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Countercultural Pilgrims of East and West

The Spiritual and Ecological Turn of the Beat Generation

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May all beings live in a beatific world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	7
Introduction	9
The Counter-Spaces of a Generation	13
From The East Coast	13
Sense of Place and Belonging	18
Beyond the Frontier: Exploring Counter-Spaces	26
Sense of Space and Reinhabitation	33
The Pilgrimage of a Generation	39
To the West Coast	39
Beat vs. Square	45
<i>A Beatific</i> Eastern Turn	51
The Rucksack Pilgrimage	57
The Legacy of a Generation	63
Gary Snyder—The Beats, Dharma Gaia and Bioregionalism	67
Michael McClure—The Beats, Animism and Animal People	74
Allen Ginsberg—The Beats, Non-Violence and Back-to-the-Land	82
Conclusion	91
Bibliography	95
Acknowledgements	103

Preface

This research on the Beat generation started from a cocoon of intuitions. Never would I have expected to find so many entanglements and good hints to follow, up to the point of getting lost in the maze-like net of interrelations nourished by a rich ensemble of the best minds of a generation.¹

At that beginning of this study, my original question was nothing less than, how come was the Beat generation born and which was its revolution? Shortly after, the issue became more challenging and elaborate since it turned out to be, where could we place – more specifically, how can I place – the Beat generation within the *Environmental Humanities*? Followed by a remark, should I really do that, and if yes, what for?

It took me some time to find the answers, but I was motivated. My cocoon of intuitions told me that it was possible to find a way, and that this way would have been surprisingly rich. The starting point of my encounter with the Beat generation had somehow something in common with the gathering of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Lucien Carr, when they met for the first time at the Columbia University in 1943. They knew very little about each other and nothing about where that meeting would have led them, but it was what they felt that mattered – they were hungry, eager, and enthusiastic.

The answer was just as simple as that. On the road to the Beat generation, I would have found its place within the *Environmental Humanities*.

¹ Paraphrasing Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. "Howl," p. 9.

Introduction

The Beat generation is a singular and complicated fragment of the history of that vast yard¹ of the world that we call America. For this, we cannot just call it a literary movement. The Beat generation was not only a literary movement indeed. It was the intersection and meeting ground of some yet indefinite feelings – indefinite, at least at its dawn – that raised during the second post-war period but were already in the air previously. Thus, the Beats represented the multi-faced nature of issues, questions, and disenchantment towards a society and a social system that kept changing frantically and hopelessly since the beginning of their century. They conveyed the voice of crowds that had not yet found the courage to rebel against their own alienation. Moreover, they embodied the conjunction ring between the past of a country that had just found its own literary identity² and the future of that same country, which would foresee the coming revolution – a revolution that would take place out of the domain of literature, but of which literature will be a vital piece, nevertheless.

This paper aims to dialogue with the historical, geographical, cultural, spiritual, literary, and environmental context that pushed various groups of students and minds,³ who would become known as *Beats*, to start a unique and unparalleled journey within the universities, on the roads, and among the people of their homeland, the land of the United States. Outcome of an intense feeling of longing for freedom, their travelling would be characterized by a desperate wandering and bumming through the unexplored outdoors of their country. However, it would also hold a more personal and intimate side, expressed as a journey within the soul and on paper. In this regard, thus, we distinguish two kinds of Beat journeys, those *on the road* and the journeys of the meditative mind, both expressing an inner urge for the pursuit of something, driven by an overpowering anguish. Indeed, beat⁴ students were impatient and alienated from their society, its cultural and life proposal. Hence, this feeling of dissatisfaction drove them to searching for new alternatives, both on an experiential and a spiritual level. This same research led Beat writers to turn their gaze eastwards, especially to the world of Buddhism, and more specifically – in most of the cases

¹ I have stolen the image of the “yard,” translation of “aia” (IT.), by Bevilacqua, Emanuele. 1994. *Guida alla Beat Generation*, pp. 15-17.

² With this claim, I am referring to the literature of their predecessors, particularly Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman.

³ The meaning of the term *mind(s)* should always be associated to Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “Howl,” p. 9.

⁴ Here, I am using the adjective *beat* deliberately, thinking about all its associated meanings. See Waldman, Anne. 2007. *The Beat Book*, p. xiii-xiv.

– to Zen Buddhism, which made its way into America through the first half of the 20th century, particularly thanks to writings and translations of British and Japanese philosophers, Allan Watts and T. D. Suzuki. Through Buddhist knowledge and Zen experience, Beat writers – each his own way, – would come to fundamental insights, meeting their intellectual and spiritual hunger, their personal and social suffering and, above all, their inherent need to reconnect with the sacredness of nature and life itself. Attributable to the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, as well as to European existentialism, Beat literature affirmed a strong desire for literary, cultural, spiritual, political, and environmental identity in the United States, into which counterculture movements, hippies, flower children and environmentalists of the second half of century converged.

The following analysis is divided into three main parts. To begin with, the first chapter aims to site a rising generation on the map of its native places and ensuing living spaces. In particular, the analysis focuses on the birth of the Beat generation on the East coast of the American country, precisely in its vibrant New York City, where the writers of the early circle gathered for the first time. The relevance of this chapter is based on the understanding of the bond between a generation and its environment(s), thus deepening the Beats unique relationship with geography. In literary terms, the chapter speaks of spatialised forms of literature and geo-poetics. Hence, from the standpoint of the *Environmental Humanities*, it discusses some fundamental ideas linked to concepts of space, place and sense of belonging. Psychogeographical theories elaborated by Guy Debord and the Situationists give a vital support to the analysis. Particular attention is paid to the meaning that certain postwar spaces, such as house, city or highway, come to take. Meanwhile, issues connected to Cold war culture and capitalism emerge, e.g. the marginalization of some groups of people, addressed as *fellaheen*, in Oswald Spengler's terms.

The second chapter, then, explores the migration of the Beat generation to the West coast, together with its spiritual and environmental turn. In San Francisco, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg encountered the Zen lunatic poet of the mountains, Gary Snyder, who became symbol of a new way of living in harmony with nature, based on the spiritual essence of life. Thus, the analysis shows the emergence of both Beat environmental literature and Buddhist American literature, of which *The Dharma Bums* is epitome. Moreover, the chapter recounts the socio-cultural situation of the second post-war period characterized by two different lifestyles, one of the *beats* and the other of the *squares*. Following this discourse, relevance

is given to the “ills of the West”⁵ that Beat poets tried to flee, looking for solutions in the Eastern world and its spiritual traditions. The chapter ends on a discussion about pilgrimage ecopoetics, which stresses the potential of ecological sensitivity that arose since the Six Gallery reading and would become a key component of the Beat evolution and consequent later phase.

The structure of the first two chapters is slightly different from that of the third. Indeed, they describe a passage – a migration – of Beat literary people “From the East Coast” “To the West Coast.” If the focus of the first chapter is the writers’ relationship with geography, the main theme of the second chapter is spirituality. Both perspectives help reading the Beat generation from a different environmental understanding. Concerning the third chapter, it does not begin with a proper opening subchapter, rather it is introduced in the frame of the 1960s atmosphere. Indeed, it is more political. Hence, its actual content is made of three mini-essays – as I like to define them – that focus on three specific subjects, one per author. They address three key concepts that should always be considered when speaking of the desire of an environmentally sustainable world: care for the place we belong to, respect for all living beings and peace. Behind each topic, there is always a Buddhist understanding of the world. Consequently, the first mini-essay argues for bioregional theories, however introduced and supported by the principle of interdependence, seen both in scientific and spiritual terms. Here, Gary Snyder is taken as reference thinker. Afterwards, the second mini-essay is dedicated to Michael McClure, “the Human Spirit & all Mammals.”⁶ Thus, the analysis focuses on relationships between human and animal people, always in accordance with the idea of interdependence of life. Finally, protagonist of the last mini-essay is Allen Ginsberg, together with his anti-Vietnam war poems and non-violent protests. This last part aims to give pause to a very current topic, which represents the example of massive alienation from the interconnectedness of all life on earth.

The aim of this thesis is that of paving the way for the Beat literary movement within the *Environmental Humanities*, in order to encourage further research on the topic. The other purpose is that of showing how an ever richer and fruitful dialogue between East and West – or better, different cultures – can have a fundamental role in facing issues, questions, as well as finding solutions for our living planet, currently suffering us and our alienation.

⁵ The Authors of Poetry Foundation. “Gary Snyder.”

⁶ Michael, McClure. 1969. *Ghost Tantras*.

The Counter-Spaces of a Generation

1. From the East Coast

“It was in the spring of 1943 that the story of the Beat generation really begins. That’s when a chain reaction of events began to unfold.”¹ The place of this singular entanglement is the city of New York, on the East coast of the vast land of the United States of America. According to Rich Weidman, “New York City can truly lay claim to being the «Birthplace of the Beat Generation».”²

Every major writer of that movement lived in or visited New York. They all had a love-hate relationship with it. Some writers, like Michael McClure and Lew Welsh, found it a brutal city that stifled creativity. Others, like Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Huncke, and Gregory Corso, found it intoxicating (if not hallucinating). Still others, like Jack Kerouac, longed to be somewhere else, yet always came back to Gotham.³

It was as if the Beats were destined to end up in New York during those years. Indeed, in a very short time, every writer of the early Beat generation found his way to New York. Among those was the young St. Louis’ boy Lucien Carr. Often overlooked – just for the simple reason that he never published,⁴ – he was the very first piece of the domino effect of events that led to the birth of the 1950s revolutionary literary movement in New York City:

Following a suicide attempt, Lucien Carr, a good-looking eighteen-year-old boy from St. Louis, spent some time recuperating in Chicago’s Cook County Hospital. There he received little therapy for the depression that had made him put his head in an oven in the first place. When the doctors determined that Carr was no longer a threat to himself, they released him into the care of his divorced mother, Marion Gratz, then living in New York City. [...] Eventually, to escape from her watchful eyes, he enrolled as a second-term freshman at Columbia University [...] Carr appeared to be a man on the run, but it wasn’t clear even to him whether he was running away from something or in search of something.⁵

That is how the archivist and bibliographer Bill Morgan describes the arrival of the young Carr in New York, more specifically at Columbia University, in the fall of 1943. At that time, “America had been at war for nearly two years” and “the college had given over most of its space to the [V-12] Navy College Training Program.”⁶ In a certain way, thus, the environment that surrounded the young Carr was far from being academically stimulating, despite his

¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy: The Complete Uncensored History of the Beat Generation*, p. 1.

² Weidman, Rich. 2015. *The Beat Generation FAQ: All That’s Left to Know About the Angelheaded Hipsters*, see “New York City” in chapter 5.

³ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York. A Walking Tour of Jack Kerouac’s City*, p. xi.

⁴ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. xix.

⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 1-2.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 2.

classes were taught by “legendary professors.”⁷ However, this was not a big deal for Lucien, as the student was:

far more absorbed in the exciting, colourful, and even lurid lives of the people he was meeting in the city, beyond the wrought-iron fence that surrounded the campus. His classroom became the bar stools and booths of the West End, a dingy tavern directly across Broadway from Columbia’s main gate.⁸

This image of the wrought-iron fence, which separates college from city, somehow already embodies one of the emblematic antitheses that would characterize the nascent generation. As explained by Roy Kozlovsky, in his *Beat Literature and Domestication of American Space*, these poets “rejected the detachment of the university in favour of the street, and combined an anthropological method of observation with a commitment to an unmediated bodily experience of the city.”⁹ In this regard, the academic life that unfolded within the borders of Columbia University and the recklessness of New York boroughs were poles apart. However, the Beat generation would have never been what it was without one of these two realities. Indeed, if the street was where our poets could experience and find their best expression, it was among the rooms of campus that they first got the chance to meet and discover their likenesses:

During the Christmas break, Carr stayed on in his room, preferring the solitude of the empty dormitory to his mother’s company. One afternoon while Carr was listening to Brahms on his record player, his door opened. Curious about the music echoing down the deserted hallway and wondering who besides himself had chosen to spend the holiday in the dorm, in walked seventeen-year-old Allen Ginsberg, another Columbia student.¹⁰

He came from “nearly Paterson, New Jersey.”¹¹ There, he had “received a scholarship from the Young Men’s Hebrew Association [...] to Columbia University,”¹² where he was glad to go since his high-school crush studied there as well.¹³ That winter meeting between Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg was the first of a long series. It is true indeed that “before the Beats emerged in the fifties, a network of friends took shape in the forties.”¹⁴

Ginsberg and the affable Carr hit it off immediately, and before long Lucien invited Allen to meet some of the people he knew. A few days before Christmas 1943, Allen found himself riding the subway down to Greenwich Village to meet Lucien’s friends. That get-together would lead to a lifelong relationship that was to change Ginsberg’s life and alter the course of American literature and culture forever. Lucien took Allen to the Bedford Street apartment of William S. Burroughs, [...] Burroughs, a St. Louis native like Carr, knew Lucien through a mutual Missouri friend, David Kammerer, who was also visiting Burroughs that night. This

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 41.

¹⁰ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 2.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 3.

¹² Weidman, Rich. 2015. *The Beat Generation FAQ*, chapter 1.

¹³ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

gathering of young men was the first assembly of the group that would grow over the next fifteen years to become the literary circle known as the Beat Generation.¹⁵

This first meeting signed the future of a group of students that would “[play] beyond the limits of what was socially acceptable at the time.”¹⁶ At this point, however, it is reasonable to wonder, where was the “writer”¹⁷ Jack Kerouac if he was not at Burroughs’ apartment in Belford Street? He was, as all others, somewhere around New York:

I had a room all to myself on the second floor, overlooking the beautiful trees and walkways of the campus and overlooking, to my greatest delight, beside the Van Am Quadrangle, the library itself, the new one, with its stone frieze running around entire with the names engraved in stone forever: ‘Goethe ... Voltaire ... Shakespeare ... Molière ... Dante.’ That was more like it. Lighting my fragrant pipe at 8 P.M., I’d open the pages of my homework, turn on WQXR for the continual classical music, and sit there, in the golden glow of my lamp, in a sweater, sigh and say “Well now I’m a collegian at last.”¹⁸

The room – described in Kerouac’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Vanity of Duluo*, which recounts his adventures from 1935 to 1946, – is at Columbia University, precisely at Livingston Hall.¹⁹ Indeed, Jack Kerouac was also a Columbia student around the same years of Ginsberg and Carr. He had come there on a football scholarship.²⁰ However, as he would later recount to Carr, he dropped out university at his second year, left New York and came back some time later. That begs the question again, if not at Burroughs’ place, and not even on campus, where was that Kerouac met his lifelong friends? Thanks to a singular event, the shy boy from Lowell, Massachusetts, met the girl that would introduce him to the Beats. Her name was Edie “Frankie” Parker and, as almost everyone in this story, she was a student at Columbia too. She had come from Detroit to New York to study art, even though her first purpose was to be independent from her mother. Edie had met Lucien while “living with her grandmother near the Columbia campus,”²¹ whereas the encounter between Edie and Kerouac took place thanks to Heri Cru, another student she was dating at the time. It was not long after that meeting that Kerouac became “her steady boyfriend.”²² If there were two places that Edie attended assiduously, those were the West End Bar and her apartment

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Among all early Beats, Kerouac was “the most committed to the idea of being a writer,” so that he was the “writer.” Charters, Ann & Samuel Charters. 2010. *Brother-Souls: John Cellon Holmes, Jack Kerouac and the Beat Generation*, p. 32.

¹⁸ Kerouac, Jack. 1968. *Vanity of Duluo: An Adventurous Education, 1935-1946*. Cited in University Archives. 2023. “Jack Kerouac: #DormLife in 1940.”

¹⁹ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 7. His previous room was at Hartley, which he had disliked since he moved in.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 3.

²¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 6.

²² *Ivi*, p. 7.

at 421 West 118 Street. Thus, it was right in these very places that Kerouac got the chance to encounter Lucien Carr, Allen Ginsberg and finally, William Burroughs:

One day after class Parker introduced her fellow classmate, Lucien Carr, to Kerouac at the West End Bar. While relaxing over a few beers, the two men struck up a conversation and swapped stories. Kerouac came from a working-class family but hoped to become a writer. He told Lucien that he had been a star football player back in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, but he had been injured during his second year on the Columbia team. He quit the team, dropped out of school, and was now determined to find subjects worth writing about on the streets of New York. It was Kerouac's belief that he didn't need a college degree to become a writer.²³

If there was someone who could help Kerouac finding the perfect subjects for his novels, that someone was precisely Lucien Carr, as witnessed by Kerouac's first writings *Orpheus Emerged* – written between 1944 and 1945 – and *The Town and the City* – started in 1945 and sent for publishing in 1948. Nevertheless, following his departure from the academic environments of Columbia University and before finding his own place in New York City, Kerouac worked here and there, also living at the sea for some time – among his jobs, he served as a merchant seaman, which inspired his first novel *The Sea Is My Brother*. Meanwhile, he went back to his parents, up until the end of 1943, when he officially began living with Edie.²⁴ She shared a “four-bedroom apartment” with some friends in “in a six-floor yellow brick [...] building”²⁵ located “just a block away from the [Columbia] campus”²⁶ in Upper West Side of Manhattan, precisely at 421 W. 118 St.²⁷ Here, apparently, Kerouac spent “the happiest days of his life.”²⁸ It was probably because, between the end of 1943 and 1944, the apartment became an “unofficial hang-out for the Beats.”²⁹ It is there indeed that he met Ginsberg and soon after, the curious William Burroughs:

One night that winter [1943] Ginsberg was talking with Carr at the [West End] bar and by chance met Edie and Celine [Lucien's girlfriend, at the time]. They invited him over to their apartment to meet Kerouac, whom they described as a writer and a sailor, both careers seemed romantic to Allen. [...] At the time, Ginsberg [...] considered himself to be an amateur poet [...] He was fascinated by Kerouac's idea of writing as his calling in life.

After walking up five flights of stairs to Edie's apartment, Ginsberg found himself face to face with one of the most handsome men he had ever met. Nearly four years older than Ginsberg, twenty-one-year-old Jack Kerouac struck Allen as the very epitome of masculine beauty. At their first meeting Kerouac didn't think very highly of Ginsberg [...]

On the afternoon they met, Allen had the chutzpah to ask Jack to help him move all his belongings from his dorm to another room about ten blocks away. Begrudgingly Jack agreed. As Allen locked the door to his old room for the last time and walked down the hallway carrying his few possessions, he turned and said, “Good-bye, door.” At the first landing he paused

²³ Ivi, pp. 7-8.

²⁴ Charters, Ann & Samuel Charters. 2010. *Brother-Souls*, p. 32.

²⁵ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 11.

²⁶ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 8.

²⁷ Charters, Ann & Samuel Charters. 2010. *Brother-Souls*, p. 32.

²⁸ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 11.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

again. “Good-bye, stairs,” he said and continued in that vein all the way out of the building. It was at that moment that Jack realized that he and Allen were kindred spirits, because he often said good-bye to physical things when he left one place for another.³⁰

Once the meeting between Kerouac and Ginsberg had taken place, the only missing bond was that between Kerouac and Burroughs, which was soon created, thanks to the latter’s interest in “the ins and outs of merchant marine service,”³¹ where Kerouac had worked for some time. Hence, in February 1944, Ginsberg and Carr decided to bring Burroughs up to the sixth floor in the 118th Street apartment so that he could meet Kerouac,³² to whom he soon “became a close friend and confident.”³³

The generation of the road was therefore born in between the academic spaces of Columbia University, “where [it] appeared, like a wild seed in a city garden,”³⁴ and the chaotic apartments of Manhattan – as Edie’s or Burroughs’ place in Greenwich Village, a vibrant neighbourhood on the West Side of Lower Manhattan, which attracted many avant-garde artists because of its low rents and “rich bohemian history.”³⁵ Once the group was formed, they went into the City, aiming to encounter the most exciting, crazy and angelic people of their country. However, before spending their nights in the streets, they would have a few drinks and discuss about their new visions at the West End, “a university replica of a Greenwich Village dive.”³⁶ It was probably their dearest bar around the campus anyway.

³⁰ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, pp. 8-9.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 9.

³² Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 12.

³³ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 8.

³⁴ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 1.

³⁵ Weidman, Rich. 2015. *The Beat Generation FAQ*, chapter 4.

³⁶ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 13.

2. Sense of Place and Belonging

This first part of the chapter has been key, not only to trace the origins of the Beat generation, but also to map its early places. Up until this point, our study has shown that there are fundamental sites that marked the beginning of Beat history and would influence its future becoming. In addition, each of these environments assumed a particular meaning within the course of events and, as time went by, many other places would do accordingly. A singular interest in the subject has been raised by archivist and bibliographer Bill Morgan. He discussed the relationship between Beat generation members and their environment(s) in his four books: *The Beat Generation in New York: A Walking Tour of Jack Kerouac's City* (1997), *The Beat Generation in San Francisco: A Literary Tour* (2003), *Beat Atlas: A State by State Guide to the Beat Generation in America* (2011) and *The Beats Abroad: A Global Guide to the Beat Generation* (2016). Morgan's guides are extraordinary means of understanding the itinerant life of our poets. They represent an incredible way to walk their apartments, bars, neighbourhoods, universities, birth places, cities, hotels, streets and roads, and so the list could go on. Furthermore, Bill Morgan provides his guides with floorplans, maps and photographs, along with addresses, descriptions and engaging anecdotes. His work was possible because the Beats had very strong "geographic [ambitions]" that resulted in the "insistence on naming even the most obscure places they [passed] through,"³⁷ which allowed scholars to retrace all their landmarks and recurring places, as well as their occasional waypoints. Since they ended up anywhere around the United States and the world,³⁸ the list includes an almost endless number of locations. Thus, it is possible to map all Beat landmarks and retrace their itineraries, aiming to put them in relation to each other, study the impact they had on the history of the movement and the meanings they assumed within the personal lives of our poets. However, in the context of our research, such a detailed and meticulous analysis is not feasible, since it would not leave us the space to deepen other fundamental aspects. Nevertheless, this does not prevent us to explore the hypothesis that one fundamental feature of the Beat subculture movement was the relationship with its places, its environment(s) and the spaces of its country.

It follows that, to work on this theory, the very idea of place should be defined. In this sense, I find myself agreeing with Wendy Harcourt's reasoning, whereas she understands place as

³⁷ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. "Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space," p. 36.

³⁸ See especially Morgan's *Beat Atlas: A State by State Guide to the Beat Generation in America* (2011) and *The Beats Abroad: A Global Guide to the Beat Generation* (2016).

“meeting-place,” characterized by networks of relations.³⁹ This definition strongly resonates with our previous affirmations about the early Beat history. Indeed, mapping the birth period of the movement, our analysis has shown that it is possible to identify a group of places that represented the meeting-places of the Beats, whereas *meeting-places* stands both for places where their lucky very first encounters occurred and for those that became their regular spots for gathering. In addition to that, *meeting-place* should also be understood as the possibility for things to happen and for people to interact – in a broader sense, for entanglements. Then, along with this definition of place, it could be very helpful to introduce the concept of “psychogeography,” which was developed by “Guy Debord and his followers,” namely the Situationists, “in the 1950s, the same decade that saw the composition of Ginsberg’s *Howl*.”⁴⁰ Similarly to the Beats, the Situationists “were advocating for a new vision of landscapes through direct and subjective experiences of them.”⁴¹ Thus, psychogeography was defined in 1955 as:

the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The adjective psychogeographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.⁴²

To put it simply, psychogeography can be outlined as the study of the influence of geography on feelings, whereas the self is at the centre of its experiences, as it emotionally interprets the world.⁴³ By relating with its surrounding environments, the self creates a map of its emotional states. This allows people to reinforce their position in the world, while redefining its space and reclaiming their territories.⁴⁴ Hence, the result of psychogeography is linked with processes of self-discovery and self-placement, which lead to the establishment of a sense of belonging to the world.⁴⁵

Concerning the Beats, as far as they seem to have had singular relationships with their affections, up to the point of escalating in cynicism and even misanthropy, they were not as emotionally detached as one might think. On the contrary, they felt particularly bonded with their places, up to tiniest details, at times. Our first evidence is Allen’s sickness while leaving

³⁹ Harcourt, Wendy. 2016. “Place,” p. 161.

⁴⁰ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments: The Geo-Poetics of Allen Ginsberg,” p. 1.

⁴¹ Despite they shared similar views, Situationists have never appreciated the Beats, whom they even defined “mystical cretins.” See *Ivi*, p. 2.

⁴² Debord, Guy. 1955. “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography.”

