



“An Ephemeral Oddity”?: The Beat Generation and American Culture

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In 1958, the critic John Sisk suggested that “Beat literature may turn out to be an ephemeral oddity that fifty years from now exists only for desperate Ph.D. candidates” (Sisk, 194). Sisk suggested that Beat writing might turn out to be a “fad” in the doubly negative sense: merely fashionable, and lacking in inherent or lasting traditional literary merit. Focusing particularly on Jack Kerouac, and contextualising this material with reference to William Burroughs, this paper seeks to explore the tensions inherent in the Beats’ attempts to disseminate their work in and through the growing media culture of postwar America. It also investigates the recent use of Beat icons and iconoclasm by such big name brands as Nike and the Gap.

The Beats have been understood in many different ways: as a literary movement, media creation and mutually exploitative marketing strategy. What is clear is that for such a “statistically tiny group”, a great deal of attention, statistical and otherwise, was paid to them in the fifties (Miller & Nowak, 387). The Beats’ emphasis on the centrality of individual experience, as evidenced in their writing and performance, has produced an uneasiness in categorising and containing various writers under the umbrella term of Beat, leading some critics to conclude that the Beats were in fact “too distinctly individualistic to allow their work to be classified” (Fleischmann, 113). In the postwar era, though, the Beats were regarded by the media as a cohesive social group, and their emphasis on individualism was viewed as a very real threat to the accepted postwar social order that was exemplified in middle class suburbia. Indeed, too often the Beats’ relationship with society is considered as one of complete opposition and rejection, but in fact their relationship to American society is more complex and nuanced than that of complete disengagement. The Beats therefore attracted widespread media interest in the fifties, with much of the coverage relatively unfavourable. Once under media scrutiny, “Beat” quickly became the ridiculed “Beatnik”: laughable and unthreatening, but also reflecting certain anxieties within the mainstream as to cultural cost of prosperity. The Beat questioning of the heavily politicised culture of the cold war was troubling to many. They were seen to “[consort] with, and [romanticize], society’s outcasts and misfits – blacks, drug addicts, prostitutes, bums, migrant farm workers, and petty criminals”, hence drawing attention to the reality of poverty, or what Michael Harrington would term the *Other America*, outside of the suburban ideal (Oakley, 398). The Beats therefore found their lifestyle under scrutiny from a wealth of social commentators, psychologists and sociologists, who put forth their views via radio, television and print.

While the media generally portrayed the Beatnik in a negative light, the Beats themselves attempted to use the media to gain publicity for their writing and ideas. Hence, although they are traditionally placed in opposition to mass culture, the Beats' appropriation of the mass media suggests a need to renegotiate this cultural positioning, rather than regarding them as entirely "devoid of media savoir-faire" as Ann Douglas describes (Douglas, xiii). It is clear, for instance, that Jack Kerouac used the media for his own ends in an effort to promote his writing, as Ronna C. Johnson's analysis of his appearance on *The Steve Allen Show* in 1959 suggests. As Johnson notes:

Although Kerouac is made to advertise *On The Road*, he resists his exploitation as a sales gimmick and reverses the joke made at his own expense by reading "pages" which could not be purchased: he reads from the unpublished manuscript of *Visions of Cody*, which he concealed behind the copy of *On The Road* he holds to the camera. (R. Johnson, 44)

Johnson believes that this is a deliberate attempt by Kerouac to resist the commodification of his work by "'secretly' read[ing] for free a text free of commercial value" (R. Johnson, 45). Kerouac's action here though can also be interpreted as him making full use of the media as a marketing tool. As *On The Road* had already been published for two years by the time of this television appearance, it would appear to make far more commercial sense for Kerouac to read some of his unpublished work, thus taking advantage of the promotional opportunities afforded him by the success of *On The Road*.

