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**In Pursuit of Experience: The Authentic Documentation of Experience in  
Beat Generation Literature**

**Masters by Research: English Literature**

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**28,627 words**

**Abstract:** Throughout their lives the authors of The Beat Generation sought an escape from the conformity of mid-century American life, in favour of fresh thrilling experiences to influence their writing. The writers of the Beat Generation developed writing methods that authentically document their real-life experiences. Therefore, this thesis examines the documentary nature of literature that came out of this Generation. The first section of the essay explores Beat literature as memoir; arguing that Kerouac's prose is based on his own first-hand experience recollected after the event. This section also argues that due to its fast pace and lack of revision, the Spontaneous Prose Method can be used by authors as a form suited to the authentic documentation of experience. The second chapter looks at the use of transcription methods to document a moment, or specific event, written during the experience. This chapter compares Gary Snyder's *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, Ginsberg's 'Wichita Vortex Sutra', and Kerouac's *Blues Poems* as poetry that authentically portrays a moment of experience to the reader. The final chapter explores the more experimental methods of documentation, and whether any authenticity was lost to experimentation. The chapter also explores the Beat use of drugs on the content and form of the literature.

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## **Introduction: Intervening in the Rational Experience: Experimentalism as an escape from the anxieties of society**

The Beat Generation, a group of writers from the fringes of society in mid-century America, unified around the central belief in ‘a relaxation of social and sexual tensions and [who] espouse anti-regimentation, mystic-disaffiliation and material-simplicity values, supposedly as a result of Cold War disillusionment’.<sup>1</sup> The literary movement we now call the Beat Generation was actually conceptualised much earlier than this definition suggests, it is in fact pre-Cold War, with its conception being around the 1944 mark when Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs met in and around Columbia University. The writers met through their mutual friend Lucien Carr. Although not a writer himself, Carr was the catalyst which sparked the Beat revolution. After noticing that Western literature had become stagnated by overly academic regimentation, Carr encouraged Ginsberg and Burroughs to write – Kerouac was already an accomplished writer – and create fresh experiences for themselves. As in his assumptions of literature, Carr too saw that mid-century American experience was both regimented and based on a material assumption of wealth and the pursuit of wealth. Carr’s pursuit of experience and therefore, the pursuit of knowledge led to the subsequent ‘relaxation of social and sexual tensions’ that can be seen throughout Beat writing.<sup>2</sup>

Everyone *experiences* life to some degree, and by the natures of the individual being, each person’s experience is likely to be slightly different from all others. However, the Beat Generation saw that *experience* was becoming too regimented; the lives of American citizens were being, in some way, conformed. Regina Weinreich describes this conformity as ‘canned’ experience – a life experience which seems ‘hypnotised by the language of advertising and commodification.’<sup>3</sup> The Beat experience is that which Kerouac talks of in the beginning of *On the Road*. It’s a yearning to be the ‘mad’ ones who are ‘desirous of everything at the same time,’ it is a life lived by people who strive ‘never [to] yawn or say a commonplace thing,’ but who instead ‘burn like fabulous yellow roman candles.’<sup>4</sup> To describe experience as burning and ‘exploding [...] across the stars’ demonstrates exactly what the Beats yearned for life to be – it was an exciting experience,<sup>5</sup> far removed from the conformity that Weinreich describes as ‘canned.’ Therefore, the Beats favour ‘fresh experience over canned. [They] worked in that rarified and poetic place, working to express human experience that may be beyond the radar of most people.’<sup>6</sup> In order to escape this *canned* experience of conformity, Carr suggested the Baudelarian pursuit of experience as suggested in ‘Le Voyage’:

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of the Beat Generation sent to *American College Dictionary*. Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1959 in *Jack Kerouac & Allen Ginsberg: The Letters* [ed. by Bill Morgan & David Stanford] (New York: Penguin, 2010) p. 427

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Regina Weinreich, ‘Locating a Beat Aesthetic’ in *Cambridge Companion to the Beats* [ed. by Stephen Bellatto] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 51-61. P. 51

<sup>4</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 8

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> Weinreich, ‘Locating a Beat Aesthetic’, p. 51

It's time, Old Captain, lift anchor, sink!  
The land rots; we shall sail into the night;  
if now the sky and sea are black as ink  
our hearts, as you must know, are filled with light.  
Only when we drink poison are we well —  
we want, this fire so burns our brain tissue,  
to drown in the abyss — heaven or hell,  
who cares? Through the unknown, we'll find the new.<sup>7</sup>

The instruction to '*Plonger au fond du gouffre*' is likely the exact instruction Carr gave as he would quote Baudelaire out loud in imperative tones on regular occasions.<sup>8</sup> '*Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!*' is the important part of the Baudelarian instruction; to find the *new*, fresh experience through the pursuit of the *unknown*. Carr knew that before the Beats could write new and exciting pieces of writing they must first experience the life they were to write about.

The experience that the Beats were in pursuit of consists of two definitions of the word. The first is that which Weinreich defines as *fresh* experience: that is the tangible, day to day experience of occurrences and events in one's life which leave an impression on a person. These experiences could include everything from getting up in the morning, drinking coffee with friends, and journeys across America. The second definition is that of experience as *knowledge* and the pursuit of this knowledge. However, this second definition cannot be present without the first. This second definition of experience comes, in part, from the Blakean idea of *Innocence* and *Experience*. *Experience* is that of the Fall and therefore, the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> It is an existence of suffering and knowing only acquired through the occurrence of a lived event. The Beats saw Blake as a potential spiritual teacher, in their mission of creation: 'the commitment of self to poetry, the commitment of poetry to immediate experience, to the "perceptions of the moment ... a memento [composed] during the time of ecstasy".'<sup>10</sup> There is therefore, a suggestion that this creation of art – whether poetry or prose – was born out of the knowledge of life whether it be *suffering* or *ecstasy*.

This pursuit of experience, and subsequently its documentation in writing became known by Carr as The New Vision, a termed stolen from Yeats.<sup>11</sup> However, as Campbell suggests, there was actually very little *new* about the vision; it was a mixture of French Symbolism and Modernist Experimentation (namely Joycean stream of consciousness).<sup>12</sup> The New Vision consisted of three basic tenets:

- i) Naked self-expression is the seed of creativity;
- ii) The artist's consciousness is expanded by derangement of the senses;
- iii) Art eludes conventional morality.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'The Voyage' in *Selected Poems* [trans & ed. by Carol Clark] (London: Penguin, 1995) p.145

<sup>8</sup> See James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999) p. 11

<sup>9</sup> See William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* [ed. by Geoffrey Keynes] (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1975)

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, p. 87

<sup>11</sup> See W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1937)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27

<sup>13</sup> See Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, p. 27

Consequently, The New Vision is almost completely built around a basis of experience, or more exactly, the pursuit of experience. The second two tenets are exclusively about pursuing a life that will result in new and exciting experiences; a complete ‘derangement’ of the ‘sedate’ life ‘modern existence’ pushed upon the artist. Carr chooses here to completely quote Rimbaud’s line to Demeny from a letter dated 1871 in which he suggests that ‘*Je veux être poète, et je travaille à me rendre Voyant. ... Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de tous les sens*’, that is to become a poet, one must engage in mental work, and experiences that may derange the senses (experiences such as drugs) and thus allow the poet to see the world in a deeper unconscious sense.<sup>14</sup> The first tenet however, speaks more to a method of documenting these new found experiences: ‘Naked self-expression’ talks to a deeper set of ideals in writing. Carr was suggesting a form of writing which bends and rebrands the contemporary styles of mid-century American Literature – a form which stems from the self and ignores ‘conventional morality’ in favour of authenticity over modernist stuffiness. Only this New Vision could allow them to escape the regimentation of *polite society* which was ‘straight jacketing them’ in their ‘artistic self-actualisation’ and gain the experiences *worth* writing about.<sup>15</sup> Kerouac states plainly in *On the Road* his need for the character of Dean:

Yes, and it wasn’t only because I was a writer and needed new experiences that I wanted to know Dean more.<sup>16</sup>

This *need* for new experiences is one that is important to a writer such as Kerouac, presented here as Sal Paradise, who is concerned with recording experience fully. For Kerouac, Dean (or rather his real-life influence, Neal Cassady) is the seed of Kerouac’s greatest novels. Without Cassady, the experiences of the novel may be bland, or in fact not exist at all. For Kerouac, Dean was ‘a burning, frightful Angel, palpitating toward me.’<sup>17</sup> Dean was this prophet figure bringing new experience to the Beat circle; the one who essentially allowed the New Vision to be fully recognised in practice.

This ‘pure creative expression’ could only be properly executed in the context of authenticity.<sup>18</sup> The philosophy behind this bases itself on the purity of thought in the moment, it is ‘factualist’ art.<sup>19</sup> Using the ‘first thought’ as the final – and ‘best thought’ – demonstrates a purity in the narrative. In his journal, Kerouac stated that ‘admitting the truth’ is one of the most important characteristics of literature.<sup>20</sup> For Kerouac, this meant abandoning formalism and recording ‘in words [the] messy, confounding – but wholly exhilarating – zeitgeist as he and his friends were living it.’<sup>21</sup> As Joyce Johnson points out, the Beat writer was ‘looking for

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<sup>14</sup> See Rimbaud’s letter to Paul Demeny, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1871 in *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, [trans. by Wallace Fowlie] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) p. 307.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Marcus, quoted in David J. Krajicek, ‘Where Death Shaped the Beats’, *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Apr 06 2012, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Jan. 2021. p.2

<sup>16</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 10

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112

<sup>18</sup> David J. Krajicek, ‘Where Death Shaped the Beats’, *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, Apr 06 2012, p. 2. *ProQuest*. Web. 19 Jan. 2021. p.2

<sup>19</sup> Jack Kerouac, Letter to Allen Ginsberg, December 1948, in *Jack Kerouac & Allen Ginsberg: The Letters* [ed. by Bill Morgan & David Stanford] (New York: Penguin, 2010) p. 63

<sup>20</sup> Kerouac, Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1947, in *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954* [ed. by Douglas Brinkley] (New York: Penguin, 2004)

<sup>21</sup> Brenda Knight, ‘Memory Babes: Joyce Johnson and Beat Memoir’ in *The Cambridge Companion to The Beats* [ed. by Steven Belletto], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp.137-150. p.137

the truth of what happened – [...not] wanting to fictionalise it’ but instead wanting ‘to find out, what was it really?’<sup>22</sup> The word *truth* can however, be ambiguous in the context of literature. It is for that purpose that *truth*, unless otherwise stated, going forward in this essay will be defined as an authentic account of the author’s experience, whether physical or mental. Any reader can see this yearning for authenticity throughout the Beat canon. It is a selection of literature littered with writers who ‘sought to express, to vent, to reveal fully’ the depths of their experience.<sup>23</sup> Knight suggests that the authenticity in ‘the Beat chronicle[s]’ is a ‘retina-searing heat [that] rolls off the page’ to reveal the lives of the authors so fully that the novel becomes a memoir, almost autobiography.<sup>24</sup> However, even memoirists ‘want to tell a good story, a compelling and meaningful story, a story that others would want to read.’<sup>25</sup> This demonstrates the importance of *fresh* experience in the writing of memoir literature for a ‘compelling’ and believable story that is at the same time exciting.<sup>26</sup> At the same time as creating an authentic story, Beat writers must also portray their mindset in the novels and poetry they create. Kerouac describes in his prose the headiness of New York or Mexico, Ginsberg documents the searing ups and down of bohemian life, while Burroughs’ documents the physical and mental effects of Junk, and Snyder transcribes the experience of trail clearing.

For the Beats this notion of truth can be neatly defined as ‘pure, unadulterated language, the truth of the heart unobstructed by the lying of revision.’<sup>27</sup> Kerouac’s use of ‘unadulterated’ here is interesting; for Kerouac the adulteration of language occurs when revision takes place, and the writing loses the spontaneous meaning which occurred at its conception. *Adulterated* language, therefore, is what Kerouac termed ‘literary lying’ or writing fictions based nowhere near the author’s own experiences or mind-set.<sup>28</sup> The last clause in the definition is the most important - ‘the truth of the heart unobstructed by the lying of revision’ – the authentic feelings of the ‘heart’ must be allowed to flow onto the page and then be left as they are, not edited. This authenticity in writing is not a new idea in literary criticism or even in writing; Heidegger wrote, at length about the importance of truth in writing:

All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of beings, is in essence, poetry. The essence of art, on which both the artwork and the artist depend, is truth’s setting-itself-into-work.<sup>29</sup>

The Beats therefore make a Heideggerian statement, that the truth and the art are one in the same; for the poet, one cannot work without the other. Truth is, in essence a creation of poetry, or at least an ‘unconcealment’ of the writer’s experience.<sup>30</sup> Both the truth of the event and the

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<sup>22</sup> Joyce Johnson, in Laura Barton, ‘I Never Met Anyone Else Like Jack Kerouac [interview with Joyce Johnson]’, *The Guardian* (11 October 2007), [www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/12/fiction.jackkerouac](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/12/fiction.jackkerouac) (accessed 19/01/202)

<sup>23</sup> Knight, ‘Memory Babes’, p. 147

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148

<sup>25</sup> Mary Paniccia Carden, “‘What You Would Like to Hear:’ Sex, Lies, and Life Writing in Diane di Prima’s *Memoirs of a Beatnik*”, *a/b Auto/Biography Studies* 22:1 (2007), pp.26-45, p. 27

<sup>26</sup> *Fresh* experience is that which is different to the average mid-century American life of conformity. It is a step away from the white picket fence image which is so prevalent in American writing.

<sup>27</sup> Weinreich, ‘Locating a Beat Aesthetic’, p. 52

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young & Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp. 1-56, p. 44

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’*, trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 26.

poem are the same – the poem (or prose) sets out the experience as it happened in the author’s eyes. Heidegger defined this feeling of self as *Dasein*, or Being; the *Dasein* is the truthful self which ‘becomes the living bearer of the power of this poetry.’<sup>31</sup> Good poetry – or more likely excellent poetry – must ‘open the possibility of a conception of truth.’<sup>32</sup> Heidegger therefore disagrees a little with the Beats, as only a ‘possibility’ of authenticity is needed, a mere mention or notion will suffice. What Heidegger likely means is, that there is a need for an authentic expression of the author’s feeling on a given event, but his *true* physical experience is not necessarily needed. Whereas the Beats would assume a higher level of truth in writing, a truth that encapsulates the whole being of the author’s experience. The artist must allow this ‘happening of truth’ naturally – a forced truth becomes both inauthentic and uninteresting.<sup>33</sup> The truth must therefore not be a ‘result of the work [...] but the work becomes work alongside the happening of truth.’ Thus, again truth and the experience of writing are one and the same. The use of ‘allow’ here suggests an air of unconscious writing to gain an authentic documentation of the experience being described.

Heidegger describes this action of writing from the basis of experience as ‘unconcealment.’<sup>34</sup> To unconceal the truth is, in essence, an unconcealment of the self. Thus, suggesting that the personal *self* had, at one point, been concealed or hidden. There is a belief in Beat writing that the most *authentic* – or truthful – work could only be *unconcealed* in a state of unconsciousness.<sup>35</sup> In ‘Essentials of Spontaneous Prose’, Kerouac quotes Wilhelm Reich’s theories of Orgastic Potency, in which a ‘beclouding of consciousness’ is suggested.<sup>36</sup> The connection between authentic writing and orgasm is strangely similar – in that both demand a certain amount of involuntary action.<sup>37</sup> Both authentic writing and orgasm depend on the author allowing themselves to just let go, to allow the experience to just flow from them without inhibition. Kerouac suggests that during unconscious writing the truth can be *unconcealed* and be allowed to ‘come from within.’<sup>38</sup> This *unconsciousness* allows the author to ‘admit [his] own uninhibited interesting necessary and so “modern” language what conscious art would censor.’<sup>39</sup> Therefore, Kerouac links consciousness with censorship and therefore *literary lying*. In the context of mid-century America, with its regimentation and ‘social and sexual tensions,’ the authenticity of experience was concealed by conscious censorship; it was the Beat Generation’s plan to unconceal this inbuilt truth. Through a mixture of fresh experience and literary experimentation the Beats sought a ‘letting happen [...] of truth’ to communicate their experience of life in the fullest, least inhibited way they could.

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<sup>31</sup> Heidegger, *Holderlin’s Hymns ‘Germania’ and ‘The Rhine’*, trans. William McNeill & Julia A. Ireland (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014) p. 21

<sup>32</sup> Alberto L. Siani, ‘Antisubjectivism and the End of Art: Heidegger on Hegel.’ *British Journal of Aesthetics*; Jul2020, 60:3, p335-349, 338

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 339

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’*, (1996), P. 26.

<sup>35</sup> See Jack Kerouac, ‘Essentials of Spontaneous Prose’ in *The Portable Beat Reader* [ed. by Ann Charters], (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp.57-8.

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelm Reich quoted by Jack Kerouac, ‘Essentials...’, p. 58 – however Kerouac may have mis-quoted Reich here as ‘beclouding’ cannot be found in any translations of Reich I have read; I have, however, found ‘unclouding of consciousness.’

<sup>37</sup> See Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of the Orgasm: Sex-Economic Problems of Biological Energy* [trans. Vincent R. Carfagno] (London: Souvenir Press, 1999). Reich suggests that the orgasm consists of both *voluntary* and *involuntary* actions; the climax is *involuntary* and is strongest in a state of unclouded consciousness.

<sup>38</sup> Kerouac, ‘Essentials...’, p. 58

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*



As Heidegger states, this poetic truth ‘belongs to a definite time.’<sup>40</sup> By extension the Beat definition of truth also ‘belongs to a definite time.’ The events and thoughts represented in a piece of writing are set within two particular time frames; they belong both in the time that the experience took place and in the time they were documented in writing. The thoughts of the author are those from the experience itself but also of those while writing (if this was different to the time of the experience). For example, the events that took place in *On the Road* happened almost 10 years before Kerouac decided to immortalise them in words. So much happened between the experience of the events and the experience of writing that details could have been forgotten and thoughts on characters changed. This change in time means that the writing of this experience of time can change over the years and therefore the Beat form of writing cannot really be as truthful as one first thought unless the experience is documented at the time it takes place.

Throughout this thesis the juxtaposition between truth and experience will be explored and questioned to determine just how authentic Beat Generation literature is. The first chapter argues the point that Beat writing is as much memoir as it is fiction, and that the experiences documented within the pages of Beat Literature are, as the Beats saw it, representations of truth. This first chapter looks mainly at pieces written after the event of the experiences documented and the methods used to write the author’s past. Although it may not be the historical facts of an event, the thoughts documented within the novels and poetry of Beat writers are truthful to the mental experience of the author (especially at the time of writing).

