhetorical analysis blurs ideological distinctions between the personal and the

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<sup>677</sup> Catherine Palczewski, "Bodies, Borders, and Letters: Gloria Anzaldua's 'Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers' *Southern Communication Journal*, 62,1 (Fall 1996):1-16, 10.

<sup>678</sup> Palczewski, "Bodies, Borders, and Letters," 10.

<sup>679</sup> Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 33, 3 (2000):193-220, 194.

<sup>680</sup> Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther," 214.

public. She also expands the canon of rhetoric beyond the Aristotelian conception of epideictic, forensic and deliberative categorization.

Lisa Flores studies Chicana rhetoric to reveal how rhetorically Chicana feminist authors create the idea of a homeland through their texts. “As object the Chicana feminist is disempowered. Knowledge about her has been created by others, and she is forced into roles that do not fit.”<sup>681</sup> This problem for Flores is the source of the focus of Chicana rhetoric. Flores examines poetry and other rhetorical artifacts from Chicana rhetors and reveals how the writers create the idea of a homeland in order to form a subjectivity of their own. In her conclusion, Flores delineates a key portion of feminist rhetorical scholarship; “Further exploration of the process of creating one’s own definitions should be a part of feminist scholarship. . . . As we become aware of the different ways in which women use the resources available to them to construct their identity, we can continue to build feminist theory that opens spaces and provides voice for women.”<sup>682</sup> Studying the application of rhetoric to create identity for those who are not allowed the opportunity by the dominant ideology will point out those spaces where subjectivity is possible.

Although all considering different texts from different theoretical perspectives, each critic provides a scope and purpose for rhetorical criticism in feminism. This short examination of a few works of feminist rhetorical critics serves to highlight the variety of ways in which the idea of feminism has been approached through rhetorical criticism. Each of these critics offers an investigation into the possibilities of a rhetorical “place” for women. In each situation, the way a rhetorical place is crafted differs based on cultural and social factors. None of the previous critics

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<sup>681</sup> Lisa Flores, “Creating Discursive Space Through a Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 82, 2(May 1996): 142-156: 147.

<sup>682</sup> Flores, “Creating Discursive Space,” 153.

or theorists have turned toward Bakhtin to garner critical insights into how feminist thinkers craft their rhetoric because the rhetoric was an elucidation of realizations. In Di Prima's case, her rhetorical turn elucidates a place for the occurrence of realizations and the crafting of alternative subjectivity. In this analysis, Di Prima's text uses what I am calling the beat rhetoric to craft that place. In order to fully elucidate the place she offers, I now turn to an explanation of how Bakhtin's ideas can be useful in rhetorical criticism to reveal these insights.

### 7.3 NOTIONS OF CARNIVAL AND THE GROTESQUE

Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the work of Rabelais attempts to find the significance and meaning of Rabelais's novels which, up until Bakhtin's treatment, were not very seriously considered.<sup>683</sup> Bakhtin finds Rabelais's images of feasts, carnivals in the streets and the mixing of food and bodily forms to be not just for entertainment or shock value, but a very deliberate move to uncrown and strip the official tradition of the popular carnival, turning the official order upside down for a limited amount of time. Bakhtin states:

It [Carnival] is a festival offered not by some exterior source but by the people to themselves. Therefore the people do not feel as if they were receiving something that they must accept respectfully and gratefully. They are given nothing, but they are left alone. This festivity demands no sanctimonious acknowledgement or astonishment such as official occasions usually expect. There are no brilliant processions inviting the people to pray and admire. Instead a signal is given to each and every one to play the fool and madman as he pleases.<sup>684</sup>

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<sup>683</sup> See David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), as well as Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>684</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. trans. Helene Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 245.

The carnival is something created outside of the official system by the people themselves: “In the world of carnival, awareness of the people’s immortality is combined with the realization that established authority and truth are relative.”<sup>685</sup> The carnival is a way of questioning the often unquestioned authority and power of the ideologies and institutions that operate around people daily.

Inside carnival, two important images constitute its effectiveness: The banquet and images of feasting. Bakhtin discusses the role of these banquets as a sort of triumph over the everyday world. Eating symbolized humanity’s conquering of the external, processing it and making it a part of the internal: “Here man tastes the world, introduces it into his body, makes it part of himself. Man’s awakening consciousness, could not but concentrate on this moment, could not help borrowing from it a number of substantial images determining its interrelation with the world.”<sup>686</sup> Bakhtin believes that the role of the feast is more than just celebration of a communal kill – it is the figurative triumph of life over death, and an occasion for triumph:

This element of victory and triumph is inherent in all banquet images. No meal can be sad. Sadness and food are incompatible (while death and food are perfectly compatible). The banquet always celebrates a victory and this is a part of its very nature. Further, the triumphal banquet is always universal. It is the triumph of life over death. In this respect it is equivalent to conception and birth. The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed.<sup>687</sup>

This focus on life over the notion of death, which is compatible with food imagery alone, has important rhetorical implications. Bakhtin argues that the imagery of the banquet carries with it particular feelings and contexts. In a text, a choice to utilize the imagery of a banquet over imagery of food is suggestive of a move toward a carnival. This carnival would exist for the

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<sup>685</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 256.

<sup>686</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 281.

<sup>687</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 283.

reader in his or her mind – a temporary unsettling of the ideology of authority. The author’s traditionally perceived role as guide or master of the text leading the reader would be replaced by a more participatory engagement in the text – the reader is not the definitive subject of an authorial discourse handed down from above. Using banquet imagery also provides the author a space to equalize social relations and further universalize the carnival critique of authority or ideology: “The scene is strictly limited by time, the time of the banquet, but during that period there are no footlights, no separation of participants and spectators. Everybody participates. While the usual world order is suspended, the new utopian order which has come to replace it is sovereign and embraces all.”<sup>688</sup>

Although limited in scope, the banquet imagery is an important part of the carnival scene. It provides a position for everyone to take up agency in a critique of ideology and authority as they are enacted in individual lives. Carnival provides this through a lack of hierarchy and official sanction, as the banquet table would seem to represent.

Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque image is important to carnival due to the foregrounding of the base. The clean and holy are moved to the background in favor of a celebration of the lower body, the genitals and bodily functions. Organs and pieces of the body are described in detail in grotesque imagery. “Exaggeration, hyperbolism and excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style.”<sup>689</sup>

What is the purpose of the carnival? Clearly it is officially invoked, so it cannot be called into existence by an individual with a specific purpose in mind. Carnival exists when base elements and the lower regions of the body are highlighted, or when festive eating or

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<sup>688</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 265.

<sup>689</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 303.

consumption of food and drink in a party-like atmosphere are established. The establishment of this is symbolic, as Bakhtin points out in his analysis of Rabelais. The images of carnival call into question hierarchy and create spaces which allow “a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” to occur.<sup>690</sup> These spaces that are created by texts only exist for a limited time – the course of the reading of the novel. So what purpose do they serve? For Bakhtin, the only purpose is to laugh at official institutions and societal truth, or ideology:

It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some comic event. Carnival laughter is a laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. . . Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time, mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.<sup>691</sup>

Through this type of laughter, everything is game for mockery. Through laughing at the official, unofficial and everyone in the world while simultaneously laughing at oneself, “A new form of communication always creates new forms of speech or a new meaning given to the old forms.”<sup>692</sup> Carnival is the place where new communication, or at least new meanings, can emerge for Bakhtin. He thinks that the use of such images provides a place for refiguring of meanings since the laughter of the carnival moment is ambivalent.

It could be argued, that Bakhtin’s notions of the carnival, the role of the banquet and the grotesque are particular to Rabelais, and the transition from the medieval world to the Renaissance. What application do they have to modern texts? Bakhtin invokes this question when he asks, “Perhaps all these images are nothing but a dead and crippled tradition? Nothing but an empty form, a dead weight, which prevents the author from seeing and representing the

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<sup>690</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 10.

<sup>691</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 12.

<sup>692</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 16.

true reality of modern times?”<sup>693</sup> He answers his own question by indicating that these images speak to humanity on a base level, maintaining currency over time because it addresses the key conceptions that humanity uses to organize its relationship to the world and itself:

This long development had its own scoria, its own dead deposits in manners, beliefs, prejudices. But in its basic line this system grew and was enriched; it acquired a new meaning, absorbed the new hopes and thoughts of the people. It was transformed in the crucible of the people’s new experience. The language of images developed new and more refined nuances. Thanks to this process, popular-festive images became a powerful means of grasping reality; they served as a basis for an authentic and deep realism. Popular imagery did not reflect the naturalistic, fleeting, meaningless, and scattered aspect of reality but the very process of becoming, its meaning and direction. Hence the universality and sober optimism of this system.<sup>694</sup>

For Bakhtin, the notions of the grotesque, carnival and the feast, when they appear in literature, are always markers of an inversion of norms. For Bakhtin, all three serve as an invitation to the reader, a way for Rabelais to join with the reader in an ambivalent space that may offer re-conceptualization of society’s hierarchy. Now I will critique *Memoirs of a Beatnik* using these conceptions from Bakhtin in order to highlight the feminist rhetorical contributions that can be garnered from her work.

#### 7.4 CARNIVALISTIC ELEMENTS OF MEMOIRS AND BEAT RHETORIC

Diane Di Prima’s semi-autobiographical book *Memoirs of a Beatnik* is primarily more fiction than fact, even though titled a memoir. For Kerouac, as shown earlier, this was often the opposite. Di Prima seeks to unsettle the easy boundaries formed around types of texts. Chapters

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<sup>693</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 211.

<sup>694</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 212



that discuss her acquaintances, female lovers, and experiences in New York City are interlaid with chapters that discuss in vibrant detail various sexual encounters. I argue that the ambivalence generated by carnivalistic images in this text allow for a positioning of a feminist subjectivity. The rhetoric used by Di Prima is similar to the rhetorical ideas of Ginsberg and Kerouac, but importantly using their ideas to create a position from where a woman's voice could be heard as persuasive.

Anthony Libby's criticism of the book, which I detailed a bit earlier in this chapter, offers a very specific framing for understanding *Memoirs*. Libby's analysis of this book offers three implications. First, he comments on the large amount of homosexual activity depicted in the book. For Libby, these lesbian scenes are outside of typical depictions of the act because they are created by a woman about women and avoid the problems of male created scenes in pornography, as Mulvey identified in her work on the masculine gaze.<sup>695</sup> Secondly, the pornographic writings are interlaid with images and language Libby calls "surreal" which are "threatening to the suspension of intellect required by pornography."<sup>696</sup> Libby argues this use of language interrupts the usual processing of pornography by the reader, disrupting "the erotic theater of the mind."<sup>697</sup> Finally, he argues that her word choice allows her to avoid creating sex scenes for mere male pleasure, allowing freedom from the male dominated interpretation of the text.

One scene that Libby points to for proof is one that I also find particularly revealing: "Against my cheek Petra shuddered and came like a great, alien mammal, and my hand in Matilda's cunt ached as it was alternately squeezed by her thighs and ground by the frantic,

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<sup>695</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16, 3 (1975): 6-18.

<sup>696</sup> Libby, "Diane Di Prima," 55.

<sup>697</sup> Libby, "Diane Di Prima," 55.

circular movements of her pussy. . .”<sup>698</sup> (Di Prima, 1988, p. 62). For Libby, this image is surreal and disrupts it from being a purely pornographic image. From a Bakhtinian perspective, the image is ambivalent at best, and highlights sexual encounter using metaphors that de-center the sexuality of the image as it is constructed. Describing one of the participants in this orgy as a “great, alien mammal” when she experiences orgasm is an indicator of grotesque style through hyperbole and excessiveness. According to Bakhtin, “exaggeration becomes caricature” in examples of grotesque imagery. The purpose is to provide a “contradictory and double-faced fullness of life.”<sup>699</sup> Along with description and highlighting of the sexual organs and pleasure in the scene, characterization of the resulting pleasure in the sex act as “alien” presents the other view of the situation. In this scene, the pain and pleasure described in grotesque images unsettles the typical images of pornography. Libby links these images back to Di Prima’s anger intertwined in the sexual act.<sup>700</sup> I argue that these images provide a way for the text to constitute the world through contradiction. The grotesque always highlights the intertwined nature of birth and death in the world. Libby interprets Di Prima’s work with great insight, but the omission of the grotesque applied to the body in the sex act leaves out the possible ambivalence that such images can create.

Grotesque focuses on the lower body in the beginning of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* contribute to the start of the book by raising the question as to whether this moment is a beginning or an end. Contemporaneous sources such as *Evergreen Review* suggest that the

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<sup>698</sup> Diane Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (New York: Penguin, 1969), 62.

<sup>699</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 62.