These efforts to engage with the media, though, had mixed results. Indeed, an interview given by Jack Kerouac to WABCTV in 1958 in order to promote his new book *The Dharma Bums* provides a perfect example of the tension between the Beats' desire for self-promotion as serious literary figures, versus the media approach to them. The interview took place on the Ben Hecht Show and was broadcast in the New York metropolitan area. The show ran for nine months and caused controversy owing to both the presenter and its choice of guests. However, it appeared that even in this non-mainstream setting Kerouac's work could not be taken seriously. During the broadcast, Hecht insistently refers to Kerouac's text as *The "Drama" Bums*, whilst asking him a series of questions relating to his religious and political views, his opinion on homosexuality, sexual practices involving multiple participants, and drug-taking.¹ The interview itself is excruciating to listen to, and although Kerouac is remarkably adept at answering (or refusing to answer) these types of questions, we find out relatively little about the book itself or Kerouac's motivations for writing it. Rather, it appears that Hecht is far more interested in establishing if Kerouac is in fact a dangerous subversive – whether a communist, deep affiliate of Eastern religion, drug addict, homosexual or sexual deviant. Thus whilst Kerouac's alternative lifestyle is explored in detail, Hecht glosses over the content of *The Dharma Bums*, other than to sensationalise some of the sexual practices it depicts, and his rejection of it as a serious literary work is also implicit in his refusal to refer to it by its correct title. In addition, when Hecht does question Kerouac about the text, his questions are invariably based on misunderstandings and misquotations.² This indicates that Kerouac's work was not taken seriously by the media – even by that portion of it which set itself in opposition to the mainstream. Moreover, by making controversial appearances such as this, Kerouac was apparently undermining his own attempts to be taken seriously as a writer, as although these appearances lent weight to the Beats as figures of non-conformity they simultaneously provided more material for the

mainstream portrayal of the Beats to be built up around aspects of their lifestyle rather than their literary achievements.

Beat writers faced further problems of acceptance, as literary critics were also divided as to how seriously to treat Beat literature and therefore as to whether or not there was such a phenomenon as a Beat literary movement. Many critics stridently rejected their work as being without any redeeming literary value, so for example John Ciardi commented in 1960 that:

As the literary heritage of the Beat Generation, I conclude, we are left the unreadable un-novels of Jack Kerouac and the first part of “Howl.” Add in the Beat influence on a few writers such as Norman Mailer who were on their way before the Beats, but took some of their later direction from behind the beard. It still seems a thin enough achievement for what has been the most talked-of “literary” movement of the last decade (Ciardi, 262-63).

Paul O’Neil similarly complained:

The bulk of Beat writers are undisciplined and slovenly amateurs who have deluded themselves into believing their lugubrious absurdities are art simply because they have rejected the form, style and attitudes of previous generations and have seized upon obscenity as an expression of “total personality” (O’Neil, 241).

He did concede, though, “If the general level of Beat writing is appalling, however, it is impossible to honestly discount all Beat literature.... A few Beat writers demonstrate that gift of phrase and those flashes of insight which bespeak genuine talent” (O’Neil, 241-42).

Despite the fact that the Beats struggled to gain literary credence, their media image paradoxically continued to grow, with the two becoming increasingly divorced from each other. The image of the Beat was stereotyped in the media as a dirty, sandal-wearing, bearded male dressed in black, listening to jazz and spending the evenings at poetry readings in espresso bars, and this stereotype proliferated rapidly. The Beats were “exploited by commercial interests, hounded by the national press, and ridiculed on television and in the movies” (Charters, xix). In terms of the Beat image being exploited for commercial purposes, Joyce Johnson, a female Beat writer, recalls that the label:

“Beat Generation” sold books, sold black turtleneck sweaters and bongos, berets and dark glasses, sold a way of life that seemed like dangerous fun – thus to be either condemned or imitated. Suburban couples could have beatnik parties on Saturday nights and drink too much and fondle each other’s wives. (J. Johnson, 480)

Thus the Beat image became detached from the Beat aesthetic, and was appropriated by middle-America as a method of temporary escape from the boredom of suburbia, with “Rent-a-Beatnik” services becoming increasingly popular for parties. These hired beatniks would turn up complete with black turtleneck, beret and goatee beard in accordance with their stereotyped media image, and engage guests with obligatory poetry readings and bongo-playing, guaranteed to enliven any otherwise “square” middle class party. As Mitchell J. Smith recognises:

This practice turns the Beat into pure image, a kind of shabby Ken doll to be marketed as pure capital product. The beatniks may be read as an outrage to contemporary mores, but they are an outrage only against the prevailing tastes and

fashions, which is nothing more than any new fashion does. While the Beat attitude rejects poses and superficial masks as conformity to preconceptions, the Rent-A-Beatnik service had the effect of fetishizing appearance and further capitalizing on it in a way that would have been antithetical to the ascetic early Beats (Smith, "Beat").

