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2016

# Social Madness in Beat Generation Writing

Megan Reynolds

Trinity University, [mreynold@trinity.edu](mailto:mreynold@trinity.edu)

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## Repository Citation

Reynolds, Megan, "Social Madness in Beat Generation Writing" (2016). *The Expositor: A Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities*. 8.

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# Social Madness in Beat Generation Writing

MEGAN REYNOLDS

**T**HE BEAT GENERATION, an American literary movement that rose to popularity during the late 1950s and continued into the 1960s, serves more as a reaction against the preceding literary generation than as its own political, social, or economic statement. The Lost Generation, which includes writers like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John Steinbeck, came of age during or immediately after World War I, an event that dramatically shaped their writing. Disillusioned with war and humanity's apparent cruelty, writers of the Lost Generation dwelt on hard-drinking, fast-paced lives and an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. The Beat Generation, including William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, and Jack Kerouac, attempted to turn away from these preoccupations and create works that rejected normative American values and embraced alternative ways of living. Beat, a word that connotes beaten or worn down, but also references "beatitude," comprises two of the main attitudes undertaken in Beat Generation literature: members of the Beat Generation feel both broken down and drawn to new forms of religion that could pull them up from the Lost Generation's morbidity. While Beat Generation writers rarely take a firm political stance, they do consistently push away from the existing American society by seeking alternative social and cultural lifestyles. To do so they often associate with the minorities present

within the American landscape, and, in particular, Beat writers repeatedly reference the “mad” or mentally insane figure as a way to reject their predecessors and forge a new literary path.

Beat writing abounds with examples of the “mad genius,” a figure who steps across time and space to comprehend true understanding of the universe, showing a clear preoccupation with madness and its consequences. Delving into such a personal aspect of mental health, one’s innermost thoughts and feelings, clearly aligns with the Beat Generation’s confessional writing style. The Beats, through their memoirs and *roman à clef* type novels, seek to share the full range of human experience, even if that phenomenon includes examining what exactly it means to be “mad.” However, stark descriptions of mental insanity and its consequences also represent a powerful form of resistance against the 1950s American ideology that confronts writers like Jack Kerouac, Joyce Johnson, John Clellon Holmes, and others in the Beat movement. Madness, although it signifies difference and results in exclusion from the mainstream society, serves as a sign of belonging for the Beat counterculture. This counterculture, which deliberately sought a kind of segregation from the mainstream, “took delight in inferior social and economic positions.”<sup>1</sup> While the American mainstream views insanity, which Joyce Johnson’s mother refers to as “Down Below,” as a threat to the status quo, the “unparkliness of Down Below” attracts the Beats precisely because of its very difference from the values that the previous generation upholds.<sup>2</sup> Beat writers, looking to break away from the American norm, found fellowship in the very group of individuals that society at large sought to hide away.

## **BREAKING WITH SOCIETY**

The confessional writing style, used by the Beats to differentiate themselves

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1 Raluca Rogoveanu, “Glancing at Deforming Mirrors: The Mad Artists of the Beat Generation,” *Europeana* (2009): 247.

2 Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters: A Young Woman’s Coming-of-age in the Beat Orbit of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 8.

from the American mainstream, indicates a break from their predecessors. Instead of trying to forge a new “political or economic position,” the Beats are more intent on “escaping from one.”<sup>3</sup> They do not want to create a new ideology so much as they want to exist outside the American system of belief confronting them. As outsiders of the Lost Generation, unable to identify their place in what they perceive as a “seemingly aggressive and stifling social ethos,”<sup>4</sup> Beat writers rely instead on their rebellion against that ethos. Johnson represents this rebellion against the generation that engendered the very countercultural movement she was to join through her rebellion against her own parents’ way of life. Her weekend excursions into Greenwich Village, a mecca of countercultural activity, seem to promise “something I’d never tasted all my life as a child—something I told myself was Real Life. This was not the life my parents lived.”<sup>5</sup> The counterculture, which by the time Johnson begins visiting Greenwich Village had actually been established for a few years, holds a certain allure for her; she hopes she can find something outside of her sheltered, middle-class childhood, something that feels “real.” The fact that Johnson so clearly rejects her parent’s bourgeois life in *Minor Characters* symbolizes the larger feeling shared by members of the Beat Generation: the desire to push away from the very generation that created them. While the Lost Generation sought to create the voice of a generation, their writing does not include subjects they considered taboo, like sex, flagrant drug and alcohol abuse, and madness. The Beat Generation, on the other hand, immediately embraces once off-limit subject matter in their confessional writing to indicate a clear break from their predecessors. When Joyce’s friend Elise announces that she is “going into analysis” she also reveals how the previous generation attempted to hide what they considered a shameful affliction: “They’re going to pay for it. But they won’t if I don’t live at home.”<sup>6</sup> As it so often happens with those that society deems deviant,