<sup>700</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 56.

textual environment of the late sixties was one where “politics, sex, and art went together.”<sup>701</sup> *Evergreen Review*, noted for publishing some of the earlier beat writings had transitioned to a more explicit rhetoric linking effective political expression with explicit imagery. In Di Prima’s book this seems to be the case. Her narrator describes waking up in a strange apartment, and begins to detail the loss of her virginity. As she describes the apartment, she begins to focus on her own body:

The muscles of my thighs felt sore, and I passed my hand over them to feel the grainyness of the dried come that was stuck to them here and there. Then I slid my hand between my legs and felt softly of the lips of my vagina. The skin was raw as I slipped my fingers inside, exploring gently. He certainly was a big one, I thought. A big one for the first one, that was good. . . . Now, I thought with a little grin of cynical pleasure, I certainly won’t have any more trouble using Tampax.<sup>702</sup>

Here we find the grotesque imagery used to emphasize contradiction. First, her description of her own body, soreness, the dried fluid still left on her, all absent of discussion of her emotions or rationality. The characterization of her lover as nothing more than the size of his penis is further a grotesque image through characterization. Essentializing her lover to his generative organ is a clear reversal of the usual hierarchy of top down. The privileging of the brain and head in opposition to the genitals is reversed, providing privilege to body parts associated with excretion and reproduction. As Stallybrass and White note:

Grotesque realism uses the material body – flesh characterized by corpulent excess – to represent cosmic, social, topographical, and linguistic elements of the world. Thus already in Bakhtin there is the germinal notion of *transcodings* and *displacements* effected between the high/low image of the physical body and other social domains.

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<sup>701</sup> Ken Jordan, “Introduction,” *The Evergreen Review Reader, 1957-1996* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1994), 2.

<sup>702</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 5.

Grotesque realism images the human body as multiple, bulging over-or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete.<sup>703</sup> These elements are present when we read about how large he is, how open she is now and how “grainy” and “sore” her thighs are the morning after. The over indulgence and the incompleteness of the body mark a completeness and a whole to the narrator, who is happy that now she can use Tampax easily. The focus on the lower body instead of the mental state of the woman who has lost her virginity reverse the expected order of the narrative, where such physical elements of the sexual act would be secondary to the emotional or rational state of the narrator.

Through all of these images, there arises some tension and contradiction. The contradiction occurs between expectation of form and what the text delineates. First, in the beginning of a book, readers already know that they are at the start, the opening of something. Di Prima’s choice to highlight grotesquely the loss of virginity (especially through avoiding any of the act, just the physical effects) describes the end of what is traditionally held as innocence.

In titling the work *Memoirs*, Di Prima is also evoking a similar contradiction in expectation. She uses the genre expectation of a “memoir” in an unexpected way. Genres are more than just categories, often helping people make sense of their world as containers of expected response. “In other words, as individuals’ rhetorical responses to recurrent situations become typified as genres, the genres in turn help structure the way these individuals conceptualize and experience these situations, predicting their notions of what constitutes appropriate and possible responses and actions.”<sup>704</sup> Carolyn Miller agrees in her investigation of the relationship of genre and rhetoric: “For the critic, genres can serve both as an index to

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<sup>703</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Aaron White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 8-9.

<sup>704</sup> Anis Bawarshi. “The genre function” *College English* 62, 3 (January 2000): 335-360, 340.

cultural patterns, and as tools for exploring the achievements of particular speakers and writers; for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community.”<sup>705</sup> In either view, the function of genre is not metaphysical, but negotiated – genre helps readers understand and interact with social expectation, and authors can play with what a genre suggests as the appropriate, then twist it for rhetorical effect. The genre is as important for readers as the story in this view. The genre helps the reader understand what sort of experience they will be encountering in the book. As far as the genre expectations of memoir go, Helke Dreier argues for little difference in the forms of memoir and autobiography, lining up the similarities:

Life writings cannot be used as straightforward documentation of historical facts. The possibility is too strong that their authors did not accurately remember their life history when writing, or even deliberately “remembered” the past incorrectly in order to describe themselves, their families, or other loved ones more favorably. Even if the writers were intent on describing the past entirely correctly, this could only be managed to a limited degree; an exhaustive and complete reconstruction of one’s life is impossible to achieve. When writing, authors know for instance the consequences of decisions and actions taken in the past, and cannot disregard these results. The social code governing a society also influences what authors mention, how they mention it, and what they leave out.<sup>706</sup>

The raw, detailed facts listed in this “memoir” violate the expected norms of genre, as well as the violation of the social code in discussing such an act in vulgar terms. In Di Prima’s book these expectations are shattered almost immediately with seemingly pornographic images.

This violation of the content of the expected genre is a concept Bakhtin describes as the chronotope. Morson and Emerson argue the chronotope can be effectively upset by placing events or actions in a genre that are unexpected or out of place:

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<sup>705</sup> Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” in Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, eds., *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994), 39.

<sup>706</sup> Helke Dreier. “Memoirs as Dynastic Means of Legitimization: Dutchess Sophie of Hannover.” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*. 27, 3 (Summer 2004): 495-516, 496.

So important are chronotopes that we all intuitively recognize what Bakhtin has in mind. We know, for instance, that actions that would be highly implausible, if not impossible, in a nineteenth-century realist novel may be fully expected in a chivalric romance or other adventure tale; and we tend to shape our expectations to given works based on a sense of what is plausible in a work of that kind.<sup>707</sup>

When Di Prima infuses her *Memoirs* with violence or pornographic depictions of sex, or casual conversation about bodily fluids and raw feelings after sex, she upsets expectations for the memoir. The chronotope for her own pornographic imagery faced with text we expect to read in a memoir can “implicitly dispute (or agree with) each other. That is, the relation of chronotopes to each other may be *dialogic*.”<sup>708</sup> In the United States specifically, there is a long tradition of highly sexualized memoir, including Henry Miller, who Ken Shapiro argues, “writes hundreds of pages describing in the minutest and clearest detail his exploits in bed.”<sup>709</sup> Additionally, in *My Secret Life*, explicit pornographic scenes fill the story as if they were its only motive. As one scholar notes, “Pornography never generalizes, but rather, repeats instances, moments, and scrupulously rendered concrete detail. The author of *My Secret Life* wants always to move through these particular rooms, to record these very singular moments; he doesn’t desire transcendence but always immanence.”<sup>710</sup> The presence of explicitly sexual imagery also tinged reception of Emma Goldman’s autobiography *Living My Life* (1931) prompting readers to evaluate the strength of her political vision not on the efficacy of her rhetorical performance, but her sexual habits. “The autobiography removed her from such direct contact with her audience and, contrary to her own expressed wishes, allowed readers to decouple and reconstruct the

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<sup>707</sup> Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 371.

<sup>708</sup> Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 369.

<sup>709</sup> Ken Shapiro, “Introduction,” in Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), xvi

<sup>710</sup> Deborah Lutz, “The Secret Rooms of *My Secret Life*,” *English Studies in Canada*, 31,1 (March 2005):118-127, 125.

relationship between the life she had intensely lived and her political convictions.”<sup>711</sup> The presence of highly charged sexual imagery clearly pushes readers toward a particular range of responses to the genre, none of which are quite the effect we see in *Memoirs*. The presence of explicit pornographic images is not enough to rhetorically spark what is going on in Di Prima’s work. One way to critically assess this difference is the use of Bakhtin. The chronotope of memoir along with the expectations of pornographic genre are combined in a way that does not meet the expectations of either, but rather offers an alternative rendering that hopes for a transcendent moment. *Memoirs of a Beatnik* combines these two chronotopes to evoke a dialogism that upsets dominant ideology about the role of memoir, and memoir written by a woman. The result is disturbing, but within the rhetoric of the carnival, as I will discuss later, this disturbance is where subjectivity can arise due to ambivalence.

This contradiction is further developed with the use of the grotesque focus on the lower body. For Bakhtin, these are the areas of death and destruction – through digestion and defecation, as well as the areas of reproduction and childbirth. These areas, for Bakhtin, can never be separated and only further create an ambivalent space where the ideology of the society can be questioned:

Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase.<sup>712</sup>

On the other side of this contradiction, beginning with an ending, there is still a beginning of something taking place. The narrator’s focus on her genitals highlights the ending of

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<sup>711</sup> Oz Frankel, “Whatever Happened to ‘Red Emma’? Emma Goldman, from Alien Rebel to American Icon,” *The Journal of American History*, 83, 3 (Dec 1996): 903-942, 908.

<sup>712</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 62.

innocence and a change. Laura Kipniss (1996) investigates pornography and its implications in her book *Bound and Gagged*. Kipniss argues that pornography serves as a rebellion against ideological norms of control that are traditionally centered on the body. For Kipnis, pornography is a way to confront difference and open up spaces in ideological constructions:

Pornography forces social differences in our faces: Not only class differences, not only differences between male and female sexuality, but the range of differences between women. Calling one version of sexuality 'nature' and assigning it to all women is false in many ways, not least of which involves turning an historically specific class and educational position – coincidentally, that of the feminist antiporn intellectual – into a universal that tramples over the existence of very real divisions between women.<sup>713</sup>

What Libby terms as spaces of freedom from male ideas of dominance and control can also be read as moments where the social hierarchy is highlighted in all its inequity. As Kelly McDowell argues, "Lesbian pornography works from within the dominant power structure of mainstream pornography to undo its own established norms. It appropriates the apparatuses which have been used to dominate women and resignifies them in accordance with a female subjectivity. This demonstrates the unfixity of power and the possibility for its re-appropriation."<sup>714</sup> McDowell's claim is based on not just the images of pornography, but the production of lesbian pornography by women with the intent being consumption of the images by other women. This is quite a distance from the analysis of pornography offered by Andrea Dworkin where, "strains of male power are intrinsic to both the substance and production of pornography; and the ways and

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<sup>713</sup> Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America*. (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 150.

<sup>714</sup> Kelly McDowell, "The Politics of Lesbian Pornography: Towards a Chaotic Proliferation of Female Sexual Imagery," *Xchanges* 1, 1 (September 2001)  
<http://infohost.nmt.edu/~xchanges/xchanges/1.1/mcdowell.html>



means of pornography are the ways and means of male power.”<sup>715</sup> Pornographic images are more ambivalent than Dworkin’s assessment when the production element is considered. In this case, Di Prima’s production of lesbian pornographic images is not intended for the sole consumption of lesbians, but a mixed audience, which would allow the male controlling gaze that Dworkin writes about access to the images. However, I argue this does not have a transformative effect on the rhetorical potential of the scenes. The effect’s change, if any, is argued by Jill Dolan as one where the power relations are thrown into question by virtue of the participation of lesbians in the scene: “In the lesbian performance context, playing with fantasies of sexual and gender roles offers the potential for changing gender-coded structures of power. Power is not inherently male; a woman who assumes a dominant role is only malelike if the culture considers power as a solely male attribute.”<sup>716</sup> Di Prima taps into all of these complex readings and potentials at once with her explicit lesbian encounters in the book. The opening scene of *Memoirs*, with the suggested “transcoding” that Stallybrass and White see in Bakhtin, can become a moment where pornography highlights the “taking” of a woman. But the scene is also ambivalent because of the highlighting of the lower-bodily strata, making the construction of hierarchy in a normative manner difficult at best. The pornographic element in *Memoirs* can serve as a political space through this ambivalence. These spaces also serve as places to rebel against the deployment of ideological controls:

Symbolically deploying the improper body as a mode of social sedition also follows logically from the fact that the body is the very thing those forms of power under attack -- - government, religion, bourgeois manners and mores -- devote themselves to keeping ‘in its place.’ Control over the body has long been considered essential to producing an

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<sup>715</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1979), 24.

<sup>716</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 68.

orderly work force, a docile populace a passive law-abiding citizenry. Just consider how many actual laws are on the books regulating how bodies may be seen and what parts may not, what you may do with your body in public and in private, and it begins to make more sense that the out-of-control, unmannerly body is precisely what threatens the orderly operation of the status quo.<sup>717</sup>

Kipnis taps into some of the ideas of Bakhtin about the nature of the body and its role in arranging social hierarchy which is so well explained by Stallybrass and White. Focus on the lower strata call the hierarchy into question, creating a space of ambivalence where, according to Kipnis, inequities can be revealed, but according to Bakhtin, social ambivalence rises. The images in Di Prima's book create a space of such ambivalence, since they offer up front images of lower body strata in grotesque form. This highlighting of the lower strata does not just come in pornographic images, although I would argue those are the most powerful moments in the text where ambivalent spaces for consideration of subjectivity are created.