Once again the prevailing media image of the "beatnik" was foregrounded and accepted by the public, as well as being open to ridicule. By placing emphasis on image, any potential threat to the social order that the Beats posed in terms of using their work and lifestyle as a means of openly criticising society could be effectively undermined by the media.

Jack Kerouac was well aware of the knotty relationship between the Beats and the mass media and attempted to unpick this in his 1959 article in *Playboy* magazine entitled "The Origins of the Beat Generation". He talks of the "horror I felt in 1957 and later 1958 naturally to suddenly see "Beat" being taken up by everybody, press and TV and Hollywood" (Kerouac, "Origins", 75). The success of Kerouac's novel *On The Road* appeared to have been the catalyst for this as it laid out precisely what the Beat ideal was, again demonstrating the tensions between Kerouac's desire for popular literary success and his frustration at having his ideas devalued once they were disseminated within the public domain. Moreover, implicit in Kerouac's statement is that "Beat" does have a certain exclusive meaning, and his article was an attempt to define this. He describes Beat as a "new *more*" characterised by a particular energy and passion for life which he tries to present within his literature (Kerouac, "Origins", 73). Ann Charters, though, suggests that the term "Beat" was picked up by the media precisely because of its *lack* of fixed meaning, which enabled it to be used as a floating signifier and hence as a powerful marketing tool:

The term caught on because it could mean anything. It could even be exploited in the affluent wake of the decade's extraordinary technological inventions. Almost immediately, for example, advertisements by "hip" record companies in New York used the idea of the Beat Generation to sell their new long-playing vinyl records (Charters, xx).

The term "Beat" was therefore able to encompass all qualities that could not be defined as "Square" (Ehrenreich, 67). Moreover, as "Beat" was so open to individual definition it had mass appeal and anyone who was not "Square" could potentially define themselves as "Beat".

The Beats' attempts to use mass media as a means of promoting themselves as literary figures who wished to seriously engage with social questions ultimately appears to have been unsuccessful. Although they were at first regarded as a serious threat to society, mass coverage eventually allowed the term "Beat" to be redefined for commercial interests, divorcing it from its original meaning and undermining it as a means of protest by making a stereotyped Beat image the subject of national ridicule. Indeed, as Theodore Roszak points out, this may be regarded as "a kind of cynical smothering of dissent by saturation coverage, and it begins to look like a far more formidable weapon in the hands of the establishment than outright suppression" (Roszak, 37).

The complex relationship between Beat literature and media image is still evident today in the recent appropriation of photographs of the Beat Generation's key figures by the corporate advertising machine. Gap and Nike use these photographs very specifically to portray a particular set of ideas relevant to their target market. A photograph of Jack Kerouac was used in a Gap Advert in 1993, along with the tagline

“Kerouac wore Khakis”.³ The image and caption suggest that the consumer’s choice of such clothing will confer on them aspects of Beatness, but Gap wish to associate their product with very specific aspects of Beat culture, and this is exemplified in their choice of photograph. The picture has evidently been chosen with great care, as there are many photographs of Kerouac and the one used by Gap is one of (at least) two of Kerouac taken at the same time and in the same location. In one of the images that was not used, Kerouac’s chin defiantly juts towards the camera, and his facial expression is serious and unsmiling.⁴ In contrast, in the photograph Gap chose to use, Kerouac is smiling and looking directly into the camera; the archetypal clean-cut all-American hero. Their advert is therefore again making use of “Beat” as a floating signifier. Gap wish to associate the notion of Beat with such ideas as freethinking individualism, rather than Beat as a threat to American society. Kerouac’s individualism is thus carefully tailored to fit with the particular brand of individualism Gap wants to portray, with the irony of course being that this is an advertisement for mass-produced clothing.