⁴³ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ This anticipates bioregionalist ideas that are discussed further on. According to bioregionalists, a deep knowledge of an area or a place helps fighting people’s alienation from their environment. See “Gary Snyder—The Beats, Dharma Gaia and Bioregionalism.”

his room in the dormitory, although he was just moving to another in the same campus. As described by Kerouac, his new acquaintance was taking the time to saying goodbye to all his familiar spaces, even objects, starting from the door, then the stairs and so forth, “all the way out of the building.”⁴⁶ Similarly, affection towards college environments is shown by Kerouac himself, for whom “Columbia served the same function as his mother’s house; a place of refuge after visiting friends and partying in the heart of the city downtown.”⁴⁷ In this regard, the boy from Lowell would always feel a nostalgic pain towards his hometown, portrayed in *The City and the Town*. On the other hand, however, he would recognize that experiencing city life offered incredible opportunities and represented a major source of inspiration, especially if the city in question was New York:

I settled down to long sweet sleeps, day-long meditations in the house, writing, and long walks around beloved old Manhattan a half hour subway ride away. I roamed the streets, the bridges, Times Square, cafeterias, the waterfront, I looked up all my poet beatnik friends and roamed with them, I had love affairs with girls in the Village, I did everything with that great mad joy you get when you return to New York City.⁴⁸

In line with a psychogeographical perspective, the writer established a sense of belonging to the city, thanks to this daily practice. Indeed, as previously outlined, the self is at the centre of its psychogeographical experiences in the space of the world, where it creates maps of its emotional states. According to this description, the spaces of the city became familiar to the author, who invested his time in regular “walks around beloved old Manhattan,” where he roamed the streets and followed the steps of a daily round. This habitual contact with the city gave the writer the opportunity to experience New York’s environments and bound with people there. It follows that his routine joined a process of identification, whereas Kerouac did not go to random places during his daily journey, rather he satisfied his need of visiting familiar environments and beatnik friends around. As a result, the poet felt at ease within the spaces of Manhattan, as he was able to create a sense of belonging. A similar approach to that of psychogeography can be recognized in the field of the *Environmental Humanities*, as we read in Emmett and Nye’s words:

A psychological identification between self and site is part of place-making, in an ongoing social process. It demands a personal investment in a particular location whose appearance, sounds, and smells become part of a daily round. Creating a sense of place in an unfamiliar space establishes somewhere to belong. Human geographers and other researchers consider this process of identification to be fundamental to place.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Kerouac, Jack. 1968. *Lonesome Traveler*, p. 103.

⁴⁹ Emmett, S. Robert & David E. Nye. 2017. *The Environmental Humanities. A Critical Introduction*, p. 24.

This process of *place-making* is fundamental in the works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, as well as in those of other Beats not yet encountered – additionally, their “written texts [became] creative psychogeographical accounts,”⁵⁰ as our study will later explore. Nevertheless, while in a second moment the Beats looked for the experience of the *dérive*,⁵¹ in this first phase they daily experienced a sense of belonging, going through *place-making* processes, precisely in New York City. There, indeed, many places *belonged* to the Beats and to as many the Beats *belonged* – e.g. the Columbia campus, the West End Bar, the apartment in 118th Street etc. This kind of belonging reciprocity or mutual belonging can be understood as a circular process of psychogeographical reactions, whereas “the landscape affects the observer who, in turn, affects the image and representation of the landscape following a phenomenological impulse.”⁵² It was in that very moment, indeed, that the early Beat generation started shaping the environments of New York City, creating subcultural spaces, where established social norms and identities were challenged. On the other side, this reshaping process also involved the Beats personally, as new environments allowed to try things they had never done before.⁵³ Thus, they were given the chance to transform and rediscover their identities. In a circular way, their engagement with the environments of the city produced new emotional possibilities in its spaces, each time they re-entered its tissue and so forth, in a never-ending transformative process of reshaping and replacing.

Accordingly, one must be aware that psychogeographical interactions are not always as easy. Indeed, if places are meeting-places, this means that they do not only involve subjects that meet there, but also social implications and temporality, time-related exchanges. It follows that, places can also be understood as situations created over time:

A situation is also an integrated ensemble of behavior in time. It is composed of actions contained in a transitory decor. These actions are the product of the decor and of themselves, and they in their turn produce other decors and other actions.⁵⁴

Hence, places do convey meanings that are absorbed over time, encompassing what Ferrere calls “spirit of places:” they end up being inhabited by their past, since their space transcends time.⁵⁵ As a result, the experience of place becomes a complex and pluralistic

⁵⁰ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 1.

⁵¹ The *dérive* is an experimental method of psychogeography, linked to the experience of wandering in order to explore. *Ivi*, pp. 3-5.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 4.

⁵³ We might think to Allen Ginsberg who, after meeting Carr, had his first chances to explore homosexuality and drugs, as Morgan (2011) recalls, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁴ Debord, Guy-Ernest. 1958. *Internationale Situationniste, No. 1*. Cited in Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 4.

⁵⁵ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” pp. 4-5.

one, which impacts the individual and his emotions so that, to take an example, the city of New York may become an “intimate wound” for Ginsberg, as he recollects memories of his dead mother in *Kaddish*.⁵⁶

Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.
downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph.⁵⁷

Accordingly, the experience of place informs people's understanding of the environment:⁵⁸

Our experience of place flows across spatial scales from the body to the household to the community, national, and global levels. Place extends beyond the physical. People negotiate place as they protect and conserve places, enhance and modify places, create connections with other places at different levels. Our attachments to place are about social, spiritual, and cultural meaning and identity as well as economic need.⁵⁹

In this sense, especially during the American postwar period, the Beats sensed the city as a particularly complex environment, which vehiculated *square*⁶⁰ ideas of modernity, however still fuelling a sense of belonging. It follows that, whether it be New York or any other, Beat poets always had contrasting feelings towards the space of the city.⁶¹ This inner struggle is well embodied by Ginsberg's use of the aboriginal name “Mannahatta,” when referring to New York City in his poem *Bayonne Entering N.Y.C.*, where he claims:

Whizz of bus-trucks shimmer in Ear
over red brick
under Whitmanic Yawp Harbor here
roll into Man city, my city, Mannahatta
Lower East Side ghosted &
grimed with Heroin, shit-black from Edison towers
on East River's rib—⁶²

Taken from the collection of poems *The Fall of America*, these lines express the criticality of the city. Indeed, if the poet takes inspiration from the places of his New York, he also discusses them in a sharp way, creating a contrast between a two-sided Manhattan, where shimmering tools of modernity coexist with hidden social uneasiness. Moreover, the poet Ginsberg makes an excellent pun, by using the Whitmanian “Mannahatta” and playing with it, up to the point of transforming it in “Man city” and “my city.” This way, he lets humankind's experience of place meet with his own, thus “emphasizing a sense of both objective and

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. 1961. “Kaddish,” p. 7.

⁵⁸ Harcourt, Wendy. 2016. “Place,” p. 161.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 164.

⁶⁰ See “Beat vs. Square.”

⁶¹ In “Beyond the Frontier: Exploring Counter-Spaces,” this paper explores the idea of city as a counter-space, however in competition with the even more attractive space of highway road.

⁶² Ginsberg, Allen. 1972. “Bayonne Entering N.Y.C.,” p. 37.

subjective belonging to the city.”⁶³ By saying “my city,” Ginsberg is placing himself in the poem and in the city itself, of which he is part, together with all its downsides. In fact, as argued by Ferrere, “the mention of Mannahatta also invokes historical forces, in an almost Rousseauist vision of a nature that has been lost and destroyed by modernity.”⁶⁴ Similarly, in *Howl*, Ginsberg chose the Biblical figure of “the loveless, [...] the heavy judger of men”⁶⁵ Moloch to portray his nightmarish vision of the city:

What sphinx of cement and aluminium bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?
 Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!
 [...]
 Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!
 Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!
 Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities!
 Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!
 [...]
 Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!
 They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!
 Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!
 Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!⁶⁶

In this second part of *Howl*, the poet hymns against the “incomprehensible prison” of the city, which has “bashed open [the] skulls and [eaten] up [the] brains and imagination” of the best minds of his generation.⁶⁷ Frustration is embodied by “unobtainable dollars,” “boys sobbing in armies” and “old men weeping in the parks” probably because their boys are sobbing at the war front. According to these images, modernity is embodied by capitalistic and warmongering constraints. Moloch stands for the rational modern world, “whose name is the Mind,” which sacrifices his youth to the city and to capitalism.⁶⁸ In fact, on the other side of the war, the city offers itself as a place of security and control, however built as a “vast stone of war.” In the presented scenery, the individual finds himself in solitude and the

⁶³ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 8.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “Howl,” p. 17.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁷ Here, I am quoting the opening line of the poem. *Ivi*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 9.

poet “[sits] lonely!”⁶⁹ He represents the genius that lives in the poverty of Moloch – he is a “consciousness without a body,”⁷⁰ while Moloch has a mind, blood running, fingers, breast, and ears. This anthropomorphic image of Moloch crates a high contrast between the idea of the body’s living matter and the city’s inorganic nature, whereas the latter is associated to problematic tools of modernity, such as technological progress: “machinery,” capitalism: “money,” war: “ten armies” and “cannibal dynamo,” and finally, death: “smoking tomb.” Nevertheless, despite the destructive side represented by this image, the association between the human body and the body of the city can also be read in other terms. Indeed, the physicality of metropolitan areas may be associated to the desire of a “bodily experience of the city,” practiced by Beat poets as an “independent type of anthropology,” which led them to “drifting without a destination, experiencing urban space under the influence of drugs, exploring spaces and populations that escaped modernisation, and incorporating those discoveries into their writing practices.”⁷¹ Finally, despite city was one of the products of modernity, for the Beats it also represented a valid alternative spatial system to the most compromised and affected modern environment of all: the domestic space of the house. In fact, in agreement with post-war politics, the house had the function of “a defensive shield to protect its inhabitants from a physical engagement with the chaotic, impure exteriority.”⁷² According to a psychogeographical approach, the enclosed and walled space of the house, nourished by electronic mass media, became perfect ally of an emotionally repressed society, where individuals lost the chance to map their emotional states, as a result of their renunciation to experience outdoor spaces and the open world. In this regard, the “porosity of the frontier between the inside and the outside”⁷³ is to be considered an incredibly relevant talking point, since only the very engagement with otherness can generate new forms of identity and new emotional experiences for individuals. Nevertheless, this possibility was hampered by postwar American government, which on the contrary pushed towards the formation of *square* families “integrated into the consumer economy.”⁷⁴ These “nuclear”⁷⁵ families were supposed to inhabit the domestic house space, with the aim of establishing a sense of belonging there, while they renounced to mingle with the chaos of the outdoors. It is to this “incomprehensible prison”⁷⁶ of stability that the Beats opposed their need of a

⁶⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “Howl,” p. 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 41.

⁷² *Ivi*, p. 45.

⁷³ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 10.

⁷⁴ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 37.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “Howl,” p. 17.

“bodily experience of the city,”⁷⁷ so as “to resist the formation of any habitual identity or established sense of place.”⁷⁸ Indeed, if creating a sense of belonging meant belonging to modernity, together with its standardized spaces and identities, they would proudly give up. Finally, the open world offered plenty of spaces to inhabit that did not require to renounce to the experience of outdoor spaces or to the engagement with otherness, meaning emotional experiences of authentic life. According to this, the Beats would thus look for their sense of belonging far from home – among the counter-spaces of the open road. Indeed, refusing to belong to a “robot [apartment],”⁷⁹ they felt compelled to reclaim the spaces of their country. This pushed them to embark on several physical and spatial processes of reappropriation of territories, people, freedom, thus authenticity.

⁷⁷ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 41.

⁷⁸ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage,” p. 178.

⁷⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “Howl,” p. 18.

3. Beyond the Frontier: Exploring Counter-Spaces⁸⁰

This search for authenticity urged the East coast poets to leave their New York's apartments and approach a "westward movement,"⁸¹ which would possibly lead to the discovery of their country's counter-spaces with consequent familiarization. According to this unusual choice, the Beats frequently found themselves in a "liminal state"⁸² where they faced the margins of themselves, of their society and other kinds of metaphysical frontiers:

He woke up with a start at dawn. Off we roared, and an hour later the smoke of Des Moines appeared ahead over the green cornfields. He had to eat his breakfast now and wanted to take it easy, so I went right on into Des Moines, about four miles, hitching a ride with two boys from the University of Iowa; and it was strange sitting in their brand-new comfortable car and hearing them talk of exams as we zoomed smoothly into town. Now I wanted to sleep a whole day. So I went to the Y to get a room; they didn't have any, and by instinct I wandered down to the railroad tracks – and there're a lot of them in Des Moines – and wound up in a gloomy old Plains inn of a hotel by the locomotive roundhouse, and spent a long day sleeping on a big clean hard white bed with dirty remarks carved in the wall beside my pillow and the beat yellow windowshades pulled over the smoky scene of the rail-yards. I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was – I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon.⁸³

In his geographically ambitious work⁸⁴ *On the Road*, Kerouac – Sal Paradise in the novel – sets off to the discovery of America, sometimes alone or else with his friend Neal Cassady, in the role of Dean Moriarty. In the extract above, Sal finds himself halfway across the country, in Des Moines, locality that assumes the meaning of geographic centre of America. This marks a very important passage in the life of the author, as well as in the history of the Beat movement. The recognition of a border between "the East of [his] youth and the West of [his] future" has indeed psychogeographical implications for Kerouac. He emotionally responds to the situation of finding himself in a place where he has never been before, which elicits new and peculiar sensations. In fact, he is not only at a metaphysical frontier between the East and West of his country, rather this very space represents a passage from youth to adult life. The locality of Des Moines calls into question the identity of the author, who does not know who he is at this point. Feeling a stranger to himself, he abandons his old identity

⁸⁰ I borrowed the terminology *counter-space* and its associated meanings from Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. "Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space," pp. 36-47.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 36.

⁸² Amundsen, Michael. 2021. "Green Jack: Naïveté, Frontier and Ecotopia in *On the Road*," p. 5.

⁸³ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ If I might paraphrase Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. "Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space," p. 36.

to welcome a new one. It is a moment of *satori*⁸⁵ for Kerouac, who does not feel frightened facing this out-of-the-ordinary experience. Accordingly, this passage can also be read as an anticipation of the Beat migration towards West, specifically towards San Francisco, where they joined the San Francisco Renaissance, thanks to the Six Gallery reading organized by Kenneth Rexroth in 1955.⁸⁶ This transition from one coast to the other would bring about important developments within the writers' group. Once again referring to psychogeography, the West coast turn determined a change in the identity of the group, as the writers got the chance to dialogue with new realities, minds, and places, thus expressing themselves differently. In addition to that, "the choice to travel westward"⁸⁷ has also historical and literary roots. For Kerouac, the arrival to Des Moines symbolizes a first achievement of "the attempt to turn away from the historical origins of America in the East towards the mythical direction of the open future"⁸⁸ represented by the Great West.⁸⁹ According to theorist Frederick Jackson Turner, "the American frontier [...] ended as a reality in 1890,"⁹⁰ however its myth continued to shape the American soul, its character and literature. Indeed, the push towards West had been a fundamental feature in the process of establishing a proper American identity, especially in the field of literature.⁹¹ This brought many researchers to explore and identify multiple American frontiers,⁹² which is the type of work attempted in this part of our journey through the counter-spaces of the Beat generation. Using the frontier as a metaphor, the following analysis goes through its significations, as regards the Beat exploration of American space.

In the first place, we must state one thing: Sal's dream of going West – "I'd often dreamed of going West to see the country"⁹³ – represented his way to "dropping out of square society,"⁹⁴ city's established identities and *Howl's* robot apartments. This dream could finally take shape thanks to his encounter with Dean Moriarty, the "hero of the snowy West,"⁹⁵ thus embodiment of authenticity. That is where our discussion about frontiers and counter-spaces

⁸⁵ In the Buddhist tradition, it is the experience of awakening or enlightenment: "satori (Jap.). In Japanese *Zen *Buddhism, an intuitive apprehension of the nature of reality that transcends conceptual thought and cannot be expressed through «words and letters»." Keown, Damien. 2003. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, pp. 255-256.

⁸⁶ Johnston, P. J. 2013. "Dharma Bums," p. 173. See also "To the West Coast."

⁸⁷ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. "Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space," p. 38.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁹ Copello, Roberto. 1997. "Hanno raccontato la Grande Avventura." *Meridiani no. 59, USA – I Grandi Parchi*, pp. 99-102.

⁹⁰ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. "Green Jack," p. 4.

⁹¹ Copello, Roberto. 1997. "Hanno raccontato la Grande Avventura," p. 99-102.

⁹² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "American Frontier."

⁹³ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 4.

⁹⁴ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. "Green Jack," p. 3.

⁹⁵ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 4.

starts. In fact, the main quest of *On the Road's* protagonist is finding “timeless authenticity:”⁹⁶ he believes that this almost “patriotic duty”⁹⁷ can be accomplished by leaving home and hitting the road to the West. Hence, the very frontier discussed in the novel is that between authenticity and inauthenticity, what is authentic and what not, as regards life, the self and his country. The author “wants to love America, its landscape and people. He wants to love the authentic and true America.”⁹⁸ That is because “the USA [represented] the center of the world for [him] just as Paris was the center of the world for Balzac.”⁹⁹ In this sense, *On the Road* can be read as a “Whitmanesque love letter to America:”¹⁰⁰

And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up. Rock Island-railroad tracks, shacks, small downtown section; and over the bridge to Davenport, same kind of town, all smelling of sawdust in the warm midwest sun.¹⁰¹

The feeling of love that Kerouac-Sal expresses towards America and its geography, thus its landscapes, could be said to be innate. He projects his sensations onto the landscapes,¹⁰² entering a process of *place-making*, where he becomes aware of his belonging to the whole Turtle Island.¹⁰³ Indeed, in “his way into the American consciousness,” he saw the possibility of self-discovery and that of finding “the meaning of his home, that is America, and his place in it.”¹⁰⁴ As much as this desire was born from an attempt to flee postwar societal changes, it was precisely thanks to these occurring changes that Kerouac’s flight could take place:

In the postwar period, American society was restructured by two complementary spatial tendencies. It was decentralised by technologies such as highways, broadcast television and the dispersal of the means of production and social reproduction from the city to its suburban periphery; whereas the management of these technologies became concentrated in a diminishing number of big corporations and government agencies. As a consequence of this process of centralised decentralisation, society was split into two spatial scales, the continental and the domestic. [...] This dual character of American space was exploited by Beat writers to provide the basis for their strategies of escape and resistance. The mobile geography of Beat literary production was made possible by two postwar continental networks, the GI Bill and the highway system. The first, a policy for financing higher education and individual homeownership for war veterans, was used by Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg to support their nomadic living patterns outside the capitalist system; indeed, *On the Road's* yearly cycle of trips was determined by the annual instalments of the scholarship. The second allowed Beat writers to independently explore the continental space of America. Previously fragmented and regional in character, the various highways on the local state level were first integrated under the Highway Defense Act into a nationwide system to streamline war production. After the war

⁹⁶ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. “Green Jack,” p. 9.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 7.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. “Green Jack,” p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 11.

¹⁰² Paraphrasing Amundsen, Michael. 2021. “Green Jack,” p. 7.

¹⁰³ That is a Beat “vision inherited by Whitman, of a primary land.” As Ginsberg explained, it was “an appreciation of the American-Indian vision of America.” Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 8. See also “Gary Snyder—The Beats, Dharma Gaia and Bioregionalism.”

¹⁰⁴ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. “Green Jack,” pp. 1-2.

the system was further expanded to accommodate a new type of user, the individual car owner of the emerging consumer economy. Kerouac, who was employed during that war in the construction of the Pentagon, the largest office building in the world and the very embodiment of the centralisation of power, would turn after the war to examine the decentralised space of the highway as a system which unifies the American continent while at the same time decentring its subjects.¹⁰⁵

Together with Sal and Dean, the Lincoln Highway – “the first highway to cross the continent,”¹⁰⁶ – is protagonist of Kerouac’s first three coast-to-coast trips *on the road* (1947-1949), the fourth then heading south to Mexico (1950). Thus, car and highway became “alternative spatial [systems]” to a situation of “postwar domesticity,” embodied by ownership of a house, belonging to nuclear family and its gendering structure, participation in consumer economy and its processes of homogenization.¹⁰⁷ In this regard, the most complicated space to inhabit remained the city, gateway between the suffocating “container of a rooted identity”¹⁰⁸ – the house – and American spaces for homelessness and mobility that “[allowed] for the evacuation of the self.”¹⁰⁹

The layout of the highway system in the late 40s still permitted such a direct relationship between the highway and the city, since the beltways encircling the cities were yet to be built. Accordingly, as much as *On the Road* is a road novel, it is equally an urban novel, and Beat writers matched their quest for mobility with an investment in the city as a generator of literary form and as a counter-space to domesticity.¹¹⁰

It follows that, beginning from the end of the 40s, the Beats went through an almost endless research process of counter-spaces. To begin with, they started from the refusal of the new cult of domesticity linked to the house, “site for heterosexual reproduction and material consumption,”¹¹¹ which Reverend William Eliot had promoted as follows:

The foundation of our free institutions is in our love, as a people, for our homes. The strength of our country is found, not in the declaration that all men are free and equal, but in the quiet influence of the fireside, the bonds which unite together in the family circle.¹¹²

Following the departure from the walled space of their homes, the Beats understood that the city was also taking part in the postwar plan of creating a “one-dimensional society,”¹¹³ supported by a “rising urban culture.”¹¹⁴ Thus, they got their cars and moved to the counter-space of the highway, heading West – clear alternative to the East of their youth and of a

¹⁰⁵ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ *Ivi*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁷ *Ivi*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁸ *Ivi*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁹ *Ivi*, p. 38.

¹¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 41.

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 43.

¹¹² *Ivi*, p. 44.

¹¹³ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest,” p. 221.

¹¹⁴ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 43.

sick intellectualism.¹¹⁵ According to their beliefs, this step allowed to overcome the most significant frontier, in between the American control culture and a chosen authentic life of freedom.

In this process of conquering the rightful place of the country, the frontier moved always further – West and, at a certain point, South, towards Mexico. However, through this process, it also accommodated further meaning. Indeed, if up until this point spatial frontiers – however also political – were called into question, another frontier was likewise to catch their attention: the social frontier. As already anticipated, Dean Moriarty is for Sal Paradise the very embodiment of conquest of the frontier, just as Neal Cassady was for Jack Kerouac. He “is a frontier between square society and yea-saying, life-affirming reprobation. The frontier is the margins of society or in a different society altogether.”¹¹⁶ It follows that, according to the two friends, frontier space can possibly be container of authentic identities. Hence, Sal and Dean became interested in meeting frontier-people and counterpeople or, in other words, Spengler’s *fellaheen*. They believed that these individuals led alternative lifeways, in the perspective of “living not consuming,”¹¹⁷ since they were “free of the bonds of ordinary work and home-life.”¹¹⁸ This kind of attitude is described by Kerouac in his *Lonesome Traveler*: “...but you can find it, this feeling, this fellaheen feeling about life, that timeless gayety of people not involved in great cultural and civilization issues.”¹¹⁹ In fact, as Oswald Spengler argues in his *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*:

The fellaheen, who exist at the *limina* of cultures, are from the perspective of culture-builders useless “waste-products” who endure the slings and arrows of history without changing events or being changed by them, who identify with all human beings rather than with their nation only.¹²⁰

It was thanks to the “older and wiser” William Burroughs that Kerouac, together with Ginsberg and Carr, was introduced and urged to read the literary masterpiece *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler,¹²¹ so that they could collectively discuss it and enrich their vision. According to the German author, “cultures and peoples arise and decline in grand cycles in which «primitives» yield to «culture-peoples» as cultures expand and then to «fellaheen» as cultures degrade.”¹²² Hence, in his two-volume work, Spengler overturned

¹¹⁵ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. “Green Jack,” p. 10.

¹¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 5.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Kerouac, Jack. 1968. *Lonesome Traveler*, pp. 29-30.

¹²⁰ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” pp. 211-212.

¹²¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 10.