Chapter two discusses the methods that Beat writers used to document experiences as they happened and poses the question: Can one fully experience an event if they are consumed by the need to document it? Beat writers mainly used poetry to capture a moment in words. This chapter explores the question of whether transcription can be more useful in capturing the truth of an event than Kerouac’s word sketching or whether authenticity is more in what an author writes rather than how they write it.

The final chapter of this thesis looks at Kerouac’s assertion that ‘language is dead’ and strange, new ways of writing are the only way to resurrect it. Therefore, this chapter explores the more experimental ways in which the Beats tried to document experience, from Burroughs’ argument that the psychic use of cut-ups were more useful in documenting truth than the trance writing of Kerouac. In essence this last chapter mops up the strange theories that Beat writers put forward to argue the *need* for truth in a society that they thought regimented their writing too much.

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<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), p. 64

## Chapter 1: 'I'm sticking to the facts:' Spontaneously Written Memoir<sup>41</sup>

Beat writing is fundamentally a memoir, a *roman à clef*. The author writes about their own experience – sometimes but not always – presenting it as fiction. For example, Kerouac's *On the Road*, *Big Sur*, *Subterraneans*, and *The Dharma Bums* are all examples of novels in which Kerouac's own life has been thinly veiled by the fictionalisation of certain names,<sup>42</sup> Ginsberg changes most of the names in 'Howl' to 'who', and Burroughs creates a hallucinatory fictionalisation of his own experiences. It is a literature of experience, literature that goes deep into the consciousness of the author's individuality, but literature that above all reveals what the author sees as the authentic documentation of an experience. Beat writing is, in effect, the authentic documentation of the author's experience as perceived at the time of writing. As Knight states in her essay, 'Memory Babes', Beat literature is a recording 'in words [of] this messy, confounding – but wholly exhilarating – zeitgeist' of personal experience.<sup>43</sup> It is clear that, to some degree, Beat literature was an 'attempt to reveal, in the most intimate detail, the world of the outcast'.<sup>44</sup> Seeing themselves as 'outcasts', the Beat authors would demonstrate their own experience through tracts of spontaneously written prose and verse in order to show their way of life – a way of living that was generally at odds with most Americans at the time.

Spontaneity is of the utmost importance to the Beats as it is a tool for writing freely about personal experience, it holds the potential for the purity of emotion when writing about personal experience.<sup>45</sup> Kerouac's 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' set out the way in which this authentic purity can be harnessed. First Kerouac states the set-up for Spontaneous writing. He suggests setting an object 'before the mind' – this object can either be 'in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching of memory of a definite image-object'.<sup>46</sup> For the purpose of this chapter we are going to take the 'sketching of memory' as the context for studying the account of the Beat experience. The importance of authenticity is already set out in this instruction with Kerouac's insistence of a 'definite' image from memory, it is not an imagined landscape but rather a 'definite' concrete image in the author's eyes. This is important in the eyes of the Beat memoirist; it is not the literary quality of a piece of writing that is important, but rather the 'honesty' of the experience being described.<sup>47</sup> As Kerouac suggests in *The Subterraneans* as he sets up his story, 'you must admit now I'm sticking to the facts':<sup>48</sup>

Dancing, I had put the light out, so, in the dark, dancing I kissed her – it was giddy, whirling to the dance, the beginning, the usual beginning of lovers kissing standing in

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<sup>41</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) p. 4

<sup>42</sup> See Ann Charters' 'Identity Key' in *Kerouac a biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994) p. 389

<sup>43</sup> Brenda Knight, 'Memory Babes: Joyce Johnson and Beat Memoir' in *The Cambridge Companion to The Beats* [ed. by Steven Belletto], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp.137-150. p.137. Knight's use of 'zeitgeist' here assumes that the writing of the Beat Generation tried in effect to document their age, while at the same time documenting their own experience. Therefore, there is an assumption in the Beat way of thinking that they were an important voice within their age.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Newhouse, *The Beat Generation and the Popular Novel in the United States, 1945-1970* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000) p. 3

<sup>45</sup> This purity is a sense of authentic documentation of emotion which is true to the experience being documented.

<sup>46</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' in *The Portable Beat Reader* [ed. by Ann Charters], (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp.57-8. P. 57

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p. 58

<sup>48</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Subterraneans* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) p. 4

a dark room the room being the woman's the man all designs – ending up later in wild dances she on my lap or thigh as I danced her around bent back for balance and she round my neck her arms that came to warm so much the *me* that then was only hot - <sup>49</sup>

If one compares Kerouac's account of his relationship with Alene Lee in *The Subterraneans*, with Ann Charters' recount of the affair in her biography of Kerouac, the stories pair almost identically. In Kerouac's description of their first night together we see a tenderness, a slowing down of memory that cuts through the sharp speed of the rest of the novel. Here, we do not see the excitable dialogue riddled prose that litters the preceding scenes in their self-deprecating senses but rather a meditation on love; the grammar reappears out of the haze of long sentences, slowing down the reader's pace, the breathiness of the prose's rhythm evoking the lustful cadence of Kerouac's own experience. In this short paragraph it seems that Kerouac slows down the rhythm in order to, not only mimic the slowness of the action, but also to savour the memory of the night – to hold it in his mind as he continues to write. The word 'giddy' presents a feeling of love sickness, which as Weinreich suggests, indicates Leo Percepied's obsessive fascination with Mardou.<sup>50</sup> The tentative descriptions give the novel a suggestion of worship, Kerouac wishes to worship the character of Mardou and to understand her intimately. According to Charters, Kerouac understood Alene Lee – the real-life character of Mardou – so intimately that he 'succeeded in taking the way the girl spoke' in *The Subterraneans*.<sup>51</sup> This demonstrates the sheer authenticity of experience that Kerouac uses in his Spontaneous writing, the prose is not only about Kerouac's "Mardou experience", it also *becomes* the Mardou experience with Mardou's 'syntax and her style' infused throughout the paragraphs of prose. This remembered rhythm comes through Kerouac's use of unconscious writing which allows the 'subconscious to admit' the facts of experience into the writing.<sup>52</sup>

The unconscious rhythm of Kerouac's writing allows the experience to trip along as if it were happening in real time, as if at the point of writing Kerouac remembers small details and inserts them. This unconscious 'buildup' of words creates an 'outward' motion of the description, allowing it to encompass the whole experience that it endeavours to document. The 'outward' motion also allows the author to place his experience within the wider context of the world, creating a broader perspective to the immediacy of the author's mindset while writing. Holmes suggests that Kerouac's 'intricate' descriptions 'unwound adroitly through a dense maze of clauses; astonishing sentences that were obsessed with simultaneously depicting the crumb on the plate, the plate on the table, the table in the house, and the house in the world'.<sup>53</sup> This 'maze of clauses' can be seen perfectly in Kerouac's first description of Cody in *Visions of Cody*.<sup>54</sup> The description starts simply enough: 'Have you ever seen anyone like Cody Pomeray?', and then moves through a series of physical descriptions of Cody's appearance, each interspersed with insertions of his family history, memories of times Jack Duluoz – Kerouac's character in *Visions* – had spent with Cody – a representation of Neal Cassady. These descriptions, and fragments of memory run in one continuous sentence for a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 15. However, it might be suggested that Charters only uses the plot of *Subterraneans* in her evidence of the biography, using the character name 'Mardou' rather than Alene Lee. This may be to protect the real characters, however.

<sup>50</sup> Regina Weinreich, *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990)

<sup>51</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac a biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994) p. 186

<sup>52</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58

<sup>53</sup> John Cllelon Holmes quoted in Charters, *Kerouac*, p. 99

<sup>54</sup> See Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (London: Flamingo, 1995) pp.67-69

page and a half of clauses which place Jack's memory within the context of Cody's personal appearance. These long intricate sentences are influenced by Cassady's own speech patterns, Proustian in their detail and dense with 'disparate elements all put together within one sentence'.<sup>55</sup> Despite their intricacies, Kerouac's long sentences are surprisingly precise, they allow the 'development to unfold' into the experience of the author.<sup>56</sup> The development in Kerouac's prose is not linear but rather circular, allowing for many 'variations' of the lived experience. As Tytell suggests when he is discussing *Visions of Cody*, these variations allow the reader to see Kerouac's experience from every angle.<sup>57</sup> Despite Kerouac offering many variations of an experience this does not mean there is more than one experience within his description; Kerouac instead needs to take each experience in hand and dive deep into it, pulling it apart to show its many levels. It is like he says in 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,' the author must start at the 'jewel centre of interest [...] and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release.'<sup>58</sup> In writing in this 'outward' motion the author is able to not only discuss the experience being described; he also has the ability to give the reader the context around such experience. However, as Walsh suggests 'no assessment' of the experience 'may be considered valid until the entire orchestration is presented'; Walsh's argument uses the metaphor of music to make her point about Kerouac's prose, suggesting that each clause is a line or couple of beats, she makes the assertion that one cannot base an assessment of an entire song on a couple of beats. Therefore, when looking at Kerouac's experience and his account of experience, we cannot judge them until the entire experience is presented.<sup>59</sup>

The 'playfulness' and 'freedom' of Spontaneous Prose allows Kerouac's experience to be documented seemingly authentically and to shine through the intricacies of the prose.<sup>60</sup> The intricacies and 'buildup' of clauses comes, as we looked at earlier, through the unconscious nature of Kerouac's spontaneous writing. Kerouac advocates for a 'semitrance'-like state when writing.<sup>61</sup> This unconsciousness allows the author to write what 'conscious art would censor'. In the Beat mind the 'inherited literary conventions' of conscious art do not allow for personalisation; they censor the mind into omitting certain personal experience thus watering down the purity of the experience being described.<sup>62</sup> The end of this chapter will explore this self-censorship in more detail, however it is useful to mention it in our discussion of unconscious writing. However, the purity of thought comes through in Kerouac's other instruction about writing without consciousness; he urges the writer 'never afterthink to "improve" or defray impressions, as the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from the cradle warm protective mind [...] always honest'.<sup>63</sup> Kerouac asserts that to edit, or 'afterthink', an author would be censoring himself or changing the purity of their 'uninhibited' best thoughts: 'If you don't stick to what you first thought, and to the words the

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<sup>55</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats* [ed. by Bill Morgan] (London: Penguin Classics, 2018) p. 123

<sup>56</sup> Joy Walsh, "Kerouac's Harmonious Combination of Elements: The Long Symphonic Sentence." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* Summer (1983), p. 28

<sup>57</sup> John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1976)

<sup>58</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58

<sup>59</sup> Walsh, "Kerouac's Harmonious Combination...", 28

<sup>60</sup> Tytell, *Naked Angels*, p. 181

<sup>61</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58. Kerouac attributes this idea of 'semi-trance' to Yeats. A further discussion of this unconscious writing will take place in chapter 3.

<sup>62</sup> Weinreich, *Spontaneous Poetics...*, p. 4. The end of this chapter will explore this self-censorship in more detail, however it is useful to mention it in our discussion of unconscious writing.

<sup>63</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58

thought brought, what's the sense of bothering with it anyway, what's the sense of foisting your little lies on others?'<sup>64</sup> In the Beat aesthetic, to revise was to lie and according to this aesthetic philosophy took the value out of the writing. This value that Kerouac puts on writing is not necessarily an arbitrary value of quality. He does not say that unrevised writing is good because it reads well or sells well; value is instead measured in a sense of authentic documentation of experience – to what extent has an author shown the true nature of their mindset, and to what degree they have left their writing free of revision and *afterthinking*.<sup>65</sup> For the Beats, spontaneous, unconscious writing was the Emersonian 'essence of genius, of virtue, and of life'.<sup>66</sup> It is the innermost thoughts of the writer let out when their internal-censor is put to sleep (or at least ignored), these unconscious thoughts are perceived to be more *true* and therefore an internal 'genius' due to the absence of a censor.

As well as Emerson, Rimbaud was another influence on the unconscious method of writing used by the Beat Generation. Lucien Carr's 'New Vision' features an unreferenced quote of Rimbaud, stating that the Beat Generation live, as well as write, with a consciousness 'expanded by derangement of the senses'.<sup>67</sup> This influence from Rimbaud suggests not only to write unconsciously but to translate your own experience of that 'derangement' into the writing. In Rimbaud's *Parade* there is a strong suggestion of 'an internal kaleidoscopic vision recombining, in Freud's terms, day residues according to dream logic.'<sup>68</sup> This unconscious vision of experience comes through as 'residues' of images in his dream-like image of a circus passing through. Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* has the same dream like feel. In containing both real life experience – what we will call 'day residues' – and unconscious dream logic, *Visions of Cody* becomes a book of fragments, a scrap book of images and memories.<sup>69</sup> These fragments allow Kerouac to 'capture the fleeting nature of lived experience;' as one experience fades out of his memory, another fades in. In this fragmentary prose Kerouac gives snapshots, sketching dream-like landscapes of what it might be like 'cutting' around with Cody.<sup>70</sup> However, as Trudeau suggests, due to the unconscious nature of the fragments Kerouac is unable to 'authentically reproduce exactly' what he sees.<sup>71</sup> Yet, it may in fact be within his inaccuracies that Kerouac is at his most authentic; opening himself up to the *truth* of his unconscious mind. He suggests that *Visions* is his 'supplication in [a] dream'; prayer-like and from the bottom of his soul.<sup>72</sup> As Jung suggests, dreams 'may contain ineluctable truths' which come to the fore in our unconscious moments. This is important for the Beats in their need for authenticity that might be escaped by consciousness.<sup>73</sup> If one were to compare Kerouac's

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<sup>64</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'The Last Word', *Escapade*, June 1959, p.72

<sup>65</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58

<sup>66</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self Reliance' (White Plains, N.Y: Peter Pauper Press, 1967) p. 28

<sup>67</sup> Lucien Carr, 'New Vision' quoted in Chris Sullivan, *Rebel Rebel: How Mavericks Made Our Modern World* (London: Unbound, 2019) p. 120. 'derangement of all the senses' comes from Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny, May 15<sup>th</sup> 1871 in *Complete Works, Selected Letters*, [trans. by Wallace Fowlie] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) p. 307.

<sup>68</sup> Adrianna M. Paliyenko, 'The Dialogic Je in Rimbaud's Illuminations: The Subject of Self and Other', *French Forum Sept*; 19(3): (1994) pp. 261-77. P. 266

<sup>69</sup> Justin Thomas Trudeau, 'Stooging the Body, Stooging the Text: Jack Kerouac's Visions of Cody', in *Text & Performance Quarterly*. Oct 2007, 27:4, p334-350. P. 335

<sup>70</sup> Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, p. 397

<sup>71</sup> Trudeau, p. 341

<sup>72</sup> Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, p. 368

<sup>73</sup> Carl G. Jung, *The Practical Use of Dream Analysis in The Practice of Psychotherapy, Collected Works Vol. 16* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954) p. 147

fragments in Visions of Cody with Rimbaud's *Illuminations* one might find various similarities in the structure and feel of the pieces:

Have you ever seen anyone like Cody Pomeray? say on a street- corner on a winter night in Chicago, or better, Fargo, any mighty cold town, a young guy with a bony face that looks like it's been pressed against metal bars to get that dogged, rocky look of suffering, perseverance, finally when you look closest, happy prim self-belief, with Western sideburns and big blue flirtatious eyes of an old maid and fluttering lashes; the small and muscular kind of fellow wearing usually a leather jacket, and if it's a suit it's with a vest so he can prop his thick busy thumbs in place and smile the smile of his grandfathers; who walks as fast as he can go on the balls of his feet, talking excitedly and gesticulating; poor pitiful kid actually just out of reform school with no money, no mother, and if you saw him dead on the sidewalk with a cop standing over him you'd walk on in a hurry, in silence. Oh life, who is that? [...] He looked like that, and God bless him he looked like that Hollywood stunt man who is fist-fighting in place of the hero and has such a remote, furious, anonymous viciousness (one of the loneliest things in the world to see and we've all seen it a thousand times in a thousand B-movies) that everybody begins to be suspicious because they know the hero wouldn't act like that in real unreality. If you've been a boy and played on dumps you've seen Cody, all crazy, excited and full of glee-mad powers, giggling with the pimply girls in back of fenders and weeds till some vocational school swallows his ragged blisses and that strange American iron which later is used to mold the suffering man-face is now employed to straighten and quell the long wavering spermy disorderliness of the boy.<sup>74</sup>

Ginsberg describes this fragment as, 'such a pretty piece of prose poetry and also full insight, raw insight in the sense that it brings you back home to some sense of the self which is real...it displays that quality of panoramic awareness very clearly'.<sup>75</sup> Ginsberg is correct here in his statement that the fragment displays 'raw insight [...] which is real', and it is that unconscious purity that allows for its rawness and reality. The piece takes on the attributes of Cody; its unconscious description not only describes, but becomes Cody; the fragment talks 'excitedly' and begins 'gesticulating as it dances across every attribute of Cody. This is not a slowly written piece of prose but rather a fast paced 'outfanning' over the details. It not only talks about the 'disorderliness' of the character but also takes on its own disorder as it moves through its various descriptions and images of Cody. Similarly, Rimbaud's *Illuminations* skirt over detail illuminating it and then moving the torch on, over another part of the scene:

These millions of people who feel no need to know one another experience such similar kinds of education, occupation and old-age, that their life-spans must be several times shorter than those which a mad statistic determines for the peoples of the continent. Just as from my window, I see new specters rolling through the thick and eternal fumes of coal fires, - our shadow of the woods, our summer's night! – modern-day Furies, in

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<sup>74</sup> Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, p. 67

<sup>75</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats* (London: Penguin, 2018) p. 121

front of my cottage which is my country and all my heart since everything here resembles this [...]<sup>76</sup>

The experience of this *Illumination* encompasses a Beat motif; it transcribes experience, not only of the author but also of the people it takes into its lines. The ‘specters’ of ‘modern-day Furies’ roll past Rimbaud’s window as a metaphor for the changing world he sees; he does see them, and uses his imagery to give them a life elevated from that which all others see. Like Rimbaud, the Beats also concentrated on ‘modern-day Furies,’ taking the personal human condition as a starting point for a lot of their writing and then elaborating on this theme through personal human experience. Take for example Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’, a long poem documenting the personal experience of his contemporaries’ suffering in mid-century America. Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* fragment, ‘City’ by Rimbaud, and Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ were written using *unconscious* methods which, according to their authors, makes their words truer and of a *purser* experience. If we again take Jung at his word that the unconscious mind - a dreamlike state – can hold ‘ineluctable truths, philosophical pronouncements, illusion [...] memories, [...] irrational experiences, even telepathic visions’ then one can only ascertain that these unconscious writings hold at least some truth of an experience. This authentic documentation may not have been present if the author was writing with a full consciousness. As Paliyenko suggests, ‘seeking inspiration in the realm of the unknown, a poet sees unconsciously and comprehends what would elude a conscious outlook’.<sup>77</sup> This ‘inspiration in the realm of the unknown’ must however come from somewhere, come from some personal experience: ‘day residues according to dream logic’.<sup>78</sup>