Another aspect of highlighting the lower strata is when the narrator discovers her pregnancy. This, coming near the end of the book, has the important implication of finalizing the book. However, traditionally a memoir is supposed to be a discussion of events in the past. Here, Di Prima utilizes the grotesque and focus on her body to problematize this traditional conception:

And when the full moon shone on the fire-escape again, I didn't get my period as I should have. And as the moon waned, my breasts grew and became sore, and I knew I was pregnant. And I began to put my books in boxes, and pack up the odds and ends of my life, for a whole new adventure was starting, and I had no idea where it would land me.<sup>718</sup>

Once again, focus on menstruation and the discussion of the body's changes. This is the last paragraph of *Memoirs*, and through her discussion of potential birth near the end, we expect to hear about the end of her "wild days" as a beatnik. However, the mention of "adventure" and

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<sup>717</sup> Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged*, 134.

<sup>718</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 187.

uncertainty that comes with it suggests the future is wilder than the memoirs we have just read. The fact that the narrator “had no idea” what was coming is pretty shocking considering the pages of orgy and sexual encounter that we just encountered as a recurrent theme of the book.

These moments, especially this one, highlight the connection between Kerouac and Ginsberg that Di Prima has, at least rhetorically. Here we have the limits of the body – changes coming due to pregnancy – seen as the beginning of a great adventure instead of the end of one. The pornographic scenes can be read as Ginsbergian rhetorical moments as well. The limits and disgust of the grotesque body are cherished experiences that the narrator shares in extreme detail out of joy. Kerouac’s rhetoric of *kairos* is present here as well, as the *chronos* of the moon’s phases as well as the body’s changes for coming pregnancy are contrasted with the decision to “move out” because of the opportunity pregnancy presents for adventure. Of course, Di Prima’s rhetoric utilizes these beat rhetoric theories, but for the purpose of creating a position to speak from persuasively, a feminist subjectivity. However, what Di Prima creates is a bit unusual if not very controversial from her use of the grotesque.

The prime example of this in the novel is when the narrator is raped by the father of her friend. The narrator goes home with her lover from college, and meets her lover’s family, which she finds nearly opposite of her own. She describes the father, Serge, as “like most vigorous healthy men, at least half his problem was simply that civilized life could not contain, or in any way use, his energies.”<sup>719</sup> The family travels to the beach and has a picnic where everyone drinks and eats in a celebratory mood. The narrator dozes off alone while reflecting on her love for her friend: “I was awakened by the weight of another body on my own and a tongue in my ear. I pulled my head free and turned enough to see that Serge, complete with shorts and

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<sup>719</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs*, 66.

sunglasses, was lying on top of me.”<sup>720</sup> She attempts to escape, but he catches her and she states, “I struggled silently to free myself, all the time thinking unbelievably that this was rape, that I was about to be raped:”

Serge somehow managed to free his rigid cock from his shorts, for I could feel it poling between my legs, looking for a way in. Suddenly his mouth was on my bare backside, I could feel that absurd moustache against my skin. And my fear and horror seemed ridiculous. This was Serge, poor silly Serge, who never got to screw his wife, and if he wanted to throw a fuck into me, why I might as well let him. It wasn’t going to hurt me. Not a whole lot. Anyway, it didn’t seem that I had much choice. I stopped struggling. Serge immediately sensed my acquiescence. His hands released their vice-like grip on my shoulders, and slid under my sweater, under my blouse and took hold of my breasts.<sup>721</sup>

What to make of this scene? Is it simply a giving in to the dominant male in this instance as a weak female? For Libby, this passage is another example of contradiction, in her world where “nothing sexual is unambiguous; nothing sexual is wholly destructive, and even destruction is never wholly negative.”<sup>722</sup> He interprets the above description of Serge as Di Prima’s dismissal of her attacker with “bored affection.”

What Libby misses here is the possible rhetorical uncrowning of the patriarchy through a grotesque and symbolic acquiescence. For Bakhtin, even the most serious oaths and statements of violence are used for the uncrowning or unmasking of official truth. Bakhtin gives the example of the Roman carnival, where a little boy blows out his father’s candle in a processional and cries, “Death to you, Papa!”<sup>723</sup> These cries were echoed by all at the carnival. The taking of the most serious crime and transforming it into ‘gay matter’ helps to de-legitimize the control that power or ideology has over individuals, giving them subjectivity and agency. The rhetorical

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<sup>720</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs*, 67.

<sup>721</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs*, 68.

<sup>722</sup> Libby, “Diane Di Prima,” 48.

<sup>723</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 138.

work here opens a space for the reader where typical and expected roles can be questioned and recast. Within the larger scope of beat rhetoric, the application here of the topoi of the limits of the body as well as time work together to bring ambivalence to the forefront and provide opportunity to the reader to see the expected roles of woman and man as questionable and changeable.

Looking at the scene again, Di Prima's description of Serge as "poor" and "silly" at the moment the narrator realizes that rape is inevitable are the equivalent of the extinguishing of the candle. To take Bakhtin's example a bit further, candlelight vigils are generally considered to be the most solemn and holy of rituals in which one can participate. Given that example, the seriousness of the rape scene is "extinguished" through the pity the narrator gives to her attacker. The narrator seems convinced to define herself out of the rape by re-describing the situation. Furthermore, the narrator discusses whether she should "allow" her attacker to continue. However, the discussion of her rapist as silly and harmless gives her room to discuss whether or not she should do him a favor. This totally flips the standard conception of a rape scene on its head, making the entire situation uncomfortably ambivalent. Is it a rape if the "victim" becomes someone who "does a favor" for the "attacker?"

Additionally, her characterization of Serge has the effect of disempowering him by discussing him in caricature, a quality of grotesque literature. His silly nature, his "absurd" moustache seems to kill the fear of the narrator, and she becomes in control of the situation. The unsettling of the dominance of the patriarch through caricature and grotesque imagery to transform the horror of the act into "gay matter" is the sort of rhetorical disarming that allows the narrator to occupy a position above Serge in a situation that seemed hopelessly one-sided. Serge

is something to be laughed at rather than feared. Very much like the son blowing out the candle, the typical illumination of events is darkened.

The role of laughter allows the narrator to unmask her attacker for what he truly is – unusable by society, as her earlier description indicates. Permitting him to have sex could be read as a critique against society’s prescribed roles for men and women. Providing a carnivalesque space to investigate traditional male and female roles in society allows for laughter at what normally would be considered an inevitable situation. Di Prima states, “The real horror, the nightmare in which most of us are spending our adult lives, is the deep-rooted insidious belief in the one-to-one world. The world of ‘this is my old man.’”<sup>724</sup> This scene’s ambivalence, typical of the deployment of grotesque imagery, can now open a space for the questioning of the normal hierarchy. Perhaps the scene is one that places the guilt of rape on society which forces men like Serge to behave this way – the narrator describes him as made useless by society. Of course, that this sex is unwanted, or a threat at all is merely an illusion, and her use of grotesque imagery allows for questions and critique of traditional conceptions of rape, sexuality and the roles society imposes on men and women through those assumptions.

The major question is whether or not the scene takes place in a carnivalesque atmosphere. Remember, for Bakhtin, writing as he is about Rabelais, the carnivalesque takes place symbolically, through imagery and rhetoric that invoke the “gay matter” of carnival. The rape scene occurs after a picnic which has all the characteristics of a carnivalesque feast: “There was enough to eat, and nearly everyone was intent on stuffing themselves. Conversation was jovial, Martha’s wit crackling like that wood she had gathered.”<sup>725</sup> Since this is a feasting situation, the

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<sup>724</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 109.

<sup>725</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 66.

tone must be victorious, as eating is a mode of life triumphing over death. Di Prima could give into her attacker, but in the spirit of carnival, grotesque characterization allows her to laugh at powerful problematic of victim and attacker, of who is in control of a precarious situation. At first the victim, Di Prima is able to rhetorically position Serge as the subject of a powerful and problematic society, thereby shifting the power over the situation to her through carnivalesque laughter at her attacker's physical features, abilities and personality.

I argued earlier that the deployment of the grotesque imagery and the hints at a carnivalesque situation in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* allow for the repositioning (or positioning) of a feminist subjectivity. Now I will turn to a few examples of how that subjectivity is occupied during the story by the narrator. The ambivalent spaces created by the use of the grotesque rhetoric, such as the scenes above, allow for the questioning of what is normally unquestioned. The feminist subjectivity appears in the novel as a rather traditional public address-styled argument aimed at the reader.

The first example is an invective against birth control. The narrator argues against the birth control pill by claiming, "it makes you fat, the pill does. . . gives you sore breasts, slight morning sickness, condemns you, who have avoided pregnancy, to live in a perpetual state of early pregnancy: woozy, nauseous and likely to burst into tears."<sup>726</sup> She describes the use of some alternatives to the use of the pill:

What then? What does that leave us? Leaves us ye olde-fashioned diaphragm, and we all know what a drag that is, and ye almost-as-olde creams and foams, which purportedly can be used *without* a diaphragm, and are good for exactly twenty minutes to a half hour after insertion, which means you have to work pretty fast, with one eye on the clock. They also drip and run and are unspeakably gooey, and add to the natural joyous gooeyness of lust a certain chemical texture and taste, which could, I suppose, with determination, become an acquired taste but is at least slightly unpleasant to the

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<sup>726</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 105.

uninitiated. And up you get, if *he* gets his up again, and you insert into all the gooey mess inside you some more foam. Medieval, I'd say.<sup>727</sup>

Di Prima's use of the grotesque slides into a comic and distasteful description of so-called modern contraceptive techniques. Use of adjectives such as "gooey," "foam," as well as using terms such as "uninitiated" brings birth control out of the sterile, scientific terms of approval with which they are usually associated. The characterization of these representatives of medical science in such grotesque terms reduces them to the equivalent of medieval medicine but this section should be read in context with the very next part, which is the alternative:

Or it leaves us having babies. Having babies has certain advantages, not be gainsaid. One is that you don't have to do anything about it – when you want to fuck, you just fuck. Nothing gooey, nothing tension-making. If you get knocked up, the discomfort of early pregnancy tends to last only two or three months – whereas with the pill it lasts forever. Pregnancy always makes me want to fuck more, too, and I enjoy it more. And in those last months, the delights of ingenuity are added, and many new joys discovered. As for childbirth, having a baby is a matter of laying down and having it. After the first one, nothing could be easier if you forget the rules: forget doctors, hospitals, enemas, shaving of pubic hair, forget stoicism and 'painless childbirth' – simply holler and push the damned thing out.<sup>728</sup>

Referring to the act of childbirth as "hollering" and the baby as a "dammed thing", as well as the joys of "fucking" while pregnant, serve as grotesque characterizations of an act normally discussed in clinical or highly romanticized terms. Grotesque images, as stated above, tend to provide ambivalence, where nothing is proven final or complete. This is not a polemic against birth control; it is the creation of space for alternatives to the dominant discourse of society. Grotesque images allow for the separation from official sanctioned discourse into a realm where everything is the target of laughter, which allows for the inversion of things that would not normally be questioned. In this case, we have a powerful demonstration of the grotesque as a

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<sup>727</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 106.

<sup>728</sup> Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 106.



place where feminist subjectivity can arise. The narrator is able to invert the position of medical science in two ways. First, she equates birth control methods of her time with primitive medieval techniques. Secondly, she places unassisted natural childbirth as easier as and simpler than medically supervised birth. Being pregnant is not a medical condition, but a natural one in this rhetorical turn.

Di Prima is able to answer Biesecker's question again by seeming to counterpoint the dominant rhetorics of birth control as a woman's choice and medical science. By upsetting the dominant discourse, claiming it's really no big deal to have babies, she posits a world where women can reject privilege offered by the state, the subject is urged to avoid the hospital in favor of her own devices. Pregnancy, usually considered a fragile state, is a state where sex becomes much more pleasurable and creative. And the discomfort of pregnancy is short term rather than the long term suffering brought about by birth control pills.