¹²² Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” p. 212.

the understanding of history, in a sort of “«Copernican Revolution» directed against progress,” whereas “linear development [gave] way to a portraiture of culture.”¹²³ World-history was no more to be understood as a succession of epochs, rather as the evolution process of cultures, seen as evolving organisms. Thus, Edward J. Hundert explains that each culture rises from the “prime phenomenon” – *Urphänomen* – and declines, “when it has actualized the full sum of its potentialities,” turning into civilization – *Zivilization*.¹²⁴ In this process of becoming, *fellaheen* play the role of “bearers of cultural transformation and regeneration.”¹²⁵ Witnesses of the decline, they “populate the dead land”¹²⁶ and see it flourish again. However, as previously discussed, they are considered useless “waste-products” by culture-builders. In this regard, it is worth to stress that the analogy between people and waste is a fundamental trait of the modernization process, thus of the path towards progress and/or civilization. Indeed, in his *Wasted Lives*, Zygmund Bauman argues:

The production of ‘human waste’, or more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’ [...]), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of *order-building* (each order casts some parts of the extant population ‘out of place’, ‘unfit’ or ‘undesirable’) and of *economic progress* (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of ‘making a living’ and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood).¹²⁷

Recognising this fact, “Beat writers [consciously] stepped into and inhabited leftover spaces and populations that, because they were of no use to the capitalist system, had escaped this process of modernisation.”¹²⁸ If Bauman identifies these *wasted humans* or *redundant humans* in migrants, refugees and other outcasts, Jack Kerouac – providing a very detailed list – speaks of:

soldiers, sailors, the panhandlers and drifters, the zoot-suiters, the hoodlums, the young men who washed dishes in cafeterias from coast to coast, the hitch-hikers, the hustlers, the drunks, the battered lonely young Negroes, the twinkling little Chinese, the dark Puerto Ricans, and the varieties of dungareed young Americans in leather jackets who were seamen and mechanics and garagemen everywhere [...] All the cats and characters, all the spicks and spades, Harlem-drowned, street-drunk and slain, crowded together, streaming back and forth, looking for something, waiting for something, forever moving around.¹²⁹

In a perpetual state of migration – “back and forth [...] forever moving around,” – these people were the surviving source of authenticity left at the margins of new civilized society,

¹²³ Hundert, Edward J. 1967. “OSWALD SPENGLER: history and metaphor the decline and the west,” p. 105.

¹²⁴ Spengler, Oswald. 1934. *The Decline of the West*, p. 106. Cited in Ivi, p. 106.

¹²⁵ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums,” p. 173.

¹²⁶ Hundert, Edward J. 1967. “OSWALD SPENGLER,” p. 107.

¹²⁷ Bauman, Zygmund. 2004. *Wasted Lives. Modernity and its Outcasts*, p. 5. In addition to that, it is evident that the discussion on waste – that we cannot deepen here – stays a fundamental one, since waste is the main by-product of modern economy and its production continues to be linked with that of a *wasted humanity*.

¹²⁸ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 41.

¹²⁹ Kerouac, Jack. 1950. *The Town and the City*, pp. 361-362. Cited in Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” p. 212.

of “postwar prosperity.”¹³⁰ In fact, in addition to the above-given definition, *fellaheen* were also “people working the land, farmers, cowboys, laborers, in some kind of balance with nature,”¹³¹ thus “tied to the soil and its basic pleasures.”¹³² Consequently, they represented valid alternatives to the established identities of American domesticated reality. Following this belief, Beat travels can also be read as mapping processes of counter-identities, other than a charting of counter-spaces:

«[...] Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there.»

«Where we going, man?»

«I don't know but we gotta go.»¹³³

¹³⁰ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” p. 210.

¹³¹ Amundsen, Michael. 2021. “Green Jack,” p. 9.

¹³² *Ivi*, p. 11.

¹³³ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 138.

4. Sense of Space and Reinhabitation¹³⁴

“We were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved!”¹³⁵ That is how Kerouac recounts the beginning of his journey with Neal Cassady, LuAnne Henderson and Al Hinckle – in the novel, *Dean Moriarty, Marylou and Ed Dunkel*. Undertaking a psychogeographical analysis, we could claim that the quartet engaged with the experience of the *dérive* (from French, “drift” or “drifting” in English), “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”¹³⁶ as its theorist Guy Debord argues. Indeed, this definition resonates well with *On the Road’s* “experience of accelerated driving in its liberating and pleasurable capacities:”¹³⁷

Dérives [...] are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll. In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. [...] One can *dérive* alone, but all indications are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness.¹³⁸

Commenting upon this extract of “Théorie de la *dérive*” published by *Internationale Situationniste*, it could be said that *On the Road’s* trips may be read as accounts of different *dérives*. In fact, they departed from the common way of travelling, even just for the fact of resulting in material for writing or, as our analysis tries to show, in “psychogeographical accounts.”¹³⁹ Indeed, *On the Road* does not only inform its readers about life anecdotes of Sal-Kerouac and his friends, in fact its stories become maps. Accordingly, whereas “writing has [...] to do with [...] mapping,”¹⁴⁰ pages of alternative trips happen to represent another spatial system, a new counter-space, where the author has the chance to “explore, and consequently critique, postwar American culture.”¹⁴¹ This strongly resonates with the aim of the *dérive* – indeed, however confined to urban spaces, the *dérive* is an exploring technique aiming to deconstruct and create new situations within what Guy Debord calls “the society of the spectacle,”¹⁴² where authentic social life has been replaced by its representation. As suggested by our analysis on the push that brought Beat poets on the road, Kerouac was also very aware that authenticity was slowly disappearing to make room for postwar social

¹³⁴ I am borrowing this term from Snyder, Gary. 1995. “Reinhabitation.”

¹³⁵ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 80.

¹³⁶ Debord, Guy. 1958. “Theory of the *Dérive*.”

¹³⁷ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 38.

¹³⁸ Debord, Guy. 1958. “Theory of the *Dérive*.”

¹³⁹ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 1.

¹⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 8.

¹⁴¹ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 36.

¹⁴² See Debord, Guy. 2014. *The Society of Spectacle*.

homologation. Hence, he left *the society of spectacle* and looked for authentic life elsewhere. Accordingly, the drive towards the experience of the *dérive* is provided by the abandonment of *the usual motives for movement and action*, thus of the routine – “leaving confusion and nonsense behind” in Kerouac’s words. In addition to that, another similarity between the Beat drifter and Guy Debord’s theory concerns experiencing the *dérive* with a small group of people on the *same level of awareness* – even if it was already a main theme of *On the Road*, it would become even more relevant in Kerouac and Snyder’s adventures recounted in *The Dharma Bums*. It is explanatory the episode that takes place at some point of the climbing up to Matterhorn Peak, when Henry Morely – John Montgomery in real-life – is forced to leave the journey for a while. At that point, Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder – Kerouac and Snyder, respectively – can finally share that same level of awareness and be:

talking a blue streak, about anything, literature, the mountains, girls, Princess, the poets, Japan, our past adventures in life, and I [Ray Smith] suddenly realized it was a kind of blessing in disguise Morley had forgotten to drain the crankcase, otherwise Japhy wouldn't have got in a word edgewise all the blessed day and now I had a chance to hear his ideas.¹⁴³

Finally, retracing to Debord’s theory, another hint is that “the spatial field of a *dérive* may be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the goal is to study a terrain or to emotionally disorient oneself.”¹⁴⁴ In their purpose, Sal and Dean’s back-and-forth trips encompass “a defense of freedom of movement,” followed by an “emotional interpretation of the world.”¹⁴⁵ Hence, they are centred on self-discovery and, in addition, reclamation of territories. According to this understanding, we can recognize two tendencies: the first being that of experiencing a “*mobile* sense of place,”¹⁴⁶ the other focused on finding alternative ways for inhabiting.¹⁴⁷

Retracing to the beginning of our analysis about the idea of place, sense of place and their implications, it is worth to rethink about those processes of *place-making* that allow the individual to establish a sense of belonging to the world, to his country, or simply, to his surrounding environments. Our study has showed how Beat journeys sought self-discovery and self-placement, following a refusal to suite established identities and environments. In this sense, the poets of the East coast made an “investment in mobility,”¹⁴⁸ whereas “place and sense of place [resulted] as not threatened by or in conflict with, but in many ways

¹⁴³ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, p. 58.

¹⁴⁴ Debord, Guy. 1958. “Theory of the *Dérive*.”

¹⁴⁵ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 1.

¹⁴⁶ Gerhardt, Christine. 2016. “Imagining a Mobile Sense of Place: Towards an Eco-poetics of Mobility,” pp. 421-443.

¹⁴⁷ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 46.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

constituted by, movement.”¹⁴⁹ Borrowing the words of Christine Gerhardt, our poets were able “to envision [...] a distinctly *mobile* sense of place,”¹⁵⁰ where movement and sense of belonging could coexist, if not strengthen each other. In accordance with this, the dialogue between mobility and discovery resulted in a deep feeling of – not only belonging, but also – interconnectedness:

I realized the jungle takes you over and you become it. Lying on the top of the car with my face to the black sky was like lying in a closed trunk on a summer night. For the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but became me. The atmosphere and I became the same. Soft infinitesimal showers of microscopic bugs fanned down on my face as I slept, and they were extremely pleasant and soothing. The sky was starless, utterly unseen and heavy. I could lie there all night long with my face exposed to the heavens, and it would do me no more harm than a velvet drape drawn over me. The dead bugs mingled with my blood; the live mosquitoes exchanged further portions; I began to tingle all over and to smell of the rank, hot, and rotten jungle, all over from hair and face to feet and toes. Of course I was barefoot.¹⁵¹

Even if extremely far away from home – in Mexico, – Sal experiences a deep sense of belonging and connectedness with the whole. In Ferrere’s words, this moment describes “a way to zoom out, to shift focus from the individual towards the gist of the universe, and to a wider sense of belonging,” embodied by a feeling “of union, transcendence and humility.”¹⁵² Following that, the psychogeographical frontier – that which opposed space and self, the outside and the inside, the physical and the emotional, the open world and the secret mind, the landscape and its observer, geography and psyche, reality and imagination¹⁵³ – is not overcome, but lived within. That is where the poet finds his meaning of things against the alienation experienced before hitting the road. In this new space, everything is one again – separation or polarity are replaced by a reconnection of the poles. In addition to that, the *dérive* through the American country and wilderness, as well as “connections to Mexico[,] personally or geographically catalyze emotional liberation,”¹⁵⁴ responding to one of the possible goals of a *dérive*. This allows the poet to experience and witness new powerful sensations, among which thrill, enthusiasm, excitement are particularly predominant: “Dean [...] was simply a youth tremendously excited with life” / “his excitement and his visions, which he described so torrentially that people in buses looked around to see the «overexcited nut.»” / “There he [...] yelled joyously in my ear all the sordid dreams of his life.

¹⁴⁹ Gerhardt, Christine. 2016. “Imagining a Mobile Sense of Place,” p. 425.

¹⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 421.

¹⁵¹ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 170.

¹⁵² Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 7. The author refers to Ginsberg’s poetics, which I translated onto Kerouac’s.

¹⁵³ *Ivi*, pp. 3, 4, 10, 11.

¹⁵⁴ Morrison, Susan. 2020. “«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»: The Resilience of Pilgrimage Eco-poetics and Slow Travel from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*,” p. 7.

I kind of liked him [...] because he was enthusiastic about things. [...] His name was Eddie.” / I [Kerouac] was [...] tingling with kicks at the thought of what lay ahead of me in Denver” / “And here I am in Colorado! I kept thinking gleefully.” / “I tingled all over [...] I stumbled along with the most wicked grin of joy in the world, among the old bums and beat cowboys of Larimer Street.”¹⁵⁵ In this sense, Kerouac is not only mapping his movements, but also his and others’ feelings, spontaneous and instantaneous reactions. Once again, his stories on the road are pervaded by psychogeographical food for thought. Indeed, his *dérive* results in a very deep study on the “effects of the geographical environment [...] on the emotions and behavior of individuals,”¹⁵⁶ which make him an “active reader of his environment.”¹⁵⁷ The more the writer goes West, the more psychogeographical variations are evident.

Concerning our analysis, this perspective is relevant since it supports the idea that “Kerouac turned to the open road in order to reimagine sociality,”¹⁵⁸ which is linked with the need of finding alternative ways for inhabiting. Indeed, according to different scholars who specifically studied Beat writers in geographical and environmental terms, we could speak about some of their works as forms of spatialised literature, involved in “spatial projects.”

Kerouac, together with Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, took the risk of pursuing a literary programme that I would define as a spatial project – the systematic effort to represent postwar culture through categories of space. In privileging space over time, geography over history, the natural over the social [...] the writers employ space to open new possibilities for reclaiming the social [...], at a time when the very concept of the social was in a state of crisis.¹⁵⁹

According to Kozlovsky, each writer of this new “migrant generation”¹⁶⁰ “explored a different form of urban otherness” in order “to regain a meaningful political space.”¹⁶¹ In other words, these poets “[charged] social space with new forms of politics by testing the ways it was divided, signified and controlled, and suggesting alternative ways it could be inhabited.”¹⁶² Accordingly, another aim of psychogeography is that of creating “new situations” that can be translated into “an invitation to build anew everyday scenery according to inner perceptions.”¹⁶³ In Beat literature, the “need to reclaim (or to save) the landscape from capitalistic views”¹⁶⁴ is often actualized through a movement that goes in and out the text –

¹⁵⁵ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, pp. 5, 6, 13, 21, 24.

¹⁵⁶ Debord, Guy. 1955. “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography.”

¹⁵⁷ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 10.

¹⁵⁸ Alworth, David J. 2016. *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*, p. 82. Cited in Morrison, Susan. 2020. “«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»,” p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 36.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 42.

¹⁶² *Ivi*, p. 46.

¹⁶³ Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments,” p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 9.

overcoming thus the literary frontier, – creating a dialogue between the poet and his environment(s). Following the analysis that Ferrere does, Deluze and Guattari's notions of de-territorialization and re-territorialization are embraced to explain Beat poetics as a "text-ritory."¹⁶⁵ In this new poetic space, the poet can reimagine sociality, build a "cartography of a future America,"¹⁶⁶ where re-enchantment may take place. In his study, Ferrere brings to light the example of Ginsberg's poem *Sunflower Sutra*, where "the ruins of an old locomotive (which could be interpreted as an industrial vision of America) form a big sunflower."¹⁶⁷ For what concerns our analysis, it would be relevant to consider another example that resonates with our departure from the Beat refusal of domesticity. Once again, I would retrace to Kozlovsky's article, where he resumes postwar American space in three political scales – the continental, the urban and the domestic,¹⁶⁸ which our discussion has explored. Following that, Beat spatial projects were accomplished thanks to their initial "anti-domestic stance."¹⁶⁹ However, at a later time, their great achievement was making postwar domestic space collapse by finding their own way to reinhabit it. In this sense, Kozlovsky brings about two significant examples, the first being Burroughs' *Interzone* space, where:

Anyone comes into your room at anytime ... through the open doors, tables and booths, and bars, and kitchens and baths, copulating couples on rows of brass beds, crisscross of a thousand hammocks, junkies tying up for a shot, opium smokers, hashish smokers, people eating talking bathing back into a haze of smoke and steam.¹⁷⁰

Thus, the poet's "writing room is no longer private."¹⁷¹ On the other hand, Ginsberg "chose to represent the act of composing *Howl* in the kitchen of the apartment he was sharing with his lover Peter Orlovsky."¹⁷² This way, he succeeded in merging productivity and intimacy, by redefining his house as "a space of creativity and freedom."¹⁷³ The innovative conception of his writing room advocates for a re-enchantment of the domestic space, which the poet is finally able to perceive as familiar and where he can finally establish a sense of belonging. Accordingly, Beat literary projects carried on their call into question of postwar American space, identities and living ways, by moving back and forth along some concentric structure that expanded towards the open road and tightened around the domestic point of departure.

¹⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁸ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. "Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space," p. 36.

¹⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 43.

¹⁷⁰ Burroughs, Williams. 1992. *Naked Lunch*. Cited in *Ivi*, p. 44.

¹⁷¹ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. "Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space," p. 45.

¹⁷² *Ibidem*.

¹⁷³ *Ivi*, pp. 45-46.

The Pilgrimage of a Generation

1. To the West Coast

If the first chapters of the Beat generation began to be written in the spring of 1943, it was in the autumn of 1955 that “the Beat generation was made whole.”¹ This time, the coming to the fore of the poets of the East coast, together with those of the West coast, will be staged in the city of San Francisco, California. Consequently, whether New York represented the birthplace of the literary movement, San Francisco would become to be considered “the capital of the Beat generation within a few years.”²

It's the beat generation. It's the BE-AT. It's the beat to keep. It's the beat in the heart. It's being beat and down in the world and like old time low down. And like an ancient civilization, the slave boatman rowing galleys to a beat.³

Jack Kerouac's words emerge from *San Francisco Scene*. Indeed, the extract is part of a collection of recordings under the same name, but either way it embodies a moment whereas its writer was dipping in “a jazz-joint and beat generation madtrick”⁴ night in his Frisco.⁵ His words entwine and come to *inter-be*⁶ not only with place, but also with music and atmosphere of the “white city.”⁷ Here, in fact, to the rhythm of jazz and blues, the Beat generation will finally flourish. Thus, the original New York circle and network of writers – Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso – and inspiring heroes – Lucien Carr, Herbert Huncke and Neal Cassady⁸ – will be joined by many other members. It follows that, whereas Lucien Carr was the good-looking young boy that started the chain of events that unfolded in New York, Kenneth Rexroth was the “older San Francisco literary [giant]”⁹ that would guide the newly arrived within the Bay Area literary community. In this regard, the most interesting literary entanglements of the American 1950s and years

¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy: The Complete Uncensored History of the Beat Generation*, p. 104.

² *Ivi*, p. 84.

³ Kerouac, Jack. 1960. *San Francisco Scene*. [Video].

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Frisco is the affectionate name with which Kerouac refers to San Francisco. See Kerouac, Jack. 1960. *On the Road*, where it appears 60 times at the very least.

⁶ I am purposefully using this term, deeply associated with the Buddhist world thanks to Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. This way, I am anticipating ideas that are discussed further on, especially in “Gary Snyder—The Beats, Dharma Gaia and Bioregionalism.” To deepen the meanings of *interbeing*, see also Holst, Mirja Annalena. 2023. “«To Be is To Inter-Be»: Thich Nhat Hanh on Independent Arising,” pp. 17-30.

⁷ Kerouac, Jack. 1995. *San Francisco Blues*, p. 79. Kerouac often associates the adjective *white* with San Francisco, probably due to its foggy appearance.

⁸ The Beat generation is such large group that our analysis could not take on the task to present everyone. Nevertheless, it is worth the attempt to frame a picture of its leading members.

⁹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 94.

to come would find their way thanks to Allen Ginsberg's enthusiastic decision to stay in San Francisco for a while. Indeed, after visiting the white city with Neal Cassady for his first time, he claimed: "California is the only state outside of New York that seems like home,"¹⁰ and so it was that these encouraging words took shape in the desire to "[invent] a new life for himself in San Francisco," even if his beloved friends had not made their way there yet.¹¹ Motivated by a conversation with his new therapist, Allen "rented a large apartment at 1010 Montgomery Street in North Beach,"¹² the Italian neighbourhood where "old-style bohemia was still in full-flower."¹³

Just down the street from his apartment, Allen discovered the perfect independent bookstore. It was the first in the country to sell nothing but paperbacks. [...] This particular bookstore had been founded in 1953 by Peter Martin, the publisher of a little magazine christened *City Lights* in honor of the Charlie Chaplin film of the same name. Martin had decided to open a store to subsidize the magazine, and while he was putting the sign over the door, a thirty-four-year-old man passed and struck up a conversation.¹⁴

That thirty-four-year-old man was Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who had already bought the business by the day Ginsberg discovered the store. Thus, the young poet stopped at *City Lights* and met he who will become his first editor and publisher, moved by the same curiosity that many years earlier had led him to walk in Lucien's room in the dormitory of Columbia University. As widely discussed in our first chapter, one of the interests of our analysis is drawing attention to some parallels between the places and the events that made and shaped the Beat generation. Accordingly, it is worth to see how, whether the East or the West coast, there are kinds of places that are recurrent. Thus, if it is the first time we bump into a publishing house – and indeed it is because the Beats had not had any real publishing success yet, – we cannot say the same about academic environments. If Columbia was the university of the early Beats, Berkeley will play his role for what concerns the Californian period of the literary movement:

Ginsberg had been toying with the idea of going to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley. [...]

On September 1, 1955, [...] Allen moved into a small cottage he had leased in Berkeley, a few blocks from the campus. [...] By the time Allen moved the rest of his clothing to Berkeley, Kenneth Rexroth, the great literary gadfly of San Francisco, had already been in touch with him about organizing a reading of new writers. At first Allen thought that maybe he, Kerouac and Cassady could read together, but Jack was terribly shy, and Neal didn't have much written down yet, so that concept didn't go very far. Allen didn't really know the other writers in the Bay Area that Rexroth had suggested to him.¹⁵

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 84.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 93.

¹² To read more about the dialogue with his therapist Philip Hicks, see *Ivi*, p. 92.

¹³ Morgan, Bill. 2003. *The Beat Generation in San Francisco. A Literary Tour*, p. xiv.

¹⁴ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 96-97.

Those writers were Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Philip Lamantia, who would take part in the reading that Rexroth was planning on organizing, together with Ginsberg:

In those days the Six Gallery was a small storefront space in San Francisco's less-than-posh Marina district. The directors of that gallery had offered to host Rexroth's evening of new poets on October 7, 1955. [...] Snyder and Ginsberg collaborated on a postcard announcing the event and sent it to as many of their friends as they could think of; about a hundred people showed up, none of them expecting anything out of the ordinary.¹⁶

Finally, the reading turned out to be “the seminal event that [ignited] the literary community of San Francisco,” as “the small audience witnessed the birth of [...] the San Francisco Renaissance,”¹⁷ whereas the poets of the East and the West coast merged and emerged to the public scene. This entanglement will bring about important changes within the original group of the Beat generation members.

At this point, I would like to rediscuss some subjects that were explored in the first chapter. Particularly, our study has showed how geography can influence feelings and experiences, thus how people and environments do shape each other. It follows that, as the early Beats influenced the environments of New York City, creating their own subcultural spaces, the West coast literary revolution did the same – or better, as Kerouac and Ginsberg arrived in the Bay Area, subcultural spaces were already thriving and all the writers had to do was to take all in: “I’m in San Francisco and I’m Gonna take it all in.”¹⁸ Accordingly, the engagement with new environments and, more especially, with their new acquaintances encouraged a change in the identity of the group, as Sal Paradise’s westward movement had anticipated: “I didn’t know who I was [...] I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.”¹⁹ As we discussed, among its many meanings, this statement somehow foretells the migration of the Beats to the West, which took along a sort of abandonment of their old identity and the welcoming of a new one. In other words, this coast-to-coast migration can be read as a full-fledged turn in the personality of the Beat generation. Key elements of this renewal can be found in the presentation that took place at the Six Gallery. Indeed, the readers had much in common with Ginsberg and Kerouac, both attending the event – the first as a performer of his powerful, shocking and electrifying new long poem, *Howl*,²⁰ the latter as an enthusiastic supporter, shouting and encouraging his friend “in the manner of a raucous bebop jazz

¹⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 99-101.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 99.

¹⁸ Kerouac, Jack. 2012. *Desolation Angels*, p. 123.

¹⁹ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 12.

²⁰ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, pp. 101, 103.

performance.”²¹ The first to read at the Six Gallery was Philip Lamantia, who “was in the midst of a nomadic period and had been travelling extensively.”²² Moreover, he “had been having visions of his own,”²³ which is a detail that very much intrigued Allen who was “still on his own spiritual quest [...] with his Blake visions”²⁴ and had recently tried peyote, which resulted his vision of Moloch’s face on Sir Francis Drake Hotel – image that inspired the writing of *Howl*, on October 17, 1954.²⁵ Nevertheless, however much they shared with Lamantia, the real revelation of the Six Gallery was the encounter with the Zen lunatic poet of the mountains, Gary Snyder:

Although born in San Francisco, Gary Snyder had grown up on the western slopes of Washington and Oregon, and at a young age had begun to climb the various volcanic peaks along the Cascade Range in both summer and winter. He was an outdoorsman who loved the quite beauty of the mountains.²⁶

[...] one day Allen decided to go over to the other side of Berkeley to meet Gary. Snyder remembers their first meeting vividly. Gary was in the yard of his little cottage on Hillegass working on his bicycle when Ginsberg dropped in. He was impressed most of all by Ginsberg’s curiosity about everything.²⁷

At the Six Gallery, the two poets read one after the other – whereas Allen “condemned the dehumanizing nature of America’s corporate culture,” Gary “stood on the stage in his hiking boots” and ended the evening with his reading of *A Berry Feast*, “a mixture of Native American lore with a wisdom that came from his Buddhist meditation practice.”²⁸ Similarly, his fellow friend Philip Whalen, “the nearest person anyone had ever seen to an American Buddhist Bodhisattva,” brought to the stage his “mystical-anarchic”²⁹ nature. The two poets of the West coast – Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen – had been classmates at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where they discovered their likeness. Indeed, they both shared “interests in Eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism, the outdoors, and poetry that was rooted in America’s western landscape.”³⁰ In this regard, the poets of the East coast were very much pleased to make their acquaintance, since the same subjects had recently started to draw their interest:

The more they got to know one another, the more the young poets found that they had quite a bit in common. [...] Kerouac was attracted to them more because of their common interest in Buddhism and their experience in camping and hiking. He admired the pair for having

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 103.

²² *Ivi*, p. 99.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 85.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 87.

²⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 105-106.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 98.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 103.

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 102.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 98.

gone off on Thoreau-style retreats into the pristine mountains, something that he had long dreamed of doing himself. [...] It had long been a dream of Jack's to get away from everyone and find a peaceful hermitage [...]³¹

In short, Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen brought along experiences of Eastern spirituality and wildlife in nature – what would become *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), – both new and appealing to the still unexperienced Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. This way, new spiritual insights and a new environmental sensitivity entered the tissue of their studies, discussions and investigations:

While Kerouac had been in California, he had discovered Eastern spiritualism and spent much of his time in the public library researching on the life of the Buddha. Over the next few months via their correspondence, Jack repeatedly urged Allen to explore Buddhism for himself. [...] The notes that Jack made in the San Jose library eventually found their way into his book *Some of the Dharma*.³²

On his part, Ginsberg received with enthusiasm the “long reading lists of Buddhist texts” that his friend suggested, however he was more interested in the practice rather the literature.³³ Finally, the encounter with the poets of the West coast will bring a good deal of experience and practice to their life. Thus, it followed a period of wild camping moments and meditative mountain hikes. In this sense, it is possible to speak about a spiritual and ecological turn in the Beat generation personality, with respect to their arrival to the West coast in 1950s, as the country and its population were changing to the point of witnessing the birth of “a new American consciousness:”

The beginning of the 1950s was a germinal moment in the birth of a new America and a new American consciousness. With the end of the World War II, hundreds of thousands, uprooted by the war, now returned home briefly, only to leave again, finding themselves adrift in a changed America. Others stayed, married their old sweethearts, and moved to new suburbias. But some – young poets and dreamers, visionaries and vagabonds and wanderers – saw the chance to escape from button-down conformism, consumerism, and boredom. And they began hitchhiking and catching freights, or driving coast to coast, discovering a new America.

San Francisco was the end of the line, and such it was a natural focal point for the shifting population. It was as if the whole continent had tilted up and poured its contents West. [...]³⁴

This image of San Francisco as the end of the country is a recurrent one: “This pretty white city / on the other side of the country [...] / said «This is the End».”³⁵ Meaningfully, San Francisco, also portrayed as “last frontier of some temporary lost Atlantis risen from the sea,”³⁶ seems to accommodate the idea of the final conquest of the frontier.³⁷

³¹ *Ivi*, pp. 105-106.

³² *Ivi*, p. 84.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Morgan, Bill. 2003. *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, pp. xiii-xiv.

³⁵ Kerouac, Jack. 1995. *San Francisco Blues*, p. 79.

³⁶ Morgan, Bill. 2003. *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, p. xiii.

³⁷ The idea of the conquest of the frontier has already been discussed in our first chapter, see “Beyond the Frontier.”

It seemed like a matter of minutes when we began rolling in the foothills before Oakland and suddenly reached a height and saw stretched out ahead of us the fabulous white city of San Francisco on her eleven mystic hills with the blue Pacific and its advancing wall of potato-patch fog beyond, and smoke and goldenness in the late afternoon of time. «There she blows! [...] Give me water! No more land! We can't go any further 'cause there ain't no more land!»³⁸

The fact of being the end of the country, thus also the end of their coast-to-coast journey, takes on the meaning of the possibility to start anew, so much so that even the arrival to the city is experienced as a time of transition:

It's the bridge that counts, the coming-into-San Francisco on that Oakland-Bay Bridge, over waters which are faintly ruffled by oceangoing Orient ships and ferries, over waters that are like taking you to some other shore, it had always been like that when I lived in Berkeley—after a night of drinking, or two, in the city, bing, the old F-train'd take me barreling across the waters back to that other shore of peace and contentment—We'd (Irwin and I) discuss the Void as we crossed—³⁹

In addition, San Francisco – being “surrounded on three sides by water” – is somehow considered “an offshore province, not really part of mainland America.”⁴⁰

A certain young traveler, arriving overland by train and ferry to the San Francisco Embarcadero [...], uncertain what direction to take [...] stopped the first man he came across and half-seriously asked, “Is this really San Francisco?” The man, swaying a bit, [...] let forth a loud guffaw, allowing that this indeed might be the City, but adding “However, young feller, I ain't so sure it ain't necessarily in the U-nited States!”⁴¹

Hence, Kerouac chanted in his *San Francisco Blues*: “San Francisco / San Francisco / You're a muttering bum / In a brown beat suit.”⁴² It follows that, the white city – last frontier, end thus beginning of something new – opened up new possibilities and allowed the birth of a “new American consciousness” precisely because it did not want to have anything to do with the *square* postwar America mentality that was spreading in the rest of the country:

It's seeing the rooftops of Frisco that makes you excited and believe, the big downtown hulk of buildings, Standard Oil's flying red horse, Montgomery Street highbuildings, Hotel St. Francis, the hills, magic Telegraph with her Coit-top, magic Russian, magic Nob, and magic Mission beyond with the cross of all sorrows I'd seen long ago in a purple sunset with Cody on a little railroad bridge—San Francisco, North Beach, Chinatown, Market Street, the bars, the Bay-Oom, the Bell Hotel, the wine, the alleys, the poorboys, Third Street, poets, painters, Buddhists, bums, junkies, girls, millionaires, MG's, the whole fabulous movie of San Francisco seen from the bus or train on the Bridge coming in, the tug at your heart like New York—And they're all there, my friends, somewhere in those little toystreets, and when they see me the angel'll smile—⁴³

³⁸ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 99.

³⁹ Kerouac, Jack. 2012. *Desolation Angels*, p. 121.

⁴⁰ Morgan, Bill. 2003. *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, p. xiii.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Kerouac, Jack. 1995. *San Francisco Blues*, p. 26.

⁴³ Kerouac, Jack. 2012. *Desolation Angels*, p. 121.

2. Beat Zen vs. Square Zen

The second post-war years witnessed the propaganda, thus the spread of the so-called Cold War American culture, which proposed a mass standardization of living – whereas people were supposed to settle down, find a job, buy a car, purchase a house and start a family. These ideas were supported by a strong desire for progress, the advent of mass-communication, thus the spread of the flow of information, a push to massive economic development and significant technological advances.⁴⁴ It was therefore a time of massive change in values and attitudes within the United States and their Western Bloc. As Allan Johnston claims, “the Cold War worked to fuel the metanarratives of what Alan Nadel calls the «containment culture,» encouraging an atmosphere of general tension and impelling social and consumerist conformity.”⁴⁵ To explain it better, he mentions Stuart Ewen’s study on “the role that advertising played in the evolution of American Capitalism:”⁴⁶

Consumerist ideology became rampant, critical social thought became anathema [...] The consumerized universe was [...] erected with unprecedented vigor, positing an economic nationalism which signified the inviolate sanctity of the world of goods. The definitions of "freedom" and "choice" were being unified and firmly implanted in the conception of loyal commitment to the political, religious and social arenas [of] brand names and consumer credit [...] the definition proffered by a "freedom loving" political ideology was one in which to produce one's own world was subversive (except where it was legitimized by the "do-it-yourself" industry); to assert the idea that a community might control its own destiny was "communistic." [...] to look different; to act different; to think different; these became the vague archetypes of subversion and godlessness. [...] The vision of freedom which was being offered to Americans was one which continually relegated people to consumption, passivity, and spectatorship [...] While heralding a world of unprecedented freedom and opportunity, corporations (in concert with the state apparatus) were generating a mode of existence which was increasingly regimented and authoritarian.⁴⁷

Within this context of great transition – that caused alienation, insecurity, fear and anxiety about the future – the American country witnessed the need of a cultural and spiritual revolution, thus the birth of a new culture and new forms of spirituality. This led to the emergence of a way of living that challenged values and norms of behaviour embodied by established society, mainstream thinking or, to put it simply, Eisenhower's America.⁴⁸

It was in this atmosphere of resistance and questioning that the opposition between the terms *square* and *beat* took place. In this regard, the article “Squaresville U.S.A. vs. Beatsville” published on 21 September 1959 by *Life* magazine is particularly remarkable.

⁴⁴ Alexe, Adina Georgiana. 2021. *The emergence of an ecological self in the 1960s American cultural revolution. A study of Beat poetry and countercultural music*, pp. 12-29.

⁴⁵ Johnston, Allan. 2005. “Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation,” p. 105.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Ewen, Stuart. 1976. *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, pp. 206-15. Cited in *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest,” p. 206.

Indeed, the article proposed an overview about the contrasting “values and habits of middle-class Americans living in the «midwestern town» Hutchinson, Kansas, and bohemians known as «beatniks» from Venice, California,” the “west coast enclave.”⁴⁹ The issue was inspired by a letter sent by three Hutchinson girls, whose names were Kathy Vannaman, Anne Gardner and Luetta Peters. The letter was an invitation for Mr. Lawrence Lipton – journalist, “leader of the Venice beatniks”⁵⁰ and writer of *The Holy Barbarians* (1959) – to visit Hutchinson, since “[that] city was Squaresville itself.”⁵¹ It was therefore delivered to the city of Venice, which embodied “the seedy capital of [those] bearded bohemians called beatniks,”⁵² consequently opposed to Hutchinson. Indeed, the two cities – of the addressers and of the addressee – represented the

two extremes of present-day U.S. life and attitudes – Squaresville vs. Beatsville, Hutchinson is the personification of traditionally accepted American values – a stable, prosperous community, given to conservatism but full of get-up-and-go. Venice throbs with the rebellion of the beatnik, who ridicules U.S. society as “square,” talks a strange language and loves to chant his poetry while jazz bands or bongo drums play accompaniments.⁵³

However, Lipton never went to Hutchinson because he was uninvited, specifically for fear that this confrontation could take place. Nevertheless, the article had already been inspired and it was published with the aim of representing the “clash between the squares and the beats [that was] taking place in many small ways all over the U.S.”⁵⁴ Pictures of Hutchinson’s “homey pleasures” and Venice’s “far-out freedom” were shown,⁵⁵ together with descriptive captions and stories:

The inhabitants of the two communities were polar opposites in terms of family life, amenities in the home, recreational activities, physical appearance, and dress styles. In a pleasant and clean household in Hutchinson, a married couple and their two children gazed happily at a family photo album. In an unkempt “hip pad” in Venice, artist Arthur Richer and his wife and young daughter pondered abstract portraits on their walls. For recreation adults in the Kansas town took walks in a park or visited the local grain elevator; children swam in the municipal pool, bowled, went to the movies, or danced at a convention hall. In Venice “hip cats” read poetry in a bath tub outdoors, painted garbage cans, listened to jazz, played bongo drums, drank wine, and discussed art philosophy. The citizens of Hutchinson were neat in appearance and conservative in hair style and dress, and the men wore no facial hair. The beatniks looked unclean physically, their hair disheveled, their shirts untucked, the men bearded. Both groups expressed satisfaction with their lives in their respective communities. “I think Hutchinson is the nicest small town in the whole world,” remarked Ruby Haston as she smiled with her children. Arthur Richer was equally content in Venice, while he found “chaos” in “the frontier of so-called civilization.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Petrus, Stephen. 1997. “Rumblings of Discontent,” p. 1.

⁵⁰ Life Magazine. 1959. “Squaresville U.S.A. vs. Beatsville,” p. 29.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 31.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ See *Ivi*, pp. 32-35.

⁵⁶ Petrus, Stephen. 1997. “Rumblings of Discontent,” pp. 1-2.

It was in the same year of *Life's* article – 1959, – that *City Lights*⁵⁷ decided to publish *Beat Zen Square Zen and Zen* by Alan Watts, a British philosopher that helped the flourishing of Buddhism in postwar years. He was indeed one of the main translators and popularisers of Eastern philosophies to the Western world, preceded by the arrival of Soyen Shaku,⁵⁸ “the first Zen master in America,”⁵⁹ and his translator, student, and key figure of Zen in America, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. Often referred to as D. T. Suzuki, he arrived in San Francisco in 1897 and began “to settle into his New York life around 1953,”⁶⁰ holding some seminars at Columbia University. In this regard, his three series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927, 1933, 1934), together with *A Buddhist Bible* by Dwight Goddard (1932) and *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts (1957), had a fundamental role in the arousal of a powerful interest towards the Buddhist word and Buddhist literature. In addition, a key function was also played by the coming, thus the spread, of a considerable number of Asian religious texts translated into English. That resulted in the emergence of the so-called Buddhist American Literature. In accordance with that, some scholars agreed that “literature itself was the avant-garde of the movement of Buddhism into America.”⁶¹ Thus, in 1958, “all the emerging lines of the new American Zen gathered together”⁶² in a special *Zen* edition of the *Chicago Review*, which included:

Snyder's essay “Spring Sesshin at Sokoku-ji,” [the already mentioned] Alan Watts's “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen,” “Meditation in the Woods” by Jack Kerouac, D.T. Suzuki's translation from the Chinese *Sayings of Rinzai*, [...] a poem of Philip Whalen [...]⁶³

Therefore, in 1959, the American audience was already familiar with the essay written by Alan Watts.⁶⁴ However, Lawrence Ferlinghetti considered important to propose the British philosopher's considerations to his readers again, given that they had been issued before the publication of *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac.⁶⁵ According to his publisher and

⁵⁷ By that year, *City Lights* had already published its first poetry collections, belonging to the Pocket Poets Series: *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955) by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Thirty Spanish Poems of Love and Exile* (1956), by Kenneth Rexroth, *Poems of Humor & Protest* by Kenneth Patchen (1956), *Howl & Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg (1956). Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 94.

⁵⁸ “In 1892, [Soyen Shaku] received an invitation to the World Parliament of Religions, which was to be held in Chicago as part of the Columbian Exposition of 1893. He decided to go even though his disciples, monks and laymen alike, opposed the journey, thinking it improper for a Zen priest to set foot in such an uncivilized country. His letter of acceptance was put into English by a young university student who had recently begun to study at Engakuji—a certain D.T. Suzuki.” Fields, Rick. 1981. *How the Swans came to the Lake. A narrative history of Buddhism in America*, p. 113.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 126.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 204.

⁶¹ Whalen-Bridge, John & Gary Storhoff. 2009. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, p. 2.

⁶² Fields, Rick. 1981. *How the Swans came to the Lake*, p. 221.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 220.

⁶⁴ Watts, Alan. 1996. “Beat Zen, Square Zen e Zen.” The original essay and the anecdotes around it are available online: https://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/Miscellaneous/Beat_Zen_Square_Zen.html

⁶⁵ Watts, Alan W. 1959. Foreword to “Beat Zen, Square Zen e Zen.”

editors, this new novel had to be “another *On the Road* [written] [...] especially for his generation, [...] telling «what it was all about.»⁶⁶ The result was a portrait of “the poetry-and-buddhist milieu of the time,”⁶⁷ centred around the friendship between Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith – respectively, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac himself. If *On the Road* was the “pre-Buddhist Beat manifesto,” *The Dharma Bums* can be considered the manifesto of “the postconversion.”⁶⁸ Moreover, the book was “dedicated to Han Shan,”⁶⁹ “a Chinese scholar who got sick of the big city and the world and took off to hide in the mountains” or, in other words, “Japhy’s hero.”⁷⁰ Finally, *The Dharma Bums* contained a prophecy of the coming revolution that would take place in the 1960s, which Japhy called the “great rucksack revolution.”⁷¹ In this context, according to Ferlinghetti, the reedition of *Beat Zen Square Zen and Zen* could trigger new reflections, opening a dialogue with Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith’s experiences as *dharma bums*. This would have made room for new meanings to emerge, especially for what concerned the definition of *beat Zen*.

Taking advantage of this new edition, Alan Watts cleared up the misunderstanding that spread the word that he was “a spokesman for «Square Zen».”⁷² Thus, he argued that “[by] this term [he] was designating the traditional and official Zen schools of Japan, Rinzai and Soto, to which many Westerners do indeed belong.”⁷³ Indeed, they even go to Japan in order to study and then, they bring their acquired knowledge back home in America. The reason why it is defined *traditional* is because people look for the *right* way to do Zen: “it is a quest for the *right* spiritual experience, for a *satori* which will receive a stamp (*inka*) of approval and established authority.”⁷⁴ This way of doing Zen runs the risk of leading to “spiritual snobbism and artistic preciousness.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, resonating on the subject, Alan Watts is very understanding, thus adds that it must be hard for Anglo-Saxons – as well as for Japanese – “to absorb anything quite so Chinese as Zen.”⁷⁶ The exact same thing could be said as regards Americans. In a certain sense, Watts makes a comparison

⁶⁶ Fields, Rick. 1981. *How the Swans came to the Lake*, p. 222.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 223.

⁶⁸ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage,” p. 175.

⁶⁹ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, see inscription.

⁷⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 20-22. See also pp. 17-24, to read more about Japhy-Snyder’s dedication to Han Shan and his devotion to translations, which will flow into his *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1959).

⁷¹ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 97-98.

⁷² Watts, Alan W. 1959. Foreword to “Beat Zen, Square Zen e Zen.”

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ Watts, Alan W. 1959. “Beat Zen, Square Zen e Zen,” p. 19.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 1.

between Japanese and Westerners that “tend to be [...] uneasy in themselves,” contrary to Chinese who have “trust in the good-and-evil of one’s nature,”⁷⁷ since

they reflect a marvelous understanding and respect for what we call the balance of nature, human and otherwise—a universal vision of life as the Tao or way of nature in which the good and the evil, the creative and the destructive, the wise and the foolish are the inseparable polarities of existence.⁷⁸

This Chinese sense of acceptance reveals “it [...] obvious that one [can] not be right without also being wrong, because the two [are] as inseparable as back and front.”⁷⁹ Here, Watts identifies the appeal of Zen by many Westerners, who needed to flee “metaphysical anxiety and sense of guilt”⁸⁰ and took refuge in a thought that “does not preach, moralize and scold.”⁸¹

Looking out into it at night, we make no comparisons between right and wrong stars, nor between well and badly arranged constellations. Stars are by nature big and little, bright and dim. Yet the whole thing is a splendor and a marvel which sometimes makes our flesh creep with awe. On the other hand, this is also the sphere of human, everyday life which we might call existential.

For there is a standpoint from which human affairs are as much beyond right and wrong as the stars, and from which our deeds, experiences, and feelings can no more be judged than the ups and downs of a range of mountains.⁸²

Thus, Alan Watts comes to talk about *beat Zen* and the *beat* mentality. In this regard, he emphasizes that *beat Zen* has not to be strictly associated with the *hipster life* of the two main cities of the Beats – New York and San Francisco. Hence, the British philosopher attempts to rebut criticism often levelled at his Beat friends, particularly Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac:

The “beat” mentality as I am thinking of it is something much more extensive and vague than the hipster life of New York and San Francisco. It is a younger generation's nonparticipation in “the American Way of Life,” a revolt which does not seek to change the existing order but simply turns away from it to find the significance of life in subjective experience rather than objective achievement. It contrasts with the “square” and other-directed mentality of beguilement by social convention, unaware of the relativity of right and wrong, of the mutual necessity of capitalism and communism to each other's existence, of the inner identity of puritanism and lechery, or of, say, the alliance of church lobbies and organized crime to maintain the laws against gambling.⁸³

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 7.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 5.

⁸² *Ivi*, pp. 5-6.

⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 9.

According to Watts, Zen is “above all liberation of the mind from conventional thought,” the latter being “the confusion of the concrete universe of nature with the conceptual things, events, and values of linguistic and cultural symbolism.”⁸⁴ With that being said,

the Westerner who is attracted by Zen and who would understand it deeply must have one indispensable qualification: he must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously. He must really have come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah and with his Hebrew-Christian conscience so that he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion. He must be free of the itch to justify himself. Lacking this, his Zen will be either “beat” or “square,” either a revolt from the culture and social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability. For Zen is above all the liberation of the mind from conventional thought, and this is something utterly different from rebellion against convention, on the one hand, or adopting foreign conventions, on the other.⁸⁵

Finally, Alan Watts resolves the dualism between *beat Zen* and *square Zen* by showing a third way: the way of Zen, that is “*wu-shih*, which means approximately «nothing special» or «no fuss».”⁸⁶ Thus, when commenting upon *The Dharma Bums*, the character of Japhy Ryder, inspired by the personality of Gary Snyder, seems to embody something of the sort:

Snyder is, in the best sense, a bum. His manner of life is a quietly individualistic deviation from everything expected of a “good consumer.” His temporary home is a little shack without utilities on a hillside in Mill Valley, at the top of a steep trail. When he needs money he goes to sea, or works as a firewatcher or logger. Otherwise, he stays at home or goes mountain-climbing, most of the time writing, studying, or practicing Zen meditation. Part of his shack is set aside as a formal “meditation hall,” and the whole place is in the best Zen tradition of clean and uncluttered simplicity. But this is not a Christian or Hinayana Buddhist style of asceticism. As *The Dharma Bums* made plain, it combines a voluntary and rather joyous poverty with a rich love-life, and for Western, and much Eastern, religiosity this is the touchstone of devilry.⁸⁷

Eventually, the issue of *beat Zen* is faceted. It might be seen a good Western attempt, even if it cannot be taken as the role model. Indeed, Alan Watts clarifies:

Beat Zen is a complex phenomenon. It ranges from a use of Zen for justifying sheer caprice in art, literature, and life to a very forceful social criticism and “digging of the universe” such as one may find in the poetry of Ginsberg, Whalen and Snyder, and, rather unevenly, in Kerouac [...]⁸⁸

The use of Zen made by the writers of the Beat generation had indeed different outcomes. However, it offered a way to pursue that search of authenticity that Kerouac started with his movement westward, which was now turning into an urge “to look eastward,”⁸⁹ as Ginsberg – reading T. D. Suzuki – recounts in a letter to Cassady.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 24.

⁸⁷ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁸⁸ *Ivi*, p. 9.

⁸⁹ Jackson, Carl. 1988. “the counterculture looks east: beat writers and asian religion,” p. 60.

⁹⁰ Fields, Rick. 1981. *How the Swans came to the Lake*, p. 210.

3. A Beatific Eastern Turn

It is nothing new to say that the history of the Beat generation was lined with a considerable number of critics and judgment. As Stephen Prothero argues:

From the pages of *Life* [...], contemporary scholars have inherited two key interpretative lines that I want to call into question here: first, the tendency to view the beat movement rather narrowly as a literary or cultural impulse; and second, the inclination to judge this impulse negatively, as a *revolt against* rather than a *protest for* something.⁹¹

His latter claim is well evident in his article's title, *On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as a Spiritual Protest*. His thesis is that the Beats were "spiritual protesters" and that their movement carried out "a spiritual protest against [...] the moribund orthodoxies of 1950s America."⁹² Finally, he aimed to point out that "the Beats also deserve a place in American religious history," since they contributed to the "«radical turn» in America's religious road."⁹³ Hence, the author issues the question of how little interest scholars have showed in Beat spirituality, contesting that the Beat generation marked "a significant shift in post-World War II American religious consciousness."⁹⁴ Prothero claims that what united the early circle of the Beats was "a «new consciousness» or a «new vision»" that "included a rejection of dominant spiritual norms and established spiritual options."⁹⁵ As a result, they "were not wed exclusively to any one religious tradition," however one "did inspire more of them more deeply than any other, namely, Buddhism, especially the Zen and Yogacara formulations of Mahayana school."⁹⁶ In this regard, it is worth to go back to the time before the early Beats met the West coast poets in San Francisco in 1955. In fact, the roots of a Beat possible interest in Asian thought were already present in their 1945's readings of Oswald Spengler, who "[suggested] that the solution to their individual crisis of faith (and to America's crisis of spirit) might lie outside western culture and civilization, in the Orient."⁹⁷ It is true than that "Kerouac and Ginsberg did not begin to study Buddhism in earnest until 1953, [when] a reading of Thoreau's *Walden* inspired Kerouac to learn more about Asian religious traditions."⁹⁸ The decade that goes from the 1945s to the 1955s is thus very significant. Indeed, in this period, the Beat "*search for something to believe in*"⁹⁹ started to

⁹¹ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," p. 205.

⁹² *Ivi*, p. 208.

⁹³ *Ivi*, pp. 220-221.

⁹⁴ Here, I am quoting Jackson, Carl. 1988. "the counterculture looks east: beat writers and asian religion," p. 52. Nevertheless, Prothero and Jackson disagreed about some aspects of the complexity of Beat spirituality.

⁹⁵ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. "On the Holy Road," p. 209.

⁹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 217.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 211.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 217.

