INTRODUCTORY WALL TEXT

On the Road with the Beats
February 5–August 3, 2008

The Beats were a generation in motion. Pilgrims in search of a destination, they crisscrossed the globe, from New York to San Francisco, Los Angeles to Mexico City, Tangier to Paris, Calcutta to London. While many literary circles are synonymous with a particular city, the Beats are unique in their association with locales around the world. The Harry Ransom Center’s extensive Beat holdings show how cities, travel, and the idea of movement itself inspired the work and shaped the lives of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and other writers and artists.
The Beats sought to escape the conformism of Cold War America and discover new modes of expression and experience. Inspiration came in such diverse forms as New York’s twenty-four hour automat, Calcutta’s Buddhist processions, and jazz clubs in cities across America. More importantly, cities and communities quite literally made possible the publication of the major Beat works. Surveying these events and more, this exhibition shows how the Beats’s actual and symbolic voyages were influenced by, and in turn reshaped, American culture from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Visitors should begin their journey in New York, stop in to see The Marriage State and The Jazz Scene, and view America by car in The Road West. Continue on to Beats Abroad, and take a side trip to learn about the publication history of On the Road, before ending at From Beat to Beatnik.

— Molly Schwartzburg, Curator
— Caitlin Murray and Kurt Johnson, Assistant Curators

NEW YORK CITY

What was the Beat Generation? Today, the term may be used to refer to many things: a small, specific group of friends, an American literary movement, an international shift in social and artistic norms. In the mid-1940s, it was a few young men who met in New York City: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady. They were drawn together primarily by their literary ambitions but also by their shared inability—and unwillingness—to conform to social norms. None were accepted for service in World War II, all had sexual encounters with both men and women, and all were drawn to the subterranean culture of the city: the hustlers, the dealers, the bums, the addicts, and the insane who populated areas such as Times Square and the Lower East Side.

With its rich bohemian traditions, New York was the first heart of Beat culture, and until the movement faded in the mid-1960s—its social rebelliousness eclipsed by political activism, and its literary experimentation eclipsed by new innovators—the city stimulated many of its literary products. Motion, improvisation, and process are driving concepts that may be found in the work of all the Beat writers. The experimental jazz being played in clubs in Harlem prompted the writers to stretch prose and the poetic line to rhythmic extremes. The self-consciously slapdash aesthetic of the poets and painters known as the New York School inspired influential collaborative projects.
From the 1940s to the 1960s, the Beat community grew into a significant presence in New York, contributing a unique combination of artistic experiment and social nonconformity to the city’s cultural scene in the form of publications, films, poetry readings, plays, happenings, and more.

[case introduction]

BEAT BEGINNINGS

The Ransom Center’s collections represent many aspects of the Beat generation, but are strongest in documenting the lives and work of five individuals who are also “founders” of the Beat movement: Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, William S. Burroughs, and Gregory Corso.

As the background sketches in this section demonstrate, the Beats were a strikingly diverse group, from disparate geographical, class, and religious backgrounds. But despite their differences, they shared perhaps even more. In their early years, all of the individuals represented here were recognized as brilliant creative thinkers. Before they became famous, all of them were either incarcerated or institutionalized, or both. And they all met in New York, a city whose intellectual traditions and social freedoms set the stage for the Beat revolution.

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ALLEN GINSBERG (1926-1997)

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 21 January 1950
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Unidentified Photographer
*Allen Ginsberg with Mother and Friends*, undated
Gelatin silver print
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Allen Ginsberg grew up in a middle-class neighborhood in Paterson, New Jersey, the second son of Louis and Naomi Ginsberg. Naomi had emigrated from Russia and shared the Russian Jewish heritage of her husband, who was born in the United States. Both were involved in leftist politics. Louis was a high-school English teacher and minor poet. Naomi Ginsberg suffered from severe mental illness,
a fact that had a significant impact on her son’s childhood and his sense of his own mental stability. Allen Ginsberg enrolled in Columbia University in 1943.

Ginsberg’s early twenties were dominated by his ambivalence about social and poetic conventions, and the letter displayed here shows him grapple with his desire to emulate confident fraternity boys as he grows more aware of their “phony” posturing. The letter poignantly captures the very real impact of the repressive culture of the postwar era.

Ginsberg was introduced to William S. Burroughs in the spring of 1943 by Lucien Carr, a fellow Columbia undergraduate and student of poetry.

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WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS (1914-1997)

The opening page of Neal Cassady’s fragmentary typescript “The History of the Hip Generation,” 1952

Neal Cassady Collection

Burroughs’s ancestors included Protestant ministers, writers, a spokesman for the Rockefeller family, and most famously, his grandfather, the inventor of the adding machine. Burroughs was never comfortable with his background, and his body of work actively critiques the mechanisms of power represented by the people from whom he was descended. He attended Harvard, graduating in 1936 with a major in English. He then wandered for several years, trying out medical school, graduate school in anthropology, military service, and odd jobs. In the early 1940s he found his place among the hipster addicts of New York. By 1944 he was a morphine addict.

In this typescript, Cassady uses the Burroughs pseudonym that Kerouac uses in Desolation Angels (1965). He concludes his description of Burroughs, “By sixteen he was as high-horse as a Governor in the Colonies, as nasty as an old aunt, and as queer as the day is long.”

A few months after Lucien Carr introduced Ginsberg and Burroughs, he introduced both men to his friend Jack Kerouac.
JACK KEROUAC (1922-1969)

The endpapers of the first edition of Jack Kerouac’s *The Vanity of Duluoz* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1968)

Jean Louis Kerouac was born into a family of French-Canadian immigrants in the mill-town of Lowell, Massachusetts. Kerouac spoke French almost exclusively until the seventh grade. His father was a job printer and his mother, a devout Catholic, bore and raised three children. Kerouac’s brother Gerard died at age nine, an event that haunted Kerouac for the rest of his life. Kerouac’s relationship with his mother—nicknamed *mémère*—was close and he lived with her much of his adult life.

At Lowell High School Kerouac was a football star, and used this talent to win a place at Columbia University. He broke his leg in a game his freshman year and never played varsity again; it was a crushing defeat and he dropped out of Columbia soon after. The photographic endpapers of *The Vanity of Duluoz* demonstrate the degree to which he mythologized his own life throughout his career.

In 1946, Kerouac’s friend Hal Chase introduced him to a friend he thought resembled Jack, Neal Cassady.

NEAL CASSADY (1926-1968)

The table of contents and an excerpt from a duplicated typescript of Neal Cassady’s memoir, *The First Third*, with manuscript revisions by Allen Ginsberg, undated

Neal Cassady Collection

Neal Cassady was born in Salt Lake City, Utah during a family road trip from Des Moines, Iowa, to Hollywood, California. His father, a barber, and his mother, who had seven children from a previous marriage, soon settled in Denver. After his wife left him, Neal Sr. raised his son on Denver’s skid row. Neal Jr. walked to school through the city’s slums and ate his meals at the Citizen’s Mission.
In his teens, Cassady read widely, hitchhiked around the country, stole cars, impregnated several girls, and worked as a hustler. In 1945 he was locked up in the Colorado State Reformatory. After his release in 1945 he became good friends with Hal Chase, also from Denver, who regaled Cassady with tales of his housemate Jack Kerouac and other friends in New York. Intrigued, Cassady took the bus to New York with his new wife Luann in 1946.

This passage from Cassady’s memoir is a harrowing description of the six-year old child’s discovery that his father has disappeared during their travel home on a freight train from Missouri; on the next page we learn that his father had jumped into a car further down the train.

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GREGORY CORSO (1930-2001)


A letter from Sam Corso to his son, Gregory Corso, 16 June 1955
Digital reproduction of the second page
Gregory Corso Collection

Nunzio Gregory Corso was the child of teenage Catholic Italian immigrant parents in Greenwich Village; when he was a year old, his mother left, and for a decade he was shuffled among foster homes. When he was eleven his father remarried and took his son back home, perhaps in an effort to avoid the draft; Gregory repeatedly ran away and by age thirteen lived on the streets, exchanging errands for food with street merchants. His education ended in the sixth grade.

Corso told his autobiography often—with embellishments—but some facts are known. At thirteen he was arrested for a minor theft and imprisoned alongside adult criminals in the infamous lower Manhattan jail known as The Tombs. He was arrested twice more: at his third strike at age seventeen he was sent for three years to Clinton State Prison in upstate New York. He read voraciously, educating himself from the prison library, and began to write poetry.

After his release in 1950, he returned to Greenwich Village. Soon after, Allen Ginsberg introduced himself to the strikingly attractive Corso at the Pony Stable Inn, a lesbian bar in the West Village.
Selections from over 600 pages of Allen Ginsberg’s letters form the backbone of this exhibition. Ginsberg was a prodigious letter writer, and his letters often comprise seven or more single-spaced, typed pages. The letters include descriptions of his writing, reading, travels, sexual adventures, and his efforts to help publish the work of his friends. He frequently enclosed drafts or fragments of poems.

Most of the letters are written to Jack Kerouac, and were acquired by the Ransom Center in the late 1960s. During that period the Center also acquired Neal Cassady’s letters to Kerouac. Before selling the letters, Kerouac marked the approximate date of each letter at the top of the first page in his crisp, legible hand. Ginsberg never completed the proposed edition of his letters.

Parents should be aware that some of these and other personal documents in the exhibition contain discussions of sexual behavior and drug use.

NEW YORK: THE EARLY YEARS

Allen Ginsberg’s early letters to Jack Kerouac document the people and places that shaped the first years of the Beats. Many sites in New York City were crucial to the young writers: Columbia University, Sheepshead Bay Merchant Marine Station, dive bars and cafés in Harlem, and anywhere that William S. Burroughs happened to be. Burroughs was a teacher figure who held forth in hours-long conversations and provided his younger friends with great works of literature to read, building their poetic sensibilities.

Ann Douglas captures the essence of the three central Beat figures in this description: “Jack Kerouac became the mythologizer, Allen Ginsberg the prophet, and Burroughs the theorist.” The events of their early years in New York City profoundly influenced the ways in which each would fulfill these roles over the coming decades.
The years that followed the Kammerer stabbing were turbulent for Ginsberg: he was suspended from Columbia due to behavior problems, joined the Merchant Marine, took over responsibility for his mentally ill mother, and struggled to accept his homosexual desires.

Ginsberg had become an editor at the Columbia Review in 1944. He completed his studies in 1948, glad to be done with an education he found increasingly stifling. The prize-winning formal verse poem that appears in this volume, “Dakar Doldrums,” was composed on his return trip from West Africa with the Merchant Marine. Ginsberg shared the prize with friend and rival John Hollander (b. 1929) who
also rose to fame and a decade later wrote a negative review of Ginsberg’s “Howl.”

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The first page of a letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, undated, with date added by Kerouac, ca. July 1948
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Ginsberg’s descriptions of reading, writing, and listening to music offer a feel of the near-college-graduate’s experience living in Harlem in the late 1940s. His attention was mostly upon writing; on the second page of the letter he describes the conflict between his poetic training and the form he seeks: “I am learning by the week, but my poesy is still not my own. New rhyme new me me me in words. I am not all this carven rhetoric.”

The upbeat tone of this letter belies Ginsberg’s low state during this period. Soon after it was written, the depressed and struggling young writer experienced a profound vision of William Blake while lying on his bed in the apartment described here. The event frightened him but changed him profoundly, and for years he sought to repeat the experience of enlightenment it provided, even as he sought psychological help.

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The first page of a letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, undated, with date added by Kerouac, ca. March 1949

Ginsberg describes his ill-fated decision to allow Herbert Huncke to move into his apartment. Huncke (1915-1996) was a junkie, criminal, hustler, and master storyteller whom Burroughs met in 1946. Their meeting led to Burroughs’s first drug addiction and created the foundation for Burroughs’s lifelong ethic of subversion.

Huncke’s addict lifestyle and amorality contrasted fully with the traditional respectability to which Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs had been raised. Among other things, he introduced the group to junkie slang, including the word “Beat,” which he used to mean beat down, wasted, downtrodden, or exhausted.

Huncke soon involved the unwitting Ginsberg in the transport of stolen goods and he was arrested. Ginsberg’s father enlisted his
son’s professor, Lionel Trilling, to help persuade police that Ginsberg should receive psychological help, not prison. Ginsberg, who had been seeking serious help for some time, was glad to be sent to the New York Psychiatric Institute, where he remained until early 1950.

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The first page of a letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 17 June 1949
Allen Ginsberg Collection

In this letter, Ginsberg documents his first day in the Psychiatric Institute and his introduction to Carl Solomon (1928-1993), a brilliant fellow patient who taught Ginsberg to see insanity as an antidote to society’s illness of conformism. Ginsberg describes Solomon in French: “there is a 21-year-old man here, a surrealist who makes me laugh with his inspired wild imagination.” Ginsberg dedicated his great liberatory poem “Howl” to Solomon.

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An inscribed first edition of Jack Kerouac’s *The Town and the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950)
From the library of Stuart Groves

Written in his mother’s apartment in Ozone Park, Long Island, beginning in 1946, Kerouac’s first novel is a semi-autobiographical account of the tension between his traditionally minded family and his subversive new group of friends. Modeled after the style of Thomas Wolfe, it shows the young writer honing his skills with narrative structure before beginning to write “spontaneous prose,” a method whose discovery was to prompt a great rush of creative productivity in the early 1950s.

Kerouac was in the process of writing *On the Road* while he sought a publisher for *The Town and the City*. By the time *On the Road* was published in 1957, Kerouac had already written the text of ten more books that were later published.

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A telegram from John Clellon Holmes and Allen Ginsberg to “Jack Kerouassady,” 26 December 1951
John Clellon Holmes (1926-1988) met Ginsberg and Kerouac in 1948 and three years later published the first roman a clef of the Beats, titled *Go*. His book was more readily received by publishers than Kerouac’s more experimental work, *On the Road*. In this telegram, Ginsberg and Holmes announce *Go*’s publication to their friends. Ginsberg’s enthusiasm infuriated Kerouac, who was jealous of Holmes’s success.

Holmes also wrote a 1952 *New York Times Magazine* article documenting the struggle of young intellectuals like Kerouac and himself. Entitled “This is the Beat Generation,” it surveyed the existential impact of the Depression and World War II on young intellectuals, and elicited over 300 letters to the editor. Jack Kerouac had coined the phrase “Beat Generation” in 1948, while he and Holmes were discussing their own relationship to the Lost Generation of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Kerouac said, “Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation.”

Many writers, artists, and intellectuals served in the Merchant Marine during and after World War II. Some were rejected from military service because of homosexuality, others due to physical limitations or “mental defects.” Many, including Kerouac and Ginsberg, shipped out from Sheepshead Bay.

Kerouac joined the Merchant Marine in 1942 after dropping out of Columbia and traveled to Greenland, Liverpool, and London on ships transporting ammunition. Gregory Corso was a merchant seaman on a Norwegian vessel in the early 1940s, traveling to South America and Africa. Ginsberg joined the U. S. Merchant Marine in 1945 in the hopes of earning money to complete his
Columbia degree (Burroughs joined soon after, but only lasted two days in training). Ginsberg traveled up and down the East Coast and then to Dakar, Senegal in West Africa; a decade later he traveled on a U. S. Navy Ship to the Arctic Circle.

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Unidentified Photographer
Allen Ginsberg, ca. 1947
Digital reproduction
Copyright the Allen Ginsberg Trust

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Unidentified Photographer
Lincoln Tunnel traffic jam during a transit strike, 24 May 1946
Gelatin Silver Print
New York Journal American Photograph Morgue

“I said, ‘Hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you as soon as I finish this chapter,’ and it was one of the best chapters in the book. Then I dressed and off we flew to New York to meet some girls. As we rode in the bus in the weird phosphorescent void of the Lincoln Tunnel we leaned on each other with fingers waving and yelled and talked excitedly, and I was beginning to get the bug like Dean. . . .”

—Jack Kerouac, On the Road

THE NEW YORK AVANT-GARDE

In the early to mid-1950s, the Beats spent only some of their time in New York. During this peripatetic period of road trips, stays in San Francisco, and travel abroad, many of the major Beat works were printed, the writers’ circle of colleagues and publishers grew, and “Beat Generation” became a widely used term.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Corso and many other Beat writers had become important figures in the rich cultural scene on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where poets, painters and jazz musicians gathered in settings such as the Cedar Bar, the San Remo, and the Five Spot. Art shows and readings took place in every venue possible, including writers’ pads and artists’ lofts, and all-night parties helped foster the early performance-art genre of Happenings. As one historian has put it, all of this produced
“the feeling of a pan-aesthetic revolution.” The Beats were part of a loosely-defined effort among writers, artists, composers, and choreographers to erase the lines between art and life, product and process.

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The rich cross-fertilization of the arts in this period is documented in this 26-minute film, written and with an improvised narration by Jack Kerouac. It was directed by the photographer Robert Frank and the action painter Alfred Leslie, with a score by composer David Amram. Actors included Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, painters Larry Rivers and Alice Neel, dancer Sally Gross, and art dealer Richard Bellamy. Some played characters, while others played themselves. The film takes place in a loft in the Bowery where a railroad brakeman and his wife entertain a group of poets.

*Pull My Daisy* will be screened at the Alamo Drafthouse Downtown as part of the Ransom Center Beat Film Series on April 2, 2008.

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The first American edition of Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (New York: Grove Press, 1959)

The Swiss-born Robert Frank’s (b. 1924) seminal photobook *The Americans* is a stark document of America in 1955, juxtaposing the surface prosperity of post-war suburbia with the struggles of the working classes and the poor. Like the film *Pull My Daisy*, the photographs in *The Americans* have an intentionally raw, homemade look and feel.

Frank’s unconventional aesthetic did not sit well with many critics at the time. Echoes of negative reviews of Kerouac’s own works may be heard in the words of the reviewer for *Popular Photography*, who saw in the work “meaningless blur, grain, muddy exposures, drunken horizons and general sloppiness.”

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Alfred Leslie’s *The Hasty Papers* (New York: A. Leslie, 1960)
Leslie’s (b. 1927) legendary “one-shot review” represented a range of writers from the New York scene and beyond, with particular focus on the writers and artists who convened nightly at the Cedar Tavern. Leslie republished the book in 1999, and in 2001 produced a film on those early years entitled *The Cedar Bar*.

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Ted Joans’s “A Happy Hip Happening,” ca. 1964
Charles Henri Ford Papers

The wandering poet and artist Ted Joans (1928-2003), the child of riverboat performers in Illinois, studied art at Indiana University. In New York in the 1950s, he became famous for throwing outrageous all-night “birthday parties.” A self-proclaimed surrealist, with the rhinoceros as his emblem, he sought to emulate the surrealists’ rejection of convention and embrace of the absurd in his life and work. He was the quintessential hipster, speaking and writing in jive slang to the point of self-parody: in the late 1950s he schmoozed at suburban parties as part of the famed “Rent-a-Beatnik” service invented by Fred McDarrah and advertised in the *Village Voice*.

As Joans explains here, Happenings were coming into prominence during his time in New York. He left America in 1961, traveling to Tangier, Morocco, and around Europe and Africa throughout the decade, returning regularly to Amsterdam. This document suggests that he staged a Happening in Copenhagen, Denmark around 1964.

