“What are you if not beat? – An individual, nothing. They say to be beat is to be nothing.”

Individual and Collective Identity in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg

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1 From “Variations on a Generation” by Gregory Corso
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**Introduction**

When Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* was published in 1956 he could never have imagined how greatly his literary, social and cultural influence would affect all sorts of readers. His rebellious voice was strong enough to reach within a minimum period of time a new generation that would be considered the predecessors of the hippie movement of the 1960’s. Ginsberg and his closest friends defied the repressive authority of Cold War America and in uniting their pacifist voices became known as “The Beat Generation”. Together with other groups in the 1950’s like the Black Mountain Poets they became known as the New American Poets, named after Donald Allen’s influential anthology *The New American Poetry*. This ‘new’ writing showed a rekindled interest in Whitman’s pluralist conveyance of “multitudes”. These poets considered the self open and inclusive, so via this self “all can speak together” (Spahr 73). This renewed vision on the inclusive “I” in poetry indicated that their coterie and their strong friendships formed in the 1950’s played a significant role in the poetics of this new generation of rebellious voices. These literary groups were not only a subculture on the rise, they also influenced the perception of the single speaking voice and the unique, romantically inspired lyrical subject. A specific, collective identity proved a central theme in the poems of Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) of the New York School (as discussed in Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies*). In the poetry of the Beats such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and many others, friendship and community became a prominent writing topic too.

However, this period also brought about a questioning of the closed, analyzable self. It namely put a possible variety of selves on the poetic programme. T. S. Eliot’s *Prufrock*, for instance, shows a lyrical subject that seems to avoid being pinpointed, while it simultaneously shows that the “multiplicity of selves” is only a result of “social role-play” (Nicholls 182). The opened-up self, on the other hand, sparked an interest in the self as a mobile given, as a changeable entity, as something debatable and distinctly opposed to other selves. After a period when sentimentality was looked down upon and impersonality was held high, this renewed interest in introspection brought about new forms of poetry like confessionalism. Confessional poetry wanted a new perspective on the expression of immediate experiences, whether it be trauma, discontent with life in general or personal issues. The confessional poet, therefore, displayed a concern for the subjective inner self and poetry started functioning as a therapeutic way to deal with pain and related issues, especially when “courting extremity” (Collins 198). The 1950’s provided a political context that nurtured such discontented, outcast individuals so confessionalism produced its most representative poetry at that time (Collins 198).

This dissertation will focus on Ginsberg’s writing concerning this ambivalent rendering of the self in relation to friends and like-minded people and the self that is unique, independent yet changeable. In specific, this dissertation will analyse how Ginsberg inscribes his daily reality of collectivity and close prominent literary influences in his poetry while at the same time focussing on
his individual self and own poetic aspects. Will he feel ambivalent towards an unquestioning acceptance of a collective identity or will he eventually express a desire for the self to remain unilateral? Or when uniting the two visions, will his poetics fluctuate between the two dichotomies and represent a reciprocal sphere of influence from the self and his community. The next paragraphs will discuss the contents of the chapters on the Beat Generation, the Cold War and the analysis of Ginsberg’s poetry. They will show how the 1950’s gave rise to collective identities in smaller form such as the Beat Generation, while they also instigated identities that were inspired by greater ideologies such as the conformist, conservative suburban identities. The chapter on Cold War in particular will show that the eccentricity promoted or originated by the Beats also promoted self-insight and individuality. So in contrast to the easy-going coterie of the Beat Generation, also self-recognition and a return to the individual and the self were encouraged.

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The spotlight, then, will be on the formation and maintaining of the (collective and individual) self, specifically in the time period directly following the second World War. Axel Honneth’s study on recognition, which gives special attention to the foundation of self-esteem, self-image and self-respect, is invaluable for this study. It shows that the self is construed under the influence of a “shared group experience” and, moreover, it shows that the individual needs to be surrounded by a group of peers in order to form an effective framework for self-recognition (Honneth 214). A vigorous individuality was the primary force to keep away such conformist ideals of a regime they did not support and which did not affirm their ideal. In order to create such a potent self, one needs to find the affirmative actions of a close group of like-minded individuals. Essentially, the dynamics between self and the collective will be analysed as indispensable to each other’s existence. This dissertation will analyse if Ginsberg’s poetry reveals the same conclusion of this give-and-take relation of the individual with his coterie.

Interesting is that this paradoxical clash of the individual and the collective still persists in the contemporary tensions of (post)modernist ideals with capitalism and consumerism. This results in the formation of a critical individuality and the rise of an ideology of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. Ginsberg and the Beats broke through the existing literary and social conventions and as The Poem That Changed America: “Howl” Fifty Years Later proves, they still influence contemporary thinkers and writers today. Ginsberg placed himself on a continuum between the modernists and the postmodernists with his renewed perspective and representation of the self. By establishing himself there he is able to shed new light on the discussion of avant-gardism which expects the individual to continually contribute to the group. This analysis in specific wants to break through the perception of Ginsberg as either a personal, unique confessional writer, or as the father of the collective identity of the Beat Generation, in order to expose the one-sidedness of such extreme, distant perspectives. In other words, it wants to bring together the notions of Ginsberg as either a highly inspired individual or as a literary entity in a literary community. This dissertation wants to investigate how not only an authoritative and expressive “I” enters Ginsberg’s writing but also how this clashes with avant-gardistic notions of a literary collective and “homo-social literary communities” (Davidson 21).
focal point will not be on Ginsberg’s gay bonding, nor on his Buddhism but on the formation and ambivalence of the creative self (individual or collective) in his poetry of the 1950’s. Hence, this is an addition to Andrew Epstein’s Beautiful Enemies, who with his framework on friendship, selfhood and intersubjective relations paved the way for a more ambivalent rendering of the self in the analysis of the New American Poets.

The first chapter will discuss the Beat Generation, its members and the idea of collective identity in contrast to the idea of a single, inspired self. The focus will be on the difficulty of arriving at a definition for such a varied group of friends, who all had different ideas on what they were and what they stood for. It will underline the specific group dynamics, the intersubjective and collective atmosphere but also, through notions such as existentialism and confessional poetry introduce the next chapter, namely the Cold War. In other words, these existential and confessional facets of the Beats’ lives are a reaction to their political environment and a call for rebellious, differing, and oppositional voices.

The second chapter will convey a general overview of the political, cultural and social climate in the 1950’s concerning the Cold War and its repressive influence on deviancy and avant-garde. This chapter will also convey an exploration on the formation of an individual self in relation to its environment (in this case 1950’s America). In both chapters a few paragraphs are dedicated to modernist and postmodernist poetics on the self, so as to give an idea on the literary climate before and after the 1950’s. These paragraphs will prove helpful to show how Ginsberg meanders in between the two with his specific rendering of the dichotomy of collective and individual mobile identities.

The last chapter will then bring together my findings on the dynamics between the individual, innovative self and the collectively influenced lyrical subject or poet. It will analyse Ginsberg’s poetry collections The Green Automobile, Howl, Before & After: San Francisco Bay Area, Reality Sandwiches: Europe! Europe! and Kaddish and Related Poems, dated from the beginning of the 1950’s to the beginning of the 1960’s. The first part will consider Ginsberg’s emphasis on collectivity in his collaborative poems, his poems that consist of catalogues of names and his specific credos of togetherness. This part will then be contrasted to Ginsberg’s highlighting of the self and its porous boundaries. Ginsberg shakes modernist beliefs and changes identities, conveys inner drives and the chaotic subjective, and also stresses mobility and introspection.

For my analysis of the individual and collective self in Ginsberg I have mostly focused on Axel Honneth’s study of recognition The I in We and Leerom Medovoi’s Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity. The latter was also an interesting addition to the case studies presented in Andrew Epstein’s Beautiful Enemies. Friendship and Postwar American Poetry and Michael Davidson’s Guys Like Us. Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics. Both engage, to a greater or lesser extent, with the dynamics between the avant-garde individual and its literary, collective environment. Furthermore, the insights on modernist and postmodernist poetics are derived from key publications such as After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism by Andreas Huyssen,
Five faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism by Matei Calinescu and Modernisms: A Literary Guide by Peter Nicholls. Lastly, Julia Kristeva’s text “From One Identity to An Other” will prove helpful to underline the fluctuating self introduced in the paragraphs on the disseminated, postmodern self on a more language directed level.
Chapter 1. Ginsberg, Beat Generation and Community.

Let you not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments-love is not love which altercation finds – O no! ‘tis an ever fix’d lark. (Kerouac to Ginsberg in first letter; Morgan & Stanford xxi)

How the ‘Beat Generation’ has risen, who is involved and why the members of the Beat Generation chose the specific term ‘beat’ are the central questions of the next few paragraphs. Because this dissertation focuses on Ginsberg’s poetry, the chapter will also illustrate how he and his poetry function within the Beats and how the group of friends are represented in his poetry. First of all, the introduction to The Penguin Book of the Beats shows that finding a correct/clear definition of ‘the Beat Generation’ seems quite complex, if not impossible. Not only are there several meanings of ‘beat’ ranging from a physical to a spiritual connotation but also an appropriate sense of ‘generation’ seems difficult to arrive at. The core group consisting out of Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac shared mythic, spiritual and aesthetic notions on their lives and friendships which eventually lead to the creation/naming of a group known for sharing and discussing literary interests. Later on, their literary voices would gain such a unified force that they started presenting themselves as a generation. However small they started, they recruited many other like-minded writers and thinkers such as bad boy Neal Cassady, the son of a publisher and former mental asylum patient Carl Solomon, the young poet Gregory Corso, Kerouac’s friend and author of Go John Clellon Holmes, and many others that were associated with other literary groups and schools in the 1950’s. Not only the main Beats, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs have different opinions on the origin and the original meaning of the term but also the later arrivals have included discussions on the function and impact of the bohemian group in their writing.

Internal Friction and Self-Promotion

This ambivalence regarding the definitions of the ‘Beat Generation’ turns out to be especially unavoidable when one takes the correspondence of Kerouac and Ginsberg into account. Whenever the term comes up in their conversations, it is downplayed by derogatory thoughts by either party. At one point Ginsberg advises Kerouac (who supposedly coined the term and was frequently asked for definitions) to “say it was just a phrase you tossed off one fine day and it means something but not everything. Tell them you got six vaginas” (Morgan & Stanford 370). This letter, together with some other letters will show a growing concern with the popularity that ‘The Beat Generation’ was receiving. This, furthermore, seemed to have been a cause for arguments between Kerouac and Ginsberg. Although they are the members of the much discussed ‘Beat Generation’, they did not
always experience it themselves as such. The many definitions Ginsberg, Kerouac and Clellon Holmes have come up with, illustrate how they are not a group of writers fixed to a specific manifesto and writing platform. It was mainly because of their shared visions and loose literary style they started to call and associate with the term ‘beat’.

In 1953, for example, Ginsberg is vigorously promoting his friends’ books to publishers and at one point writes a piece for The New York Times Magazine starting with: “Jack Kerouac and Clellon Holmes, both experts in the Beat Generation” (Morgan & Stanford 189). On doing this, he gets a vicious response of Kerouac who does not want his name associated with “habit forming drugs” (189). He even feels uncomfortable calling himself an expert on the Beat Generation let alone be coupled with Holmes artistically and professionally (189-90). Kerouac eventually started to revolt against the stereotypical bohemian drug image and felt he much rather wanted to promote the spiritual transcendence of values. This general feeling of uneasiness with the term does not mean the Beats did not promote its connotations and artistic/cultural implications. There are several works and novels written on the Beat Generation and its members, frequently by its own members such as On the Road (Kerouac), Go (Holmes), Beat Traveler (Kerouac). They do not shy from using beat or generation in their titles or as their topics. Further on, the dissertation will concentrate on their looseness of poetics and comfortable sociability making them a group of friends, while their status as outcasts, their visions on madness and drugs, their changed stance towards honesty and sensibility makes them a generation.

**Beat**

The term ‘beat’ was first used in the jazz scene and became part of other neologisms such as ‘deadbeat’, ‘beat-up’ in the musician jargon. In the Beat scene, Herbert Huncke introduced the word to Burroughs and via him to the rest of the gang (Charters xvii). For Kerouac this melancholy word inspired him to think about the previous ‘lost’ generation. A generation that was ‘lost’ because of war and atrocities. Instead of calling their new group of friends ‘found’, in that case, he rather preferred the word ‘beat’ which was a typical representative word for the hip-language from the 40’s (Morgan 2001: 236). Kerouac as well made an attempt to define their status as ‘Beat’ writers with the following: “characters of a special spirituality who didn't gang up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization...” (Charters xvii-iii). The meaning of ‘beat’, which Leerom Medovoi in Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity explains, can easily be added to what Kerouac tried to clarify, namely that they embodied a reaction to their suppressive environment by achieving a spiritually higher sense of poetics and being. They do this by emphasizing both their individuality and their shared fate. Medovoi’s definition of the word ‘beat’ focuses on the constant and specific formation of identities. In the most straight-forward explanation there are three alternative meanings for ‘beat’. First of all, “beat” could mean “exhausted”, which connected to a search for identity means a constant struggle, thus stressing mobility. This indicates a different understanding of self in that it underlines the constant regulation that is necessary with a changing environment. The self is no longer
a fixed unity, but an entity in process. Secondly, “beat” could be derived from “beatific” and in that sense signify a spiritual search, something especially Kerouac promoted. As Ginsberg explains: “darkness that proceeds opening up to the light, egolessness, giving room for religious illumination” (Morgan 2001: 237). Lastly, we could return to the original meaning (from jazz music) namely “rhythm” similar to “life rhythm” which can ultimately also mean having a “unique living identity”, being unique and able to establish a distinctive rhythm in living (222). In conclusion, the rebellious nature of this community of friends is directly connected to these three definitions, or better, life visions. Being ‘beat’ in all those meanings makes them the “age group that clashes with mainstream America” (222).

‘Generation’ & Collective Identity

On the specificity of ‘Generation’ we learn from Fitzgerald that innovative spokespeople of a new generation emerge three times in a century. They base their ideas on the outsider intelligentsia of the previous generation and try to effectively form an intricate web of thinkers who attract less defiant ones from the same time period (Charters xvi). And indeed, the Beats aesthetically succeeded and reacted to the generation of the New Critics that emerged after the years of High Modernism of the 1920’s. Burroughs not so much as Kerouac and Ginsberg, but they all initiated new formal experiments and renewals of older poetics such as the Whitmanic notion of self instead of Eliot’s objectivity/ impersonality. In this way, they reacted to the “rigour and complexity” of the New Critics (Burt & Lewin 156) 2. What is more, they, as the definition of ‘generation’ proclaims, augmented their triumvirate with many of their friends. Eventually, they also influenced a considerate amount of youngsters, who started calling themselves ‘hipsters’ as will be explored by Norman Mailer in “The White Negro”. This group of writers however, although being aware of their intimate friendship and aesthetic bond, did not immediately call themselves ‘beat’, not finding it necessary to paste a label on their friendship. But however unnecessary they must have found the label, a certain constructing, maintaining and manipulation of their group identity has taken place during the Cold War years. In the chapter “Beat Fraternity and the generation of identity” Medovoi explains how the Beat Generation represented a collective identity and even more so names it the “generation of identity” (217). The word ‘generation’ plays a significant role in explaining the Beats’ collective identity as well as in the literal formation of such an intricate identity. As already mentioned earlier, forming a generation implies reacting to other important voices of a previous generation. The fact that the Beats shared as many life visions (especially concerning mystic, mental and drug related issues) as they did made them find a unified voice, forceful enough to construct a representation, in their case a ‘beat’ and ‘beatific’ collective character. The Beats, together with people outside their peer group, achieved in

2 This particular “rigour and complexity” established a different kind of modernism than the one of the more “populist free verse[ed]” writers. New Critics’ poetics also countered that of poets like William Carlos Williams, who the Beats much rather seemed to acknowledge as their poetic example (Burt & Lewin 156).
forming a self, an “itself”, through their cooperation, influence and shared literary interest. So the group became a generation, which eventually lead to the formation of a collective identity by accepting the naming process and the realization of a generational voice augmented by sheer togetherness in mind and interests (216-217).

Ambivalence in Group Formation

Such a web of literary and social influence, however, is not always conceived as simply beneficial. Andrew Epstein’s Beautiful Enemies - Friendship and Postwar American Poetry, for example, warns us about several fallacies of existing analyses on literary influence. Previous analyses, namely, directed their attention predominantly on the vertical “anxiety of influence” by predecessor poets (4). For Ginsberg this would imply several perspectives on how he materialized some of his poetry in the style of William Blake, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams and others. This analysis, however, is especially interested in how Ginsberg dealt with horizontal influences of his contemporaries. This dissertation will consequently centre on how friendship, avant-garde association and a desire for individuality coexist in the poetic experiments of Ginsberg.

An anxiety of influence was prevalent since the general belief expected a certain uniqueness and power of introspection of modern poetry. A new perspective, in contrast, considers it fruitful to see how friendships get written in “subject, form, rhetoric and imagery” and properly reflect the daily reality in mid-century homosocial groups such as the Beatniks (8). Ginsberg freely incorporated a lot of ideas and influences of his predecessor poets but he also wrote a lot about his friends, frequently mentioning their proper names in his verses. He has in addition written collaborative poems with Kerouac, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky, his life partner, and recurrently wrote about his friends’ poetry and visions. This of course does not imply he completely erased an individual sense of self by hiding behind a collective identity, the impersonality of Eliot, or the unified self of the modernists. What is more, mid-century poetry cannot be solely analysed as chauvinistic and masculine like in Michael Davidson’s Guys Like Us, as it displays an intricate interaction between the subjective poet who thrives in “experimental individualism” and the poet as comrade and critic (Epstein 8). For this analysis, this would mean that Ginsberg’s poetry displays a coexistence of individuality, but also has an (inescapable) tendency towards communal writing, honouring his friends and their writing. Functioning in a generation therefore implies battling previous standards and prescribed ideas, and battling the dissolving of the unique poetic voice.