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3 Allan Johnston, “Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economics and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation,” *College Literature* 2 (2005): 103.

4 Johnston, “Consumption,” 104.

5 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 29.

6 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 67.

Elise's parents hide her away. The Beats, instead of succumbing to society's "condition of supposed normality as the ideal,"<sup>7</sup> react directly against it by describing the very topics the previous generation tries to suppress. Elise telling Johnson about her psychosis breaks through the Lost Generation's silence surrounding taboo subjects. Johnson, recreating this scene in turn in her memoir, similarly pulls Elise from her parents' attempts to cover up mental illness; she frees Elise from the oppressive nature of the preceding generation.

The Beat countercultural movement not only liberates these writers from "assimilation into the American society,"<sup>8</sup> but it also bonds them within their own form of community. Since Beat writers consistently identify with outsiders due to their own feelings of alienation, they describe a sense of loneliness within the mainstream American ideology, a feeling which ultimately drives them to seek other forms of society. The word "counterculture" in and of itself connotes a sense of belonging, even if that sense of belonging exists solely because of one's desire to abandon a previous affiliation. The Beats' counterculture signifies a "camaraderie of loneliness"<sup>9</sup> for those who felt distinctly "other" within the prevailing American mainstream. Common meeting places, most notably Greenwich village, serve to collect outsiders who find comfort in other's similar sentiments. Beats, instead of attempting to assimilate the marginalized into a "massifying and de-individualizing"<sup>10</sup> society like the American bourgeois, celebrate the "other" and the individual. Their acceptance, and even at times glorification of the outsider, explains not only the Beats' detestation of the 1950s ideology surrounding them, but also their self-identification with the mentally insane. One could only gain access to this community by rejecting the previous society and thereby achieving a sort of isolation. Joyce Johnson even

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7 Meghan Warner Mettler, "If I Could Drive You Out of Your Mind," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 9.2 (2015): 173.

8 Loni Reynolds, "The Mad Ones" and the Geeks," *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 9.2 (2015): 158.

9 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 27.

10 Johnston, "Consumption," 107.

refers to her bubble within the counterculture as “the community,”<sup>11</sup> indicating a sense of belonging within this smaller society. However, Johnson also hesitates from completely submerging herself within “the community;” she does not “want to become too entangled”<sup>12</sup> with the Beat counterculture because she fears losing her hard-won individuality in another communal group. Her apprehension reflects the general Beat anxiety that even a community like theirs could somehow turn into a society like the one they try to escape. The problem the Beat counterculture then faces is how to validate their own identity as a unique group while also rejecting the larger American community to which they unhappily belong. In order to work their way out of this conundrum, and because their community hinges on their self-identification as outsiders and on their inherent individualism, the Beats simultaneously uphold a sense of individuality and fraternity. Their society exists as a community of individuals rather than a social machine, which explains why the figure of the outsider continues to appear in Beat writing even after the formation of their countercultural community. Madness therefore serves as a “way of justifying communal and individual identity,”<sup>13</sup> allowing them to preserve a sense of individuality within the counterculture itself. They do not assimilate the outsider once he joins the counterculture, but they instead allow him to retain his marginal status.

Mad characters, which Beat writers view as the “ultimate non-conformist[s],”<sup>14</sup> seem the perfect representatives of the Beat counterculture as a whole. For the Beats who “held positions of relative normativity,”<sup>15</sup> creating a madman in their writing allows them to experience a similar escape by proxy. To generate a countercultural movement, the Beats choose a stigmatized, isolated figure as their champion because of his ability to break from the society that initially stereotyped him. His place in the American ethos places him beyond society’s grasp, the ultimate goal of the Beat counterculture, simply because society traditionally rejects the mentally

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11 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 83.

12 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 84.