Additionally, the description of birthing as something that occurs at home, in typical surroundings, and in terms that are very guttural and animalistic upsets the typical stories on childbirth that are shared in the dominant discourse. These narratives, while not completely medically supported, are a part of the cultural machinery of judgment that we use to determine what makes a good mother:

According to our cultural mythos, "good" mothers deliver vaginally without pain medication, after advance planning and appropriate prenatal education. Second-best mothers submit regretfully but docilely to whatever medical interventions the doctors recommend to correct and control their unruly bodies. "Bad" mothers make other, "selfish" choices, such as giving birth at home, seeking out an epidural or a cesarean section, or attempting a vaginal birth after a previous c-section. Alternatively, "bad" mothers may just fail to demonstrate sufficient control over their births. They may labor "unproductively" and thereby "fail to progress" or otherwise fail to proceed in a timely fashion toward an uncomplicated birth. In some hospitals, women that end up receiving cesarean sections resulting in healthy babies are routinely given unsolicited literature on

grieving to help them through their feelings of failure and loss at not having successfully achieved a normative birth.<sup>729</sup>

The normative birth standards of the time of Di Prima's writing were not the same as described above in our cultural moment. The point is that what is good or bad about birth and pregnancy are determined culturally as well as medically. Di Prima reflects on her own mother's reaction at the time when she told her mother that for her first child she was going to deliver naturally:

When I had asked my mother about 'natural childbirth' she was horrified. No, she said, of course she didn't remember any of our births. She had been unconscious. She was quite self-righteous about it. Why, she wanted to know, would anybody want to experience all that? "They put me to sleep, and when I woke up, you were there." To her, as to many women of her generation, pain-free birthing was one of the marvels of modern medicine. When I told her that I wanted to be awake, to see and feel my baby come out of me, she looked at me as if I was quite demented and not a little perverse.<sup>730</sup>

It is this normative, unquestioned hierarchy that the grotesque can cast into ambivalent by making it a target of laughter. The laughter creates a space where the order of the normal can be reconsidered, if only for a short time. However, this powerful rhetorical move allows for at least the recognition of the construction of the hierarchy, and at best, it provides a space from which one can construct alternative orderings.

Comparing this section to others in the book, this section functions in the same way as earlier pornographic sections, unsettling the ideological construction of women (who are supposed to enjoy this natural and blessed event of having a child) and provides a new subjectivity. The woman is more dominant of the situation and in control of nature, deciding on where and when to give birth, and evaluating pregnancy based on the joy it provides for the raw sex act.

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<sup>729</sup> Rebecca Kukla, "Measuring Mothering" *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 1, 1 (Spring 2008): 67-90, 74.

<sup>730</sup> Diane Di Prima, *Reflections of my Life as a Woman*, 169.

But on closer evaluation, both alternatives are rather comic. There is a grotesque element present in considering a baby as the casual result of sex. The grotesque is also present when childbirth is described as “hollering” and “pushing the dammed thing out.” This placing of the lower extremities above the mind is classic grotesque inversion in the Bakhtinian sense. It is not a serious advocacy in a traditional sense, but inversion. The inversion exposes a situation where the woman is in complete control of sex and childbirth. The whole section on birth control can be read carnivalistically, placing normal hierarchy and ideology on its head to explore alternatives and laugh at all the results. However, the potential for subjectivity remains. Here the woman is in charge, an active determiner of when sex occurs (for her pleasure), pregnancy (a hidden joy for sexual pleasure) and when childbirth occurs (as an unexpected result of seeking out sex partners).

## 7.5 CONCLUSION

In examining *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, I have attempted to extrapolate Di Prima’s answer to Barbara Biesecker’s burning question – How do women place themselves rhetorically in a space designed by and suited for men? I have argued that through the use of the carnival, grotesque imagery and other forms, Di Prima creates a space where the normal hierarchy is interrupted temporarily between the reader and the world in order to laugh at ideology and dominant discourses, opening them up for interrogation. Through Bakhtinian theory, Di Prima’s semi-autobiographical text takes on a different dimension and a clearer picture of the appeal of her writing comes forth. Perhaps the scope is even unknown to Di Prima, drawing on the ancient

rituals of carnival which, according to Bakhtin, have evolved through literature over the centuries to continue to enable us to construct spaces where we can gain some agency.

*Memoirs of a Beatnik* demonstrates how the grotesque and carnivalesque, as rhetoric, can serve to make the beat rhetorical contributions a place to develop a political position. Di Prima's unsettling of ideology through use of the grotesque and carnival provide an invitational space for the reader to experience and join in laughter that questions the hold particular systems of thought have over individuals.

Di Prima's constant use of the grotesque, her carnival treatment of subjects such as rape and virginity, and her political commentary on birth control and other women's issues, go hand in hand. Injecting of carnivalistic scenes with images of the grotesque provide a way around dominant ideological constructions of female subjectivity. As she demonstrates through pornographic images as well as grotesque images of the body after sex, Di Prima's construction of subjectivity is made effective in a text where the reader sees page after page of norms interrupted. Di Prima's space is one where she can finally answer the question posited by Biesecker on ground that is not set out by dominant discourse. Since everything is up for carnivalesque laughter, the subjectivity is as well, and this provides a unique space for feminist subjectivity. The grotesque, combined with ideas of *kairos* and the body as a *topos*, create the ambivalence necessary from which to construct a place from which to speak.

In this chapter, I argued that Diane Di Prima's contribution to the beat rhetoric of *kairos* and body as *topos* was that of the grotesque and carnivalesque. In this addition, a space for feminist subjectivity can be created through the ambivalence brought out through grotesque imagery. In the final chapter, I will follow the beat rhetoric's development in another direction

by analyzing Amiri Baraka's controversial September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 poem in order to evaluate how the beat rhetoric functions today.

## **8.0 CONCLUSION: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BEAT RHETORIC**

In this work, I have argued that the Beats – notably Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac – should be considered as implicit rhetorical theorists in addition to their status as poets and writers of literature. Through my analysis of the two most famous works by these writers – *On the Road* and “Howl” – I have shown that both works could be considered contributions to a rhetorical theory that I call beat rhetoric. To establish this I have drawn on several ideas from rhetorical criticism and theory, most prominently the ideas of Kenneth Burke, who argued that rhetoric was not only persuasion, but a process of identification and division for the purpose of consubstantiality - a “coming together” of people in a special type of cooperation when people recognize similar motives between one another. In addition to Burke, I argued that Kerouac’s principal contribution to the beat rhetoric was a sense of kairos, or “appropriate timing,” which he tried to demonstrate in the style and composition of *On the Road*. Allen Ginsberg’s primary contribution was to recognize and develop a poetic that celebrates the limitations of the human body. It is through these limits that we can find new ways to reach out to others for identification and division of motives. Both offer not only a literary product, but a strong suggestion as to how such texts should be made. The purpose of both texts that I analyzed is to reach out for consubstantiality with others.

Of course Kerouac and Ginsberg are not the only Beats. I also discussed Diane Di Prima in order to assess her application of this implicit rhetoric. Although Di Prima is using the beat rhetoric as I constructed from Kerouac and Ginsberg, she also contributes to it with her sense of the grotesque. Her engagement of beat rhetoric shows how its application can be used for many purposes. In her case, she used it to suggest a place for a new feminist subjectivity, using the genre of memoir in order to craft the necessary ambivalence of rhetorical situation in order to deploy Bakhtinian senses of transgression. There are also examples of perspective by incongruity as well as representative anecdotes, specifically in Kerouac and Ginsberg, which for Burke are devices par excellence for the struggle of identification and division.

I chose these figures for several reasons. First, Ginsberg and Kerouac are arguably the most well-known and most central characters to the Beat Generation literary movement. One cannot do an analysis of any part of Beat culture without including them. Secondly, their works are canonical to the Beat Generation movement, and still continue to enjoy popularity as exemplars of Beat writing. They are also critically significant, having received attention from critics, scholars, and others who wish to comment broadly on the Beat Generation, or comment on what the proper meaning of “beat” is. Di Prima is one of the few women beat writers, and her work is significant because of that fact, as well as the fact that she uses the rhetoric a bit after the establishment of what I am calling the key texts of beat rhetorical theory.

However, this focus on Ginsberg and Kerouac effaces other contributors to the beat movement. As a broad social movement, the Beat Generation had many participants, many of whom wrote within the Beat rhetoric as I outlined it here, and many of whom were published.<sup>731</sup> There are also numerous writers who were inspired by the beat movement who in turn,

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<sup>731</sup> See Ann Charters, ed. *Beat Down to Your Soul*. (New York: Penguin, 2001).

contributed to the movement's extension into other movements in the future. The attention I give to Ginsberg and Kerouac is the beginning of the sort of attention that should be given to the many figures in the Beat Generation to see what contributions they have for the larger Beat rhetorical theory that I have sketched here.

In this conclusion I would like to gesture in that direction by offering some cursory analysis of the effectiveness of the Beat rhetoric in the modern era. I will analyze Amiri Baraka's poem "Somebody Blew Up America," a poem that was written, performed and published within a month of the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. I argue that Baraka's poem can be read as a manifestation of the Beat rhetorical theory, and an attempt to, as the best Beat rhetoric does, argue for how to see political events in general as well as how to see and understand the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The Baraka poem is significant because it led to a state-wide controversy in New Jersey, where Baraka held the post of poet laureate – a post that the state legislature would eventually eliminate due to Baraka's poem.

The New Jersey Poet Laureate controversy, as I term it, is not just controversial, but germane to my rhetorical study. First, as a public controversy, there is an ample amount of discourse from media, the public, and from the politicians that naturally arises. Most of the discourse surrounding the controversy is definitional – that is, it attempts to argue that Baraka violated the norms of proper poetry, so therefore cannot be considered a poet, thereby failed to uphold the post of poet laureate. Secondly, the arguments in the public discourse about Baraka's poem tend toward equating his "sick" poetry as a natural extension of a "sick" mind and/or body that produced it. This development might indicate an opposite audience reaction in the light of my arguments that the beat rhetoric uses notions of consubstantiality and kairos, as well as comic framing. As I will show in this conclusion, elements of the beat rhetoric are present in Baraka's



poem, and the reaction to them show just how transgressive these elements are. What I find in my analysis of the controversy is a moment of discursive policing - an attempt to explain away, remove, or eliminate the transgressions of the normative hierarchy found in Baraka's poem.

Finally, there is a larger discussion of the purpose of poetry in the political sphere that is played out in the media of the crisis. This discourse I believe can be examined to see how successful the beat rhetoric is in the modern era. The results are fairly unsurprising, as the dominant hierarchy struggles to find any way to "discount" rhetorical strategy that unseats the normative paradigm.

## **8.1 AMIRI BARAKA AND BEAT RHETORIC**

Amiri Baraka, known as LeRoi Jones for the first part of his career, was influenced directly by the beat poets in his early work. "Jones's early artistic influences show that he was located not only outside a black artistic/poetic community but also outside of a black poetic tradition. For the most part, Jones was not part of a black literary tradition. Rather, his early poetry reflected his bohemian sentiments."<sup>732</sup> Instead of writing about race issues, Jones's first poetry focuses on his own reflections about his day to day life. His first published work, a letter to the editor, was in defense of Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation after they had been attacked by Norman Podhoretz in the pages of Commentary magazine. In Jones's reply, Jerry Watts finds much in what Jones did not say, attempting to avoid admitting his unfamiliarity with Harlem being from

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<sup>732</sup> Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 48.

the middle class himself. What is revealing from Watts's analysis is the reasoning why Jones moved to Greenwich Village, which was to get writing instruction:

What Jones evidently could not admit was that he had come to Greenwich Village to gain access to a community that could and would help him master his craft as a writer. Instead of defending his intellectual and personal freedom, he hid his artistic motivations behind the deceptive claim that his flight to the Village was an escape from the black bourgeoisie. If Jones had revealed his reasons for moving to the Village, Podhoretz and others might have regarded them as a confession of estrangement from the black community. And such an interpretation would not have been completely wrong. Living in Greenwich Village was Jones's way of distancing himself from a life governed by bourgeois mores.<sup>733</sup>

Watts argues that if Jones admitted to a desire to learn to write for class reasons it would destroy his credibility. His answer to Podhoretz about the value of the Beat Generation would have lost all of its steam if Jones were not immediately connected to writing or producing art for the betterment of the black community. The fact that Jones realized this and crafted a rhetorically savvy response to Podhoretz indicates that Jones was very much attuned to and aware of the position attributed to him due to his race. Although Baraka primarily saw categories in terms of economic class, he realized not everyone sees these divisions this way. His attitude about his position as African-American was therefore fluid, at least at first - "As a bohemian, Jones viewed himself as a member of a deviant subculture outside the tolerated boundaries of the dominant white society. For Jones, 'white America' was an ethos, not simply a place where whites were found in large numbers."<sup>734</sup> As an ethos, perhaps most well defined in this case as a "dwelling," Jones felt that he could divide from that ethos by associating with others who also wanted to be outside of the dominant culture.

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<sup>733</sup> Watts, 36.

<sup>734</sup> Watts, 37.