Ginsberg functioned in the close-knit atmosphere of the Beat writers, and explicitly surrounded himself with inspired and like-minded poets/writers, while, as we will discuss later, he lives in a time where conformity and anxiety scare the individual into accepted roles. An increase in individuality or a rise in collective/conformist identity are not always easy to distinguish. In the

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3 Homosocial bonds are intense non-sexual friendships with people of the same sex
process of modernization, many theories have been proposed when it comes to individualism. Markus Schroer, says Axel Honneth, puts forward three possibilities. Firstly, an increase in “conformist individualism” can occur because of the strict disciplinary workings of “education, administration and the culture industry” on the tendency to oppose and be critical. Secondly, our sense of self and consciousness might indeed be emphasized and stimulated because of a loss of tradition. And lastly, in between the previous two, we recover a self-reflexive attitude by avoiding traditional institutions, but at the same time find ourselves ambiguously more prone to conformism (Honneth 156). As we shall see in a later chapter, America will create —through a specific Cold War climate— a society mostly inclined to adopt Schroer’s first proposition of conformism. Ginsberg and his friends functioned on the periphery as well as in an avant-garde context and tried to oppose theses disciplinary workings of the nation by holding on to a more existential and introspective way of living. A group such as the Beats will consequently search for an own individual core of (collective) self in order to battle the all-encompassing conformity. The period in which the Beats formed themselves reveals an intricate dynamic between horizontal and vertical influence and a valuing of the creative, isolated artist.

Confrontation of the Self and Group Identity

Like The New York school in Epstein’s analysis, the Beats can therefore be considered as a group that shared values, aesthetic beliefs and reverie for influential predecessors, and who also formed “in close proximity” but were “noisier, more notorious” (6). In order to understand this collective identity of the Beats, there is either a negative or a positive approach to analyse specific group aspects of formation and influence. Psychoanalysts stress a “weak ego” as the primary foundation for group formation while sociologists, alternatively, positively underline the formation of a specific group culture that promotes “language, tradition and [...] values” (Honneth 202-203). The affirmative approach, moreover, analyses how “collective identities” protect an individual’s psyche and lets individuals derive their group structure from “deviations from dominant value systems” (203). Although the latter explanation seems to encompass the Beats’ credo completely it does not fully explain the strength of each individual Beatnik (ego) or their fear of losing autonomy in specific group formations, although the analysis does focus on deviancy. Bringing together both perspectives would give a better insight in the formation of the self (individually or collectively) and give, especially for Ginsberg, a more omnifarious image of horizontal influence and the way an individual copes with communal interaction.

Previously pointed out, the Beats brought into being a group of like-minded, equally inspired and deviating minds and thus created a collective identity counteracting repressive America (as will be the topic of the next chapter). This group participation is necessary as people need to weigh their values to that of others and, more specifically, need to construct a positive apparatus for self-recognition (which implies the continual need for approval by others). If not, they tend to lose reciprocal energy and consequently a strong “relation-to-self”. This is the case because one’s self-
image gets built through assessing others’ representations of self and self-value (Honneth 205). Someone’s notion of self is established through what he learns of the self-image of others. Mirroring certain aspects would benefit him into acquiring a positive self-consciousness and recognition. A group of like-minded friends is particularly necessary as the self gets constructed out of mirroring and affirming what others’ selves represent. Consequently, the Beats’ collective identity secured both individual and collective voices through reciprocal recognition and moreover protected their self-image as a generation. Key terms such as affirmation, interaction, judgement, self-image and self-confidence are essential when trying to understand group affiliation and were irrevocably present within Beat dynamics (Honneth 201-4). In John Clellon Holmes’ explanation on the Beats we recognize the same conclusions on their togetherness:

Sometimes I find myself wondering if this happened, in actual fact, in our case. But deluded though we may have been, it was a generation we sought to describe, and not simply a minority group and its exotic mores; it was a unique phenomenon-of-mind in all of us, and not only the eccentric behavior pattern in a few, that we felt impelled to name. [...] I believe that we perceived the new sort of consciousness that distinguished us from our elders with a clarity the intervening years have not seriously blurred (Charters 621).

Holmes, among other Beats, found himself in a “counterculture[...] of respect” because they battled a larger force in the form of a previous generation that was incapable of extending them assenting self-respect and lead them to seek out others for unison and self-recognition (Honneth 206). This togetherness helped establishing their own norms and values in a closed unit that, in turn, positively influenced their “relation-to-self”, in contrast to a society that denies them a recognized place and subsequently a symbol of support (206). The “new sort of consciousness” Holmes speaks of is developed through recognition and an encouraging interactive atmosphere in the Beat coterie.

In conclusion, group formation is based on self-recognition and reciprocal recognition. People have a basic need to be affirmed in their self-respect, self-image and self-esteem by peers. So sociability that leads to collective identities helps people in their need to find self-worth and an insight in their consciousness. In the case of the Beats, moreover, their collectivity stood out as deviating and had a very specific function. It was a safety net for minority characters in society that needed a shared “unique phenomenon-of-mind” in order to vitally experience self-respect and gain the strength they needed to overcome repressing features of the previous generation (621). Their mainstream social environment did not provide them with affirmative valuing, while the forming of the Beat Generation helped them gain voice and vigour.

**Spirituality as Binding**

Interestingly, the spirituality, their unique life rhythm and their sense of insurgence perfectly aligns with what Kerouac constantly argued in his writing on the Beat’s goals. In his letters to Ginsberg
another definition on the Beat Generation arises when he explains how the American College Dictionary made a mess of their interpretation on the Beatniks. Men “who affect detachment from moral and social forms and responsibilities, supposedly due to disillusionment” was changed by Kerouac to men “who join in a relaxation of social and sexual tensions and espouse anti-regimentation, mystic-disaffiliation and material-simplicity values, supposedly as a result of Cold War disillusionment” (Morgan & Stanford 427). In both definitions the Beats come forward as having a critical view on Post-war society and a mutual organic and spiritual flow in professional and social life. Yet Kerouac was ardent in his underlining of the religious, pacifistically oriented and anarchistic refusal of societies’ norms. In the poetry of Ginsberg there is no denying that spirituality maintained high regards in lines like “in a moment of provisioning sleep” from “Siesta in Xalba” (112), “I’m going to Pucallpa/to have visions” from “To an old poet from Peru” (249) or the celebration of experiment, the constant search towards higher spheres and the deep respect for spiritual thinkers in the lines:

Yet the experiments must continue!/ Every possible combination of Being-all/the old ones! all the old Hindu/ Sabahadabadie-pluralistic universes/ringing in Grandiloquent Bearded Juxtaposition [...] whatever drugs, or aire, they breathed/ to make them think so deep/ or simply hear what passed (Aether 251).

Their celebration of their “blessed inspiration” formed a strong connection between the Beat poets and again shows how they mirror the self’s identity to that of the others (Epstein 125). They function on affirmative juxtaposition in order to establish a spiritual group identity. The Beats thus found themselves aligned because of their deepened sense of spirituality and their inspired, almost mythic writing. They functioned in the same peripheral milieus as they were contesting society’s repressing and conformist nature when it came to drugs and anti-elitist writing. They recognized their outcast selves and others’ selves in the periphery through a unified voice, gained strength and counteracted other authoritative generations by naming and accepting their label as Beat Generation. Naming their group meant identifying their beneficial position of self-awareness and recognition, putting forward their spirituality meant underlining their recognition of their mental, inspired selves.

Notably, group formation is also emphasized by the actual appearance of Beat friendships and influence in Ginsberg’s poetry, and the exceptional amount of names that keep returning. When reading the four collections of poems The Green Automobile (1953-54), Howl, Before & after: San Francisco Bay Area (1955-56), Reality Sandwiches: Europe! Europe! (1957-59) and Kaddish and Related Poems (1959-60) Ginsberg wrote in the fifties, we certainly get to know his habitual coterie. Especially the personalities of his friends are all represented, but also names of his predecessors and influences frequently return. Some in epigraphs, some in dedication, but almost all get a spot in his epic poem “Howl”. The four collections contain 62 poems and the names of his Beat friends recur
almost 28 times. Kerouac and Orlowsky with five, Burroughs and Cassady with four are on top of the list. While “Howl” can serve as an illustration for Ginsberg’s strong bond to his Beat fellows and a mapping of the political and cultural climate ruling the Beat years, other poems such as “Fragment 1956” (the year in which he finished “Howl”) are a provocative addition to Ginsberg’s commentaries on ‘the Beat Generation’. The lyrical subject starts off by generally describing the “natural pathos of the human soul” which he classifies under tags as lustful, “intellectual” and conscious of the outer world, but also as part of his inner reality and known for its loving nature. Further on, we get a catalogue of names who, according to the speaker, are all worthy owners of such a soul. Herbert Huncke, Burroughs, Joan (Burroughs), and especially Kerouac seem to possess a “soul identical each to each” (157). The souls described here even have the ability to switch physical bodies. The lifetime experiences of these people do not draw boundaries between the intimate clinging of their souls, they only seem to bring them closer together. The “illumination” that the speaking voice experiences at the time of speaking, will eventually –he feels certain- come to all. The friends even find themselves in similar situations. They wander in tombs, are locked up in jails, or by paranoia constructed walls, and so on. It makes them so intensely connected that they can almost be considered each other’s lovers. Eventually, it ends with the death of Bill –William- Cannasta (Bill King) who jumped out of a “subway window”. At that moment, when Bill finds death, the lyrical subject asks “who else/ was he then but himself?” (157). Is this an indication that the choice for death separates him from the rest? Is this a suggestion that in death we regain our individuality? That the spiritual bonding of souls is lost? Either way, they are connected through their experiencing of the repressing and claustrophobic outer world, while they try to be “open-eyed, self-knowing, trembling with love”. For Ginsberg, self-identity is something affected by “lusts and intellectual faces” and is therefore formed through the constant affirmation of his environment.

‘Hipster’, Existentialism and Queer Culture

Already a few times now, their malcontent with the American mainstream environment has come to the surface. The Beats wanted to counteract the political malfunctioning America. In Rebels, differing opinions are displayed by the ones who conform and are called ‘square’ and the ones called rebel in mid-century hip jargon (Medovoi 31). This rhetoric is reminiscent of an influential article by Norman Mailer (who was directly involved with the Beats), “The White Negro” in which he discusses his view on the hipster as a psychopathic entity. This text proves highly valuable for all later remarks on the Beat poetics, such as introspection in confessional poetry, mobility and energy in being beatific, the postmodern self, and the self-doubt that occurs before finding an affirmative environment.

His text is a general introduction to the few individuals who felt a crisis to break through “the collective creation from the past” (Mailer 583-4). This can be linked to the earlier definition of Fitzgerald, which stated that a generation is formed and founded by rebelling voices. Ginsberg’s rebelling statement on the conformist ‘squares’: “SQUARES SHUT UP and LEARN OR GO HOME.
But alas the square world will never and has never stopt bugging the hip muse” clearly shows his discontent with critique from outside and underlines the reality of such dichotomies (Morgan 2001: 252). Correspondingly, Mailer names the new generation’s personalities “the American existentialist” and the “hipster” (584). Being square makes one subdued to anxiety filled regimes of Cold War America, while the hipster pushes boundaries until he finds himself beat, until the ultimate rebel in himself is discovered. Being a ‘white negro’ then, meant vicariously finding oneself living the immediate pleasures of existential negro life. According to Mailer, the joy, the bodily jazz music and the instant lust of the all-encompassing present are considered the best way to ward off the threatening aspects of negro lives.⁴

A fitting and most powerful line to accompany these statements, is one from “America” in which Ginsberg wrote: “It’s true I don’t want to join the army or turn lathes in precision parts/factories, I’m nearsighted and psychotic anyway./ America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (156). Ginsberg thus exposes his troubled mind and is willingly showing defiant behaviour in order to initiate change. Like the negro who lives in a gray zone between “totalitarianism” and “democracy”, Ginsberg puts forward his queerness and mental instability in an age where homophobic standards rule the nation. Instead of conforming, he fashions his life through physical pleasures and jazz, accepting his place on the outside of society. He mirrors this behaviour to that of the negro and makes the periphery his niche. This ‘deviancy’ gives him the opportunity to enjoy the same pleasures and immediate comforts as the outsider negro and lets him focus on rebelliously putting forward his queer/deviating identity. Like the negro he does not shy from the “warping of codes[...] from the sartorial to the rhetorical” (Davidson 101).

Mailer additionally underlines the existentialist’s motivation to get to know one’s passions in order to live a fuller life and find a religious purpose. This links up with the Beats’ persistent search for a unique life rhythm and a beatific, introspective life. Both your emotions and your religious conviction help achieve insight in your existence and inevitable non-existence or death (587). Being an existentialist then, means accepting a mysterious and unknown end to life and a belief in the search towards meaning and not in the end itself. The pain of having an inevitable present surrounding them, leads the existentialist to an ‘easy’ acceptance of death, and also makes them mystics, or even psychopaths (being lead by their drives and lusts). They construct their own rational feelings when death arrives, while the atheist is blinded by his deep belief in life itself with death as an empty closure (587) (“Ignu lives only once and eternally and knows it” (211)). Existentialism in the 50’s and 60’s especially had a powerful influence on notions of self as it tried to gain insights in a life that no longer had an identity organized by “transcendent meaning” (Gregson 42). It emphasized regaining an

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⁴ A line from the poem “Ignu” directly engages with the black man’s culture. An ignu is a particular type of person in which many Beats would find characteristics of their own lifestyle. One of the verses mentions that the ignu “listens to jazz as if he were a negro afflicted with jewish melancholy and white divinity” (212). So not only the melancholic state of mind is linked to negro existence, also a sense of spirituality comes forth out of this lifestyle.
identity through “personal authenticity” and “heroism” (Gregson 42). An example of this would be Ginsberg’s last poem, five days before his death “Things I’ll Not Do (Nostalgias)”. The slightly ironic summary and catalogue of things he will miss and never be able to re-experience again provides a compelling reflection on how his life has been a search for spiritual insights, mind-altering experiences, mostly achieved through drugs and journeying with a consistency in companions. Against the backdrop of a square environment the psychopathic existentialist lets out “infantile fantasies” and makes endless journeys hoping to find the “apocalyptic orgasm” instead of longing for the end, which is also shown in Ginsberg’s last poem as he keeps travelling, reading, teaching and searching (592-593). Philosophical psychopathic feelings, eventually, become Mailer’s main characteristic of the hipster (588). Interesting, then, is that these observations return in the analysis of confessional poetry which deals with inner desires, the unconscious, a new perspective on the (deviating) self and the self’s suffering and trauma.

The hipster is not always so extreme, but he suffers from the useless and aged principles of past and forefathers. In order to avoid disappointment, they need to build up new nervous systems and stay in a constant state of movement (591/596). We have already seen this in the definition of Beat and of Generation, and it seems that time and again, their collective identity is explained as a reaction against mainstream politics. The previous generation’s beliefs are perceived to be repressive and makes one want to evolve from ‘beat’ to ‘beatific’ and find a new ‘beat’. The ‘stability’ of conventional norms is countered with an inherent belief in motion. This is reflected in their unpredictable lifestyle, and in their sense of self. Notably, the hipster’s obsessive search for change is reflected in the choice of title for the first and iconic work on the Beat Generation, namely Go by John Clellon Holmes. One of the major characters is Neal Cassady, someone who, according to Holmes, was the perfect personification of the beat spirit. One of Cassady’s favourite expressions ‘Go’ became not surprisingly the most appropriate way to describe the lives of his friends (Charters xii). To this we can also add the title of Kerouac’s novel On the Road, a road trip which features a lot of the Beat friends and which also promotes a constant search and necessary change.

This sense of dynamics is extended to the last part of Mailer’s discussion in which he explores the tension between self and context. In order to get rid of values and totalitarian truths the “liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society” is necessarily acted out by the hipster (Mailer 601). What we read here is a reaction to the overarching sphere of the 1950’s. He posits a hypothesis of what a possible reaction may be on the part of the ones who see themselves on the periphery of society. The existentialist Mailer describes, explains how Ginsberg’s poetry engages with a new discussion on the self, how his verses reveal a new spirituality and why his poetics reveal a constant search for his

5 Especially in the poems in Kaddish and Related Poems self-doubt surfaces. He vulnerably questions life and death much more than he did before the lament for his mother. He lets himself be guided by drugs on a spiritual journey, and frequently life, death, and his existential self become the central themes.

6 “Over Kansas” speaks of an “illuminate nervous system” (126).
individuality, a unique self. When looking at lines such as “The kindly search for growth, the gracious desire to exist of the/ flowers, my near ecstasy at existing among them/The privilege to witness my existence -- you too must seek the /sun...” the reader experiences the actual writing down of these lines as a striving towards growth ( “Transcription of Organ Music” 148). The existentialist contemplates life and how one can perceive it as an outsider. He wants to make most of it and advises everyone to search for the things that are necessary to make you grow. In the case of his flowery friends, this means seeking for the sun. “Mescaline” too depicts a troubling search hoping to give the all-encompassing self-doubt a place:

I want to know
I want I want ridiculous to know to know WHAT rotting ginsberg
I want to know what happens after I rot
because I'm already rotting
my hair's falling out I've got a belly I'm sick of sex
my ass drags in the universe I know too much
and not enough
I want to know what happens after I die
well I'll find out soon enough
do I really need to know now?
is that any use at all use use use
death death death death death
god god god god god god the Lone Ranger (236).

He is afraid of what might happen to him after death but realizes life is already a process of decay. By verbalizing his most subjective and inner thoughts he also gives them a more rational feel. His fear of death eventually gets replaced by a questioning of the usefulness of his doubt. Is it really something one needs to know?