These unconscious images taken from memory seem to be the embodiment of the Wordsworthian definition of poetry: ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings [...] recollected in tranquillity’.<sup>79</sup> It should be recognised that Kerouac took Wordsworth’s definition on the writing of most of his novels; they are written from real life experience recollected in the tranquillity of the typewriter. Although there is great speculation as to the actual spontaneity and writing method of Kerouac’s novel, *On the Road*, it is undisputed that the events portrayed in the novel did actually happen and were written at the type-writer after the event. The legend is that Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in a feverish ‘three week rush’ on a 120 foot roll of teletype paper spurred on with only Benzedrine and jazz.<sup>80</sup> However, although a great legend, this story of completely spontaneous writing may in fact be exaggeration; As Brinkley suggests the ‘fevered burst’ of typing came as a result of meticulous planning – Kerouac had notebooks of ‘outlining, character sketching, chapter drafting, and meticulous trimming’.<sup>81</sup> So although his novels were written in the tranquillity of his home; his evidence of experience and the ‘overflow of powerful emotion’ was to be found in his notebooks which were written by Kerouac while he was gaining his road experiences. However, there is a problem with the authenticity of *remembered* memoir as opposed to memoirs written at the time – the problem lies in how well the author can recollect the events that took place and what

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<sup>76</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, ‘City’, in *Illuminations* [trans. By John Ashbery] (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2011) p.75

<sup>77</sup> Paliyenko, (1994) P. 266

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 266

<sup>79</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’ in *Romanticism: an Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (4th edn.) (1800; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) p. 514. In this definition I am taking poetry to encompass all written word

<sup>80</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: a biography*, p. 97

<sup>81</sup> Douglas Brinkley, ‘Introduction’ in *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2004), pp. xi-xlii. P. xxiii

was said. The writing remains a ‘sketching [...] of a definite image’ and therefore holds onto the authenticity of the experiencer’s memory, but to what extent has the image been changed, forgotten or marred by events and emotions taking place after the experience took place? Can we trust the author’s memory? For example, Kerouac’s first meeting with Cassady was edited or forgotten for in its portrayal in *On the Road*. Kerouac writes in *On the Road* ‘Dean came to the door in his shorts’,<sup>82</sup> yet Charters states that ‘when he [Kerouac] told his friend Carl Solomon about meeting Neal in 1947, there weren’t any shorts’.<sup>83</sup> Instead Kerouac remembered ‘Neal standing naked in the doorway of the tenement, as a kind of Nietzschean hero’.<sup>84</sup> It is interesting to speculate whether this detail is misremembered or simply edited. Campbell goes as far to suggest that the famous meeting scene in *On the Road* may in fact have been the second meeting between Cassady and Kerouac; Campbell suggests ‘when he [Kerouac] began the task of shaping and recording their legend – recognising the legendary status of Cassady from the start – Kerouac restructured events and put the significant second meeting first.’<sup>85</sup> The use of ‘shaping’ in Campbell’s criticism is interesting and owes a certain suggestion that Kerouac’s *roman à clef* novel is not as factual as other critics may have perceived. Kerouac’s attempts to faithfully render Cassady into his novels was a frustration that led to Kerouac’s ‘artistic despair’. It is Kerouac’s ‘fascination with Neal’s persona’ coupled with the ‘mystery of Neal’s character’ that made Cassady such a difficult subject to write about and which led to Kerouac continually reviewing pieces about Cassady in order to capture Cassady in the truest light.<sup>86</sup> However, it is not just the truth of Cassady as a character but also the likeness of the sound of the generation. The long sprawling excited sentences of Kerouac and Ginsberg encompass this aesthetic of Cassady’s voice and persona; they echo what it was to know him as a person, however, as stated above it is difficult to pinpoint how much of this description is reality – and Kerouac wasn’t even sure of that himself. However, the aesthetic sound of the literature of the Beat Generation is important to discuss in greater detail.

In fact, it may be one of the most important aspects of how the Beat Generation documented a personal experience of mid-century America. Breaking open the punctuation disturbed lines of prose, Beat writing was the ‘barbaric yawp’ of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>87</sup> Like Whitman, the Beats ‘freely expressed himself [themselves] in the vernacular of American speech’.<sup>88</sup> As Miller states, it is important that the vernacular and sound of a country are echoed in a piece of writing in order for the authenticity of a description to be displayed:

[the] good poet, or in this case “spontaneous bop prosodist”[sic] is always alive to the idiomatic lingo of his time – the swing, the beat, the disjunctive metaphoric rhythm which comes so fast, so wild, so scimmaged, so unbelievably albeit delectably mad, that when transmitted to paper no one recognises it.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 4

<sup>83</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: a biography*, p. 68

<sup>85</sup> James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), p. 58

<sup>86</sup> John Clellon Holmes quoted in Tim Hunt, *Kerouac’s Crooked Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p. 117-119

<sup>87</sup> Walt Whitman, ‘Song of Myself,’ in *Leaves of Grass*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 78. The enthusiasm and audacity of Whitman’s ‘Yawp’ is greatly echoed in the yawp that is Spontaneous Prose.

<sup>88</sup> Jerome Loving, ‘Introduction’ in *Leaves of Grass*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. vii-xxii p. ix

<sup>89</sup> Henry Miller, ‘Introduction’ in Kerouac’s *Subterraneans* (New York: Avon Books, 1959) p. 2



Using the ‘lingo’ of one’s time is the ability to demonstrate authenticity in a vernacular which will be understood by the intellectual and the simple hipster alike. Therefore, the Beat method of ‘speak[ing] now in own unalterable way’ allows an author to build a landscape of Americanism through the language in which they write.<sup>90</sup> This documentation is therefore understood by the reader in a language and vernacular that they understand: the language that they think in, the language that they hear in the street. Yet it must be understood that this language is not pure American, it is not the American of middle-class America; it is the language of, what Mailer defines as, the Hipster. Despite its strange views on race, Mailer’s essay, ‘The White Negro’, sets out what is meant by the language of the Hipster. It is ‘a language of energy,’ it is fast paced and sparse; it makes use of single short words to communicate a whole sentence or whole idea. Mailer gives the following phrases as an example of Hip language: ‘man, go, put down, make, beat, cool, swing, with it, crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square’.<sup>91</sup> These are all words of experience, words that would only be understood by those who have experienced the world of the hipster, or who has an understanding of hip culture. They are also words that allow the Hipster to communicate quickly and still experience as much as possible. It is a language that gives ‘expression to abstract states of feeling which all could share’.<sup>92</sup> These ‘abstract states of feeling’ are in the basic form inward personal experience, so Hip language allows the Beat to communicate these experiences in a way in which he and his contemporary can understand. Another important sound within the Beat Generation was bop jazz. As Mailer suggests, ‘jazz [...] spoke across the nation, it had the communication of art [...] it spoke in no matter what laundered popular way of instantaneous existential states [...] it was indeed a communication by art because it said “I feel this, and now you do too.”’<sup>93</sup> Jazz was not the only medium to communicate ‘existential states’ across the nation, Beat literature was using the same philosophy as jazz to ‘blow as deep as you want – write as deeply as you want’.<sup>94</sup> Here, Kerouac’s instruction to ‘blow’ when writing, refers to the idea of a jazz musician blowing the saxophone or trumpet in a long improvised solo; Kerouac suggests to write like a jazz musician plays: spontaneously. The deepness of the *blowing* refers to the detail that the author wants to delve into, does the author want to skirt along the surface of an idea or do they want to dive deep into the feeling? This feeling of improvisation in Beat writing ‘echo[es the] bebop consciousness and bebop paranoia’ of the late forties and early fifties when the bulk of Beat writing was being created.<sup>95</sup>

Self-censorship of memory is not the only variable that might affect the authentic documentation of an author’s past; events outside of the remembered event may also inhibit the accuracy of memory – especially in the fast-paced environment of Spontaneous Prose. Events since the memory, and events happening at the time of writing can both alter the mindset of the author and therefore create a piece of writing that is not wholly accurate in its representation of a real event.

In the window I smelled all the food of San Francisco. There were seafood places out there where the buns were hot, and the baskets were good enough to eat too; where the

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<sup>90</sup> Kerouac, ‘Essentials’, p. 57

<sup>91</sup> Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro’ in *The Portable Beat Reader* [ed. by Anne Charters] (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992) pp. 582-605. P. 595

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 586

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 586

<sup>94</sup> Kerouac, ‘Essentials of Spontaneous Prose’, p. 57

<sup>95</sup> Ginsberg, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*, p. 35

menus themselves were soft with foody esculence as though dipped in hot broths and roasted dry and good enough to eat too. [...] And oh, that pan-fried chow mein flavored [*sic*] air that blew into my room from china town, vying with spaghetti sauces of North Beach, the soft-shell crab of Fisherman's Wharf [...] Add fog, hunger-making raw fog, and the throb of neons in the soft night, the clack of high-heeled beauties, white doves in a Chinese grocery window...<sup>96</sup>

The description here takes in the entire overwhelming aroma of the city; smells become visible on the air, and even the physical shops and baskets become 'foody esculence'. Note here the importance of 'esculence', the French for edible; San Francisco has a small but strong French community and Kerouac his own French heritage. Using this detail Kerouac brings his own experience of the city into a very olfactible and audible piece of writing. However, how much of this scene might have been influenced by the views and smells coming through the window while he was writing *On the Road* in his apartment in Manhattan? How much of the aroma was influenced by making San Francisco so much different from the greyness of New York? In his description of San Francisco here, there is no feeling of the greyness or closeness that he describes New York with – in fact Kerouac describes the view of San Francisco as 'the fabulous white city'.<sup>97</sup> Compare this to the 'oily' claustrophobia that Kerouac uses to write about New York in 'New York Scenes', and it would seem that while writing the San Francisco scenes of *On the Road* sat in a Manhattan flat, Kerouac was trying to get as far away from that 'oily' closeness as possible.<sup>98</sup> While writing, Kerouac essentially stands both inside and outside of the present tense; he is writing within the present while mentally living within the past.<sup>99</sup> However, the influence of the present sinks into the memory of the past. Thus making the description marred and somewhat unreliable. However, we must also take into account that the opinion of the present allows the reader to see inside the author's personal thoughts at the time of writing.<sup>100</sup>

Another problem that arises with the apparent authenticity of Beat literature is the presentation of other characters' thoughts. In Ginsberg's poem 'Sunflower Sutra', Kerouac's thoughts are presented by Ginsberg as follows: 'we thought the same thoughts of the soul, bleak and blue sad-eyed, surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery'.<sup>101</sup> In presenting Kerouac in this way Ginsberg is assuming the thoughts of Kerouac in a strange kind of omniscience. However, from reading Kerouac's journal entries from around the same time, Ginsberg seems to hit pretty close to the 'bleak and blue sad-eyed' thoughts that Kerouac may have been having; Charters states that 'Jack began to feel more and more depressed' around the time that the poem was written.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, Ginsberg's description of their 'thoughts' seems to be authentic but what is interesting in the examination of the Beat state of mind in this poem is the way that he describes their surroundings. Almost everything in the poem – apart from the eventual sunflower – becomes industrialised; the once natural roots of trees become the 'gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery' and the shade is not that of the trees but

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<sup>96</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 157-158

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, p.154

<sup>98</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'New York Scenes' in *Lonesome Traveler* (London: Penguin, 2018) pp. 88-99. p. 94

<sup>99</sup> See Weinreich, *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac*, p. 8

<sup>100</sup> Although this would not be true for all forms of literature, the personal nature of Beat writing allows for this spontaneous subconscious to slip into the *fiction*

<sup>101</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'Sunflower Sutra' in *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) pp. 138-139. P. 138

<sup>102</sup> Charters, *Kerouac a biography*, p. 261

of ‘a Southern Pacific locomotive’. Even the ‘beauty of a sunflower’ is ‘gray’ and ‘battered’. This ugliness of nature resembles the *depressed* states of Kerouac and Ginsberg’s thoughts in the poem. However, there is some hope and exaltation in what Ginsberg calls his ‘sermon’ the last lines of the poem: ‘We’re not our skin of grime, we’re not our dread bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we’re all golden sunflowers inside’.<sup>103</sup> Here lies the important dichotomy of *beatness*: it is that feeling of being ‘exhausted, at the bottom of the world’ but also of being ‘open [...and] receptive to a vision’.<sup>104</sup> Here, like in dreams, lies the problem of validity in Beat writing. As in dreams, visions may come from the sub-conscious, drugs or somewhere else. The famous retort of Norman Podhoretz was that the Beats ‘can’t think straight’.<sup>105</sup> Their visions both validate and prove Podhoretz wrong; Ginsberg would be the first to admit that he was institutionally *crazy*.<sup>106</sup> However, his visions and poetry may seem too profound to simply render Ginsberg a *No-Nothing Bohemian*. It would seem that Podhoretz’s argument is more an attack on unorthodox thinking rather than the actual intelligence of the Beat writers. This essay is not in the business of answering questions of intelligence, but it must be noted that intelligence cannot be measured by how one gets to a viewpoint but rather than the importance is in the final viewpoint. It does not matter if one can ‘think straight’ or whether they think in circles always coming back to the beginning; in fact it is one of the main doctrines of the Beat Generation to question and look through different viewpoints to find an answer of selfdom rather than simply taking the first viewpoint as gospel. It is in Ginsberg’s ‘Sunflower Sutra’ that he mentions one of his most profound visions – ‘memories of Blake – my visions’.<sup>107</sup> Ginsberg’s famous vision was that of an auditory hallucination. He asserts that while reading William Blake’s *Poems of Innocence and Experience* the voice of Blake could be heard in the apartment with him reading ‘Ah Sunflower’ – hence why it is mentioned in ‘Sunflower Sutra’ – Ginsberg then suggests that the voice of Blake morphs into that of God to wake Ginsberg ‘deeper into [his] understanding of the poem’.<sup>108</sup> Ginsberg believed that this experience would guide him to his spiritual and poetic mission and to ‘realise that this existence was *it!*’. Exactly what Ginsberg means by *it* is unclear, but it would seem that Ginsberg’s mission was to experience life as deeply as possible and to record this experience in totally uninhibited poetry. But Ginsberg’s vision might remind readers of another literary vision – and to *straight thinking* academics or critics may even be too close to call a vision and rather an idea lifted from literature:

As I ponder'd in silence,  
 Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long,  
 A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,  
 Terrible in beauty, age, and power,  
 The genius of poets of old lands,  
 As to me directing like flame its eyes,  
 With finger pointing to many immortal songs<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ginsberg, ‘Sunflower Sutra’, p. 139

<sup>104</sup> Ginsberg, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*, p. 2

<sup>105</sup> Norman Podhoretz, ‘The Know-Nothing Bohemians’ in *Partisan Review* (Spring 1958), reprinted in *The Beats: A Literary Reference* [ed. by Matt Theado] (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2003) p. 81

<sup>106</sup> In June 1949 Ginsberg entered the Psychiatric Institute of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

<sup>107</sup> Ginsberg, ‘Sunflower Sutra’, p. 139

<sup>108</sup> Ginsberg quoted in Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, p. 86

<sup>109</sup> Walt Whitman, ‘As I Ponder’d in Silence’ in *Leaves of Grass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p.9

Ginsberg's hallucination of Blake seems to mirror Whitman's 'menacing voice' in *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>110</sup> Was Ginsberg's hallucination simply a dreamed-up version of Whitman's lines or was it a true vision of Blake's voice? It must however be noted that where or how visions present themselves or what they present is not wholly important to the Beats but rather the affect they have on the viewer or on writing. Although this closeness to Whitman's earlier words do call into question the validity of Ginsberg's experience it does not have any bearing on the obvious profundity that the experience had on him. Ginsberg's vision took the 'voice of the Ancient of Days' and turned it into a 'consciousness, of being alive unto myself'.<sup>111</sup> Ginsberg, like many other mystics or seers believed wholeheartedly in his vision but believed more profoundly in his ability and duty to share it; he said of writing about his experience 'never forget, never renege, never deny. Never deny the voice'.<sup>112</sup> It is in this statement that Ginsberg sets out his mission for the next fifty years of his life; it is not just the vision that he promises to 'never forget' or 'deny', but it rather his whole life. He vows to depict his whole being, from the deepest thought of his 'lovelorn tongue', to the pornographic details in 'Done, Finished with the Biggest Cock', and the 'screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories'.<sup>113</sup> To depict all this was shocking in the sanitised environment of the mid-century America, when *Howl* was first released it was seized and became the subject of a lengthy obscenity trial. The argument of the prosecution was that the poem contained obscene homosexual elements and 'coarse and vulgar language'. However, due to the fact that the poem did not 'lack in "social importance" [or in literary merit] it cannot be held obscene'.<sup>114</sup> Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg's defence, in the obscenity trial, used the constitutional First Amendment as the argument for publishing *Howl*.<sup>115</sup> The unassailable right to print the innermost feelings of the soul without forgetting or denying any detail.