13 Rogoveanu, “Glancing At,” 248.

14 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 173.

15 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 153.

ill. Michel Foucault describes society's historical treatment of the mentally ill, beginning with the "ritual exiles" madmen faced.<sup>16</sup> In confining or removing the insane entirely from public society, the mainstream creates an easily identifiable "other" that the Beats latch onto. As Meghan Warner Mettler explains, the Beats consider "this pernicious system [i.e., the American mainstream]...all-encompassing," and "the only way to successfully break out was to do so at a fundamental level."<sup>17</sup> To sever their ties with the American ideology that considers the mad deviant, the Beat Generation appropriates their divergent behavior and thought processes in order to represent their own "rejection of the existing society," thus furthering their own countercultural movement.<sup>18</sup> Due to the social stigma that marginalizes them within the prevailing American ethos, the mentally insane also find an accepting community of outsiders in the Beat counterculture. Sal Paradise's aunt in *On the Road*, for example, a character who represents the American mainstream, takes "one look at Dean and decide[s] that he [is] a madman."<sup>19</sup> While his aunt immediately characterizes Dean as an outsider and refuses any further association with him unless forced, Dean and Sal understand each other "on other levels of madness."<sup>20</sup> Sal and Dean clearly have a connection that exists outside of the prevailing 1950s ideology, a connection that bonds both of them within the "(anti-)ideology" of Beat counterculture.<sup>21</sup> The madman represents the embodiment of the Beat Generation's anti-ideology because he illustrates a character so clearly outside of the mainstream's traditional way of thinking.

## THE APPEAL OF MADNESS

By adopting the mad persona for different characters throughout their writ-

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16 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 10.

17 Mettler, "If I Could Drive," 174.

18 Mettler, "If I Could Drive," 173.

19 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 3.

20 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 4.

21 Mettler, "If I Could Drive," 172.

ing, Beat writers use “insanity as a cultural site of ideological contestation” and as the fundamental break from the American ethos that Mettler discusses.<sup>22</sup> Although the Beats do not strive to uphold one single ideology but to instead reject the prevailing one, they use characters that imply outsider status in their very cultural stereotype. The madman, long a figure exiled from the mainstream society, can “provide new insights” about problems facing society because such people are “at times unable to think in conventional ways.”<sup>23</sup> Their ideas, therefore, are often disjointed and non-linear. Dean says, “We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side” when he, Sal, and Sal’s unwilling aunt drive back to New York. Sal, after hearing these mad observations, admits that “there was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant to say was somehow pure and clear.”<sup>24</sup> Even though Dean’s conversation means nothing to Sal, he understands that Dean intends to say something significant. Dean seems to understand something of which Sal remains ignorant; he sees society in a way that Sal cannot, suggesting that Dean, through his natural madness, has moved beyond the restrictive 1950s American ideology in a way that non-mad Sal cannot. These transcendental visions or mystic moments let the mad character dissolve all ties with society, thereby allowing them to accomplish the true goal of the Beat countercultural movement: a complete break from all forms of organized community. The madman can do what those that do not experience true insanity cannot in the form of a “spiritualized attempt to escape” that demands release from American society, a release that includes stepping across temporal boundaries.<sup>25</sup> In *On the Road*, Dean repeatedly exclaims that “we all know time,”<sup>26</sup> but he never specifies how exactly one knows time or even what knowing time means. While in the car with Sal, he experiences a transcendental moment, which he then attempts to relate to Sal:

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22 Rogoveanu, “Glancing At,” 247.

23 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 172.

24 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 121.

25 Johnston, “Consumption,” 104.

26 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 114.



“You see what I mean? God exists without qualms. As we roll along this way I am positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us—that even you, as you drive, fearful of the wheel” (I [Sal] hated to drive and drove carefully) —“the thing will go along of itself and you won’t go off the road and I can sleep. Furthermore we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do.”<sup>27</sup>

Dean, owing to his mad ability to transcend both physical and mental society, can go anywhere in America and “get what he wants” because his desires are not based on cultural, communal, or regional differences. Instead, Dean escapes civilization’s grasp and truly understands the universe; he expresses an incredible belief in the world, a fate-like idea that everything will occur the way it is “supposed” to. Sal, on the other hand, drives carefully; he does not have the same kind of trust in the universe as Dean because he is not mad and therefore cannot transcend his society, body, and mentality. Not only do Dean’s visions liberate him from America’s repressive 1950s ideology, they also have the power to illuminate meaning in a way that sane people cannot.