In essence, “The White Negro” gives a thought-provoking perspective on the ambivalent relationship between self and community. The existentialist aspect promotes a constant search for the self and implies mobility and change, something that is essential in the Beat’s existence that yearns for energy. This shifting self will later be reflected in the postmodern notion of self. The psychopathic aspect shows a renewed interest in the self and its deviant character and introduces a newfound significance of the subjective inner character. The dichotomy between the hipster and the square, then, encourages a collective identity. The hipster identifies with the negro’s outsider life and by searching for others who share his specific lifestyle, they are able to successfully form an influential counterculture to the mainstream squares.
The Lyrical “I” in “We”

The Beats have been a much discussed subject both socially and literarily, as for example Mailer’s analysis shows. One of the major focal points of many analyses is the friendship and (literary) closeness of the Beats (Micheal Davidson’s *Guys Like Us*, Andrew Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies*). In the literal sense of the word ‘generation’, Gary Snyder, the more exotic friend of the Beats, once said that the term is not correct, as the group was too small. But rapidly the core of friends met others and introduced everyone to everybody. In a short period of time Kerouac, Ginsberg, Lucian Carr and Burroughs added Herbert Huncke, Neal Cassady, John Clellon Holmes, Carl Solomon and Gregory Corso to their essential “family of friends” (Charters 2). Throughout the years, these writers helped, criticized and influenced each other but at the same time had such respect for variety and “pluralism” of interests that they could not be linked to movements relying on strict manifestoes and literary policies (Charters xxxiii). When reading about this naturally affiliated yet intense group of friends/writers, their unforced affective blending of life visions and the stress put on the individuality and personal work ethics paradoxically come forward. The next few paragraphs will elaborate on the already existing discussion on how much their friendship and homosocial bonding features in the works of the Beats.

Besides people outside the literary group, also Beat writers wrote about the interplay of friendship and individuality. They have written for anthologies, journals and own specific purposes on their writing ethics. Allen Ginsberg, for example, wrote several interpretations. One of those declares that the Beats are a group of friends working on their literary genres while over the course of several years “[the] smaller circle, through natural affinity of modes of thought or literary style or planetary perspective, was augmented in friendship and literary endeavour by a number of writers” (Morgan 2001: 237-238). Kerouac further explains the previously mentioned ambivalence of influence with two central phrases in one of his texts “Lamb, No Lion” (1958). First he wonders about their “mysterious union of minds” and then proceeds by praising the Beats’ “spirit of non-interference with the lives of others” (Charters 1995: 564). With this juxtaposition he again emphasizes the gentle nature of the generation when criticizing each other. Their friendship augments a unison in life visions yet forbids violent intrusions to someone else’s personality.

Allen Ginsberg and his friends write in a period which can be seen as a transition between modernism and postmodernism. The individual and isolated (as exists in modernist movements) poet gets contrasted to the Beatnik poets who not only consider their boy gang a worthy poetic topic but also “self-mythologize” their group and the group’s poetic insights (Epstein 26). Ginsberg in “Transcription of Organ Music”, for instance, concludes his poem with the wish: “I want people to bow as they see me and say he is gifted with poetry, he has seen the Creator” and frequently he attributes the same divine inspiration to his friends (148-149). In contrast to Davidson’s emphasising of their homosocial bonding, this makes clear that there remains an interest in the romantic image of the poet as divinely inspired. Next to their collective identity, there exists an individualistic notion of
the spiritual, subjective poet. Modernist avant-garde movements, however, promoted a lyrical subject that remained objective, and did not directly engage with intimate emotions, while the Beats frequently fuelled their lyrical persona with autobiographical, emotional reflections that implicitly and explicitly declare Beat poetic and social principles. Epstein gives “Howl” and “Sunflower Sutra” as an example but “Daydreams for Ginsberg” from Kerouac also provides a telling illustration. In this poem the lyrical subject starts off with an all-encompassing vision at midnight while the entire world floats before him, and he, as a prophet, says: “I know I’m/ forever right & all’s I got to/ do […]/ i will write/ it, all the talk of the world/ everywhere in this morning” (Charters 1995: 456). Further on, he does not only distinguish himself as a prophet but links himself to the Greek philosophers and proclaims his visions as worthy as canon writers such as James Joyce and Gore Vidal. The lyrical “I” feels he can sincerely convey his prophetic status to Ginsberg, placing writers such as Lucien, Ginsberg and Cassady (all featuring in the poem) on an equally high pedestal because (only) they know what it feels like writing down “all world” (456-57).

The previous poem not only explained the self-mythologizing aspect of Beat writing, but also exposes the audacious voice of the lyrical “I”. Indeed, the reader is confronted with an assertive “I” that is not scrupulous when it comes to engaging with his self/individuality and his environment. In most Beat poems, therefore, it may be so that the ambivalence between one’s own views and what is considered a friend’s influence is frequently explored on one and the same page. The Beats namely functioned in an avant-garde movement that promoted friendship and fraternity, yet were worried of losing their autonomy. This ambiguity, we will learn does not get enough attention in other analyses. The essential message here will eventually turn out to be that such avant-garde writing communities promote friendship and fraternity, yet simultaneously expect its members to maintain their autonomy.

**Avant-Garde, Modernism and Postmodernism**

It may be necessary to add some notions of mid-century avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism to these statements on the ambivalent self, to help explain the enduring interest in mobility and the individual. *The Five Faces of Modernity* tries to distinguish modernism and old avant-garde from postmodernism and neo-avant-garde. It sets apart the negativism and “intellectually anarchic” style of the postmodernists from the positivistic search of the modernists on a subconscious reality through mythology and poetry (Calinescu 135). The rise of mass production in culture, education and society has given postmodern writings a disillusioned and pessimistic character. “The new age”, according to Calinescu is:

> in perfect contrast to the self-aware spirit of ‘analysis, rationality, anti-romantic dialectic’ embodied in modernist literature, ‘apocalyptic, antirational, blatantly romantic and sentimental; an age dedicated to joyous misology and prophetic irresponsibility; one, at any rate, distrustful of protective irony and too great self-awareness’ (139).
The negative connotations of the postmodern world seem to be accompanied by a distrust of rationality and a celebration of everything that goes against a belief in the analytical nature of man. Elitism, as a result, is no longer considered the ideal. The ‘mass’-years in mid-twentieth-century America generate anti-elitists, people defying authority in order to make art “communal, optional, gratuitous or anarchic”. Eventually the dissemination of “the ego” follows (142). More than in modernist years, there seems to be a lesser valuing of the rational and thus a more doubtful period since the reconstruction of the variety of inner desires gets more attention in the postmodern age (Gregson 56). By choosing the internal tensions as central focus, they choose to explore almost undiscovered territory.

With the new avant-garde specifically, it seems that the element of surprise, which was highly acclaimed in modernism, is doomed to fail due to the habit of change. Typical for the modern years is a continuation of change, and the more we progress, the faster all this change accumulates. The renewal that was promoted by the modernists loses its effect in an age where newness is daily business. This makes the modern man accustomed to perpetual change, and as a consequence makes the cultural consumer barely affected by experimental art (Calinescu 146). This perpetual changing climate can, for instance, also be linked to the ever shifting figure of the Hipster explained in Norman Mailer’s text and shows a tendency towards the dissolved postmodern self. The avant-gardist, in other words, learns to stay mobile and has the ability to tear himself away from and be submerged again into his collective group (Epstein 145). These poets pledge faithfulness to a group but at the same time display a certain mobility and “commitment to kinetic change” (16). By this belief in continuous alteration, they also defy a simple notion of self and therefore a single allegiance (39). In other words, mid-century writers have trouble adhering to a set of values since a “crisis of ideologies” becomes the centre of the “‘modular’ structure” of the psychological world instead of a belief in one modern ideology (Calinescu147).

It consequently seems that the avant-garde is divided by the dichotomy of the individual countered by a belief in collective identity. In essence, the avant-garde is constructed around the notion of collective writing and ideas while they promote individual experiments at the same time. Critics such as Poggioli, Rosenberg and Burger, however, are no advocates of that individuality as they extensively wrote essays that avant-gardist writers exist in a social stream of grouped creativity in which “the avant-garde impulse and the individual self are mortal enemies” (Epstein 32). The Beats, however, are advocates of both communal, yet non-competitive, writing and poetry that conveys an exploration of the self and its individual powers. By the 1960’s, a vision on communal work ethics will be reflected in the Beat works by constructing a homosocial jargon (35). By doing so they contest modernist ideals of rationality and lean towards the postmodern tendency of mobility, change and deconstruction. Change is a basic notion for the Beats who frequently celebrate their energetic and unpredictable lives. This, furthermore, implies that the attempt of creating “unstable” and “mobile”
works is achieved through competition and creative stimulation between creative equals. Writers in the 1950’s are prone to search each other’s help and creativity in order to boost their own formal and spiritual experimentations. At the same time, however, Epstein stresses that such avant-garde poets feel uneasy because of “that idealized loss of self-hood” (36). He relates this to the paradox of the avant-garde battling the larger conformist society, asking for extreme collaboration within the group, while it lies in the nature of their writing to be nonconformist and anti-conventional. And indeed, the Beat writers have different affinities towards poetics and in any case they keep striving for an individual lyrical “I” and own aesthetic voice that keeps underlining personal pain and chaos. Burger’s and Poggioli’s deriding of the individual thus also becomes a reality for writers of the fifties as they struggle to find a balance between individual inspiration and group instigated ideas and jargon, which is the central idea of this dissertation. The communal beliefs and the tendency towards dissemination of the ego of the postmodern era are moreover not fully assimilated in the Beat poetics.

A quote from Ginsberg’s prose in which he defines the Beats may make this more apparent. He talks about dreams and how they “as the suchness of this universe pervade[…] all the spiritual intelligence of Beat writers on differing levels” (my emphasis; Morgan 2001: 246). Further on, he explains that “this basic metaphysical understanding of the eternal nature of dream, more or less clearly perceived by the various “Beat” authors according to their individual temperaments, served as common ground. It saved their essential work from the decay of time- because the “message” was permanent, as “change” and “emptiness” are a permanent gnosis from Heraclitus’ time to now” (my emphasis; Morgan 2001: 246). So Ginsberg feels that their working together establishes universal philosophies, because they are able to efficiently unite their natural inclination of individual thinking. Without meaning to, they all add to one stream of thought, yet remain their own thinking and individual self.

From Modernist Abstraction to the Grounded Voice
Zooming in on the mobile and more expressive self, it becomes clear that Beat poetics distanced itself from modernist principles of separating poetry from reality and emotions. For Ginsberg in “Back to the Wall”, the Beat Generation functioned as a safety net for the ambushed soul. “As long as this tender feeling body is under attack”, Ginsberg asserted, “there will continue the expression in art of the scream or weep or supplication the EXPRESSION in one form or other of that infinite- Self” (6). What is more, he experienced the avant-garde as the only expression that still made sense. The avant-garde gave a push to the “feelers of feeling” and allowed the “private sensibility” to reign under a money driven and power driven society (Morgan 2001: 7). Both the self as the collective made authoritative claims about the self and its environment. The apocalyptic dissemination of self and society by the avant-garde is, in consequence, assimilated into the Beats anarchic, loud and collective distrustful writings.
This belief in critical and rebellious writing in an age of rising popular “culture industry” was not always welcomed by some modernist theorists (Huyssen 144). Theodor Adorno, for example, wrote in 1947 that even in a controlled capitalist society art had no power to avoid being influenced by the culture industry. The consequences of merging of art and reality caused a loss of independence, and even reduced the art of its spirituality and criticalness. Art should maintain its independence from reality, and should show its autonomous force (144). This is, however, invalid for an analysis of the Beat gang. Art, for them, should directly engage with the external reality. They engaged with modern mass culture and were not the victim of such regressions discussed by Adorno.

Of this, Ginsberg’s walk through a night-time supermarket with Whitman at his side in “A Supermarket in California” is a perfect example (144). His choice of words resembles the discourse of the average consuming American, as he is “shopping for images” in “a neon fruit supermarket”. He envisions Walt Whitman and Gabriel García Lorca strolling past the “brilliant stacks of cans” while “possessing every frozen delicacy” (144). His verses directly engage with his consumerist environment and the lyrical subject admits to being enchanted by the magic of modern mass production. The ending nevertheless gives the reader a nostalgic and critical turn in which the lyrical voice questions human existence in contemporary America as opposed to the grand American life of Whitman’s years. Even if the Beats engaged in modernist culture and let reality seep into their inspiration, their writing increased in critical observations, kept propagandizing spirituality throughout the years and acclaimed to be above all truthful when immediately engaging with their (money-driven) environment. They were thus less anxious when it comes to “a commercially produced and manipulative mass art” than the modernists and were not keen on producing a “negative knowledge of the actual world” by resisting a reflective stance in their poetry (Brooker 50).

Ginsberg’s poetry in that case departs from a few modernist aesthetic principles. He not only resisted modernist detachment of poetry and external reality, but also questioned the breach between the lyrical subject and its emotions. As mentioned before, his notion of the avant-garde stresses its inherent quality of relieving one from its emotions. When talking about the lyrical subject, the constraints on the “expansive, romantic self” in modernism are discarded by the “autobiographical or confessional lyric” of poets such as Lowell, Ginsberg and Plath (Davis & Jenkins 173). The poet in the Beat Generation did not just abnegate the self completely, but as Naked Angels explains, Kerouac and Ginsberg looked back at Whitman and by doing so refused to “transcend [...] personality and private emotion” (Tytell 15). This should be nuanced because it is only to some extend that the poet permits the self to enter his poetic lines and when reading, one should always investigate how much the “artistic mask” permits an elaborate notion of self (15). In either way, however, the self in Ginsberg gets renewed attention and even frequently returns as an emblematic topic.

In any case, abstraction like the modernists praised found (almost) no form in the poetry of the Beat Poets. For example, Stein’s “Guillaume Apollinaire” functions as a good example for modernist
abstraction and a try at collage (Peppis 37). Only four lines long, the first line is a curious transcription of the poet’s name.7

Give known or pin ware.
Fancy teeth, gas strips.
Elbow elect, sour stout pore, pore caesar, pour state at.

Ginsberg’s “At Apollinaire’s Grave”, contrastingly, is no more than a means to talk about a day in the lives of Peter and the lyrical subject and an honouring of his example Apollinaire (Ginsberg 188). More than once the “I” returns, and is never rendered so ambivalently as in Stein’s sound play poem. In Stein’s four lines she plays homophonically with the “I” in the last line “Leave eye lessons I. Leave I. Lessons. I. Leave I lessons, I.” (Stein 279). This is a playful yet quite confusing line. Ginsberg’s poem, though, lets the lyrical subject’s voice strongly boom throughout the poem, when talking about a certain experience, and when he envisions the graveyard as a universe or when he thinks of himself lying in Apollinaire’s grave. In the light of this argument, confessional poetry, which experienced its height in mid-century, is an appealing explanation. Ginsberg is much more inclined than for instance John O’Hara, who also frequently questioned his self, to expose his real face through “authentication and revelation” (Davidson 114).

Confessionalism
A number of political and cultural changes such as the cold war, or the progress in nuclear warfare were a prime cause for the development of disturbed individuals and an anxiety driven community. With respect to Ginsberg’s poetry it has already become clear he frequently uses his poetry as an outlet to his deepest fears, emotions and past traumas (Collins 198). Confessional writing, then, provides a valuable perspective on Ginsberg’s verses because it explains more virtually the interest in introspection and the search for the self as well as the critique on the immediate present and experiences. The self gets more attention, the fundaments of self are questioned and above all poetry becomes almost the parallel of “the psychotherapeutic talking cure” (Gregson 48). John Osbourne in A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry gives us an overview in “Beat Aesthetics” of certain principles such as the valuing of individuality over the collective. He places the subjective hierarchically higher than objectivism and emphasizes the Beats’ natural inclination to the irrational and innocence. Even more, the emotions of the reader can only be weakened through subjective poetry that lets the personal voice speak from its own deepest emotions (185). The modernist approach of speaking to the reader’s emotions by a set of objective images is replaced by subjective, and explicit

personal images directly related to experiences of the lyrical subject. Citing Steven G. Axelrod, Lucy Collins gives specific and applicable basics of confessional poetry: “[a]n undisguised exposure of painful event... a dialectic of private matter with public matter... and an intimate, ornamented style” (197). The poet has lived through a number of early traumatic experiences and also in his adult life experiences after-effects. The madness of Naomi Ginsberg and Ginsberg’s own admission in a mental hospital, or the drug and alcohol abuse of Kerouac and Burroughs can for example function as the perfect inspiration/instigation for their poetry and prose. Ginsberg’s close alignment with confessionalism becomes clear in his extensive revealing of his past pains in poems such as “Kaddish”, “My Alba”, “Howl” or “To Aunt Rose”. Now the tendency towards subjective poetry, the direct representation of experience and the overpowering of the irrational spoken of earlier when discussing the modernism and postmodernism finds form in confessional poetry (197). The writer’s experience of intense individual hurt is released though the therapeutic tendency of confessional writing and through this the reader perceives the chaotic, fractured inner self of the writer. This categorization of the confessional poet can, for example, also be recognized in Ginsberg’s own words: “poetry: the renaissance of the individual sensibility carried thru the vehicle of individualized metrics-individually differentiating not conforming” (Morgan 2001: 8). Ginsberg relied heavily on a direct expression of the personal mind, hoping to convey this through innate poetic yet unconstructed lines. This technique helps him, as Collins says, to intensely speak to the reader’s emotions, and lets him address and avoid a conformist “pre-packaged” America (Morgan 2001: 7).