⁹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 210.

find its way through Eastern spiritual insights. Additionally, during the same decade, the Beat term itself did undergo a process of transformation and evolution:

THE PHRASE “Beat generation” arose out of a specific conversation between Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes in 1948. They were discussing the nature of generations, recollecting the glamour of the Lost Generation, and Kerouac said, “Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation.” They talked about whether it was a “found generation” (as Kerouac sometimes called it), an “angelic generation,” or some other epithet. But Kerouac waved away the question and said beat generation—not meaning to name the generation, but to unname it.¹⁰⁰

Since late 1952, the term started circulating more and more thanks to John Cellon Holmes’ article *This is the Beat Generation*, published by *New York Times Magazine*. Hence, the poet Herbert Huncke – “[embodiment] of marginality and spirituality,”¹⁰¹ – introduced and explained the term in the context of the “hip language,” whereas “the word «beat» [was] a carnival, «subterranean» (subcultural) term” very much used in Times Square:¹⁰²

So, the original street usage meant exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, wide-eyed, perceptive, rejected by society, on your own, streetwise. Or, as it once implied, “beat” meant finished, completed, in the dark night of the soul or in the cloud of unknowing. It could mean open, as in the Whitmanesque sense of “openness,” equivalent to humility. So “beat” was interpreted in various circles to mean emptied out, exhausted, and at the same time wide-open and receptive to vision.

A third meaning of “beat,” as in beatific, was publicly articulated in 1959 by Kerouac, [...] [He] was trying to indicate the correct sense of the word by pointing out its connection to words like “beatitude” and “beatific”—the necessary beatness or darkness that precedes opening up to light, egoless-ness, giving room for religious illumination.¹⁰³

In this regard, Jack Kerouac wanted to “have [his] little say about it before everyone else in the writing field” could mislead people about its meanings.¹⁰⁴ Thus, in his *Lamb, No Lion* (1958), he wrote:

Beat doesn’t mean tired or bushed, so much as it means *beato*, the Italian for beatific: to be in a state of beatitude, like St. Francis, trying to love all life, trying to be utterly sincere with everyone, practicing endurance, kindness, cultivating joy of heart.¹⁰⁵

In this sense, the meaning of *beat* went from the original “[identification] with the beat-up and the beat-down” to a more holy *new vision* that embraced “some redemptive force or transcendental hope.”¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, Allen Ginsberg identified “some essential ideals:”

¹⁰⁰ Waldman, Anne. 2007. *The Beat Book. Writings from the Beat Generation*, p. xiii.

¹⁰¹ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” p. 213.

¹⁰² Waldman, Anne. 2007. *The Beat Book*, p. xiii.

¹⁰³ *Ivi*, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁴ Kerouac, Jack. 1995. “Lamb, No Lion,” p. 562.

¹⁰⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 562-563.

¹⁰⁶ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” pp. 213-214.

An inquisitiveness into the nature of consciousness, leading to acquaintance with Eastern thought, meditation practice, art as extension or manifestation of exploration of the texture of consciousness, spiritual liberation as a result.¹⁰⁷

Hence, one of the highest statements of the Beat quest towards spiritual liberation is to be read in Ginsberg's announcement: "There is a God / dying in America."¹⁰⁸ According to Prothero, the poets asserted "the death of the tribal god of American materialism and mechanization," however leaving some hope for "a new deity [to raise] from the wreckage."¹⁰⁹ Overcoming "Spengler's apocalypticism"¹¹⁰ – the idea that "society [was] running towards apocalypse"¹¹¹ – and the "dark allegory of the fall of America,"¹¹² the Beat protest resulted in "a perfect craving to believe [...] the stirrings of a quest."¹¹³ The poets aimed to "[stress] the chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness [...] and, in the process, to transform into sacred space every back alley through which they ambled and every tenement in which they lived."¹¹⁴ Thus, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* rises:

Holy!
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! [...]
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!
The bum's as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!
The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!
Holy Peter holy Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy Kerouac holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy
Cassady holy the unknown bugged and suffering beggars holy the hideous human angels!
[...]
Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy the cafeterias filled with the millions!
Holy the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!
Holy the lone juggernaut! Holy the vast lamb of the middleclass! Holy the crazy shepherds of rebellion!
Who digs Los Angeles IS Los Angeles!
Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria & Seattle Holy Paris Holy Tangiers Holy Moscow Holy Istanbul!
Holy time in eternity holy eternity in time holy the clocks in space holy the fourth dimension holy the fifth International holy the Angel in Moloch!
Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the locomotive holy the visions holy the hallucinations holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the abyss!
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!¹¹⁵

Being one of the "boldest affirmation of the sacred camouflaged in the profane,"¹¹⁶ *Howl* unveils a new vision of material reality, where the holy nature of everything is cried out. In

¹⁰⁷ Waldman, Anne. 2007. *The Beat Book*, pp. xv-xvi.

¹⁰⁸ Ginsberg, Allen. 1963. "Siesta in Xbalba," p. 33.

¹⁰⁹ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. "On the Holy Road," p. 209.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 221.

¹¹² *Ivi*, p. 209.

¹¹³ Holmes, John Cellon. 1952. "This is the Beat Generation." Cited in *Ivi*, p. 210.

¹¹⁴ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. "On the Holy Road," p. 211.

¹¹⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. "Howl," pp. 21-22.

¹¹⁶ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. "On the Holy Road," p. 219.

this part of the poem, Ginsberg tackles even the so-called “ills of the West”¹¹⁷ – from skyscrapers and pavements to the wholeness of metropolis – by sacralising them. Along these lines, the presented *holiness* slightly resonates with the idea of Buddha-nature, whereby every element of the universe – even those that do not have a mind – is “Buddha-nature and vice versa.”¹¹⁸ Following that, everything in the universe is enlightened and “the world is drenched in spirit.”¹¹⁹ This finding is relieving in a society that – on the contrary – is more and more affected by the predominance of rationality and matter, with consequent loss of landmarks:

Western thought has changed so rapidly in this century that we are in a state of considerable confusion. [...] Familiar concepts of space, time, and motion, of nature and natural law, of history and social change, and of human personality itself have dissolved, and we and we find ourselves adrift without landmarks in a universe which more and more resembles the Buddhist principle of the “Great Void.” The various wisdoms of the West, religious, philosophical, and scientific, do not offer much guidance to the art of living in such a universe, and we find the prospects of making our way in so trackless an ocean of relativity rather frightening. For we are used to absolutes, to firm principles and laws to which we can cling for spiritual and psychological security. This is why, I think, there is so much interest in a culturally productive way of life which, for some fifteen hundred years, has felt thoroughly at home in “the Void,” and which not only feels no terror for it but rather a positive delight. To use its own words, the situation of Zen has always been –

*Above, not a tile to cover the head;
Below, not an inch of ground for the foot.*¹²⁰

In *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts provides a good picture of the Western world in early 20th century, especially when he associates its loss of guidance to the Buddhist principle of the “Great Void.” It is true, indeed, that consistent changes had taken place, particularly regarding familiar concepts of space and time, not to mention the psyche.¹²¹ This marked a passage from a state of security to one of relativity and uncertainty, which made people feel lost and uneasy. Hence, whereas people needed to process the important upheavals of the century, the state of constant conflict and the anxiety to respond to societal expectations did not allow to do so. In this context, it is interesting to re-read the meaning of what Watts calls a *culturally productive way of life*, referring to traditions familiar with Zen. In fact, if his words attempt to understand Western interest in Zen, they also imply an evident truth: American society needed a productive model of life in other to fill its “Great Void.” The result was an ideal of capitalist productivity on one hand, and a turn to the

¹¹⁷ The Authors of Poetry Foundation. “Gary Snyder.”

¹¹⁸ Ruperti, Bonaventura, Silvia Vesco & Carolina Negri. 2017. “Rethinking Nature in Japan. From Tradition to Modernity,” p. 88.

¹¹⁹ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” p. 219.

¹²⁰ Watts, Alan. 1969. *The way of Zen*, pp. ix-x.

¹²¹ References are evident: the passage from classical to quantum physics, the development of the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein, the discovery of the unconscious by Freud, thus the birth of psychoanalysis etc.

culturally productive way of life of the East on the other. Refusing the first alternative, while identifying its limits, the Beats started to believe that – as it emerges from Alan Watts' words – Western wisdom was not sufficient anymore, especially if that was part or even source of the problem. Indeed, if people felt frightened, alienated and unsatisfied, that could be symptomatic of their difficulty to recognize themselves in their own environment. In the face of the alternatives available in second post-war America, a general sense of discomfort was indeed evident. Referring to Philip Whalen, that can be seen as a problem of identity, thus he saw Zen “as a way of distancing himself from identities available to mainstream America [...] in the 1950s.”¹²² It follows that, general distress was released in a relentless process of research that call into question both individual and shared values. Beginning with the previously discussed loss of landmarks, this process resulted in a significant need for guidance. Among all possibilities, Gary Snyder suggested to “getting off the path” and “[veering] off the trail”¹²³ – of Western lifestyle – as a necessary choice to find one's own Way.¹²⁴ Indeed, “the path is *not* where you walk for long [...] [since the] whole range of items that fulfill our needs is out there.”¹²⁵ He too was motivated by his own experience with Zen Buddhism. Finally, if the West was not able to offer a guiding light, turning to Eastern knowledge could be an attempt to find it:

There is no single reason for the extraordinary growth of Western interest in Zen during the last twenty years. The appeal of Zen arts to the "modern" spirit in the West, the work of Suzuki, the war with Japan, the itchy fascination of "Zen-stories," and the attraction of a non-conceptual, experiential philosophy in the climate of scientific relativism—all these are involved. One might mention, too, the affinities between Zen and such purely Western trends as the philosophy of Wittgenstein, Existentialism, General Semantics, the metalinguistics of B. L. Whorf, and certain movements in the philosophy of science and in psychotherapy. Always in the background there is our vague disquiet with the artificiality or "anti-naturalness" of both Christianity, with its politically ordered cosmology, and technology, with its imperialistic mechanization of a natural world from which man himself feels strangely alien. For both reflect a psychology in which man is identified with a conscious intelligence and will standing apart from nature to control it, like the architect-God in whose image this version of man is conceived. The disquiet arises from the suspicion that our attempt to master the world from outside is a vicious circle in which we shall be condemned to the perpetual insomnia of controlling controls and supervising supervision *ad infinitum*.¹²⁶

An important outcome of these words is that the advent of Buddhism marked a big chance in the history of American thought, whereas “traditionally, [...] writers and intellectuals [had] looked to Europe for their inspiration and sense of identity.”¹²⁷ Moreover, Buddhism

¹²² Whalen-Bridge, John & Gary Storhoff. 2009. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, p. 10.

¹²³ See Snyder, Gary. 1990. “On the Path, Off the Trail,” pp. 144-154.

¹²⁴ Whalen-Bridge, John & Gary Storhoff. 2009. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, p. 142.

¹²⁵ Snyder, Gary. 1990. “On the Path, Off the Trail,” p. 145.

¹²⁶ Watts, Alan. 1959. “Beat Zen, Square Zen e Zen,” pp. 3-4.

¹²⁷ Jackson, Carl. 1988. “the counterculture looks east,” p. 53.

emerged as an “antidote to the ills of the West,”¹²⁸ a “means of transcending Western civilization’s institutional and psychological barriers to achieve higher consciousness,”¹²⁹ as well as an “anti-materialistic point of view.”¹³⁰ According to Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff, “if the First Noble Truth is that everything in life is pervasively unsatisfactory, the writers most interested in Buddhism bore witness [...] to the most unsatisfactory dimensions of American life.”¹³¹ Particularly, Alan Watts mentions two driving forces – Christianity and technology – that pushed humans to “[identify] with a conscious intelligence and [stand] apart from nature to control it.”¹³² At odds with ideas of separation and duality, the Beats looked out of their country’s culture to find alternative understandings of *more-than-human* relationships – that is why they “may be seen as early leaders in the post-World War II «turn to the East.»”¹³³ Furthermore, as a way to reconnect with their land and its sacred nature, (this time) they went out into the wild – bumming. This approach to life followed Ginsberg’s prescription: “more art, meditation, lifestyles of relative penury, avoidance of conspicuous consumption that’s burning down the planet. [...] We had a great job to do, and we’re doing it, trying to save and heal the spirit of America.”¹³⁴

¹²⁸ The Authors of Poetry Foundation. “Gary Snyder.”

¹²⁹ Jackson, Carl. 1988. “the counterculture looks east,” p. 68.

¹³⁰ Whalen-Bridge, John & Gary Storhoff. 2009. *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, p. 1.

¹³¹ *Ivi*, p. 2.

¹³² Watts, Alan. 1959. “Beat Zen, Square Zen e Zen,” p. 4.

¹³³ Jackson, Carl. 1988. “the counterculture looks east,” p. 52.

¹³⁴ Waldman, Anne. 2007. *The Beat Book*, p. xviii.

4. The Rucksack Pilgrimage

At the core of the Beat generation's spiritual and environmental turn, there lies the experiential, afore literary, work *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. Accordingly, it can be said that the book's title is epitome of its deep spiritual and environmental contents. Indeed, the novel gathers a set of meanings, belonging to two different – however connected and communicating – traditions. To begin with, the term *dharma* refers to the Buddhist world, being one of its “Three Jewels – *Triratna*,” as well as a key concept in all other Indian religions: “I find my refuge in the Buddha, I find my refuge in the Teaching (*dharma*), I find my refuge in the Monastic Community (*saṃgha*).”¹³⁵ The Three Jewels of Buddhism are where its practitioners can seek refuge, whereas the *Dharma* “is nature, natural truth, natural law and the teachings of Buddha.”¹³⁶ The first part of Kerouac's title is thus a founding principle of the novel, since its protagonist Ray Smith “believed that [he] was an oldtime bhikku¹³⁷ in modern clothes wandering the world (usually the immense triangular arc of New York to Mexico City to San Francisco) in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, the narration is imbued with a rich vocabulary of terms and expressions that constantly recall the teachings of Buddha, which the protagonist learns from “the number one Dharma Bum of them all,” his friend Japhy Ryder, “who coined the phrase.”¹³⁹ Hence, readers find endless references to Buddhism: a collection of specific terms, such as “bhikku,” “bodhisattva,” “haikus,” “yabyum,” “koan,” “karma,” “satori,” “samsara,” “mandala,” “zendo,” “zazen;”¹⁴⁰ a series of emblematic sentences, among which “a mountain is a Buddha,” “rocks are space [...] and space is illusion,” “this thinking has stopped” and “silence is the golden mountain;”¹⁴¹ prayers like “Japhy Ryder, equally empty, equally to be loved, equally a coming Buddha” or “Om Mani Pahdme Hum;”¹⁴² conversations about “Sakyamuni's four noble truths;”¹⁴³ references to

¹³⁵ Braarvig, Jens. 2012. “The Spread of Buddhism as Globalization of Knowledge,” p. 252.

¹³⁶ Henning, Daniel H. 2002. *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, p. 5.

¹³⁷ bhikṣu (Skt.; Pāli, bhikkhu). A Buddhist *monk, an ordained member of the *Saṃgha. The etymology of the term is uncertain, as is that of its female equivalent, a *nun or *bhikṣuṇī. [...] Originally, the community of bhikṣus was a mendicant order which travelled extensively, other than during the rainy season, and required only limited necessities. Monks were allowed to possess only their robes, a *begging-bowl, razor, needle, staff, and toothpick. Food was obtained by begging, and no fixed residence was permitted. Keown, Damien. 2003. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, pp. 32-33.

¹³⁸ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, p. 5.

¹³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 5, 10, 18, 23, 24, 31, 34, 53-54, 98, 101. Terminology is directly quoted from *The Dharma Bums*. For proper transliteration see Keown, Damien. 2003. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*.

¹⁴¹ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 67, 71, 31, 72.

¹⁴² *Ivi*, pp. 68, 29.

¹⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 12.

the sutras, particularly the “Diamond Sutra;”¹⁴⁴ moments of “deep meditation” “[sitting] down in full lotus posture crosslegged;”¹⁴⁵ and finally, inspiration from Japhy’s heroes, namely Han Shan, Shin-te, Li Po, as well as John Muir.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, taking a cue from all learnings and acquired vocabulary, Jack Kerouac ends up creating his own new Buddhist expressions, such as “Zen Lunatics” or “bhikkuing.”¹⁴⁷ Hence, describing his friend Japhy, he explains that besides “bhikkuing,” he does also “mountainclimbing.”¹⁴⁸ It follows that, on the other hand of the represented Eastern universe, Kerouac portrays an intense bumming experience in close communion with nature. My argument here is that, on the other side of *The Dharma Bums*’ coin, another tradition is followed, that of wanderers and pilgrims. Indeed, to the previously cited statement about himself, Ray Smith adds: “at this time I was a perfect Dharma Bum myself and considered myself a religious wanderer.”¹⁴⁹ In this sense, many scholars have agreed that Beat life *on the road*, “itinerant, involving spontaneous directionless travel in search of highs and epiphanies and one’s «original mind»”¹⁵⁰ can be read as a form of pilgrimage. Thus, it is worth to start from the very definition of pilgrim:

“PILGRIM, n. A traveler that is taken seriously.”

—Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* 2007:133.¹⁵¹

Pilgrimage is intended as a “religiously motivated travel” or a “spiritually inspired [peregrination].”¹⁵² In this sense, “the beats shared much with pilgrims coursing their way to the word’s sacred shines,” argues Stephen Prothero.¹⁵³ This statement, however, has been largely criticized, since the Beats did not “reference to [any] highly organized and socially stratified systems of belief and practice;” consequently, they had to be seen more as “existential tourists,” rather than pilgrims.¹⁵⁴ In this regard, the research work done by scholars like Prothero (1991), Johnston (2013) and Morrison (2020)¹⁵⁵ has vastly covered

¹⁴⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 5, 17, 97, 165.

¹⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 54.

¹⁴⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 9, 32.

¹⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage,” p. 175.

¹⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 165.

¹⁵² *Ivi*, p. 167.

¹⁵³ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” p. 210.

¹⁵⁴ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums,” p. 167.

¹⁵⁵ See Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” pp. 205-222; Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums,” pp. 165-179; Morrison, Susan. 2020. “[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage,” pp. 1-11.

the topic and rebutted these arguments, finally considering the Beats as “countercultural pilgrims”¹⁵⁶ – claim on which my thesis research flourishes:

From the perspective of *Religionswissenschaft*, [...] the beats were liminal figures who expressed their cultural marginality by living spontaneously, dressing like bums, sharing their property, celebrating nakedness and sexuality, seeking mystical awareness through drugs and meditation, acting like “Zen lunatics” or holy fools, and perhaps above all stressing the chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness or *communitas* over the pragmatic functionality of social structure. The beats, in short, lived both on the road and on the edge. For them, as for pilgrims, transition was a semipermanent condition. What distinguished the beats from other pilgrims, however, was their lack of a “center out there.” The beats shared, in short, not an identifiable geographical goal but an undefined commitment to a spiritual search. They aimed not arrive but to travel [...] Thus the beats appear in their lives and in their novels not only as pilgrims but also as heroes (and authors) of quest tales, wandering (and writing) *bhikkhus* who scour the earth in a never fully satisfied attempt to find a place to rest.¹⁵⁷

This description is epitome of the path that our research has been following. Indeed, it reaffirms what was anticipated and discussed in our chapter “The Counter-Spaces of a Generation,” meaning Beat writers’ desire of authentic life, their closeness to liminal figures – *fellaheen*, – and their urge to do new experiences and (re)discover their identities. In addition, their spiritual turn can be discerned through references to meditation moments, Zen lunacy and findings on the principle of universal interdependence. This nod to the comparison between the Beats of the East and those of the West coast opens an interesting reflection about what Prothero points out as “their lack of a «center out there».”¹⁵⁸ Indeed, it would be wrong to say that the Beats never had “an identifiable geographical goal,”¹⁵⁹ as shown by the example of Jack Kerouac – in the shoes of Sal Paradise – who “often dreamed of going West,”¹⁶⁰ whereby San Francisco was the final geographical goal of his travel, since “everybody was going to Frisco.”¹⁶¹ Accordingly, it is true that once the Beats reached the West coast altogether, their search became more transcendental than geographically placed. Thus, Jack Kerouac – in the shoes of Ray Smith, – this time

was immensely pleased with the way the trail had a kind of immortal look to it, in the early afternoon now, the way the side of the grassy hill seemed to be clouded with ancient gold dust and the bugs flipped over rocks and the wind sighed in shimmering dances over the hot rocks, and the way the trail would suddenly come into a cool shady part with big trees overhead, and here the light deeper. And the way the lake below us soon became a toy lake with those black well holes perfectly visible still, and the giant cloud shadows on the lake, and the tragic little road winding away [...]¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums,” p. 167.

¹⁵⁷ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. “On the Holy Road,” pp. 210-211.

¹⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 211.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁰ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 4.

¹⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 37.

¹⁶² Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, p. 61.

Following this reasoning, *The Dharma Bums* takes part, not only in the collection of Buddhist American literature, but also in that of “pilgrimage literature” or, more specifically, “pilgrimage ecopoetics,” whose “structural elements [are] the spiritual development of the narrator, reliance on vernacular dialect, acute environmental awareness, slow travel [...] and slow walking, where slowness functions as a form of rebellion,”¹⁶³ in the words of Susan Morrison. In this sense, while the authoress focuses on the novel *On the Road*, our analysis is more inclined towards *The Dharma Bums*, especially for what concerns slowness. Indeed, as brilliantly outlined by Roy Kozlovsky, Kerouac’s travels on the road “explored the experience of accelerated driving” and the power of car speed.¹⁶⁴ Cars have a central role in the novel, whether those of unknown drivers that pick hitchhikers up, the *Hudson* of Dean Moriarty, a *Cadillac limousine* taken from a travel bureau or an old *Ford*. Instead, in *The Dharma Bums*, the experience of slow walking, *bhikkuing* or pilgrimage – whatever one prefers to name it – really takes place. Nevertheless, what is fascinating about Morrison’s analysis is her reading of the “unpublished autograph manuscript travel diary dating from 1948-1949 (*One the Road* notebook), [where] Kerouac imagines the novel as a quest tale, thinking of pilgrimage during its gestation:”¹⁶⁵

“*Pilgrimage* [...]. My interest in the ‘beat’: it must be because they’re not only poor, but *homeless* [...]. Their lives have an exterior air of pilgrimage (wandering + impoverished) [...]”
(*On the Road* notebook, Tues. 29 March 1949).¹⁶⁶

Following his interest, the author makes explicitly use of the word *pilgrimage* twice in *On the Road*: “Did this mean that I should at last go on my pilgrimage on foot on the dark roads around America?”¹⁶⁷ Hence, Morrison claims that his work fits into the “allegorical tradition of understanding life itself as a pilgrimage,” whereby Sal speaks about “the holy road” and claims that “the road is life.”¹⁶⁸ Moreover, she adds that this tradition is “an environmentally aware tradition, [that ranges] from the Tang dynasty poet Han-shan to [...] the fourteenth-century English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer,”¹⁶⁹ even though we could go further, including the wanderers of German romantic literature – *die Wanderer* – and Hermann Hesse’s. In this sense, whereas *The Dharma Bums* was dedicated to Han-Shan, his influence is evident and, additionally, there is a whole part of the novel where Ray and

¹⁶³ Morrison, Susan. 2020. “«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»: The Resilience of Pilgrimage Ecopoetics and Slow Travel from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*,” pp. 1-2.

¹⁶⁴ Kozlovsky, Roy. 2005. “Beat Literature and the Domestication of American Space,” p. 38.

¹⁶⁵ Morrison, Susan. 2020. “«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»,” p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 176. See also p. 82.

¹⁶⁸ Morrison, Susan. 2020. “«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»,” p. 3. Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 82, 122.

¹⁶⁹ Morrison, Susan. 2020. “«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»,” p. 1.

Japhy discuss about his work.¹⁷⁰ Instead, concerning Chaucer's influence on Kerouac, Susan Morrison argues: "in *The Canterbury Tales*, each pilgrim is to tell four tales" – during the trip to Mexico, Sal and Dean "pounded plot after plot of books [they]'d read,"¹⁷¹ which could be read as a "metatextual [allusion]" to Chaucer.¹⁷² In fact, Kerouac explicitly cited the English poet in his *On the Road notebook*.¹⁷³ Then, for what concerns German romanticism, I would like to comment upon two characteristics: "the sense of yearning" under the name of *Sehnsucht* and "the sense of *werden*, of progression or «becoming»."¹⁷⁴ Deepening the linguistic roots of the term *Sehnsucht*, it could be interpreted as a combination of the German verb *sehnen*, meaning *longing* or *yearning*, and the name *die Sucht*, meaning *dependence* or *addiction*, thus indicating a desire multiplied by two – a desire of a desire.¹⁷⁵ This tension is characteristic of Beat literature, whose driving force is a restless desire for life, "an undefined commitment to a spiritual search [...] and [...] a never fully satisfied attempt to find a place to rest."¹⁷⁶ Hence, the so-described semipermanent condition of transition¹⁷⁷ can also be seen in the perspective of the romanticist sense of *werden* or becoming. Finally, these two traits that characterise German romantic's "wandering [heroes]"¹⁷⁸ seem to be familiar even to Beat wandering heroes. In addition, both Romantic and Beat poets developed an "affinity [...] for the world of nature" – while the first were "encouraged by the late arrival of the Industrial Revolution in Germany,"¹⁷⁹ the latter were pushed by a "further realization we can destroy the human residence on the planet if we don't trust and exercise our better natures."¹⁸⁰

Along this environmentally aware tradition of pilgrims, it is worth to place even the German writer of the *Schwarzwald*, Hermann Hesse, and his wandering heroes, among which readers may remember *Knulp* (1915), *Siddhartha* (1922) and *Goldmund* (1930).¹⁸¹ The reference to this author cannot be neglected in the context of our research, since his "work can [also] be viewed as a pilgrimage in search of"¹⁸² the essence of life. In fact, his novel

¹⁷⁰ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 20-24.