Allen Ginsberg describes a similar mad ability to transcend the self. The speaker of the second part of Ginsberg’s “Howl” exclaims that “I am a consciousness without a body,” indicating that he has indeed succeeded in escaping corporeal boundaries.<sup>28</sup> Physical transcendence, which involves a feeling of leaving the body, however, does not also mean forgetting the mind. The madman can escape the mental ethos that stifles the Beats, but he does retain a consciousness, a consciousness that can exist outside of society as a whole. Maintaining a consciousness is crucial for the mad genius because it

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27 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 121.

28 Allen Ginsberg, *Howl, and Other Poems* (San Francisco, City Lights Pocket, 1965), 22.

signifies his ability to think without cultural influences and therefore truly understand the world around him; he can understand that “Heaven...exists and is everywhere about us,” whereas the sane cannot due to their inability to transcend the physical and mental restrictions placed upon them by the American mainstream.<sup>29</sup> With a sense of almost divine clarity, the madman not only experiences a “detachment [understood] as holy,” but also a “connection to God.”<sup>30</sup> The madman then assumes the place of prophet for the Beats, as a symbol of truth in a middle-class culture they consider tainted with rampant corruption. Due to this connection, madmen may actually be the “healthiest members of society,” because they are not held within its restrictive system.<sup>31</sup> The Beat counterculture accepts the “other” simply for existing outside of the repressive cultural norms, norms that actually produce “an inhibited, neurotic individual.”<sup>32</sup> This “neurotic individual” becomes “crucial to the lives and work of the Beat Generation”<sup>33</sup> because he represents the adverse consequences of the “type of engagement required by social conventions.”<sup>34</sup> In Kerouac’s *On the Road*, a few weary passengers complain about Dean Moriarty’s driving. They protest, whispering amongst themselves that “[w]e can’t let him drive anymore, he’s absolutely crazy, they must have let him out of an asylum or something.”<sup>35</sup> Another passenger exclaims in a “suppressed, hysterical whisper” that she just “can’t stand it.”<sup>36</sup> Yet these characters, representative of the American mainstream, cannot speak any louder than a whisper. They acknowledge what they consider madness, but they cannot adequately express their concerns because society has inhibited their capability “to establish normal human contact.”<sup>37</sup> The woman takes on aspects of madness herself, but it is a madness produced

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29 Ginsberg, *Howl*, 22.

30 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 159.

31 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 175.

32 Rogoveanu, “Glancing At,” 250.

33 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 153.

34 Rogoveanu, “Glancing At,” 250.

35 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 211.

36 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 212.

37 Rogoveanu, “Glancing At,” 250.

precisely by a stifling cultural ideology. Her “suppressed, hysterical” whisper indicates an inability to convey her true feelings openly and a hysteria produced by that very inability. The transcendental visions the mad experience allow them to escape the powerful and repressive American mainstream that damages those trapped within it.

### THE FEAR OF PERMANENT ISOLATION

Despite their idealization of the madman, Beat writers also demonstrate persistent anxieties surrounding this figure throughout their writing, in particular a fear of permanent isolation. Permanent isolation can arise in multiple ways—forced isolation through confinement, isolation from the madman’s own transcendental abilities, or suicide. In *Go*, a novel by John Clellon Holmes, the crazy character Waters states that his neighbors are “trying to get me taken away, of course.”<sup>38</sup> Waters explains this to David Stofsky as though his neighbors’ reaction was glaringly obvious and somehow appropriate. The mainstream, seeking to neutralize the threat that unconventional thinking presents, actually throws the mad from society itself. Unlike the Beat counterculture that simply rejects a previous community but cannot truly escape it, the neurotic finds himself trapped within a psych-ward or insane asylum, places that offer no escape and no connection to society at large. After this incident Stofsky wonders “[h]ow many of *them* would recognize profound truths on the lips of a madman? How many? They’d put him in a cage! Out of the same fear that drove him to try, to try!”<sup>39</sup> Society takes Waters, the madman, the “guardian of truth,”<sup>40</sup> away and isolates him when he tries to share his knowledge with the greater American community, apparently because his truth threatens the American mainstream. Holmes also recalls civilization’s historical reaction to what is perceived as a hostile other—neutralization through forced confinement—a reaction that continually stifles the madman’s attempt to uncover the truth about the nature

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38 John Clellon Holmes, *Go: A Novel* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1997), 47.