The first line of “Howl”, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness”, accentuates Ginsberg’s affiliation with his friends and contemporaries, but equally points out the ambivalent perspective he himself was in. Ginsberg –like most of his friends– suffered from bouts of madness and mental issues.8 This, according to Collins, has shaped the connectedness together with a certain “competitiveness”. The latter is due to a strong leaning towards “omnipotence”, comparable to the self-mythologizing illustrated in a previous paragraph) (198). The harsh cultural and political American environment not only helped shape collective voices, it also “victimized the individual” so that confessional poetry served to mend the mutilated minds through writing about own personal difficulty. This emotive poetry therefore aimed to reflect on mental disintegration and the consequential need to find ways to puzzle things back together (198-9). This again links up with the already dismissed modernist inclination towards abstraction. Eliot’s statement that “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” now no longer subsists as a poetic fundament (199). Ginsberg much rather used his poetry as a way to reflect on lasting friendships, daily emotions and trauma’s past. The creation of poetry is as a

8 These worries about mental health included concerns about his homosexuality as it was illegal and most other homosexuals he knew were outspoken “queens” (Morgan 2006: 120). It became clear however that the doctors at the mental hospital thought “insanity was basically absurd, eccentric behaviour” (Morgan 2006: 116). Ginsberg disagreed with this misunderstanding of the nature of insanity and started thinking and writing about being different without feeling guilty, nor crazy.
result dependent on his unstable state of mind and emotion. It in no way perfectly distinguishes the suffering from the creation as the creation is mostly derived from the suffering. His verses let him escape from fears and let him come to terms with certain overwhelming emotions by structuring them through poetry. His topics mostly include the madman, madness, conformist and war-driven America, visions and drugs and as such give the writer back self-esteem and self-respect on the collective as the individual level.

Formally, both Collins and Osborne agree on the attempt of the Beats to write natural flowing, organic poetic lines that leave behind complexities in images and symbols, or as Osborne critically titles his piece “a practiced spontaneity” (199/187-191). In general, Collins comments on the loose forms that the later confessionalists want to achieve, as well as on their hopes to convey the poem’s psychological reality as directly as possible to the reader (199). For Ginsberg, this means taking the position of the outsider in both social context and in his (crude) literary achievements. Furthermore, what Osborne presented in one derogatory breath, Collins observes as one of the most outstanding characteristics of Ginsberg’s writing. The natural inclusion of both the details and wider scope of society and self, but also an intimate relationship with “earthly reality and spirituality” (202). The poem “An Asphodel” for example shows the lyrical “I” reflecting on existential issues while lying drunk on the floor in a darkened room. He wonders about reality and a method of changing the inevitable. He feels himself “inspired” and “dreaming” but at the same time reveals a vulnerable loneliness in his nakedness. Death and life are an equal concern during his (literally) bared, spiritual reflections. The specific choice of a flower to mirror his apprehension of life and his own nudity compared to his open mind also reflects the confessional poet’s incorporation of details combined with earthly reality.

A comparison to modernism’s closed and self-contained self can give a deeper insight in Ginsberg’s experimental writing. Modernisms: A Literary Guide takes its reader through the 1920’s and high modernism (which is clearly distinct from the paradigm of postmodernism (Huyssen x)) and points out that the ‘Men of 1914’ kept the self as a closed unity and avoided on the one hand authentic self-expression and on the other hand an exploration of the internal psychological world. They much rather wanted to reconnect art to the public than dive into the unconscious (Nicholls 251). The twenties, represented the self through “impersonality”, and as an imbalanced entity (Nicholls 253-4). Ginsberg, however, tries to incorporate his own suffering, his friends’ suffering, his society’s suffering and does not feel embarrassed to emphasize the taboos of the mind and body in order to gain insights. The modernist poetic principles, then, go against what the reader encounters in the poetry of Ginsberg: an uninhibited flow of feeling and spontaneity in representing inner and external reality.

The poem “Tears”, for instance, shows us an emotional lyrical subject who is confused in all his crying. Typical for Ginsberg’s poetry is the anaphora of the central sentence “I cried”, provoking an atmosphere of incantations by someone who laments. He is unafraid of showing his emotional and unstable self. He cries “listening to Bach”, he cries for “happy flowers” and “middle-aged trees”. He
knows happiness is to be found, but still he keeps on crying. He cries for both his own soul and the “world’s soul” (Ginsberg 159). He finds himself loving the world while still crying. He sways from minute scenery such as indiscriminate streets to the whole of Paterson, from his own soul to the one of the world, from himself to god and from flowers to trees. Not only does he connect with his inner self, he also connects feelings and selfhood to the outer world. There is no rational explanation and he is utterly sentimental, and without his crudeness still succeeds in creating an outsider position in which he critically questions his own and the world’s emotions. Through his personal lyrical voice he thus rejects the modernist perception of an impersonal speaker.

Not all poems, however, show such a dedication to the self’s deepest emotions. Some poems also reveal their confessional aspect through an authoritative subjective voice that merely states its emotional path. The poem “My Sad Self” (209), for example, with the epigraph To Frank O’Hara, clearly places the ‘me’ in the spotlight by starting the title with a clear focus on the self. Frank O’Hara is known for writing openly about his inner self, even known for writing “vulgarly about his feelings and his life” (Epstein 102). The flâneur-like procession of the poem “My Sad Self” then shows an intricate engagement with the self’s pain and emotions as well as with O’Hara’s interest for the flaneur and the way the self is “composed minute by minute” (Gregson 50). Just like O’Hara likes to concentrate on “existential notions of personal authenticity”, Ginsberg permits the lyrical voice to “walk in the timeless sadness of existence” (Gregson 53; Ginsberg 210). The lyrical subject declares: “Sad,/ I take the elevator and go/ down, pondering,/ and walk on the pavements staring into all man’s plateglass, faces” (209). Introspection has become the theme of an entire poem and proves to be a worthy topic of discussion. Even the ‘trivial’ emotion of sadness (without any cause) deserves attention, as it enlightens the inner self and its inexplicable and unpredictable motions. The self’s sentiment is linked to the mobility of the subject as he walks the streets. This is a celebration of the meandering mind, of the reflecting self rather than a reflection on his surroundings. By giving the self such renewed attention he provides poetry a new discourse for introspection and subjectivity. So the description of the town in which the subject walks is not used to conjure up emotion, it is the subject and his emotions that take over the role of the objective correlative. Immediate self-expression replaces objectively described images, scenes and objects to show the intimate self and, what is more, a self that is mobile and splintered: “composed minute by minute” (50).

To conclude, the Beat Generation has proven to be a much discussed subject. In addition to the meaning also the importance and maintaining of such a group has frequently caught the attention of both Beat friends and critics. The group of friends persist on their individual style and insights, but seem to be naturally connected through life style, visions, spirituality and friendship. Influence is therefore unavoidable. The Beats’ participation in an avant-garde movement only enhances their critique on society and friends’ writings. Their movement especially seems to display a rupture with certain modernists poetics such as impersonality, abstraction, rationality, myth and the subconscious. For that reason, Beat poetics leans more towards certain postmodernist tendencies, but Ginsberg’s
poetry does seem to have a quality of its own, namely the confessional aspect. In this, the desiring, chaotic and deviant self as analyzable given resurfaces against the context of the Cold War. In a later chapter, the poetry of Ginsberg will be analyzed in order to find the insistent communal influence in his work in dialectics with his own individuality. The question will then arise if he welcomes such tensions or if his poetry displays a certain discontent with a mixture of (horizontal) influences.

By avoiding society you become separate from society and being separate from society is being BEAT (Gregory Corso qtd. in Watson 5).

Political Context

A closer look at the period is necessary, as we need to understand what the literary climate was after WWII and what the consequences were of a changed political climate for writers in the post-war period. The Beats were an avant-garde group that can be situated in a transition period of a modernist paradigm to a post-modernist paradigm, more specifically during the fifties, or the early Cold War years. Most Beat individuals already started writing in the 1940’s and Kerouac and Ginsberg formed their friendship and epistolary correspondence as early as 1944. These writers came of age during WWII, and later experienced several major shifts in the political era of latent war. Ginsberg’s poetry and prose frequently made comments on these political events. “To Aunt Rose”, for example, commemorates Aunt Rose while it also reminds us of Hitler’s death (192). Both “Kaddish and “Hymmm” speak of Trotsky, and the former of Mussolini, Fascists and spies (217/253). “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear”, lastly, mentions Franco, the war machine, “petroleum mongers”, “bombs of larceny”, and sliding into the 50’s, emphasises “rockets” and “obsession on property and vanishing selfhood” (175-176). For this chapter in specific, the attention will be on the fact that “nobody publishes a word that is not the cowardly robot ravings of a depraved mentality” (175). The political, domestic, cultural and social crises that ruled the nation were so encompassing that it is impossible to ignore when discussing the Beats and their writing.

After the nuclear bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, WWII ended. Although the atom bombs had put a stop to four years of violence, the race for superior military power and nuclear weaponry between the US and USSR would last another fifty years. People who at that time became adults had grown up with parents who had lived through the first world war, had themselves felt the climate of depression in the thirties, and heard the announcements of war on the Axis Powers after Pearl Harbor was bombed. To top it off, one of the most destructive weapons ever made was tested and eventually used in action to end WWII. The fifties brought about other (war) ideologies that kept controlling the political doubts of US inhabitants. Already in 1947, George F. Kennan wrote what later became known as the ‘long telegram’ against the Soviet’s regime in which he described how democracy and communism would never be able to exist in the same universe (Isaacs & Downing 30). In that

9 “A poem on America”: “all the pictures we carry in our mind//images of the thirties/depression and class consciousness/transfigured above politics/filled with fire/with the appearance of God” (72).
document he promoted a ‘containment policy’, “a policy of calculated and gradual coercion”, because if the USSR would find a safe haven anywhere, the entire American society and traditional norms would be reduced to chaos (JL Harper 59; 93). At all costs, communism should be kept off American grounds and should be reduced to an absolute minimum in the rest of the world. Furthermore, to achieve greater power than the Soviet, the USA installed security institutions and issued regular rapports on what happened across the Iron Curtain. Not all of these, unfortunately, were equally accurate and could contain exaggerated and incorrect information. National Security Council Report 68, for instance, exaggerated heavily on Soviet weaponry power in the beginning of the 1950’s (“200 atomic bombs” and an “intercontinental bomber” were not developed by the Soviet before 1955) (J.L. Harper 93-94). Generally, this created a very paranoid and anxiety filled atmosphere.

Agency Panic, Other-Directedness and the Suburbs

People as a result started to react explicitly and implicitly to this environment of alertness and mass controlling devices. The term “agency panic” specifies how people at that time relied much more on overarching social and national mores than internalized instincts. Unconsciously, the majority of the American population conformed to traditional norms and Cold war credos. On top of this mass controlled society, ‘normalcy’ and conformism became the authentic ideals set by anti-Soviet America. People found themselves living in a nation controlled by mass production and supported this by their anonymous mass consumption. This “other-directedness”, which implied someone was more likely to follow external norms than one’s own instinctual values. Other-directedness is a term coined by Riesman, and this focus on external values eventually gave people a feeling of loss of selfhood and confused them into conformity (Medovoi 22, Davidson 7; 17). Opposed to “other-directedness” we find two other character traits, correlated to their individual social contexts, namely “traditional directedness” and “inner directedness”. The latter suggests a person, directly influenced by a small domestic circle (such as family) who is capable of achieving the goals he himself has set. “Other-directedness”, however, focuses on a much broader circle. Family, neighbours, the town, nation and mass media were able to pressure this “cosmopolitan” person into conformity.

This political context and argumentation influences the previous discussion of self-recognition, which is inevitably linked to confirmatory actions of your environment. “Recognition” in such authoritarian circumstances is able to raise subordinated citizens (Honneth 77). Without actively repressing people, Cold War ideology sets up “reciprocal recognition” that motivates people to willingly submit to society’s needs instead of forming individual self-oriented selves (75). “Social recognition” can as a consequence coerce one into “formist ideology” that through conditions of recognition can stimulate people to subject (77). This helped form such close-knit communities such as the suburbs, where people raised their children to play with the other kids and become popular.

10 The same has happened in more recent times with Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Information is used in order to wage a war.
“Keeping up with the Joneses” found its literal incarnation in the other-directed suburban families (Riesman 3-26). So Cold War ideology influenced the political and economical climate as well as the domestic spheres. People on the whole lived in latent fear as the reports of communists and nuclear weapons kept streaming in.

An interesting aspect, as already briefly mentioned, were the suburban families that became the image of traditionalist American values. The rise of ‘the modern nuclear family –that only consisted of the core of parents and children- were shipped to the outskirts of town, is what for Medovoi can also be called a “Cold War ideological apparatus” because it confirmed Cold War ideology by displaying the perfect American ideal (19). It has thus become clear that the Cold War ideologies do not only remain influential on political and militaristic grounds. Also the domestic spheres –families and suburbs– were the paragon of anti-communist, extremely solid traditional America. Politically and economically these suburbs contributed to Cold War domestic ideology and forged a conservative shield against the Red East. People opposed to this ideology were marked as an equal threat like the Soviets. In other words, ‘containment’ functioned as an ‘ideologically driven system of socio-political repression’ and the eventual “other-directedness” also provided a subdued crowd to support repression internally (Medovoi 19).

On the political level, after the execution of the Rosenbergs, who were believed to have given information to the USSR, many started believing in the infiltration of the reds, something that would invoke witch hunts and further paranoia. A telling instance is McCarthyism, derived from the exploits of Senator Joseph McCarthy (Isaacs & Downing 112-3). He made claims that communist infiltration had occurred in almost all political, cultural and educational institutions in America and he accused previous administrations to have been too soft in the implementation of their anti-communist policies. So in 1950-51 more investigations were set up and even national heroes such as Chaplin did not escape the “anti-commie-crusade” (114). Furthermore, containment remained the most prevailing policy of the Truman-years, until Dulles ('53-'59) came up with “Rollback”, a more forceful policy than the one on containment as it propagated the the restraining of communism together with an active war policy of fighting communism. This became impossible to execute, however, seeing that America would not cross the Iron Curtain (127). It was in those years, in which the collective morals were repressed and moulded, in which a policy of containment was implemented in- and outside America that Ginsberg published “Howl” in 1956. The obscenity trial that followed in 1957 was fascinatingly considered extremely healthy for the critical literary climate. His case got a lot of support and in the words of his bibliographer Bill Morgan: “The “Howl” case was hailed as an important judicial decision upholding the constitutional amendments, protecting the freedoms of speech and a free press. It was one of the first rays of hope for a country after the repressive McCarthy era” (2006: 250). Ginsberg, in other words, became one of the voices in a countermovement against war, lost liberties and against the absorption of the individual in a subdued collective.
The Avant-Garde and the Rebel

The Beats themselves avidly discussed the ongoing tensions and their opinions thereof. In *Jack Kerouac & Allen Ginsberg: The Letters* there are several letters that discuss the changing political climate. In August 1954, for example, Ginsberg considers “all hell will break lose when Asia begins fucking us, so the possibility of a prophetic poem, using ideas of politics and war and calling on love and reality for salvation, etc” (232). His writing was, as he indicates himself, frequently based on what happened on world scale, and wanted to address the healthier, more pacifistic aspects of humanity. Moreover, in 1960 both watched the Nixon- Kennedy debate and although Kerouac and Ginsberg felt ambivalent towards communists and the Red East (not knowing whether to support or not), they did agree on a pacifist stance in politics. In the following excerpt we explicitly hear Ginsberg’s discontent with military and patriotic war ideology: “Nixon is [...] not ‘giving an inch’ to the communists. He is very evil, like that. I register I’ll vote for Kennedy. Both are phony and both are outright warmongers, the communists are right on that” (460). Not choosing either side, Ginsberg condemns the specific policy of war and militant foreign actions of America during the Cold War. He explicitly voices unusual remarks in a period that would most likely condemn him to be an outsider, or worse, a communist.

Furthermore, most authors that we have already encountered such as Norman Mailer, Judy Collins, Andrew Epstein, and Michael Davidson have mentioned how the political climate influenced the formation of specific groups such as the Beats. The Beats namely included similar notions of disillusionment and discontent about the political climate in their writing. Their disagreeing stance towards governmental decisions therefore helped them maintain their collective policy of criticalness. Words such as conformity, anxiety, communism or war are impossible to ignore when analysing 1950’s poetry because these terms not only constantly recur in secondary sources but also receive an equal amount of attention in the poems themselves. With an America ruled by fear and anxiety about “nuclear paranoia, McCarthyism, communism, conformism [and] corporate anomie” it may not be a surprise that Beat writing uses its aesthetic rebellion as a counter device to the rigid cultural and political environment (Davidson 4-5). The ‘contained’ ideas that were propagated by the American ‘totalitarian’ state showed such force that they provoked anxiety in insider groups and also directly stirred outsider groups into (counter)action.

For the most part, this dichotomy of insider and outsider parallels the square-hip tension we have already encountered in Mailer, particularly the periphery or margin (hip) counteracting mainstream conformist groups (square) (Davidson 49). The discussion of the avant-garde, however, is not as easily defined as the more clear-cut dialectics of mainstream and periphery. The Beats

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11 Intriguingly, Ginsberg’s biographer mentions a striking silence in Allen’s journals during the end of WWII when the atom bombs destroyed Japan. What his thoughts were on the subject remain unknown. Many sources, however, mention the end of the war as a “major catalyst” in the formation of the Beat Generation (Morgan 2006: 69).
paradoxically played with the discussion on what constitutes inside and outside. As an avant-garde group in the 1950’s they “incorporate[e] the margin”. The inclusion of a marginal stance meant they made it a “centering feature” (50). Their outsider status was fundamentally based on their centring of the margin. Furthermore, they profiled themselves as a marginalized group, but this did not mean they were completely excluded from the mainstream, insider world (50). In other words, the Beats resisted certain facets of conformist American Cold War culture, but their literary rebellion could also be seen as a “reflex of larger forces they could not control” (50). Less theoretical, the “bohemian excess” that was so typical for Beat writing started to be associated with being part of the “cultural mainstream” (51). The Beats, for instance, denounced mass media in their writing, resenting the “Frankenstein” image that has been put up of their group, but they themselves have developed skills in manipulating the mass media, and are, in other words, not wary of publishing in the popular press (like Kerouac or Mailer in Playboy) (Medovoi 221). Because of this difficulty in labelling, geographical and political boundaries are for Davidson in *Guys Like Us*, more efficient than literary boundaries when underlining the “proximity of cold war ideology” to the “literary tradition” (4). With this he confirms Axelrod’s statement that these poets are much more Cold War poets than they would fit a modernist or postmodernist label. In further research, the Beat Generation might also be analyzed as a counter current to modernist (positivist) thought and as such a precursor to postmodernism.