¹⁷¹ Kerouac, Jack. 1959. *On the Road*, p. 156.

¹⁷² Morrison, Susan. 2020. "«[A]n Exterior Air of Pilgrimage»," p. 9.

¹⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 1.

¹⁷⁴ Gish, Theodore. 1964. "Wanderlust and Wanderleid: The Motif of the Wandering Hero in German Romanticism," p. 225.

¹⁷⁵ Genzolini, Marco. 2019. *Il deserto che avanza. Forme del nichilismo contemporaneo*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁶ Prothero, Stephen. 1991. "On the Holy Road," pp. 210-211.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁸ Gish, Theodore. 1964. "Wanderlust and Wanderleid," p. 226.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁰ Waldman, Anne. 2007. *The Beat Book*, p. xvi.

¹⁸¹ These three wandering heroes belong to the following works: *Knulp. Drei Geschichten aus dem Leben Knulps*; *Siddhartha. Eine indische Dichtung*; *Narziß und Goldmund*.

¹⁸² Tekel, Rose M. 2006. *The Pilgrim Without a Map: The Religious Vision of Hermann Hesse*, p. 5.

Siddhartha is the parable of a pilgrim longing for wisdom – *der Suchende*. It follows that, together with *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, this little literary jewel was one of the companion books carried along by the Western generation that finally “engaged with countercultural travel” in the 1960s and mid-1970s:

[...] an unknown number of Westerners participated in an overland trek on no precisely fixed route from Eastern Europe through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan into India and Kathmandu and sometimes points farther east. This clandestine route was known by many names – “the Road to Goa,” “the Road to Kathmandu,” and (most famously) “the Hippie Trail.” Beats like Snyder and Ginsberg were considered the pioneers of the route for having made early trips to India that inspired collective interest. These travelers were mostly backpackers [...]¹⁸³

Thereby, books like the above-mentioned became literary icons of pilgrimage. This way of traveling brought together spiritual search, slow walking and an essentialist understanding of one’s needs – the *great rucksack revolution*, anticipated by the hero of *The Dharma Bums*, was finally taking place. Faithful companion of their hikes was indeed a “big full rucksack complete with sleeping bag, poncho, and cookpots” “all fitting into one another in a compact unit and all tied and put away inside a knotted-up blue bandana.”¹⁸⁴ Indeed, in another passage, it is said that all one needs is “a rucksack with those little plastic bags of dried food and a good pair of shoes.”¹⁸⁵ Presented by Japhy Ryder, this is a whole broad *new vision*, where criticism for *square societies* and its resolution are thus condensed:

“I’ve been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that’s the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, see the whole thing is a world full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume, I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of ’em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures, [...]¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums,” p. 177.

¹⁸⁴ Kerouac, Jack. 1976. *The Dharma Bums*, pp. 10, 18.

¹⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 77.

¹⁸⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 97-98.

The Legacy of a Generation

“Determining when a literary generation begins or ends is arbitrary,”¹ states Bill Morgan. Concerning the Beat generation, an attempt can be made by agreeing that it started with the encounter of the East coast poets in New York in the spring of 1943 and ended “during the autumn of 1969 [...] when the telephone rang in the little farmhouse”² that Allen Ginsberg had purchased some years earlier – it was “an old dilapidated farm in upstate New York [...] a bucolic gateway for himself and his friends.”³ There, Ginsberg “was laboring over his Blake music,”⁴ when he got the news:

It was a long-distance call from Florida bringing news of Kerouac’s death. [...] One day while watching television, Jack began to hemorrhage and spit up blood. It was October 20, 1969. Kerouac was forty-seven years old. He was rushed to a local hospital where he passed away early the next morning from cirrhosis of the liver, the alcoholic’s death.

Kerouac’s body was flown to Lowell [...] Ginsberg, Holmes, Creeley, Corso, and Jack’s first wife, Edie, made the trip to say good-bye to their once-close friend.⁵

It cannot be denied that the death of Kerouac, as well as that of Neal Cassady the previous year,⁶ has been a major episode of the Beat generation’s final chapters. However, it would be wrong to focus only on the moment where his spirit left his body⁷ to announce the end of *his* generation. In this regard, Bill Morgan argues: “it would be easier to summarize the last days of the Beat generation had all the writers drifted into obscurity, but that was not the case.”⁸ In addition, it must be said that long before his death Kerouac had already withdrawn from his friends, thus from the Beat generation, or what was left of *his* original feeling:⁹

What had begun in the mid-forties as a group of friends sharing inexpensive apartments on the edge of Columbia campus, had grown into a larger network of writers and friends now living in various parts of the world.¹⁰

Now, looking at the Beat generation timeline – from birth to its vanishing period, – one could suppose that it was characterised by three major periods: its East coast phase of the 1945s,

¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 232.

² *Ivi*, p. 229.

³ *Ivi*, p. 220.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 229.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 226.

⁷ That is how Ginsberg would describe the “inevitable,” according to what he learnt in India, when he “hung out with the holy men on the banks of the Ganges a few days each week observing the cremation of bodies. As he watched the human flesh turn to ash, he realized that his body was nothing more than a shell that contained a spirit. He visualized humans as great wheels of meat being worn down by life.” *Ivi*, p. 194.

⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 231-232.

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 196.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 209.

its West coast stage of the 1950s and finally, its international moment of the 1960s and following years, when the poets enjoyed long stays abroad and had worldwide recognition, together with its downsides. In this regard, the work of Bill Morgan is once again very emblematic. Indeed, his guides confirm the above-mentioned hypothesis of the Beat generation's *three periods*, namely *The Beat Generation in New York* (1997), *The Beat Generation in San Francisco* (2003), and *The Beats Abroad* (2016).¹¹ Among the places of their stays abroad, it is definitely worth mentioning India and Japan, where Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger had the chance to spend some years of their lives: exploring new countercultural spaces, deepening their spiritual experiences – up to the point of meeting the Dalai Lama, – connecting with local people and poets – like the Hungryalists,¹² – and learning Asian life-ways.¹³ Following that, the 1960s represented an overall period of intense activity for many members of the Beat group, both in terms of literary production and political action:

[...] some Beat writers became more politically active than they had been in the past. They followed a long tradition of writers from Homer to Blake to Keats and Shelley, who wanted poetry to bring social, political, and cultural change. Some became champions of various causes—opposing nuclear proliferation, fighting censorship, and supporting environmental issues.¹⁴

Meanwhile, they witnessed the birth of a new generation of young people, with whom they shared common values:

The interests of this new youth happened to coincide with Ginsberg's own ideas about the liberation of society. As a result, many young people looked to him and some in his circle for leadership and guidance. The Beat Generation aspirations were echoed in the next generation's search for greater personal freedom and liberty. Like the Beats, many young people [...] looked for a spiritual basis to their lives in non-Western forms, finding value in Buddhist, Hindu, and other Asian teachings. More people became actively involved in finding ways to save the planet from self-destructive pollution and overdevelopment. Like Ginsberg, the younger generation also seemed intent upon questioning authority in all forms and believed that equal rights should finally be available to all people. [...] Some saw that reform was needed in every area of government involvement. [...] It would still be a while before the press began to call these young people "hippies" instead of "beatniks," but a universal change in consciousness was already in progress. Ginsberg, McClure, Di Prima, Ferlinghetti, and Snyder became some of the elder spokespersons for the counterculture of the later sixties.¹⁵

¹¹ See bibliography for full titles. More references can be found in "Sense of Place and Belonging."

¹² See Belletto, Steven. 2019. "The Beat Generation Meets the Hungry Generation: U.S.—Calcutta Networks and the 1960s «Revolt of the Personal»."

¹³ See *Indian Journals: March 1962—May 1963* by Allen Ginsberg (1970), *The Japan and Indian journals 1960-64* by Joanne Kyger (1981), *Passage through India* by Gary Snyder (1983).

¹⁴ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 193.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 203-204.

In this regard, Gary Snyder expands: “in a way the Beat generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed before, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum. We put them together and opened them out again, and it becomes like a literary motif, and then we added some Buddhism to it.”¹⁶ In a nutshell, the Beat generation opened the road for “people [...] interested in revolution, *real* revolution, which starts with the individual mind and body”¹⁷ and propagates to all beings and places, being everything in universe deeply entangled and interconnected. At the core of this massive change in consciousness, there were desires for environmental protection and re-connection, acknowledgment of the brotherhood of all beings and a non-violent stand for universal peace.

¹⁶ Johnston, P. J. 2013. “Dharma Bums: The Beat Generation and the Making of Countercultural Pilgrimage,” p. 172.

¹⁷ Snyder, Gary. 1995. *A Place in Space*, p. 11.

The following three essays spread some light on the ecological importance of the Beat generation cause, which is still relevant nowadays – if not relevant more than ever. Focusing on three of the most active Beat poets since the 1960s, our analysis will address some significant aspects of the legacy of Gary Snyder, Michael McClure and Allen Ginsberg.

1. Gary Snyder—The Beats, Dharma Gaia and Bioregionalism

According to some American Indigenous groups, the story of the creation is to be found in “the belief that the Earth is supported by a gigantic turtle.”¹⁸ It follows that to speak of the Earth, or North America, one can use the name of Turtle Island. This understanding of the country as a great living animal has pushed the West coast poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder (San Francisco, 1930 –) to title his 1974’s collection of poems right *Turtle Island*. Thus, we read in his INTRODUCTORY NOTE:

Turtle Island—the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millenia, and reapplied by some of them to "North America" in recent years. Also, an idea found world-wide, of the earth, or cosmos even, sustained by a great turtle or serpent-of-eternity.

A name: that we may see ourselves more accurately on this continent of watersheds and life-communities—plant zones, physiographic provinces, culture areas; following natural boundaries. The "U.S.A." and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here.

The poems speak of place, and the energy-pathways that sustain life. Each living being is a swirl in the flow, a formal turbulence, a "song." The land, the planet itself, is also a living being—at another pace. Anglos, Black people, Chicanos, and others beached up on these shores all share such views at the deepest levels of their old cultural traditions—African, Asian, or European. Hark again to those roots, to see our ancient solidarity, and then to the work of being together on Turtle Island.¹⁹

In the first place, these lines are emblematic of the poet’s life-long interest for myths and indigenous knowledge. In addition, they outline his understanding of the planet as a living organism: “The land, the planet itself, is also a living being—at another pace.”²⁰ Finally, they bring to light the poet’s critique of the political borders of our world, which should instead be reimagined in the perspective of bioregionalist philosophy. According to this first bit of analysis, it can thus be stated that *Turtle Island’s* collection of poems follows the tradition of nature writing, which has been “heavily weighted towards the U.S. tradition: often constructed as beginning with Thoreau’s *Walden* and extending through works like Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* and Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*.”²¹ However, we could go further and state that the work of Gary Snyder takes its place in what, later in the years, has been more precisely defined as ecopoetics:

“Ecopoetics” is an ecocritical neologism referring to the incorporation of an ecological or environmental perspective into the study of poetics, and into the reading and writing of (mainly) literary works. “Poetics” and “poetry” derive from the classical Greek word “*poiesis*,” meaning “making,” [...]. Making is by no means an exclusively human practice. Many other species make things, some of which display not only high levels of craftsmanship but also an aesthetic sensibility [...] The natural systems that have enabled the emergence of these diverse creative

¹⁸ Converse, Harriet Maxwell & Arthur Caswell Parker. 1906. *Myths and Legends of the New York State Iroquois*, p. 33.

¹⁹ Snyder, Gary. 1974. “INTRODUCTORY NOTE.” *Turtle Island*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Armbruster, Karla. 2016. “Nature Writing,” p. 157.

practices might also be seen as *poietic* or, rather, *autopoietic*, continuously generating new forms and patterns, and dissolving old ones, in a dynamic process of open-ended becoming. Human “poesy” is thus both continuous with that of other species and sustained by what the early German Romantics referred to as the “unconscious poesy” of the Earth. One of the core concerns of ecopoetics is to consider how what we make—especially, but not exclusively, with words—might in turn help sustain these other-than-human poietic practices and autopoietic processes.²²

In other words, poetics can be seen as a creative process that is intrinsic to the very practice of being alive. That is because the art of *making* is constantly nurtured by the “unconscious poesy” of the living organism of which every species is part, the Earth. It follows that “at its most encompassing, ecopoetics entails nothing less than the art of living genuinely sustainably.”²³ In this sense, Snyder brilliantly argues on the subject in this talk given for the ethnopoetics conference at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, in 1975:

So, what is this poetics then that starts back there? Like Dr. Diamond said, primary experience. Our hands got this way by doing certain things a long time. The hand must still do those things or it isn't what it can be. Beautiful little system. This is the origin of language and poetry from the standpoint of India: Brahma, the creator, is in a profound state of trance. He is silence, stillness. A thought moves somewhere in there. It manifests itself as song, the goddess Vak. The goddess Vak becomes the universe itself as energy. Of that energy all sub-energies are born. Now, Vak, in Indo-European philology is the same as the Latin “vox” of the English “voice.” This goddess takes on another name: she's also called Sarasvati, which means “the flowing one,” and she's recognized today in India as the goddess of poetry, music and learning. She's represented as wearing a white sari, riding a peacock, carrying the vina and a scroll. In the primal days of that energy flow, language was just “seed syllables.” The practice of mantra chanting in India, which is the chanting of those seed syllables, is conceived of as being a way to take yourself back to fundamental sound-energy levels. The sense of the universe as fundamentally sound and song, begins poetics. They also say in Sanskrit poetics that the original poetry is the sound of running water and the wind in the trees.²⁴

The origins of poetry are thus rooted in nature. That is why poetics is primary experience: this way, the poet can directly reconnect with the source of energy, the energy of the Earth. In accordance with this, it is possible to speak of a “poetics of the earth.”²⁵ Thus, Snyder explains how “communication energy” flows, stating that the experience of poetics and its “transmission” is possible only when the poet or singer finds himself in a deep state of connection with nature.²⁶ This state is enhanced by “an attitude of openness, inwardness, gratitude; plus meditation, fasting, a little suffering, some rupturing of the day-to-day ties with the social fabric.”²⁷ Then, the poet adds:

Now, I like to think that the concern with the planet, with the integrity of the biosphere, is along and deeply-rooted concern of the poet for this reason: the role of the singer was to sing the voice of corn, the voice of the Pleiades, the voice of bison, the voice of antelope. To contact in a very special way an “other” that was not within the human sphere; something that could not

²² Rigby, Kate. 2016. “Ecopoetics,” p. 79.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 81.

²⁴ Snyder, Gary. 1975. *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, pp. 9-10.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 11.

²⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 11-12.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 10.

be learned by continually consulting other human teachers, but could only be learned by venturing outside the borders and going into your own mind-wilderness, unconscious wilderness.²⁸

Snyder describes a very deep relationship between the poet and the *other-than-human*, whereby the latter is the very source of his inspiration. In this sense, the transmission of communication-energy supports the idea of interconnectedness, where “each living being is [...] a «song»” and “the planet itself, is also a living being.”²⁹ Thus, Snyder introduces the Earth-goddess of the Western world: the Gaia Hypothesis – a scientific view of the universe, however linked with some kind of mythology. It is “a biochemists’ hypothesis” developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, who argued that “the whole of the biosphere is one living organism which has strategically programmed its evolution for 3 billion years, including producing us.”³⁰ However scientific, the theory can also be read in accordance with many other interpretations, including some more philosophical, spiritual or even religious. Referring to the Buddhist tradition, the Gaia Hypothesis can be learnt in the telling of the *Flower Garland Sutra*, specifically in the metaphor of the Jewel Net of Indra, being it:

a beautiful net which stretches out infinitely in all directions. Every node of this net has a bright and shiny jewel placed in it. Since the net is infinite in all directions, it contains infinitely many jewels. Each one of the jewels in the net reflects all the other jewels, and each one of the jewels is reflected in all the other jewels, so that the jewels reflect each other infinitely. [...] each one of the jewels depends for its existence on all the other jewels and each one of the jewels contains all the other jewels. If any one of the jewels was missing, none of the other jewels would still be what it is. Each jewel is vital to the existence of all the other jewels.³¹

It follows the Buddhist principle of “dependent co-origination or Great Wheel of Causation,”³² *pratītya-samutpāda*,³³ nowadays otherwise referred to as the phenomena of *interbeing*, in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh,³⁴ a Vietnamese Buddhist monk contemporary to Gary Snyder. That is to say, the principle of interbeing can be explained as a “co-evolutionary interrelated world based on co-dependency, built upon dynamic cause and effect to create aggregate conditions.”³⁵ This idea is also at the core of the environmental philosophy of deep ecology, characterized by Arne Naess in 1973:

Rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image. Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions or basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Snyder, Gary. 1974. “INTRODUCTORY NOTE.” *Turtle Island*.

³⁰ Snyder, Gary. 1975. *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, p. 11.

³¹ Holst, Mirja Annalena. 2023. “«To Be is To Inter-Be»: Thich Nhat Hanh on Independent Arising,” p. 21.

³² Badiner, Allan Hunter. 1990. *Dharma Gaia. A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, p. xvi.

³³ Keown, Damien. 2003. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, p. 221.

³⁴ Thich, Nhat Hahn. 1991. *Peace is Every Step: The Path to Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, pp. 95-96.

³⁵ Murray, Hunter. 2012. “Dependent Origination as Natural Governing Law,” p. 26.

The total-field model dissolves not only the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept [...]³⁶

The interrelation, not only between all living organisms and their breathing planet, but also among the theories around it, is evident – so evident that it is even possible to speak of a *Dharma Gaia*, according to Buddhist scholar Allan Hunt Badiner. In his collection of essays – that includes writings of just-mentioned Thich Nhat Hanh, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, but also Rick Fields, whose work has been fundamental to trace the coming of Buddhism to the United States, – he merges the Buddhist understanding of the universe with that of James Lovelock, according to the following words:

[...] dependent co-origination or the Great Wheel of Causation [...] suggests that all things — objects and beings — exist only *interdependently*, not *independently*. This is the emptiness of *sunyata* — that nothing has a separate existence. In a Buddhist perception, everything is alive and influences everything else. All of nature is vibrating with life, even the air.

In fact, it was while observing the air that independent atmospheric scientist James Lovelock, then under contract to NASA, recognized dependent co-origination in the self-regulating, constantly changing atmosphere of the Earth. He hypothesized that the Earth is a homeostatic living organism that coordinates its vital systems to compensate for threatening environmental changes. At the suggestion of his friend, novelist William Golding, Lovelock called this theory the Gaia Hypothesis, after the Greek Goddess of the Earth. While unity is the essence of the Gaia principle, so is the fact that differences and variety in nature are not just to be tolerated, but encouraged. Our very survival depends on diversity.³⁷

Therefore, Badiner goes on by arguing that Lovelock's theory could possibly be understood as “a scientifically verifiable religion,” able to merge “Buddhism, deep ecology, and [even] feminism:”³⁸

Such a faith might [...] be called *Dharma Gaia*.

Dharma comes from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, which means “that which is established firmly,” that which is confirmed, that which is real. *Dharma Gaia* might therefore mean *the teaching of the living Earth*. The place of the Buddha's enlightenment was Bodh Gaya in northeastern India. As meditation teacher and Green activist Christopher Titmuss has observed, both Gaia and Gaya share the same pronunciation — and a certain ancient intimacy with the Earth.³⁹

It follows that if the poet wants to learn *the teaching of the living Earth* and sing it to his community, he must be aware of his “sense of belonging to the global biosphere.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, he should try to “[practice] ideas of symbiosis and permeable relationality” with his surrounding non-human entities, thus also with his place(s).⁴¹ He must focus on the practice of “community building [...] starting from the materiality and situatedness of [his own

³⁶ Naess, Arne. 1973. “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary,” p. 95.

³⁷ Badiner, Allan Hunter. 1990. *Dharma Gaia*, p. xvi.

³⁸ *Ivi*, pp. xvi-xvii.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. xvii.

⁴⁰ Marques, Nuno. 2020. “A New Song for Ourselves—Contributions of Gary Snyder's Poetics of Place to Current Eco-poetics,” p. 39.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 33.

body] to recognize the existence of other organisms, in whose bodies the environmental, cultural, and political complexities of the globalized world also become visible.”⁴² Following this process, he would recognise that “affiliation with place is not the result of a passive relation to place, or of a spontaneous and «natural» relation; rather, it is a cultural and site-specific process of identity and community creation as mediated by poetry and other communal activities.”⁴³ Concerning Snyder’s ecopoetic practice, it must be acknowledged that “community making and relation to place” play indeed a fundamental role – referring to his work, one could talk of “poetics of place” or, in a broader sense, of “[literature] of place.”⁴⁴ In addition to that, his “commitment with places”⁴⁵ has been channelled in various contributions to the social movement of bioregionalism and in a deep study of bioregional perspectives,⁴⁶ of which the previously discussed Gaia Hypothesis or Dharma Gaia is considered a fundamental principle:

Bioregionalism is a social movement and action-oriented field of study focused on enabling human communities to live, work, eat, and play sustainably within Earth’s dynamic web of life. At the heart of the matter is this core guiding principle: human beings are social animals; if we are to flourish as a species, we need healthy relationships and secure attachments in our living arrangements with one another and with the land, waters, habitat, plants, and animals upon which we depend. [...] Thus, bioregionalists argue, we need to establish new, just, ethical, and ecologically resilient ways to reconnect with one another and with the land.⁴⁷

Mentioning Ray Dasmann – one of the main bioregionalist thinkers, – Gary Snyder argues on what the biologist calls “the relationship between ecosystem cultures and biosphere cultures:”⁴⁸

Ecosystem cultures being those whose economic base of support is a natural region, a watershed, a plant zone, a natural territory within which they have to make their whole living. Living within the terms of an ecosystem, out of self-interest if nothing else, you are careful. You don’t destroy the soils, you don’t kill all the game, you don’t log it off and let the water wash the soil away. Biosphere cultures are the cultures that begin with early civilization and the centralized state; are cultures that spread their economic support system out far enough that they can afford to wreck one ecosystem, and keep moving on. Well, that’s Rome, that’s Babylon. It’s just a big enough spread that you can begin to be irresponsible about certain specific local territories. It leads us to imperialist civilization with capitalism and institutionalized economic growth.⁴⁹

Following this definition, ecosystem cultures can be said to be living in accordance with deep ecological values and a bioregional understanding of their territory. Indeed, preserving a natural region, or bioregion, becomes a major interest for the people who inhabit it and

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 34.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 40.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 34-35.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 39.

⁴⁶ Snyder, Gary. 1990. “Bioregional Perspectives,” pp. 37-44.

⁴⁷ Pezzoli, Keith. 2016. “Bioregionalism,” p. 25.

⁴⁸ Snyder, Gary. 1975. *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

acknowledge to be dependent on its resources. Therefore, bioregions should be understood as “life-places,” where “local and daily life [adapts] to local specificities and circumstances.”⁵⁰ It follows that their inhabitants develop a “deep awareness of [their] own [...] situatedness,” allowing the creation of a sense of place and identity *with* the place.⁵¹ In bioregional terms, this “place-based strategy” is called “localization.”⁵² This can be supported by different practices, such as “walking, working, and sitting in meditation”⁵³ – as suggested by Snyder’s own experience. Accordingly, another bioregionalist process is that of “reinhabitation,” which involves “learning to leave-in-place and in areas that have been disrupted by past exploitation.”⁵⁴

Reinhabitory refers to the tiny number of persons who come out of the industrial societies (having collected or squandered the fruits of eight thousand years of civilization) and then start to turn back to the land, back to place. This comes for some with the rational and scientific realization of interconnectedness and planetary limits. But the actual demands of a life committed to a place, and living somewhat by the sunshine green-plant energy that is concentrating in that spot, are so physically and intellectually intense that it is a moral and spiritual choice as well.⁵⁵

In fact, according to Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, “the term [bioregion] refers both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness—to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place.”⁵⁶ This solution supports the fight against what Snyder calls “the inexorable push towards monoculture,”⁵⁷ to be added to the widespread issue of “alienation from one’s [own] body and [...] place of living, [...] promoted by centralized forms of government,”⁵⁸ such as those of biosphere cultures. Thus, the bioregional approach to the land and the region allows the “[creation of] sustainable and resilient communities at a human scale; it encourages local investments in resources, livelihoods, and institutions that build the community’s assets.”⁵⁹ From the standpoint of the poet, this can be “envisioned as a form of stewardship,”⁶⁰ which means “find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there [...] Find psychological techniques for creating an awareness of the «self» that includes social and natural environment.”⁶¹ Could

⁵⁰ Marques, Nuno. 2020. “A New Song for Ourselves,” pp. 35-36.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, pp. 41-42.