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The poet and publisher Daisy Aldan (b. 1923) was an important figure in the New York poetry community in the 1950s and 1960s. Her periodical *Folder*, which ran from 1953-1956, premiered many early works of the writers and artists of the New York School, the informal circle surrounding the Abstract Expressionist or action painters.
Daisy Aldan’s annotated draft of an announcement for a reading at the Living Theater, 1959

Daisy Aldan Papers

Aldan was invested in merging art and literature, and in a 1977 interview, recalled the reading announced here:

One midnight at the Living Theatre, eighteen Folder poets...read their work to a background of projected abstract expressionist drawings which were in my book: de Kooning, Kline, Pollack, Blaine, Knaths, Freilicher, Goldberg. I could have bought a de Kooning then for fifty dollars. I meant to, but just didn’t get to it.

Aldan’s ambivalence towards the Beat poets is clear in this document. While the Beats and the poets of the New York School had many similarities, the latter group’s language was cleaner and their behavior better suited to the New York art scene.

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A letter from Frank O’Hara to Peter Orlovsky, 23 March 1961

Allen Ginsberg Collection

Allen Ginsberg and the New York School poet Frank O’Hara (1926-1966) shared a deeply personal, expressive, and exuberant poetic calling. As the critic Marjorie Perloff writes:

O’Hara loves the motion picture, action painting, and all forms of dance—art forms that capture the present rather than the past, the present in all its chaotic splendor. And New York is therefore the very center of being, quite simply because it is the place where more is happening at once than anywhere else in the world.

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Peter Orlovsky’s diary entries for 13-16 December 1963

Peter Orlovsky Papers

The final months in this 1963 diary of Allen Ginsberg’s partner Peter Orlovsky (b. 1933) constitute a unique document of New York literary culture. Orlovsky records information about readings he has
attended, galleries he has visited, and publications underway by writers and artists both new and established.

Wall items:
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Larry Rivers
O’Hara Reading, 1967
Lithograph
Universal Limited Art Editions Collection

Allen Ginsberg’s “356 W 15th St,” sent with a letter to Neal Cassady on 15 February 1952
Neal Cassady Collection

Ginsberg’s writings are replete with poems about place. In this early poem, Ginsberg has found his theme, but has not yet freed himself from conventional poetic form. Frank O’Hara’s poetic portraits of walks through New York City are among the most influential poems of the mid-century; this poem was composed in 1957. Rivers created this print the year after O’Hara’s tragic death at age 40. Ginsberg said of O’Hara,

Frank taught me to really see New York for the first time, by making of the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment. It’s like having Catullus change your view of the Forum in Rome.

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A typescript of Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara’s How to Proceed in the Arts, ca. 1961
Daisy Aldan Papers

A folded printing of Jack Kerouac’s Belief and Technique for Modern Prose (Evergreen, undated)
Jack Kerouac Collection

The painter Larry Rivers and the poet Frank O’Hara collaborated on several works. Their slyly funny list of instructions captures the surrealist influence on both artists, and their shared aesthetic of spontaneity and the absurd. O’Hara famously scribbled poems on his lunch break and tossed them in the drawer of his desk, often
forgetting about poems that later became famous. As a curator at the Museum of Modern Art beginning in 1960, he was an active in reshaping artistic taste in this period. Rivers subverted the dominant Abstract Expressionist aesthetic by collaging popular culture materials into much of his work, and with O'Hara shared a love for the banal products of popular culture. Rivers began his career in the arts as a jazz saxophonist, and he and fellow Julliard student Miles Davis were life-long friends. He brought the gestural experimentation of jazz to his painting.

Kerouac's list lacks the sense of irony in Rivers and O'Hara’s, but demonstrates many similar aesthetic tendencies. He wrote it in 1955 as a response to readers’ critiques of the early publication of an excerpt of *On the Road* in *New World Writing*. In it, he outlines his theory of writing while performing it at the same time: the list is off-the-cuff and inconsistent, shifting point of view from item to item as Kerouac puts his thoughts on paper. It is akin to action painting in its insistence upon the equation of process with product. Kerouac became heavily invested in the principle of “first thought, best thought,” disagreeing with poets Ginsberg’s and Corso’s practice of revising their work in multiple drafts.

[loan item]

Alfred Leslie (b. 1927)  
*The Red Side*, 1961  
Oil and collage on canvas  
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991

One of the younger painters in the Abstract Expressionist movement, Alfred Leslie demonstrates in this work the principles of established action painters such as Jackson Pollock and William de Kooning, allowing drips to land and run randomly down the canvas, producing results not entirely under his control. The uneven geometric shapes collaged into the painting seem to have been slapped on, and along with the sweeping brushstrokes, seem to offer the viewer direct access to the moment of the painting’s creation.

Melissa Warak describes Leslie’s “tendency to approach painting in the manner of a collage, pilfering, re-contextualizing, and juxtaposing seemingly disparate painterly elements, from controlled lines and nearly transparent layers of pigment to thick brushstrokes and haphazardly applied paint drips, in a single work.” In his life, too,
Leslie sought to bring all things together, working as a painter, filmmaker, musician and poet in the ferment of Greenwich Village.

PUBLISHING THE NEW YORK AVANT-GARDE

Little magazines, small presses, and performance venues flourished in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Small publications came and went in as little as one issue, and Happenings, dance performances, and plays performed in theaters, churches, cafés, and apartments often went undocumented. While the do-it-yourself necessities of small-press publishing often led to amateurish publications, their very cheapness and ephemerality were often an integral part of an artist’s or publisher’s project. As Michael Anania describes the culture of avant-garde periodical publication:

The world of literary magazines is raffish and irregular because nothing else will do in a setting in which the best hope for every serious writer is to undermine every notion of what makes a piece of writing good and durable.

The items shown here represent only a tiny portion of the output in the period.

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The first four issues of *Yugen* (1958-1959)

LeRoi Jones (b. 1934) and his wife, Hettie Cohen Jones (b. 1934), co-edited *Yugen*. The writer and small-press publisher Gilbert Sorrentino described the *Yugen* scene years later:

LeRoi Jones had a magnetic and powerful personality, and his magazine immediately began to flourish—so much so that the poets and writers who contributed to it and who were drawn to Jones’s apartment (first on West 20th street in Chelsea and later on east 14th Street) became known as the “*Yugen* crowd.” Jones had informal gatherings in his apartment for readings, discussions, talk, and drinking, and often these gatherings would turn into all-night parties. A not at all atypical party at Jones’s would include Selby, Rumaker, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Bremser, Corso, Rosenthal, Oppenheimer, Finstein, and when they were in New York, Wieners, George Stanley, Dorn, and Burroughs. There was often music played by Ornette
Coleman, Archie Shepp, Wilbur Ware, and Don Cherry….It assumed the character of a freewheeling and noisy salon.

The first edition of LeRoi Jones’s *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (New York: Totem/Corinth, 1961)

Among Jones’s many publishing ventures was the *Totem Press*, which published this, his own first book of poems. Jones stated the influence of Kerouac’s essay “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” on his work and that of the Black Mountain poet Charles Olson’s concept of “composition by field” and manipulation of typographical space on the page. The poems in *Preface* often investigate the relationship between blackness and the bohemian world and are infused with references to television, film, and other popular culture.

*The Floating Bear* 9 (1961)
From the library of Louis Zukofsky

Edited by LeRoi Jones and Diane di Prima (b. 1934), *Floating Bear* is one of the most famous avant-garde periodicals of the 1960s. *Floating Bear* was distributed only by mail, and when issue 9 was sent to a poet in a New Jersey prison, postal authorities seized it as obscene. The texts in question were Jones’s play, “The Eighth Ditch,” and Burroughs’s “Roosevelt after Inauguration.” Jones and di Prima were arrested after the New York Poets Theater scheduled a performance of Jones’s play. The theater was fined, but the case against Jones was dismissed after he defended his work’s literary value.

*Kulchur* (Spring 1960)

Running from 1960-1966, *Kulchur* was a major Beat journal of commentary and criticism. Under the guidance of contributing editors LeRoi Jones and Martin Williams, it was an important venue for writing on jazz. Frank O’Hara regularly published a column on modern art in the early issues. As one history of the magazine states, the range of topics covered in *Kulchur* included “pornography,
drugs, William Reich, the Kama Sutra, Freud, civil rights, L. Frank Baum and the *Oz* books, blues singers, Hollywood’s ten best social protest movies, and the dangers of hipness.”

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Advertisements and reviews gathered by a clippings service, 1961-1964
New York Poets Theatre Collection

In 1961, Diane DiPrima and several others founded the New York Poets Theatre (also known as The American Theatre for Poets). Besides play productions and workshops, the group mounted art exhibitions, screened films, and organized dance concerts, readings, and Happenings. It helped lay the groundwork for today’s innovative off-off-Broadway play workshops.

The theater earned a large audience, and ephemera in the Ransom Center’s collection document many productions whose runs were extended after sell-out performances.

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Elsene Sorrentino’s reading copy of Michael McClure’s *The Blossom: Or Billy the Kid* ca. 1964
New York Poets Theatre Collection

The theater produced only one-act plays by poets. This play by the San Francisco poet Michael McClure (b. 1932) was staged in 1964, following the theater’s 1961 production of his play *Pillow*. McClure’s later play, “The Beard,” was the victim of repeated censorship in California and received two Obie awards after it was performed at the Evergreen Theater in New York in 1967.

Elsene Sorrentino was married to editor and novelist Gilbert Sorrentino, and her annotations of McClure’s playscript suggest that she was on the crew of this production. She also performed in other avant-garde and dance productions during this period.

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*Something* 2.1 (Winter 1966)
From the Library of George Dowden
While the Beat movement has a clear starting point—1944, when the core figures of the movement first met—it is much harder to mark its end. But it is clear that by 1965 or 1966, the Beats no longer cohered as a group, their writing careers were going in different directions, and public interest in the social changes they represented was supplanted by concerns about the situation in Vietnam. The New York underground publishing scene flourished in the wake of the Beats and others and new little magazines blossomed.

This “Vietnam Assemblage” issue of *Something*, edited by David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg, has a cover of lickable stamps designed by Andy Warhol, a collage by Jess, and work by writers as varied as Robert Bly, Denise Levertov, Jackson MacLow, Charles Bukowski, Rochelle Owens, Dick Higgins, George Economou, and Allen Ginsberg (the anti-war poem “Who Be Kind To”).

Wall items:
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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, 1953
Digital reproduction
Copyright the Allen Ginsberg Trust

Ginsberg’s caption to this photograph reads:

“But Jack I’ve told you before, if you continue going back to live with Memère you’ll be wound tighter and tighter by her apron strings till you’re an old man...
...” William Burroughs acting the André Gidian sophisticate lecturing at country bumpkin Thomas Wolfian American youth Jack Kerouac listening deadpan earnestly to “the most intelligent man in America.” Fall 1953, my apartment 206 East 7th Street, Manhattan.

145, 146

Unidentified Photographer
Larry Rivers, undated
Gelatin silver print
Daisy Aldan Papers
Unidentified Photographer
Frank O’Hara, undated
Gelatin silver print
Daisy Aldan Papers

As a central figure in the Greenwich Village social world, Norman Mailer (1923-2007) was good friends with Ginsberg and many other Beat writers. After his 1957 essay “The White Negro” was published, Mailer was often termed a Beat writer by insiders and outsiders alike.

The essay was a groundbreaking, if problematic, effort to understand the origins of white hipsterism in Black experience. In it, Mailer brings together loose strands of the post-war underground—existentialism, jazz, marijuana, psychopathology, miscegenation, slang, anarchism—to explain the hipster mentality. The hipster is a “white negro,” who like the Negro embraces a “morality of the bottom” in response to a culture that despises and fears him.

Many of Mailer’s comments on race are compelling: “It is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro, for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries.” But claims for the Negro as a “psychopath” and a “wise primitive,” alongside the oft-quoted claim that “jazz is orgasm” diminished the essay’s influence.

LeRoi Jones has been politically involved all his life, and during his Beat period, participated in the nascent civil rights movement and in the fight for revolution in Cuba. His work became increasingly political over the years, and his landmark 1964 play about racial
oppression and revolt, *The Dutchman*, represents a turning point in Jones’s career, as he began to reject the white-dominated literary avant-garde in favor of full political engagement.

In 1965, the assassination of Malcolm X and the Los Angeles Watts riots prompted him to break with his wife and children and the Beat community and found the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem. In 1967 he became a Muslim and in 1968 changed his name to Ameer (later Amiri) Baraka. He became involved with Black Nationalism and is celebrated as the father of the Black Arts Movement. He continues to court controversy; in 2007, the Supreme Court refused to hear Baraka’s case to reinstate him in the position of the Poet Laureate of New Jersey. New Jersey eliminated the post after Baraka wrote a poem about September 11, “Somebody Blew Up America.”

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Kate Simon Photography

*Patti at William Burroughs’, Dec. 30, 1975, Franklin St., NYC*

Victor Bokris and Andrew Wylie Collection

Burroughs moved back to New York in 1974 after living abroad for twenty-four years. Many young artists, writers, and musicians became his followers and visited him at his basement apartment, known as “The Bunker.” Burroughs is pictured here with Patti Smith, for whom he later composed song lyrics. As one critic has put it, “It is generally accepted that the Beats were the daddies of the Hippies, the granddaddies of the Punks.”

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158, 152, 200

Paste-up of an announcement for a poetry reading, 12 June [1959]
Daisy Aldan Papers

Paste-up of an announcement for a Wagner Literary Magazine event, ca. 1964
Gerard Malanga Papers

An announcement for a benefit reading at St. Mark’s, 10 March 1966
Carol Bergé Papers

In the 1950s and 1960s, the poetry scene in New York flourished. As their fame grew, Beat writers often read at benefit events supporting arts organizations and literary magazines. These announcements...
are rare documents of both the aesthetic sensibilities of their historical moments and the rich cross-fertilization among poetic movements that took place at readings and other events.

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AP Wirephoto
*Tigers Boo Beatnik Bards*, 12 November 1959
Gelatin silver print
New York Journal American Photograph Morgue

In isolation, this image and caption do not capture the nature of this event. The poets, who also included Michael McClure, arrived to find the Princeton University lecture hall’s stage decorated like a bohemian café, complete with coffee machines and young women dressed in beatnik black delivering coffee to the audience. In a 1971 interview with Anne Waldman, Philip Whalen (1923-2002) recalled:

>. . . . and then Bremser got up and started reading and he said fuck once or twice and everybody broke up and they were screaming, whistling and yelling, and he kept yelling, “All right, shut up, or you won’t be able to hear the dirty words” . . . and then he’d read a few more and he’d say “shit” or something like that and everybody’d break up, and so, but finally we got through all four guys and we left the stage and at this point the management comes up and says, “Wait, hey, where are you going? . . . we told the audience you were going to stay here till midnight reading poems. It was going to be like a beat coffee shop and everything, a beat coffee shop in San Francisco’s North Beach.”

After arguing with the theater managers and receiving their pay for the event, the poets prepared to leave, and chaos ensued:

>Anyway it was an awful scene . . . the audience was starting to run up and down the aisles and through the balconies and in and out of the windows and stomping and screaming and, oh, it was really marvelous. . . .

42

Unidentified Photographer
*Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, and Ashley Montagu*, 9 March 1961
Gelatin silver print
Ginsberg was a proponent of personal freedom of all kinds. In this 1961 panel event, he defended the use of marijuana. Unlike many of his friends, he was lucky that his life was not consumed by drug addiction. At the time of this event, his partner Peter Orlovsky was addicted to heroin. As Bill Morgan describes it, Ginsberg’s relationship to drugs was based in his efforts to recreate his 1949 Blakean vision:

He hoped that through drugs he could unlock a new and unexplored part of his mind, and he tried, unsuccessfully, to replicate his earlier Harlem epiphany. To that end he had taken marijuana, heroin, laughing gas, opium, mushrooms, majoun, amphetamines, hash, and an array of hallucinogens.

THE MARRIAGE STATE

My darling, let’s be nice old bourgeois with salt shakers on the table and a Chevrolet station wagon in the garage.

—Diana Hansen in a letter to Neal Cassady

The openly sexual writings of the Beats in the 1950s were radical and dangerous and, in the minds of some readers, remain so today. They wrote frankly about sexual acts and lived outside the boundaries of monogamy and sexual orientation. The Beats’ approach to sexual relationships was nevertheless unquestionably important in setting the stage for dramatic changes in social norms in the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet despite the Beats’ groundbreaking—and risk-taking—representations of sexual relationships in general and homosexuality in particular, their often appalling attitudes towards and treatment of women make many readers ambivalent towards the Beat movement as a whole. Women writers were, of course, present in the Beat literary community but critics disagree over how they should be represented. On the one hand, female Beats have been arguably neglected in the scholarship and need to be recovered. On the other hand, attempting to prove women’s prominence in the Beat scene might misrepresent the reality and even shield from scrutiny its inherent misogyny.
The Beats’ approaches to the institution of marriage offers one entry point into the complicated problem of gender relations. As the items in this section show, their attitudes toward marriage are sometimes radically progressive, sometimes baffling, and often infuriating.

334

The first page of a letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 8 June 1950
Allen Ginsberg Collection

“I have started into a new season,” Ginsberg writes, “choosing women as my theme.” He first informed Kerouac of his homosexual desires in 1946, and in his twenties struggled to find his sexual identity. He wrote to Kerouac in early 1950, “I am not going to have anymore homosexual affairs anymore: my will is free enough now to put this in writing as a final statement.” The heterosexual infatuation described in this letter did not last long, and though Ginsberg had sexual relations with women from time to time, no relationship would rival the longevity of his love for Peter Orlovsky, whom he met in 1954.

This letter captures the core Beat group’s attitude towards relationships with women and parenthood: Ginsberg wants all the benefits of the relationship with none of the responsibilities. At the bottom of the page he describes his reluctance towards “getting stuck permanently with the situation.” Later in the letter, Ginsberg criticizes Cassady for getting stuck in the “authority and ritual” of marriage.

339

“Marriage” in the corrected proof of Gregory Corso’s Selected Poems (London: Eyer & Spottiswoode, 1962)
Gregory Corso Collection

Corso’s widely anthologized poem, “Marriage,” is a complex and characteristically comic investigation of the institution and an important statement about social conventions in 1960, when it was first published. Corso had relationships with both men and women, married twice, and had a daughter. Critic Ann Douglas suggests that Corso’s critique of marriage was liberating in its implications for women and men alike:
Women looked at Corso and the other Beats and asked, “if these men can free themselves from constricted gender roles—getting married, working for a corporation and so on—why can't we?”

208

A letter from Robert Duncan to Celia Zukofsky, 4 February 1959
Louis Zukofsky Collection

Poet Robert Duncan first met artist Jess [Collins] at a reading in Berkeley in 1949. Jess said that after watching Duncan read he fell immediately in love. In 1951 the couple said marriage vows. In this touching letter, Duncan describes the financial challenges of their unconventional life in the small artists’ community of Bolinas in northern California: “we’re back on the corner grocery charge account.” Despite all this, Duncan and Jess embrace the simple domestic pleasures of their garden.

Duncan and Jess’s monogamy is a foil to many of the Beats’ relationships, which were often tumultuous and adulterous. Their self-proclaimed marriage lasted until Duncan’s death in 1988.

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A letter from Neal Cassady to Allen Ginsberg, May 1948
Neal Cassady Collection

For Allen Ginsberg, his 1946 introduction to Neal Cassady was love at first sight. Within a few months, the two began a sexual relationship, but only at Cassady’s whim, which was much too infrequent for Ginsberg. Although Cassady was more interested in women than in men, he and Ginsberg had an off-and-on sexual relationship until Ginsberg met Peter Orlovsky in 1954.