To conclude, we can state that the containment policy has taken its toll on the view of the American way of living and thinking because it relied heavily on anti-Soviet propaganda, and stirred people’s fear of internal (“domestic”) deviancy (Davidson 40). According to Ginsberg then, it would seem that because of the public concern about deviancy/normalcy the general opinion would sound like this: “[w]hy should [we] support, with tax-payers’ money, dirty poems, anti-American poems, ‘immoral’ poems? Kill the U.S. avant-garde that helped with the Cold War in Eastern Europe!” (Morgan 2001: 499). The progressive literary groups, which Ginsberg thinks are essential for a healthy society, have become the disease of cultural life, are thought to be promoting communism, anti-conformism and discarding traditional values. Even though countercultures are a healthy addition, fifties America did not perceive them as such. Their collective identity is thus formed because their group affirmed what the nation’s ideology rejected. Interestingly, the Beats, although functioning in an avant-garde group, have trouble with completely avoiding the typical aspects of America’s credos at the time. They created an identity and poetics very much influenced by the Cold War Years.

**The Cold War Rebel in “Howl” and “America”**

Already brought up in the previous chapter, the 1950’s poets displayed a hesitant relationship to individuality, friendship and avant-gardistic notions of collectivity. The individualistic notion of flux

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12 Because of the Beats’ fascination for spirituality and Buddhism they were diametrically opposed to secularized political countercultures such as communism. This does not, however, prevent the mainstream to associate them with communism.
and continuous motion, specifically, acquires extra meaning in the context of McCarthyist America as it implicitly contests the striving for unity in the domestic and social spheres (Epstein 17). A stable American family became the ideal of 1950’s Cold War years. Divergence from this norm, however, becomes clear in Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” in which he wonders “[t]oward education marriage nervous breakdown, operation, teaching school, and learning to be mad, in a dream—what is this life?” (217). He asks questions that have an unsettling effect on the ideal American citizen who wants to fit in and who is embedded in the ideology of “other-directedness”. A completed education, a marriage to a girl, a job are things Ginsberg never aspired. His mother’s mental illness and his rebellious friends had taught him to accept abnormalities, and did not expect him to conform. Abnormality rather than conformism, questioning rather than resigning oneself, hipsters rather than squares easily find a way in his verses and reveal his feelings about his own self and that of his coterie.

It therefore seems the Cold War years nurtured ‘rebels’ or as Philip Lamantia, another mid-century poet, has once said: “To Rebel! That is the immediate objective of poets!” (Watson 215). After the last war, when youngsters needed to fulfil adult tasks much sooner because their fathers were away at the front, people started talking of the “sovereign status of American Youth” (Medovoi 29). In essence, this could on the one hand lead to delinquency, or negative rebelling (even get them on the verge of becoming ‘psychopaths’14) or on the other hand produce positive rebels, rebels who addressed the misdoings of society (32). In line with what Mailer argued for the Beats’ cause, the positive rebel is described as someone well aware of his selfhood and an avid protector of his individuality. The dichotomy of an authoritative atmosphere supported by the collective and the lonesome figure of the rebel was something that kept returning. We see this in the discourse of squares and hipsters, or the terms mainstream and periphery, but it needs to be stressed that the rebel is not necessarily negatively connoted. Moreover, the groups or individual outside the centre of society unavoidably function in that same society. The rebellion that is described in Lindner’s “Raise your child to be a rebel”, comes forth out of the distinctive separation of the self’s wishes/desire from that of an identified other. Boundaries like these help the child to gain insights into his own needs and to assert his position in the greater whole of society.15 Linder wanted to sort out the different associations linked to the term ‘rebel’ by addressing the negative connotations and opposing these with a positive perspective on the rebel. As a consequence, the positive rebel becomes someone who functions as a protector of social democracy instead of a destroyer of social traditions (33). Like Honneth’s study on the adult self, the child prospers if it is freed from the unconscious, repressed drives and is able to move without the controlling “pressures of any authoritarian system” (Medovoi 33). The victory in the obscenity trial is

13 Yes, I should be good, should get married/find out what’s it all about/but I can’t stand these women all over me/smell of Naomi/ erk, I’m stuck with this familiar rotting ginsberg (Mescaline 236)

14 In Mailer and Lindner, the meaning of psychopath did not mean what it does now.

15 This is a perfect addition to Honneth’s study on recognition, as it describes the child’s need for affirmation and encouragement. Honneth argues for the same analysis for the matured self. We move from the smaller circle of family and parent to a broader influential group of friends, colleagues and more.
one example of the more positive perspective on rebellion during the Cold War, but most of Ginsberg’s poems were not just celebrations of drugs and obscene behaviour, they convey reflections on what he does with his life, how he asserts his ‘American’ freedom and how he wants to fashion his self. Through this specific rebelling, Ginsberg promotes self-assertion and again shows a particular fascination for personal identity.

“Howl”, in this case, emerges as the perfect example of a rebellious voice against some of the discussed principles of traditionalist America. In his expression of fear for an enormous force which encompasses almost every physical and mental wrongdoing of the world, the lyrical voice shouts: “Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible mad houses granite cocks! monstrous bombs!” (139-40). The demographical and political changes are all absorbed by Moloch, something presented as an army, as filth, as mentally instable, as banks, war, or as “stunned governments”. Every aspect that contradicts the Beats’ lifestyle is in “Howl” represented as Moloch. They are not a threat to the nation but the nation forms a threat against their ideals of freedom. What most Americans call democracy is conceived as almost totalitarian in the eyes of Moloch’s victims.

Another interesting stanza for the discussion on nonconformity, or the lone rebel presents itself in the third section, namely the one in which the lyrical voice pledges support to his friend Carl Solomon.

I'm with you in Rockland where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we're free (141).

His experience with Solomon in a mental institution gets imbedded in a discourse that explicitly derived its terms from militaristic and nuclear warfare. As if surveying a battlefield, they experience their souls flying, but then bombs are dropped and illumination comes as if an implosion has taken place. A comical image of legions is sketched as the ‘crazies’ of society have decided that imagined walls, in addition to the actual walls of the hospital can be broken down and so they start wandering on the lawns. Shock therapy is ironically called merciful when finally the impending war broke out. We get submerged in militaristic terms and a discourse that would have been heard everywhere in the media to justify the war, only here Ginsberg employs it ironically to expose what was regarded as deviant. This suggest that the war that America is fighting with the USSR, is equal to the war on anomaly and mental instability: unjust and destructive for pacifist ideals. Containment is extended towards the individual who gets contained in a mental asylum, by shock therapy. Nevertheless, Ginsberg dryly concedes, “O victory forget your underwear we’re free” (141).
For the asylum patients, walls are imaginary and the simple action of forgetting to clothe oneself means freedom. They expose themselves in order to show that conformist America has not taken their identity, nor damaged their selfhood. The nudity represents their uniqueness, their strongly formed and independent selves. The Beats felt deceived by their nation and politicians, and in protest stressed a policy of “baring the body and exposing the soul” (Tytell 4). This echoes the poetics of confessional poetry, in that it advocates introspection and an interest in the inner ‘madness’. Neither Ginsberg, nor Solomon were letting themselves be repressed by a “starry-spangled shock of mercy” and instead welcomed nakedness of mind and body as a recovery from their sheepish nation (Ginsberg 141). These last two poems accuse the state of repressing their collective ideology as Beats, and the “I” that speaks like an inclusive “I”, almost as a spokesperson. Other poems like “Battleship Newsreel” (214), “Europe! Europe!” (179) “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear” (175-178) speak from a single person’s discontentment. The most individual lyrical subject, however, can be found in the poem “America” (154-156).

“America” represents Ginsberg’s positive rebel status as a counter figure to America, the warmonger. Because of the transgression on the part of America, the lyrical subject wants to become a saint, and in a sense reveals his wish to rebel positively through his writings. The first stanza reveals his rebelling as being an enthusiast of Marx’s writings, but at the same time he exposes himself as an avid reader of Time Magazine, which is reminiscent of the infiltration of mass culture in the Beats’ lives and literature. The second stanza, then, digs deeper and shows the lyrical subject confusing himself with America. The self’s boundaries are stripped and a vicarious experience is conjured up. When he eventually crawls back into his own skin he “wants to take our cars from out our garages” (155). This statement directly engages with the suburban desire for commodities and the reification of the nation’s wealth and the consequential threat that Russia would gladly destroy this modern American comfort.

Throughout the poem we notice that he, as an individual, takes up the responsibility for addressing America’s problems, but it is only the last few lines that indicate his dedication. In the last stanza the expressive and authoritative “I” asks: “America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set. America is this correct?” (56). Because of the circumstances he finds himself in, he questions recent developments on political and military decisions and concludes: “America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (154-56). After three pages of remarks and one question, he does not await an answer. He performatively reveals actions will be taken. The direct confrontation between America and its queer citizen is therefore concentrated in that last sentence. It directly exposes a forceful countercultural voice. He explicitly exposes himself as queer, and shows himself equally worthy of fighting the system as any other individual. “Howl” and “America” show a critical,  

16 Later, with the third chapter of analysis, we will see how the recurring use of “naked” or “nudity” as a theme can also signify the complete opposite of strength and defiance and mostly stresses the consequences of their credo of change and search.
self-aware (sometimes collectively speaking) individual that has not yet lost its inner-directedness and chooses to stay at the periphery of the society he lives in. Awareness and recognition have taken place outside society and helped develop a strong personality that has come to terms with its ‘deviancy’. With this distanced position the autonomous individual has a better scope to criticize the collective, war-focused and ideologically repressed America. With the conclusions he makes he gathers strength and frees himself from walls and lets his words remediate the sick nation.

For poets like Ginsberg, the perpetual influence of containment on domestic life makes poetry a “linguistic suburb” in which one can impose external anxiety while abiding in a safe world of words (Davidson 5). In Ginsberg’s own words: “America is having a nervous breakdown. Poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul of the individual and because all individuals are one in the eyes of the creator, into the soul of the world” (Morgan 2001: 3). This helps not only to clarify how the personal and confessional writings of Ginsberg and his friends were able to stir the domesticated suburban inhabitant into a fit of unease about Beat personalities but also why they chose to retreat in a more personal and self-reflexive writing. Trying to find your own inner ‘irregularities’ by using “racial and sexual boundaries” to construct your own personality and way of expressing identity scared the dominant culture that wanted unity and conformism (Epstein 42). Consequently, we can conclude that writers, who explicitly deviated from Cold War ideology, felt the need to explore the character of personal identity and selfhood in order to become a “positive rebel”. Identity discourse, in other words, transforms in a subjective weapon that defies the dominant cultural public discourse that refutes any kind of deviant behaviour in the 1950’s (42).

**Modernism, Postmodernism and the Self**

On the 4th of July 1959, Ginsberg wrote, “there is a crack in the mass consciousness of America – sudden emergence of insight into a vast national subconscious netherworld filled with nerve gases, universal death bombs [and...] unknown chemical terrors” (Morgan 2001: 3). His critical stance indicates that throughout the 1950’s there were many counter voices questioning the authoritarian American Cold War atmosphere. In addition to the harsh political years, the literary tradition before him remained a constant companion to his thoughts. When discussing “Kaddish”, he wrote, “you lose touch with what’s been done before by anyone, you wind up creating a new poetry-universe” (Morgan 2001: 234). At the end he added his worries concerning previous literary thinkers: “‘Make it new’ saith Pound. ‘Invention,’ said William Carlos Williams. That’s the ‘Tradition’ a complete fuck-up so you’re on your own.” (234). Ginsberg, who with the publication of “Howl” became a “crack” in America’s anxiety filled society, definitely counts as a representative of the Beats’ critical writings, but he also wanted to formulate his own specific personal poetics and those did not always come so easily. The following paragraphs will describe the literary climate previous to and following the 1950’s and how Ginsberg, as a Cold War poet, positioned his individuality, notions of self and desire on a continuum between modernism and postmodernism.
In the article “Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell, and Ginsberg”, Steven Gould Axelrod argues that these three poets are situated in an in-between position when it comes to gender, sexuality and writing during the Cold War period, especially since they started writing during that period of latent war. They take a particular stance in their poetry not specifically related to modernist conventions nor post-modern poetics, but to the specific poetics of “Cold War Poetry” (1). Ginsberg has numerous poems discussing the Cold War climate, and his formal writing is (unconsciously) affected by the idea of looming war and the political sphere. Certain formal aspects can be analysed as a reaction to the national ideology of normalcy and dichotomization. The unified subject from the modernist era, for example, is challenged in this mid-century poetry as Ginsberg did not want to submit his subject to strict binary oppositions, the norm at that time, but rather played around with mobile lyrical subjects. By doing this he continually broke down boundaries, by breaking through the squeamish discourse of prude America, and, additionally, by verbalizing the gap between dichotomies of normalcy and aberration. He put his deviating content and form to the wheel and this affected notions of the self as one, and the speaking subject as impersonal.

Ginsberg’s poetics distinctly diverged from what the generation before had advocated for the self and its forms of expression. According to Peter Nicholls in his book Modernisms, modernism makes elaborate use of references and metaphors in order to create borders as protection for “the chaos” of subjectivity (196). Modernism thus tries to achieve a clear-cut view on the inner workings of the self, while the chaotic of the subjective is to be avoided. A well-known statement linked to modernist poetics which also shies from overt sentimentality is the “objective correlative” of T.S. Eliot (Brooker 5). An objective correlative wants to objectively express an emotion through art by “a set of objects, a chain of events, which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (Nicholls 150). In the light of this “Eliotic aesthetic” of impersonality and obscurity “the twenties and thirties […] installed […] self-reflexive dislocation, allusion and impersmality at the centre” (Brooker 7). Both in Pound and in Eliot emotion does not come to surface in their poetry. Personality is something that can be avoided through/ in poetry and it is the medium, not one’s personality that deserves priority (Nicholls 180-81). Even though some critics consider Eliot’s influence to continue well into the fifties, Fiedler argues that after WWII, with the rise of the Beat Generation, the “Age of Eliot” was over (Brooker 7). Accordingly, Axelrod maintains that Cold War poetry focuses much more on emotive verse while the modernists want objectivity and a way to mask oneself (7). Poems such as “Sunflower Sutra”, for example, will show a complete rejection of this ‘masquerade’ and will proclaim a renewed curiosity for the outlines of the self. The self and all its emotive and bodily facets will resurface in poetry and other writing with the rise of the Beats’ aesthetics.

So the Beat poets (especially Ginsberg) and the Black Mountain poets are seen as representatives of this change towards a more personal style and an interest in the representation of the self (Brooker 7). Ginsberg’s poetry reveals renewed attention for personal experience in the form of
confessionalism, and presents a new view on the self as fluctuating and porous. The confessional poet
opens the self up for introspection and subsequently assumes boundaries can be taken away.
Furthermore, the more personalised voice in Ginsberg’s poetry easily conveys an “interpenetration of
the personal and the public”, or take the shape of something or someone else which shows how
penetrable the boundaries of the self have become (Gregson 4). Introspection in itself implies a
deconstructive action. So through this interest in personal experience, and the subjective voice, a need
to know all the facets of the self has become the prime focal point.

In addition, an interest in the personal implies an interest in the subconscious, in the self’s
desires and in the chaos of the human mind. These fields of concern again show a tendency towards
mobility and instability of the self. This self, Ian Gregson elucidates, was in the modernist era
considered as “fractured” because of Freud’s insights concerning the unconscious. The same
tendencies have only found greater support in postmodernist poetics. The questioning and
deconstructing of the self also applies to the notion of identity. Self and identity function in a
reciprocal relationship in which self is constantly in flux and identity, by means of the self’s actions, is
constructed “performatively” (Gregson 41). The subjective representation of the self, in other words,
reveals the inner desires as constantly readjusting itself. Introspection in Ginsberg’s literature shows
the incapability of controlling a correct and perfect image of the self, thus ultimately it propagates a
poetic that depicts the self as splintered.

Ginsberg succeeded in sketching this destabilized self by letting the wall between exterior and
interior collapse and by constructing a poetic world in which the lyrical subject can fluctuate. This
emphasis on a disjointed identity and self is representative for postmodernist texts as identities and
selves are no longer central while the “disintegration” and “loss” of a unified self gain more attention
(Fokkema 58). The notion of mobility, as emphasized in texts like those of Mailer, indicates a
beginning deconstructionist view on inscribing the self. As we will see, both the search for a knowable
and analysable self and a more critical view on self as a closed unit will come to surface in the four
poetry collections discussed in the last section.