This situation is far too complicated to cover in full detail here, but some highlights of the difficult position Baraka found himself help to illuminate the importance of the beat rhetoric in his work. In the beat environment of Greenwich Village, Baraka found his social status inverted from mainstream American society. “Blacks were considered by the Beats as heroic precisely because they were seen as the true antithesis to decadent bourgeois society. This romanticization of the black lumpen ignored the possibility that their tenuous socioeconomic situation might not have been a conscious rejection of bourgeois society but vice versa.”<sup>735</sup> Praised and admired for being marginalized, blacks in the beat generation had the unenviable position of being admired for being oppressed and excluded from opportunities. This led to the awkward situation of being expected to, in Burkean terms, “identify with the division” offered by the dominant society. Additionally, Baraka’s negotiation of these different social positions influenced his view of social structure, perhaps moving him toward a more fluid interpretation of human relations. As Walton Muyamba argues, following the work of Tejumola Olaniyan, culture and identity are expressed in a fluid, contingent manner that Baraka picks up on and includes in his poetry. “Since the culture has no essential basis, neither do the identities that develop from engagements with it. Just as the culture is rootless and ever in flux, so too is the process of identification. In Jones/Baraka’s case the best way to articulate these cultural and personal revolutions, how to imply these changes, is by turning jazz improvisation into a literary and cultural philosophy, into a way of stating poetically the ‘transgressive and transitional truth’ of black identity.”<sup>736</sup> Muyamba believes that for Baraka, the nature of culture, society, and the self is a negotiation

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<sup>735</sup> Watts, 39.

<sup>736</sup> Walton Muyumba, “Improvising over the Changes: Improvisation as Intellectual and Aesthetic Practice in the Transitional Poems of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka” *College Literature* 34, 1 (Winter 2007): 23-51, 25.

based upon the lack of a totalizing, hegemonic cultural story. “For Jones/Baraka the openness of culture (and its traditions) remains possible only when the structural incompleteness of the cultural fabric, its as yet unwoven threads are exploited through renewal ad infinitum. This cultural openness creates the space for the antagonistic but cooperative transactions between the self and the culture.”<sup>737</sup> Therefore, the articulation of identification and cultural belief is as crucial as that belief — without the articulation, the belief fades into obscurity. A place must be maintained for the articulation of the self, and this space provides a place for identification and division, if we put it in Burkean terms. For Baraka’s work, it suggests the need for rhetorical posturing, as the need to always be “proving opposites” in order to find moments of consubstantiality with others are primary to determining both identity and culture.

Of course, Baraka changed his name from LeRoi Jones in order to identify (using one of the most powerful symbols available to someone, that of name) with his changing interests and connections to black nationalism and pan-African movements. In more recent years, Baraka identifies as a Marxist thinker, and believes that “the goal of the revolutionary poet is to write poems that educate and intensify the class consciousness of the working class. To do this, the revolutionary poet must develop a writing style that is accessible to the masses. Such a poet is the creator of a popular mass art.”<sup>738</sup> In examining Baraka’s work on jazz criticism, Lee B. Brown observes that the many changes in Baraka’s jazz criticism over the years can be explained by understanding Baraka as attuned to situational fluidity. “It is arguable, from Baraka’s point of view, that — while hewing to basic convictions — he sees his discourse as responsive to a

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<sup>737</sup> Muyumba, 31.

<sup>738</sup> Watts, 456.

shifting picture.”<sup>739</sup> Brown’s view is one that highlights the importance of rhetorical adaptation of ideas given the circumstances. Even with so many political interests and changes through the years of Baraka’s focus, interests, and style, Watts is forced to conclude that the early beat sensibility is the dominant influence in Baraka’s work: “Baraka appears to have returned to the approach to society that he took during his Beat bohemian days. It may be crazy to believe that Baraka has returned to his bohemian roots, but I don’t think he ever left.”<sup>740</sup> The orientation toward society that Baraka kept through his work could contain the same theoretical assumptions and rhetorical *topoi* that both Kerouac and Ginsberg used.

Jones held a close relationship with Allen Ginsberg for most of his life and identified with the beats because “they are outside the mainstream of American vulgarity.”<sup>741</sup> The association of the mainstream with the vulgar, and the beats as the ones that he wants to identify with suggest that in Baraka’s work there may be elements of the beat rhetoric present. For example, Watts argues that Baraka is a radical intellectual, “precisely because he still has a normative vision of society that is neither hegemonic nor realizable in the existing political-economic parameters of the social order.”<sup>742</sup> Compare this observation to those of Osteriker and her argument that both Blake and Ginsberg should be read as prophetic since they use their rhetoric as a way of moving others toward envisioning and realizing that world.<sup>743</sup> Should Baraka be read as a prophetic poet? I won’t seek to answer such a broad question here, but what I

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<sup>739</sup> Lee B. Brown, “Marsalis and Baraka: An Essay in Comparative Cultural Discourse” *Popular Music* 23, 3 (October 2004): 241-255, 252.

<sup>740</sup> Watts, 479.

<sup>741</sup> Charlie Reilly, ed. *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 110.

<sup>742</sup> Watts, 469.

<sup>743</sup> Osteriker, Alicia. “Blake, Ginsberg, Madness, and the Prophet as Shaman” in Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt, Eds. *William Blake and the Moderns* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982).

will engage is the idea that perhaps similar rhetorical moves exist between two poets who were close friends and who both wanted an alternative world and campaigned for it through their work. I offer my rhetorical criticism of “Somebody Blew Up America” in order to point to this beat influence, as well as identify moments of beat rhetoric at play in the work.

## 8.2 THE SEPTEMBER 11TH POEM

Amiri Baraka watched the attack on the World Trade Center from the third floor of his Newark, New Jersey home on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. By October 1<sup>st</sup>, Baraka completed his poem about the event, “Somebody Blew Up America.”<sup>744</sup> The 226-line poem was well described in the *New York Observer*: “The press accounts of ‘Somebody Blew Up America’ have focused on the nuttiness of a few of its 226 lines and thereby overlooked the fact that the poem is hilarious and scabrous. A rant about an unnamed group called ‘Who’ – basically the conspiracy of white men who deliver suffering to everyone else – it is full of song and surprise.”<sup>745</sup> This account of Baraka’s poem is unusual for the news media of the time.

By the time of the publication of the *New York Observer* article, Baraka’s poem was at the center of a controversy in the State of New Jersey. The New Jersey Anti-Defamation League (ADL) attacked the poem one week after Baraka read it at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo. The ADL argued explicitly that Baraka’s words were the root of the entire system of violence that made September 11<sup>th</sup> style attacks possible: “What 9/11 served to

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<sup>744</sup> Philip Weiss, “If Poet Amiri Baraka Becomes Ex-Laureate, Is It Bad for Writers?,” *New York Observer*, October 21 2002.

<sup>745</sup> Weiss, 2002.

underscore is that words of bigotry lead to acts of bigotry which in turn lead to the kind of murder that occurred on 9/11.”<sup>746</sup> This statement by the ADL was written in a letter to then Governor Jim McGreevey asking for Baraka’s removal from the position of poet laureate. The controversy filled the news for almost three years – even appearing in articles reporting on Baraka’s activities after he was no longer poet laureate of New Jersey.<sup>747</sup> How could one poem cause such controversy? Normally, a poet cannot command two years worth of media attention in mainstream newspapers over an entire book of poetry. This is the question asked by Piotr Gwiazda in his examination of Baraka’s poem: “My purpose is to ask why the same kind of political position we are accustomed to seeing in the pages of mainstream and left-leaning publications such as the *Nation*, the *New Republic* or the *New York Review of Books* becomes the target of condemnation when it is presented in the form of a disturbing, difficult poem composed by an African American poet who has an antagonistic relationship with ‘the American way of life.’”<sup>748</sup> Gwiazda, like me, is interested in questions of appropriate discourse, and how and why a text labeled poetry that makes political claims is vilified, while those same claims can be made in a political journal and receive little to no public outcry. Part of the reason, he argues, is that the form is largely ignored in this controversy, which allows for the offensive reading:

Apart from the failure of many of its critics to read "Somebody Blew Up America" in its entirety, another troubling aspect of the controversy over the poem is the fact that almost none of the commentators who spoke about the poem publicly took it for what it really is—a poem. And what does it mean to call "Somebody Blew Up America" a poem? For one thing, it means to pay attention not only to what it says but also to how it says what it says. It means to be alert to the discursive and formal elements that produce its unique configuration and to recognize how these elements project, identify, or at least call forth a

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<sup>746</sup> Weiss, 2002.

<sup>747</sup> Tony Ortega, "Poetry Slam: Now We Know Why a Librarian Was Tight-Lipped About Her Celebrity Guest Speaker," *Kansas City Pitch*, April 22 2004.

<sup>748</sup> Piotr Gwiazda, "The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics: Amiri Baraka’s ‘Somebody Blew Up America.’” *Contemporary Literature* 45, 3 (Autumn 2004): 460-485, 468.

particular kind of audience. The following remarks are intended as just the first step toward a discussion of Baraka's piece as a constructed utterance whose rhetorical strategies exist not only for the articulation of the poet's political agenda but also for a calculated aesthetic effect.<sup>749</sup>

Giwazda points out the importance of recognizing the utterance as a “poem,” but somewhat naively complains that it is the fault of the audience of critics to not see the text for “what it really is.” Such statements seem to be at odds with the wink toward constitutive rhetoric, which recognizes “the discursive background of social life” and that people are always “interpolated” into particular audiences, not roaming ontological subjects.<sup>750</sup> Mentioning that Baraka’s utterance was to “call forth a particular kind of audience” suggests an understanding of the interpolated nature of subjects and audiences. However, the idea of the poem as a constructed moment meant for articulating both audience and meaning is one that opens the poem to rhetorical criticism.

Baraka instigated large changes in state law, national controversy, and generated a large number of newspaper articles that speculated on the poem’s meaning, Baraka’s politics, and the relation between his past poems and his modern political sensibilities. Part of the reason for this, I will argue, is due to the I will examine newspaper stories from September of 2002 through April of 2004, all of which report on the poem, Baraka’s defense of it, or the actions of the ADL and the State of New Jersey to force Baraka to retract the poem, apologize for it, or resign from the position of poet laureate. Gwaizda points out accurately that the primary complaint about the poem -- that it is anti-Semitic — ignores a framing that questions “rhetorical privilege,” that is, to speak from a position of totalizing objectivity, and lists a litany of violent acts in order to raise

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<sup>749</sup> Giwazda, 471.

<sup>750</sup> Maurice Charland “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, 2 (May 1987): 133-150, 147.



questions about a common denominator.<sup>751</sup> The question I address in the conclusion is to examine the response in the media to the poem and from that attempt an assessment of what elements of beat rhetoric are present in the poem.

The way I will proceed will be through an analysis of the rhetorical framing and language use of the media surrounding this poem, and how the media implicitly offered a reading of Baraka's poem through their choices in language. I argue this analysis of language could be a good barometer of the success of the Beat rhetoric project as I have outlined it above. Additionally, if the reader of the newspaper never picks up the poem, the reader might have this story as the only account of the poem available. The media offers a reductionist read of Baraka's poem, often extending this read to account for Baraka's political beliefs, as well as limiting the power and scope of poetry as a media itself. In these ways we can easily see that the media still views the poetic and the political as distinctly separate categories of discourse. In the Beat rhetoric, upon which I argue Baraka bases this poem, the distinction of political and poetic is intentionally blurred in order to speak differently about being in the world, or to permit a place for those who are different to speak. In this case I argue that the media's intense demarcation of the "proper" role of poetic discourse indicates that there is a clear threat to the discursive order from poetry like Baraka's and it must be quickly policed or silenced to make sure this discourse is fully discounted as inappropriate.

In the case of "Somebody Blew Up America," no overarching critical theory seems to fully explain what transpired in the battle over the meaning of this poem. I will proceed with an analysis of the poem's textual elements, then move to how the poem was "read" by the media, and in turn, suggested a unilateral reading to the public. Although the public had access to the

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<sup>751</sup> Gwaizda, 471-2.

poem through the internet – for which some newspapers published the URL – I will argue that the repetition of four lines from the poem again and again in the mass media narrowed possibilities, over time, of reading this poem as anything but offensive, and anti-Semitic. The possibilities of alternative readings of Baraka's poem were few, and when suggested, they dismissed the poem as meaningless, silly or trite, and not as a potential site of alternative rhetorical considerations. It will be my claim that Baraka's poem, like the models of beat rhetoric examined in earlier chapters, offers an alternative rhetorical model to the one of the dominant society. Using elements of the body, kairos and the comic frame, Baraka attempts, like Di Prima, to articulate another position from which to communicate about events. For Di Prima, the issue was the subjectivity of women. For Baraka, writing as he is from his perspective of international Marxism, it might be capitalism as the key factor he wants to highlight in his poem.