Orlovsky and Ginsberg were together until Ginsberg’s death in 1997. During that time their relationship was strikingly open: Ginsberg had many male partners and Orlovsky had many female partners. While traveling together they would write to friends about the other’s success or failure in finding suitable sexual prospects in the cities they visited, and wrote to one another frankly about their various sexual encounters.
Taking a step forward for gay rights, Allen Ginsberg listed Peter Orlovsky as his spouse in his *Who’s Who* entry.

336

A letter from Diana Hansen to Neal Cassady, 27 August 1950
Neal Cassady Collection

Neal Cassady began seeing Diana Hansen in 1949. Already married to Carolyn Cassady (b. 1923) and divorced from his first wife LuAnn, Cassady was married to both Carolyn and Diana and fathered children with both of them in 1950. Neal traveled with Kerouac to Mexico City that year to obtain a divorce from Carolyn in order to marry Diana, but the divorce was never confirmed.

In this letter, Diana writes a non-traditional marriage agreement for Neal that anticipates the “free love” movement. The contract gives Neal free rein to be with as many women as he wants in whatever manner he desires. It is clear from Diana’s later letters to Neal that the terms of this contract do not truly represent the life she desired.

102

Unidentified photographer
*Little Neal*, 1950
Gelatin silver print
Neal Cassady Collection

Diana Hansen gave birth to Neal Cassady’s son on 7 November 1950. Originally named Neal III, his name was later changed to Curtis. For a while Cassady attempted to maintain relationships with Carolyn in San Francisco and Diana in New York, but eventually left Diana with very little money and no emotional support with which to care for their son.

100, 101, 104

Unidentified photographer
Neal Cassady with daughters Cathy and Jami, undated
Gelatin silver print
Neal Cassady Collection

Unidentified photographer
Neal and Carolyn Cassady had three children together, Cathy, Jami, and John. Life with Cassady was not easy. He habitually left Carolyn and the children to take road trips. Carolyn has been vocal about her experiences being Cassady’s wife. In *Off the Road* she writes of Neal leaving her to go on a trip with an ex-lover, stating that if it were not for her newborn baby girl, Cathy, she would have left him:

> Without her, what would have happened? Her needs caused me to keep going through the motions. . . . Of course, without Cathy, I’d have been free; I’d never have gone back to Neal. I’d have gone to work and moved away. How simple.

A letter from Neal Cassady to Carolyn Cassady, 19 January 1951
Neal Cassady Collection

“I have just left Diana after 48 hours of talk and tears,” Neal Cassady writes. The letter states that Diana understands that he is returning to Carolyn and that, “everything, yes, every little thing is completely, and perfectly, and absolutely o.k.” But later that year Diana wrote to Neal:

> I’m perfectly open-minded about going out and trying to find a father for your son—but alas, no one asks me. . . . Why should anyone want to visit me in this slum—or take a serious interest in me with my life. You did a complete about-face on all the things you told me—re marital status, feelings, etc. etc. . . . Why can’t you please send Curt’s money silently and regularly?

A father’s day card from Carolyn Cassady to Neal Cassady, undated
Neal Cassady Collection
THE JAZZ SCENE

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of
night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up
smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats
floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz…
—Allen Ginsberg, “Howl” (1955)

The Beat generation was, in many ways, a product of the Bebop
movement in jazz in the 1940s. Bebop was avant-garde, non-
commercial, and intimate. Born in backroom venues in New York,
and spreading across the country, it focused the attention of both the
musician and the listener on complex harmonic structures, taking
apart the traditional jazz melodies and investigating the abstract fact
of the musical form itself. It was jazz for listening, not jazz for
dancing. It was a radical aesthetic with an accompanying free
lifestyle, that to many mainstream listeners represented not just a
threat to musical taste, but to the social—and racial—status quo.

Bop was appealingly subversive and intellectually stimulating for the
young Beat writers. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and their friends visited
Harlem venues such as Minton’s, the Three Deuces, and The Open
Door. From what they heard, the writers derived their own “bop
prosody,” improvised sentences and lines with extensive repetition
and heightened rhythm. The atmosphere of Bop was almost as
important as the music itself, and the figure of the jazzman was an
ideal for many Beat writers: the musicians were uncompromisingly
dedicated to their work, intellectual outlaws who lived fast. The Beats
borrowed not just compositional styles but the drugs that delivered
the musicians to states of improvisational intensity. They also
adopted the jazzmen’s jive slang—hip, hep, cat, dig, junkie, beat, and
many more. Jazz venues across the country introduced the mostly
white Beats to a culture easy to idealize and exhilarating to join; in
On the Road, stereotyped images of African-Americans alternate with
the famously virtuosic accounts of performances and audiences.

While East Coast bebop and its later embodiments tended to a fast,
“hard” sound, the West Coast sound was more relaxed, lending itself
to a new performance genre. In the mid-1950s, poets such as
Kenneth Patchen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Kenneth Rexroth
began reading their work to jazz accompaniment in jazz clubs such as
The Cellar, spurring a poetry performance trend that continues to
this day.
The first edition of John Clellon Holmes’s *The Horn* (New York: Random House, 1958)

Holmes is best known for his novel of the Beat Generation, *Go*, but jazz historians consider his second novel, *The Horn*, to be an important account of Bebop. It tells the tragic story of musician Edgar Pool, a character who is part Charlie Parker, part Lester Young. *The Horn* is filled with rhythmic descriptions of performances and replete with hipster slang.

For white writers, Bebop was a culture easy to idealize and exhilarating to write about. In *The Horn* as in *On the Road*, stereotyped images of African-Americans accompany the virtuosic accounts of performances and audiences. As Kenneth Rexroth put it in a 1958 commentary on Holmes’s book:

“If (as Norman Mailer has characterized him) the hipster is an imitation Negro, the characters in *The Horn* are the kind of Negroes the hipster tries to imitate. Holmes is a conscientious craftsman, with considerable understanding of humans and their motives, and his fictional honesty redeems him. He says, “Finally Negro people are forever out of reach of white people, no matter how the whites strive or how they yearn.”


Ross Russell Papers

Russell’s novel about a jazzman named Red Traver is a fictionalized telling of the life of Charlie Parker. Whitney Balliet, jazz critic for the New Yorker when the novel was first published in 1961, wrote in his review:

Russell’s prose, plain as a dishrag, never gets between his material and the reader. Several scenes and characters are indelible: Traver’s collapse in a nightclub because of an overdose of heroin; his filthy, cold walk-up in Harlem; his theft of a trumpet from a retired old-line jazz musician; a for-once wholly credible white band leader, who is a neat cross between Woody Herman and Stan Kenton; a cool, languorous
white camp follower; and fat-girl, a monstrous homosexual drug peddler.

129, 245

Gregory Corso’s “Experiment in Sound and Color Variations: Blue on Black,” undated
Gregory Corso Collection

Neal Cassady’s “There’s More of that Kind of Rhyme,” undated
Neal Cassady Collection

264

The limited, signed first edition of Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), copy F of 26 lettered copies

The free improvisations that make up *Mexico City Blues* were written in 1955. Biographer Ann Charters writes that Kerouac told a magazine interviewer that “he used the size of his notebook page for the form and length of the poem, ‘just as a musician has to get out, a jazz musician, his statement within a certain number of bars, within one chorus, which spills over into the next, but has to stop where the chorus page stops.’

Of all the Beats, Kerouac was most heavily influenced by bebop. In the early 1940s, while an undergraduate at Columbia University, he lived up the street from Minton’s Playhouse, the Harlem club where the most innovative jazz was played by musicians such as guitarist Charlie Christian, tenor saxophonist Lester Young, trumpeter Dizzie Gillespie, pianist Thelonious Monk, and alto saxophonist Charlie Parker.

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A letter from LeRoi Jones to Gregory Corso, undated
Gregory Corso Collection

On the second page of this letter, likely written in 1958, Jones describes a reading with the free jazz innovator Cecil Taylor (b. 1929), who helped move jazz piano to new heights of improvisation
in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jones’s description of the event is a performance in its own right.

117

A letter from Frank O’Hara to Gregory Corso, 20 March 1958
Gregory Corso Collection

In the longest paragraph of this letter, poet O’Hara meditates on the influence of jazz and painting on the Beats and himself respectively: “where one takes Bird for inspiration I would take Bill de Kooning.” Influence moved in all directions: the alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman reproduced a Jackson Pollock painting on the cover of his landmark 1960 album *Free Jazz*.

56


Ted Joans’s work has been neglected in both the Beat and the African-American canon. His shifting, ironic tone, combined with his sweet, goofy poetic demeanor and swift readability, are subversive, but arguably not in the manner that leads to inclusion in lists and anthologies. While his poetry has had few readers in recent decades, Joans is remembered well for scribbling the phrase “Bird lives!” on walls across New York City after the death of Charlie Parker.

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Ross Russell (dates here)
*Gillespie and Parker*, ca. 1949
Gelatin silver print
Ross Russell Papers

Bebop revolutionized jazz. The harmonic door it opened presented new avenues of expressing heart and soul as well as new demands on virtuosity. Of the Beats—Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Cassady in particular—were greatly affected by the seemingly inexhaustible torrents of rhythmic and harmonic variety found in bebop. As they developed their ears, they became aware of the possibilities of this new freedom in application to their own work.
The album sleeve for *Dizzy Gillespie/Charley Christian Harlem 1941* (Esoteric Records 4, 1953)

John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie (1917-1993) was born in South Carolina. A trumpeter from an early age, he studied harmony in college before moving to Philadelphia and New York to play and arrange for bandleaders such as Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington. In legendary jam sessions at Minton’s Playhouse in the early 1940s, Gillespie began to evolve beyond his influences and develop a new harmonic freedom. With Charlie Parker and others, Gillespie helped create bebop.

The early piece “Kerouac,” recorded at Minton’s in 1941, is Gillespie’s version of “Exactly Like You” by Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh. Altered and extended chords, whole-tone scales, and chord substitutions, heard in Gillespie’s solo, were all new to jazz. Jerry Newman, a jazz enthusiast and friend of Kerouac and Ginsberg, suggested the new title to Gillespie.

Hear this recording of “Kerouac” at the listening station.

The album sleeve for the recording *Charlie Parker Volume 4* (Dial Records 207, 1952)

Charlie “Bird” Parker (1920-1955) left school in Kansas City at age 15 to become a professional musician. His personal style began to take shape during a yearlong stay in New York. Parker explained his restlessness within traditional jazz structures:

> I kept thinking there’s bound to be something else. I could hear it sometimes, but I couldn’t play it. . . . I found that by using the higher intervals of a chord as a melody line and backing them with appropriately related changes, I could play the things I’d been hearing.

Alcohol and heroin addiction caused Parker to be committed to a mental institution for several months and contributed to his death at thirty-five. After his death, the graffito “Bird Lives!” began to appear in
locations around New York, a tribute usually credited to Beat poet Ted Joans.

Hear this recording of “Klactoveedsedstene” at the listening station.

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Unidentified photographer
Tempo Music Shop, Hollywood Blvd, Hollywood, CA, Opening Week 1945
Gelatin silver print
Ross Russell Papers

Ross Russell (1909-2000) was a jazz journalist, jazz historian, and record store owner. He was also the founder of Dial Records, a short-lived but influential label that released important recordings by artists as varied as Charlie Parker and Arnold Schoenberg. Russell had a turbulent relationship with Parker, but many great Dial recordings resulted from the partnership. Russell’s biography of Parker, Bird Lives! The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie “Yardbird” Parker, was published in 1973.

Russell annotated this photograph as follows: “L to R Dorothy Russell, "Gil" (businessman neighbor), Ross Russell. The home made fixtures and scanty stock are to be noted.”

223

Wallace Berman (1926-1976)
Untitled, 1946
Print from drawing
Ross Russell Papers

This drawing by the Beat artist Wallace Berman depicts famous jazz musicians of the period, including Dodo Marmarosa, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Teddy Edwards, Roy Porter, and Howard McGhee. In 1945 Parker and Gillespie, with a young unknown named Miles Davis, traveled to Los Angeles, where they spent months practicing, recording, and performing bebop for new audiences.

The influence of surrealism is evident in the disturbing imagery in Berman’s collage, created when he was just twenty. The young Berman immersed himself in Los Angeles’s black jazz community,
and his art of the period is strikingly honest in portraying jazz's darker side. One of his drawings from this period is featured on a Dial Records bebop album cover. In the 1960s, Berman became the de facto leader of the Los Angeles underground art scene.

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Ross Russell (1909-2000)
*Bird's band in club*, undated
Gelatin silver print

*Charlie Parker at the Open Door*, New York 1952
Gelatin silver print
L to R: Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker
Ross Russell Papers

No jazz musician had as powerful hold over the Beats as Charlie Parker, whose early death was eulogized by many writers, including Jack Kerouac in the 239th Chorus of *Mexico City Blues* (1959):

Charley Parker Looked like Buddha
Charley Parker, who recently died
Laughing at a juggler on the TV
after weeks of strain and sickness,
was called the Perfect Musician.
And his expression on his face
Was as calm, beautiful, and profound
As the image of the Buddha
Represented in the East, the lidded eyes,
The expression that says “All is Well”
—This was what Charley Parker
Said when he played, All is Well.
You had the feeling of early-in-the-morning
Like a hermit’s joy, or like
the perfect cry
Of some wild gang at a jam session
“Wail, Wop”—Charley burst
His lungs to reach the speed
Of what the speedsters wanted
And what they wanted
Was his Eternal Slowdown.
A great musician and a great
creator of forms
That ultimately find expression
In mores and what have you.

215

Ross Russell (1909-2000)
Sarah Vaughan, 126th ST. NYC, ca. 1950-51
Gelatin silver print
Ross Russell Papers

Vaughan (1924-1990) was a favorite singer of Ginsberg and Kerouac, who mentions her in *Mexico City Blues*. Born in Newark, New Jersey, she dropped out of high school to concentrate on her music, eventually winning an amateur competition at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. This led to a job offer to sing and play piano with Earl Hines, whose band at this time featured Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Over the next few years she shared the stage with the most groundbreaking jazz musicians of her day, including Art Blakey, Dexter Gordon, and Miles Davis. Her hard-partying lifestyle and substance abuse did not lead to tragedy, as with many of her peers, and she continued singing until the late 1980s.

359

Unidentified photographer
Lester Young, undated
Gelatin silver print
Ross Russell Papers

Lester “Prez” Young (1909-1959) was born into a musical family in Mississippi. He grew up touring the vaudeville and carnival circuits with the family band. In 1933 he moved to Kansas City and eventually joined Count Basie’s group on tenor sax, where his relaxed intensity and warm, smooth tone complemented the driving, bluesy K. C. swing. He was an important influence on Charlie Parker, and his lifestyle and eccentricities made him one of the earliest “hipsters.” Young died as a result of years of drug and alcohol abuse.

218

The album sleeve for *The Kansas City Style* (Commodore Record Co. FL20, 021, no dated)
Lester Young was one of Jack Kerouac’s idols, both musically and personally, and Kerouac used Kansas City swing to help develop his ideas of spontaneous prose. Kerouac became acquainted with Young in New York in the early 1940s, where he would request songs of him and then sing along. Prez gave Kerouac his first marijuana, in a cab in Times Square. Kerouac wrote of Young in *Visions of Cody* (1959):

Lester is just like the river, the river starts in near Butte, Montana in frozen snow caps (Three Forks) and meanders on down across states and entire territorial areas of dun bleak land with hawthorn crackling in the sleet, picks up rivers at Bismark, Omaha and St. Louis just north, another at Kay-ro, another in Arkansas, Tennessee, comes deluging on New Orleans with muddy news from the land and a roar of subterranean excitement that is like the vibration of the entire land sucked of its gut in mad midnight, fevered, hot, the big mudhole rank clawpole old frogular pawed-soul titanic Mississippi from the North, full of wires, cold wood and horn.

Hear this recording of “Pagin’ the Devil” at the listening station.

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Harry Redl (b. 1926)
Kenneth Patchen, undated
Gelatin silver print
Kenneth Patchen Literary File

Poet, novelist, and artist Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972) is seen as an important figure in the so-called San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the 1950s. Although he never allied himself with a particular movement or group of writers, his work has been described variously as Dadaist, Surrealist, proletarian, political, or self-consciously naïve. Patchen was a pacifist with anarchist convictions, and above all things an experimentalist who often interwove his writing with music or images. His rage towards mainstream culture, paired with his vision of hope, wonder, and love, inspired the Beats and many other poets of the period.
Patchen began combining his poetry with jazz in 1950 and heavily influenced Beat writers, who soon followed suit. Biographer Larry Smith writes, “Patchen verified the Beat faith in jazz as a spiritual source and as a parallel art form to their writing—hot and cool, emotional and cerebral, a spontaneous creative act engendered out of the artist’s intense confrontation with life.”

Patchen’s friend Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti both pursued collaborations with jazz musicians, most famously at the San Francisco jazz club The Cellar. Larry Smith points out a crucial difference between the results: “the fact that Patchen termed his work ‘poetry-jazz,’ while others, including Ferlinghetti and Rexroth, labeled theirs as ‘poetry-and-jazz’ speaks much. In fact Patchen’s was the only true synthesis of the art forms into something new.”

The collaboration began with recordings only, due to Patchen’s condition. But when he improved in the fall of 1957, the group began a two-week stint at the Blackhawk Club in San Francisco, drawing large crowds for the two-week gig. Further performances at clubs around the city followed. By December they were playing clubs in Los Angeles, and though the Sextet dismantled soon after, Patchen traveled around the country performing, including two evenings collaborating with Charles Mingus in New York City in 1959.

Allen Ginsberg Reads Howl and Other Poems (Fantasy Records 7006, 1959)
Ginsberg describes his writing in the liner notes to this recording:

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns. . . . I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration. . . . I thought I wouldn’t write a poem, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn’t be able to show anybody, write for my own soul’s ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of Howl, “I saw the best minds etc.,” the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a huge sad comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin’s walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear sound of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry. . . . Ideally each line of Howl is a single breath unit. . . . My breath is long—that’s the Measure, one physical and mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath.

222

The album sleeve for Lenny Bruce’s I am not a nut, elect me! (Fantasy Records 7007, 1959)

Lenny Bruce’s (1925-1966) humor, satire and resistance to authority place him with the Beats in attempting to transcend and subvert the moral and societal strictures of the time. His edgy comedy led him to trouble with the law, and his rants confronting hypocrisy and pretense in politics, race relations, religion, and American culture in general struck a deep chord for thousands. He died of a morphine overdose.

Albert Goldman, in his liner notes to the recording of the 1961 Lenny Bruce Carnegie Hall performance, called Bruce:

. . . . a child of the jazz age. Lenny worshiped the gods of Spontaneity, Candor and Free Association. He fancied himself an oral jazzman. His ideal was to walk out there like Charlie Parker, take that mike in his hand like a horn and blow, blow, blow everything that came into his head just as it came into his head with nothing censored nothing translated, nothing
mediated, until he was pure mind, pure head sending out brainwaves like radio waves into the heads of every man and woman seated in that vast hall.

228

The interior of the album sleeve for the Fugs’s *Tenderness Junction* (Reprise RS6280, 1967)

Ed Sanders (b. 1939) and Tuli Kupferberg (b. 1923) formed the Fugs in 1965. Both had been active in the New York literary and counterculture publishing worlds; they can be viewed as links between the Beat Generation and the underground of the 1960s. The Fugs were committed to literature, humor, and political and social protest and their lyrics often featured open discussions of sex and drugs. They disbanded in 1969, exhausted after years of controversy:

We were always on the verge of getting arrested. We had bomb threats. We were picketed by right-wingers. . . . We were investigated by the FBI, by the Post Office, by the New York District Attorney. . . . We were tossed off a major label. It took bites out of our spirit. I was getting weary—four years had seemed like forty, and I felt as if I’d awakened inside a Samuel Beckett novel.