The Beats leaned more towards a postmodern aesthetic of the fractured self instead of the
modernist belief of unity and the objectivity of the men of 1914 because they felt a more personal
approach to experience was necessary. This renewed attention for the deconstructed self namely
brought about an interest in internal chaos and the repressed unconscious desires, in all their aspects.
These Cold War poets therefore constructed their inner chaos as a psychological reality. “On
Burroughs Work”, for instance, ends with the stanza “A naked lunch is natural to us,/ we eat reality
sandwiches./ But allegories are so much lettuce./ Don’t hide the madness” (122). These lines of verse
contemplating the instable self and the (experimental) representation of reality in poetry counteracts
the modernists’ poetics as their literary experiment tried to maintain an emotional sterility which
would “undermine[…] an aesthetic of spontaneous prose” (Nicholls 179). On a very personal level,
the confessionalist/subjective works of Ginsberg highlighted his own subconscious demons, own fears,
disintegration or reintegration of selves and by doing this, he promoted “the inward gaze” (Axelrod 11). In Axelrod’s words: “[t]hey invented new, perhaps unrepeatable vocabularies of subjectivity […]. The inside-out quality of their subjective representation, the emphasis on loss and suffering, and the desire to situate subjectivity on psycho-social peripheries gave these Cold War poets a distinctive power to make darkness visible” (13). What was hidden becomes the central theme in their search for identity and recognition. The promotion of the inward gaze included desire too, which was previously regarded as something unworthy as a literary topic.

The humanist representation of (an individual’s) desire, represented as sympathetic, gets replaced by an interest in desire as an unknown force, which is moreover considered destructive (Gregson 6). Previously, modernists or ‘Men of 1914’ wanted desire “mediated” by former “literary models and conventions” (Nicholls 179). A liberated desire was to be avoided. The best way to represent desire, then, was through regulated mimesis which not only imitated but complemented the described object. Desire could only be neutrally represented by an object, and thus stay “externalized” (179). Desire had a more important impact on postmodernist notions of the self. Before people considered the individual a desiring subject, the self was not seen as something actively living. The self was seen as “worldless, non-corporeal and non-situated”, implying it only consisted out of “mental activities” (Honneth 7). Later on, desire constituted the opposite, because a desiring self became a “living thing” (7). An individual gained a much deeper insight in its “self-consciousness” if it incorporated desire as a possible emotion as one then believed the self as something worth examining (7). Additionally, “self-consciousness is Desire” because desire reminded one of oneself as an organic consciousness, as a living thing and this extensive notion of one’s desires consequently let human beings “stand both inside and outside nature” (Honneth 9-10). Axelrod, accordingly, argues that speakers in Ginsberg’s poetry can easily convey a female voice next to a male voice in one single poem. Other poems as well show the self as porous and changeable. It can be portrayed as a bird, a kid, a woman, or an entire country. We can therefore conclude that these subjects have a more direct affinity with their sense of self and are better equipped to confront their deviant desires, giving the transformable self free reign. Together with the notion of a deconstructed self came an interest in the self as desiring, which sparked introspection because the self became more tangible. This results in mobile (gender) boundaries and suggests that Ginsberg, like postmodernist texts, questioned a stable identity and much rather tried to convey inner desires through that destabilized core. While modernist poetry emphasized how important an enclosed self was, fearing another might take “possession”, postmodernist poetry celebrated the fragmented desiring self, which presented itself open to diffusion (Nicholls 194).

17 “A creep in the eye of all Universes/trying to escape my Being” (“Lysergic Acid”, 239).
18 Axelrod ascribes this questioning of sexual roles especially to the Cold War climate. And interestingly, while Ginsberg already experimented with such deviances in traditional roles it was only in the 1960’s that people started to see “promiscuous experimentation” as a form of “individual self-realization”
Even sexual divergence was to be avoided in modernist literary works as it defied the autonomous self (Nicholls 194). Ginsberg, instead, represented his self(ies) as porous and flexible since he almost without exception positioned them in sexual and social outsider positions. The poem “Magic Psalm”, for instance, reveals a direct confrontation of the “I”’s desires and inner chaos. It depicts how the subject longs to share its self with a higher force, asking it to “descend from heaven to this shaking flesh” and “invade” his body. This longing also confronts him with his desires, which he makes real by verbalizing its all-encompassing existence and influence:

Desire that created me, Desire I hide in my body, Desire surpassing the Babylonian possible world/that makes my flesh shake orgasm of Thy name which I don’t know will never speak— (263).

There is no escaping the desires that the lyrical subject feels. The drives he sets free eventually steer him to dissolution, but without regret. This acceptance of taboo wishes/desires leads him to a recognition of his “disintegration of [...] mind” (264). Unlike modernist text, this broken entity and overflowing sense of desire seems necessary for the speaker. It leads him to self-discovery and introspection and this as a consequence leads to a higher spirituality. Regaining control over the (disintegrated) self implies an acceptance of one’s deviancy and repressed unconscious and thus an acceptance of the need to convey private experience directly. There will always remain the search to “surpass desire for transcendency and enter the calm water of the universe” (264).

The emphasis on confessionalism and the deconstructed inner self enforces the outspoken opinions of the Beats. The “endistanced” personages of the modernists are now substituted by “ontologically (and culturally) grounded voice[s]” as the lyrical subject can now speak up and become an immediate presence (Davidson 20). So the impersonality of previous thinkers was discarded by Ginsberg as his poetry thrived on an open and opinionated voice representing his own and his friends’ visions. Critics have interpreted this evolution in post-war poetics as a “new postmodern poetics” in which an “expressive ‘I’” gets the ability “to testify”[…] and confess” and as a consequence mainly lose its modernistic irony (21). A new paradigm therefore arose after the two wars. Together with the beginning of the Cold War, the years of poetics of impersonality changed to a more deepened sense of self which was presented in personal, almost Romantic inspired style. Put differently, the modernist poetic of objectivism gets replaced by an interest in the personal, but this “personality” is constantly questioned and divided in its constant interaction with “larger, collective forces which infiltrate and continuously shape it” (Gregson 47).

(Honneth 160). Foucault’s “subjects of desire” was only then accepted as a chance to reevaluate individuality through new and more radical representations of your sexuality (160).
On Identity and the Self
A relevant and valuable addition to the previously mentioned function of poetry as a liberation from intense emotion or hurt, is Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the transcendental ego, the semiotic and the symbolic. It helps interpret the verbal world Ginsberg constructs as one specifically for his friends and illustrates how his poetic language helps him get to his individual inner drives. The semiotic presents a multilateral method to analyse Ginsberg’s ambivalence towards collective identity. “From One Identity to an Other” juxtaposes the different signification methods of on the one hand the semiotic, which is based on marks that show “indeterminate articulation” and the other hand the symbolic, which makes use of the transcendental ego (133-134). The transcendental ego, which supports the idea of a unified, reflexive consciousness that follows a strict structure of “meaning and signification”, cannot fully explain the realm of the semiotic (in Kristeva’s analysis also considered as the verbal world of poetry)(132). A transcendental ego operates through judgement and is as “operating consciousness” able to form and perceive a “transcendental object” (or direct reality) completely (129-130). In the semiotic, on the other hand, signification is only one of poetry’s aspects and poetry does not specifically rely on an “operating consciousness” (133). In other words, poetry is the “place where social code is destroyed and renewed” (132). Poetry becomes a verbal world that provides a “release” for the wrongdoings of the age because it “animate[s], attract[s], lower[s] onto its shoulders the wandering age of a particular time for the discharge of its psychological evil-being” (Kristeva and Artaud qtd. by Kristeva 132). The poetic consequently highlights an emotive and non-signifying act on top of the (symbolic and almost scientific) act of signification. This analysis again emphasises poetry’s specific function as therapeutic release and, moreover, gives a renewed vision on how signification can be opened up through semiotic discourses. Ginsberg’s poetry is for a great deal an experiment with implication and meaning, as well as a way of introducing new words and (verbal) worlds. The semiotic thus approaches the representation of the self from the verbal realm, or more specific from particular aspects of poetic language.

A threat to signification is something the poetic embraces because of the semiotic’s affinity with “heterogeneousness to meaning” (133). In line with Mailer’s discussion on the psychopathic hipster that needed to reinvent new nervous systems as a shield against previous and repressing systems, Kristeva asserts that semiotic, poetic language is based on a kind of heterogeneousness that can, for instance, be found in the speech of children and “psychotic discourses” (133). The speech of a child for example is, among other, based on ‘echolalias’, a form of speech that copies what others say. In Ginsberg’s poetry this “poetic echolalia” returns when he quotes from literary predecessors or seems to mirror ideas and lines from his friends’ poetry and prose (Epstein 106). The heterogeneous, illogical and nonsensical verses, then, form a deflecting mechanism that avoids a strict structure of signs and as a result undermines the closed judging of the transcendental ego (133). Previous discussions on the self have already clarified the mobility of the lyrical “I”. The semiotic too implies a “subject-in-process” which is freed from a continuous suppression of drives because it is mainly based
on the unconscious and on “heterogeneity” (135). Not only content-wise is the openness of the self suggested, but also through the form of speech, the “I” can find itself as mobile and in process by letting his expression have free range.19 This, in other words, can account for Ginsberg’s lyrical subject that ignores heterosexual norms and confuses the self’s boundaries, as well as explain the stress on madness, the illogical realm of vision and the poetic universe in which complete new beliefs are proposed. Ginsberg’s speaking subject is not tied to the values of strict signification and the repressed unconscious since his poetry freely expresses an elevated and more emotive voice, a voice that is not restricted to one consciousness or a conformist drive. The renewed interest in desire and psychological realities are conveyed through his poetic language as well and not only via the contents.

The opening stanza of “Siesta in Xbalba”, for instance, describes the moment the lyrical subject decides to write down an experience and is confronted with a “blank page” that needs to be filled:

Late sun opening the book,
blank page like light,
invisible words unscrawled,
impossible syntax
of apocalypse—
Uxmal: Noble Ruins
No construction—

Let the mind fall down (105)

It is already late, seeing that the sun is at its lowest, and even though the page is brightly empty, it shows promise, as the words are invisible, but can be scrawled. Later in the poem he describes himself in 3rd person as a madman, and like with Kristeva’s remarks on “psychotic discourse[... ]”, he struggles with syntax, especially the way factual ruins and landscapes do not easily lend themselves for a simple verbal construction. Ideally, letting “the mind fall down” will help him find a way (yet not the syntactical way) to describe the “Noble Ruins” and transform reality’s diversity in (un)scrawled pages. He is not concerned with an immobile and observing ego, but rather embraces the madman’s search for verbal illumination.

19 An telling example for this presents itself in the fifth section of “Hymnnn” where the crows start crowing: “Caw caw caw crows shriek in the white sun over grave stones in Long Island Lord Lord Lord Naomi underneath this grass my halflife and my own as hers caw caw my eye be buried in the same Ground where I stand in Angel Lord Lord great Eye that stares on All and moves in a black cloud caw caw strange cry of Beings flung up into sky over the waving trees [...]Lord Lord an echo in the sky the wind through ragged leaves the roar of memory caw caw all years my birth a dream caw caw New York the bus the broken shoe the vast highschool caw caw all Visions of the Lord Lord Lord caw caw Lord caw caw Lord Lord caw caw Lord Lord caw caw Lord” (253).

He finds himself caught between a God, and many crows, and the particular onomatopoeias have a down to earth feel, but still manage to convey a general confusion and an image of process as he engages a communion with his deceased mother in an imitation of incantation.
Furthermore, Kristeva’s explanation also includes Ginsberg’s attraction to beat-language and music(al rhythm). The long-winding lines of “Howl”, for example, rely on rhythmical and spontaneous incantations (“battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear light of Zoo”(134)) and are constructions of an open and diverse mind. The specificity of Beat (hipster) language, moreover, gives room for new verbal reflections on social and cultural norms and provide the lyrical subject with new methods of accepting meaning. “Bop”, “teahead”, “cultivate a habit” or “beat” are terms that verbalize his very close niche and are a means to explore an unconventional reality (a heterogeneity) without feeling repressed by syntax and a transcendental ego. In other words:

obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the vibrating plane,
who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus
To recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head (138-9)

These lines from “Howl” discuss in more detail how, in this case, the Beats obtain meaning and signification in a different, uniquely constructed verbal realm. The stanza begins with allusions to Ginsberg’s own poetics and seem to initiate a metapoetic discussion that includes the poetics of friends such as the spontaneous prose of Kerouac. Verbs, nouns and consciousness, for instance, join forces to personify “gaps in Time & Space” during a search for a holy incarnation of their souls. A catalogue of (contrasted) images introduced by a recreated syntax provides the Beats with a new means to express the “absolute heart of the poem of life” (139). The Beats seize the opportunity to recreate syntax by surrendering to “the rhythm of thought” of the bared and vulnerable (un)conscious, freeing possible drives that were suppressed. Although they are “shaking with shame” and “rejected”, they are willing to abandon conformity and security in order to give the soul a “confessing” voice. Even if they voice a substitution language, the lyrical subject is convinced they successfully conceive an image of time, space and the soul. The strict signification of the transcendental ego is thus questioned by an internal/eternal search for more than what tradition has to offer and more than what ‘normal’ prose can add to meaning. More specifically, to find their “archangel of the soul” the reader can directly trace their search in Beat writing. Formally it depicts the alternative and non-conformist individual that through the semiotic rejects the static, judging ego in favour of heterogeneousness. The analysis of the semiotic provides a means to see how their friendship gets written in form and syntax,

20 From “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”: “swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang!” (Kerouac 484).
as they unanimously chose the recurrent use of similar neologisms and a new writing style to convey their inner, “naked” selves or their selves in process. This perspective on language, moreover, shows the effort of the Beat individual to link syntax with the soul. Both content and form provide answers on the self and the text in particular efficiently conveys internal dynamics. In the next paragraph we proceed from the realm of language to the concept of identity itself. How identity is formed, maintained and shaped will be the central last question. A self’s inner desires represented in the realm of the poetic involves a certain recognition of one’s self as well as a knowledge of the boundaries between the self and a recognizable other/collectivity.

For the discussion on the individual an analysis of identity and the recognition thereof sheds an insightful light on the previously mentioned deviant individual battling repressing collectivism. The ideological aspect of a person’s recognition of self implies that the self and the self’s identity are supposed to support what the governing order assumes as ideologically fitting. There are, however, certain basics that need to be met up before one feels able to voluntarily submit oneself to the overarching ideology. Firstly, one needs to experience a “positive expression” to the values one holds high. In other words, such an ideology needs to add to a positive self-image and can only effectively contain a collective value system if its subjects feel that that ideology contributes encouragingly to their self-insights (Honneth 86). This implies that people who are excluded from this affirming ideology will not be enthusiastic to submit to its norms and values. These people will subsequently not “represent ideological forms of recognition” because they do not feel supported and they would, in contrast to those who feel represented, built up negative self-insights (86). Secondly, the subjects should believe in the “credibility” of such an ideology, otherwise they are not going to internalize any of the ideology’s ideas. Realism, in other words, is necessary because it directly deals with a person’s “abilities or virtues” and only through a credible ideology people might feel it would help them in their recognition (87).

In the case of the Beats then, we can conclude that their sense of self has been constructed ‘outside’ of the ideology of 1950’s America. They did not possess (m)any of the virtues the Cold War ideology positively addressed/promoted and were not prone to assimilate to such ideas. That is to say, they remained individuals in ideology and self-recognition and had, moreover, independently formed a self in a landscape that thrived upon a collective support of war, community, anti-communism and traditionalist American values. As they much rather adopted an ideology of transcendent openness concerning drugs, pacifism, friends and spirituality they quite explicitly dismissed the credibility of traditionalist ideologies. Specifically, the Beats did not have the matching background to let the overarching ideology “intensify or expand [their] recognition” (Honneth 89). The individual in the Beat group was critical and assimilated more easily with like-minded people as they realised that their recognition of self, leading to self-respect, self-esteem and an affirming self-image was not compatible with what society expected. Moreover, their sense of self was complicated through this difficulty of assimilating into ‘normal’ environments. An individual self and the way a person perceives its own
self is greatly influenced by what is mirrored from external selves (85-89). The ideal way to have a positive introspection is when your values and images are affirmatively represented. Their otherness has made them individuals in motion, fragmented and searching. The Beat individual obtained a sense of recognition through the understanding that he did not fit in and therefore had to go to more trouble than merely adapting to an overarching ideology. So both affirmation from his coterie and the negation of society’s ideals was constructive for self-insight and recognition. He stayed in motion and existentially questioned his search for truth, life and self.

The closing lines from “Sather Gate Illumination”, are in this case a direct representation of the self-doubt and misrecognition that can occur when relying too much on the affirmation of others.

My grief at Peter's not loving me was grief at not loving myself. Huge Karmas of broken minds in beautiful bodies unable to receive love because not knowing the self as lovely --- Fathers and Teachers! Seeing in people the visible evidence of inner self thought by their treatment of me: who loves himself loves me who love myself. (153)

The mind is broken because of a lack of love. They cannot perceive their selves as beautiful and at the same time do not find the chance to open themselves up for external love. What is necessary according to the previous stanza is an intense dynamics between knowing your own self and loving another’s self. This needs to be balanced through self-recognition, and this recognition is always in dialogue with other’s actions. The swaying between low self-esteem and high-self-esteem is influenced by what others think of you and what they promote/applaud about your self’s characteristics. Here, the speaker indistinctly focuses on his surroundings and not on any greater ideological platform. He specifically notices that when another knows himself he can also teach another to love himself.
Chapter 3. Writing, the Individual and Communal Influence in Ginsberg’s Poetry.

The motion of change is beautiful, as well as form called in and out of being. (58)

(“The Terms in Which I Think of Reality”
- Ginsberg)

Collaboration and Unity

The first eponymous poem in the collection The Green Automobile, is a key example of Ginsberg’s desire for communion contrasted to his difficulty with accepting complete unison. Inspired by Kerouac’s On The Road, the lyrical “I” goes to Neal’s house and persuades him to join a heroic trip he wants to make with his imaginary “Green Automobile” (91). The reading is directed through a particular discourse that reminds us of the poem “Howl” with Beat terminology such as “angels”, “beat”, “burn”, “illumination” or “naked” (91-95). These distinguishable words indicate an outsider status to the mainstream world because of their insider connotations. The discourse implicitly makes the description their own verbal world/experience, especially since it deals with a wished for/imagined situation. The created ‘linguistic suburb’ therefore is an ideal world in which the two travellers can leave behind the ‘beat’, exhausting real world. Instead of conforming, they find the “lost jazz of all Saturdays” and are able to rediscover their own life rhythm. Their togetherness results in a radiating strength and an insightful beatific journey while their separation underlines the negative connotations of being ‘beat’.