39 Holmes, *Go*, 52.

40 Foucault, *Madness*, 14.

of society itself. Actually attaining critical knowledge about the American middle-class community threatens the madman's freedom simply because it deviates from the norm. Johnson notes that

[t]he members of "the community" are very much afraid. They are afraid of bouncing checks, rejection slips, institutional hierarchies, middle-class backgrounds, sexual failure and schizophrenia. I think it is the schizophrenia that frightens them the most; this threat seems to them more imminent than any other. They believe it is entirely possible that anyone of their number may someday "become schiz."<sup>41</sup>

While the first few fears she lists reflect the Beat Generation's push against the American mainstream and their distress at even the most remote connection with it undermining their belonging in the counterculture, the dread of one day becoming "schiz" indicates a paradoxical fear of joining the ranks of those that have escaped society all together. Even though the Beats idolize the mad, they fear becoming him because insanity can be incredibly isolating not only physically, but mentally as well. David Stofsky, in his mystic vision, feels as though he is "tottering on a slippery, bat-thronged chasm, invisible in the murk, being powerfully urged on to take some wild, irrevocable leap."<sup>42</sup> He stands on the precipice of sanity and insanity, debating whether or not he should surrender to his madness. Yet he understands that submitting to lunacy is irrecoverable; once he leaves the realm of the sane he can never return. Stofsky, in the same scene, suddenly feels "frightened of being alone,"<sup>43</sup> directly expressing the fear that haunts many Beat writers. If Stofsky succumbs to insanity there is a very real possibility that he may never return to society, that he may only exist in a permanent state of psychotic isolation.

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41 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 83.

42 Holmes, *Go*, 86.

43 Holmes, *Go*, 88.

The Beats' apprehension surrounding madness also springs from the perceived lack of control associated with mental illness; as Johnson suggests, the person the universe selects as a mad prophet feels, as it were, random, and the high frequency of insane figures within the counterculture makes it feel all the more possible that one amongst their ranks will be chosen next. Stofsky, in the midst of a vision, knows that "if he let go, and fell into that violence of relaxation, he would shriek, flail his arms, and howl as the animality within him erupted."<sup>44</sup> Giving into insanity implies losing something human about oneself and abandoning self-control. However, the language Holmes uses in this scene indicates an underlying violence in completely submitting to madness. Relaxation is no longer peaceful or meditative, but violent and dangerous. Loss of control does not mean freedom from societal pressures, but living like an animal, howling, shrieking, and flailing one's arms. Violence stemming from neurosis also manifests in other forms. While Stofsky fearfully steps back from the ledge to madness, some of the characters in Beat writing choose instead to jump, a leap that ends in suicide. Johnson's friend Elise, the woman who (as noted above) experienced forced confinement and hospitalization, "jumped from the window of her parents' living room in Washington Heights."<sup>45</sup> Trapped within a system that deprived her of her ability to make her own decisions, Elise chooses to regain control in the most extreme manner possible. By killing herself, Elise does manage to take back some of her own agency, but also falls into the most severe and irrevocable form of isolation there is—death.

While this societal dissociation initially appeals to the Beats because it does clearly signify a complete break from the American mainstream, it also means that the mad figure is isolated, often violently, from even his own counterculture. Although Beat writing reflects an obvious desire to escape the mainstream and their penchant for rational thought (i.e., thinking in a way deemed normative in comparison to other members of American society), they back away from this escape when it takes the form of a complete a break—often because many of them do not actually possess true madness

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44 Holmes, *Go*, 87.

45 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 257.

nor do they actually want to. The American ideology sits at one end of the societal pole and insanity rests at the other; the Beats who reject the American ethos yet cannot experience true madness remain somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. Their simultaneous inability to break from the American mainstream and distress at joining the ranks of the insane explains why Beat writers so often include mad figures, characters who “provided a more complete break with conventional thinking;”<sup>46</sup> these characters allow the Beats to try to experience true madness without the negative side-effects. If even those who push against 1950’s ideology cannot understand the madman’s ravings (as seen in the Kerouac example, where Sal is unable to comprehend Dean’s insane insight), then these characters must represent a more successful escape from society as a whole.