The group reunited in 1984 and continues to play today. The photographs for this album sleeve were taken by Richard Avedon; Ginsberg composed the track entitled “Hare Krishna.”

**THE ROAD WEST**

Remember: On the Road is also a study of the great places like San Joachin valley, Butte, the Mississippi River, the Susquehanna, the So. Platte, ‘Frisco, Arizona, Nevada, the Dalles, minor league night game in Rocky Mount, New Orleans, Texas, Chicago, Iowa, Grants N. M., and so much else. This is the rockbound spine of it...

—Jack Kerouac journal entry, April 1949
In striking contrast to New York’s bustling, crowded streets was the open road of American highways. Throughout the writings of Kerouac and other Beats the American landscape is celebrated both as a contemplative space of sublime proportions and the stage for the drama of the pioneers of the nineteenth century. Beat descriptions of America’s regions often take on a nostalgic tone, the writers grasping after the long-gone paths traveled not only by wagon trains, but by the hoboés of their own Depression era childhoods.

Jack Kerouac took his first road trip west in 1947 with two destinations in mind: Neal Cassady’s hometown of Denver and San Francisco. On later trips William S. Burroughs was the destination, either in Algiers, Louisiana or on his farm in South Texas. But San Francisco was the magnet that drew the Beats most strongly. The Bay Area already supported a thriving literary community whose established poets, such as Robert Duncan and Kenneth Rexroth, infused the Beat vocabulary with new spiritual urgency. After the founding of City Lights Publishers and Bookstore, the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco became a mecca for the literary counterculture.

Southern California had its own important roles to play in the history of the Beats in the West. Hollywood contributed to the mythology of the American highway in early 1950s films featuring screen icons such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, tapping in to the same impulses that drove the lives and writings of the Beats. In the late 1950s the community dubbed “Venice West” became the southern counterpart to North Beach, attracting writers, artists, and surfers alike to fashion a distinctive L.A. Beat culture.

CROSSING AMERICA

The travels across America that Kerouac documents in many of his books began in 1947, and have led many readers to associate the Beat movement itself with cross-country drives, hitchhiking trips, and bus rides. The items represented here show just a few of the ways in which the Beats explored America’s great middle expanses in their work. At its simplest, the road may be read as the catalyst for Neal Cassady’s explosive charisma or as a symbol for his unwillingness to be constrained by the grid of city streets. Cassady’s lawless letters about the road most famously inspired Kerouac and also led to Allen Ginsberg’s major poetic breakthrough, “The Green Automobile.” But
the road’s relevance extends further, representing the idea of America itself and its traditions of individualism and reinvention. For Gregory Corso, the open road is where America’s stereotypes lose their bearings, while for Ginsberg it eventually becomes the space of political transformation.

321, 96

The first page of Neal Cassady’s “Adventures in Auto-eroticism via automobile,” undated

Neal Cassady Collection

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
Neal + New Girl Anne, 1963
Gelatin silver print
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Contrary to popular misunderstanding, Jack Kerouac’s character in On the Road never drives. In fact, Kerouac hated to drive and avoided it as much as possible after a car accident in the early 1940s. Neal Cassady, on the other hand, had a relationship with cars that arguably transcended all others. Here he documents his legendary early years as a car thief from 1940-1947:

During the course of those 7 years I had illegally in my possession—whether just for the moment to be taken back to its owner before he returned to claim it (i.e. on parking lots and the like) or whether I had taken it for the purpose of repainting and otherwise altering its appearance so as to keep it for several weeks—a total of some 500 automobiles.

The remainder of this brief memoir has been published in The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry (1999). In Cassady’s post-Beat days, he was most famous for driving the bus for Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters in 1964.

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A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 21 May 1953, with enclosed illustration, annotated by Kerouac

Allen Ginsberg Collection

In 1953, Ginsberg finally had the poetic turning point he was waiting for in his poem “The Green Automobile” which he called “a nostalgic
recapitulation of *On the Road.*” The poem, two parts of which are represented in this letter, was partly an autobiographical investigation of his declaration of love to Cassady in the middle of a rural intersection in Texas in 1947. It was an embrace of his sexuality, the “first time I let my imagination and desire dominate over what, in the mental hospital, I had been taught to accept as an adjustment to reality.” The poem also shows him leaving behind rhymed verse and archaic language and embracing the free-verse influence of William Carlos Williams and the flowing directness he found in Kerouac’s manuscripts of the early 1950s.

The early part of this letter concerns Power of Attorney over two of Kerouac’s books; Ginsberg was at this time working as his friend’s agent.

121, 8

The first page of Gregory Corso’s “In this Hung-Up Age: A One-Act Farce,” 1954
Gregory Corso Collection

Gregory Corso (1930-2001)
Characters from “In this Hung-Up Age” undated
Pen and ink on paper
Gregory Corso Art Collection

Corso’s play treats the road in characteristically comic style. It tells the story of a bus that breaks down somewhere between New York and San Francisco, and whose passengers, each representative of a certain American type, are trampled by a herd of buffalo. Corso later pointed out that his play was the first study of the “Hipster” as a figure, predating Norman Mailer’s essay “The White Negro” by three years. Corso wrote this piece while living in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1954. It was performed by the Harvard Dramatic Workshop in 1955 and later published in *Encounter* magazine.

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In the decades since *On the Road* was published, the book’s narrative style has been so widely absorbed into fictional convention that it is easy to forget how radical it was at the time. In 1963, five
years after On the Road was issued, the Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha composed Twentysix Gasoline Stations. The book is just that: photographs of twenty-six gas stations on Route 66 between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City.

Though there are many differences between Ruscha’s and Kerouac’s works—Ruscha’s tone is emotionally flattened and ironic whereas Kerouac’s moves between elation and desperation—both works investigate the relationship between the linear process of road travel and the temporal process of reading a book. Each disposes with the neatness of a narrative arc and shows the way in which the straightforward documentation of real life is never just that.

120, 319, 320

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Gregory Corso, 28 March 1966
Gregory Corso Collection


Allen Ginsberg’s Wichita Vortex Sutra (San Francisco: City Lights, 1967)

In the mid-1960s, the road took on a new symbolic meaning for Ginsberg in the anti-war poem Wichita Vortex Sutra. In this letter, he describes composing the poem into a tape machine while riding through the great open spaces of the Midwest during the first major escalation of the Vietnam War. The road is no longer a site of personal transformation, but a place where car radios transmit news of deaths halfway around the world: “Flesh soft as a Kansas girl’s / ripped open by metal explosion — / . . . . on the other side of the planet.”

The Ransom Center owns eleven different editions of this poem published in 1966 alone by small presses and newspapers across the United States and abroad.

Wall items:
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The first page of a letter from Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac, 8 January 1951
Neal Cassady Collection
Likely high on Benzedrine, Cassady spends the first part of this letter pouring out an extended alliteration that leads up to the pronouncement, “YOU GET A JOB!” He wants Kerouac to save enough money for a road trip and, in the final paragraph of the page, presents a strict itinerary for his own voyage from his home in San Francisco to Los Angeles and across the country to New York by train. After finding a truck to move Kerouac’s belongings, they will return west in a leisurely seven days.

This trip never happened. But memories of earlier road trips and Cassady’s juxtaposition of manic literary experiment with descriptions of manic travels inspired Kerouac. Cassady wrote several letters of this type to Kerouac in the spring of 1951, prompting him to finally sit down in early April to type the first draft of *On the Road* on a long roll of tracing paper.

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A letter from Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac, 31 August 1947
Digital reproduction of verso
Neal Cassady Collection

This letter about Cassady’s and Ginsberg’s visit to the Burroughs family in New Waverley, about fifty miles north of Houston, is the only document in the Ransom Center collections that documents the Beats’ time in Texas. Burroughs moved there in 1946 to start a marijuana farm and Cassady finally agreed to travel there from Denver with Allen Ginsberg, who was at the time deeply in love with Cassady. This was Cassady’s first introduction to Burroughs, whose unconventional way of life took him aback: “this is a crazy spot, but I anticipated that + can accept it all + with some kick.” To Ginsberg’s relief, his two friends hit it off.

Ginsberg shipped out to West Africa soon after this letter was written, and Cassady stayed for the harvest. He drove the marijuana up to New York with Herbert Huncke and Burroughs.

360, 167

Associated Press
*Proposed Network of Interstate Highways, 1947*
Gelatin silver print
New York Journal American Photograph Morgue
In a 2007 article in the New Yorker, critic Louis Menand wrote of the relationship of On the Road to America’s highways:

Nostalgia is part of the appeal of On the Road today, but it was also part of its appeal in 1957. . . . In 1947, when Kerouac began his travels, there were three million miles of intercity roads in the United States and thirty-eight million registered vehicles. When On the Road came out, there was roughly the same amount of highway, but there were thirty million more cars and trucks and the construction of the federal highway system, which had been planned since 1944, was underway. The interstates changed the phenomenology of driving. . . . Although there are about a million more miles of road in the United States today than there were in 1947, two hundred million more vehicles are registered to drive on them. There is little romance left in long car rides.

Although hitchhiking has a long history in the United States, the practice became increasingly common during World War II, when gasoline was rationed. As Elijah Wald writes, “For a time, hitchhiking became so respectable that Emily Post even provided car-stopping advice for women working in defense plants.”

As the photograph here suggests, not long after the war ended hitchhiking lost social acceptance and gained symbolic, and often
literal, illegal status. Sal Paradise’s adventures hitchhiking in *On the Road* are credited as being the most influential in shaping modern hitchhiker culture. After the book’s publication more and more young people embarked on hitchhiking trips, not to get somewhere, but to experience the road itself.

THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

Although the core Beat figures were based in New York, they only became nationally known after they became part of the San Francisco literary scene where established writers such as Robert Duncan and Kenneth Rexroth exerted their influence on a growing community of younger poets. Writers who are now defined by the intersecting terms “Beat Generation,” “Black Mountain College,” and “The San Francisco Poetry Renaissance” interacted on every level in a social and intellectual community that has left a permanent mark on contemporary poetry.

The Bay Area had a long tradition of embracing unconventionality and, as such, was a natural destination for the Beats. Culturally and racially diverse, the region had an active art and literary scene, a tradition of radical and anarchist politics, and an open culture that made it a relatively safe home for homosexuals. In addition, San Francisco’s ports and railway terminus made it a good place for temporary work. A decade after Kerouac’s first visit to the city, San Francisco’s Italian neighborhood of North Beach was known nationally as the capitol of the literary counterculture. The items displayed here show how the New York writers found their place—and made their mark—in the Bay Area scene.

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A postcard from Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac, 16 July 1951
Neal Cassady Collection

Kerouac’s first visit to San Francisco, as documented in *On the Road*, had been in 1947. Multiple cross-country trips with Cassady in the years that followed also took him to San Francisco, where Cassady spent several years living off and on with his wife Carolyn. Broke in early 1952, Kerouac decided to try work as a brakeman, after being urged to do so several times by Cassady. He spent a few months training at the Southern Pacific Railroad in nearby Oakland and then moved on.
Cassady mentions an “ekotape” recorder, a reel-to-reel device into which he and Kerouac would record prose experiments and conversations, some of which Kerouac transcribed verbatim into *Visions of Cody*. While staying at the Cassady’s small house in San Francisco, Kerouac revised *On the Road*, wrote sections of *Visions of Cody* and resumed work on *Doctor Sax*, a project started several years earlier.

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A letter of recommendation from Neal Cassady to J. C. Clements, 21 August 1952
Neal Cassady Collection

The Cassady home became cramped in the summer of 1952. Kerouac moved out and the Cassadys moved to San Jose, fifty miles south. Kerouac went to Mexico to visit Burroughs. By late summer he was visiting his mother in North Carolina and Cassady invited him back to the Bay Area. Kerouac couldn’t afford the trip, so Cassady drove across country to pick him up.

While working for the railroad that fall, Kerouac wrote a prose piece about his experiences riding up and down the California railway lines, “October in the Railway Earth,” which was published in the 1957 *Evergreen Review* issue on the San Francisco literary scene.

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A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 12 January 1955
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Ginsberg fell in love first with a portrait of Peter Orlovsky done by his friend Robert LaVigne which he saw soon after moving to San Francisco in 1954. Orlovsky had been posing for (and sleeping with) LaVigne for a few months. After meeting in person, Orlovsky and Ginsberg began a complicated relationship that would last the rest of their lives. Like Ginsberg, Orlovsky came from a family with mental health problems, and Ginsberg saw in him a childlike “saint” figure to protect, love, and teach. Orlovsky had been given a medical discharge from the military in part due to the vision mentioned in this letter—“he has visions too, trees bowing in park on startled mornings for him on way to school.”
Later in the letter, Ginsberg mentions Burroughs’s progress on the as-yet-untitled *Naked Lunch*, which he was writing in the form of letters to Ginsberg, and also talks of submitting Kerouac’s writing to “Crazy Lights” (City Lights).

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Robert Duncan’s *Faust Foutu* (Stinson Beach, CA, 1960)

In 1952, Robert Duncan, his partner Jess, and Harry Jacobi founded King Ubu Gallery in the Cow Hollow neighborhood of San Francisco. One of several underground art galleries that opened during this period, it displayed the work of artists working far out of the mainstream. In 1954, King Ubu became the Six Gallery, and it was here that *Faust Foutu* was performed. The cast list includes writers involved in the San Francisco poetry scene before the Beats arrived.

Duncan invited Allen Ginsberg, who had recently moved in with Neal and Carolyn Cassady in nearby San José, to the performance in 1955. At the end of the play, Duncan stripped naked in front of the audience, inspiring Ginsberg to do the same for the first time a year later.

343, 344

Two copies of the *Black Mountain Review* 7 (Spring 1957)

Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which had opened as an experimental educational community in the 1930s, closed in 1956. Poet Robert Creeley, who joined the college in 1955 as an instructor and editor of *The Black Mountain Review*, decided to move to San Francisco. He later described the reason: “for a writer there was really no place that could have been quite like it, just at that time.”

Creeley asked Ginsberg to write an article about the current poetry scene for the final issue of *The Black Mountain Review*. The idea expanded into an entire issue surveying the “San Francisco Renaissance,” and was edited to a great extent by Ginsberg. Creeley wrote later of the significance of this issue, which he saw as an “opening” of the avant-garde and an acknowledgment of a major geographical “shift” in the poetry world. San Francisco “was unequivocally a shift and opening of the previous center, and finally
as good a place as any to end. Other magazines had appeared as well, with much the same concerns, among them Big Table and the Evergreen Review. Whatever battle had been the case did seem effectually won.”

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The Evergreen Review 1.2 (1957)
From the library of George Dowden

Even in its earliest days, the Evergreen Review had a larger budget and circulation than other literary magazines. This celebrated issue spread awareness of northern California’s literary and artistic renaissance to the national literary audience. The issue proclaimed that “a vigorous new generation of writers, painters and musicians in the Bay Area is revolting against the sterility of American ‘academicians.’” Along with poetry and prose, the issue contained articles on the “San Francisco Jazz Scene” by Ralph Gleason and on the “San Francisco School” of artists by Dore Ashton.

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An aerogramme from Gary Snyder to Gregory Corso, 30 July 1958
Gregory Corso Collection

Of the many poets the Beats met in San Francisco, Gary Snyder had perhaps the most profound impact upon their spiritual lives and aesthetics. At Kenneth Rexroth’s suggestion, Ginsberg walked over to Snyder’s tiny cottage soon after moving to Berkeley in 1955 and introduced himself. Kerouac and Snyder hit it off immediately when they met later that year. Snyder is the model for the hero of Kerouac’s The Dharma Bums, and guided Ginsberg on visits to India and Japan in the early 1960s.

Snyder’s Zen Buddhism, open form poetics, and investment in ecology and the natural world were broadly influential. Note his mention to Corso of the “No. Beach” situation in 1958 when the neighborhood was overrun by Beatniks and covered regularly in the popular press.

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A postcard from Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac, 27 October 1959
Neal Cassady Collection

In 1958, Cassady received a felony conviction for possession of marijuana. He was sentenced to prison at San Quentin, near San Francisco, where he remained for two years. As Gerald Nicosia puts it, he was “protected by his prison walls from having to play Dean Moriarty, but the reality of his life there was more horrible than any fiction Jack could create.” Kerouac sent Cassaday a typewriter, but never visited. Before Cassady’s conviction, the friends had both been having serious personal problems and their friendship was not altogether secure.

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A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Peter Orlovsky, 20 November 1963
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Ginsberg returned to San Francisco for an extended stay in the early 1960s and this newsy letter covers many goings on at the time. Note Ginsberg’s mention of the “Auerhahn poets,” some of whom are featured in the broadsides series on the wall in front of you and to your left. He also mentions his affair with poet Charles Plymell, Robert Frank’s (later aborted) film of the poem Kaddish, and Kerouac’s growing isolation: “dont tell noone his address you know how he is.”

Three-quarters down the page, he mentions hearing a “cowboy blakean” musician with the name “Bob Dilon.” In a 1994 interview, Ginsberg recalled, “Dylan has fantastic breath, great wind, like a blues singer of the West. When I first heard Dylan’s records, I heard that instantly, and I was knocked out. I thought, “Well, at least we’re not a dead end.” Into the 1960s, Dylan was perhaps the most well-known inheritor of the Beat mindset, influencing the next generation.

Wall items:
84-88, 140

Selected prints from Poems in Broadside, first series (Berkeley, CA: Printed for Oyez by the Auerhahn Press, 1964)

31-36

Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972)
Selected prints from the series *A Surprise for the Bagpipe Player* (1955-1956)
Silkscreen prints

“it happens that very often my writing with pen is interrupted by my writing with brush, but I think of both as writing. In other words, I don't consider myself to be a painter. I think of myself as someone who has used the medium of painting in an attempt to extend. It gives an extra dimension to the medium of words.”

—Kenneth Patchen

Joe Brainard (1942-1994)
Robert Creeley, 1971
Pencil on paper

Allen Ginsberg’s *A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley* (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1963), with woodcut by Robert LaVigne

Ginsberg moved from San Francisco to Berkeley in 1955 to attend classes at the University of California. His one-room shack was an idyll for the poet, who read extensively from Whitman and worked on the poems that would be published as *Howl and Other Poems* two years later. He wrote this poem soon after the move. This period was a turning point in Ginsberg’s life; the personal struggles and poetic frustrations he had suffered for years would soon end, after “Howl” was triumphantly performed and published.

Ginsberg writes of this photograph:

*Ginsberg Typing*, 1956
Digital Reproduction
Courtesy The Allen Ginsberg Trust

In and out of Peter and Laf Orlovsky’s apartment on Potrero Hill while waiting for U. S. N. S. Jack Pendleton to ship out from Bay Area to Icy Cape, Alaska, bearing supplies for arctic Distant Early
Warning line radar station, I retyped Howl manuscript at kitchen table for Larry Ferlinghetti’s Pocket Poets series Number Four.

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
Neal and Ch. Plymell in front of 1403 Gough, ca. 1963
Gelatin silver print
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Charles Plymell was a poet from Kansas who joined the community of poets surrounding City Lights in the early 1960s. The house at 1403 Gough Street was occupied by Neal Cassady; a decade earlier, it was where Ginsberg first met Peter Orlovsky. Ginsberg and Plymell had a brief affair at the time of this photograph. Cassady was employed at a car repair shop and working on his memoir, The First Third.