Hitting the road, furthermore, signifies trivial visits to “poolhall flophose jazzjoint jail/whorehouse”, but also symbolizes their intense bonding and unison of mind. They “can see together /the beauty of souls” and because of this ability of recognition they share the status of what the lyrical “I” calls “heroes” (92). In other words, venturing out together gives them the opportunity to recognize their own individual strength and that of the other because of their ability to effectively analyse beauty and chase illumination. Most of all, “The Green Automobile” underlines their understanding of shared strength and united force. During the ride, they are an isolated unit and even make a “solitary vow” that the reader may only guess at since it is written by means of “the solitary vow [...] I can’t inscribe here.....” (93). What they have built is something outsiders cannot understand as they alone thrive on “supernatural illumination” and “great art” (93). Both language and content indicate and celebrate togetherness. The lyrical subject and his friend have built up their own
perspective on the world, are not afraid to show their bared bodies, nor afraid to expose their untypical behaviour and sexual desires. They battle the world and conclude that “all men fall, our fathers fell before” (92). Fortunately, they possess enough imaginary, sexual, bodily and artistic power to regain what was lost.

This is an epic poem that narrates the protagonists’ heroic deeds while travelling the country, and a celebration of the constant mobility which keeps them vitalized. It is their fate, their bodies and their pilgrimage, but eventually, the lyrical subject realizes and verbalizes the illusion that this ‘green automobile’ is only a creating of his imagination, not more than a present for the one he desires unity with. In the end they each go their separate way even though he considers their bond unique, supernatural and gifted with vision. When dawn arrives he returns to his own visions and finds himself alone in New York.

The first stanzas reveal a longing for a friendship based on artistic, emotional and spiritual aspects, but towards the middle of the poem the intonation expresses admiration and becomes explicitly erotic. Neal is the angel, the sexual remarkable man that gets imitated by “many boys” (92). And even though the lyrical subject asks for shared artistic participation, their separation is conceived as inevitable. While battling the outside world, together they are strong. Their friendship supports self-recognition and illumination while their separation generates loneliness and daily domestic dullness. The energy of travel has died out. Unlike many modernist texts, these self-mythologizing verses convey a deep belief in sexual desire, revelations of (unusual) personalities and give way for the subjective speaker to convey what chaos his self goes through when uniting and separating himself from his friend. His confidence is boosted by the reunion with his friend and, what is more, the poem itself is solely based on the mere idea of an imaginary reunion. “The Green Automobile” directly engages with the idea of stimulating friendships besides the artistic limitations of such communions. One remains an individualistically thinking entity.

Already mentioned several times is the word “naked” and its physical and figurative connotations. Like in the “Green Automobile”, Ginsberg’s poems frequently convey a personal voice giving the reader and himself a renewed/deeper insight in loss, trauma, pain or private experience. In addition to his struggle with his contemporary environment, he struggles with himself and his own visions. The enormous amount of variations on the word ‘nudity’, then, shows how he either feels stripped and cheated by others/the nation, or tries to open up, tries to connect with higher spheres and acquire intense enlightenment. In this metaphoric usage, we again encounter a double movement of connection and vulnerability. “Over Kansas” (124), for instance, describes a literal air flight over Kansas, where the lyrical subject is a normal traveller, who behaves equally anonymous like everyone in the airport. But on the other hand, he is also a “barefaced” pilgrim wanting to find “hallucination and supernatural deliverance” (124). Looking out from his core of self he is able to begin a spiritual

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21 The word “naked” is almost used in every poem and frequently returns as a metaphor for vulnerability and openness.
journey. What is captivating about this symbolical search is his conviction that he lacks an ego, and his subsequent doubt in the structure of the soul. This search consequently directly engages with his self-doubt and his need to question the continuous changing self. ‘Is there something to investigate?’ becomes the central question.

The traveller ultimately concludes “all this facility of travel/too superficial for the heart/I have for solitude./Nakedness/ must come again—not sex,/ but some naked isolation (my emphasis; 125). He is no longer the anonymous observer, as he has discovered what keeps him unhappy. Before he will be able to cross the “dark void of the soul”, he will have to discover the exact outlines of his being, and this in an isolated and exposed approach. The final lines, however, give the reader a surprising turn:

Better I make
a thornful pilgrimage on theory
feet to suffer the total
isolation of the bum
than this hipster
business family journey
—crossing U.S. at night-
in a sudden glimpse
me being no one in the air
nothing but clouds in the moonlight
with humans fucking
underneath... (127)

These lines show the lyrical subject’s intention of revealing his nudity. The only way he thinks to get to know himself is through isolation. He explicitly expresses his need to leave behind his habitual coterie of hipster friends in order to let this pilgrimage work. In the first part he is certain he can shed his sadness and unhappy state by regaining control over the emptiness of the soul, yet “in a sudden glimpse” he notices that his spiritual travels lead to the conclusion that he is nothing. He is no one. The last part therefore makes the interpretation of complete isolation ambivalent. He is convinced to discover his soul, but ultimately finds nothing. Is contact and spiritual union then completely excluded as a solution for self-discovery and self-shaping or is it the vulnerable state of nudity that gets him nowhere?

The theme of existential nudity frequently returns in other poems. Nudity can reveal the subject’s loneliness negatively like in “Many loves” where his nakedness only emphasizes his difficulty at remaining alone (“And I lie here naked in the dark”) (166). It can also be conceived as something positive as it adds to his contemplative mood and helps him position himself in the greater universe of thought and selves, like in “An Asphodel” with the last line: “my only rose tonite’s the
treat of my own nudity” (96). Furthermore we encounter the term when he wants to describe his own soul but also wants to connect his friends’ exposed states like in “Howl” with “hysterical naked” or in “Poem rocket” with “Here I am naked without identity” (194 & 171). Essentially, we can derive from this recurrence that when someone chooses to bare oneself or feels stripped, it is the soul that remains for inspection. The subject’s soul in “Sather Gate Illumination” can, for instance, be defined as “your original nude Allen” and in “Fragment 1956” the soul is again referred to as “original” in the two verses “the human soul/ naked original skin beneath our dreams” (my emphasis;157).

The reappearance of these connotations of vulnerability, openness, inner exploration and contemplation shows a strong concern with the self and its relationship with the outside. He feels connected to his friends when they feel most vulnerable, but his own self is also in constant fluctuation. At one time connection with the self is possible, while other times his self and identity are completely lost. The boundaries that encircle his self or ‘soul’ seem therefore porous and fragile. The title of Burroughs’ novel Naked Lunch lends itself perfectly to describe the tendency towards introspection: “A naked lunch is natural to us/ We eat reality sandwiches./But allegories are so much lettuce./Don't hide the madness” (122). There is no need to cover up your identity. Much better to get to know oneself and deal with its reality. Moreover, his last wish for his mother to “wear your nakedness forever” (231) after she died, shows he never condemned her madness, or her tendency to reveal her every psychotic feature during her mental illness. She constantly uncovered her mind and never wore a mask of normalcy. This resembles the nakedness he wants to display in his own verses while reflecting on the nature of his being. The only solution for a positive sense of nudity, however, seems to be a sense of communion or a shared mindset such as we find in “Fragment 1956” or “On Burroughs’ work” when ‘nudity’ is considered as a necessary state of being to get to know oneself and a method to recognize yourself in others. An openness of soul, and thus a bared mind, is what boosts their group formation.

Nudity need not be explicitly mentioned. As already investigated, Ginsberg’s poems are confessional in nature and expose the subjective inner chaos of the individual’s human existence. On the one hand this exploration reveals an emphasis on the individual self (and its emotions) and on the other hand shows what is most important to this individual’s existence. Frequently this leads to contemplations on his friends and like-minded environment. “Siesta in Xibalba” depicts his daydreams on his hometown while being alone in a far off place. The isolation is perfect for his “mad mind to study alien hieroglyphs of eternity” (109). The verses contemplate the existence of thought and ego through time, and how these are affected by the natural world. Furthermore, it conveys an interesting dichotomy between being alone, and a nostalgic desire for reunion. His being alone, his travelling is inspired by “an inner anterior image of divinity” and leads to an interior journey (114). The buildings are “motionless” and “rotting” in New York, so to find energy he needs to find change. He, however, discovers that he would gladly “dismiss Allen with grim/pleasure” (116). His solitude leads him away from himself as he contemplates that “the problem is isolation/ --there in the grave/ or here in oblivion
of light” (116). Finding himself secluded from the intimate circle of friends fills him with nostalgia and yearning contemplations on “tender moments” and a dismissal of his “intelligence and nerves” (116). What his self actually longs for is the “few actual/ ecstatic conscious souls/ [...] familiars.../ returning after years/to my own scene/transfigured:/ to hurry change/to hurry the years/ bring me to my fate” (112). Again, we see an underlining of the strength that can be derived from togetherness. The celebrated notion of change, of beat rhythms becomes possible though his “familiars” and it is via them that he more easily and consciously discovers his fate, his own changing self.

His friends are frequently brought up and examined in Ginsberg’s writings because of their direct effect on his exposed self.22 The poem “Fragment 1956” is an interesting example of Ginsberg’s catalogues, as it sums up most of the proper names of his closest friends, revealing their specific Beat lifestyle and visions on life. Several more poems of his like “The Names” and “Fragment: The Names II” give, as their titles reveal, the reader more insiders in his friends’ lives and experiences. With these descriptions he remains quite superficial with only a few lines per proper name, mostly discussing comparable problems of drugs, misunderstanding, suicide or madhouses but also more positively, their shared love and life visions. Poems such as “Sunflower Sutra”, on the other hand, mention only one name and pay (direct) homage to the ideas of only one of his friends, in this case Jack Kerouac (but can also implicitly refer to others’ influence). In this poem we again encounter a tension between a belief in the collectively assembled and inspired idea, and the individual spirit. It opens with an amicable introduction to his “companion”, Jack, while they seem to try to align their thoughts on a favourite topic, the soul (146). The discovery of a sunflower ultimately leads to a stream of contemplations on the soul which the lyrical “I” explains as: “Unholy battered thing you were, my sunflower, O my soul, I loved you then!” (146). The “battered” nature is in this case because of the dirt and smudge of the industrial environment and the locomotive’s pollution (146). The goal of the poem is therefore to convince the sunflower of its proper nature which is “a sweet natural eye to the new hip moon” (147). The individual beauty that the sunflower, or soul, seems to portray gives rise to a new credo for Beat beliefs:

--We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we're all beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we're blessed by our own seed & golden hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown vision (147).

Those who consider themselves hip are advised to no longer let themselves be overshadowed by the grime of a locomotive as the golden sunflower needs direct light to blossom. In the case of the Cold

22 The more we progress in his 1950’s poetry collections, the more names get mentioned. Howl, Before & After proves to be the summit in the reoccurrence of names, while The Green Automobile is the most celebratory of unions and Europe and Kaddish present more contemplations on the self as individual and fluctuating.
War period, this implies that the Beats can resist the overwhelming controlling ideology of 1950’s America if only they decide to reveal their naked selves and not go by the mask of the conformist ideal and traditionalist American. The conservative label everyone should assimilate to is only superficial, and it does not signify who you really are. Interesting, however, is that even though all souls are beautiful and this makes them living as one under a “new hip moon”, the lyrical subject stresses they are blessed by their own seeds (147). Again, it seems they consider themselves as battling a larger force together with a united voice while in the end a sense of autonomy still seems required.

In this case, this new sermon on the soul is inspired by Kerouac, but Ginsberg has also worked together on many interdisciplinary projects. He made music with Philip Glass (Hydrogen Jukebox 1990) and Bob Dylan as well as a film with photographer Robert Frank and actors Corso and Orlovsky, Pull My Daisy in 1959. For this, they used a script written by Kerouac, and the title of a collaborative poem from 1949 (Morgan 2006: 188). The latter was written together with Kerouac and Cassady and gives an interesting perspective on the community they strived for. It seems to be composed one line at a time, always remaining true to the first line’s connotations of pulling one’s daisy, but also honestly asking for support, back-up and fulfilment in less sexual terms. Looking past the sexual, ‘shocking’ innuendos, the easy rhythm and childlike simplicity and associations easily convey a message of unity and togetherness. The heterogeneousness that is conveyed through all these simple verses does not impede the exclusive unison it tries to convey. Simple wishes such as “seraphs hold me steady” or “cut my thoughts” are possible through the assurance of “all my doors are open” (32-33). The individual reveals its pure core in order to harmonize perfectly with its closest surroundings, his friends. Every line stresses unity, contribution and openness. A sharing of artistic talents is expressed together with a sexually revealing nature, but most of all it displays their fun at being and composing as one.

Another collaborative project is “Poem Rocket” that supposedly was written with the conjoining voices of Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, Simon Vinkenoog and Adriaan Morrien in Amsterdam in 1957 (der Bent & Ginsberg 171-72). The poem is a message inspired by the launch of the Sputnik and is directed to the people they might meet outer space. This entails a description of them as poets on earth:

O fellow travelers I write you a poem in Amsterdam in the Cosmos
where Spinoza ground his magic lenses long ago
I write you a poem long ago
already my feet are washed in death
Here I am naked without identity
with no more body than the fine black tracery of pen mark on soft paper
as star talks to star multiple beams of sunlight all the same myriad thought
in one fold of the universe where Whitman was (171-2).
As the lyrical voice searches for a way to communicate, it seems best to retreat for a moment of introspection. What he then finds is a lack of identity, a stripped down entity that is ready to assimilate. He is left with nothing but the imprint of his words that he writes at that moment. He, as a physical presence, becomes/tries to embody his verbal message and eventually finds out that he is “without myself finally/pure thought” (172). He, therefore, completely opens up to suggestions of his verbal message. He stops existing in the real world, but outlines his being with ink and pen, in an atmosphere of cooperation, like the line “as star talks to star” seems to suggest. The chaos of thoughts is not a single impediment to a new verbal identity as their collaboration unites in a single message, and that message is the replacement for the search for a single, delineated physical identity. They are one in thought and mind. Mentioning Whitman in this context is an extra underlining of the ‘multitudes’ he propagated, and shows the poetic voice as inclusive.

The message of their recurrent group participation is still to reunite their powers to achieve an alternative mindset that counters mainstream conformism. The forming of such a literary camaraderie was partly the consequence of trying to rebel against overall compliance, but at the same time it increased the independent individual’s need towards self-recognition through intersubjective dynamics. Their collective identity is based upon a discontent with the ruling ideologies that were unable to help them achieve a positive self-image (as illustrated by “Sunflower Sutra”). Redirecting their attention towards a select group of like-minded people helped form a framework of affirmation and self-development. In “Laughing Gas”, Ginsberg says: “Gary Snyder, Jack, Zen thinkers, split open existence and laugh & cry [...] follow the blinking lights of contrariety” (199). Rebelling thus comes natural to the ones banned to the outskirts of society, and their collectivity strives upon an open mind and a sharing of fate. The poetry underlines their togetherness by achieving a specific Beat semiotic language, by linking the vulnerable and permeable self to its peers and by celebrating the beatific transcendence that their unison results in.

**The Self and Mobility**

As the previous paragraphs have shown, friends and collaboration were an unavoidable reality in Ginsberg’s life and artistic projects. “Howl” alone describes several instances where their minds vicariously seem merged and instances when they experience life together as a unity (“Who drove crosscounty seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision” or “ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe” 137-8)). Not only were their lives an inspiration for political and cultural critical aspects in Ginsberg’s writing, they also inspired him more directly through collaboration, like-mindedness and invention of innovative techniques such as the recreation of “syntax and measure of poor human prose” (138). In this way they form a generation, with a need

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23 Kerouac’s ideas on spontaneous prose.
to battle certain presuppositions of literary predecessors and their contemporary political environment. The strength for this struggle, as many poems show, lies partly in their cooperation and friendship. In the poem “Igno”, for instance, the reader gets acquainted with the eponymous character, a person who has interesting spiritual, musical and existential treats, and is someone who is specifically noticeable because “it’s the soul that makes the style the tender firecracker of his thoughts/the amity of letters from strange cities to old friends” (213). An ignu is thus someone who immediately recognizes a fellow and makes a lifetime commitment, either as friend or lover. He makes his own soul and other like-minded souls the central concern for his reflections. This brings us to the ambiguity of the dynamical interplay between the “intersubjective, the dialogic, and the social” and the self-conscious, individual assertion of a place in the “field of cultural producers” (Epstein 92).

In other words, no matter how strongly their friendship is emphasized, the hipster writing of Ginsberg keeps returning to a central question of being and self. The self described in previous paragraphs already had a tendency to erase its boundaries in order to have an open mind for friendship, inspiration or introspection. The latter tendency, then, makes the Beat writer self-consciously interested in personal and intimate feelings of the self. This gives another perspective on the one-sided acceptance of a collective identity. There remains an intense need to explore the self as a single (closed or open) entity. Although many of Ginsberg’s poems portray an interaction with an external negative ideology that they reject, or an intense dynamic between like-minded friends, its focus frequently returns to the self, stripped of other external influences.