It is this obscene personality that makes *Howl* the quaking success that it is. There is a deepness of thought that goes into the lines, an almost raw attack of the personal psyche. It is a poem, as Mortenson suggests, that seeks 'to turn intensely personal observation and feeling into public statement'.<sup>116</sup> Ginsberg does attack all feeling and thought of himself, typing it into a frenzy of spontaneous thoughts and anecdotes. Ginsberg's poetry takes the 'scribbled secret notebooks' and throws them out into the public eye.<sup>117</sup> Ginsberg takes Rimbaud's idea of '*dérèglement de tous les sens*' to come to his previously 'unutterable, unnameable' poetry.<sup>118</sup> His poetry is a cobbling together of images in a collage of personal thoughts and anecdote. Take for example *Howl*, it is essentially a list poem containing the deeply personal details of the inner soul of both himself and his contemporaries:

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'Paris Review Interview' in *Writers at Work* [ed. by George Plimpton] (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977) pp.279-320, p. 303

<sup>112</sup> Ibid

<sup>113</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley', p. 135, l. 11, 'Howl' p. 127 in *Collected Poems: 1947-1980*

<sup>114</sup> Judge W. J. Clayton Horn, quoted in Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (London: Virgin Publishing LTD, 2000) p. 230

<sup>115</sup> *Ginsberg vs New York*, 88 S. Ct 1274 (1968)

<sup>116</sup> Erik Mortenson, 'Allen Ginsberg and Beat Poetry' in *The Cambridge Companion to The Beats* [ed. by Steven Belletto], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 77-91, p. 83

<sup>117</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader* [ed. by Ann Charters], (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp.58-9. P. 58

<sup>118</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, 'Letter to Paul Demeny', in *Collected Poems* [trans. Oliver Bernard] (London: Penguin, 1986) pp. 7-17. P 10

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and  
 Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,  
 who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the  
 windows of the skull,  
 who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in wastebaskets  
 and listening to the Terror through the wall,  
 who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana  
 for New York, [...]

with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,  
 incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind  
 leaping toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless  
 world of Time between<sup>119</sup>

The mixing of anecdotal evidence with contemporary imagery allows Ginsberg to both show his mind but also the wider zeitgeist mind of his generation. In taking a personal anecdote of being ‘expelled’ from Columbia University for ‘publishing obscene odes on the windows’, Ginsberg also adds in the contemporary image of the popular neurosurgical treatment – lobotomy – using the addition of ‘of the skull’ after windows. In using the piling up of images in the final lines of this extract, Ginsberg allows us to see into his ‘waking nightmares’ of homosexual anxiety but also into the ‘waking [social] nightmares’ of the ‘blind streets’ of America. In his collaging composition, Ginsberg states that the different ‘phrasings’ come from ‘different parts of the mind, which are existing simultaneously’; one part of the mind might be thinking of jazz or a jukebox and another might be thinking about politics and the atom bomb – hence where phrases such as ‘hydrogen jukebox’ might come from in the poems.<sup>120</sup> This piling and compiling of images allows the author to tap into those thoughts he might not even know existed – the deepest *unconscious* mind of the poet; ‘in the moment of composition I don’t necessarily *know* what it means, but it comes to mean something later [...] I realise it meant something clear, unconsciously’. Ginsberg suggests that potentially ‘we’re not always conscious of the entire depth of our minds’.<sup>121</sup> This again falls back onto Rimbaud’s idea of the self ‘being other’ [*car Je est un autre*].<sup>122</sup> Williamson defines this phenomenon of the deeply personal, being *unknown* and *unconscious*, as the ‘conscious ego’ being ‘a mere internalisation of received ideas’.<sup>123</sup> This allows us to better understand the collaging effect, that Ginsberg uses in *Howl*, as a method internalising what goes on in *society* and the poet’s relationship with that. Therefore, the poet receives moral and political messages from the outside world, internalises them, and comes out with his own unconscious mind – the deepest innermost thoughts of his soul. Williamson also argues that this *omnipresence* of ‘self-revelation’ within an author’s *personal* poetry must be explored to its ‘vanishing point,’ allowing the poem to become the poet and the poet to become the poem.

It is true for a lot of Beat writers that ‘complete self-definition is a sufficient and possible goal’ for poetry.<sup>124</sup> However, this begs the question of ‘whether a writer morally should – and psychologically *can* – tell the entire truth about himself to any audience’. One such Beat poet who completely *defines* herself in her poetry is Elise Cowen. However, it may have been easier for Cowen to ‘tell the entire truth’ in her poems, as they were never meant to

<sup>119</sup> Ginsberg, *Howl*, p. 126

<sup>120</sup> Allen Ginsberg, ‘Paris Review Interview’ p. 296

<sup>121</sup> *ibid*

<sup>122</sup> Rimbaud, ‘Letter to Paul Demeny’, P. 9

<sup>123</sup> Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984) p. 6

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

be published.<sup>125</sup> Although Cowen's poetry shows a deep personality, the reader will never know the facts of her life as 'nearly all of her work was burned' – as favour to her parents after her suicide in 1962. The destruction of the poems demonstrates the deep personal nature of Cowen's poetry, as they document her bisexuality and drug use – details that her Jewish parents were 'unsettled' by.<sup>126</sup> Cowen's writing is stripped back and elliptical, mirroring her life of escaping the bourgeois grips of her parents and living a bohemian lifestyle in the centre of the Beat circle. The poems that remain after her death document relationships – most notably a short relationship with Allen Ginsberg – and the inner workings of the everyday mind. Cowen was a poet 'committed to rendering her inner life with candor [*sic*]' reflecting her 'idealistic and dark responses to psychic and familial conflict'.<sup>127</sup>

The fact that most of Cowen's work was destroyed after her death highlights the pure power of personality in poetry and answers Williamson's question of whether a writer morally should tell 'the entire truth' about themselves in their poetry and the answer is that they should not as it may harm those close to the writer. However, is it not better to tell the truth about oneself rather than leave it pent up inside? The Beat Generation would argue that there should be 'no fear or shame in the dignity of your experience' and therefore to show the full truth in writing.<sup>128</sup> Due to the destruction of most of her most personal work I will be unable to fully explore the personality of her poetry, although if we look at what survives we can still see glimmers of deeply personal imagery. In the poem 'Teacher – Your Body My Kabbalah' we see the deep interplay between the spiritual, the literary, and the personal. Cowen's poem notes literary allusion alongside sexual fantasy and empties 'memory' alongside her Jewish background. We see in the poem that Cowen may have been reading *Jane Eyre* at the time of composing the poem – she writes: 'The aroma of Mr. Rochester's cigars/ among the flowers/ Bursting through the paper/ [...] And you/ Graciously/ Take me/ by the throat'.<sup>129</sup> It is unclear whether Cowen's fantasy comes from reading *Jane Eyre* – we are reminded of Bertha's attempt at strangling Rochester 'this is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know'.<sup>130</sup> – or whether the fantasy comes from her own sexual frustration.<sup>131</sup> The poem then goes on to highlight details of her previous relationships with Keith Gibbs, Donald Cook, and Allen Ginsberg. It is unclear who the poem is actually addressed to, but we can assume from the lines 'and you talking of/ plum blossom scrolls/ and green automobiles' that the poem is addressing Ginsberg, whom Cowen had a relationship with in the spring of 1953; of course 'green automobiles' is a reference to Ginsberg's poem of that title.<sup>132</sup> These personal details, including names of former boyfriends demonstrate the personal nature of this poem. However, the true details of this poem are unclear due to the fact that Cowen never published – or even typed – any of her poems in her lifetime and that it has been very difficult for researchers to decipher her handwriting from her notebooks.<sup>133</sup> Trigilio suggests that it may have affected our reading and understanding of Cowen's life. Leo Skir, who had typed some of Cowen's poems after her death, had made some mistakes in his typescript; in his typescript for 'Teacher – Your Body My Kabbalah' (published

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<sup>125</sup> Tony Trigilio, in *Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments* [ed. by Tony Trigilio] (Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2014) p. xiv – it has been difficult researching Cowen's work as most of her poetry was destroyed after her suicide.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. xv

<sup>127</sup> Trigilio (2014), p. xix

<sup>128</sup> Kerouac, 'Belief and Technique for Modern Prose', p. 59

<sup>129</sup> Elise Cowen, 'Teacher – Your Body My Kabbalah', in *Poems and Fragments* [ed. by Tony Trigilio] (Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2014) pp. 27-29

<sup>130</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Group, 1994) p. 292

<sup>131</sup> See Trigilio (2014), p. 134

<sup>132</sup> Cowen, 'Teacher – Your Body My Kabbalah', p. 28

<sup>133</sup> Trigilio goes into great detail in the notes to this poem at the difficulty at which he had in transcribing this poem from Cowen's notebook and how some words are left out as they are simply unreadable.

in *Women of the Beat Generation*),<sup>134</sup> Skir includes a ‘process note’ that Cowen used while revising the poem.<sup>135</sup> In publishing these details – if only accidentally – Skir has given greater information into the mind and personality of Cowen. However, these *truths* may not be the personality that Cowen wanted to put out with this poem. Contrary to the *first thought best thought* philosophy of the beat writers some were also myth makers, crafting their work to suit their image. This may have been what Cowen was doing with her process note in the notebook in which ‘Teacher – Your Body My Kabbalah’ is found. She is still laying down her personality but crafting it in such a way that might appeal to her parents best, or more likely for this poem, might appeal better to Ginsberg.

The Beats’ insistent inclusion of personal detail is most likely a direct attack of New Criticism, which the Beats believed littered too much of mid-century poetry. It is a direct turn away from the academic modernism of the poets who came before them. The Beats, particularly Kerouac and Ginsberg, ‘felt that the time had come to challenge this [Modernist] concept’ of taking the personal out of writing and instead make ‘personality the centre and subject of their work’.<sup>136</sup> In his essay, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, the modernist poet and figurehead of New Criticism, T. S. Eliot argues that *good* poetry should consist of ‘a continual extinction of personality’ and that the ‘impressions and experiences which are important for the man [meaning author] may take no place in the poetry and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality’.<sup>137</sup> In this, Eliot asserts that the author must ‘surrender’ his personality ‘as he is at the moment to something that is more valuable’.<sup>138</sup> Putting value on the writing rather than the self is an attribute that the Beats share with Eliot. Nevertheless, the Beat writers would find it difficult to surrender themselves completely from the *moment*. As the *moment* is incredibly important in the composition of a spontaneously written poem or piece of prose, *complete surrender* from the self would impede the Beat philosophy of writing from the spontaneous unconscious self. Surrender from the self would also impede the natural flow of memory in Beat literature; considering that most Beat writing is memoir and about living life devoid of *canned* conventional experience, the Beat author must not sacrifice the self, but instead sacrifice themselves to the full, uncensored outpouring of self onto the page. However, it may not be as simple as that – when Eliot suggests that *good* poetry consists of a ‘extinction of personality’, he may in fact be asserting that *good* poetry is that which can be read and understood without the need to know the biography of the writer. The reader of ‘Howl’ or *On the Road* is able to understand and enjoy the writing without first researching the author’s biography. Therefore, Beat writing may in fact be able to fall into Eliot’s category of *good* poetry; the author is an absent presence – we are able to read their personal writing and feel a closeness to them as writers but we are also able to look on the writing as a piece of fiction and appreciate it as literature rather than mere autobiography. Holladay, in her essay on Beat Criticism, argues that the ‘biographical approach [to reading Beat literature] can in fact create impediments’ as the reader is continually ‘looking for the author’ in a text and thus pays less attention to the works themselves.<sup>139</sup> In this, reader verses author reading of the works, a ‘strange transaction’ takes place; the ‘poet has become at once subject, for the reader, and object, for himself.’<sup>140</sup> The Beat

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<sup>134</sup> See *Women of the Beat Generation: The Writers, Artists and Muses at the Heart of a Revolution* [ed. Brenda Knight] (Berkeley, Conari P, 1996)

<sup>135</sup> Trigilio (2014), p. 134

<sup>136</sup> John Tytell, *Naked Angels* (Chicago: Grove Press, 1976) p. 15

<sup>137</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* [ed. by Frank Kermode] (London: Faber & Faber, 1975) pp. 37-44 p. 40,42

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40

<sup>139</sup> Hilary Holladay, ‘Beat Writers and Criticism’ in *The Cambridge Companion to The Beats* [ed. by Steven Belletto], (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 151-161, p. 152

<sup>140</sup> Alan Williamson, *Introspection and Contemporary Poetry*, p. 13

writer both participates in and distances themselves from the writing; Elise Cowen is present in participation of her anecdotal poetry, and in the act of writing. However, in being the object she also distances herself from the reader – or rather the reader distances Cowen from the poem in their own reflection on the reader’s relationship with the subject. When we read, we all see *ourselves* in the poetry, whether we are disagreeing or agreeing with what is said. Therefore, when Cowen talks of her relationship with Ginsberg as having ‘no answer but grunts’ we automatically read our own experience into the poem’s lines and somewhat forget about the life of the author.<sup>141</sup> Or when Diane Di Prima talks of her own unborn child in ‘Songs for Babio, Unborn’, the reader automatically puts themselves in the speaker’s place imagining their own relationship to an unborn child. Williamson suggests that this could be dangerous for the poet of personal writing. Stating that the poet may begin to ‘experience his [or her] self as if it were an external object’, constantly prejudging themselves through the eyes of a reader.<sup>142</sup> While it is true that for many Beat writers the threat of *defining* their entire self in their writing was a risk, it also seems to be some kind of escape from the middle-class quietness of modernism. Despite Beat writing being full of personal experience, the Beat philosophy followed the Buddhist doctrine to ‘slip the yoke of personality’, allowing the author to share something far deeper than the mere, existence of themselves. The Beat writers, conscious of the fact of their own mortality, understood that their own consciousness and experience on the world would not last forever. However, ‘the writing, an entity apart from the hands that typed it, is what lasts’.<sup>143</sup> It is this that is important to the Beat Generation – the writing rather than the life. Despite the yearning for deeper experiences, away from the canned existence of mid-century America, the end goal for the Beat poets was always to create writing.

It is in the Beat spirit to write as memoir, to build a myth around the writer and to make this myth as close to the authentic lived experience as possible. This may seem oxymoronic to be both myth and factual memoir. However, as the reader can see from both Beat literature and theoretical writing by the Beats, authenticity can encompass the purity of the mind rather than simply being an authentic, full account of an event. The apparent authenticity of a piece of writing comes from the closeness of its content to the writer’s thoughts in the moment of writing. This, Kerouac argues, is only possible through a Spontaneous method of composition which takes its influence from the Wordsworthian idea of the ‘overflow’ of strong emotions written in ‘tranquillity’ after the event took place.<sup>144</sup> This, as the evidence from *On the Road* and other Beat literature points out, can be problematic in the composition of experience-based literature, or literature which is both an authentic representation of the author’s lived experience and mental state. With events getting mixed up in the author’s mind and the benefit (or lack of benefit) of hindsight can mar the authenticity of an event and that is why the need for the purity of the author’s mind to come through is so important rather than the facts of an event. The Spontaneous method, as we see in *Visions of Cody* and *Subterraneans*, is so important in creating an authentic environment for which the novel exists; creating and mimicking authentic speech patterns of characters creates an authentic experience for the reader to exist in, but also allows the author to create an ‘outward’ flowing description of the experience being discussed.<sup>145</sup> Mailer’s essay, ‘The White Negro’ was invaluable as a source to document the importance of sound in the transcription of the Beat experience. Transcription of the moment and the importance of sound will be further discussed in chapter 2 of this essay. The influence of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* as a tool for transcribing experience is important in the building of

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<sup>141</sup> Cowen, ‘Teacher – Your Body My Kabbalah’, p. 28

<sup>142</sup> Williamson, p. 12

<sup>143</sup> Holladay, ‘Beat Writers and Criticism’ p. 152

<sup>144</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Preface to the Lyrical Ballads’, p. 514

<sup>145</sup> Kerouac, ‘Essentials of Spontaneous Prose’, p. 58



the Beat aesthetic for factual documentation of experience, the letters of Kerouac and Ginsberg shed light on this influence as a building block for building an authentic description of experience. However, the influence of Rimbaud goes further than this, offering an opportunity to derange the senses, and write from an unconscious mind – further allowing the author to spill their deepest thoughts onto the page, thoughts that they may not have even realised that they possessed. Finally, the supposed authenticity of Beat writing may have been sullied slightly by the act of editing. Whether it is the destruction of Cowen’s notebooks after her death or the difference between the Scroll version of *On the Road* and the final publication. Censorship and self-censorship is a big part of Beat literature, in their attempt to escape censoring themselves the Beats sometimes found themselves being censored by the establishment. Censorship within Beat literature has led to many problems especially the building of myths around the Beats and their supposed way of life, leading to speculation around the events of the author’s lives and therefore, problems of discerning biography from fiction. However, as Williamson argues, this argument may be null and void due to the fact that the reader is able to understand almost all Beat literature without first researching the biography of the author. This is the main important fact of Beat literature, that although the authors went out of their way to experience a life devoid of the *square* mundanities of life and went even further out of their way to document these experiences in their writing, it is the spontaneous authenticity of the literature that was the most important goal not truth.

## **Chapter 2: Documentation as catching a moment of experience in writing**

Just as spontaneously writing memoir and authentic accounts of real personal experience is important in Beat literature so too is the idea of the Moment. The capturing of a specific moment or experience written in the time that it is experienced in order to authentically translate a feeling without the censorship of time. As discussed in the previous chapter, authenticity is a very important feature within Beat Literature and time can lead to details being forgotten, or purposefully emitted. This authenticity of a moment can however be protected if the experience is carefully documented at the time of experience. Think of these Beat writings as a snapshot of a moment of the author's life. It is however, important to note that not all Beat poems or novels are written with the goal of capturing a specific moment; spontaneously written pieces about specific moments are, instead, a motif that runs through a lot of Beat writing. Just as Kerouac sets out his Spontaneous Method for 'sketching from memory', in 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' he also sets out the importance of sketching an 'object set before the mind [...] in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape, or teacup or old face)'.<sup>146</sup> For Kerouac this sketching will generally be of a landscape, or of a person; for Ginsberg the subject may instead be an action or thought taking place in a specific place or moment. This chapter will seek to demonstrate the ways in which the Beats composed writing that would authentically capture a moment. Using a wide range of sources from Blues Choruses, and haiku to novels and letters we will be able to determine the importance and map the development of the practice of authentically writing about specific points in time.

Firstly, it would be useful to look at the importance of transcription in the idea of capturing a moment in Beat Literature. Transcription is the documentation, in writing, of a specific experience. Transcription generally takes place at the time of experience or directly after the event, in a verbatim fashion. This idea of transcription is the back bone of authentically communicating a scene or feeling within a specific moment. Effective transcription should allow an author to represent a given scene through the medium of writing. Just as a photographer transcribes a landscape onto film a writer transcribes the same landscape onto the page. Notice the use of transcription here rather than translation; just as a photographer chooses the angle and exposure with which to shoot a picture, the writer must also choose an angle with which to approach the experience. It is impossible to translate an emotion or experience into words, therefore transcription allows the writer to get the most authentic, unadulterated expression of the experience. Gary Snyder is a great example of the transcription technique taken to the extreme. 'Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout' is a short poem which transcribes an experience succinctly and authentically; the first stanza subtly sketches out the landscape through a very simple description, while the second stanza is split into two parts the first two lines of the stanza set out the context and feelings of Snyder and the last three lines effectively communicate the action of the poem. Snyder's description is both exact and simple – it doesn't describe in detail every inch of the landscape but does demonstrate what is important to the poet's eye:

Down valley a smoke haze  
Three days heat, after five days rain

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<sup>146</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' in *The Portable Beat Reader* [ed. by Ann Charters], (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 57-58. P. 57

Pitch glows on the fir-cones  
Across rocks and meadows  
Swarms of new flies.<sup>147</sup>

The detail of the week's weather is important within the context of the poet's life at the time the poem is written; Snyder was working as a fire lookout on Sourdough Mountain at the time of this poem being written so three days heat would be a reason to concentrate more on looking for fires; for Snyder this poem is a poem of work, written while working.<sup>148</sup> The simplicity of the description allows the reader to understand the thoughts of the poet through his use of omitting unimportant details from the description. Like a photographer might use focus to draw the eye to specific points in the picture, Snyder omits details from his description to focus our mind's eye on the important parts of the landscape – in this poem those points of focus are the 'smoke haze', 'fir-cones', and 'Swarms of new flies'. Just as with the use of the weather, the importance of 'new' in the last line of the stanza allows the poem to be placed in a specific moment, it makes the poem personal to the writer's experience rather than to the place.