⁵² Pezzoli, Keith. 2016. “Bioregionalism,” p. 27.

⁵³ Marques, Nuno. 2020. “A New Song for Ourselves,” p. 41.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 36-37.

⁵⁵ Snyder, Gary. 1995. “Reinhabitation,” pp. 190-191.

⁵⁶ Pezzoli, Keith. 2016. “Bioregionalism,” p. 26.

⁵⁷ Snyder, Gary. 1975. *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Marques, Nuno. 2020. “A New Song for Ourselves,” p. 36.

⁵⁹ Pezzoli, Keith. 2016. “Bioregionalism,” p. 27.

⁶⁰ Marques, Nuno. 2020. “A New Song for Ourselves,” p. 36.

⁶¹ Snyder, Gary. 1974. “Four Changes,” p. 100. Mentioned in Marques, Nuno. 2020. “A New Song for Ourselves,” p. 36.

thus this new self be envisioned as Whitman's transcendental "I" and compose a new Song of Ourselves?⁶² In 1975, desiring "to talk about [...] the poetry of ourselves,"⁶³ Snyder said:

We're just starting, in the last ten years here, to begin to make songs that will speak for plants, mountains, animals and children. When you see your first deer of the day you sing your salute to the deer, or your first red-wind blackbird – I saw one this morning! Such poetries will be created by us as we reinhabit this land with people who know they belong to it; for whom "primitive" is not a word that means past, but primary, and future. They will be created as we learn to see, region by region, how we live specifically (plant life!) in each place. The poems will leap out past the automobiles and TV sets of today into the vastness of the Milky Way (visible only when the electricity is turned down), to richen and humanize the scientific cosmologies. These poesies to come will help us learn to be people of knowledge in this universe in community with the other people – non-human included – brothers and sisters.⁶⁴

⁶² Marques, Nuno. 2020. "A New Song for Ourselves," pp. 32-46. That is the main question of this essay.

⁶³ Snyder, Gary. 1975. *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 13.

2. Michael McClure—The Beats, Animism and Animal People

The poetry of Beat writer Michael McClure (Marysville, 1932 – Oakland, 2020) has always been “dedicated to the Human Spirit & all Mammals,”⁶⁵ given that he felt deeply connected to his “mammal self,”⁶⁶ thus fully acknowledging his belonging to the animal world. Consequently, his work “has been anchored in nature from the start.”⁶⁷ In fact, the poet’s way of living and literary compositions was profoundly oriented towards an understanding of nature and more-than-human relationships that resembled animistic philosophy, up to the point of experimenting “beast language”⁶⁸ as a way to connect with non-human animals:

GOOOOOOR! GOOOOOOOOOO!
GOOOOOOOOOR!
GRAHHH! GRAHH! GRAHH!
Grah goooooor! Ghahh! Graaar! Greeeeeer! Grayowhr!
Greeeeee
GRAHHRR! RAHHR! GRAGHHRR! RAHR!
RAHR! RAHHR! GRAHHHR! GAHHR! HRAHR!
[...]
GAHHHHHHHH!
ROWRR!
GROOOOOOOOOOH!⁶⁹

In a certain sense, the roaring of McClure can be interpreted as a personal form of howling, which might remind us of what his fellow friend Allen Ginsberg brought on stage – the stage that they shared – at San Francisco’s Six Gallery reading in 1955. However different, both forms of howling were permeated by a sense of spiritual transcendence and raised from a shared need to shake the Cold War robotic⁷⁰ atmosphere of their time. In addition, they could be seen in the perspective of the practice of mantra: whether Ginsberg repeatedly asserted that everything was holy, McClure fused with the sacredness of animal creatures by echoing their sounds. Nevertheless, this type of performance came in the life of McClure some years after the Six Gallery. For that event, he presented instead another kind of his own poetry – the poetry people are more familiar with, not made of animal sounds but words. In any case, even before that night, poets of the Bay Area were already familiar with McClure’s sensitive soul. Indeed, it was Kenneth Rexroth that suggested “Allen to get in touch with [Michael], whose early poetry was extremely powerful and infused with an

⁶⁵ Michael, McClure. 1969. *Ghost Tantras*.

⁶⁶ Bellarsi, Franca. 2008. “Sex and the Body in Michael McClure’s Quest for «the Mammal Self»,” pp. 173-191.

⁶⁷ Faylor, Garrett. 2016. “Michael McClure,” p. 1.

⁶⁸ Bonome, Antonio J. 2021. “McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians,” p. 3.

⁶⁹ Michael, McClure. 1969. *Ghost Tantras*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ I am using this adjective thinking about Ginsberg’s *robot apartments* in “Howl” (p. 68) and Snyder’s *robot nations* in “Mother Earth: Her Whales” (p. 574). Both poems can be found in the volume edited by Ann Charters, *The Portable Beat Reader* (1992).

uncommon awareness of nature.”⁷¹ It was already a fact that “McClure’s words were to grow into a new voice that coupled ecological and environmental concerns with a respect for the sacred spirit of all creatures.”⁷² In this way, Bill Morgan recounts the poet’s presence at the Six Gallery:

The second poet to read was Michael McClure, the youngest at twenty-three [...] Micheal read his own powerful “For the Death of 100 Whales.” It was a sobering poem that detailed a horrifying example of man’s cruelty to other creatures. McClure had just read that the military had used a pod of whales off the coast of Iceland for target practice. The story had just broken his heart. Protecting the environment was not yet an issue of public interest during the 1950s. Through his poetry, McClure would guide readers to a new respect for the planet.⁷³

In McClure’s words, the poem “sprang from an article in *Time* magazine (1954):”⁷⁴

Killer whales . . . Savage sea cannibals up to thirty feet long with teeth like bayonets . . . one was caught with fourteen seals and thirteen porpoises in its belly . . . often tear at boats and nets . . . destroyed thousands of dollars worth of fishing tackle . . . Icelandic government appealed to the U.S., which has thousands of men stationed at a lonely NATO airbase on the subarctic island. Seventy-nine bored G.I.’s responded with enthusiasm. Armed with rifles and machine guns one posse of Americans climbed into four small boats and in one morning wiped out a pack of 100 killers . . . First the killers were rounded up into tight formation with concentrated machine gun fire, then moved out again one by one, for the final blast which would kill them . . . as one was wounded, the others would set upon it and tear it to pieces with their jagged teeth.⁷⁵

Feeling “horrified and angry” about the slaughter, McClure was inspired to write *For the Death of 100 Whales*,⁷⁶ with the aim of drawing more attention around those *bleeding* news. In fact, whereas the article talked about “killer whales” and “savage sea cannibals,”⁷⁷ thus addressing non-human animals as violent, bloody-thirsty and murderous, the poet shifted the focus on the real act of violence, the practice of cruelty at the hands of human animals, those of the Icelandic government and American G.I.s who committed the slaughter. McClure describes them as “sleek wolves / mowers and reapers of sea kine,” while whales are presented as “THE GIANT TADPOLES / [...] like sheep or children”⁷⁸ – the metaphor, addressing humans as wolves and whales as sheep-children, guides the audience towards an understanding of the latter, as extremely innocent, even vulnerable, beside their size. Thus, McClure appeals to the Spanish painter Francisco Goya, whose *Horrors of War* (1810-1820) only could bear comparison: “shot from the sea’s bore. / Turned and twisted (Goya!!)

⁷¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 98.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 102.

⁷⁴ McClure, Michael. 1992. *The Portable Beat Reader*, p. 285.

⁷⁵ I am quoting the extract of *Time* magazine directly from *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 285-286.

/ Flung blood and sperm” and “snapped at the sun, / ran for the sea’s floor. / Goya! Goya!”⁷⁹ Then, the desperate poet “[calls] on D. H. Lawrence [...] to be the tutelary figure of the poem because of his description of the copulation of whales and his imaginings of the angels moving from body to body in the mammoth act,”⁸⁰ referring to the composition *Whales Weep Not*. This feeling of care and concern towards giant sea-animals is thus not isolated to the poetry of Michael McClure – not even is the episode of *the death of 100 whales*. Indeed, in the lines of Gregory Corso we read: “when the mayor comes to get my vote tell him / when are you going to stop people killing whales!”⁸¹ Additionally, McClure recounts:

Years later, at the United Nations Environmental Conference in Stockholm in 1972, Gary Snyder and I were among the contingent of independent lobbyists (led by Project Jonah and Stewart Brand) who took it upon themselves to represent whales, Indians, and the freedom of the diversity of the environment. We participated in whale demonstrations in Stockholm and immediately following the conference I returned to San Francisco and staged a pro-whale demonstration. At the Stockholm conference Snyder wrote and distributed a poem, *Mother Earth: Her Whales*. . .⁸²

This poem does not only address the issue of the killing of whales, but many different – however similar in their roots – environmental problems altogether:

The whales turn and glisten, plunge
and sound and rise again,
hanging over subtly darkening deeps
flowing like breathing planets
in the sparkling whorls of
living light—

And Japan quibbles for words on
what kinds of whales they can kill?
A once-great Buddhist nation
dribbles methyl mercury
like gonorrhoea
in the sea.⁸³

These two stanzas mirror one the other. At first, poet Gary Snyder describes the marvelling life and beauty of whales in the ocean, to which it follows a feeling of disappointment towards a country – Japan – he has long loved and which, moreover, has a long history of respect for the living planet and its living creatures behind – that is related to its Buddhist tradition, which seems to have vanished in its past. In fact, Japan’s leaders wonder what kind of whales they can kill, as if some lives, or species,⁸⁴ mattered more than others – this belief

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 286.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ Corso, Gregory. 1992. *The Portable Beat Reader*, p. 180.

⁸² McClure, Michael. 1992. *The Portable Beat Reader*, pp. 286, 287.

⁸³ Snyder, Gary. 1992. *The Portable Beat Reader*, p. 573.

⁸⁴ Here lies the foundation of speciesism. See Ryder, Richard. 2010. “Speciesism Again. The Original Leaflet,” pp. 1-2.

is strongly in contrast with the Buddhist principle of “equality of all life.”⁸⁵ Furthermore, Snyder brings to light another Japanese act of misbehaviour towards the planet and its interrelated lives:

Japan. Between 1932 and 1968, a Japanese factory released industrial waste containing high levels of methylmercury into local waterways, resulting in widespread pollution of Minamata Bay and the contamination of fish and shellfish species in the region. In the 1950s, local residents became alarmed by the strange behaviours of animals and an increase in the incidence of developmental disorders in newborns. In 1959, epidemiological studies revealed that communities living near Minamata Bay that traditionally depended on fish and shellfish for their diet had been unknowingly exposed to high levels of methylmercury. The devastating health effects subsequently became known as Minamata disease – a developmental condition at high dose characterized by infantile cerebral palsy, congenital abnormalities, ataxia, paralysis, hearing and vision loss, and other symptoms related to acute methylmercury exposure.⁸⁶

This report by the World Health Organization recounts the water pollution disasters of the Minamata Bay in mid-twentieth century, evidently illustrated according to an anthropocentric point of view. Indeed, the article exposes methylmercury’s health effects on human people as a main concern, while water pollution and fish peoples’⁸⁷ intoxication take second place. This very perspective of such a massive environmental disaster is the whole point behind the poet’s statement: “a once-great Buddhist nation / dribbles methyl mercury / like gonorrhoea / in the sea.”⁸⁸ When observing the Minamata disaster, the interrelatedness and interdependence of life is indeed mind-blowing: misdirected human action leads to water pollution that leads to fish intoxication that leads to human diseases or even death. Life on the planet breaths together, it inhales toxic waste together, it dies together. Let us wonder:

IS man most precious of all things?
—then let us love him, and his brothers, all those
fading living beings—

[...]
May ants, may abalone, otters, wolves and elk
Rise! and pull away their giving
from the robot nations.

Solidarity. The People.
Standing Tree People!
Flying Bird People!
Swimming Sea People! Four-legged, two-legged, people!

How can the head-heavy power-hungry politic scientist

⁸⁵ That is “the idea that all sentient beings, including both human and nonhuman animals, are equal—as expounded by the Taiwanese Buddhist nun Shih Chao-hwei.” “Chao-hwei recognizes animals as part of a more inclusive category she calls «life» (*shengming* 生命), or «sentient beings» (*zhongsheng* 眾生). [...] The term *zhongsheng* refers to «all living things», but in the context of «equality of life» or «protecting life», «living things» or «life» frequently refers to «all sentient beings». Nicolaisen, Jeffrey. 2021. “Rethinking Ontology with Equality of Life,” pp. 35, 41.

⁸⁶ World Health Organization. 2019. Introduction to “Strategic planning for implementation of the health-related articles of the Minamata Convention on Mercury,” p. 6.

⁸⁷ We are soon discussing the reason behind the use of the term *people* related to fish, and all other living beings.

⁸⁸ Snyder, Gary. 1992. *The Portable Beat Reader*, p. 573.

government two-world Capitalist-Imperialist
third-world Communist paper-shuffling male
non-farmer jet-set bureaucrats
speak for the green of the leaf? Speak for the soil?⁸⁹

If it is to love man – purposeful use of the word *man* to emphasise hierarchy, – then all living beings must be loved accordingly. What is more, the poet recognises a special importance to those who could be defined as *animal people*: they are the real energy *givers* in this world. This recognition of personhood – not only to animals, but also to plant beings: “standing Tree People!” – accords to our research-path some more important hints. In the first place, it allows the transition from the term *non-human animals* to this new-found *animal people* – eventually, *tree people* or *plant people* to replace the more general meaning of *other-than-human* or *more-than-human beings*. In fact, while the very latter seems to even prize what is beyond the human kingdom, what is *more-than-human*, thus apparently giving the term a positive connotation, it shares with all other option-terms the same issue, its human-centrality. As an alternative, the recognition of personhood to all living beings – be they animals, humans, or plants – resolves the issue of what is human and what is not, acknowledging the fundamental role that everyone – all life – plays *on/for*, or better, *together with* Mother Earth. In Buddhist terms, this idea could be linked to arguments around Buddha-nature, originally “a permanent and eternal substance pervading the universe, immanent in all phenomena,” later also stated to be “the phenomena themselves,” thus resolving the dualistic-attitude, according to which the existence of beings was on one side and Buddha-nature on the other.⁹⁰ Following this and according to the basic Mahāyāna principle, all sentient beings – nature included, since “Buddha-nature is universal”⁹¹ – are “manifesting Buddhahood.”⁹² Eliminating any separation fulfils thus the ideal of a non-separate world, where “everything – animals and inanimate objects, mountains, rivers, flowers, etc.”⁹³ – is nature. Every element of the universe is “Buddha-nature and vice versa.”⁹⁴

A way of seeing an organism, other than a lump or bulk of self-perpetuating protoplasm (and there’s nothing wrong with that), is the view that the organism is, in itself, a tissue or veil between itself and the environment. And, it is not only the tissue between itself and the environment—it is also simultaneously the environment itself. [...] There is, in fact, a central force in the organism and it IS the environment.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ *Ivi*, p. 574.

⁹⁰ Ruperti, Bonaventura, Silvia Vesco & Carolina Negri. 2017. “Rethinking Nature in Japan. From Tradition to Modernity,” p. 87.

⁹¹ *Ivi*, p. 85.

⁹² *Ivi*, p. 90.

⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 85.

⁹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 88.

⁹⁵ McClure, Michael. 1994. *Scratching the Beat Surface*, p. 44. In Nelson, Paul E. 2018. “Projective Verse: The Spiritual Legacy of the Beat Generation,” p. 8.

In McClure's cosmology – that can also be interpreted as a “[combination of] the words cosmic and ecology,”⁹⁶ – the universe is seen as animated and alive. Human people, together with all other living life, are “manifestations of Indra's infinite net,”⁹⁷ being it “a net of infinite size with jewels at each intersection of the net, and each jewel reflecting every other jewel and thus said to be the same as every other jewel.”⁹⁸ In McClure's words, “this is all a string of pearls / with reflections of reflections [...]”⁹⁹ Therefore, “all consciousness is interconnected.”¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, in Whitehead's organismic philosophy, “the fundamental elements of the universe are «occasions of experience».”¹⁰¹ In order to acknowledge interconnectedness, the most powerful occasion of experience is *prehension*:

Each actual entity is [...] a process, first a process of becoming itself and then of becoming every other actual entity. According to his interpretation of the theory of relativity, no two actual entities are unrelated; each actual entity “feels” every other actual entity. [The] term for this “feeling” is “prehension.” One actual entity can prehend another. One actual entity transmits itself—thereby extends its life—to another . . .¹⁰²

In other words, every living being exists in its eternal process of becoming in relation with other entities or *objects*. The experience of *prehension* happens when, during the interaction with the surrounding environment, the organism's “consciousness for a time actually merges with the «object» [...] as an extension of [its] own consciousness and, as such, for a time create a greater field of energy; a deeper occasion of experience.”¹⁰³ Thus, *prehension* is “a deeper engagement [...] experienced in the act of sacred devotion to a moment,” which turns out to be an “[experience] of vividness.”¹⁰⁴ There is no better example of *prehension* than McClure's action at San Francisco Zoo in 1965, when “he read the poem *Tantra No. 49* to four caged lions.”¹⁰⁵ More precisely, he roared the poem using his beast language:

Bruce Conner and I went there to record roosters. We ran into the lion keeper, who was also a poet, and he invited us to see the lions. I read and they roared. We roared together. You can Google it. I also read Chaucer to kangaroos that waved their heads back and forth and to seals that were barking.¹⁰⁶

I read and they roared. We roared together. At San Francisco Zoo, McClure created a moment of deep vivid experience, whereas his consciousness merged with the lions as an

⁹⁶ Nelson, Paul E. 2018. “Projective Verse: The Spiritual Legacy of the Beat Generation,” p. 9.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 10.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ McClure, Michael. 1995. *Three Poems*, p. 35. In *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ Nelson, Paul E. 2018. “Projective Verse,” p. 10.

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 4.

¹⁰² von Hallberg, Robert. 1978. *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art*, p. 86. In *Ibidem*.

¹⁰³ Nelson, Paul E. 2018. “Projective Verse,” p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ Bonome, Antonio J. 2021. “McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Raskin, Jonah. 2013. “Interview with Poet Michael McClure.” In *Ivi*, p. 8.

extension of his own consciousness – thus, the reading produced a greater field of energy around the animals’ cage. As explained by Franca Bellarsi, it is McClure’s choice “to explore reality and the subject in terms of a web of energy by relying on concepts such as process, impermanence and interdependence.”¹⁰⁷ According to this, his performance “portrayed [...] a tantric willingness to find divinity within [...] the animal kingdom.”¹⁰⁸

The word ‘Tantra’ refers to a spiritual system. ‘Tantra’ also means ‘to weave’ in Sanskrit and allegedly addresses the idea that everything is connected. As for the origin of the word, Tantric Master Shri Aghorinath Ji writes: “The word tantra is derived from two words, tattva and mantra. Tattva means the science of cosmic principles, while mantra refers to the science of mystic sound and vibrations. Tantra, therefore, is the application of cosmic sciences with a view of attaining spiritual ascendancy.”¹⁰⁹

McClure’s “[acknowledgement of] divinity within animality”¹¹⁰ resonates with an animistic understanding of reality:

I had come to believe that the way to the universal was by means of the most intensely personal. I believed that what we truly share with others lies in the deepest, most personal, even physiological core— [...] I wanted to tell of my feelings of hunger, of emptiness, and of epiphany. [...] I wanted to say how I was overwhelmed by the sense of animism—and how everything (breath, spot, rock, ripple in the tidepool, cloud, and stone) was alive and spirited. It was a frightening and joyous awareness of my undersoul. I say undersoul because I did not want to join Nature by my mind but by my viscera— my belly. The German language has two words, Geist for the soul of man and Odem for the spirit of beasts. Odem is the undersoul. I was becoming sharply aware of it [...]¹¹¹

In this passage, which refers to poem *Point Lobos: Animism*, McClure introduces a fundamental feature of his poetic exploration. That is the “Undersoul” or “spirit of the beast,” a “hidden, earth-connected, organic matter, [...] that the rational ego has tended to repress and without which [...] no real freedom or individuation can be achieved.”¹¹² It is “the basic energy of which all mammal and living forms partake.”¹¹³ As regards human people, it can be seen as “the divine animal/mammal part of [their] being.”¹¹⁴ In this sense, “the self is conceived of as encompassing multitudes of biological living forms,” starting from “the basic cell up to the mammal form.”¹¹⁵ This shared animality “[links] the human subject and the non-human Other:”

[...] to McClure, humans are first and foremost organisms and fields of cellular energy which share a number of lower common denominators with all other life forms, down to the most primitive and logos-deprived ones, the basic cell and the protein included. Hence the need for

¹⁰⁷ Bellarsi, Franca. 2008. “Sex and the Body,” p. 175.

¹⁰⁸ Bonome, Antonio J. 2021. “McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians,” p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Shri, Aghorinath Ji. 2018. “A Tantric Master’s View of Tantra.” In *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁰ Bonome, Antonio J. 2021. “McClure, Beuys, Kulik, and the Flux of Pink Indians,” p. 3.

¹¹¹ McClure, Michael. 1992. *The Portable Beat Reader*, p. 284.

¹¹² Bellarsi, Franca. 2008. “Sex and the Body,” pp. 184-185.

¹¹³ *Ivi*, p. 186.

¹¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 191.

¹¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 186-187.

humans to deconstruct their false sense of separateness from the rest of creation and their far too rigid self-image built on the erroneous assumptions of anthropocentrism.¹¹⁶

McClure's ecological stance is thus "radically biocentric in its displacement of the human from the centre of creation and in its privileging of the notion of species and biological systems."¹¹⁷ Finally, the poet's biocentric sensibility recognises that "all life on earth has intrinsic value"¹¹⁸ and human people are just a little fragment of such a precious system. It follows that "the human mammal is not capable of receiving pleasure from the tortured deaths of his own kind without previous acceptance of insanity or the development of insanity within himself!"¹¹⁹ Hence, McClure takes his stand:

I
AM
A MAMMAL
PATRIOT
and LOVE
all life
FOR
LIKE
all life
I
MOVE
in an expanding
helix
through the waves
and fields
and forces.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 176.

¹¹⁷ Bellarsi, Franca. 2008. "Sex and the Body," p. 175.

¹¹⁸ Max Oelschlaeger. 1991. *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*, p. 208. Cited in Bellarsi, Franca. 2008. "Sex and the Body," p. 175.

¹¹⁹ McClure, Michael. 1970. *Star*, p. 96.

¹²⁰ McClure, Michael. 1978. "Antechamber," pp. 38-40. In Bellarsi, Franca. 2008. "Sex and the Body," p. 177.

3. Allen Ginsberg—The Beats, Non-Violence and Back-to-the-Land

“America when will we end the human war?”¹²¹ The question – still echoing – dates to the 1950s, when desperate poet Allen Ginsberg (Newark, 1926 – New York, 1997) addresses his warmongering country:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.
I can't stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don't feel good don't bother me.
I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.
America when will you be angelic?
[...]
I'm sick of your insane demands.
[...]
Your machinery is too much for me.
You made me want to be a saint.
There must be some other way to settle this argument.¹²²

America (1956) is a critical declaration against the state of war supported by the United States, together with their domestic and foreign policy – it was written during the years of Cold war tension, shortly after the beginning of the twenty-year period of the Vietnam war (1955-1975), also remembered as “the first television war.”¹²³ Allen Ginsberg touches on relevant issues, as nuclear threat, persistent propaganda, anti-communist persecutions, inhuman robotic machinery, war profits. Hence, in *My Sad Self* (1958), the poet walks on the pavements of “[his] world, Manhattan,” thus describing his inner state: “sad, / [...] stop, bemused / [...] waiting for the moment when... / Time to go home & cook supper & listen to / the romantic war news on the radio.”¹²⁴ Similarly, in another passage of the previous poem, he claims not to have read the newspapers for months because of their unhappy content – then, adding:

I'm addressing you [America].
Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?
I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.
I read it every week.
Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.
I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.
It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious.
Movie producers are serious. Everybody's serious but me.
It occurs to me that I am America.
I am talking to myself again.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “America,” p. 31.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ Houen, Alex. 2008. “«Back! Back! Back! Central mind-machine pentagon...»: Allen Ginsberg and the Vietnam War,” p. 361.