Unidentified photographer
Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady, undated
Gelatin silver print
Neal Cassady Collection

CITY LIGHTS AND HOWL

Allen Ginsberg first discovered City Lights Bookstore in 1954, a year after it was opened by the poet and editor Lawrence Ferlinghetti. It was the first paperback-only bookstore in the country, with stock hand-selected by the discerning Ferlinghetti. It quickly became the center of the North Beach literary community. Ferlinghetti began to produce his own well-designed, inexpensive publications, cementing the reputation of the Beat writers. But Ferlinghetti gives Ginsberg credit for molding the San Francisco literary community: “Well, everybody was writing and things were happening—of course. But it wasn’t until Allen came that it really happened.”

In 1955, artist Wally Hendrick asked Ginsberg to organize a series of poetry readings at the Six Gallery. Ginsberg demurred, but agreed to organize one group reading. The ensuing groundbreaking performance, particularly Ginsberg’s reading of “Howl,” sent
shockwaves throughout the national literary community. Among other things, it prompted New York’s Viking Press to finally publish a manuscript it had been considering for two years: a novel by Ginsberg’s friend Jack Kerouac titled *On the Road*. Ferlinghetti’s publication of *Howl and Other Poems* altered not just Ginsberg’s career, but the very nature of the San Francisco poetry community.

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, [Summer 1955]

This letter documents the first two major events in the saga of “Howl.” In the third paragraph of this letter, Ginsberg mentions his new poem to Kerouac, who was in Mexico at the time: “I enclose first draft scribblenotes of a poem... nearer in your style than anything.” In the next paragraph, he mentions the possible reading series at the Six Gallery, and suggests that “maybe you & I & Neal one night give a program.”

As Ann Charters describes it, after reading a draft of what was to become “Howl,” Kerouac “inadvertently named it by excitedly writing a letter to Ginsberg saying ‘I received your Howl.’” In the fall of 1955 he left Mexico, where he had just written *Mexico City Blues* and *Tristesssa*, to visit Ginsberg in Berkeley.

Two pages from Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg’s “Lit Revolution in America,” undated

In this passage from a partial manifesto of the Beat generation, written for the most part by Corso, Ginsberg describes the evening at the Six Gallery in which Kenneth Rexroth served as Master of Ceremonies, and Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder read. Kerouac famously refused to participate—Ginsberg wanted him to read from *Mexico City Blues*—instead lubricating the audience by passing around large jugs of wine and calling out encouragement to the poets from the aisles.
Robert Duncan’s copy of the first printing of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl for Carl Solomon* (San Francisco, 1956)
Scanned reproduction of the first page of the poem

In mid-1955, alone in San Francisco, Ginsberg was thinking about his absent friends and wrote in his journal, “I saw the best mind angel-headed hipsters damned.” In the months that followed, the first draft of “Howl” was written. The version read at the Six Gallery was itself expanded in the weeks that followed. In early 1956 Ginsberg was invited to co-teach a poetry class at San Francisco State University and needed a reading copy for the students. Robert Creeley typed it and Martha Rexroth mimeographed it. Ginsberg sent copies of this, his first book, to friends and major literary figures such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams.

An inscribed copy of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956; 1959 printing shown here)
From the library of George Dowden

Planning an unusually large print run of 1,000, Lawrence Ferlinghetti decided to print *Howl and other Poems* in England to save money, although he knew that importing it might lead to a seizure at customs. The 1957 second printing of 500 was indeed seized and Ferlinghetti was prosecuted for importing obscene material. The trial was heavily covered in the press, and the decision in favor of City Lights is a landmark in the history of censorship. In October 1957 the courts declared that the poem had “redeeming social value importance.”

Even before the censorship trial, the book had made its mark. It was featured in a 1956 *New York Times* article on San Francisco poetry, “West Coast Rhythms.” National magazines such as *Life* and *Mademoiselle* published features on the San Francisco poets, and Ginsberg’s work was readily accepted by major literary magazines, where earlier he had struggled to find any outlet for his writing.

George Dowden was Allen Ginsberg’s first bibliographer, and Ginsberg often provided Dowden with inscribed copies of his publications. Many of the rare and ephemeral print items in this exhibition come from Dowden’s library.
A mimeographed announcement for a reading with Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, 1956

This announcement is packed with inside jokes and commentaries. Ginsberg’s swipes at the poetry community—“they’re all a pack of fools. It’s all been a big con—are a sign of the tension that had sprung up among the poets. As Michael Schumaker writes:

As unknowns, the poets had relied on each other for mutual support and encouragement; as budding celebrities, they started to feel resentment, competition, and outright hostility toward one another….Despite his good intentions, Allen had alienated some of his friends in his efforts to unite a disparate group of poets into a poetry movement strong enough to take on the literary establishment.

After the reading, Ginsberg and Corso hitchhiked to Los Angeles for a reading in Venice Beach, then went on to Mexico. By the time Howl was seized, they were in Tangier, Morocco editing Burroughs’s Naked Lunch.

113-116

Postcards from Lawrence Ferlinghetti to Gregory Corso, August to November, 1958
Gregory Corso Collection

Gregory Corso composed his famous poem Bomb during a highly productive period of writing at the Beat Hotel in Paris in 1958. Simultaneously, William S. Burroughs was putting the final touches on Naked Lunch in a room downstairs.

The Paris Review and various presses were interested in publishing the poem, but only Ferlinghetti was willing to print the poem as a long fold-out in the shape of a mushroom cloud. The resulting City Lights edition is displayed on the back wall of the gallery.

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City Lights Books Fall 1961 catalogue
Digital reproduction of verso
Carol Bergé Papers
Wall items:
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Unidentified Photographer
A group of poets outside City Lights Bookstore, 1963
Allen Ginsberg Collection
Enlarged digital reproduction

Pictured from left to right are Philip Whalen, Bob Brannaman, [unidentified], Allen Ginsberg, Bob Kaufman, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Alan Russo, and Charles Plymell.

155, 156

Two copies of Gregory Corso’s Bomb (San Francisco: City Lights, 1958), showing the front and back of the publication

In 1958, fears of the hydrogen bomb and radioactive fallout were widespread. Corso was fascinated by “Ban the Bomb” demonstrations, and uncomfortable with writing a purely political response to the bomb: “The best way to get out of it was to make it lyrical….I start with hating it, with the hate of it, I get no farther than a piece of polemic, a political poem—which I usually fall flat on.” Bomb was highly regarded by other poets but its lack of a clear anti-bomb stance led to problems; at a 1958 reading in London, audience members threw their shoes at Corso, calling him fascistic and anti-social.

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Bob Kaufman’s Abomunist Manifesto (San Francisco: City Lights, 1959)
Scanned reproduction of verso

Bob Kaufman (1925-1986) was a central figure in the San Francisco Beat scene. The American son of a German Orthodox Jewish father and a Black Catholic mother from Martinique, he joined the Merchant Marine at age 13, and first met Ginsberg and Burroughs in New York in the early 1940s. Kaufman was a jazz poet, famous for reciting poems in coffeehouses, bars, and on street corners. In 1959, Kaufman co-founded the little magazine Beatitude with Ginsberg, John Kelly, and William Margolis.
The *Abomunist Manifesto* is a tongue-in-cheek manifesto of the North Beach hipster written by that community’s unofficial spokesman, who apparently had a penchant for oatmeal cookies.

**Hero Wall:**
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Matt Valentine (b. 1976)
Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 2007
Inkjet print

Lawrence Ferlinghetti is still an active participant in the poetry world. Valentine, who photographed Ferlinghetti for his upcoming book of portraits of poets, is Programs Coordinator for the Joyces Reading Room at the Honors Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

17-30, 58, 170, 175-191

The Pocket Poet series is the most widely recognized of City Lights Books publications and through it, many readers first encountered avant-garde poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. This array represents the first twenty years of the series. Ferlinghetti wrote of the series, “From the beginning the aim was to publish across the board, avoiding the provincial and the academic....I had in mind rather an international, dissident, insurgent ferment.”

1. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955)
A footnote in most histories of the Beat Generation, Los Angeles fostered a thriving bohemian scene in the 1950s, with Venice Beach at its center. Built at the turn of the century as an Italian-themed housing development, complete with canals and gondola rides, Venice was seedy and depressed by mid-century. Its crumbling state made it an appealing haven for young writers and artists, and cafés and communal gathering spaces sprung up. In Venice and other counterculture enclaves throughout the region, small galleries fostered the work of underground artists, and a movement of assemblage art grew.

In the early 1950s, Hollywood capitalized on the rumblings of disaffected youth to great success in films such as Rebel Without a Cause and The Wild One. Hollywood actors and writers frequented the Venice scene, seeking artistic respite and inspiration. After the Beatnik craze began in the late 1950s, Hollywood saw a lucrative opportunity and began to build Beatnik characters into more film and television projects. Location and casting agents took advantage of Venice’s proximity, building sets that resembled its hangouts and hiring film extras from the growing community of Beatniks loitering along the beachfront.
Lawrence Lipton’s *The Holy Barbarians* (New York: Grove Press, 1962)
From the library of George Dowden

Lipton’s bestselling study of Beat culture was first published in 1959 during the height of the Beatnik craze. Essentially a field guide to the Beats, it contained a glossary of terms and opened with almost anthropological sketches of Venice residents. It introduced a broad audience to Beat culture, including a long description of a reading given by Ginsberg and Corso in 1956, at which Ginsberg disrobed in public for the first time.

Lipton (1898-1975) was the elder statesman of the Southern California Beat scene, mentoring and sheltering many young writers at his Venice Beach home. Ironically, his book was the beginning of the end for the Venice scene. It brought a flood of new residents to the town, which led to a crackdown by authorities.

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The first edition of Stuart Perkoff’s *The Suicide Room*, published as *Jargon* 17 (1956), cover illustration of Miles Davis by Fielding Dawson

Perkoff (1930-1974), the most important poet of the Southern California Beat scene, opened the first Beat café in Venice Beach, the Venice West Expresso Café. The center of L.A. Beat culture until it was shut down by the police in 1965, its décor included poems written on the walls—most famously, artist Wallace Berman’s credo “Art is Love is God.”

*The Suicide Room* was Perkoff’s first book of poems, published by Jonathan Williams’ influential Jargon Society. Perkoff’s work was highly regarded by his fellow poets and was published in Donald Allen’s influential anthology, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*.

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Personality Posters
Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1954)
Interstate Theatre Collection

*The Wild One* will be screened in the Prothro Theater as part of the Ransom Center Rebel Classics Film Series on June 5, 2008
Neal Cassady’s “Leaving L.A. by Train,” undated
Neal Cassady Collection

Wall items:
147
Bill Bridges (1925-2003)
*Coffee House Scene in L.A.*, undated
Gelatin silver print
Bill Bridges Collection

353, 354
Bill Bridges (1925-2003)
*Lawrence Lipton, Eric Nord, and an unidentified woman*, October 1959
Inkjet print from original negative
Bill Bridges Collection

Bill Bridges (1925-2003)
*The Gas House*, October 1959
Inkjet print from original negative
Bill Bridges Collection

In 1959, the photographer Bill Bridges documented the Gas House, one of the original Venice West Beat hangouts, to accompany an article in *Life* magazine. The collective community was founded by Eric Nord, who had earlier worked at North Beach’s legendary Coexistence Bagel Shop and founded the equally legendary North Beach nightclub, The Hungry I. The Gas House received national attention in 1959 after being denied an entertainment permit; after five months in court attempting to over turn the ruling, the permit was denied despite the support of the American Civil Liberties Union and celebrities such as Groucho Marx. After years of struggles with the authorities The Gas House finally shut down in 1962.

The Gas House is featured in Roger Corman’s *Bucket of Blood* which will be screened as part of the Ransom Center Beat Film Series at the Alamo Drafthouse Downtown, April 23, 2008
Pages from of Diane di Prima and George Herms’s *Haiku* (Topanga, CA: Love Press, [1966]), limited handwritten edition with woodblock prints

George Herms (b. 1935) was part of the artists’ circle surrounding Wallace Berman, and is best known for his assemblage art. In the 1950s, he gathered detritus from Los Angeles beaches and vacant lots, building small and large constructions of objects. He printed this book at his Love Press in the bohemian enclave of Topanga Canyon in the Santa Monica mountains. He also contributed cover art to di Prima’s little magazine *Floating Bear.*

*Semia* 1-7 ([1957]-1961)
From the library of Judson Crews

After acquiring a small handpress in 1955, the Los Angeles artist Wallace Berman (1926-1976) began the groundbreaking little magazine *Semia.* It was printed in small runs and sent through the mail to subscribers; as Rebecca Solnit describes it, “the title suggests insemination and dissemination, semen and seeds. Berman’s role as printer / publisher was that of sower.” *Semia* featured the early work of many Beat poets alongside that of Berman’s literary heroes, such as Paul Valéry, William Butler Yeats, Charles Baudelaire, Herman Hesse, and Jean Cocteau.

In *Semia,* arcane symbols, organic tones, and references to peyote and other hallucinogens, in juxtaposition with modern printing methods and collaged photographs, create the feel of a primitive ritual dropped into the middle of the modern world. As Holland Cotter describes it, “Semia defined a distinctively trippy, sardonic West Coast surrealism. New York had hard, cold Pop; the West Coast had a woozy Peyote-Funk that prefigured the hippie era.”

In 1957 Berman agreed to a rare showing of his work at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. After the show opened, Berman was arrested for the exhibition of lewd material. The object in question was a small image of a copulating couple by the female artist known as Cameron. It was among the contents of *Semia* 1, which was scattered at the base of a Berman assemblage. After the case was resolved, Berman moved to Northern California in protest; two years
later he moved to Topanga Canyon, where the final issues of Semina were produced.

The Ransom Center’s copy of Semina 1 lacks the Cameron item.

THE BEATS ABROAD

The Beats are deeply associated with America’s literary history, jazz, landscapes and regions, and the cities of New York and San Francisco. They lived their lives in reaction to definitively American social values and their most powerful impact as a movement has been upon American culture and literature. But many of these writers spent a great deal of time crafting their work and living their lives outside the United States. The impact of their travels may be seen in the number of Beat poems that refer to cities and other geographical points around the world. As the items in this section show, many Beat works might not have come to fruition were it not for opportunities abroad.

While some of the Beats shipped out with the Merchant Marine during World War II, their period of extensive travel began with William S. Burroughs’s move to Mexico in 1949, and subsequent visits from Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, and Lucien Carr. In September 1953, Burroughs returned to New York and began an intense love affair with Allen Ginsberg. After Ginsberg broke it off, Burroughs left New York for Rome and then Tangier, Morocco, and did not return to the United States for fifteen years.

In 1957, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso all met up with Burroughs in Tangier, and from there set off on voyages across Europe and Asia. It would be difficult to map the international voyages of the Beats, since they traveled so widely and often, both alone and in groups. Other places to which the main Beat figures traveled before 1965 include Italy, Greece, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Kenya, Ecuador, Chile, Peru, Bangladesh, Israel, and Japan.

MEXICO

Then we turned our faces to Mexico with bashfulness and wonder. . Beyond were music and all-night restaurants with smoke pouring out the door. “Whee,” whispered Dean very softly.
For the Beats, Mexico was a place of exploration and inspiration. In 1952, two years after his famous trip there with Neal Cassady, immortalized in *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac returned to experience anew what he called the “fellaheen feeling about life.” Mexico seemed akin to an idealized Middle East: drug use was permitted, mysticism abounded, and as soon as the border was crossed, the myriad constrictions of American life lifted. During the 1950s, Ginsberg traveled to Mexico three times, and in 1956 Kerouac, Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, and Orlovsky’s brother Lafacadio all went together for a vacation that they later idealized; gatherings in Tangier and Paris were nostalgically compared with their time in Mexico and could not match it.

In part, Mexico appealed to the Beats as a place to relax all inhibitions; it was also a place where they wrote important works. At Burroughs’s apartment in Mexico City Kerouac wrote the bulk of *Doctor Sax* and Burroughs completed his first book, *Junkie*, and wrote his second, *Queer*. Ginsberg wrote poems during his travels, inspired by the all-night cantinas, the almost constant music, and Burroughs’s lifestyle. But Mexico City in particular is best known in Beat histories as the place where Burroughs lived—a junkie by choice and an expatriate by necessity—with his wife Joan and their young children. It was there that Burroughs shot and killed Joan, spreading a tragic shadow over the city’s gothic appeal.

The initial motivation for Kerouac’s first trip to Mexico was Neal Cassady’s need to legalize his divorce with his wife Carolyn; he wanted to marry the newly pregnant Diane Hansen. Kerouac, who was downtrodden in the face of sluggish sales of his first novel, *The Town and the City*, gladly accompanied him. They went to visit Burroughs, who had moved his family to Mexico City in September 1949 to avoid being arrested in the States for narcotics and firearms possession. Kerouac’s later descriptions of his experience of Mexico were mixed—though exhilarating, he also found it dark and violent—but it remained in his mind a place of inspiration. Among other things, this visit plays an important role in *On the Road*, which reaches its
narrative climax when Sal Paradise has a vision deep in the Mexican jungle.

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A letter from Jack Kerouac to Neal Cassady, undated
Neal Cassady Collection

Cassady stayed in Mexico only long enough to finalize his divorce. In *On the Road*, as in real life, Dean Moriarty leaves Sal painfully ill in Mexico, and does not wait to see if he recovers:

“Yes, yes, yes, I’ve got to go now Old fever Sal, good-by.” And he was gone. Twelve hours later in my sorrowful fever I finally came to understand that he was gone.

The abrupt departure was hurtful in reality too, but this letter begins with a reaffirmation of the friendship. As usual, Cassady’s selfish behavior was not enough to outweigh his magnetism. By the fall of 1950, Kerouac was back in New York working on *On the Road* and courting Joan Haverty, whom he married in November.

201, 75

Two copies of William S. Burroughs’s *Junkie*, bound with Maurice Helbrant’s *Narcotic Agent* (New York: Ace Books, 1953)

Though generally acknowledged as the teacher and mentor of the younger Beats, Burroughs decided to begin writing with the encouragement of Ginsberg and Kerouac. His first published work (under the pseudonym William Lee) was the semi-autobiographical *Junkie*, a chronicle of the thoughts and activities of a New York heroin addict and small-time drug pusher. Burroughs wrote *Junkie* in Mexico from 1950 to 1951. Its controversial subject matter made finding a publisher difficult. Though Kerouac had helped with the book’s writing, he refused to contribute a blurb for the cover, stating, “I do not want my real name used in conjunction with habit forming drugs while a pseudonym conceals the real name of the author thus protecting him from prosecution.”

Allen Ginsberg contacted Carl Solomon, the dedicatee of “Howl,” whose uncle A. A. Wyn owned Ace Books, which then published the novel. Burroughs later said of Ginsberg’s assistance, “Without the incentive of that publication, I might well have stopped writing
altogether.” Once it was paired with a novel whose protagonist was an agent punishing drug users, the novel was an easier sell.

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A letter from Joan Vollmer Burroughs to Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg,
9 July 1951
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Joan Vollmer became William S. Burroughs’s common law wife in 1946. In this letter, Vollmer updates Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg on her life in Mexico. The two had recently spent a month with her while Burroughs traveled in South America.

Not long after Joan wrote this letter, Burroughs shot and killed her, supposedly accidentally, while playing a drunken game of “William Tell” with a shot glass on her head. Speculation about the incident still continues; it may have been an “assisted suicide,” as Joan had become extremely ill due to her ongoing drug addiction. Their son and Joan’s daughter were subsequently raised by their grandparents.