Through my analysis I want to make it clear that I am not accusing the media of explicitly attacking Baraka or deliberately representing his poetry or views for the purposes of a political attack. Alternatively, I would like to suggest that the media, fully well-intentioned to report the stories to the readers, used phrasings and words that carried with them particular assumptions about the relationship of poetry to the poet, the location of meaning, and the power of the poem to influence thought and belief. Critically analyzing the way the media represented this controversy is a unique opportunity to gain insight into common assumptions within daily natural language that frame the limits of poetry. Examining this discourse will point out how and where particular uses of quotes of the poem, descriptions and other attributions of meaning offer a singular reading of the poem to the reader. From this, the media also frame a place for poetry that is decidedly outside of the political, limiting the potential of almost any poem to be

read as political discourse. First I offer my own critical reading of Baraka's poem, "Somebody Blew Up America."

### 8.3 "SOMEBODY" AS ALTERNATIVE RHETORIC

At the start of this work, I made some overtures toward the examination of the discourses known as "poetry" and "rhetoric." I argued that the relationship between these discourses has always been close and intertwined. The shared relationship between these two different ways of speaking, thinking and perceiving the world is exactly what the Beats were after. In the previous chapters I argued that both Kerouac and Ginsberg offer implicit alternative rhetorics through their major works. Both of these writers were seeking alternatives to the rhetorics offered by mainstream society. Both contribute elements to the beat rhetoric, notably a focus on the body as a commonplace, and the kairotic. Amiri Baraka takes this tradition of the Beat rhetoric and applies it to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 as an exigence to produce a poem that not only addresses the tragedy, but evaluates the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> comparatively against the perspective of a nation that perpetuated tragedy through most of its history toward people of color.

With this shared relationship in mind, examining Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" reveals a host of various sites of meaning generated by the blur of the traditional provinces of rhetoric and poetry. Starting at the beginning of the poem we find the speaker addressing the reader in a very straightforward and traditional manner:

(All thinking people  
oppose terrorism  
both domestic

& international...  
But one should not  
be used  
To cover the other)

They say its some terrorist, some  
barbaric

A Rab, in  
Afghanistan  
It wasn't our American terrorists  
It wasn't the Klan or the Skin heads  
Or the them that blows up nigger  
Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row  
It wasn't Trent Lott  
Or David Duke or Giuliani  
Or Schundler, Helms retiring

It wasn't  
the gonorrhea in costume  
the white sheet diseases  
That have murdered black people  
Terrorized reason and sanity  
Most of humanity, as they pleases<sup>752</sup>

The opening parenthetical statement seems almost like a dedication or epigraph for the poem as a whole. It could also be read as announcing the intent of the poem – it speaks in a general sense of what is not to be done, i.e. cover up one form of terrorism with another, and hints at the specifics of 9/11 and the responses to it in the weeks following the attack – how all thinking people oppose terrorism, but large acts of terror can be used to cover up the daily terrorist environment the government could perpetrate against its own citizens. The parenthesis, as “artifice” in Bernstein’s terminology, resist a reading of the statement as a direct utterance from the speaker of the poem.<sup>753</sup> Instead, the phrase resists an easy reading, liminally floating

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<sup>752</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Somebody Blew up America* [HTML] (October 2001 2001 [cited December 7 2005]); available from <http://www.amiribaraka.com/blew.html>.

<sup>753</sup> Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 10.

between being seen as an assumption to keep in mind while reading, or as a foundational belief of the author – a purpose for writing the poem.

The next stanza begins attempting to account for 9/11 through the common “they say” figure of speech that denotes some authority, the media as a whole, or common discussions overheard in public places – and sometimes all three at once. This trope’s use here indicates to the reader that popular media and public opinion are behind the view that an “A Rab” committed the act of terror, as opposed to the long list of “nots” which include most Republican and conservative high-profile American political figures. The speech here is stylized into a mocking of white vernacular American discourse. The parenthetical opening of the poem warns us that one form of terrorism should not cover another, but after this exhaustive list of those who might be considered the “usual suspects” of violence, we start to wonder about their culpability in “blowing up America.” The beginning stanzas have a palpable sense of distance - that some unnamed “A Rab” in Afghanistan blew up America instead of the long list of violent, offensive and hateful people who are in our own backyard. Baraka is already moving toward an identification of America as something beyond homogenous, unified, and wholesome.

Into the third stanza, the “not” is expanded from hate groups and politicians who are conservative to the idea of racism and racist violence on a general level. The continuous discussion in terms of the negation – the “not” serves a purpose here that is also along the lines of artifice, but in the vein of artifice that assists absorption through difficulty. Along with breaking up the word “A Rab,” the continuous conversation in the terms of the negative allow for a reading of dissatisfaction with the accounts for terrorism provided in the status quo. Through its content as well as the form, the poem points toward dissatisfaction as the meaning of these accounts – the large and overwhelming lists of American terrorists and acts of terror are a

stark contrast to the generic “A Rab” who is only described as being from Afghanistan. There is also a bit of surprise in the rhetoric of the speaker, expressing a sense of dismay that the “white sheet diseases” didn’t perpetrate this crime, since they are comfortable and familiar with slaughter. The transition between racist crime and the 9/11 attacks is non-existent for the speaker. Immediate association between the two events is assumed, creating another site of artifice that works toward absorbing the meaning of dissatisfaction with the 9/11 accounts.

Looking further into the poem, we find the next section moves us into the main body of the work:

They say (who say? Who do the saying  
Who is them paying  
Who tell the lies  
Who in disguise  
Who had the slaves  
Who got the bus out the Bucks

Who got fat from plantations  
Who genocided Indians  
Tried to waste the Black nation

Who live on Wall Street  
The first plantation  
Who cut your nuts off  
Who rape your ma  
Who lynched your pa<sup>754</sup>

In this portion, the trope of “they say” is again repeated, but immediately interrupted with an open parenthesis. “Who say? who do the sayin?” directly asks to know the source of the “they” who were allowed to proclaim who, and by association, who was not, responsible for the terror attacks. At this point, the authority of the common account for 9/11 is rejected, and the poem attempts to find out who is doing the speaking. Almost instantly, the question diverges to the

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<sup>754</sup> Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America.”

issue of who is allowed to speak, and then to the account of slavery, racism and genocide in American history. The structure of this section is, in argumentative terms, an enthymeme, described by Aristotle as, “a type of deduction” but more informal – the enthymeme relies on the “commonplaces” or common sense, the familiar, of the audience. Aristotle defines the commonplace as “notions possessed by everybody” in the audience.<sup>755</sup> The audience here is complicated. Baraka’s use of phrases like “who lynched your pa” seem to indicate a black audience. At the same time the perpetrators also “genocided Indians” and live “on Wall Street/the first plantation.” Baraka is not merely constructing a black speaker for a black audience, but is attempting to constitute a line of connection between all these atrocities. The focus on bodily violence - rape and castration - also seeks to unify the audience as people. Baraka though does highlight black violence with references to “plantations” and “lynching.” The entire stanza seeks to make the line between terrorists and victims unclear, and helps unsettle the easy binary between the terms. The stanza looks like a common enthymeme, but works in a very complicated manner - blurring the nature and understanding of terrorist violence while clearly listing the most horrific injustices imaginable.

In this way, enthymemes are powerful arguments as they call on the audience to actively participate rather than passively receive the address. Comparatively, there is much in common here with Bernstein’s notion of the relation of artifice and absorption when they work together in a poem – the construction allows the reader deeper absorption of meaning through interrupting the “easy” assimilation of the text.

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<sup>755</sup> Aristotle, "On Rhetoric," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Princeton/Bollingen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2154-5.

Baraka does not directly indict anyone for the attacks on 9/11 but much more effectively has the audience, or reader, jump to particular points in common knowledge by carefully using words that hint toward the conclusion. The skillful construction of these enthymemes has the reader jumping to one group or the next to attempt to assess blame for these atrocities. Some, like the lines “Who cut your nuts off?/ Who rape your ma?” seem like open ended questions, but the term “lynch” and its racist connotations cannot be missed by the reader. However, the tense of the second line, using the term “rape” along side the past tense “lynched” once again allows for dissatisfaction in that meaning as the rape is, apparently, presently occurring or ongoing.

This is the style of the remainder of the poem, with the exception of the final two stanzas. Almost every line begins with the interrogation of “WHO” and lists atrocities extending from hate crimes, racism, the Holocaust, imperialism, class exploitation, poverty, colonialism and the excesses of global capitalism. Although it is not clear who the “who” is, the structure of the poem leads the reader to jump to particular conclusions as certain points only to disrupt those assumptions with the next stanza:

who try to put DuBois in Jail  
Who frame Rap Jamil al Amin, Who frame the Rosenbergs, Garvey,  
The Scottsboro Boys, The Hollywood Ten

Who set the Reichstag Fire?  
Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed  
Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers  
To stay home that day  
Why did Sharon stay away ?  
/  
Who, Who, Who/<sup>756</sup>

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<sup>756</sup> Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America.”



This section of the poem includes the four lines of the poem that would be repeated continuously in every story dealing with the controversy of Baraka's poem and his defense. In this section, I add only the four lines above it and the line immediately following as evidence of the inability to close the question "Who blew up America?" The question the poem poses suggests in a simple read that the answer is forthcoming, but the artifice and absorption of the poem, along with the skillful use of what Aristotle would call the "commonplace" or shared meanings through enthymeme. This section would be cited as the evidence of Baraka's anti-Semitism in the poem, and would eventually not only lead to calls for his dismissal, but the elimination of his job in entirety. Directly above the lines about Sharon and the Israeli World Trade Center employees, Baraka lists a variety of political trials, framings, and set ups for the reader to conclude are all for the benefit of the same group. The group must be extremely diverse to both benefit from the framing of Marcus Garvey and his subsequent prison time, and the indictment of the Hollywood Ten, under investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s. This diversity of accusation to an invisible, temporally fluid, and timeless enemy is completely contradicted in the next line, where Israel is suggested to have foreknowledge of the attack. Once again, the reader, through the contradiction they provide themselves through their own enthymemes, arrives at dissatisfaction.

Elements of the beat rhetoric are present in the poem, most notably the sense of kairos that I analyzed in Kerouac's work. The kairotic as deployed in Baraka's poem is a bit different qualitatively, but the basic sense is the same - to privilege connections that interrupt linear, chronological time. Here is one example from the middle section of the poem:

Who/ Who / Who/

Who stole Puerto Rico

Who stole the Indies, the Philipines, Manhattan

Australia & The Hebrides  
Who forced opium on the Chinese

Who own them buildings  
Who got the money  
Who think you funny  
Who locked you up  
Who own the papers

Who owned the slave ship  
Who run the army

Who the fake president  
Who the ruler  
Who the banker

Who/ Who/ Who/<sup>757</sup>

Instead of a linear, logical progression of history, Baraka offers a fragmented view placing “slave ships” within one line of “who the fake president” — an obvious jab at President George W. Bush and the controversy surrounding his election in 2000. Baraka’s rhetoric of *kairos* here points at connections between the owners of buildings, slave ships, and papers that might not be apparent if one approached them in the terms of narrative, chronological history. “Who stole Manhattan” and “forced opium on the Chinese” would never be connected to terrorism, or even associated as the same act normally. But Baraka’s kairotic re-arrangement of the elements suggests a much larger terrorist conspiracy than was imaginable at the start of the poem.

As it reaches its conclusion, the poem becomes even more overwhelming. The final stanza of the poem offers no answer to this never ending litany of questions, only the frustrated result of such compounded, copious accusations:

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<sup>757</sup> Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America.”

Who is the ruler of Hell?  
Who is the most powerful

Who you know ever  
Seen God?

But everybody seen  
The Devil

Like an Owl exploding  
In your life in your brain in your self  
Like an Owl who know the devil  
All night, all day if you listen, Like an Owl  
Exploding in fire. We hear the questions rise  
In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell  
Who and Who and WHO (+) who who ^  
Whooooo and Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!<sup>758</sup>

The conclusion of the poem keeps the entire proposition open, again providing no answers, only the sound of the question “who” like “the whistle of a crazy dog” or an “owl exploding in fire.”<sup>759</sup> The poem’s conclusion appears to be that the questions will continue to be asked about 9/11, but additionally they perhaps indicate the “insanity” that result from such investigations. The dog’s crazy whistle indicates insanity directly, while the flaming owl indicates a self-destructiveness or destructiveness that is all-consuming from asking these questions. This could possibly point as well to the intensity of the questions, and the desire to know the truth about these events. Most importantly, the conclusion of the poem indicates that these questions will always be asked, and are always around us. Like the “whistle of a crazy dog” the questions howl in neighborhoods across America. Once the oversimplification of the definition of “terrorist” is

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<sup>758</sup> Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America.”

<sup>759</sup> Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America.”

investigated, the questions become all-consuming, as the owl “exploding in fire.” In the end we might understand the questions as important, but unanswerable, because not one person, group or country is responsible for these atrocities. The poem exposes the insane quest to assess blame to one individual or group and suggests, as the parenthetical introduction warns, that such accusation allows for atrocity.