¹²⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. 1963. “My Sad Self,” pp. 72-73.

¹²⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “America,” p. 32.

In these two poetical moments – waiting to go home for listening to *romantic war news* and being obsessed by the *emotional life* encapsulated in newspapers, – Ginsberg shows the brutality of the government’s means of propaganda that create emotional dependence, being the news romanticised and loaded with emotional transport. Already in *Howl* (1956), the young poet was “accusing the radio of hypnotism,”¹²⁶ while in *Television Was a Baby Crawling Towards that Deathchamber* (1961), he deepens: “MAKE EVIL PROPAGANDA OVER THE WORLD! [...] EVIL SPELLS THRU THE DAILY NEWS!”¹²⁷ In a nutshell, Ginsberg draws attention to the narratives of the “Magic Intelligence” that sells the news, creating a separate world, whose sides communicate only through “electric networks.”¹²⁸

Westmoreland wants
to be Devil, others die for his General Power
sustaining hurt millions in house security
tuning to images on TV’s separate universe where
peasant manhoods burn in black & white forest
villages [...] ¹²⁹

In this sense, Allen Ginsberg brings to light a new question that is badgering his mind: is the planet interconnected as described by the metaphor of the Indra’s Net¹³⁰ or thanks to “wires of masscommunication in [our] head and phantom political voices in the air?”¹³¹ In fact, whether the first hypothesis is supported by Buddhist philosophy and even scientific theories of the universe,¹³² the latter does actually describe the seemingly reality that daily surrounds the poet. Inspired by this contradiction, Ginsberg narrates such a feeling of wired interdependence through “radio antennae high tension”¹³³ as it follows:

Six thousand movietheaters, 100,000,000 television sets, a billion radios, wires and wireless crisscrossing hemispheres, semaphore lights and morse, all telephones ringing at once connect every mind by its ears to one vast consciousness This Time Apocalypse — everybody waiting for one mind to break thru [...]
Life is waving, the cosmos is sending a message to itself, its image is reproduced endlessly over TV
over the radio the babble [...]
Hello hello are you the Telephone the Operator’s singing we are the daughters of the universe get everybody on the line at once plug in all being ears by loudspeaker, newspeak, secret message,
handwritten electronic impulse travelling along rays electric spiderweb
magnetisms shuddering on one note We We We, [...]
the wire services are hysterical and send too much message,

¹²⁶ Ginsberg, Allen. 1956. “Howl,” p. 15.

¹²⁷ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Television Was a Baby Crawling Towards that Deathchamber,” p. 20.

¹²⁸ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Pentagon Exorcism,” p. 143.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁰ Holst, Mirja Annalena. 2023. “«To Be is To Inter-Be»: Thich Nhat Hanh on Independent Arising,” p. 21.

¹³¹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” p. 132.

¹³² I am referring to the Gaia Hypothesis by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. See Snyder, Gary. 1975. *The Politics of Ethnopoetics*, p. 11.

¹³³ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” p. 127.

they're waiting to bam out the Armageddon, [...] ¹³⁴

According to these words, all citizens are pushed to participate in the nervous and neurotic vortex of the news, where they are regularly bombarded by images of despair and announcements of hysterical journalists, only looking forward to informing the apocalypse:

The war is language, language abused
for Advertisement, language used
like magic for power on the planet:
Black Magic language,
formulas for reality — ¹³⁵

It was 1963, when Allen Ginsberg finally decided to “take a political stand against the prevalence of «cold war subjectivity»” that strengthened “the automation of thinking and feeling.” ¹³⁶ Having spent the previous years travelling in Japan, Tibet, India, Cambodia and South Vietnam, ¹³⁷ his return to the American continent marked a turning point in his life:

Ginsberg realized that the world was not going to change without political activism. He marched in his first political protest against the Vietnam War shortly after his arrival in California. Madame Nhu, the influential sister-in-law of South's Vietnam's President Diem, was visiting San Francisco on a speaking tour and had denounced American liberals as a bigger threat to democracy than the communists. A handful of protestors, Allen among them, decided to picket outside her hotel. Those antiwar demonstrations, modest at first, grew to enormous proportions as America became tangled in the quagmire of Vietnam in the coming years.

Many of the Beat writers became directly involved in those protests, further reinforcing the connection between the Beats and the new American counterculture. For the next decade, most of the West Coast poets actively opposed the military incursion into Vietnam. [...] At countless marches and rallies in the Bay Area, their voices could be heard among the more youthful demonstrators in what became known as «the Movement». ¹³⁸

However, government policies about war were not the only cause of protests. In the years following 1963, Ginsberg took part in many other battles “to fight the city strong-arm tactics.” ¹³⁹ In any of these, he always maintained a non-violent attitude, so that “by 1967 Ginsberg was frequently depicted as a leader of the hippie «flower power» movement that had been sprouting in communities like Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco.” ¹⁴⁰ That year represented the “zenith of what we now call «the sixties»,” since it witnessed the happening of the San Francisco Human Be-In, also known as Gathering of the Tribes, in Golden Gate park: “it was the symbolic beginning of a period of new social consciousness, accented by a spirit of communal concern.” ¹⁴¹ Subsequently, 1967 saw also the occurrence of the March

¹³⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Television Was a Baby Crawling Towards that Deathchamber,” pp. 27-29.

¹³⁵ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” p. 119.

¹³⁶ Hoen, Alex. 2008. “«Back! Back! Back! Central mind-machine pentagon...»,” pp. 351-352.

¹³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 352.

¹³⁸ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, pp. 204-205.

¹³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 208.

¹⁴⁰ Hoen, Alex. 2008. “«Back! Back! Back! Central mind-machine pentagon...»,” p. 363.

¹⁴¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 223.

on the Pentagon, where Ed Sanders performed Ginsberg's poem *Pentagon Exorcism* (1967), originally titled *No Taxation without Representation*: "Pay my taxes? No."¹⁴² Hence, Ginsberg denounced the bond between money power, economic capital growth, and violence of war, naming anyone complicit in *War Profit Litany* (1967): "companies," "Fathers in office in these in these industries," "directors, markers of fates," "stockholders," "ambassadors to the Capital," "representatives to legislature," "generals & captains military," "banks, combines, investment trusts," "newspapers," "airstations," and so even "citizens employed by these businesses."¹⁴³ Together with Ginsberg, 458 writers and editors signed the *Writers and Editors War Tax Protest* to state their direct non-participation in funding the state government:

We are refusing to pay the 10 per cent surcharge, or any ether war-designated tax increase, because, as the Johnson Administration originally explained, the money is to be used solely for the immoral war in Vietnam: "This /surcharge/ is necessary to give American fighting men the weapons, equipment and help they need." (Johnson's message to Congress, August 3, 1967.)¹⁴⁴

To be considered as an act of civil disobedience, it recalls Henry David Thoreau's refusal to collaborate in injustice, represented by his tax resistance – by this action, the American transcendentalist wanted to state his non-participation in the Mexican-American war (1846-1848) and in the enforcement of slavery pursued by the government. Thus, he wrote in his *Civil Disobedience* (1949), originally named *Resistance to Civil Government*:

If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible.¹⁴⁵

Thoreau's peaceful philosophy of dissent "imposed a duty on the individual to defy civil authority through passive noncooperation [...] advocating immediate and unconditional disobedience to unfair laws as a superior method of effecting social change [...]" – he "set the standard for New World nonviolent protest."¹⁴⁶ His example would be followed by many other pacifist leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Lev Tolstoy, Martin Luther King, and members of environmental movements like Earth First!¹⁴⁷ Likewise, Allen Ginsberg became the peacemaker person during the anti-Vietnam war protests, driven by the desire to tackle

¹⁴² Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. "Pentagon Exorcism," p. 143.

¹⁴³ Ginsberg, Allen. 1972. "War Profit Litany," p. 95.

¹⁴⁴ WRITERS and EDITORS WAR TAX PROTEST. Original document available at the following link: <http://jfk.hood.edu/Collection/Weisberg%20Subject%20Index%20Files/W%20Disk/Writers%20and%20Editors%20Prot%20est/Item%2002.pdf>

¹⁴⁵ Thoreau, Henry David. 1965. "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience," p. 244.

¹⁴⁶ Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. 2009. *Civil Disobedience. An Encyclopedic History of Dissidence in the United States*, p. 301.

¹⁴⁷ See Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. 2009. *Civil Disobedience. An Encyclopedic History of Dissidence in the United States*.

that persistent and omnipresent violence recounted precisely in his *Violence* (1968).¹⁴⁸ Thus, one of his most emblematic contributions to nonviolent resistance was during “the demonstrations surrounding the August 1968 Democrats’ Convention in Chicago,” which nevertheless turned out into bloody days of police riots:¹⁴⁹

On August 25, the Sunday afternoon before the convention’s keynote speech, the police unexpectedly surrounded [Lincoln] park, armed with guns and clubs. Many people panicked, not knowing if the police would attack or not. At the time there was no communication at all between the police and the demonstrators. [...] Allen stayed in the park to exercise passive resistance. [...] As the police had unwisely decided to block all the exits, there was to be no escape.

Allen witnessed the problem as it developed and immediately sat down in the center of a large group of demonstrators and began chanting “OM” into a portable microphone. He intended to chant for about twenty minutes and calm himself and the crowd immediately around him. It seemed to work, so he continued chanting as the circle around him grew larger. Allen ended up chanting for seven and a half hours, until he lost his voice completely. During the process he became aware that his chanting was causing a physiological change in himself, an unmistakable electric sensation that crept over his body, like nothing he had experienced before. Allen’s breathing became more regular and steady, as if he were breathing in the air of heaven and then circulating it back out into the universe. The Hindus call it *prana*, when you realize that the air inside you and the air outside you are one and the same life force.¹⁵⁰

In this episode, Ginsberg’s nonviolent attitude does not only show its Thoreauvian descent but brings up the poet’s interiorization of Asian traditional spirituality and knowledge. Particularly, the main reference here is to mantra chanting, a practice belonging to Indian religions that Ginsberg adopted after his staying in India:¹⁵¹ “Om Raksa Raksa Raksa Hum Hum Hum Phat Svaha!”¹⁵² In this regard, nonviolence itself is a fundamental Hinduist and Buddhist principle, known under the name of *ahimsā*,¹⁵³ meaning a “peaceful attitude towards all beings.”¹⁵⁴ In this sense, the link between pacifist leaders is once again very evident, up to the point that the American reporter Webb Miller claimed: “it would seem that Gandhi received back from America what was fundamentally the philosophy of India after it had been distilled and crystallized in the mind of Thoreau.”¹⁵⁵ This statement strengthens the bond of a line of thinkers that shared interest in Eastern spirituality and a deep ecological desire to rediscover their interdependence and belonging to the universe, as it happened to Ginsberg when he apprehended that his breath could peacefully and harmoniously dialogue with that of the world. Thus, at the same time as he was writing his anti-Vietnam war poems

¹⁴⁸ Read Ginsberg, Allen. 1972. “Violence,” pp. 95-96.

¹⁴⁹ Houen, Alex. 2008. “«Back! Back! Back! Central mind-machine pentagon...»,” p. 366.

¹⁵⁰ Morgan, Bill. 2006. *I Celebrate Myself. The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*, pp. 454-455.

¹⁵¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, pp. 218-219.

¹⁵² Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Pentagon Exorcism,” p. 143.

¹⁵³ Keown, Damien. 2003. *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵⁴ Henning, Daniel H. 2002. *A Manual for Buddhism and Deep Ecology*, p. 143.

¹⁵⁵ Miller, Webb. 1936. *I Found No Peace*, p. 240.

and bringing nonviolence to protests, the peaceful poet also supported a project that witnessed the infancy of the back-to-the-land movement:¹⁵⁶

During the late 1960s, when peace, drugs, and free love were direct challenges to conventional society, Allen Ginsberg, treasurer of Committee on Poetry, Inc., funded what he hoped was “a haven for comrades in distress” in rural upstate New York. First described as an uninspiring, dilapidated four-bedroom house with acres of untended land, including the graves of its first residents, East Hill Farm became home to those who sought pastoral enlightenment in the presence of Ginsberg’s brilliance and generosity. A self-declared member of a “ragtag group of urban castoffs” including Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, Herbert Huncke, and the mythic Barbara Rubin, farm manager [Gordon] Ball tends to a non-stop flurry of guests, chores, and emotional outbursts while also making time to sit quietly with Ginsberg and discuss poetry, Kerouac, sex, and America’s war in Vietnam.¹⁵⁷

These words refer to the precious memoir written by Gordon Ball, *East Hill Farm*, which takes its title precisely from the name of Ginsberg’s “lonely Eden:”¹⁵⁸

Books everywhere, Kaballa, Gnostic Fragments, Mahanirvana & Hevajra Tantras, Boehme Blake & Zohar, Gita & Soma Veda, somebody reads—one cooks, another digs a pighthouse foundation, one chases a Cow from the vegetable garden, one dances and sings, one writes in a notebook, one plays with the ducks, one never speaks, one picks the guitar, one moves huge rocks.¹⁵⁹

Reading these lines of *Ecologue* (1970), one could state that Ginsberg describes his farm life in pastoral terms.¹⁶⁰ In this sense, his back-to-the-land attitude seems to rejoin what *The New York Times* addresses as the “escapist youth movement of the nineteen-sixties,”¹⁶¹ thus attracting all kinds of critics about the “ideological status of pastoral.”¹⁶² Nevertheless, despite “everyone [around East Hill farm] had individual and unrealistic dreams of an idyllic life getting «back to nature»,”¹⁶³ their pastoral experiment should anyway be seen under the light of what Leo Marx describes as “complex” pastoral, in his *The Machine in the Garden*.¹⁶⁴ Particularly, his work leverages a literature that “juxtaposes the ideal with a more realist vision,”¹⁶⁵ showing the contradictory spirit of XX’s century America:

We buried lady dog by the apple tree —
[...]
Broken Legs in Vietnam!
Eyes staring at heaven.
Eyes weeping at earth.
Millions of bodies in pain!
Who can live with this Consciousness
and not wake frightened at sunrise?

¹⁵⁶ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 220.

¹⁵⁷ See publisher’s blurb of Ball, Gordon. 2011. *East Hill Farm. Seasons with Allen Ginsberg*.

¹⁵⁸ Morgan, Bill. 2006. *I Celebrate Myself*, p. 435.

¹⁵⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1972. “Ecologue,” p. 148.

¹⁶⁰ See Casteel, Sarah Phillips. 2016. “Pastoral,” pp. 158-161.

¹⁶¹ Reed, Roy. 1975. “Back-to-the-Land Movement Seeks Self-Sufficiency.”

¹⁶² Casteel, Sarah Phillips. 2016. “Pastoral,” p. 159.

¹⁶³ Morgan, Bill. 2006. *I Celebrate Myself*, p. 435.

¹⁶⁴ Casteel, Sarah Phillips. 2016. “Pastoral,” p. 159.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

The Farm's a lie!
 Madmen growing giant organic zucchini
 mulching asparagus, boiling tomatoes for Winter,
 drying beans, pickling cucumbers
 sweet & garlicked, salting cabbage for sauerkraut,
 canning fresh corn & tossing Bessie husks —¹⁶⁶

This passage is epitome of the complexity of feelings and visions around Ginsberg's effort of a back-to-the-land life. Indeed, as the episode of the dog's burial happens, it brings up the issue of all other deaths taking place around the world.¹⁶⁷ Thus, farm life becomes a lie, since it distances consciousness from the frightful reality of the surrounding warmongering techno-capitalist country. Hence, the poet becomes a victim of telephone that keeps him informed and anxious, being his "link to the incessant demands of the world outside the farm:"¹⁶⁸

Always the telephone linked to all the hearts of the world beating at once
 [...] and I lay back on my pallet contemplating \$50 phone bill, broke, drowsy, anxious, my heart fearful of the fingers dialing, the deaths, the singing of telephone bells ringing at dawn ringing all afternoon ringing up midnight ringing now forever.¹⁶⁹

In this sense, Ginsberg's telephone is to be understood as the *machine in the garden* of East Hill farm, in Leo Marx's terms¹⁷⁰ – meaning the intrusion of technology within a pastoral atmosphere. Nonetheless, the poet's need to reconnect with the land continues to manifest itself to the point of reaching one of its highest expressions when Ginsberg can finally sing *End Vietnam War* (1975):

Come along come along the end of Vietnam war
 Dirty small bombs and napalms & US Army whores
 [...] Come along save the whales & save the humans too
 and the ladies & the fairies and the communist true blue
 Come along outa the cold war, the planet is still here
 we got to save our momma, nothing worse we have to fear
 Come along & let the people and the other species rare
 breathe again in vasty space the cleaned up U.S. air
 Come along without your fission & if you fusion choose
 just make sure you don't burn up the very ground you use
 [...] So come along humble, and act to please mankind
 cut down on our electricals whose dim light has made us blind
 [...] The war is over YEEAH, the war is over here
 and now begins the battle to make our souls more dear
 [...] We need more farms & farmers, we need to work the land
 We need to get down on our knees and seed with our own hand

¹⁶⁶ Ginsberg, Allen. 1972. "Ecologue," p. 154.

¹⁶⁷ See also Ginsberg, Allen. 1972. "Death on All Fronts," p. 131.

¹⁶⁸ Morgan, Bill. 2006. *I Celebrate Myself*, p. 450.

¹⁶⁹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. "I Am a Victim of Telephone," pp. 75-76.

¹⁷⁰ Marx, Leo. 1972. *The Machine in the Garden*.

the earth we stand on top of, the earth we have bombed out
Come along come along, lift the sky with holy shouts¹⁷¹

Just like the escalation of the war had boosted the phenomenon of “counterurbanization,”¹⁷² its end now marked a momentum of new upheaval. The desire to get back to the land intensified, as the earth could finally heal from its war wounds: the air cleaned up and the soil grew again, not anymore being threatened by *dirty small bombs and napalms & US Army whores*. In fact, according to Marty Branagan, when talking about sustainability, it should also be considered the “large environmental footprint of militarism,” which the author stresses by drawing up a list of “Major Categories of Environmental Damage & Depletion Caused by War & Militarism,” such as “chemical weapons,” or “manufacture, testing (underground and atmospheric) and disposal of nuclear weapons,” or even “post-conflict reconstruction (often by military-linked corporations).”¹⁷³ This explains why, when Ginsberg writes his nonviolent anti-war poems, he cannot help addressing the environment:

Be kind to yourself Harry, because unkindness
comes when the body explodes
napalm cancer and the deathbed in Vietnam
is a strange place to dream of trees
leaning over and angry American faces
grinning with sleepwalk terror over your
last eye—
Be kind to yourself, because the bliss of your own
kindness will flood the police tomorrow,
because the cow weeps in the field and the
mouse weeps in the cat hole—
Be kind to this place, which is your present
habitation, with derrick and radar tower
and flower in the ancient brook —
[...]
Be kind to the universe of Self that
trembles and shudders and thrills
in XX Century,
that opens its eyes and belly and breast
chained with flesh to feel
the myriad flowers of bliss
that I Am to Thee —¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ Ginsberg, Allen. 1975. “End Vietnam War,” pp. 138, 140.

¹⁷² Halfacree, Keith. 2022. “Revisiting 1960s Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Migrations and its Millennial Insurgence,” pp. 44-46.

¹⁷³ Branagan, Marty. 2022. “Nonviolence and Sustainability: An Indivisible Connection,” see Table 1.

¹⁷⁴ Ginsberg, Allen. 1968. “Who Be Kind To,” pp. 95-98.

Conclusion

“By the end of the century, old age had finally caught up with all the central Beat characters.”¹ Thus, to the present day, the only one poet who still shares this living planet with us is the ninety-four-year-old Zen lunatic of the mountains Gary Snyder. Despite his old age, he continues to contribute to the spiritual enhancement of our world. Accordingly, during his last public appearance, he read one of his latest poems titled *Askesis, Praxis, Theôria of the Wild*, “that is to say the discipline, the practice and the theory of the wild:”²

The shining way of the wild
— its *theôria*
is, that the world is unrelenting, brief, and often painful
and its *askesis*,
cold, hunger, stupid mistakes, bitterness, delusions, loneliness;
hard nights and days are unavoidable
to find the *praxis* is to
hang in, work it out, watch for the moment,
coiled and gazing, the shining way of the wild
*from before, & 4. IX. 94*³

Hang in, work it out, watch for the moment. The task of living is not an easy one, however it can be supported by meditative practice. In a restless, *unrelenting* world, Snyder suggests a meditative attitude as the way to re-connect to *This Present Moment*, which gives the name to his last poem collection.

Concerning this paper, of which we are coming to conclusion, the reader can notice the presence of a powerful *fil rouge* that runs all through the words that have been written. No matter the term we use to name it – authentic life, sense of belonging, interdependence, bioregionalism, – it is the need to re-connect with the deepest essence of life, while fighting the overpowering alienation that has become an even more present surrounding and lurking force of social systems. In this regard, alienation should be interpreted as “[referring] to subjective experiences of estrangement, powerlessness, isolation and detachment, as well as to general processes of social fragmentation and disintegration.”⁴ In this sense, it results in indifference and carelessness. Meanwhile, meditative practices of interdependence and sense of belonging are the way to care and reconnection. Following this reasoning, Beat

¹ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, p. 246.

² Snyder, Gary. 2022. “A Tribute to Gary Snyder.”

³ Snyder, Gary. 2015. *This Present Moment*, p. 60.

⁴ Øversveen, Emil. 2022. “Capitalism and Alienation: Towards a Marxist Theory of Alienation for the 21st century,” p. 442.

poets wrote “both a critique of urban-industrial civilization and a search to recover authentic human identity.”⁵ As our analysis has shown:

The Beats of the forties and fifties were the catalysts who precipitated the more widespread social rebellion of the sixties and seventies. As a small group of kindred spirits determined to practice absolute personal freedom within a society governed by stifling conservative attitudes, they set an example [...] Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were not to be translated into economic terms for them. These were ideals to reach for everyone.⁶

Thus, the story of the Beat generation can be seen as an ever-changing evolutionary path: the more they walked, roamed, hitchhiked, exceeded speed limits, pilgrimaged, the more they transcended *square* visions of modernity, capitalist mass standardization and homologation, consumer economy and conformity, materialistic attachment and technological mechanization of their lives and environment(s). “At a time when the average American was content and wanted to enjoy postwar prosperity quietly, the Beats sensed that an essential spiritual element was missing.”⁷ Hence, Beat spirituality flourished thanks to insights and experiences of Asian knowledge and lifeways, in addition to the very teachings of the Dharma, which the poets saw as “a powerful companion [...] on [their] journey from *egocentricity* to *ecocentricity*.”⁸ In this regard, Beat history should be understood as a crescendo, not only in terms of growing numbers of people involved, but in terms of vision. If their initial search for a sense of belonging found answer in daily practices of familiarization with city environments and the counter-spaces of their country, later they came to the awareness that any living being belongs to the universe, thus there they found their sense of belonging. This marked a fundamental passage within their vision, as well as concerning the legacy that they left to this world. At the half of the 20th century, they started an inner revolution that came from the bottom, nevertheless responding to collective and global issues, still very actual. Indeed, however different and translated over time, they faced shared challenges of modernity, whether it be environmental degradation and pollution, issues of marginalization and otherness, social inequality, mental health problems and addictions, overconsumption, cultural homogenization and rootlessness, information overload, nuclear threat and war conflicts. Consequently, their discourse is to be read as highly complex, cross, collective and rich, contrary to superficial judgement that occasionally arises. If at its dawn, the Beat generation had “appeared, like a wild seed in a city garden,”⁹

⁵ Stephenson, Gregory. 2009. *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation*. Cited in Ferrere, Alexander. 2020. “Creative Environments: The Geo-Poetics of Allen Ginsberg,” p. 2.

⁶ Morgan, Bill. 2010. *The Typewriter is Holy*, pp. 247-248.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Badiner, Allan Hunter. 1990. *Dharma Gaia. A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, p. xiv.

⁹ Morgan, Bill. 1997. *The Beat Generation in New York*, p. 1.

over time it had grown roots, becoming a powerful flower that chanted mantras, aware of its bond with the land and with the creatures that inhabited its same earth and sky. This wild flower represented a whole generation's *new vision*, which is nowadays to be preserved, but also constantly enhanced and enriched.

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¹ Barucca, Lucrezia. 2021. *La Sofferenza Inutile degli ‘Animali non Umani’ in Lev Tolstoj*. Tesi di laurea, Università La Sapienza.