A further issue to be considered in terms of Gap’s use of this photograph is that it has been digitally altered for their purposes. So, for example, the neon lettering behind Kerouac has been altered slightly. In the original, the letters are easily recognisable as an “A” and an “R”, as the photograph was taken outside a bar in Greenwich village, but in the Gap photo, the “R” has been altered so it is more ambiguous and could now be read as the letter “P” – Kerouac standing in front of a sign reading “Gap”, perhaps. Additionally, the figure of Joyce Johnson standing to the left and behind Kerouac has been erased to place Kerouac alone, again emphasising his individuality. Interestingly, this is not the first time that images of Kerouac have been altered for the mass market: the same practice was already being carried out in the late fifties and Kerouac details how a widely used publicity photograph of him originally showed him wearing a crucifix, but that this was removed by many publications, presumably in order to maintain the popular image of Beats as threatening to the mainstream, with no moral values and as entirely disengaged from society.⁵

In a similar vein to the use of Kerouac’s photo by Gap, William Burroughs appeared in an advertisement for Nike in 1994, alongside a quotation from his work that “the purpose of technology is not to confuse the mind, but to serve the body.” (“Air Max² CB”). One notable difference is that Burroughs chose to allow his image to be used, as he was still alive, whereas Kerouac’s photograph was used with the permission of the holders of his Estate. Burroughs’ appearance provoked a strong reaction from literary critics and fans, as the man who has been credited with “act[ing] as godfather for literary countercultures” and “fertiliz[ing] an A to Z of postwar creativity” appeared to have actively sold out to the corporate machine (Harris, 243). Indeed, Burroughs made no secret of the fact that he had willingly appeared in order to make money (Murphy, 231-32). Whilst Burroughs did not see this as an issue, the reaction it provoked from others demonstrates the way in which Burroughs’ image was open to appropriation from all sides, and that the image that his fans had created of him proved to be inadequate.

The issue of image is therefore crucial, and there appears to be a fundamental difference in the use of the images of Kerouac and Burroughs in the two photographs. Kerouac’s image is evidently used by Gap as representative of the ideas of freedom and individualism contained within his texts. Burroughs’ image on the other hand, is used differently, as although it appears with a line of his text, it is unlikely that Nike would wish to have their footwear associated with the junky underworld that

Burroughs portrays in his work. As Burroughs was still alive when the Nike advertisement was produced, Nike appear to have chosen to use him as he was by then a countercultural icon of sorts, appearing in films such as *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and working with artists such as Kurt Cobain and REM. Hence these advertisements serve as excellent examples of the continuing negotiations between Beat literature and Beat image. They also demonstrate that Beat has connotations that resonate through to the present day which are strong enough to be appropriated by multinationals, even suggesting, perhaps, that Beat has become a brand.

In conclusion, to return to Sisk's comment, far from being the preserve of "desperate Ph.D. candidates", Beat literature is still the subject of wide-ranging critical analysis. As a literary movement the Beats have ultimately had a great influence, with William Burroughs' work being regarded as a precursor to the cyberpunk genre, and writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder feeding into the growing ecology movement in the late sixties and early seventies. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, the interest that still surrounds the Beat phenomenon attests to its continuing importance within both literary and cultural studies.

Endnotes:

¹ Among others, Hecht asks the following questions: "Do you like politics? Do you like the Republican party?"; "Are you going to vote in the next election?"; "Have you ever been in trouble with the Government forces that you like so well?"; "Do you think it's safe worshipping Buddha?"; "Have you an opinion or an attitude about homosexuals? Are they productive and constructive people like the rest of the world?"; "What drugs did you use? And where d'you get 'em? How much do they cost?" (My transcription). Ben Hecht, interview with Jack Kerouac, WABCTV, 17 Oct. 1958.

² For example, Kerouac repeatedly has to point out to Hecht that a quotation from one of his texts is not his own voice but that of one of his characters and thus is not representative of his own viewpoint. Hecht's questions about the sexual practice of yab-yum as described in *The Dharma Bums* are also based on inaccurate assumptions that Kerouac corrects.

³ This advert can be viewed online at: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/kerouac-gap.html>

⁴ This image can be viewed online at: <http://www.csassociates.com/images/Jack%20Kerouac.jpg>

⁵ Kerouac explains "the only publication which later did not erase the crucifix from my breast (from that plaid cotton sleeveless cotton shirtfront) was the New York Times.... God bless The New York Times for not erasing the crucifix from my breast as though it was something distasteful." (Kerouac, "Origins," Casebook 69).

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