Due to their strange self-location in the middle of two extremes, certain Beat writers and their characters express a strong sense of alienation from the individuals they portray as mad. Joyce Johnson’s memoir consistently emphasizes her estrangement from the insane figures she encounters. Although it is her son who says, “I just sat there watching. It was like I was looking through a window and they were all on the other side,” Johnson understands the feeling entirely.<sup>47</sup> Her son’s sense of isolation stems from her own, a feeling she describes throughout the memoir. She constantly struggles to find a place where she can belong, but even in the counterculture in which she feels most at home she cannot help but feel somewhat trapped on the outside, unable to reach the true goal of the movement itself, a goal that only madness can attain.

From the beginning of *On the Road*, Sal also places himself outside of Dean’s madness because he does not share a similar insanity: “I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones.”<sup>48</sup> He follows these psychotic figures, who for the Beat Generation are “allied to creativity” and seen as prophets,

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46 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 174.

47 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 69.

48 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 5.

observing and learning from them.<sup>49</sup> Although he wants to follow their mad “teachings,” Sal does not “want to interfere, [he] just want[s] to follow.”<sup>50</sup> He does, however, want to share in their insane understanding about the truth about the universe and break from society as a whole. In order to accomplish this desire, Sal follows madness around, trying to adopt insanity through association. Unfortunately, he cannot assume the same mentality because true psychosis cannot be learned simply through imitation. It must come from a “change in consciousness during the experience,” something that cannot be mimicked.<sup>51</sup> Even Joyce Johnson—“just to see what it’s like”—wants to “go to an analyst a couple of times,” and yet because she is not truly mad she “can’t ever ‘know what it’s like.’ Not like that.”<sup>52</sup> For the Beats, craziness represents an altered cognitive state that elevates the psychologically insane within the counterculture, an elevation that includes highly negative consequences the Beats wish to avoid while also alienating those in the counterculture who do not share the trait.

## REPLICATING MADNESS

However, since not every member of the Beat community can understand mad transcendence, Beat writers develop an inclusive way for everyone in the Beat counterculture to share in the insanity safely, social forms of madness that include drug and alcohol use as well as escapist road trips. As soon as Sal embarks on his first journey west, he recalls “one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn’t know who I was.”<sup>53</sup> Simply by taking the first step outside of society, by “actively refus[ing] to conform,”<sup>54</sup> Sal begins to undergo an out-of-body experience similar to what Ginsberg and Stofsky describe. Oscar Zeta Acosta’s protagonist in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* also takes to the road in order to break free from his old

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49 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 159.

50 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 132.

51 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 158.

52 Johnson, *Minor Characters*, 68.

53 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 15.

54 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 184.

life. After quitting his job, Oscar escapes the American ideology he found suffocating by physically leaving his home. When a young hitchhiker asks him how far he plans on travelling, he responds, "I'm just driving," indicating that his road trip is not about arriving at a certain destination, but about leaving his old bourgeois community behind.<sup>55</sup> Road trips function similarly to the confinement of the mad insofar as they represent a physical separation between reason and unreason, or the mainstream American ideology and the Beat Generation's countercultural movement. However, while society's confinement of the mentally insane indicates an attempt to control what they perceive as a "social danger," road trips connote a sense of freedom more akin to the visions mad characters undergo in Beat writing.<sup>56</sup> Beat writers, through their inclusion of escapist road trips, try to obtain the same kind of liberty that psychotic figures do when they transcend the American mainstream mentally, but they do so in a social way. Acosta's protagonist picks up a hitchhiker. Sal usually embarks upon a road trip in order to meet friends scattered throughout the United States, not to isolate himself. In other words, while confinement of the mentally insane leads to isolation, road trips result in connection at the end of the adventure.

Drug and alcohol use take social insanity one step further, attempting to mimic the cognitive alteration that accompanies madness—yet here, again, the effect is social, and the user is surrounded by other people. Sal attains lunacy by following the truly mad figures in the novel, especially Dean. They change him, to the point that others around him who are not crazy can sense "the madness they put in [him]."<sup>57</sup> Clearly, the insanity Sal experiences while on these escapist trips is not his own but a consequence of his proximity to the genuinely mad and to mind-altering substances. Even though the neurosis is not in this sense real, drug-and alcohol-induced states produce similar transcendental effects. Countercultural characters can feel as though they are "going crazy," when in reality it is simply what "you think

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55 Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 97.