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The first edition of William S. Burroughs’s Queer (New York: Viking, 1985)

Queer is a sequel to Junkie, written in the wake of Burroughs’s accidental shooting of his wife Joan. In it, the protagonist, accompanied by a male lover, travels to South America in search of the hallucinatory drug yage. The Yage Letters (1963), an epistolary novel made up of letters Burroughs sent to Ginsberg from his actual trip to South America, constitutes the third book of this “trilogy” of early works. Queer was not published until 1985 because of its direct depiction of homosexual desire.

Comparing the harshly objective tone of Junkie with the self-revealing prose of Queer, Burroughs wrote in the introduction to Queer, “While it was I who wrote Junky, I feel that I was being written by Queer.” The latter novel was deeply influenced by Joan’s death, and Burroughs wrote, “I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s
death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing.”

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Kerouac visited Mexico a second time in 1952, again lured by its outlaw mystique. *Doctor Sax* was largely completed in Mexico City while Kerouac was staying with Burroughs. Kerouac wrote sitting on the toilet to prevent the copious marijuana he was smoking from overwhelming Burroughs’s apartment. The novel blends visions of Mexico and Burroughs—figured as Doctor Sax—with memories of Kerouac’s hometown, Lowell, Massachusetts. Kerouac’s use of subconscious memories and his intensely personal, spontaneous prose style were catalyzed by his heavy drug use. Though now highly regarded by many critics, *Doctor Sax* received generally negative reviews. The *New York Times* critic wrote:

‘Dr. Sax’ is not only bad Kerouac; it is a bad book. Much of it is in bad taste, and much more is meaningless. It runs the gamut from incoherent to the incredible, a mishmash of avant-gardism (unreadable), autobiography (seemingly Kerouac’s) and fantasy (largely psychopathic).

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Two pages of a letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 18 June 1954
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Allen Ginsberg first visited Mexico with Lucien Carr in August 1951. They had planned to visit Burroughs, but arrived too late and found that Burroughs was in South America. They spent a month spent careening around Mexico City with Joan Burroughs. In December 1953 Ginsberg again traveled to Mexico, this time staying over six months.

In this nine-page letter, Ginsberg describes his adventures in Mexico; as Kerouac’s annotations show, he thought the letter was a *tour de force*. Among other things, Ginsberg vividly describes dreams that he has had while in Mexico, using poetry to describe the parts of his dreams not suited for prose.
Ginsberg wrote this poem approximately four years after the death of Joan Burroughs. Joan and Ginsberg first met in 1944 when Joan was living with Edie Parker, Kerouac's first wife. Joan was known for her remarkable intelligence and exuberance; her apartment with Edie was a main center of activity for the burgeoning Beat movement. Ginsberg later drew a comparison between Joan and the novelist Jane Bowles, whom he found to be the most interesting person he met while in Tangier in 1957.

Burroughs's shooting of his wife Joan mirrored the broader darkness and violence that he felt defined Mexico. In *Queer*, written in the wake of the shooting, Burroughs described Mexico as “sinister and gloomy and chaotic, with the special chaos of a dream. No Mexican really ever knew any other Mexican, and when a Mexican killed someone (which happened often), it was usually his best friend.” While out on bail for the shooting, Burroughs skipped town and his case was eventually suspended.
From her early twenties, Joan Vollmer’s life was plagued by addiction. Like many addicts of the period, her drug of choice was the amphetamine Benzedrine, also known as “Bennies.” Her inability to get Benzedrine inhalers in Mexico only provoked other addiction problems. In a letter to Allen Ginsberg from Mexico she wrote frankly, “I am personally fine also, although somewhat drunk from 8 a.m. on. . . . I shan’t attempt to describe my sufferings for 3 weeks after the Benzedrine gave out. . . .”

Allen Ginsberg is pictured here standing in front of a large statue of General Morelos, one of the principle authors of the Mexican revolutionary movement in 1809. Ginsberg’s primary reason for leaving New York City and traveling to Mexico in 1954 was to visit Mayan ruins. As Bill Morgan describes in I Celebrate Myself:

Allen pictured himself as the great white explorer, going into the steaming jungle on horseback to discover a lost civilization, finding Indian tribes that still worshipped forgotten blood-drinking gods. Only then would he continue on to California, where he would impress his friends with takes of the ‘manly savage solitude of jungles.’

The trip was not all adventure and exploration. Ginsberg often spent 5-10 hours a day writing poetry. He stayed in Mexico much longer than the two months he had originally planned. Due to the unreliability of mail service in Mexico, this created quite a scare among his friends, who were expecting to see him in California sooner.
On this two-week vacation in Mexico, the friends exhausted themselves with parties, drugs, and alcohol. In his journal Ginsberg describes the trip:

Walked late at night down grand street all lit up full of tortilla and sweater stands and cheesy mex burlesque and comedian theaters, ate bug [sic] steaks cheap at expensive restaurant, listened to Gregory recite incessantly, he was always spontaneously scribbling in big 10 cent notebook, Peter talked to children, Lafacadio [Orlovsky] dawdled behind us on the street, I met the fairies and had big orgies.

Case 12
TANGIER

Before coming here you should do three things: be inoculated for typhoid, withdraw your savings from the bank, say goodbye to your friends—heaven knows you may never see them again . . . Because Tangier is a basin that holds you.

—Truman Capote, 1950

Long before the Beats arrived in the late 1950s, Tangier, Morocco was well known to adventurous American and European émigrés. Only nine miles south of Spain, Tangier had a long history as a haven for smugglers and spies, and it was a place of loose laws and even looser customs. In the words of writer Robert Ruark, next to Tangier “Sodom was a church picnic and Gomorrah was a convention of Girl Scouts. Hollywood would never dare to do a movie about Tangier because it would be accused of hoking up the script even if the truth were underplayed…. [Tangier] contains more thieves, black marketers, spies, thugs, phones, beachcombers, expatriates, degenerates, characters, operators, bandits, bums, tramps, dipsomaniacs, politicians and charlatans than and other place I ever saw.”

An International Zone from 1912 to 1956, Tangier offered a respite to those stifled by the moral uprightness of their home countries. Homosexuality was accepted and drugs were readily available. The Beats found camaraderie with émigré intellectuals of the previous generation such as Paul Bowles who taught his Beat visitors about life in Tangier as well as local drugs such as kif, a highly refined form of cannabis.
Tangier appears as “Interzone” in Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. As Burroughs wrote in a 1955 letter to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, “Tangier is the prognostic pulse of the world, like a dream extending from past into future, a frontier between dream and reality—the “reality” of both called into question.”

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The second issue of *Zero*, Tangier, Summer 1949
From the library of Paul Bowles

Generations of European and American intellectuals lived and worked in Tangier before William S. Burroughs arrived in 1953. Notably, this issue of the little magazine *Zero* includes an early essay defending homosexuality by James Baldwin, who visited Tangier, and short stories of Paul Bowles. *Zero* was founded in Paris in 1948 by G.P. Solomos and Asa Benveniste. The bohemian review spanned more than thirty years and was published in a different city each issue, surveying creative communities in Paris, Mexico City, New York, and Tangier.

In the introductory letter of the first issue the editors state that *Zero* is dedicated “to all and to no techniques: conscious and unconscious, erudite and untutored, therapeutic and unpragmatic, right, left.” This description also suits Tangier itself, which was a fertile writing ground for many Americans and Europeans. In Tangier, said Bowles, “each day lived. . .was one more day spent outside prison.”

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A postcard of the Brooks Club in Tangier, undated

Paul Bowles Collection

In the Tangier of the 1940s and 1950s, American and European émigrés could buy luxury for a low price. Deluxe waterfront properties were rented for as little as one hundred dollars a month, with living arrangements in the *Medina* district of Tangier being significantly less expensive. Tangier’s social scene was extremely active, with nightly parties and gatherings in cafés.
A postcard of the Club Nautique et Darse, undated

Paul Bowles Collection

On the back of this postcard Paul Bowles has written, “This shows the inner harbor and port of the Casbah. Our house is just about at the upper right hand corner of the card.” Bowles moved to Tangier in 1947, and lived there off and on until his death in 1999.

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A postcard of Le Grand Sokko in Tangier, undated

Paul Bowles Collection

On the back of this postcard Paul Bowles has written, “At the center of town, where the Berbers gather to sell their wares when they come in from the mountains.” This open-air market in the Medina is very much emblematic of traditional Tangier. Despite the economic, cultural, and linguistic gap between Tangerinos (American and European residents) and Tanjawis (natives), Paul and his wife, writer Jane Bowles, did not shy away from crossing into Tanjawis’s cultural territory. On the contrary, both developed long-lasting and intense friendships and romances with Moroccans.

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The first issue of Big Table (Spring 1959)
From the library of Paul Bowles

In the spring, summer, and fall of 1958, the Chicago Review published three celebrated issues containing the work of Beat writers, giving them their first major public exposure as a literary movement. That winter, the student-run publication ran into trouble with the University of Chicago administration when they attempted to publish excerpts of Naked Lunch in their next issue. After the university refused to allow publication of the winter issue, the editors published its contents as Big Table.

Big Table was deemed non-mailable by the U.S. Postal Service due to obscenity and filth. After testimony in defense of the journal by prominent writers, university presidents, academics, publishers, and reviewers, the journal was exonerated. Press coverage of the
censorship boosted interest in *Naked Lunch* and *Big Table* itself, which published four additional issues. *Naked Lunch* underwent several additional legal challenges of obscenity into the late 1960s.

305, 306

A letter from William S. Burroughs to Paul Bowles, 20 May 1962
Enclosed, a cut-up of *The Sheltering Sky*

Paul Bowles Collection

Influenced by his friend Brion Gysin, William Burroughs experimented with the limits of art-making, the axiom behind this being, “Nothing is true, everything is permitted.” One of his experimental forms was the “cut-up.” A cut-up comprises two existing texts that are rearranged and spliced together to form a new text. Similar to a cut-up, Burroughs also produced “fold-ins,” which combine a half page each of two different texts, usually with complementary themes. In an attempt to illustrate to Paul Bowles the merits of the style, which Bowles regarded as unliterary, Burroughs produced a fold-in of Paul Bowles’s *The Sheltering Sky* and his own work “East Clinic Information.”

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A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 31 May 1957

Allen Ginsberg Collection

In the history of the Beats, Tangier is most famous as the place where *Naked Lunch* was transformed from a mess of manuscript fragments into a publishable novel. Just as he had aided in assembling Burroughs’s first novel, *Junkie*, in 1952, Allen Ginsberg, along with Jack Kerouac and poet Alan Ansen, would be crucial in the compiling, typing, and editing of *Naked Lunch*. Kerouac stayed for only part of the process, and in this letter, Ginsberg describes the later work to him:

(Anson was great, came & started typing immediately, read through all the notebooks and in fine hand made a huge index of all the material in the letters, sentences, announcements, routines, all to be integrated chronologically.) (Worked on it like a great professional pedantic scholar with an unruly library full of dignified ancient manuscripts of the Venerable Bill.)
Despite accounts of leisure time spent in conversation with Paul and Jane Bowles, as well as artist Francis Bacon, Ginsberg was unenthusiastic about his time spent in Tangier, noting here that “Tangiers is still a drag.”

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A postcard from Allen Ginsberg to Henry Wenning, 4 July 1961

Allen Ginsberg Collection

This postcard was written four years after Ginsberg’s first visit to Tangier in March of 1957. On the back of the postcard, Ginsberg writes: “On reverse, free copy of Burroughs’s sink in Tangier—breeding ground for unheard viruses.” Burroughs’s choice of lifestyle was not as posh as that of some of his American and European counterparts. Indeed, it was the gritty, lawless side of Tangier that affected Burroughs the most. As Ginsberg illustrates in his famous poem “America,” “Burroughs is in Tangiers I don’t think he’s come back it’s sinister.”

304, 308

A letter from Lawrence Ferlinghetti to Paul Bowles, 6 January 1962

A signed copy of Paul Bowles’s A Hundred Camels in the Courtyard (San Francisco: City Lights, 1962)

Paul Bowles Collection

Although Paul Bowles is not generally considered a “Beat” writer, his connections with the group were deep. In 1962 Lawrence Ferlinghetti published a collection of stories by Paul Bowles titled A Hundred Camels in the Courtyard. Displayed prominently on the cover is a small bag of kif with a pipe. Kif is a type of cannabis that contains particularly high levels of the psychoactive component THC. As described on the back of the book, these stories are of “a land where cannabis, rather than alcohol, customarily provides a way out of the phenomenological world.” Not shy concerning his own use of psychoactive drugs, Bowles would provide his recipe for hashish jam to Rolling Stone magazine in 1974.
Concerning the publication of *A Hundred Camels in the Courtyard*, Bowles insisted that the word “Morocco” not appear anywhere on the front or back of the book stating that “Moroccan diplomats take offense easily.” In this letter from Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books to Bowles, the publisher argues for some sort of reference to North Africa or *kif* appearing in the title. As a compromise, Bowles chose a phrase from one his favorite Moroccan proverbs: “A pipe of Kif before breakfast gives a man the strength of a hundred camels in the courtyard.”

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*Gnaoua* (Spring 1964)
From the library of George Dowden

The little magazine *Gnaoua* shows the lasting impact of the Beats on the Tangier literary scene. It was an early publishing venture of the multimedia artist Ira Cohen (b. 1935). This issue contains the writing of William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Ian Sommerville, among others. *Gnaoua* appears on the cover of Bob Dylan’s 1965 album *Bringing It All Home*. In the mid-1960s Tangier became a major tourist destination not just for Beats but Beatniks—and later, Hippies—seeking a taste of the same free lifestyle the city had afforded previous generations of Western visitors.

Wall items:
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A postcard from Gregory Corso to Henry Wenning, undated
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Although this postcard is undated, it is likely that it is from the early 1960s when Corso was staying with Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky in Tangier. Orlovsky and Ginsberg did not always have the most serene of relationships; their time spent together in Tangier was often tumultuous because of William S. Burroughs’s longstanding dislike of Orlovsky. On this particular visit, Burroughs and Orlovsky fought endlessly, eventually resulting in Orlovsky’s desire to leave Tangier and travel to Istanbul, which he did at the end of July 1961.

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Michael Portman
Peter Orlovsky, William S. Burroughs, Alan Anson, Gregory Corso, Paul Bowles, and Allen Ginsberg in Tangier, Morocco

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Pictured from left to right are Peter Orlovsky, William S. Burroughs, Alan Ansen, Gregory Corso, Paul Bowles, and Allen Ginsberg. As Ginsberg describes, “all assembled outside Bill’s single room, my Kodak Retina in Michael Portman’s hands, old garden villa Mouneria, Tanger Maroc 1961 July.”

322

An aerogramme from Jack Kerouac to Neal Cassady, 25 March 1957

Kerouac traveled to Tangier by ship a few weeks after finally signing a contract with Viking Press for the publication of On the Road in January 1957. On the verso of this aerogramme he describes wandering Tangier stoned with Ginsberg and Orlovsky; he is taken with Tangier’s relaxed feel, writing of the locals, “they are all hi, all wild, hep, cool, great kids, they talk like spitting from inside the throat Arabic arguments.” He continues the letter with a proposal that upon his return, Cassady help him move his mother from Florida to the San Francisco Bay Area in exchange for “a week’s railroad wages.”

He adds a note on Burroughs’s writing: “Well meanwhile Old Bull Burroughs is mad as usual, writing great stuff, WORD HOARD his new masterpiece putting Genet, Ginsberg, all ALL sex poets to shame once and for all.” “Word Hoard” was a working title for Naked Lunch, and it was Kerouac who suggested the final title.

PARIS

In October 1957, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Peter Orlovsky checked into a very cheap hotel at 9 Rue Git-Le-Coeur in the famously bohemian Left Bank. The hotel’s concierge, Madame Rachou, liked having eccentric artists as tenants, and was known for turning a blind eye to drugs and night visitors of both genders. Through the 1950s and 1960s dozens of expatriate American writers and artists stayed at what came to be known as the Beat Hotel. Burroughs arrived a few months after his friends, still at work on Naked Lunch even as he sought a publisher.
Paris itself was a city in which the poets could move and act freely and it became a place of great poetic energy for the Beat writers. It was there that many major works were started, completed, or published: Ginsberg’s *Kaddish*, Corso’s “Bomb,” Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Ian Somerville began their long-term collaborative experiments in the hotel, pushing word and image to new limits of meaning.

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, 13 November 1957
Allen Ginsberg Collection

In June 1956, Ginsberg’s mother died after a lifetime of severe mental illness. A year and a half later he started writing his elegy for her, *Kaddish*, titled after the traditional Jewish prayer of mourning. The lines typed here are only a fragment of the resulting long poem, considered one of his best. In the letter, he tells Kerouac that he began writing it in the “Café Select, once haunted by Gide & Picasso & well drest [Max] Jacob.” Ginsberg read widely in French literature while in Paris, and met numerous significant French writers, though he interacted mostly with other Americans.

Notably, in the final paragraph of the letter, Ginsberg counsels Kerouac to avoid becoming a spokesman for the “Beat Generation.” Kerouac and Ginsberg both had become celebrities in the previous year. Ginsberg stayed in Europe through it all, enjoying relative anonymity for a time, until admirers learned he was at the Beat Hotel and began to come to meet him.

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Jack Kerouac, undated
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Burroughs arrived in Paris just as Orlovsky was leaving for home. Burroughs and Ginsberg’s relationship had been fraught since their intense affair in New York in 1953. They resolved their problems soon after Burroughs arrived in Paris, to Ginsberg’s great relief. This letter, written around February 1958, describes Burroughs, “the great final hip gent,” settling into Paris well. He became a magnet in the café scene, intoning his mysterious thoughts to curious listeners.
The person named “G. J.” in this letter is B. J. Carroll, an actor who also lived in the Beat Motel. He spent a good deal of time with Burroughs and Ginsberg, who in another letter called him a “Peteresque ex-Hollywood angel talk fiend.”

From the library of Charles Henri Ford

First compiled in Tangier, *Naked Lunch* saw significant changes after Burroughs’s arrival in Paris. Maurice Girodias finally published it for Olympia Press in 1959 after more than a year of pressure from Ginsberg and others. Sections of the novel printed in the *Chicago Review* had been suppressed for obscenity, and press coverage of the incident filtered in to Paris. A wise businessman, Girodias began to see the book’s virtues. *Naked Lunch* was not published in the United States until its censorship was overturned in 1962.

Enthusiastic reviews of the novel by Norman Mailer and Mary McCarthy gave *Naked Lunch* traction in the literary marketplace. Its non-linear form, surreal landscape, brutal commentary on the corruption inherent in American culture, and unique narrative voice opened up new possibilities for fiction.

For many American tourists in the 1950s and 1960s, a visit to Paris included a stop at an English-language bookstore to purchase titles published by the Olympia Press. The iconic green covers of the Traveler’s Companion series were easy to identify. Olympia marketed itself as the publisher of “the greatest outlaw writers.” The press published two types of books: flat-out pornography and literary fiction banned elsewhere. The Traveler’s Companion series represented the latter, including such works as *Naked Lunch*, J. P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man*, Lawrence Durrell’s *The Black Book*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, and numerous works by Henry Miller and the Marquis de Sade.

Barry Miles writes that as the Beatnik phenomenon grew, Girodias saw a marketable “beatnik” writer in Corso, and signed him up to write a novel in the late 1950s. Corso took several years to produce *American Express*, his only novel. The novel, illustrated by Corso, tells the story of a man born in the basement beneath the American Express office in Paris, who travels the world penniless, much like Corso himself. Characters in this surreal comic novel share a resemblance with Kerouac and Burroughs, among others.