Snyder's poetry is often placed on the edges of the Beat Generation, despite being a contemporary and friend of Kerouac and Ginsberg, he sometimes finds himself being pushed into the group of the San Francisco Renaissance rather than the closer Beat circle. However, Snyder's poetry might hold the key as to the reason that he is found on the margins of Beat Literature; his poems can sometimes find themselves closer to Modernism in style than to the Beat form.. The objectivist nature of Snyder, places him closer to William Carlos Williams than the deeply personal rhetoric of Ginsberg or Gregory Corso. Compare, for example, Williams' 'The Red Wheelbarrow' with Snyder's 'Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout':

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.<sup>149</sup>

both poems have an objectivity that takes their landscape as it is – does not cloud the view with metaphor or rhetoric. Both poets take the landscape for their subject and transcribe them subtly and authentically without need for elevation. The key distinction between Snyder and Williams, however, is their personality; notice 'how neatly and artfully if impersonally composed' Williams' poem is compared with Snyder's poetry which holds onto their sense of personality.<sup>150</sup> Despite their objectivity Snyder allows his own experience to slip into the poems

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<sup>147</sup> Gary Snyder, 'Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout' in *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (Toronto: HarperCollinsCanada, 1999) p. 3

<sup>148</sup> Robert Kern, 'Clearing the Ground: Gary Snyder and the Modernist Imperative', *Criticism*, Spring 1977, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 158-177

<sup>149</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'The Wheelbarrow' in *Selected Poems* [ed. by Charles Tomlinson] (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 57

<sup>150</sup> Kern, 'Clearing the Ground', p. 161

in a narrative kind of way. Although the poet's own experience sometimes slips through, the descriptions remain 'awed, transparent registrations of experience that seem to come to us whole and unmediated, as though dictated by the sheer pressure or presence of the objects and events themselves'.<sup>151</sup> It is in these 'unmediated' lines that authentic transcription of experience is achieved. Roger Gilbert, in his book *Walks in the World* refers to this transcription technique as 'sampling': the poet 'simply set[s] down the facts of their experience as directly as possible, with little rhetorical adornment'.<sup>152</sup> Snyder's transcription of experience goes so far as to not simply transcribe a landscape, but in some cases to transcribe the physical experience of being in that landscape. Snyder himself recognises that the rhythms of his poems 'follow the rhythm of the physical work' he is doing, or life he is leading at the time of composing the poem.<sup>153</sup> Echoing the physical work he was undertaking at the time Snyder 'tried writing poems of tough, simple, short words, with the complexity far beneath the surface texture'. Here, Snyder seems to be echoing the suggestion of Charles Olson in 'Projective Verse', that poetry should 'recall' the activity or experience it is composed within; for example the 'breath' or rhythm of a poem must 'recall' the exercise it is undertaken in; for Snyder's work poems, such as 'Above Pate Valley', the rhythm (or breath) is of short breath lines:<sup>154</sup>

We finished clearing the last  
 Section of trail by noon, [/]  
 High on the ridge-side  
*Two thousand feet above the creek [/]*  
*Reached the pass, [/] went on*  
*Beyond the white pine groves, [/]*  
 Granite shoulders, [/] to a small  
 Green meadow watered by the snow, [/]  
 Edged with Aspen [/] – sun  
 Straight high and blazing  
 But the air was cool. [/]  
 Ate a cold fried trout in the  
 Trembling shadows. [/]<sup>155</sup>

Notice the breath lines (indicated by [/]), how they are short and reasonably regular just as one might breathe while walking along a trail, notice also how in the sections of more rapid movement (indicated by italics) the breath lines become even shorter representing a more rapid movement, and then as the 'Green meadow' is reached the breaths become longer and more relaxed again. Here, not only has Snyder managed to describe the landscape but through his rhythm he has transcribed the physical experience of trail clearing. This physicality is a motif which tends to run through a lot of the Beats' experiential writing; it can be seen in these work poems of Snyder, in the driving rhythms of the road scenes in Kerouac's novels and in the lucidity of Burroughs' drug scenes. In successfully transcribing lived moments into poetry,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p. 162-3

<sup>152</sup> Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 174

<sup>153</sup> Gary Snyder, see *The New American Poetry* [ed. by Donald Allen] (New York: Grove, 1960) pp. 420-21

<sup>154</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', *Collected Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1997), p. 242

<sup>155</sup> Gary Snyder, 'Above Pate Valley' in *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (Toronto: HarperCollinsCanada, 1999) p. 11

Snyder has fulfilled a key Beat aesthetic: to ‘promote the value of the external world and of immediate experience’ while not succumbing to impersonal abstraction.<sup>156</sup>

In a similar way that Snyder transcribes the experience of landscapes in his poetry, Ginsberg translates the shifting landscape of America as it passes by his car window. ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ is a long poem composed through a transcription of the experience as Ginsberg sped along the highway through Wichita. ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ is formed through ‘filtered images of the winter farms, the advertising signs, the newspaper headlines – “Vietnam War Brings Prosperity” – the endless highways through the flatlands, the continual chatter of the car radio’ – these images were then filtered ‘into a series of spoken stanzas, two or three long lines at a time, murmured directly into the microphone of his Uher as they sped along’.<sup>157</sup> The poem documents the experience of the landscape, while the added contextualised details of newspaper headlines, billboard signs, and snippets of quoted radio allow the poem to be situated in a specific place at a specific moment in time. Barry Miles, in his biography of Ginsberg, suggests that the poem is ‘highly regarded for capturing, perhaps more than any other work, the precise atmosphere of the country at the height of the [Vietnam] war’.<sup>158</sup> It is this preciseness that allows the poem to authentically catch a moment of experience, and although the poem mostly refers to the national mood with political quotes, newspaper headlines and adverts, the poem holds on to a sense of Ginsberg’s personal experience: ‘I am the Universe tonite [*sic*] / riding in all my Power riding / chauffeured thru [*sic*] myself by a long haired saint with eyeglasses / What if I sang till Students knew I was free / of Vietnam’.<sup>159</sup> In placing himself within the landscape of Wichita, Ginsberg allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the mood of the nation at that time; readers not only gain insight into the political mood but also are able to understand the experience of the *common man* driving through the mid-west at night. Ginsberg’s use of ‘thru myself’ adds a particular spiritualism to these lines – it seems that ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ is, not only a journey through the mid-west of America but also a journey into the poet’s own mind. The poem becomes a *sutra* (or manual) through the poet’s experience of the particular moment of its transcription. The method which Ginsberg chose to transcribe his experience of the drive through Wichita was the collage technique, a method that, as Rona Cran suggests, ‘embodies an intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional relationship with an artist’s environment’.<sup>160</sup> The collagist is not simply a voyeur of a landscape; in order to find and stick images together the collagist must absorb the experience of a landscape while not allowing his own personality to become lost in the ‘dialogic mass of voices’ that litters the environment he finds himself in.<sup>161</sup> Collage also allows Ginsberg to better echo the real world experience that he is describing, a world in which the viewer is confronted by a patchwork of fast moving images passing by as they drive across America in a car. Comparing ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ with Snyder’s ‘Above Pate Valley’ we notice a noticeable change in pace; Snyder’s poem takes in the vastness of the valley from an almost sedentary position (at least compared to the speed of a car), while Ginsberg moves quickly from image to image as he passes them. Both poets are authentically transcribing the experience in which

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<sup>156</sup> Kern, ‘Clearing the Ground’, p. 172

<sup>157</sup> Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd, 2000) p. 380

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 381

<sup>159</sup> Allen Ginsberg, ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’, in *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* (London: Penguin, 1987) pp. 394-411 p. 397

<sup>160</sup> Rona Cran (2020) Material language for protest: collage in Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’, *Textual Practice*, 34:4, 669-689, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2018.1517105. p. 670

<sup>161</sup> David Banash, *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption* (Rodopi, 2013) p. 87

they find themselves, not only through the images they portray but also through the pace that they appear on the page. Snyder's short lines and elliptical rhythm creates a kind of winding trail that conducts the reader through the landscape of the valley while Ginsberg's poem drives through images at a pace of glimpses: 'Red sun setting flat plains west streaked / with gauzy veils, chimney mist spread / around Christmas-tree-bulbed refineries – aluminium / white tanks squat beneath winking signal towers' bright plane-lights, / orange gas flares / beneath pillows of smoke, flames in machinery – transparent towers at dusk'.<sup>162</sup> Ginsberg's images flash past the reader's eye with no knowledge of distance or size; everything is important and profound in the red light. The tape-recorder technique of transcription here allows Ginsberg to instantly record the 'spontaneous motion of his consciousness [...] preserving a record of the moment as it actually occurred, without revision or comment'.<sup>163</sup> In this effective transcription of Ginsberg's engagement with the environment: like lived experience of a moment the poet doesn't 'really have to have a beginning, middle, and end – all they have to do is register the contents of one consciousness during the time period'.<sup>164</sup> The Wichita experience follows this rule, not having a need for a beginning or end the poem encompasses the experience throughout with no need for a narrative response each stanza – each line even – is a fragment in itself which needs no explanation except its place within an experience. 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' should be read as if it were a photobook with each line a different snapshot of what goes on outside the car, interspersed with newspaper cuttings, and advertisements, which allows Ginsberg to effectively document the experience of moments through a sprawling poem that forms a zeitgeist of 1960s America.

Unlike the transcription used in Snyder and Ginsberg's poems above, is Kerouac's sketching method which allows the author to put his own personality into the experience a little more. The sketching method, unlike transcription, gives the author a little more creative licence; where transcription writing is generally short on metaphor and imagery, sketching can contain more stylistic devices. In a letter to Ginsberg in 1952, Kerouac sets out the method for his sketching. The idea came from a suggestion by Ed White, in a Chinese restaurant near Columbia, "Why don't you just sketch in the streets like a painter but with words?".<sup>165</sup> Kerouac states that when sketching:

everything activates in front of you in myriad profusion, you just have to purify your mind and let it pour the words (which effortless angels of the vision fly when you stand in front of reality) and write with 100% personal honesty both psychic and social<sup>166</sup>

The method suggests writing *unconsciously* about the experience in front of the author, thus allowing the experience to flow from the writer's mind onto the page. Sketching is therefore a more personal and artistic response to the idea of Beat transcription of experience. Kerouac's 'effortless angels' are born from a place of experience, from 'reality'. However, unlike the

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<sup>162</sup> Ginsberg, 'Wichita Vortex Sutra', p. 394

<sup>163</sup> Mel Ash, *Beat Spirit: The Way of the Beats as a Living Experience* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1997), p. 96-7

<sup>164</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'Improvised Poetics', in *Composed on the Tongue* [ed. by Donald Allen], (Bolinas: Grey Fox, 1980), pp. 26-7

<sup>165</sup> See Ed White quoted by Jack Kerouac to Allen Ginsberg, May 18 1952 in *Jack Kerouac & Allen Ginsberg: The Letters* [ed. by Bill Morgan & David Stanford] (New York: Penguin, 2010) pp. 173-176. P. 174

<sup>166</sup> Jack Kerouac in May 18<sup>th</sup> letter to Ginsberg, p. 174

linear form found in Snyder or the patchwork view of experience found in Ginsberg, Kerouac's vision of reality *flies effortlessly* in its formation:

Friday afternoon in the universe, in all directions in & out you got your men women  
dogs children horses ponies tics perts parts pans pools palls pails parturientes and petty  
Thieveries that turn into heavenly Buddha<sup>167</sup>

The unconscious sketching that Kerouac uses riffs from his own mind, making connections between words and phrases to carry along the rhythm. In this, the first couple of lines of *Old Angel Midnight*, Kerouac builds a sketch of Friday afternoon using an alliterative list of words beginning with *p*; in these lines it doesn't matter to Kerouac if the 'pones', 'perts parts pans', or 'palls' are in the physical scene in front of him - they are in his mind's experience of Friday afternoon, and therefore important to the textual transcription of the scene. As Charters suggests, in her essay "Letting Go in Writing", it was Kerouac's idea to 'experiment with free association' in *Old Angel Midnight*,<sup>168</sup> allowing the poem to illuminate 'this inner life which we actually lead [...] in the inevitable prose or poetic forms dictated by unique revelations of the mind faithfully notating its own processes'.<sup>169</sup> It is the unconscious 'revelations' of Kerouac's sketching method that allow the author to fully transcribe experience into the written form - not only is the scene described but the reader is able to understand the feelings that permeate the author's mind while in that scene. This blend of unconscious thought and transcribed description lends *Old Angel Midnight* a 'sense of the absolute real', the author has managed to unconsciously carry 'such conviction and a sense of the truth of what he speaks'.<sup>170</sup> There is an authenticity of experience in Kerouac's sketches, they are tangible transcriptions of a specific time and place through the lens of one specific writer. Kerouac uses his unconscious sketching throughout his writing, in poetry and in prose - *Old Angel Midnight* is the most noticeably lucid, and abstract example of it; whereas in *Visions of Cody* the sketching is much more linear, Kerouac penetrates the immediacy of his sketches with notations of his feelings; going through long sketching descriptions of a 'pretty brunette with violet eyes' sitting in a cafeteria and then intersperses these with quick thoughts and dreams about the girl, before then going back to transcribing her every movement:

sits a pretty brunette with violet eyes and a flowing purple drapocoat - takes it off like  
stripteaser, hangs it on hook (back to it) and starts eating with pathetic delicate hunger  
her hot plate - deep in thought while she chews - wearing cute little white collar draped  
over black material and three pendants, pearls; lovely mouth; she just blew her nose  
daintily with a napkin; has private personal sad manners, at least externally by which  
she makes her own formal existence known to herself as well as polite social cafeteria  
watchers she's imagining, otherwise why the act though it is genuine.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Old Angel Midnight*, (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1995), p. 1. Spelling mistakes are as found in the text

<sup>168</sup> Ann Charters, "Letting Go in Writing", in *Old Angel Midnight* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1995), p. ix-xii. P. x

<sup>169</sup> Jack Kerouac quoted in Ann Charters, "Letting Go in Writing" (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1995), p. ix-xii. P. x

<sup>170</sup> Michael McClure, 'Jack's *Old Angel Midnight*', in *Old Angel Midnight* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1995), p. xii-xxi. P. xvi

<sup>171</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p.31

Kerouac, here manages perfectly to encapsulate every one of the girl's movements with a finesse that captures a realness of Kerouac's eye. The description is not only physical; Kerouac projects his own thoughts onto the 'brunette with violet eyes', masking them as her own. Ginsberg suggests that this projection of thought, is an example of Kerouac's genius – an ability to enter 'into her solitude and trying to feel what she was feeling inside, trying to psych out or guess what the meaning of some of her gestures and attitudes and body language was'.<sup>172</sup> Whether genius or a perverted projection of thought, Kerouac does manage to catch a moment in writing. Could the same details be included in a photograph? A photographer can choose the composition and exposure of a shot but is held down by that; Kerouac's sketching method allows us to see all the way around the subject and intimately into their supposed minds, and therefore also into the mind of the author in that moment of viewing. In his sketching method here, it may be that Kerouac is offering a practical example of William Burroughs' *walk exercise*, in which he describes the importance of being an observant writer.<sup>173</sup> Burroughs suggests that 'the more observant a writer is, the more he will find to write about'. However, for Kerouac, it is more a necessity to write about what he observes rather than observing for the sake of writing. Burroughs recommends the exercise which gave him the nickname 'El Hombre Invisible'.<sup>174</sup>

When walking down any street, try to *see* everyone on the street before he sees you. You will find that if you see others first they will *not* see you, and that gives you time to observe, or file for future use [...] if a writer is seen first [...] he may miss a set or a character. Someone glimpsed in passing may be used as a character years later; some doorway or shop front may serve as a set. An absent-minded writer closes the doors of perception.<sup>175</sup>

The importance of this exercise is to practice deep observation, and to meditate upon the experience of it. However, the importance of being *seen* is questionable, in some ways the not knowing that they are being observed allows for the subject to be as comfortable as possible and therefore gives an authentic view of their behaviour, however, as we can see in Kerouac's sketch of the 'brunette with violet eyes', the subject can sometimes play up their character for the observer and allow for a more precise and interesting sketch. However, Kerouac supposes that even if he is seen, the girls actions are all an act anyway: 'she makes her own formal existence known to herself as well as polite social cafeteria watchers she's imagining, otherwise why the act though it is genuine'.<sup>176</sup> For Kerouac, the experience is genuine even if he is seen – or if she is seen – as it happens in his mind, it is how it happened for him, transcribed in beauty.

There is great debate around the authenticity of Kerouac's sketching method, and whether it was an exercise always undertaken in the field or if sometimes notes were made and then taken home to write up later. Douglas Brinkley suggests that Kerouac's spontaneous

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<sup>172</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats* [ed. by Bill Morgan] (London: Penguin Classics, 2018)

<sup>173</sup> William Burroughs, 'Technology of Writing' in *The Adding Machine: Selected Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 2013) pp. 39-45

<sup>174</sup> Mel Ash, *Beat Spirit: The Way of the Beat Writers as a Living Experience* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1997) p. 53

<sup>175</sup> William Burroughs, 'Technology of Writing', p. 40

<sup>176</sup> Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (1972), p.31



method of writing novels was actually not so spontaneous as the legends suggest. Brinkley argues that Kerouac's sketches were used to fuel the 'marathon typing sessions' of Kerouac's novel writing.<sup>177</sup> The sketches, written in the field, form the muscle of Kerouac's novels – the descriptions are both taken from his memory but also from sketches made in the middle of the experience. Although this takes away from the spontaneity of Kerouac's writing method, it does allow him to create more authentic descriptions in his final novels. Kerouac's journals are littered with chapter drafts, 'atmospheric ramblings, and random character profiles' which allowed him to write novels, such as *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*, with such ferocity.<sup>178</sup> Although the revelation of Kerouac's Spontaneous Method being slightly fabricated takes away from the romanticization of his writing, it does highlight the importance of his sketching method in planning and forming descriptions for his novels.