56 Foucault, *Madness*, 73.

57 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 125.



...on hashish in the beginning.”<sup>58</sup> The drugs simulate genuine madness for the Beats, allowing them to “reconnect the individual to the universal” just as the truly crazy do in their mystic visions.<sup>59</sup> Beats throughout their novels tend to include scenes of wild parties or jazz clubs, situations in which other people all undergo the same craziness. They therefore can understand and share in the madness of the mentally insane, but in a specifically collective manner. Paul Hobbes, at a party in Holmes’ novel, smokes marijuana and feels “a detached, pleasant pulsation set up in his head and the weedy taste disappear from his mouth, and his personality seem to flow away from him without damage.”<sup>60</sup> Like the characters who exhibit true madness, Hobbes feels detached from his earthly surroundings, a sentiment that mirrors Ginsberg’s “consciousness without a body.” Hobbes even loses the “weedy taste,” indicating that the drug-induced psychosis has slipped into a form of true insanity, but one that does not damage his personality. Party-goers also express a similar trust in the universe, as in the earlier example of Dean’s transcendental vision in the car with Sal and his aunt when they get drunk: “Kathryn was decidedly affirmative. ‘I’m going to get stinking drunk and let the party take care of itself!’ ‘That’s the only way,’ Ketcham laughed... ‘Just let yourself go.’”<sup>61</sup> When they enter drug-induced social madness, anxieties about societal pressures fade away and these Beat characters can finally be completely true to themselves by “letting go.”

The other crucial aspect of this inclusive form of neurosis is that it is self-induced and therefore within one’s control; these characters control the ability to, temporarily, lose control and let themselves go. According to Mettler, “the Doors of Perception were continuously open [for the truly mad]; drugs granted fantastic and insightful perception temporarily.”<sup>62</sup> In creating a form of madness that can be self-administered, the Beats take away society’s power over the mentally ill, not least because they can still rejoin society if necessary. Their lunacy, which is both self-induced and so-

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58 Holmes, *Go*, 47.

59 Rogoveanu, “Glancing At,” 250.

60 Holmes, *Go*, 101.

61 Holmes, *Go*, 98.

62 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 177.

cial in nature, allows the Beats who use it to “simultaneously identify with nonconformity and be assured of their own normativity.”<sup>63</sup> Self-induced madness assuages the fears that Beats express regarding true insanity. Beats use self-induced forms of madness to regain and maintain the control that the truly psychotic have lost. Since the “particular issues mad characters identified were in keeping with criticisms commonly made by the counter-culture,” the Beats could still “perceive and critique the fundamental flaws in their society”<sup>64</sup> through forms of self-induced madness. These new forms of psychosis, which give the Beats more control over their bouts of insanity while still allowing them to experience enlightenment, seem safer for their personal independence than true madness. As Loni Reynolds argues, continually referencing mentally insane characters “serve[s] as safe spaces for viewers to identify with difference.”<sup>65</sup> For the Beats who do not experience true neurosis and who retain a sense of normativity, self-induced madness lets them understand insanity without the threat of completely losing themselves (either through a mystic vision or suicide)—a fear that plagues the mentally ill.

Social, self-induced madness, however, can still prove just as dangerous as true madness. Drug and alcohol use can easily transform into drug and alcohol abuse, leaving the user at the mercy of the substance. In William S. Burroughs’ novel, *Naked Lunch*, addicts no longer resemble functioning human beings but formerly human shells controlled by their addictions and their sexual appetites. Drug addicts, which Burroughs refers to as Junkies, “gibber and squeal at the sight of it. The spit hangs off their chin, and their stomach rumbles.”<sup>66</sup> The way the body reacts to the drug resembles the basic biological need of hunger that is crucial for survival. In this case however, it drives the addict to pursue a substance that only furthers the dependence itself and adds nothing of value to the individual; addicts lose control over their once self-induced substances. Always “feeling for the silent frequency

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63 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 164.