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The dust jacket of the first edition of Gregory Corso’s *American Express*

The American Express office was a frequent destination for peripatetic writers who rarely settled down long enough to have a mailing address for letters, royalty checks, and packages. Beat letters to friends from abroad are peppered with requests for money to be sent to the nearest American Express office.

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A letter from Brion Gysin to Paul Bowles, 16 May [1960]
Paul Bowles Collection

William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin (1916-1986) first met in Tangier, but not until Brion Gysin moved in to the Beat Hotel in late 1958 did their famous collaborations begin. British-born Gysin was both a poet and painter and had been active in the Paris art scene in the 1930s. Burroughs was taken with his abstract paintings and radical artistic vision. Burroughs and Gysin undertook “psychic experiments” with drugs and various devices, seeking to push the boundaries of perception and art-making.

By the time *Naked Lunch* was finally accepted for publication, Ginsberg and Corso had already left Paris, and Gysin helped Burroughs pull together the final manuscript. Burroughs designed the cover, complete with hieroglyphics in the manner of Gysin.
The first edition of *Minutes to Go* (Paris: Two Cities Editions, 1960), inscribed by the authors

In 1959 Gysin created the first “cut-up,” the result of a compositional technique akin to Burroughs’s intentionally random juxtaposition of narrative segments in *Naked Lunch*. He described the experience, in a room in the Beat Hotel, as follows:

> While cutting a mount for a drawing in room 25, I sliced through a pile of newspapers with my Stanley blade and though of what I had said to Burroughs about the necessity for turning painters’ techniques directly into writing. I picked up the raw words and began to piece together texts which appeared as “First Cut-Ups” in *Minutes to Go*.

Burroughs became deeply invested in the cut-up’s possibilities, and for the next ten years tested the procedure’s effect on text, film, tape recordings and photography. Though sometimes dismissed as a repeat of Dada experiments, the cut-up’s procedures, results, and historical context were markedly different.

A letter from William S. Burroughs to Paul Bowles, 25 January 1961
Paul Bowles Collection

Burroughs and Gysin expanded their experiments when the nineteen-year mathematician and computer expert Ian Somerville (1940-1976) moved into the Beat Hotel in 1960. He helped them make experimental recordings using multiple tape recorders, and shared with them his experimental seizure-inducing light machine, which particularly interested Gysin. Burroughs and Somerville became lovers, and Somerville introduced Burroughs to mathematical concepts, procedures, and machines that influenced his writings.

In the early 1960s technology dramatically increased in sophistication and availability, and avant-garde artists and writers across the globe experimented extensively with the possibilities of automated modes of composition, pushing at the boundaries of the concept of literary or artistic “expression.” The collaborations at the Beat Hotel are only one of the many paths these experiments took.
Wall items:
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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
Gregory Corso, 1957
Digital Reproduction
Copyright the Allen Ginsberg Trust

In a caption to another version of this image, Ginsberg writes,

Gregory Corso Paris 1957 his attic 9 Rue-Git-Le-Coeur with magic wand, Louvre postcards tacked to wall left, wooden angel kid on wire right, window on courtyard. Burroughs came to live a flight below, Peter Orlovsky and I had window on street two floors down, room with two burner gas stove. Leroi Jones (Yugen Magazine) and Irving Rosenthal (Chicago Review) wrote us from U.S. for poems, Gregory had “Marriage” ready, “Power,” “Army” & “Police” also. I began Kaddish, Peter “Frist Poem,” Burroughs shaping Naked Lunch. Madame Rachou, concierge.

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Daniel Bernstein
Gregory Corso, 1955
Digital print from a contact sheet
Gregory Corso Collection

Gregory Corso traveled the most of all the Beats; having lived on the streets as a child, he knew how to survive on very little. Corso’s love affair with Europe never ended, and after his death, his ashes were placed at the foot of the grave of his literary hero, Percy Bysshe Shelley, in Rome.

5

Gregory Corso (1930-2001)
Self-portrait, 1961
Pen on paper
Gregory Corso Art Collection
Corso’s natural-born talents were great. With only a sixth-grade education, he was a vigorous autodidact. Among other things, he built a rich poetic vocabulary by reading a massive dictionary from front to back, which he found in the library at Clinton State Prison. His art is equally untrained and shows that his gifts transcended genre.

INDIA

In early 1962, Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky arrived in Bombay, India, after travels through Paris, Tangier, Istanbul, Greece, Israel, and East Africa. India was a spiritual destination for Ginsberg. In the 1950s, he had learned about Eastern poetry and religion from San Francisco poets Kenneth Rexroth and Gary Snyder. Jack Kerouac’s own growing interest in Buddhism was also an important influence.

In India, Ginsberg sought to experience fully both Buddhist and Hindu traditions. He attended Hindu cremation ceremonies with holy men, met the Dalai Lama, and sat under the Buddha’s Bo tree. After his return home in 1963, his publications and readings helped spark interest in Eastern philosophy across America, most visibly in the Hippie movement. In 1974, Ginsberg and poet Anne Waldman co-founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, soon after its founding by Ginsberg’s teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Now Naropa University, it is the first accredited Buddhist university in the United States.
After their arrival in India, Peter Orlovsky and Allen Ginsberg quickly immersed themselves in the culture, adopting Indian styles and mores. In this snapshot they wear kurtas (knee-length, loose-fitting shirts) and pajamas.

Ginsberg describes here the sights and sounds of Kumbha Mela, a Hindu festival held every twelve years in Rishikesh, India, in which “all the holymen of India gather together to purify the ganges by bathing in it.” Ginsberg goes on to describe “elephants and columns of stark-naked ash-smeared Shiva-worshipping Saddhus marching down to the river.” Ginsberg befriended several sadhus (ascetic holy men), spending two nights a week with them smoking ganja at the burning ghats of Calcutta where families would bring their deceased to be burned on pyres.

In this newsy letter Allen Ginsberg describes the many experiences he has had in India, such as spending the night in the Taj Mahal, nursing a dying street beggar back to life, watching daily processions outside his apartment building, struggling with the Indian government, and so on.

Ginsberg wrote this letter toward the end of his time in India, writing “Leaving here in a few weeks, have a round-world planeticket sent by Vancouver canada Univ to teach 3 weeks.” Ginsberg used the ticket to travel to Thailand, China, South Vietnam, and Japan. In his final weeks in India, Ginsberg reached what he described as an
“exalted open state.” His travels had opened his mind to new perspectives on drugs, spirituality, mortality, and poetry.

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From the library of George Dowden

The published journals begin on 7 November 1961 with what Ginsberg calls a “Premonition Dream” about India. They end abruptly on 28 May 1963 after Ginsberg arrives in Bangkok, Thailand, with the open-ended fragment, “Chinese meats hanging in shops—.”

Just as On the Road was a catalyst for road trips across the United States, Ginsberg’s Indian Journals inspired many young Westerners to learn about Indian culture and religion and to travel to India themselves. Ginsberg’s public readings also helped spark the broadening interest in Eastern religion in America from the early 1960s onward. Performing at the Vancouver Poetry Conference in 1963 soon after his return from India, Ginsberg chanted the Hare Krishna mantra. It was one of the first times that a non-Hindu chanted a mantra in North America.

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A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Peter Orlovsky, 31 January 1963
Allen Ginsberg Collection

In January 1963, with trips to other parts of India still planned, Ginsberg and Orlovsky received abrupt expulsion notifications from the government of India. Unsure of what prompted the expulsion, Ginsberg worked hard to get their visas reinstated, contacting friends in the press and at the American Embassy. In this letter Ginsberg details the answers he gave while re-applying for his visa. Ginsberg and Orlovsky were eventually granted new visas, thanks to Ginsberg’s influential friends. Later they learned that the expulsion was prompted by disgruntled students at Benares Hindu University who were insulted by Ginsberg’s use of obscenities during a reading of “Howl.”

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A typescript of Allen Ginsberg’s poem “May 22 Calcutta,” undated
Gerard Malanga Papers

Unlike his time in Tangier and Mexico, where he was focused on editing Burroughs’s writing, Ginsberg spent much of his time in India alone, and used that time to immerse himself in both the culture and the landscape. This solitude was a blessing and a curse, as the opening lines of this poem suggest.

Ginsberg left India on 26 May 1963, four days after composing this poem. It was published in his Indian Journals as the final journal entry written in India. As Ginsberg describes his final days in another entry from this period, “I had nothing to say, being washed up desolate on the Ganges bank, vegetarian & silent hardly writing & smoking no pot except many leters & kidney attacks don’t care. Still this melancholy aloneness is like returning home.”

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A mailbag sent by Peter Orlovsky from India, 24 June 1963
Peter Orlovsky Papers

This mailbag containing “Books and Printed Literature” was sent from Peter Orlovsky in India back home to his mother, Katherine Orlovsky. Ginsberg had left India a month earlier. Their parting was tense: Ginsberg was worried about Orlovsky’s increasing drug use. As the biographer Bill Morgan describes, Ginsberg “sent Peter what little money he had, along with an admonition to stop taking so many drugs. They were ‘no substitute for love,’ Allen said.” Ginsberg had a revelation about drug use after his travels to India and Japan. Although he did not shun drugs completely, Ginsberg came to feel that they often deluded thoughts and emotions, preventing true self-realization.

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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
A snapshot of Peter Orlovsky sitting in a doorway in India, undated
Gelatin silver print
Allen Ginsberg Collection

Orlovsky occupied much of his time in India playing various Indian instruments and experimenting with opium and morphine. His
relationship with Ginsberg grew increasingly distant. He dated an Indian women named Manjula and considered marrying her so that she could immigrate to the United States. The plan fell through and Orlovsky returned to the States and to Ginsberg in the fall of 1963.

Wall items:
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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
Kali-Ma, 1963
Gelatin silver print

Despite being nearly broke during their travels in India, Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky often gave money to the beggars outside their apartment building. After a few weeks in the city of Benares, they had become familiar with many of the beggars in their neighborhood; they nicknamed the woman in this picture Kali-Ma, after the Hindu goddess of destruction. Ginsberg wrote of her frequently in his journals, as in this entry of 10 January 1963:

> While the black haired lady beggar Kali Ma wrapped in a mattress on the opposite corner at midnight talked to herself like a rooster imagining the blind leper down the street was trying to steal her tin cup before her opaque marble eyes—She only gets up on scratchy legs to totter to the curb to crab, holding her rags Her husband left her there & someone took care of her feet died. . . .

Ginsberg experimented with new descriptive styles in order to more vividly illustrate his experiences in India; the form of this journal entry mimics Kali-Ma’s disconnection and instability. Often the experiences he describes are surreal enough to require no poetic embellishment.

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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
Shambu Bharti Baba in Benares, India, 18 December 1962
Gelatin silver print

Shabu Bharti Baba was one of the sadhus Ginsberg befriended during his stay in Benares. In 1970 this image was published on the cover of Ginsberg’s Indian Journals. Ginsberg viewed his time in Benares as intensely transformative. Benares is one of the oldest
and holiest cities in India and is situated on the banks of the Ganges. Ginsberg and Orlovsky lived only a short distance from the Ganges while in Benares. Each day, thousands of Hindu pilgrims would travel past their building on their way to the river. Benares is also a holy Buddhist site and is said to be one of the first places the Buddha went to sermonize.

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Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)
Gary Snyder, Joanne Kyger, and Peter Orlovsky in the Himalayas, 1962
Digital reproduction
Copyright the Allen Ginsberg Trust

In the caption for another print of this image Ginsberg writes:

Kausani, India February 1962; with Peter Orlovsky, Gary Snyder & his wife poet Joanne Kyger we made pilgrimage to Buddhist sacred sites, here visiting Lama Anigarika Govinda who lived on nearby ridge. Snyder & Joanne were visiting from Kyoto, Peter & I had come from Tangier.

Snyder and Joanne Kyger were already in India when Ginsberg and Orlovsky arrived. Soon after leaving India, Ginsberg traveled to Japan and spent five weeks there with Snyder and Kyger, and the two visits together had a lasting influence on his worldview and poetic practice. While in Japan, Ginsberg learned meditation practices from Snyder. Ginsberg found Buddhist meditation practices easier to understand than the Hindu rituals he had studied in India.

In later writings, Kyger took offense when Ginsberg repeatedly neglected to mention her in descriptions of his time in India; she was frustrated by his failure to see her as anything more than Snyder’s wife. In her poem “Poison Oak for Allen” she writes about a photograph she took around the same time the photograph displayed here was taken:

Here I am reading about your trip to India again with Gary Snyder and Peter Orlovsky. Period. Who took cover picture of you three with smart Himalayan mountain backdrop The bear?”
LONDON

The literary avant-garde in America and Great Britain intersected in many ways throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As a literary movement, the Beats were frequently compared with the “Angry Young Men,” the group of British playwrights and novelists of the 1950s whose work attacked middle-class hypocrisy and institutional control. Many British poets, too, such as Michael Horovitz, Eric Mottram, and Jeff Nuttal, built strong relationships with the Beats, and presses on both sides of the Atlantic frequently published writers from both countries.

The items in this section document the time spent in London by William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso. While Burroughs was ambivalent about his time in England, Ginsberg and Corso were eager tourists, spending much of their time on literary and cultural pilgrimages to places like Stratford upon Avon, Salisbury Cathedral, the British Museum, St. Peter’s Cathedral, and William Blake’s grave.

In the mid-1960s, publications and performances by Burroughs and Ginsberg helped cement the influence of these two writers on the British literary consciousness. Popular artifacts from the late 1950s to the late 1960s likewise demonstrate the broader impact of Beat culture on British style.

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A letter from William S. Burroughs to Paul Bowles, 19 October 1958
Paul Bowles Collection

Burroughs fought his heroin addiction in vain for years. Struggling to write *Naked Lunch* in Tangier, he finally went to London in 1956 to see Dr. John Dent who spent two weeks treating him with apomorphine. The treatment was successful, and upon his return to Tangier Burroughs was able to work extensively on his book.

By 1958 Burroughs was living in Paris and using heroin again. He returned to London for a second treatment, which he documents in this letter. He also updates Bowles on their Tangier friends, who had scattered to the winds in the wake of the Moroccan government’s crackdown on foreign residents and homosexuals. Burroughs did not particularly enjoy his time in London whose broader conservatism he felt was embodied in the strict bar closing times.
Beginning in 1960, Burroughs began to feel more warmly towards Britain, and lived in London off and on for a few years between visits to Timothy Leary, who was introducing Burroughs and the other Beats to the possibilities of psychedelic drugs. It was likely in London that he pasted together the “cut-up” manuscript for *Dead Fingers Talk*, which includes material from his previous books *Naked Lunch* (1959), *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962), and new material, as noted by the initials in the margins of these manuscript pages.

Publisher John Calder (b. 1927) was an important force in the fight against strict censorship laws in Britain, where printing the word “fuck” in a book would inevitably lead to a trial to determine if the book would “corrupt and deprave” its audience. He pushed the envelope by printing British editions of many works first published by Olympia Press in Paris, including those of Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, and William S. Burroughs.

In 1962, Calder invited Burroughs to participate in a panel of writers discussing the current state of the novel (including the issue of censorship) at the Edinburgh Festival. At the event, Burroughs argued that government censorship was a form of thought control and explained his “cut-up” and “fold-in” methods to a largely baffled audience. The censorship panel returned repeatedly to the subject of *Naked Lunch*, which was still illegal to sell in the United States and Britain, and by the time the discussion concluded, Burroughs had made a strong impression. Calder published *Dead Fingers Talk* to ride on the success of the event.
Calder’s publication of *Dead Fingers Talk*, the first “cut-up” published in Britain, was meant to rouse controversy, and it succeeded. A review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, entitled “Ugh,” provoked a fourteen-week-long stream of letters to the editor. Here, we see Burroughs’s own creative response to the controversy.

Ginsberg and Corso traveled to London from Paris in 1958 to read their poetry for a BBC recording project. As this card describes, they met with fellow writers and students at Oxford, many of whom were unprepared for the poets’ unconventional poetics and personal behavior. Their meeting with W. H. Auden is described by Barry Miles in *The Beat Hotel*:

> They had tea with W. H. Auden, who showed them around Christ Church Cathedral. They had visited it, guidebook in hand, the day before but generously described his tour as “the high point” of their visit. Gregory asked him, “Are birds spies?” Startled, Auden responded, “No, I don’t think so. Who would they report to?” “The trees,” answered Allen. On taking their leave they attempted to kiss the hem of his garment, in Auden’s case the cuffs of his pants. Auden shuffled out of range, embarrassed.

One of the myriad small-press editions of Ginsberg’s editions printed throughout the 1960s, this slim volume includes two poems that Ginsberg wrote while riding trains in India and Japan in 1963. The
first, “Poem,” was written on the Upper India Express, and the second, “The Change,” was written on the Kyoto-Tokyo Express.

*The Change* was the fifth volume in the Writers’ Forum Poets series. Writers’ Forum was started in 1963 by the experimental sound and visual poet Bob Cobbing (1920-2002) who was also a major force in small press publishing in Britain. He oversaw the production of over a thousand pamphlets and books over the course of his career.

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The book of Peter Whitehead’s film *Wholly Communion* (Lorrimer Films, 1965), open to Whitehead’s description of the film’s making

From the library of Russell Banks

In the mid-1960s, London was a throbbing heart of countercultural artistic activity. Ginsberg arrived in May 1965 from Prague and visited with Bob Dylan for two days before watching Dylan perform at the Royal Albert Hall. After the concert, he was thrilled to meet the Beatles for the first time. A few weeks later, two of Ginsberg’s acquaintances heard there was a cancellation in the Albert Hall, and decided to stage a poetry reading.

On 11 June 1965, an audience of 7,000 gathered at the Royal Albert Hall in London for what has been called the largest Happening ever staged. An extraordinary testament to the magnetism of the spoken word, the group poetry reading was planned from start to finish in one week. Alexander Trocchi was Master of Ceremonies, and among the poets were Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Ernst Jandl, Christopher Logue, Harry Fainlight, and Adrian Mitchell. Allen Ginsberg, a very famous poet by this time, was the final reader.

Peter Whitehead’s documentary film of the event, *Wholly Communion*, will be screened at the Alamo Drafthouse Downtown as part of the Ransom Center Beat Film Series, 16 April 2008

Wall items:
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Two copies of *Topolski’s Chronicle* 13 (1965), sandwiched to the show the front and back of one each
Felix Topolski Art Collection
The Polish-born British artist Felix Topolski (1907-1989) began
publishing his graphic broadside periodical *Topolski’s Chronicle*,
perhaps his most distinctive and greatest work, because he felt that
newspapers had forgotten “the uses of draughtsmen” and that
“books and exhibitions are too ‘precious’ and too selective.”

Here he documents the International Poetry Incarnation of 11 June
1965 in unique detail. It also includes some events that did not
happen. Pablo Neruda, pictured here, was meant to read, but
cancelled at the last minute.

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John Hopkins (b. 1938)
*Ginsberg, Royal Albert Hall, London*, 1965
Digital reproduction
Courtesy the Allen Ginsberg Trust

Alexis Lykiard recalled the reading as follows:

No one knew what to expect: during the course of the evening
flowers were distributed; weird papier-maché creatures strolled
about the aisles; Bruce Lacey’s machine structures buzzed,
shook, and flashed; the dry eerie voice of Burroughs crackled
from a tape recorder; Davy Graham played the guitar; poets and
hecklers interrupted each other; and a girl in a white dress
danced under the pall of potsmoke with distant gestures of dream.
And the last sight of Allen Ginsberg was one to cherish as,
singing to his flower-cymbals and shuffling like a wild-haired bear
finally disappeared in a mass of foliage-waving enthusiasts.