If Kerouac's sketching method was predominantly for prose his Blues Choruses were sketches in poetic form. Each of Kerouac's Blues Choruses was 'limited by the size of the notebook pages on which he wrote, if an idea (or riff) was not exhausted in that space, he would pick it up in the next poem'.<sup>179</sup> The poems were often light and playful, expressing the 'poet's sensibility at the moment of writing'. Therefore, like most of Kerouac's sketches of experience, the Blues poems allow the reader to see into the authentic mind of the author. *Mexico City Blues* is the 'definitive documentation of Kerouac's attempt to achieve both psychic and literary equilibrium'.<sup>180</sup> It is a demonstration of Kerouac as both author and subject. In an interview with Ted Berrigan in 1967, Kerouac set out his method for writing poetry.<sup>181</sup> He suggests that poetry be 'knocked off fast' and that poetry allows the author to be 'completely free to say anything you want, you don't have to tell a story'.<sup>182</sup> For Kerouac, it seems, poetry was a form of meditation, a jotting down of thoughts on any theme, as they came from his mind. If anything, these poems were more spontaneous than his Spontaneous Prose method, quick verses transcribing a feeling in the rhythm it falls to the page. This *mind rhythm* was very important in Kerouac's poetry; he thought of poetry more as a riff, a bar of improvised jazz rather than as writing. Hence why these poems are known as Blues Choruses. Just as a jazz 'musician has to get out [...] his statement within a certain number of bars, within one chorus', Kerouac limited his poems to one page of his notebook. Gone is the instruction to 'blow as deep as you want', from *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, and in its place is a stricter, quicker method of transcribing the unconscious thoughts of the author.<sup>183</sup> For an example of Kerouac's *mind rhythm* in his poems one need only look at the 80<sup>th</sup>, 81<sup>st</sup>, 82<sup>nd</sup>, and 83<sup>rd</sup> choruses of *Mexico City Blues*. The poems are playful riffs on the sounds of words, likely arising from the

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<sup>177</sup> Douglas Brinkley, 'Introduction' in *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954* [ed. by Douglas Brinkley] (New York: Penguin, 2004) pp. xi-xxviii. p. xxiii

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, p. xxv

<sup>179</sup> Edward Foster, *Understanding the Beats* quoted in Robert Creeley, 'Introduction' in Jack Kerouac, *Book of Blues* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. ix-xiii, p. xi

<sup>180</sup> James T Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet* (Carbondale, US: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992) p. 4

<sup>181</sup> Kerouac gives both his method for writing haiku and 'regular English verse'; when talking about these longer poems I will simply use the title *poetry* and *haiku* for the shorter poems. See Jack Kerouac, interviewed by Ted Berrigan (1967), in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews* [ed. by George Plimpton] (London: Penguin, 1982) pp. 359-396

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 367

<sup>183</sup> See Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose', p. 57

experience of a conversation over breakfast. Kerouac begins the 80<sup>th</sup> chorus with a conversation about ‘How good this ham n eggs/ is’ and then in the 81<sup>st</sup> (when the previous chorus’ page had evidently run out) he continues the theme of eggs and bacon while riffing on the sounds of words: ‘Mr Beggar & Mrs Davy – / Looney and CRUNEY, / I made a pome out of it,/ Haven’t smoked Luney / & Cruney / In along time’.<sup>184</sup> It is quite evident that these poems may in fact be the documentation of a drug experience – the high received after smoking marijuana (or as Kerouac calls it here ‘Luney & Cruney’). Kerouac continues his poem with the instructions of how to write the unconscious riff poem ‘Lay that down / solid brother / ‘Bout all dem / bacon & eggs / ya gotta be able / to lay it down / solid – All that luney and fruney’. To many readers these poems may be nonsense, but to the Beat mind they are authentic transcriptions of an experience *laid down* in a rhythm that represents the thoughts of their author. These playful rhythms contained within the poems not only document the mood of the author but they also demonstrate Kerouac’s instruction to ‘use secret puns’.<sup>185</sup> The rhythms of the poems represent the ‘secret puns’ or speech rhythms of the subject: in *Old Angel Midnight* the some of the rhythms represent the speech patterns of Lucien Carr; in *Mexico City Blues* (especially the 80<sup>th</sup>-83<sup>rd</sup> chorus) the rhythm is specifically Kerouac’s jazz speech. These rhythms seem to be intrinsically linked to the subjects of the poems, again reaffirming Olson’s emphasis on ‘the HEAD, by the way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE’.<sup>186</sup> In *Mexico City Blues* ‘221<sup>st</sup> Chorus’, Kerouac writes of the ‘Early American Jazz pianist’, ‘Old Man Mose’ Allison.<sup>187</sup> In his description of the way Allison played, Kerouac uses jazz inspired rhythms; making use of varied line lengths and shortened words:

Old Man Mose walloped  
the rollickin keyport  
Wahoo wildhouse Piany  
with monkees in his hair  
drooling spaghetti, beer  
and beans, with a cigar  
mashed in his countenance  
of gleaming happiness  
the furtive madman  
of old sane times.

The fluctuating syllable count, alongside a bouncing blues rhythm here allows Kerouac to demonstrate the context of the poem through sound; furthered by shortened words and *jazz speak* such as ‘rollickin’ or ‘wildhouse’ the feeling of a packed jazz bar can be felt pulsating through the lines of the poem. This transcription of experience through description and rhythm is what makes Kerouac’s poetry writing quite so authentic.

For Kerouac the transcription of sound and rhythm into poetry is an attempt to bring himself closer to the experience, to meditate on the feeling of being within a certain environment. Kerouac’s novel, *Big Sur*, ends with a long poem titled ‘Sea’, in which Kerouac

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<sup>184</sup> Jack Kerouac, ‘80<sup>th</sup>’ and ‘81<sup>st</sup> Chorus’ in *Mexico City Blues*, in *Kerouac: Collected Poems* [ed. by Marilène Phipps-Kettlewell] (New York: The Library of America, 2012) pp. 60-61

<sup>185</sup> Kerouac interviewed by Berrigan, p. 367

<sup>186</sup> Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1997), p. 242

<sup>187</sup> Jack Kerouac, ‘221<sup>st</sup> Chorus’, *Mexico City Blues*, p. 156

tries to translate the sounds of the sea while commenting on the fall of America. Kerouac writes: ‘Parle, O, parle, mer, parle, / Sea speak to me, speak / to me, your silver you light,’ the sounds of the sea *speak* to Kerouac’s writing, inspire the movement of the poem.<sup>188</sup> Conceived as an attempt to capture the sounds of the Pacific Ocean, ‘the verse develops [...] from an effort to regain the optimistic harmony between man and nature into the recognition of Kerouac’s absolute separation from what had been a central symbol of his search for freedom.’<sup>189</sup> In his effort to ‘harmonise’ with his surroundings in *Big Sur*, Kerouac successfully manages to transcribe the sound of the sea into a nineteen page poem. However, it is not only the sound of the sea but also the mood in which it puts the author that the poem highlights. Gair argues that an ‘attention to the sensory details of daily life, the parodic appropriation of archetypal patterns and the use of stream-of-consciousness is familiar to anyone who has read Kerouac’, however, this is even more true in ‘Sea’.<sup>190</sup> With its continued sibilance, fluctuating line length, and even in the rising and falling shape of the poem, Kerouac’s words not only describe the sea but in fact become an oceanic ode.

we calcify fathers here below  
 – a watery cross, with weeds  
 entwined – This grins restoredly,  
 low sleep – Wave – Oh, no,  
 shush – Shirk – Boom plop  
 Neptune now his arms extends  
 while one millions of souls  
 sit lit in caves of darkness  
 ...  
 Shaw – Shoo – Oh soft sigh  
 we wait hair twined like  
 larks – Pissit – Rest not  
 Plottit, bisp tesh cashes,  
 ...  
 shirsh – Who’s whispering over  
           there – the silly earthen creek!<sup>191</sup>

Kerouac’s use of both the English language paired with sound offers a strange dichotomy of sense – the reader is thrust between the existentialism of Kerouac’s depressing imagery, and the almost Dadaist use of sound. The result is a poem which meditates on the human existence, moments of deep thought interspersed with an explosion of the senses (in this case sound). *Big Sur*, as Tytell suggests, is ‘Kerouac’s novel of breakdown, disintegration, the actual fulfilment of the “everything is collapsing” refrain of *On the Road*.’<sup>192</sup> In the novel Kerouac’s attempted escape from depression into nature, essentially makes him feel worse; essentially becoming the

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<sup>188</sup> Jack Kerouac, ‘Sea’ in *Big Sur* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006). P. 171

<sup>189</sup> Christopher Gair, “‘Thalatta! Thalatta!’: Xenophon, Joyce, And Kerouac”, in *Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition* [ed. by Sheila Murnaghan & Ralph M. Rosen] (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018). P. 50

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46

<sup>191</sup> Kerouac, ‘Sea’, p. 171

<sup>192</sup> John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1976) p. 206

practical embodiment of Emerson's 'Nature' in which it is asserted that the world's appearance is simply a 'projection of our inner consciousness.'<sup>193</sup> Thus, the shoreline becomes a 'bleak awful roaring' mass which takes over the flow of the poem.<sup>194</sup> The EAR of Kerouac's poem here, becomes the SYLLABLE, the HEART, and the LINE; the whole poem is carried by the rhythm of the crashing Pacific Ocean, which represents itself in a transcription of sound throughout the poem. These long poems allow the senses to mix with emotion to create a long flowing transcription of experience.

However, it can be seen that the Beat use of haiku and short poetry may in fact be more useful in the transcription of a moment. Influenced by Buddhist philosophy, the Beats took to zen poetry forms to explore ways in which to write about experience. Most Beats were introduced to Eastern poetry forms through Gary Snyder's translation of Han Shan's *Cold Mountain Poems*. Snyder argues that the plain simplicity of zen poetry allows for the *authenticity of experience* to be displayed.<sup>195</sup> For Snyder it is this 'monosyllabic step-by-step placement' and 'crispness' of the poetry that allows the author to demonstrate their experience simply. These short poems allow the author to translate small events or feelings into short bursts of image. The haiku seems to be the Beat form of choice for demonstrating short images. In his *Introduction to Haiku*, Harold G. Henderson suggests that the haiku is a short 3-line poem, with a syllable count of 5/7/5, which 'gives a picture and a mood, and the author's feeling about life as he saw it.'<sup>196</sup> However, it was the Beat mentality to go against strict form. Therefore, the syllable count was often dropped by Beat writers in preference for just a short poem translating an image or a feeling. In an interview with Berrigan in 1967, Kerouac set out how he goes about writing haiku and why its an important form for the Beats. Kerouac suggests that for a haiku to work 'you got to compress into three short lines a great big story'; you have to start with 'a haiku situation' and compress the 'haiku situation [...] into three lines.'<sup>197</sup> Kerouac goes onto argue that 'in Japanese you got to compress it into seventeen syllables. We don't have to do that in American – or English – because we don't have the same syllabic bullshit that your Japanese language has.' Despite Kerouac's, disdain here for the set syllable count not all Beat poets chose to avoid the seventeen syllable rule. The haiku is 'completely economical, no foliage and flowers and language rhythm.' This economical way of writing seems to go against the spontaneous flow seen in most of Beat literature. However, when we think philosophically about the Beat approach to demonstrating experience, the haiku seems only to be used for quick thoughts or images, haiku seems not to be used for the big issues or events; instead they demonstrate a need for an outlet for the smaller thoughts, images seen on a walk home or out of the window. However, even for a seemingly closed form, Kerouac's disdain for the syllable count demonstrates a more spontaneous nature for writing haiku. Most of Kerouac's haiku range between eight to sixteen syllables, in a way that captures 'immediacy, spontaneity, and most importantly freedom.'<sup>198</sup>

#### Leaves skittering on

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p. 207

<sup>194</sup> Kerouac, *Big Sur* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006) p. 30

<sup>195</sup> See Gary Snyder, 'Afterword' in *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (Toronto: HarperCollinsCanada, 1999) pp. 65-67

<sup>196</sup> Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958) p. 10

<sup>197</sup> Kerouac interviewed by Berrigan, p. 368

<sup>198</sup> Richard A. Iadonisi, 'The Masculine Urge of Jack Kerouac's Haiku', in *The Journal of American Culture*; Vol. 37, Iss. 3, (Sep 2014): 290-298, p. 292

the tin roof  
– August fog in Big Sur<sup>199</sup>

This haiku, like many by Kerouac offers a simple image, devoid of grammar and literary devices the poem speaks for itself. The image is the most important subject in the Beat haiku, the poet must hold a state of mind while writing haiku in which he becomes un-separated from the subject, the poet must be mentally connected with their subject.<sup>200</sup> The poem becomes intrinsically linked with the event it describes and the poem becomes the event, and *vice versa*. The final line intrinsically links the haiku to the experience it describes by placing the poem explicitly in Big Sur, while also using the key haiku motif of placing the poem within a season. Kerouac's most famous haiku is one that must not only be influenced by personal experience but also speaks, potentially on a metaphorical level:

In my medicine cabinet  
the winter fly  
Has died of old age<sup>201</sup>

This haiku presents itself, as a broken up sentence, a simple image displayed in the traditional syllabic count for haiku (seventeen syllables, however the line count does not echo the traditional rule of 5/7/5). The reader can imagine Kerouac opening his cabinet and seeing the fly dead. The poem is both objective in its approach to capturing the image of the fly, but also deeply personal; 'Kerouac identifies immediately and directly with the fly; [...the poem has] the ring of true feeling [...] Kerouac writes from almost inside the fly.'<sup>202</sup> However, Kerouac's 'fly' could also be representative of his own feelings of mortality. By identifying with the fly Kerouac, Kerouac inserts himself directly into the action of the poem; the safety of the 'medicine cabinet' – a place we'd expect to find health – is thrown into question by the death of the fly, echoing Kerouac's own views on medicine after the death of his brother Gerard.<sup>203</sup> The use of haiku to portray these feelings present an interesting paradox: the deep existential feelings presented in such simple form. However, this paradox does fit under Kerouac's definition of haiku as a form which 'point[s] out things directly, purely, concretely, no abstractions or explanations, wham wham the true blue song of man.'<sup>204</sup> The poem simply says a lot in three short lines, using a mixture of real life experience and subtle metaphor to demonstrate the 'true blue song of man.' Despite seeming like little spontaneous notes, the haiku was one of the only forms of writing that Kerouac edited; his haiku were meticulously worked and reworked to create a polished image. This again presents a strange paradox within Kerouac's work; why would the seemingly most simple poems be the ones with the most reworking? It comes from Pound's Imagism, although Kerouac tried to distance himself from the strictness of modernism's Imagist technique the similarity between Kerouac's haiku and Pound's most famous example of imagism is too close to ignore.

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<sup>199</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Book of Haiku in Kerouac: Collected Poems* [ed. by Marilène Phipps-Kettlewell] (New York: The Library of America, 2012) p. 563

<sup>200</sup> See, Reginald H. Blyth, *A History of Haiku* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1963)

<sup>201</sup> Kerouac, *Book of Haiku*, p. 545

<sup>202</sup> Barbara Louise Ungar, 'Haiku in English', *Simply Haiku: A Quarterly Journal of Japanese Short Form Poetry*, Winter (2007), vol 5 no 4. <http://www.simplyhaiku.com/SHv5n4/features/Ungar.html> [Accessed 10-10-2020] p. 24

<sup>203</sup> See Charters, *Kerouac a biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994) p. 20

<sup>204</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'The Origins of Joy in Poetry', in *Good Blonde & Others* (San Francisco: Grey Fox, 1993) p. 74

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough.<sup>205</sup>

Compare this to Kerouac's haiku about 'leaves skittering on / the tin roof;' the feeling and rhythm of the poems are almost identical both present the image simply and with a concrete form. For Pound, the image is slightly more metaphoric with the use of 'apparition' however, he does stick quite concretely to the true subject. And although the poems look different – Kerouac's use of three short lines, and Pound's use of two longer lines – the rhythm is in fact almost identical. It is only through this polishing that these images could present themselves so fully, so concretely.

This use of concrete imagery may be why Kerouac chose to use the haiku form within his prose lines. In a sequence from *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac uses the haiku rhythm sequence in the prose form:

The storm went away as swiftly as it came and the late afternoon lake-sparkle blinded me. Late afternoon, my mop drying on the rock. Late afternoon, my bare back cold as I stood above the world digging shovelsful [sic] into a pail. Late afternoon, it was I not the void that changed.<sup>206</sup>

This description of life on Desolation Peak likely comes from Kerouac's notebooks in which he sketched his haiku out, thus he likely simply copied the descriptions directly into the novel. This not only allows the prose to flow in a poetic rhythm but also allows the description to hold onto its authenticity and capture the moment of the afternoon it describes. The repetition of 'late afternoon' throughout the sequence also allows the reader to place the description almost exactly, every moment within the sequence is happening simultaneously but are presented in the prose as they present themselves to the author. First the shock of the blinding light of the lake, followed by noticing the 'mop drying' – presumably noticed after looking back into the foreground of the scene – and then the realisation of the self and the feeling of the breeze, before going straight inside the mind of the author and their feeling. The short haiku sequence allows the prose to zoom in from the landscape right through to the 'jewel centre' of the experience without breaking the rhythm of time as it is presented.<sup>207</sup>

The methods used by the Beats to capture and communicate a specific moment or experience are varied, yet they all have remarkably similar end goals; to demonstrate authentic experience in a simple and unambiguous form. Whether they are using prose or poetry the feeling is the same: personal experience is presented in simple language. The capturing of a moment in writing allows the writer to present experience in the fullest way without the loss of memory presented by time passing between the experience and the writing. Wherever possible the moments are captured within their experience, thus allowing the author to be as true to the experience as possible. Transcription allows the author to write the experience as if a photograph with only the framing – that is the author's choice of what to leave out of the writing

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<sup>205</sup> Ezra Pound, 'In a Station of the Metro', in *Imagist Poetry* [ed. by Peter Jones] (London: Penguin, 2001) p. 95

<sup>206</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1976) p. 189

<sup>207</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58

– left to the author’s whim. Transcription takes all rhetoric out of the writing and leaves only objective description. This, however, does not mean that personality is also taken out of the writing, as seen in Snyder’s poetry a feeling of personality and self is still evident within the lines of the transcribed experience. The influence of Olson is also obvious within the development of the transcription technique in Beat poetry with poetry being composed within the field and thus using rhythms which find themselves close to that of the breath of the writer during composition. Thus, allowing the writing to be as close to the experience as possible in both subject and rhythm. Similar to the transcription method that transcribes exactly what the author sees, does or thinks, is the sketching method which allows for a little more of the author’s personality to come through; the author, not only chooses what to include and what not to include but also how to present it – the sketched method is not so authentic as transcription, yet it still presents the author’s thoughts on an experience as they occur and without too much shaping or editing in the writing period. The sketching method then gave way to other spontaneous forms of writing that either were able to inform novels or became fragments and poems in their own right. The use of catching a moment in writing allows for the Beat aesthetic to document experience both personal and social.