But for the mass media, these questions were either irrelevant or uninteresting, and four lines about Israeli workers taking September 11<sup>th</sup> off, as well as the line about five Israelis filming the attacks became the sum total meaning of not only this poem, but of Baraka’s inexcusable anti-Semitism, and would lead to the elimination of his job. Investigation of media accounts of the poem might provide some clues as to why.

#### **8.4 CONTAINING AND CONSTRAINING “SOMEBODY”**

Baraka’s poem was initially read on September 19<sup>th</sup> of 2002 at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Stanhope, New Jersey. Eight days later, Governor James E. McGreevey announced publicly that he was requesting Baraka’s resignation as New Jersey poet laureate. Spokesman Kevin Davitt stated, “The language used in Mr. Baraka’s recent poem could be interpreted as stating that Israelis were forewarned of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. Mr. Baraka should clarify the intent of his language, apologize for any potential misinterpretation of his language, and resign.”<sup>760</sup> The article quoted from Baraka’s poem the offending lines: “‘Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed,’ read a line from the poem, which was cited by the

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<sup>760</sup> Peter Saharko, "Governor Calls for State's Poet Laureate to Resign," *Associated Press Wire*, September 27, 2002.

*Jewish Standard* weekly newspaper. ‘Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers to stay home that day? Why did Sharon stay away?’”<sup>761</sup> This quote is followed by the line: “Some Jewish groups have characterized the poem as anti-Semitic.”<sup>762</sup> In response to this reading of these few lines, Harris and Neilsen observe, “The fact that the anaphoric structure of the poem with its interrogating litany of *Who’s* begins by raising the question of the status of the utterance, by throwing into question the political and rhetorical ground on which the saying takes place, would seemingly make more difficult some of the charges that have been levelled against the poem, but that would require an actual reading of the poem.”<sup>763</sup>

This first article somewhat sets the tone for media coverage of the Baraka controversy through several major assumptions: First, that he is, in some respect, directly represented by the utterances in the poem; second, that he is responsible for the way those utterances are interpreted; third, these four lines from the poem are indicative of the content of the entire poem. The media leave the Governor’s office claim that Baraka should “correct” the “misinterpretation” of his language and apologize for it unchallenged in the initial months of the controversy. By September 27<sup>th</sup>, the controversy was characterized as initiated by “Some Jewish groups.”<sup>764</sup> By October 7<sup>th</sup>, only a few days later, the poem was described in the media as “widely criticized.”<sup>765</sup> No citation to other articles is given, nor is there any explanation as to what widely criticized means. Only the ADL and the Governor’s office are cited as sources of

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<sup>761</sup> Saharko.

<sup>762</sup> Saharko.

<sup>763</sup> William J. Harris and Aldon Lynn Nielsen, “Somebody Blew off Baraka” *African American Review* 37, 2/3: 183-187, 184.

<sup>764</sup> Saharko.

<sup>765</sup> Thomas J Lueck, “Mcgreevey Seeks Power to Dismiss State Poet,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2002.

controversy, asking Baraka to resign and, in absence of that, generating the legal authority to remove him from the position of poet laureate.

On September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002, The New York Times declared, “Political turmoil has found the last virgin turf in New Jersey public life: the poet laureate.”<sup>766</sup> Although missing a large portion of literary history by claiming that the position of state endorsed poet remained to this point void of political concerns, the article attempts to account for the controversial poem by presenting Baraka himself as controversial and political, not poetry. “Poets are usually ignored, not censored,” the article claims after describing how the Governor of New Jersey has no power to fire, remove or replace the poet laureate.<sup>767</sup>

The article then sets about the task of normalizing the controversial within Baraka’s politics. “The artist formerly known as LeRoi Jones has had so many phases – Greenwich Village beatnik, Harlem black nationalist, bloodied warrior of the 1967 Newark riots, Marxist, critic of Newark mayors – that he seemed unfazed by the rocky start of his laureate phase.”<sup>768</sup> Baraka, in this light, is a creature whose nature is radical change. Reasons for the changes are absent, as are any explanation as to what a “laureate phase” would be, since it is markedly different than the other clearly radical incarnations of Baraka. His nature is to be radical and controversial, as this event “unfazed” him – the implication being that since poetry is crossing the world of politics, it should be a big deal. Also, it should not be missed that calling Baraka “the artist formerly known as” is a not so subtle reference to Prince – conflating Baraka’s name change with the name changes of a pop music artist who’s work is dead center in the realm of

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<sup>766</sup> Matthew Purdy, "Our Towns; New Jersey's Unrepentant Poet of Outrage and Indignation," *New York Times*, September 29, 2002.

<sup>767</sup> Purdy, "Our Towns."

<sup>768</sup> Purdy, "Our Towns."

big business entertainment. Making the association between Baraka and Prince also associates their work – poetry becomes like pop music.

Near the end of the article, poetry is stripped of political content save Baraka's "unusual" occupation: "This standoff between governor and poet is surprising in a state with a poetic tradition that includes Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, and a Turnpike rest stop named for Joyce Kilmer. But Mr. Baraka said, superfluously, that he dislikes poetry 'as decoration.' He likes strong stuff that rattles people. 'If they resent what I'm saying, I can resent their resentment,' he said, 'but I'm not going to censor them.'"<sup>769</sup> An almost unbelievable paragraph creates a distinction between Whitman, Ginsberg and Kilmer as "decorative" poetics that would never be politically controversial as Baraka is. These are the folks that highway rest stops honor; they don't get into fights with the governor's office. This construction of Baraka as the site of controversy, not poetry, allowed the media to construct the writer as completely responsible for his or her creations. If the creation goes wrong, then it is not a question of reading but of production. Therefore, the artist has done something wrong and must account for the issue. This is reinforced by the media's construction of poetry as something in league with society, normal, and innocuous. What is so fascinating is how easily the media frames the controversy with Baraka on the outside of "normal" poetry, and rarely, if ever, does the media even consider that Baraka's work might be conservative – in the sense that poetry has always attempted to offer new and controversial perspectives, and has always been a site of contested meaning. But within the frame provided by the media, the entire experience of the poem on the whole cannot be encountered. As Dietram A. Scheufele observes, media framing is offered by journalists to quickly make sense of a story based upon accepted schemas and frames of

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<sup>769</sup> Purdy, "Our Towns."

reference provided by the audience.<sup>770</sup> This complicated arrangement of meaning is what Baraka tries to highlight as the subject of his poem, but it becomes reduced to the one claim against it.

The ease of this move is also assisted by the refusal of the media to quote any other lines from “Somebody Blew Up America” except for those quoted above. The lines are provided without any context except a short paragraph following them indicating that the Anti-Defamation League finds the poem anti-Semitic. There are a couple of exceptions in the media to this formula, one occurring in *The Boston Globe* on October 13<sup>th</sup> where an additional section of the poem appears. After quoting the familiar lines, the article offers: “That wasn’t the poem’s only reference to Jews. An earlier stitch asks, ‘Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion/And cracking they sides at the notion.’”<sup>771</sup> Either reference is one that does not fully engage the litany of crimes mentioned in the text.

The writer goes on to answer Baraka’s claim that the poem is anti-Semitic because it only references Israel and Israelis: “See, if he’d said 4,000 Jews were tipped off, that would have been an anti-Semitic canard. But why should he be labeled a Jew-hater for claiming that 4,000 Israelis were in on the plot? Nobody was fooled by this sophistry.”<sup>772</sup> In this case, more of the poem is quoted for the purpose of developing the argument that Baraka is an anti-Semite. In the rest of the column, the author quotes other Baraka poems for the purpose of offering preponderance of evidence. Separated from the artifice of the poem, the lines’ meaning is only offered in one dimension. The poems effort to suspend the readers in a dizzying array of associated accusations and questions related to terrorism is suspended with the focus on these

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<sup>770</sup> Dietram A. Scheufele, “Framing as a Theory of Media Effects” *The Journal of Communication* 49, 1 (March 1999): 103-122, 106.

<sup>771</sup> Jeff Jacoby, “New Jersey’s Bigot Laureate,” *The Boston Globe*, October 13 2002.

<sup>772</sup> Jacoby, “New Jersey’s Bigot Laureate.”



lines. Additionally, associating Baraka with “sophistry” – or the manipulation of the truth through words – further reinforces this view of Baraka as a trickster with words, and not to be trusted. He is attempting to deceive through clever word use.

Another example of other lines of the poem being cited occurs via Associated Press wire covering Baraka’s comments at the dedication of the Newark Public Library as a literary landmark on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002. Formulaically, the reporter cites the offending lines, then goes for a twist:

Baraka noted the poem also questions atrocities committed against many groups, including Jews. One stanza read:  
‘Who put the Jews in ovens,/’  
and who helped them do it/  
Who said ‘America First’/  
And ok’d the yellow stars/  
WHO WHO’<sup>773</sup>

This seemingly defensive move on the part of the media is immediately countered by the next line of the article, which offers an implicit interpretation of this “new” section of the poem: “Shai Goldstein, New Jersey regional director of the ADL, who supported McGreevey’s call for Baraka to resign, said the Newark poet has ‘added insult to injury.’ ‘One of our big concerns is that the ‘big lie’ has now been repeated by a representative of the state of New Jersey,’ Goldstein said Wednesday.”<sup>774</sup> Although left vague, could it be said that Goldstein reads this section of the poem as questioning the existence of the Holocaust? Under this interpretation, Baraka’s defense becomes more ammunition for framing him as anti-Semitic.

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<sup>773</sup> Jeffrey Gold, "Poet Laureate: 'Won't Resign, Won't Apologize'," *Associated Press*, October 2 2002.

<sup>774</sup> Gold

Additionally, limits on the role of poetry were placed on the office that Baraka held. In this way, the Governor was able to avoid criticizing the poem itself, and reduced the controversy to the realm of what an official representative can and cannot do. “McGreevey said elected officials must have some say in choosing poet laureates and means for holding them accountable. ‘It’s not the governor’s poet laureate,’ McGreevey said, ‘It’s the state’s poet laureate.’”<sup>775</sup> This attribution of ownership to the state would further the understanding that nothing controversial is to be said by a poet endorsed by the state government. McGreevey is also potentially removing himself from any direct association with the poem for his own political safety. The Governor continues in the same article to then outline the specific relationship of poetry and government: “Clearly there needs to be a bright line between poetic license and governmental discourse . . . Yet, Baraka’s poem sets forth falsehoods as fact.”<sup>776</sup> McGreevey posits this demarcation and we are supposed to place Baraka on the side of governmental discourse due to his position as laureate.

Another rhetoric deployed in the controversy was that of “expertise.” The media went to other poets or poet laureates to get “expert opinion” on Baraka’s poem. One of the most expert was the poet who served as poet laureate prior to Baraka – Gerald Stern. Claiming he made a mistake and that he was sorry that he nominated Baraka, Stern claims “[Baraka] is such a liar to say he is not anti-Semitic. There is such ignorance and lying in his whole posture.”<sup>777</sup> No qualifications or explanation are given from Stern as to why this is the case. The article rests on Stern’s credibility as another poet to warrant his claims.

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<sup>775</sup> John P. McAlpin, "Governor Seeks Authority to Fire Poet Laureate," *Associated Press*, October 6 2002.

<sup>776</sup> Gold

<sup>777</sup> "Poet Regrets Nominating Baraka to Laureate Post," *Associated Press*, November 10 2002.

*The Buffalo News* goes a step farther in credibility by asking various faculty members of the University of Buffalo writing program their informed opinion of the controversy. Interestingly enough, the question is limited to the future of free expression and artistic license. Robert Creeley attempts to defend Baraka by attacking the lines singled out by the media as representative of Baraka's views, not just the poem: "The sentiment those lines express is reprehensible, but the poem is not simply those lines. His opinions about American history are much more complex than the isolation of those lines," said Creeley. "If one respects the poet laureate, one has to understand that he or she has opinions that may not concur with the general feelings of the public, Creeley said."<sup>778</sup> Creeley concedes that the lines are indefensible in order to gain ground on the issue of free expression. He also points out that Baraka is, like most people, a complex human being and his political opinions cannot be boiled down to a few lines from a poem. Neither strategy gains much traction as Creeley's statement is immediately juxtaposed with New Jersey ADL head Goldstein, who said, "This is an honorary position that he [Baraka] dishonored with his words of bigotry," and New Jersey State Senator Garry Furnari, who offered this observation: "When you create a position whose purpose is to promote and enhance poetry, and that person doesn't live up to that standard, he should be removed. By saying he was poet laureate and reading a poem whose only purpose, it seems to me, was to be divisive and promote hatred – I am hard-pressed to see how that promotes poetry."<sup>779</sup>

By this time the New Jersey Senate voted to remove the position of poet laureate. McGreevey could not fire Baraka, nor could anyone in the government remove him.<sup>780</sup> The

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<sup>778</sup> Mark Sommer, "Looking for Rhyme and Reason in Controversial 9/11 Poem," *The Buffalo News*, December 23 2002.