64 Mettler, “If I Could Drive,” 184.

65 Reynolds, “The Mad Ones,” 155.

66 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, (New York: Grove, 2009), 6.

of junk,” the drug consumes the consumer himself.<sup>67</sup> Ginsberg famously states that he has seen “the best minds of my generation destroyed by / madness... / looking for an angry fix.”<sup>68</sup> It is not merely madness that has destroyed the “best minds of [his] generation,” but their addictions that drive them to find the “angry fix.” Additionally, even if the Beat characters that do experiment with drug use to experience madness do not fall prey to severe addiction, the hangovers can leave them isolated, thereby negating the original social element that was supposed to fight off the fear of permanent isolation. Burroughs describes the low that follows the self-induced high as “the cold you always come down with when the junk runs out of you.”<sup>69</sup> Agatson in Holmes’ *Go* demonstrates the horrifying effects of what happens after the high. He “was in terrible condition: unshaven, red around the eyes, hands dirty and quivering,” a condition that “characterized him when he was sober.”<sup>70</sup> Not only does Agatson look wretched and helpless, relying on his girlfriend to take care of him, he is also, despite her presence, “plainly alone in his universe of shuddering and misery.”<sup>71</sup> The low, once again, reduces Agatson to a shell of his former humanity and eliminates all self-control. His situation, housed in a “loft at the top of an ugly brown-stone,” isolated, and dependent on another person to help him, recalls that of the madman’s confinement, the very aspect of insanity that the Beat Generation most wants avoid.<sup>72</sup>

Even their self-induced visions crumble. In Mexico, after a night of partying, Sal encounters “the great and final wild uninhibited Fellahin-child-like city that we knew we would find at the end of the road.”<sup>73</sup> He essentially reaches the point of madness where he finally understands what is at “the end of the road,” some true knowledge about what it means to exist, to be alive, and to be human. Unfortunately, this mad comprehension, spurred

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67 Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 8.

68 Ginsberg, *Howl*, 9.

69 Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, 13.

70 Holmes, *Go*, 72–73.

71 Holmes, *Go*, 73.

72 Holmes, *Go*, 72.

73 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 301.

by all three types of self-induced lunacy, cannot last in this impure form and Sal “[gets] fever and [becomes] delirious and unconscious.”<sup>74</sup> After coming so close to experiencing a true vision, a genuine understanding of the world, Sal’s body rejects it because it does not arise from true madness. Sal’s neurosis does not even yield anything productive like the poems Holmes’ character Stofsky writes after gaining inspiration from his transcendental vision. Instead, he recognizes that “this madness would lead nowhere. I didn’t know what was happening to me, and I suddenly realized it was only the tea that we were smoking.”<sup>75</sup> Self-induced insanity can only incite the beginnings of mad understanding, but, as Oscar in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, admits “it’s not enough.”<sup>76</sup>

Despite the Beat Generation’s attempts to create an inclusive form of madness that everyone in their countercultural movement could use to break free from society, their self-induced, social forms of insanity come up short. Their counterculture ultimately relies on its opposition to the mainstream and “their verdict about what is healthy or sick—about the meritorious or degenerate—must be implemented by the police, or it remains without significance.”<sup>77</sup> If everyone in their movement could attain the same of societal liberation as the truly psychotic then their movement would cease to exist. Their attempts at social madness, presented as a safer alternative to true insanity, must invariably fail to break from society in order to keep the movement alive. Self-induced neurosis recreates the same kind of loss of control that the truly mentally ill exhibit, making it just as potentially dangerous as true madness. Although the Beat Generation initially creates these new forms of lunacy to try and replicate the visions of the truly crazy, they cannot do so because their visions are still so fully tied to the society from which they are attempt to break away. Adoption of the mad figure as a “rejection of the existing society” ultimately relies on having a society

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74 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 301.

75 Kerouac, *On the Road*, 128.

76 Acosta, *The Autobiography*, 36.

77 Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “The Aporias of the Avant-Garde,” *Zig Zag: The Politics of Culture and Vice Versa* (1997): 241.

to reject.<sup>78</sup> Through the dangers that these self-induced madnesses present in their writing, the Beat Generation's countercultural movement actually serves to reinforce the American mainstream, if only to have a culture to push against.

*Megan Reynolds is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing and Spanish. She prepared this essay as part of Dr. Michael Soto's seminar on the Beat Generation (English 4423, Fall 2015).*

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78 Mettler, "If I Could Drive," 173.