### Chapter 3: 'Language is dead': The Beat Experiments used to Resurrect Language about Personal Experience

In his 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' Kerouac made the assertion that 'language is dead.'<sup>208</sup> The Beats set out to resurrect language, and therefore literature, through a series of experiments based around writing about personal experience. Kerouac believed that it was the 'regimentation' of academic society which was choking the life out of language, and therefore a stripping back of grammatical rules and censorship would resuscitate literature into an exciting force for self-documentation. However, it was not only a stripping back of literary devices that Kerouac proposed a change in, but also the use of 'different themes' in the writing to 'give the illusion of "new" life' in language.<sup>209</sup> This chapter will seek to highlight the more experimental ways in which the Beats chose to resurrect language and document personal experience at the same time.

Considering that this chapter will be exploring the notion that 'language is dead,' it would seem useful to first explore the experimental methods of the person who first made that assertion. Kerouac believed that breaking open sentence structure would allow the author to resuscitate language. By tearing apart the traditional rule-book on prose and sentence structure, Kerouac allowed himself – and other Beat authors – to give 'new life' to their prose. The argument, presented by Kerouac, is that it is the sentence structure that holds the author back from revealing himself fully in writing. He therefore advocates a dismissal of 'sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas' and instead tells the author to use 'the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing.'<sup>210</sup> This disregard of traditional grammar and sentence structure allows the author a build-up of authenticity, as they no longer have to concentrate on the rules of writing and can instead move towards saying what they need to say. Instead, Kerouac suggests an 'infantile pileup of scatological build up words' that will aid in the rhythm of the writing without the need for too much grammar:<sup>211</sup>

At dawn my bus was zooming across the Arizona desert – Indio, Blythe, Salome; the great dry stretches leading to Mexican mountains in the south [...] Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing. In inky night we crossed New Mexico; at gray [sic] dawn it was Dalhart, Texas; in bleak Sunday afternoon we rode through one Oklahoma flat-town after another; at nightfall it was Kansas. The bus roared on.<sup>212</sup>

This extract from *On the Road* demonstrates the 'pile-up' of words which builds a poetic rhythm and begins to become the movements of the 'bus' as our reading of Kerouac's prose 'bumps' and 'rises' with the movements of the journey. This rhythm, coupled with phrases like 'zooming', allows the reader to feel almost as if they are by Kerouac's side during the 'road experiences'.<sup>213</sup> It is his use of Spontaneous Prose alongside the 'build up' of words that make Kerouac's novel life-like and therefore authentic to experience.<sup>214</sup> However, other critics disagree on this subject suggesting that Kerouac's novels 'trip along like pony hoofs [...] with

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<sup>208</sup> Jack Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' in *The Portable Beat Reader* [ed. by Anne Charters] (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992) pp. 57-58. P. 58

<sup>209</sup> *ibid*

<sup>210</sup> *ibid*, p. 57

<sup>211</sup> *ibid*, p. 57

<sup>212</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 93

<sup>213</sup> Matt Theado, *Understanding Jack Kerouac* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2000) p. 54

<sup>214</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials' p. 57



a kind of comic strip simplification'.<sup>215</sup> Krim's assertion here suggests that Kerouac's novel is less pure than we may first assume, with 'comic strip simplification' implying an imaginary journey that feels fantastical. Yet, it is this simple 'blowing' prose that makes the novel so 'definite' and true.<sup>216</sup> Therefore, the tripping nature of Kerouac's prose gives a simplicity that allows the 'pony hoofs' to become the roar of the bus with the swaying and bumps of the road. That is the beauty of Kerouac's prose; it has a feeling of certainty that permeates throughout his books which allows the reader to see fully his scope of experience.

There is a belief throughout Beat writing that this authentic 'build-up' of words could only truly be undertaken in a state of 'semi-consciousness.'<sup>217</sup> Kerouac references Yeats in his definition of semi-conscious writing. However, Yeats' automatic writing techniques seem quite different from the Beat philosophy of spontaneous writing; Yeats believed in a writing guided by *spirits* with the writer as a medium to hold the pen,<sup>218</sup> whereas Kerouac's spontaneous method is purely the author's self manifested in a trance-like state. Both writers believe in the automatic method as 'arrangements of experience.'<sup>219</sup> Therefore, it seems that Kerouac's sketching method was influenced by Yeats' trance writing. The excitement of this method came from allowing the author to just 'let[...] go on paper' and write 'with 100% honesty.'<sup>220</sup> There is also a questioning of whether unconsciousness is a result of the writing process or whether the writing comes through unconsciousness; Charters suggests that Kerouac 'sometimes was so inspired [during the sketching method that] he lost consciousness.'<sup>221</sup> There is no debate that this method of writing allows the author to document an experience fully, however, to suggest '100% honesty' could be contested. The semi-conscious method allows the writer to be as free as they can in their documentation of experience. However, the nature of memory and analysis of that memory means that some parts of the experience maybe warped or falsified in the writing process. Yet, saying this does not detract from the fact that the literature presented in the Beat canon is a true account of the writer's experience at the time of writing; it shows exactly what was going through their mind at the type-writer, and due to the existence of a 'semi-conscious' state the writing is likely to be less affected by self-censorship.

Not only does Kerouac's style allow for the 'pile-up' of words, but he also piles-up themes and images on top of each other – moving from theme to theme, image to image in quick succession. In *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac goes from describing 'God's country Texas' in one sentence to 'Well, Masturbation' in the next.<sup>222</sup> There seems little connection between these two sentences, yet Kerouac's spontaneous unconscious manages to link them:

When a man puffs a pipe his eyes bulge over the smoking bowl into space, he seems to have sinus trouble and all such big adult wreckages and profound architectural failings that on the other hand couldn't possibly exist if the man wasn't a pillar of strength and didn't have huge belly to stand it.<sup>223</sup>

It is difficult to pin-point exactly what Kerouac means by this sentence, but it still makes sense as a musing. The piled on images make the description sticky and surreal but we still get a

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<sup>215</sup> Seymour Krim, 'Introduction' in Kerouac's *Desolation Angels* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966) pp. 16-17

<sup>216</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials', p. 57

<sup>217</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials...', p. 58

<sup>218</sup> See, K. P. S. Jochum, 'Yeats's Vision Papers and the Problem of Automatic Writing: A Review Essay', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*. 36(3) (2010) 323-336. And Stella Swain, 'The Problem of Belief in Yeats' *A Vision: Text and Context Literature & Theology* Volume: 5 Issue 2 (1991) pp. 198-219

<sup>219</sup> W. B. Yeats, *A Vision*, (London: Scribner, 1962) p. 25.

<sup>220</sup> Jack Kerouac, quoted in Ann Charters, *Kerouac: a biography* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994) p. 140

<sup>221</sup> Charters, *Kerouac: a biography*, p. 140

<sup>222</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (London: Harper Collins, 1995) p. 16

<sup>223</sup> Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, p. 43

concrete feeling of the man presented. The pipe smoking, it seems, is both a metaphor for ‘adult wreckage’ and ‘strength’ at the same time, but the architectural images do not seem to fit somehow. However, this is the beauty of Kerouac’s spontaneous improvisations. In *Visions*, there is ‘no order, no plan, everything afloat in the stream of Jack Kerouac’s consciousness’ and this is what makes the novel such an interesting read; it shows Kerouac’s inner *truth* coming from within his ‘semi-conscious’ mind.<sup>224</sup> Latham’s ‘suggestion [...] to read the book in bits and pieces as if it were a book of poetry rather than a continuous narrative’ is appropriate advice, as the novel does not have a ‘continuous narrative;’ it is bits and pieces of one writer’s life.<sup>225</sup> However, reading *Visions* in this way will interrupt the nature of the author’s piled on consciousness which in turn disrupts the authenticity the experience it presents.

Further to the idea that unconscious or semi-conscious writing can present an authentic documentation of the author’s experience while writing a piece of literature, it also presents an escape from the deadening routine of mid-century America and instead offers a chance to celebrate individual imagination. Another method that Ginsberg suggested and used to full effect was pairing seemingly non-connected words to create new and exciting images. These images completely changed the meaning of the two images put together; take for example the line in ‘Howl’ where Ginsberg talks of the ‘hydrogen juke box.’<sup>226</sup> The ‘hydrogen jukebox’ image comes from the idea which Ginsberg explains in an interview in *The Paris Review* in 1966. He juxtaposes seemingly unrelated words in his poetry the way Cézanne juxtaposes colours against each other in his paintings. Ginsberg explains that, at the time of writing, he might not consciously understand what combinations like ‘hydrogen’ and ‘jukebox’ mean but over time his mind might be able to find the connection between them:

In the moment of composition I don’t necessarily know what it means, but it comes to mean something later, after a year or two, I realise that it meant something clear, unconsciously, which takes on meaning in time, like a photograph developing slowly. Because we’re not always conscious of the entire depths of our minds.<sup>227</sup>

Years later in a seminar, Ginsberg described what he thought he had meant by ‘hydrogen jukebox;’ he said the connection probably came about because of the noise of the Hydrogen Bomb and rock and roll playing on a jukebox. ‘The noise of the jukebox is apocalyptic, so the emergence of that kind of rock and roll and that kind of heavy noise is almost like the beginning of the explosion of the end of the world.’<sup>228</sup> These two unconnected words create a compound noun when put together, a compound noun that gives a complete view of the author’s unconscious mind.

Ginsberg evidently understood the method of creating compound nouns in the composition of ‘Howl’ as he outlines the method in the lines of the poem:

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

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<sup>224</sup> Aaron Latham, ‘Visions of Cody’ a review in *The New York Times*, January 28, 1973. [Accessed online 20<sup>th</sup> April 2018] <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/09/07/home/kerouac-cody.html>.

<sup>225</sup> *ibid*

<sup>226</sup> Allen Ginsberg, ‘Howl’ in *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) pp. 126-133, p.126

<sup>227</sup> Allen Ginsberg, ‘Paris Review Interview’ in *Writers at Work* [ed. by George Plimpton] (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977) pp.279-320, p. 311

<sup>228</sup> Allen Ginsberg quoted from a seminar on February 1984, in Rachel Sutton-Spence, ‘The Heart of the Hydrogen Jukebox by Miriam Nathan Lerner and Don Feigel,’ *Sign Language Studies*, 11: 3 (Spring 2011), pp. 464-474. P. 465

verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus.<sup>229</sup>

By creating compound nouns Ginsberg allows for the poet to create ‘gaps in Time and Space;’ the ‘juxtaposed’ images hop between the past – the time in which the experience happened – and the present in which the poet experiences writing. However, there is a third time frame which connect past and present with the compound noun; that is the future, or the time when the reader formulates an understanding of what the images represent. These three time frames merge to demonstrate the author’s experience fully with a ‘consciousness’ that transcends the author’s experience at the time of writing. Thus not only resuscitating language but also creating a recurring consciousness for the poet, which might change over time.

There is a discussion to be had therefore into whether an *unconscious* author who does not necessarily know what their image means at its conception is really documenting their experience authentically. However, I think it is important to note the ‘Pater Omnipotens Aeterne Deus’ as it suggests a higher consciousness than that of the author. It is a suggestion that these images within the poetry are not from the author but rather echo with an omnipotent ‘sensation’ which is given to the author through a power outside of the author’s consciousness.

Ginsberg is not the only member of the Beat Generation to suggest that writing comes from somewhere other than the author. William Burroughs’ Cut Up method suggests that images could be left to chance to find a deeper meaning. This echoes a truth of experience; life – and therefore experience – is governed by chance, meaning the documentation of said experience could also be left to chance. The cut-up method itself came about by chance, Brion Gysin was sat in his room at the Beat Hotel in Paris, mounting a picture when his knife slipped slicing through some news papers. He pasted the pieces together and noticed some interesting phrases appeared from the new text.<sup>230</sup> The results that emerge from the cut-ups can be ‘quite coherent and meaningful prose.’<sup>231</sup> When Burroughs saw the results of the cut-up method he knew that he could use it to present his own experience of life through a new and interesting way. In fact, the cut-ups provided Burroughs with the hope of ‘relinquishing his personal identity and his sense of connection to the past.’<sup>232</sup> By cutting up and reordering personal recollections of past experience, the author could ‘escape the repressive hold of memory.’ Burroughs’ biographer, Barry Miles, suggests that ‘Cut-ups were a deconditioning agent, almost a new form of psychotherapy, a way to see reality clearly without nostalgia or sentimentality.’<sup>233</sup> It is almost as if this method of writing – or rather composing – literature allowed Burroughs to document his own experiences but in a way which, for him, had lost personality; the words were not his anymore, they were left to chance. Burroughs’ method of writing his *cut-up novels* involved writing an authentic account of his own experience, then cutting this up into a new order.<sup>234</sup> Burroughs’ novel *The Ticket That Exploded* ‘reaches back into the past, to Burroughs’ childhood memories [...], in order to disperse and escape its manipulative sentimentality [...]. The cut-up text may liberate the subject from haunting and

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<sup>229</sup> Allen Ginsberg, ‘Howl’, p. 130

<sup>230</sup> See, James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999)

<sup>231</sup> William S. Burroughs, ‘The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin,’ in *A William Burroughs Reader* [ed. by John Calder] (London: Pan Books, 1982), pp. 268-271 p. 268

<sup>232</sup> Thom Robinson (2016) ‘Rub Out the Past: Nostalgia and the Cut-Up Works of William S. Burroughs,’ *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 14:2, 109-125, DOI: 10.1080/14775700.2016.1242600, p. 109

<sup>233</sup> Barry Miles, *The Beat Hotel: Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso in Paris, 1957–1963* (London: Atlantic, 2001) p. 240

<sup>234</sup> See John Calder, ‘Introduction’ in *A William Burroughs Reader* [ed. by John Calder] (London: Pan Books, 1982) pp. 7-24.

obsessive memories by shifting and permutating their fixed forms.’<sup>235</sup> In the novel, creatures from Venus intermingle with characters from Burroughs’ own life; entering a new way in which the author’s own past is represented in writing. This intermingling of themes, both real and imagined, gives the critic a new hazard in sifting fact from fiction in Beat Literature. Calder argues that almost all of Burroughs’ work is based on real life events, with his subject matter varying between ‘straightforward narrative, near-autobiographical reminiscence and the throwing in of other material, often of a haphazard nature, that happens to interest the author at the time.’<sup>236</sup> Therefore, Burroughs’ novels are a ‘patchwork quilt of past and present experience’ laced with the author’s own reading of news and literature, and experimental and accidental methods of writing.<sup>237</sup>

Another reason for Burroughs’ attempts – whether purposefully or not – to mask the autobiographical parts of his novels behind cut-up and science fiction imagery may in fact be to allow himself not to censor his own views. It is now a well-known fact that Burroughs was a pro-gun homosexual, with a fascination for human cruelty. However, this is a fact that he hid behind a multitude of motifs in his novels. These themes of violent sex, hatred of outsiders, and death are ‘unpleasant realities’ that are given ‘full recognition’ in his novels. These themes appear in his novels to allow himself distance from the disturbing truth of his own mind – the ‘controversial [...] passages are deliberately intended to destroy the barriers we build to hide our real feelings.’<sup>238</sup> Thus, Burroughs saw fiction as a space to freely demonstrate his own disturbing experience without the danger of incriminating himself. If one takes for example sex – distinctly homosexual sex – which of course is a key motif running through Beat literature and life, Burroughs keeps his ‘private life strictly private.’ However, as Calder argues, Burroughs’ ‘personal preoccupations and points of interest obviously influence the way in which he writes and what he writes about.’<sup>239</sup> Thus, experimental methods, primarily the cut-up method, allows the author to hide his private views behind a text which is seemingly randomly produced. Sex, for Burroughs, is full of imagery and violence. A scene depicting homosexual climax, in *The Naked Lunch*, is full of whistles and inverted pastoral images; the idea of the point of orgasm being displayed as fireworks is taken to the extreme with a stream of consciousness pile up of images running almost two pages:

Great whistles through his teeth. Johnny screams like a bird. Mark rubbing his face against Johnny’s, snarl gone, face innocent and boyish as his whole liquid being spurt into Johnny’s quivering body.

A train roar through him whistle blowing ... boat whistle, foghorn, sky rocket burst over oily lagoons...penny arcade open into a maze of dirty pictures...ceremonial cannon boom in the harbor [*sic*] ... a scream shoots down a white hospital corridor [...] whistles out across the desert like a bullet (vulture wings husk in dry air) [...]<sup>240</sup>

The act here becomes almost overtaken by the images used to describe it – orgasm for Burroughs is all about the imagery and less about the act. Burroughs doesn’t even use the word orgasm he simply terms it ‘spurt,’ but the stream of consciousness images transcends what we would normally use to describe orgasm – these are images of so much sound and shock, but

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<sup>235</sup> R. Lydenberg, *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois, 1987) p. 93

<sup>236</sup> Calder, ‘Introduction’, p. 8

<sup>237</sup> *ibid*

<sup>238</sup> *ibid*, p. 9-10

<sup>239</sup> *ibid*, p.16

<sup>240</sup> William Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch*, in *A William Burroughs Reader* [ed. by John Calder] (London: Pan Books, 1982) p. 110

mixed in between them are strange subverted pastoral scenes of ‘a thousand boys come[ing] at once in out houses.’ Then there is also the strange sense of violence in the orgasm, a recurring image of ‘vultures’ fighting ‘over fish heads’ or guarding their prey. This is where the violence of Burroughs’ experience – whether in real life or his own imagination – is truly noticed in its masked glory. It is true that Burroughs continued throughout his novels to display scenes of sexual violence but sometimes this violence is hidden behind the mask of imagery and we can infer that those masked imagistic portrayals of sex are potentially closer to the author’s own experience due to his seeming reluctance to censor alongside his ideal of keeping the private truly private. The private truth is therefore ‘expressionistically drawn out of the imagination from his observation’ in his lived experience.<sup>241</sup>

Thus, there is a discussion to be had as to the authenticity present in masked images. When an experience is veiled behind expressionistic imagery or experimental methods it does not lose a sense of authenticity to its original experience – in fact it may actually tell us more about the author’s experience at the time of writing. The author has chosen to frame personal experience in a stylistic way that demonstrates that they are not entirely confident with sharing these personal details with their reader. Instead they display the experience in a way which spares some of the more dramatic details and leaves the reader to fill in the gaps. When Burroughs talks of orgasm through a series of whistling and exploding metaphors he is in fact describing experience through a coded piece of prose which may actually tell us more about his feelings on the matter than a more matter of fact way of documenting the experience. The use of metaphor goes deeper into the mind of the author than simply describing the action in plain language. We see not only the action of an experience but also the author’s thought process behind it – action becomes feeling. Consequently, these veiled descriptions of actions – which may be seen as explicit or embarrassing – actually seem more to document the author’s experience more authentically than first thought due to their use of psychologically demonstrated metaphor.