<sup>779</sup> Sommer

<sup>780</sup> Marc Santora, "Poet Laureate Returns Critics' Rage," *The New York Times*, October 18 2002.

governor and the state decided that the best course of action to ensure that state money did not get into the hands of someone so clearly anti-Semitic would be to remove the post of poet laureate in its entirety.

The media's take on this move was through many articles that mocked or even questioned the necessity of poet laureates at all. "While the controversy has sparked a nasty kerfuffle in the Garden State, across the river, in Manhattan, many people were more shocked to learn that New Jersey had a poet laureate."<sup>781</sup> In another article, a professor of English argues that it is almost silly for a state to have a poet laureate:

Irving Feldman, a poet and professor of English at UB [The University of Buffalo], doesn't believe there should even be state poet laureates. "In general, I am skeptical about the institution of poet laureate. They tend to be functionaries and to institutionalize poetry. Somehow it seems contrary to the American egalitarian spirit," Feldman said. "I would suggest all the other posts be abolished as well, and the poet laureate demoted to what he [sic] was before – consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress."<sup>782</sup>

The article ends at this point, resting on the idea that poet laureate is a position that we would be better off without. The implication we are left with is that the poet laureate as a mix of the political and the poetic is simply untenable. Mixing the political with the poetic is doomed – it ruins poetry. No mention is made by Feldman of the potential of poetry ruining politics. Political change through poetry is not even a question worth considering. It is a potential threat to poetry as an art that, at its best, should remain separate and apart from the political. It is also, quite unbelievably, constructed as counter to egalitarianism. Perhaps what is meant is that having laureates might chill some people from thinking they can write poetry without being one of the anointed. Still, the connotation is that to have laureates is counter to whatever composes egalitarian American spirit.

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<sup>781</sup> Santora

<sup>782</sup> Sommer, "Looking for Rhyme and Reason in Controversial 9/11 Poem."

The New York *Observer*, the paper with which I began this essay, offers the most accommodating read of the controversy of any of the articles discussed here. The *Observer* quotes one of the committee members who nominated Baraka for the position at length:

The poem hits a nerve because of the reality underlying the poem,” says Jim Habba [coordinator of the Dodge Poetry Festival]. “I think the claim about the Israelis leaving the building is wholly untrue. But this is a poem. And that is a powerful image. What is it saying? What is it doing? It’s doing a lot of things – some of them hurtful, some of them maybe revelatory. Yes, it’s crude, but we have never had an adequate conversation about American policy toward the Middle Eastern Conflict and we’re about to go to war with Iraq.<sup>783</sup>

Habba, who is identified as a poet who served on the committee to nominate Baraka, offers a very interesting and fluid read of the meaning of Baraka’s poem. It is the read closest to the one I offer. Habba links this fluidity of meaning to the need to have adequate public discussion about Middle East relations with the United States on the eve of war. Even though the poem offers untrue statements as a part of it, Habba pushes the reader to look to the holistic “reality” of the poem to find its value.

Even though gracious, the article ends up affirming poetry as doing the same thing as something like public deliberation – it brings up issues for conversation that need to be debated. The framing of poetry through this quote by Habba puts poetry in a positive light, but only as something that is like public deliberation. Framed within the larger context of the media treatment, the reader must wonder why poetry should be doing this since it’s artistic and should be pretty – and we already have public deliberation and debate to work out what we should do as policy. The positive read becomes another way to constrain the role of the poetic; we are miles away from Bernstein’s epistemic poetry at this point.

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<sup>783</sup> Weiss, "If Poet Amiri Baraka Becomes Ex-Laureate, Is It Bad for Writers?."

On July 2, 2003, McGreevey signed into law the bill that would eliminate the position of poet laureate for New Jersey.<sup>784</sup> It is interesting to note that even in this article the four lines from the poem are again quoted, and referred to as “called Anti-Semitic” by “leaders.” After this article, *The Record* follows up with a news article entitled “Baraka: Lazy, Cruel and Now out of a Job.” The elimination of his job now allows the media to frame Baraka as one of the “outside” or problems with America – laziness and unemployment as terms come with them a baggage that there must be something wrong with the person who is jobless. The American work-ethic insists that having a job is not only positive, but also a necessary condition of being “normal.” Aside from the headline, the paper works Baraka’s position into that of anyone who has received justice – they deserved it, because they did wrong. This article is worth quoting at some length:

The ranks of the unemployed increased by at least one Wednesday. New Jersey finally fired Amiri Baraka as its poet laureate. It’s about time.

Baraka is the Jayson Blair of poets. In a pinch, he fabricates.

Of course, he sees himself far differently. Baraka, an African-American who once went by the name of LeRoi Jones, prefers to cast himself as another creative voice silence by a racist conspiracy of Jews and others insulted by his writing. It was this conspiracy that forced Governor McGreevey to sign a law Wednesday abolishing the poetry laureate’s job – or so Baraka wants us to believe.

Nice try, Amiri. Now back to reality.

Baraka’s problem is much more mundane, hardly as exotic as a conspiracy. Plain and simple, he lost his job because he played fast and loose with the truth. He has no one to blame but himself.<sup>785</sup>

Aside from the totally bizarre association of Baraka with *New York Times*’ libelous reporter Jayson Blair, these paragraphs are a perfect exemplar of the discourse of the mass media eliminating any possible complexity to this poem. Just like a child caught lying by a teacher, Baraka deserves to be punished since he did not maintain fidelity to the truth in his poetry.

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<sup>784</sup> Paul H. Johnson, "Mcgreevey Signs Bill Eliminating Poet Laureate," *The Record*, July 3 2003.

<sup>785</sup> Michael Kelly, "Baraka: Lazy, Cruel, and Now out of a Job," *The Record*, July 3 2003.

Associating Baraka's defense with conspiracy theory helps paint him as potentially crazy, while the trope "He has no one to blame but himself" draws on the commonplace of American work-ethic, a rhetoric of hard, individual work which has been a thread of national discourse since colonial days.<sup>786</sup> Contrasting Baraka's defense with reality places him as someone who has poor perspective, and is obviously failing to see something very obvious and apparent. At the end of the article, Baraka is cast as a victim since he "believes his own lie." Such strategies not only limit the public view of Baraka, but they also limit the power and potential of poetry as a discourse. Here, clearly poetry is limited to having the same function as journalistic writing – it must deal in facts, it must be well investigated and it cannot lie, or else you will be the equivalent of Jayson Blair. Poetry as journalism, as the purveyor of facts from events in the world, eliminates any read of poetry as I offer above – that the meaning could potentially come from what the poem might push you toward in all of its complexity.

The saturation of stories disciplining, restricting readings, or celebrating Baraka's "firing" foreclosed any of the potential in the more positive readings to allow the poem a more open read. In the end, New Jersey is without a poet laureate, and interest in the poem has disappeared from the headlines. The most recent article about this controversy, in April of 2004, makes fun of the controversy identifying Baraka as someone with a history of "tweaking" the "Chosen Race" as well as defending (in one line) Baraka's right, "to spew bad poetry is sacrosanct."<sup>787</sup> The column then goes on to investigate who would dare spend public money to bring someone guaranteed to offend the community to the public library to speak. The author

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<sup>786</sup> See Herbert A. Applebaum, *The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force: A Historical Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

<sup>787</sup> Ortega, "Poetry Slam: Now We Know Why a Librarian Was Tight-Lipped About Her Celebrity Guest Speaker."

interviews the editor of a local literary journal, who offers that Baraka's poem is "incoherent" and "a shame" because, "[i]t leaves him [Baraka] open to whatever reaction people are going to have."<sup>788</sup> Additionally, the four lines from the poem are again quoted, and cites from one of Baraka's earlier poems as a "classic nugget from the 1960s," quotes a line from it and ends the article with "Whee! That's some good counterculture mind-ganja, hepcat."<sup>789</sup>

Even in this final article on the controversy, the same strategies are apparent for reading poetry. Poetry is again a reflection of the politics of the author in a direct relationship. Also, meaning is clear of the poem from four lines. Also, the strategy of condemning Baraka as a bad poet due to his inability to get the facts right is used at the same time as the strategy of reducing poetry to irrelevant or silly – or in this case, only something that old stoned hippies would enjoy.

Overall, without a conspiracy, the media provided a homogenous and simplified account for "Somebody Blew Up America." The reader does not have to attend to the text of the poem in any way to understand the poem's subject. The media provides the four lines that are key, as well as analysis about the poem's meaning from experts. They paint Baraka's politics as extreme and unacceptable. They also relegate poetry and the poet laureate position, through the use of experts, as something inconsequential and trivial. Overall, the media's reporting on this controversy could not have turned out better if it had been organized from above as a conspiracy. The political content of poetry is again constrained, and Baraka, as responsible author, is disciplined and trivialized by the media.

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<sup>788</sup> Ortega.

<sup>789</sup> Ortega.



## 8.5 CONCLUSION

On Amiri Baraka's latest essay, posted on his website, he signs his name "NJ & Newark Schools' Poet Laureate (the Legislature Lied!)"<sup>790</sup> Baraka can continue to claim he is poet laureate of New Jersey, but for those reading the newspaper accounts of this controversy, that may not be easily done. Seen as "resolved" by those who choose the stories and the headlines by the State's elimination of the position, "Somebody Blew Up America" as a controversy is over and done with. The media's discourse served to eliminate the complexity of poetry as a site of contested meaning, reducing it either to a fact-based discourse, or the ramblings of someone who has reprehensible political views. In the end, the discourse over this controversy serves to discipline and limit the power of poetry's rhetoric through a journalistic rhetoric that limits, simplifies and reduces sites of meaning to the easily explainable.

I have tried to show through this controversy, and hopefully through this entire work how the beats' work can and should be seen as a rhetorical one. The elements of beat rhetoric in Baraka's poem focus mostly on *kairos*, but also point out the limited nature of human beings to know. The policing of Baraka's discourse into the extremely limited mode of "harmless poetry" indicates the presence of a perceived threat from society. The beat rhetoric is one that questions, limits and forwards uncertainty as a mode of proper communication. That is, the political, the personal, and the aesthetic are in flux in the Beat rhetoric. Using the limited, recalcitrant human body as a *topos*, and the non-linear associations of *kairos*, or the opportune and timely to make logical connections, as well as comic framing and perspective by incongruity serve to establish a

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<sup>790</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Does Newark Want to Go Back to July 1967?* (September 16, 2005 2004 [cited December 5, 2005]); available from <http://www.amiribaraka.com/newark.html>.

small outpost of alternative communicative practices. Traditional positions of authority, as we saw in my analysis of “Howl” as well as *On the Road*, are generally upended, in a Stallybrass and White sense, for the purpose of providing space for what they saw as a more “authentic” form of consubstantiality between people. But in Baraka’s case, we see a stark example of how easily this type of revolutionary rhetoric can be interrupted by the more ‘centripetal’ forces that provide the official discourses of the society.

Foreclosure of potential meaning by the way journalists account for controversies over creative political texts such as Baraka’s limit political potential for artists and rhetors interested in social change. “Somebody Blew Up America” as an explosive text was defused, contained, and disciplined by the rhetoric of the media. The question as to “why” provides some hopeful perspective about the potential of the Beat rhetoric project. For if it were not so threatening or should it contain no revolutionary elements, the drive to discipline and explain this discourse would not exist. Amiri Baraka’s poem, invoking the Beat rhetorical principles of embodiment, as well as upending traditional positions of authorized speech, as well as invoking the kairotic over the chronic in presenting history, represented a threat to the stability of the discourses known as political rhetoric and poetry. The blurring of these distinctions is exactly what Baraka’s poem accomplishes, which has the undesirable (from the perspective of the status quo) effect of distributing the ability to critique the political to a creative discourse like poetry. This blurs the origin of the concept of ethos, and allows almost anyone to make credible claims as to the nature and scope of the politics of the society.

The Beat rhetoric sought to re-arrange communicative and human relationships into something that the creators of it thought was more sustainable. Baraka’s poem attempts to do this same thing around a site of national tragedy. In one sense we should celebrate that this sort

of discourse can still elicit the power that its creators hoped it would have. In another, we should fear the disciplinary power of the authorized discourses. The example of “Somebody Blew Up America” is one that indicates rhetoricians and rhetorical critics should pay more attention to poetic events in the public as they represent sites where normative discursive rules are enforced, re-enforced, and disciplined.

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