When emphasizing this private introspection, the Beats do not shy from revealing past and related traumatic experiences in order to explore the core of their being. Ginsberg lets the lyrical “I” subjectively submit to inner chaos, questions and existential fears. The spiritual search is accompanied by visions that raise insights about identity and self-recognition. What is particularly interesting, is that the search towards the self is frequently depicted as unstable and in process. There is a returning emphasis on mobility and the possibility of a shape shifting self. This can be linked to the characteristic of the existential hipster as we find elaborated in “The White Negro”. Mailer states the Beats are feeling lost in the immediacy of the present and make ‘the’ search one of their life goals to find meaning in their existence. Personal uniqueness, then, becomes the prime object to let the self receive attention as it helps towards personal self-reflection. Taking their own lives in hand in an authoritative and controlling environment meant prioritizing a personal and combative voice depicting their inner marginality though form (beat language and experiment) and contents (spirituality, drugs, madness and confessions).

The drug induced verses of “Aether” (250-262) are a telling example of the meandering of Ginsberg’s existential questions and introspections. After submitting to the innumerable directions the mind takes, the “I” admits he wants to note down “every possible combination of Being” (250). By writing this he negates the modernist perception of only one analyzable self, submitting his inner search to the postmodern insecurity of the unstable self. Further on he starts elaborating on the
conscious, which he is certain will disappear in time, but suddenly ellipses interrupt his strain of thought, and we read “Christ, you struggle to understand/ One consciousness/& be confronted with Myriads—“ (252). He abandons the discussion on the consciousness in general to express his helplessness when being confronted with so many. The previously celebrated unison of mind and lives with his many friends has now become a more ambiguous element in his life because it takes away his ability for self-examination. He even retreats from his own conscious writing as he –as if wanting to take distance- introduces himself in third person waiting on the “Total [destruction of] Consciousness of All” (252). Through the course of his writing we thus encounter an ambivalent view on collectivity and communion, while Ginsberg keeps complicating the simple notion of the single self. Both his individual identity and his collective identity are under severe scrutiny.

On the personal identity, he refers to himself several times in the third person in different poems, as if distancing his self from himself, literally verbalizing introspection. Looking at oneself and imagining seeing someone else implies estrangement from the self and an intrinsic aspect of disintegration. This can for example also be seen in the lines “A way out of the mirror/was found by the image/that realized its existence/was only.../a stranger completely like myself (“Laughing Gas”; 206). The mirror no longer functions as a doubling device, but as an instrument of alienation. His verbal shift from the external image to a “myself” is disaffecting, just like the fact that he is unable to distinguish the one from the other. The estrangement of the mirroring explicitly reveals an opened up self. The boundaries are penetrable and even non-existing at the moment he shows himself to be a “stranger” (206). 24 The use of the third person as well as the introduction of the mirror are direct representations of the introspective aspect of his poetry. The self establishes an (unstable) image of itself through mobile boundaries that invite an inward gaze, without the influence of external selves.

Returning to “Aether” the speaker reflects on his being a poet, and suddenly realizes he is either repeating what others have said or he thinks himself a madman who writes “intelligible reactions to unintelligible phenomena” (254). It is the outside world that condemns him for being himself, but from his unique and individual outsider position he feels secure to exclaim his reasonability and intelligibility in writing. Furthermore, he finds himself in a better position to question his own self and the community’s self. These meditations eventually lead us to a central question: “O what does/the concept ONE mean? [...]! What is One but Formation/of mind?” (258). His visionary reflections constantly shake the notion of a stable and single consciousness, as he frequently expresses his belief of breaking through the wall of consciousness. His (drugged and) open mind is able to almost perceive an out of body experience. Looking at himself and talking in the third person is giving him an outsider and more distanced perspective on himself (“this consciousness, which has seen/itself before” or “someday thru the dream wall/ to nextdoor consciousness” (257/259)). This time

24 The same conclusion can be made for John Ashbery, who though this verbalization of his “otherness” shows how fragmented his self is. Through “the concept of alienation”, Ashbery introduces “openness and fluidity” (Gregson 55-56).
the topic is entirely centred on his own difficult search for an authentic voice and his battle to discern himself in his literary/philosophical environment and past. “Aether” is not a celebration of their joined inspired forces but rather a cry for an explanation of the individual’s consciousness. The many interactions he experiences are this time all but beneficial. He retreats within himself (or just outside himself) and wants “Wickedness be Me” because it is clear that with or without all those others, he still believes in “the Me! that horror that keeps me conscious” (262).

Especially interesting for insights on the Beat individual is the collection of poems Kaddish which redirects the attention Ginsberg had for his friends in Howl and Europe to his own life and individual thoughts. It begins with reflections on his early childhood and the life, madness and death of his mother. The rest encompasses on the one hand poems that describe visions or spiritual contemplations and on the other hand drug induced visions. Many of its titles are names for drugs: “Mescaline”, “Lysergic Acid” and “Aether”. At this point he freely elaborates on his unconscious drives that he wants to liberate in reply to the world’s prudishness. He furthermore frequently takes a step back to discuss the self and soul, which he seems to control or possess more and more. “Mescaline”, for example, starts with “Rotting Ginsberg, I stared in the mirror naked today”, revealing a much more controlling view of his self (236). The mirror merely mirrors, and the nakedness metaphorically confronts him with personal decay. Even though his poems sometimes convey a belief in an understandable or controllable core he does not quite convey a modernist representation of self since most other poems also stress the constant search towards a changing self, and celebrate a sense of energy and mobility. The boundaries are frequently only temporary. More commonly his poems convey a self in a dynamic relationship with his friends, a higher entity (“Invade my body with the sex of God” (263)), or represented as something else: a woman, a bird (“with the great stone tree I perch on” (109)), America (It occurs to me that I am America” (155)), a child, or ‘another’ person (third person representation: “I allen Ginsberg a separate consciousness” (239)). This sense of mobility can be grasped, but eventually one has to learn to let go and accept a leading doubt about the self’s boundaries.

“Lysergic Acid”, or LSD makes the lyrical subject once again contemplate on his position as self in the universe (239-242). At first he is a “thought, a self”, “a separate consciousness”, but he finds himself constantly beleaguered by a “you”, “the endless being” (239). Trying to escape his being, wanting to be someone else, lost in the many universes, he concludes “a Yes there is... a Yes I Am... a Yes You Are... A We/ A We” (240). The lyrical subject thus opens up for someone to take possession of his being, something a modernist would not allow as theme in his poems. In contrast to Ginsberg, the modernists try to repress desire and subjectivity. Opening up his borders shows he longs to connect and participate in a harmonious unity with all beings. But this coming together is not eternal: “I am beckoned to be One or the other, to say I am both or neither/it can take care of itself without me” (242). Eventually the lyrical subject inevitably ends up alone, left to chose only himself, ‘to be one’. All the way through his trip on acid, the “I” feels attracted towards unison and mobility,
but that mobility always leads one to oneself. No matter how high you seem to encompass/embody the entire world, you remain in your own shifting framework and stay a “consciousness to be separate and a consciousness to see” (242).

Already a herald to the drug inspired poems in *Kaddish* is “Laughing Gas” in *Europe, Europe* dedicated to Gary Snyder (197). The poem is a representation of his wandering mind while sitting in a dentist chair. It comprises most of the themes that *Kaddish* also exhibits, but this time the poem focuses less on some existential questions as it mostly emphasizes motion and the continuous going back and forth from one (mental) state to another. Like the many forms of selves and consciousnesses he encounters, there are many different realities and when leaving the porous boundaries of the mind, it are the drugs that help him “Step[...] outside the universe” (197). Even for every religion, another universe exists since it’s the mind that holds the power to construct universes “in endless series” (199). Just like his doubts concerning the need to make/see things as “One”, he as well suspects that universes and selves are multiple and ungraspable. They are, moreover, in continuous flux or even worse, only a mental construction of the mind and thus ‘non-existent’. Not even the self’s existence can be said to be certain. Indeed, the mobility he celebrates implies that one has to learn to live with “changing from dream to dream,/the constant farewell/of forms...saying ungoodbye to what/didn’t exist” (198).

| ... and the whole | BACK: Endless cycles of conflict happening in nothingness/ make it impossible to grasp for the perfection/ which does not exist/ but is not necessary/ so everything is final and occurs over & over again[...](201) | I want to return to normal/-- but there is no changelessness/ but in Nirvana/ Or is there/ Ever Rest, Lord?—and what sages/ know and sit[...] (204) |
| structure unfolds | | |
| Itself inevitably and | | |
| Folds back into | | |
| Nothing again[...] (201) | | |

Time and again, we are confronted with an inevitable mobility and flux in the structures of the self and the universe. The modernist belief of stable boundaries of the self are completely shaken as change is the new credo. Without even the influence of friends or a god, the self remains a permeable entity that is driven by desires, and personal trauma. The Beat personality is haunted by the existential search for an absolute subjective and meaningful life, and in constant search for his self. In contrast to his traditionalist environment however, the Beatnik “refuse[s] to [...] return to form” (203). No masks, only nudity, no conformism, only instability and flux, no repression, only free exhibition of drives are propagated in the later poems.

This unstable representation of the self as a consequence implies an openness towards change, and so implicitly also towards the personal. Given that the self can take many forms, frequently lets down its secure boundaries and is escappable, this means that the self is open to interpretation. This is
of course an excellent environment for the never-ending search promoted by the existential hipster and the confessional writer. Advocating a changeable and travelling, vitalized self implies that introspection -the inner journey- is also necessary. Although the self cannot be outlined, complete openness and frankness helps gain insights in oneself and its continuous shaping. The nudity displayed reveals on the one hand a consistent existence of change and uncontrollability and on the other hand invites for introspection and self-discovery. This helps explain the rejection of the modernist poetic of impersonality. The confessional nature of Ginsberg’s writing, his grounded lyrical voice, his porous self are all an indication of an interest in the self as an individual entity. It is so however that it gets its most mythological and delineated proportions when in contact with its close environment. The recognition that takes place replaces the lyrical voice’s search towards inner boundaries with a more secure and certain mindset. Collective identity can, accordingly, be considered as extending dynamic and vigour to the individual. Nonetheless, because of the self’s constant flux, introspection and self-reflection will remain a daily reality, with or without a close group identity. The myriad of different voices should sometimes be drowned out in order to understand oneself and discover the own poetic voice. Or as Ginsberg puts it in the last line of “Mescaline”: “No point writing when the spirit doth not lead” (238). The individual and the collective are represented as in a reciprocal relationship, but Ginsberg does sometimes prefer solitude of mind to go searching for his core. This, again, is described ambivalently, as the self is ungraspable. The self thus keeps fluctuating between its own different forms and other peer selves.

Lastly, the research of Epstein on Frank O’Hara’s poetry shows great similarities to some tendencies described above. The ambiguities concerning the self and community not only recurs in the literature of the Beats but also returns in many collective literary groups of the fifties. Frank O’Hara’s poetry as well mentions many names, wants to retract from the conformist culture of mainstream America, opens up the single self and confronts self and environment. The difference here, however, lies in the transcendent, spiritual motivation of the Beats (Epstein 125). While they revel in their spiritual togetherness, O’Hara confronts “American individualism” with “democratic fellowship” (125). Ginsberg is less ambivalent about the literary influence, and feels his fellowship helps him achieve higher spheres of spirituality. Frank O’Hara is, moreover, much more explicit in his fears of loss of autonomy. While Ginsberg never overtly mentions he wants to get rid of external influence, O’Hara feels much more insecure concerning some of these communal influences (106). Ginsberg much rather stresses the need for introspection, than to dismiss his friends’ help and intertextuality completely. The many other thoughts and consciousnesses could deter the self to know itself. The ambiguity of collectivity in Ginsberg’s writing is therefore concentrated on an intricate interest in the self, which can be complicated because of the secure emotional aligning of minds. He seems to want to find a complete as possible balance. So to conclude, Ginsberg’s verses are filled with the meandering mind that, like O’Hara’s poetry, is “driven by conflict, doubt and contradiction”, but seems to propagate introspection much more than isolation. While seclusion is O’Hara’s way of
making the inner journey, Ginsberg prefers nudity and openness to gain the necessary self-insight (126).
Conclusion

In the forties and fifties, the Beat Generation formed itself on the basis of their shared understanding of spirituality, lifestyle and visions. Although they not always agreed on their cultural influence as a group, there has been enough written on the subject by the Beats, critics and researchers. Being ‘beat’ mostly emphasised a fascination for religious enlightenment, a unique identity and a countering of the stasis of the outside world. This Beat identity, as a result, helped create an environment which affirmatively supported the somewhat exotic and outsider perspectives of the Beat individual. Their group formation as a ‘generation’, however, was not so easily accepted because avant-garde groups paradoxically wanted the individual to preserve unique creativity. But with the insights on ‘recognition’, we see that Ginsberg’s continuous existential doubt, revelations on madness and drugs, and experimental innovations on poetry were at that time openly accepted by his group of like-minded friends. This helped form his own notions on his individual self. So the presence of collective and individual identity in his poetry reveals the intricate dynamics in terms of assenting recognition and reflection. Mailer’s conception of the Hipster exposed a same need for emphatic peers. It, lastly, also introduced the complex rendering of the self. The self’s outlining gets complicated by its modular and mobile postmodern nature. Modernist abstraction and positivism gets replaced by a strong belief in the authoritative and expressive voice. The lyrical “I” started promoting self-reflection and engaged with its internal chaotic reality. It let the modernist wall crumble in order to discover all the various facets of identity.

A helpful explanation for this newfound fascination for personality and individual experience is confessionalism. With this, Ginsberg revealed insights in his life, doubts, pain and trauma, and exposed the self as independent and strong. He rejected modernist beliefs on objectivity and their tendency to repress desire and emotions. Much more leaning towards postmodern poetics, then, is the self that was disseminated. It had the ability of taking different forms, and frequently questions and transgresses its own borders. Even more than with transformations, regular and difficult journeys of introspection underlined the permeable boundaries.

Ginsberg’s poetry, furthermore, revealed a constant swaying between “solitude and sociability, motion and stasis” (Epstein 126). As can be seen with the analysis on the collective identity in his poems, the interest in identity keeps complicating a single-handed assumption of sociable, communal writing. Although he frequently mentions names, celebrates his friends’ actions, and takes over their ideas, the hipster’s tendency for individual spiritual and inner journeys keeps resurfacing.

The political context, furthermore, helped explicate the dichotomies square-hip, mainstream-periphery and inside-outside as well as the formation of a conformist and a marginal collectivity. In addition to the insights on collective identity, the context of Cold War provided us with insights in the formation of an outcast identity. Next to a counterculture, the Beats each were separate positive rebels,
who protected their identity by opening up the conservative ideals regarding sexual, racial and social identity boundaries.

This deconstructed disposition is achieved though a belief in authenticity, the subconscious and its desires, an identity in flux, and an inherent dynamics between the self and its community. In Ginsberg’s poetry this can be seen in the ambiguity surrounding the ego and its capability of structuring “meaning and signification” (Kristeva 123). His verses displayed more than only the signification aspect of language. They conveyed emotion and irregularity by transforming his speech. The “I” honestly conveyed inner realities because of the capacity of the semiotic to mirror the chaotic, heterogeneous mind. The poetic was able to show an understanding of the complex self and supported a link between introspection and syntax. Like with confessionalism, the semiotic was also able to function therapeutically and, additionally, underline the literal dissemination of the self through self-examination.

Ginsberg was prone to question the self to an equal standard as he did his community. While he recognized their spiritual and artistic strength in unison, the self remained his prime interest in his later collections. As his poems progressed more into the existential realm of hipster life, the unique Beat rhythm also came to surface. An essential doubt concerning complete fusion kept returning whenever his celebration of unification came up. The only certainty he explicitly seemed to value is a constant ‘nudity’ and thus openness of the self. In such a state of fluidity, the self could assimilate with friends, higher entities or reunite with itself after a certain distancing. The collective did remain important as it gave force to the individual’s voice and affirmed him in his existential facets. The mainstream or squares are conceived to have completely conformed to the nation’s ideology. By doing so they repressed deviant, subconscious desires and became the collective identity of conformity. The Beats, however, have noticed that to bring change it was necessary to realize and maintain their own secure and outsider group in order to make their voices heard.

Ginsberg’s poetry, therefore, conveyed an ambivalent relationship with both the self and community. The self is portrayed as mobile and ungraspable, yet, like the hipster existentialist, Ginsberg keeps promoting self-reflection and discovery. Sometimes he even seemed to control and fully analyze his self before realizing the impossibility of that operation. The collective, moreover, was represented as necessary, wanted and fulfilling but simultaneously seemed to get in the way of introspection, and the unique poetic voice. This ambivalent rendering of identity was a daily reality for the non-conformist and rebellious Beat writer and it is explicitly inscribed in his confessional, personal and ‘shocking’ poetry.

Ginsberg is commonly mentioned as one of the poets who function in such a paradoxal relationship to his literary community, and the stress is primarily put on his friendships and predecessors. This analysis has shown that his poetry also underlines a sense of self, and the importance of self-reflection in his 1950’s collections. What is then most interesting, is the questioning of the stable self. By analysing the tensions of self and community, postmodern tendencies come to the
surface and help situate ‘the Cold War poets’ mentioned in Axelrod’s article. Further research could work out why exactly Ginsberg positions himself in that continuum, and provide further information on how the (post) modern self and other poetics evolve and progress in his later poetry. Also the intertextual concern of the postmodernists can be further explored in this tension of collective identity. The tensions in identity, furthermore, prove helpful to reveal explicit and implicit actions of the outsider in 1950’s America, and how similar political and cultural situations influence the self and the need for a supporting collective. What Davidson and Epstein have already proven for the Black Mountain Poets and the New York School in terms of such dynamics, this analysis of Ginsberg paves the way for other Beat writers such as Burroughs, Kerouac, Corso or Holmes and may also prove valuable for a comparative study between New American poets. Tendencies of the postmodern era such as an increase in instability, constant renewal, indifference, and an increasing belief in the changeability of self and society have only progressed and complicated today. The analysis of the Cold War tensions are thus of vital importance for our insights in contemporary dynamics of the lyrical voice in contemporary literature and society.

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Bibliography