The documentation of experience seen in the literature of the Beat Generation spans many topics that had previously been avoided: sex, sexuality, criminality, and drug experience. Many of these risqué topics were those that members of the Beat Generation saw as an escape from the ‘canned’ experience of mid-century America.<sup>242</sup> However, drugs were not just an experience for the Beats to write about. They were also the technology with which the writing could be fuelled. Drugs not only allowed Beat authors to modify their ‘mental processes’ or ways of ‘perceiving reality;’ they also allowed them to modify the ways in which they wrote.<sup>243</sup> These pervasions of form allowed the Beat author to document the mental state in which they were at the time of writing.

John Long argues that there are two ways of using drugs in writing, there is writing *about* drugs, and writing *on* drugs. The Beat authors practiced both to varying degrees. The following paragraphs will discuss both methods and their ability to document the drug experience. First I will discuss the Beats’ practice of writing about drugs. Like many authors before them the Beats noticed the human urge to ‘alter consciousness’ in order to feel

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<sup>241</sup> Calder, ‘Introduction’, p. 16

<sup>242</sup> Regina Weinreich, ‘Locating a Beat Aesthetic’ in *Cambridge Companion to the Beats* [ed. by Stephen Bellatto] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) pp. 51-61. P. 51

<sup>243</sup> John Long, *Drugs and the “Beats”*: *The role of drugs in the lives of Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg* (College Station, TX: VBW Publishing, 2005) p. 6

something different than the average American consciousness of the post-war years.<sup>244</sup> For the Beats it goes back to Lucien Carr's quoting of Rimbaud in his *New Vision*; the author – or in Rimbaud's case seer – should take part in a derangement of the senses in order to gain experiences which may be more interesting to write about. Kerouac was not a massive drug user compared to the rest of the Beats, however, throughout his novels he does write about the lucidness of certain drug experiences. Specifically, marijuana is used throughout Kerouac's novels as a method of creating lucid atmospheres. The pharmacodynamic tendency of marijuana, to induce dream-like states, which could better allow the author to access the unconscious structures of his mind. This dream-like tendency also leads to parts of *On the Road* reading like 'paranoiac visions'.<sup>245</sup>

But the stream of gold continued. For a long time I lost consciousness in my lower mind of what we were doing and only came round sometime later when I looked up from fire and silence like waking from sleep to the world, or waking from void into dream.<sup>246</sup>

This extract from *On the Road* demonstrates the dream-like tendencies that marijuana – or 'tea', as Kerouac calls it – can induce. Notice how the colour of the description has changed; Kerouac makes it very clear that the 'stream' of his mind takes on a 'gold' hue; the experience of marijuana is golden, almost as if the high allows the user to access a richer state of consciousness. It is interesting also to note that Kerouac mentions that drugs allow one to escape 'the world'. Not only was marijuana 'very useful to the artist, activating trains of association that would otherwise be inaccessible',<sup>247</sup> but it also held the 'utopian promise of escape' from the canned experience the artist is so used to.<sup>248</sup> Marijuana allowed the artist to literally create a dream, escape reality and live within a dream. Drugs opened the door to escape the 'sedentariness' that had befallen American conformity.<sup>249</sup> As Bance argues, 'drugs [...] are the "only real cure" for the illness of familiarity and conventionality';<sup>250</sup> drugs allowed an escape from America, but also an escape from *conventional* writing. Drugs allowed the Beats to 'challenge all accepted notions of sanity, normality and identity, presenting itself as a solution to the madness and alienation' of post-war America.<sup>251</sup> In challenging the 'normality' of American morals, the Beats may have been acknowledging a higher *truth* in their writing. However, Foucault suggests that 'drugs, have nothing to do with truth or falsity: only to fortunetellers [*sic*] do they reveal a world "more truthful than the real"'.<sup>252</sup> However, in the use of drugs as a derangement of the senses to allow the author to become a seer, the Beat use of drugs may in fact allow the user to seek a truth (by truth here I mean the authentic documentation of a given experience) which would not have been available without the use of drugs.

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<sup>244</sup> A. Weil, *The Natural Mind* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 25. It is important to note here that the definition of consciousness here is the same as that which I have used throughout this thesis. It is used in the psychological sense of man's awareness of his own psychic activity and identity.

<sup>245</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road* p. 260

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid*, p. 260

<sup>247</sup> William Burroughs, quoted in George Andrews and Simon Vinkenoog, *The Book of Grass* (New York: Grove, 1967), p. 207

<sup>248</sup> Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 160

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*, p.198

<sup>250</sup> Lindsey Michael Bance, *Travel and Drugs in Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2010) p. 114

<sup>251</sup> Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 126

<sup>252</sup> M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* [ed. by Donald F. Bouchard. Trans. By Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon] (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) p.191

The truth that the Beats seem to seek in their drug experiences seem to be that of themselves. In Kerouac's lucid marijuana state the subject is still his own 'stream' of consciousness. Similarly, in his poem 'Lysergic Acid,' Ginsberg attempts to define himself - define his 'tic of consciousness in infinity.'<sup>253</sup> Writing under the influence and about the experience of drugs allowed Ginsberg to share his own 'human secrets,' but also a 'knowledge of something beyond' his own life.<sup>254</sup> This knowledge 'beyond' his own however, can only be defined as his own consciousness of further knowledge released by the chemical reaction of drugs in the brain. As we learnt from Foucault in the previous paragraph, drugs do not allow the user to see the 'truth or falsity' of the world but they do allow the poet in a high state to access parts of their consciousness not normally accessible. This explains why Ginsberg believes that LSD will allow him to further his 'knowledge of something beyond' his own. LSD allows the user to access parts of his own brain which are influenced by their own consciousness and experience, and to experience these as new experiences or truths. However, these truths are actually only the experiences the poet already held. The poem that Ginsberg writes while under the influence of LSD is one that is both introspective and extrospective; it explores the poet looking at his own 'face in the mirror' and seeing himself (his 'face,' his 'thin hair') but also images of God, 'the Universe in miniature,' and a sense of the whole of human existence.<sup>255</sup> It is not the LSD that has produced this knowledge but rather the poet's own past experiences and knowledge of philosophical texts – we know that Ginsberg had a deep understanding of many Jewish and Buddhist scriptures but also a deep understanding of political and social history; it is this knowledge that has infiltrated his consciousness to create the 'larger image' of knowledge that is presented as new in the poem. In fact, Ginsberg admitted his own consciousness did impede his ability to write a truly authentic account of his drug experiments:

I was still looking for a vision, trying to superimpose the acid vision on the old memory of a cosmic-consciousness, or to superimpose an old memory on the acid vision – so that I was not living in the present time, not noticing so much of what was in front of me.<sup>256</sup>

In short, Ginsberg was too self-aware, too in touch with his own consciousness, to truly transcend himself in a drug experience. There was a definite sense, for Ginsberg, that these drug experiment poems transcribed an experience fixed in time, they were authentic representations of his consciousness at the moment of writing – but due to his self-awareness they are also windows into his past. These visions contain fragments of his memory which demonstrate themselves as new visions in the poems. These facts put together mean that Ginsberg's drug poems are authentic recounts of his own experience (past and present) caught in a moment of extended chemical consciousness.

Not only did the Beats use drugs as a mechanism to transcend their consciousness and reveal a more authentic version of themselves but also as a mechanism to create new forms of writing. All drugs are, in Heidegger's definition of the word, technologies because they 'posit ends and procure and utilize the means to use them'.<sup>257</sup> We can speak of opiates as technologies

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<sup>253</sup> Allen Ginsberg, 'Lysergic Acid', in *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* (London: Penguin Books, 1987) pp. 231-237, p. 231

<sup>254</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim* [ed. by Gordon Ball] (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974) p. 104

<sup>255</sup> Ginsberg, 'Lysergic Acid', p. 231 & 232

<sup>256</sup> Allen Ginsberg quoted, P. Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross Erickson, 1978) p. 121

<sup>257</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'the question concerning technology' [trans. William Lovitt] in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) pp. 311-341 p.312

of pleasure, cannabis as a technology of dreaming, and anaesthetics as technologies of transcendence. The Beats used drugs, along with a notion of their past experience, to create writing that would resurrect *boring* literature. It is generally simple to notice when a writer is writing about drug experiences because they may mention explicitly the drug taken or describe the symptoms that a character is feeling. Yet, John Long states that discerning where and when a writer is using drugs as a mechanism of form can be ‘problematic.’<sup>258</sup> However, a basic knowledge of the psychopharmacological effects of drugs can aid in noticing the tell-tale signs of drug use in the composition of a piece of literature.

For Kerouac, amphetamines were the drugs that shaped his novels (notably *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans*). Amphetamines are seldom mentioned in the *On the Road*, but we know by his own admission that Benzedrine was coursing around his body as he composed the novel. Stimulants, such as Benzedrine, can work as “extensions of man”, extensions of our capabilities; they allow the author to become a *man-machine*.<sup>259</sup> Legend suggests that Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in a three-week typing marathon fuelled by coffee and Benzedrine.<sup>260</sup> Charters suggests that the effect of stimulants on Kerouac allowed him to feel as if he:

was blasting so high that he was experiencing real insights and facing real fears. With Benzedrine he felt he was embarking on a journey of self-discovery, climbing up from one level to the next, following his insights [...] Benzedrine intensified his awareness.<sup>261</sup>

Kerouac’s Spontaneous Prose method has often been ‘interpreted as a manifesto for writing under the influence of amphetamines.’ It is – as Boon reminds us – ‘Kerouac’s objective... [...] to accelerate writing until it approaches the speed of thought’; amphetamines allow the hand to catch up with the mind, thus allowing a strong fast writing style.<sup>262</sup> Once writing has approached this speed equal with thought there is little space for second guessing the consciousness, thus amphetamines allow the author to divulge every detail of his experience authentically, without time or space for self-censorship. Speed, both the physical pace of writing and the drug, is what makes *On the Road* the novel it is, a novel in which the pace of prose matches that feeling of zooming across America. Kerouac’s novels therefore have an authentic physicality of the experience being relayed, as well as a documentation of the events. The pace that Benzedrine encourages allows *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans* to fly with their protagonists – an authentically detailed novel that flits from image to image like talking to a person high on speed. Benzedrine allows the Beat author to inject a ‘sense of careless freedom’ into their prose.<sup>263</sup> For Kerouac, and the other Beat writers, Benzedrine was the gateway into sub-conscious writing. In *On the Road*, Kerouac describes Benzedrine as ‘fire’, allowing excitement and energy into the characters.<sup>264</sup> The ‘careless freedom’ of amphetamine influenced writing allowed Kerouac to break out of the traditional prose form that he described as ‘dead’ and make work that ‘resurrected...rugged individualism’.<sup>265</sup> This Benzedrine induced ‘careless freedom’ also echoes the ‘fragmentation, anxiety, [and] paranoia psychosis’ that

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<sup>258</sup> John Long, *Drugs and the “Beats”...*, p. 13

<sup>259</sup> See Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 171

<sup>260</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: a biography* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1994)

<sup>261</sup> Ann Charters quoted in Sadie Plant, *Writing on Drugs* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) p. 114

<sup>262</sup> Boon, *The Road of Excess*, p. 198

<sup>263</sup> Neal Cassady quoted in Charters, *Kerouac: a biography*, p. 124

<sup>264</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (London: Penguin, 2000) p. 128

<sup>265</sup> M. L. Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) p. 140



amphetamine addiction can induce, thus authentically representing the experience which Kerouac writes about in his novels.<sup>266</sup>

It was not just a need to resurrect language to make it more interesting that spurred the Beats to find new and exciting ways of writing, but also an innate feeling that ‘our usual vocabulary will not allow us to translate the indescribable strangeness’ of certain experiences that the Beats felt a need to document.<sup>267</sup> Hoffman describes these feelings as those that might be induced through the use of drugs, such as ‘euphoric states, [...] but also a depressive state accompanied by death anguish.’ But they could easily be feelings of sexual pleasure or a sense of deviancy. These are sensations, sensations which are difficult to translate into common vocabulary without the use of literary experimentation and comparison to states outside of our own consciousnesses. Burroughs describes an experience of taking peyote in *Junkie* as an experience in which the user is transported to the region where the drug is from:

Our faces swelled under the eyes and our lips got thicker [...] We actually looked like Indians. The others claimed they felt primitive and were laying around on the grass and acting the way they figured Indians act.<sup>268</sup>

Burroughs doesn’t understand the feeling being described, and so he puts the description into a way in which he understands. His everyday *reality* slipped away – and so he had to project his experience into an oneiric state in which he could describe the experience of the high. There are problems in Burroughs’ description – not simply his racially stereotypical descriptions – but also in his form; in describing his drug experience in another way in which he does not fully understand he can only make his description into a projection. For those that have experienced the feeling of the drug high no description is necessary, and for those that have not experienced it the description is very hard to master.<sup>269</sup> This is where the description of strange experiences becomes a difficult thing to gauge – why describe one unknown with another unknown? However, our language has no ability to describe these new sensations; we can only describe the unknown as something which we can understand and can transcribe into words. Therefore, Burroughs suggests an image which he can translate into an understanding of colonialist vocabulary. However, this choice of vocabulary does dilute the authentic description of experience. This is why the phrase ‘the way they figured Indians act’ is so telling – Burroughs ‘figures’ that this is the way Indians feel and act; he doesn’t know that this is the way they are but rather this is his assertion of how they might be according to the books he’s read.

For the Beats, therefore, there is a link between drug fuelled writing and a yearning for authentic documentation of the author’s thoughts. Not only does using drugs as a technology for writing allow the author to avoid self-censorship, but drugs also allow for an authentic representation of the mind’s rhythms while using them. This is important to allow the author to fully articulate the experience, and for the reader to understand it without necessarily taking a drug (although drug use would help the reader to better understand the sensations described). As we saw with Kerouac’s use of Benzedrine, amphetamine use can help the author to replicate the ‘pile up’ of thoughts going through their mind.<sup>270</sup> Other mind-altering substances will have different effects on the rhythm and composition of a piece of writing. For example, Ginsberg’s use of interesting compound nouns and *piled on* images may be due to his use of Peyote in the

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<sup>266</sup> Plant, *Writing on Drugs*, p. 114

<sup>267</sup> A. Hoffmann, ‘Les Drogues Psychodysléptiques,’ *La Recherche*, 1:1, (1970) p. 254

<sup>268</sup> William Burroughs, *Junkie* (New York: Ace Books, 1953) p. 123-4

<sup>269</sup> See Long, *Drugs and the Beats...*, p. 107

<sup>270</sup> Kerouac, ‘Essentials...’, p. 57

composition of the poem. He suggests that the idea for part two of the poem came from a Peyote vision where the poet saw Moloch in San Francisco in 1955. Ginsberg describes the experience in this way:

I had an apt on Nob Hill, got high on Peyote, & saw an image of the robot skullface of Moloch in the upper stories of a big hotel glaring into my window [...] I wondered down Powell Street muttering “Moloch, Moloch” all night & wrote “Howl II” nearly intact in cafeteria at foot of Drake Hotel, deep in the hellish vale.<sup>271</sup>

Not only does the image of Moloch repeat itself in Ginsberg’s poem but his repeated ‘muttering’ from that night becomes an angry shout. For Ginsberg, Moloch becomes the image to put America’s ills onto within the poem. Moloch becomes a pile of images to demonstrate the dystopia that America had become in Ginsberg’s eyes. Peyote allows Moloch to take on the shape of ‘Ashcans and unobtainable dollars,’ ‘the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows.’<sup>272</sup> Thus, it can be inferred that peyote allows the author to shape shift one image into many others and to pile them up in a rhythm that is authentic to that of the author at the time of writing. From Ginsberg’s own admission the poem was finished ‘nearly intact’ in one night; from Ginsberg’s own theory of *first thought best thought* and this time frame for the composition of the poem, we can confidently suggest that the poem’s rhythms are that of a mind on Peyote.

Earlier in the essay I suggested that the drug rhythms of a piece of literature can allow the reader to understand the experience better. However, Ginsberg goes further, suggesting that the rhythmic units of a poem correspond with the breathing patterns of the poet in the composition.<sup>273</sup> Ginsberg’s aim was to create a similar state of consciousness in the reader as he was experiencing during his composition. In following the ‘poet’s commas and exclamation points and following long long long breaths’ Ginsberg argues that the reader will ‘get...high physiologically.’<sup>274</sup> Thus, the ‘language of the poetry [...] becomes an extension of the physiology of the body;’ allowing the poet to authentically document the ‘particular emotion’ and therefore rhythms while undergoing an experience of writing.<sup>275</sup> Ginsberg’s theory of breath lines translating the author’s emotion is an extension of Olson’s suggestion that poetry should rhythmically ‘recall’ the activity of the poet at the time of composition.<sup>276</sup> In allowing the reader to feel the emotion of the poem in their breath, the poet has completely and authentically transcribed an experience into literature.

The authenticity of an experience in writing is so important to the Beat aesthetic that the writers of the Generation would go above and beyond traditional literary forms, and would ignore grammatical conventions to overcome literary censorship and allow the true emotions that they felt during its composition to breathe through the piece of literature being presented. It is in this way that true experience was translated through in the form of literature.

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<sup>271</sup> Allen Ginsberg, quoted in Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 78

<sup>272</sup> Ginsberg, ‘Howl’, p. 131

<sup>273</sup> See John Long, *Drugs and the “Beats”...*, p. 167

<sup>274</sup> Ginsberg in Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 79

<sup>275</sup> Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 79

<sup>276</sup> Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’, *Collected Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1997), p. 242

## Conclusion

Throughout their writing the Beat writers were in pursuit of interesting new life experiences. These experiences motivated the authors of Beat literature to reach new and exciting content for their writing; they yearned to document these experiences as fully and as authentically as possible. This authenticity takes the shape of literature that resembles the real life that it seeks to document. However, this authenticity also considers the author's mental processes at the time of writing. As we have seen Kerouac suggested that the Spontaneous Prose Method of writing is the way to capture the closest resemblance of the author's mind at the time of writing. Kerouac also warns against the act of editing when documenting their own experience.

This documentation also takes into account the idea of time in the documentation of experience; one can capture a moment, or several years held in memory. While documenting the past, an author must rely on their memory to demonstrate their past as authentically as possible. However, as we notice when we compare Kerouac's novels to his biography, we notice that some parts may have been mis-remembered or even changed for the purpose of literary excitement. The transcription of moments takes an experience as it happens and sets it down on paper. This method allows the author to capture both the experience through action and rhythm.

Beat literature does not just depend on the author's experience in itself for the content of their literature, they must also depend on their methods as an experimental writer. The experimental nature of Beat literature allowed the Beats to demonstrate their experience in form as well as in content. Experiments in form and rhythm allows the Beat author to authentically document their mental state at the time of writing. Most of the Beat's experiments found themselves in the realms of writing under the influence of drugs.

Finally, it must be noted that the Beat's need for the authentic documentation of experience allows the Beat authors to demonstrate the innermost experiences of their mind while producing exciting literature which still shocks and provokes readers half a century after their initial publication.

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