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Wes Wilson and Larry Keenan, Jr.’s broadside of Allen Ginsberg’s
“Who Be Kind To” (Cranium Press, 1967)

This poem, which Ginsberg performed at the Royal Albert Hall, was
published in dozens of periodicals in the late 1960s. The psychedelic
aesthetic of this late printing shows Ginsberg’s transformation from a
Beat to a venerable father-figure of the Sixties counterculture. Bill
Morgan summarizes the broader cultural shift as follows:
The Beat mission of expanding consciousness mutated into ecological and antiwar consciousness. The questioning of authority, the drugs, the experimental lifestyle, the leaning towards Eastern philosophy, all were a carryover from the Beats.

The mutation from Beat to hippie meant a switch from grass to acid, from literature to music, from a small group of writers and artists to a mass youth movement, from an anti-political stance to a coalition of anti-war, civil rights, and environmental movements, a great nest into which flew birds of every feather, from yippies to radical nuns and priests.

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Nodina Products Corporation for Poster Dresses, Ltd.
Two “copies” of a Poster dress, London, ca. 1968
Allen Ginsberg Collection

In the history of fashion, paper dresses, also known as poster dresses, were a brief but wildly popular fad. Beginning in 1966, disposable dresses like the one displayed here were worn by women in the United States, and the trend soon caught on in Britain. Ginsberg’s association with New York—now evoking Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein rather than the Beats—is celebrated on this dress. The hand symbol in the background is likely an adaptation of a Hindu or Buddhist mudra (ritual gesture), and has no intentional relation to this hand symbol’s meaning in youth culture today.

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UPI Photos
Mayfair Madness, 1959
Gelatin silver print
New York Journal American Photograph Morgue

UPI Photos
Beatnik This?, 16 May 1961
Gelatin silver print
New York Journal American Photograph Morgue

The craze for all things Beat in the late fifties and early sixties was not limited to American culture. These newspaper photographs
brought images of British Beatniks and Beatnik-inspired couture home to the United States, demonstrating that threats to gender norms and appropriate skirt lengths alike were rising on both sides of the Atlantic.

ON THE ROAD

The Beats produced many enduring works of poetry and prose but none as widely read and debated as *On the Road*, the novel of peripatetic youth that has just celebrated its fiftieth year in print. The events in this hybrid novel/memoir begin in 1947. A decade later, when the book was finally published, its writer and the real-life counterparts of its characters were no longer in their late teens and early twenties, and the bebop culture of the late 1940s was only a memory. Nevertheless, many readers found that *On the Road* was the first book to capture their experience living in the conformist culture of Eisenhower-era America.

As the items in this section show, the novel’s own road to publication was long and winding. Kerouac worked on the book for several years before typing the famous scroll manuscript. After he revised that document, the publishing odyssey began. The book was rejected by several houses, its frank descriptions of drugs and sex and informal style a source of anxiety for cautious editors. Finally published in 1957, it received a rave review in the *New York Times* that started a critical debate that is still ongoing; most notoriously, Truman Capote dismissed the novel and Kerouac’s method of composition with the remark, “that isn’t writing; it’s typing.” Readers must decide for themselves if *On the Road* is irresponsible or liberating in content, undisciplined or virtuosic in form, a sham celebration of “kicks” or a profound literary pilgrimage for spiritual truth.

After *On the Road* was published, the novelist and his “characters” became celebrities. Though Kerouac was thrilled by the novel’s success, he suffered strain from the pressures of fame and never really recovered. By the late 1960s, he was struggling to stay afloat financially and drinking himself to death. In a letter to the book dealer Andreas Brown near the end of his life, Kerouac’s bitterness was clear in his refusal to be included in a photograph for a book on American underground writers. The writer who coined the term “Beat Generation” wrote, “I’m on my own and always was on my own.”
The first three pages and the last page of an eight-page letter from Neal Cassady to Jack Kerouac, 7 March 1947
Neal Cassady Collection

This letter had an extraordinary influence on Kerouac’s writing style in On the Road. “The Great Sex Letter,” as Kerouac titled it, tells the story of two consecutive sexual experiences Cassady had on a bus trip across the Midwest. Kerouac was struck by the letter’s informal, associative style and unabashedly explicit language.

Cassady was bemused when Kerouac wrote to him expressing his excitement about the letter. Cassady was known for his virtuosic letter-writing, but in his own opinion, this one was just a drunken rant. But it reached Kerouac when he was searching for an expressive style. Readers of On the Road and Kerouac’s other works of “spontaneous prose” will recognize the parallel between Cassady’s second postscript and Kerouac’s major stylistic breakthrough:

P.P.S. Please read this inlegible letter as a continuous chain of indisciplend thought, thank you, N.

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Neal Cassady, 7 May 1951
Digital facsimile of second page
Neal Cassady Collection

In this letter, Ginsberg tells Cassady that Kerouac has just completed a draft of On the Road “on one sheet of paper yards & yards long” and asks Cassady, ever the muse, to “write him a serious self prophetic letter foretelling your fourtune in fate, so he can have courage to finish his paean in a proper apotheosis or grinding of brakes.”

Notably, on the second page, Ginsberg tells Cassady not to “underestimate” his own writing, in the form of what he calls “Joan letter.” This 23,000-word letter is generally referred to as the “Joan Anderson Letter,” and along with “The Great Sex Letter” was an important influence on Kerouac. The manuscript was lost and only a partial transcription survives. As Gerald Nicosia describes it, the letter:
. . . gave Jack the permission he needed to make actual reality—unadorned and unbowdlerized—his subject. Three decades and powers of freedom later, many critics fail to realize the impact of Neal’s dictum that you could write about life without changing anything.

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Joseph Fox and Pat Knopf’s rejection form for On the Road, 1955
Scanned reproduction of first page
Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records

Knopf was one of many publishing houses to reject On the Road. As this document demonstrates, a good editor takes the work of rejection seriously, and a rejection of a book is not a simplistic dismissal of its value. In the course of his rejection statement, Joseph Fox writes eloquently of the novel’s positive features; among other things, he captures beautifully the character of Dean Moriarty in just two sentences. Even Pat Knopf’s brief, confident rejection statement admits something of the novel’s narrative force: “after 75 pages I was too breathless to go on.”

Fox’s explanation of his decision demonstrates the ambivalence that many readers felt towards Kerouac’s novel: while it is a brilliant representation of a very real underground experience, that experience is too irresponsible to merit publication.

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New World Writing 7 (1955)
From the library of Anne Sexton

New World Writing was On the Road’s first public venue. An influential outlet for innovative literary fiction and poetry throughout the 1950s, it featured the most important writers of the period. Two classic novels debuted in the seventh issue: Kerouac’s On the Road and Joseph Heller’s Catch-22, both under working titles. Kerouac’s selection also included material that eventually became part of Visions of Cody, which was published in full in 1972. Kerouac supposedly used the pseudonym “Jean-Louis” in order to avoid paying royalties to his ex-wife Joan Haverty.
The first edition of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (New York: Viking, 1957)

Looking back on the Beat years in 1982, William S. Burroughs stated:

> Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not political legislators, who implement change after the fact. Art exerts a profound influence on the style of life, the mode, range and direction of perception. Art tells us what we know and don’t know that we know. Certainly *On the Road* performed that function in 1957 to an extraordinary extent. There’s no doubt that we’re living in a freer America as a result of the Beat literary movement, which is an important part of the larger picture of cultural and political change in this country during the last forty years, when a four letter word couldn’t appear on the printed page, and minority rights were ridiculous.

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A letter from Jack Kerouac to Neal Cassady, [29 October 1957]
Neal Cassady Collection

After *On the Road* was finally accepted by Viking, Kerouac was elated. This letter documents the rush of new publishing possibilities that arose from the book’s immediate success, including foreign editions, contracts for other work, and the possibility of a film of *On the Road*, starring either Cassady or Marlon Brando: “soon’s he crawls outa bed and reads ROAD he buys it, meanwhile Paramount and Warners bickering.”

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A letter from Jack Kerouac to Andreas Brown, 14 July 1968
Gotham Book Mart Collection

The fame that came along with the publication of *On the Road* and subsequent books had many negative consequences for Kerouac. He was devastated by the press’s misunderstanding of his work, and the increasingly strident public ridicule of himself as “The King of the Beats.”
When *On the Road* was published, Kerouac had already abused alcohol for several years, and over the next decade he continued to decline, despite publishing sixteen more books before his death in 1969. Royalties from his books had never been large, but began to decline seriously in the early 1960s, and when he died, his estate was almost valueless. Ginsberg’s letters were acquired by Brown’s company, The Gotham Book Mart, and sold to the Ransom Center.

Wall items:
2

Larry Rivers (1923-2002)
A study for a portrait of Jack Kerouac, ca. 1959
Pencil on paper

This is one of four studies of Kerouac that Rivers created in preparation for the portrait that appears on the dust jacket of *Lonesome Traveler*. In this image, Rivers captures Kerouac’s haunted eyes. Notably, the portrait does not represent Kerouac’s mouth: the viewer engages with Kerouac’s interior world, not his words.

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Rivers composed six drawings for *Lonesome Traveler*, each emphasizing modes of travel: boats, trucks, trains and automobiles. The 1960 *New York Times* review of the book stated,

> For those millions of Americans sitting in their nervous Eames chairs wasting away with eternal boredom, Kerouac appears as a T.E. Lawrence of the five senses...Quite obviously any 9-to-5’er in America would throw over his I.B.M. and inkpot in a second to do what Kerouac has done, if he had sufficient courage and anarchy.

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Larry Rivers (1923-2002)
An illustration from *Lonesome Traveller*, 1960
Enlarged digital reproduction
Fred DeWitt
Jack Kerouac with the scroll manuscript of The Dharma Bums (1958)
Enlarged digital reproduction
Courtesy of the Orange County Regional History Center

No extant photograph documents the scroll manuscript of On the Road at the time Kerouac created it. Kerouac also used a scroll to draft The Dharma Bums, pictured here at Kerouac’s home in Orlando, Florida.

A journal kept by Jack Kerouac, 1948-1949
Accompanied by a digital facsimile
Jack Kerouac Collection

Kerouac was dwelling on his novel’s form, mythic structure, and characters at least four years before he produced the scroll manuscript. Interspersed with brainstorming about the novel’s structure and the nature of its main characters are discussions of his friends, colleagues, reading, and efforts to publish his first novel, The Town and the City.

After years of mulling over the possible forms his novel might take, Kerouac was spurred to action in 1951 when his friend John Clellon Holmes showed him the completed manuscript his roman à clef Go, which trumped Kerouac’s plan to publish a novel documenting the Beat experience.

A letter from Allen Ginsberg to Henry Wenning, 20 June 1961
Allen Ginsberg Collection

This letter to rare book dealer Wenning is a characteristic example of Ginsberg’s indefatigable efforts to help the careers of his friends; here, he attempts to convince Wenning of the future value of many Beat manuscripts. On the second page, he mentions Kerouac’s notebooks, “neatly tied together and numbered.” These notebooks now reside at the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.
According to Kerouac biographer Paul Maher, Gregory Corso stole the Ransom Center’s notebook from Kerouac in the early 1960s and “sold it to the House of Books in New York for $1000 to support his heroin habit.”

FROM BEAT TO BEATNIK

Events such as the publication of On the Road and the obscenity cases of Howl and Naked Lunch brought the Beats to the attention of a broad public. These artists who had worked for years in obscurity were suddenly spokesmen for a generation. Young people flocked to cities like San Francisco and New York, seeking the unconventional way of life represented in profiles of Beat writers and artists in print and on television. At the same time, the Beats soon became stand-ins for existing controversial subjects represented in lurid magazine exposés of the “counterculture”: drug addiction, interracial relationships, juvenile delinquency, and other threats to the suburban respectability of mainstream 1950s life.

The term “beatnik” was coined in 1958 by the San Francisco Chronicle’s witty man-on-the-street columnist Herb Caen, who used it to describe “bearded cats and kits” who were “only Beat, y’know, when it comes to work.” It soon spread throughout commercial popular culture. In artifacts from the height of the Beatnik phenomenon, 1958–1961, the cliché varies: a beatnik man might be a motorcycle-riding, knife-brandishing juvenile delinquent or a bearded pseudo-philosopher in sandals and beret speaking in jazzy rhyme. A beatnik woman might be a highly sexualized, cynical risk-taker lounging in a seedy hotel room or a naively pensive girl with long hair and lose black clothing singing folk songs in a smoky espresso bar.

Most of the Beats were dismayed with the neologism. Ginsberg and Kerouac, among others, attempted to correct those who termed them “beatnik” writers, but couldn’t stop the rising tide. Yet the beatnik was an important phenomenon in the history of social change. If the Beat social revolution may be understood as the precedent of the radical political revolutions of the sixties, the Beatnik phenomenon prepared the American public for what was to come. It familiarized the nation with the idea of subversion, paving the way for the popularization of feminist and civil rights activism and the anti-war movement.
Maynard G. Krebs is the most famous of all Beatniks; this photograph was used to illustrate the television listings section of the New York Journal American newspaper. The character of Maynard is a foil to protagonist Dobie Gillis’s strait-laced father; among other traits, he shakes every time the word “work” is uttered.

The commercial figure of the Beatnik had all the trappings of bohemia, but little or none of the substance. The spiritual urgency beneath Beat writings, the serious literary aspirations of the writers, and their fights for freedom of expression are generally neglected. But the Beatnik’s absurdities were not entirely a commercial creation; Corso, Ginsberg, and Cassady’s sometimes sophomoric antics brought arguably deserved ridicule.

The line between Beat and Beatnik became more and more difficult to draw over the course of the late 1950s, and by 1960, the two categories were virtually indistinguishable. Photographer McDarragh (1926-2007) produced some of the most important photographic documents of the New York avant-garde in the 1950s, including this volume and a companion volume about the art scene, *The Artist’s World in Pictures*, both marketed to a broad popular audience. He also co-founded the “Rent-a-Beatnik” service advertised in the Village Voice, which provided actual Village “hipsters” to entertain at “square” parties.
Ted Joans straddled “Beat” and “Beatnik” with characteristic humor, equally embracing both terms. With his flamboyant personality, he was a popular member of the “Rent-a-Beatnik” cast.

In this book, Joans documents the Beat penchant for travel, collaging African tribal images with landmark Beat locations. Many of his collaged images come from a popular nineteenth-century pictorial encyclopedia of Africa, which he purchased at a used bookstore.

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A letter from Paul Bowles to Rena and Claude Bowles, undated, ca. 1961
Paul Bowles Collection

As news of the Beat lifestyle flooded the popular press, it touched a nerve in young people, who moved in large numbers to now famous bohemian cities. San Francisco was the center of the Beatnik craze; bus tours crawled through the North Beach neighborhood so that rubbernecking tourists could get a glimpse of the action.

Many poets left their old haunts or traveled abroad in order to escape the craze. But even the international scene was not immune, as can be seen in this letter written by Paul Bowles, in which he grumbles about the Beatnik invasion of Tangier. He also comments upon other events, including the recurring health problems of his wife, novelist Jane Bowles, and a recent visit from his friend Tennessee Williams.

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A selection from the typescript of Royston Ellis’s “Rebel,” undated
Royston Ellis Papers
These pages are from an early incarnation of the young British writer Royston Ellis’s 1962 biography of James Dean, Rebel. Ellis (b. 1941) offers here a sketch of an everyday rebel living in the Channel Islands between Britain and France, showing that the Beatnik way of life was not confined to the United States. Ellis’s archetypal figure surrounds himself with garish art, enjoys spending time at a coffee bar, rejects education in favor of manual labor, and fears being “trapped in an eternity of respectability.”

Ellis wrote his own Beat poetry, Jiving to Gyp, and published it at age eighteen. He performed his poetry to rock and roll accompaniment in the early 1960s. His collaborators included the band that was to become the Beatles. Ellis claims to have suggested that the Beatles spell their band’s name with an “a,” and also claims to be the subject of the song “Paperback Writer.”

Rebel Without a Cause will be screened in the Prothro Theater as part of the Ransom Center Rebel Classics Film Series, 26 June 2008

Unidentified Photographer
“Beatnik” Favorite (1959)
Gelatin silver print
Interstate Theatre Collection

This image shows Louis Armstrong as he appears in the 1959 film The Beat Generation, which tells the story of the search for a Beatnik serial rapist who likes to spend his time in coffee houses. In the eyes of Hollywood, one jazz legend was the same as the next. Louis Armstrong was a generation older than the bebop musicians who inspired Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso to new poetic and prose measures. In fact, Armstrong was not a fan of the intellectual introspection of bebop.

Hollywood not only got the Beat generation wrong, but they stole Kerouac’s title, securing the film rights for the phrase “The Beat Generation.” As a result, the 1959 collaborative film made by Kerouac with Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie was re-titled “Pull My Daisy” just before it was released.

Wall items:
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In 1958, riding on the fame of *On the Road*, Kerouac published and soon sold the film rights to *The Subterraneans*, a short novel about a brief 1953 love affair he had had with a young woman he met in the Village. He later said that he wrote the book “from the hours of 9 to 6 AM on the three fullmoon nights of October 1953, in my mother’s tiny apartment in Richmond Hill, Queens, N.Y.”

The transition of *The Subterraneans* from novel to film says much about the relationship between Beat experience and its representation in mass culture. Kerouac’s novel tells the tale of an interracial relationship, while in the film, the female character, Mardou, is played by the French actress Leslie Caron. In the novel, Mardou is African-American, and a taste of the novel’s complex representation of racial attitudes and the “new bop generation” may be seen in this passage from the novel:

> for the first time she opened her mouth and spoke to me communicating a full thought and my heart didn’t exactly sink but wondered when I heard the cultured funny tones of part Beach, part I. Magnin model, part Berkeley, part Negro highclass, something, a mixture of langue and style of talking and use of words I’d never heard before except in certain rare girls of course *white* and so strange even Adam [Allen Ginsberg] at once noticed and commented with me that night—but definitely the new bop generation way of speaking. . . .

A poster advertising the Allied Artists film *The Rebel Set* (1959)
Interstate Theatre Collection

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A poster advertising the Barjul International Pictures film *The Beatniks* (1959)
Interstate Theatre Collection

A poster advertising the MGM film *High School Confidential* (1958)
Interstate Theatre Collection
A young Gerard Malanga (b. 1943) sent this humorous questionnaire to his mentor, poet and publisher Daisy Aldan, probably not long after she published the works of several Beat writers in her anthology *A New Folder* (1960). Malanga was soon to become an important member of Andy Warhol’s circle and was a co-founder of *Interview* magazine.
Aldan’s responses to the questionnaire are surprisingly earnest and thorough. She returned the completed form to Malanga, who filed it with his correspondence.

Vitrine items:
78, 80-82


Harlan Ellison’s Ellison Wonderland (New York: Paperback Library, 1962)
Curry Science Fiction Collection

Harlan Ellison’s Gentleman Junkie and Other Stories of the Hung-up Generation (Evanston, IL: Regency Books, 1961)

These pulp publications represent several points on the spectrum of Beat-inspired book publishing. Some books documented the phenomenon, others celebrated it. Many satisfied their audience’s need to feel a sense of control over the growing counterculture by ridiculing it.

Of particular interest in this group, Gentleman Junkie was a serious study of social conditions at the dawn of the 1960s, written before Harlan Ellison became a highly respected writer of science fiction. It is reputed to be the only paperback that Dorothy Parker ever agreed to review. She reviewed it positively, calling one story “without exception the best presentation I have ever seen of present racial conditions in the South and of those who try to alleviate them.”