2012

Containing the Beat: An Analysis of the Press Coverage of the Beat Generation During the 1950s

Anna Lou Jessmer
anna.jessmer@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://mds.marshall.edu/etd

Part of the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons, Journalism Studies Commons, and the Mass Communication Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu.
CONTAINING THE BEAT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRESS COVERAGE OF THE BEAT GENERATION DURING THE 1950S

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Journalism

by

Anna Lou Jessmer

Approved by
Robert A. Rabe, Committee Chairperson
Professor Janet Dooley
Dr. Terry Hapney
Marshall University
December 2012
Dedication

I would like to dedicate my research to my grandfather, James D. Lee. His personal experiences during the Cold War at home and abroad inspired in me a fascination of the era at an early age.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge in writing, a few individuals without whom this paper would not be complete.

I am incredibly and eternally grateful for Professor Robert A. Rabe whose intellect, advice, encouragement, and saintly patience allowed me to achieve my goal of completing a master’s thesis. I have never before been so challenged as a writer and have grown so much throughout the process. Thank you for everything.

I would also like to thank my personal cheerleader, therapist, proofreader, research assistant, and friend, Linda Jessmer. You are an amazing mother and I am so thankful to have you in my life.

Last, I would like to thank Professor Janet Dooley and Dr. Terry Hapney for agreeing to be part of this process and not giving up on an unconventional graduate student.
Contents

List of Figures ............................................................................................................. v

Abstract ..................................................................................................................... vi

Introduction: Squaresville vs. Beatsville ................................................................. 1

Review of Literature ................................................................................................. 9

Methodology ............................................................................................................... 19

Introducing the Beats ............................................................................................... 21

Becoming Beat .......................................................................................................... 28

Containing the American Family ............................................................................. 40

Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 58

Appendix A: IRB Letter of Approval ....................................................................... 60

Bibliography .............................................................................................................. 61
### List of Figures

1. We Don’t Dig It ........................................................................................................... 31
2. Visions of Jack ........................................................................................................... 37
3. Switching Partners .................................................................................................. 43
4. Happy Midwestern Family ......................................................................................... 50
5. Stereotypical Beat Pad ............................................................................................. 50
6. The Only Rebellion Around .................................................................................... 51
Abstract

The early Cold War era was a period marked by a fear of Communist subversion and a distrust of the *other*. It was during this time that the Beat Generation emerged in literature and society as a minority opinion group—failing to conform to mainstream norms and living outside the margins of acceptable American culture. In response to the Beat Generation and their dissenting viewpoints, the media framed the Beats in a mostly negative manner. This negative framing was fueled by a desire to delegitimize the Beats as well as any other dissenting groups that posed a threat to American ideology. By examining a series of primary sources from the 1950s, the media’s attempts to contain the Beat movement are not only apparent but speak to the larger themes of Cold War paranoia and fear.
Squaresville, U.S.A.

In 1959, three female high school students from Hutchinson, Kansas, wrote to Lawrence Lipton, the leader and biographer of the Venice Beatniks. The letter from Kathy Vannaman, Anne Gardner, and Luetta Peters was an invitation for Lipton and his Beatnik counterparts to visit the small Kansas town that the girls described as "Squaresville itself."¹ Out of concern for the social state of the town, the girls explained to Lipton that, "we as its future residents want to be cooled in."² What happened next was both unexpected and shocking to not only the high school students but to the town of Hutchinson as well. Lipton accepted the invitation.

The particulars of the correspondence between Hutchinson's youth and Lipton play out in the September 21, 1959, issue of Life magazine that chronicles what exactly happened after Lipton agreed to the girls' request:

Aghast when their prankish invitation was accepted, the girls hurriedly uninvited Lipton. As they did, the story hit the newspapers and the town vibrated with indignation. Town fathers worriedly wondered if their youngsters were incipient Beatniks...whom they looked on as unspeakably unwholesome. When rumors spread that the Beatniks had been reinvited [sic] by other teen-agers, the police passed the word that, "a Beatnik doesn't like work, any man that doesn't like work is a vagrant, and a vagrant goes to jail around here."³

---

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
There was never the dramatically revealing confrontation of two extremes of [then] present-day U.S. that *Life* magazine projected might have occurred. However, the response of the townspeople to the actions (whether “prankish” or sincere) of its youth reflects an era in which the political and societal leaders of the United States sought to shape and strengthen values of family and conformity and to target those who did not fit into the acceptable mold, those labeled as the *other*. The nation’s dominant mindset at the beginning of the Cold War was to address and minimize domestic threats. Many argued that the nation could only be strong against external foes if internal dissenters and non-conformists were marginalized. It was a time of the second wave of the Red Scare and McCarthyism when many Americans had heightened suspicions about supposed Communist subversion and viewed conformity to approved American norms as a positive value “in it of itself.”

The American era of “McCarthyism” has been popularly linked to the town of Wheeling, West Virginia, where on February 9, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) made a speech at the Ohio County Women’s Republican Club. At their Lincoln Day dinner, McCarthy informed the club that he had, in his hand, a list of 205 names that “were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping

---

policy in the State Department.”5 The idea of Communist policy-makers within the U.S. State Department was a frightening thought for a nation that so publically and strongly denounced “Red” ideologies.

Senator McCarthy’s announcement reflected the tension that existed between the United States and the Soviet Union and launched a widespread attack, both internationally and domestically, against Communism and any other form of political or cultural subversion in the United States. The actions and mindset of that era that came to be dubbed “McCarthyism” cannot be boiled down to the actions of an individual senator.6 In addition to Communism, these threats included juvenile delinquency, homosexuality, anti-authoritarian messages in film, music, and literature, and the lifestyle and cultural products of the Beats. At the onset of the Cold War, the fear of nuclear warfare and the looming Soviet threat “drove women and men into the sense of security offered by suburbia’s powerful new norms of nuclear family living.”7 As Elaine Tyler May explains in Homeward Bound, suburbia would “serve as a bulwark against Communism and class conflict, for according to the widely shared belief articulated by Vice President Richard Nixon, it offered a piece of the American dream for everyone.”8 Suburbia was seen as a

---

triumph of American society as well as a defensive structure against the infiltration of Communism onto American soil.

In addition to the shift to the safe-haven of suburbia, Red Scare culture produced social regulation to uphold norms with devastating effects to groups that failed to adhere.\textsuperscript{9} These groups included unmarried or independent women, homosexuals, bohemians, racial minorities who fought against white control and any other “deviant” that did not conform to the postwar ideal of normalcy.\textsuperscript{10}

The Beat Generation refers to a poetic and literary movement that emerged from the disillusionment following the end of World War II. Faced with the societal conformity that marked the 1950s, a few individuals (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Lucien Carr, Gregory Corso, and others), detached from the ideals of normalcy through their writing as well as lifestyle. To the Beats:

Middle-American conformity represented a citadel to be stormed, youth an energy to be liberated, the official politics of Corporation and Pentagon a ruse to be exposed, and sexual repressions a burden in need of challenge and release. Life, if it were to matter, would be lived existentially at the edge.\textsuperscript{11}

In an effort to reject the burgeoning American norms, the Beat writers covered such topics as power, sex, drugs, unconventional love, and an alternative lifestyle to the one that was projected as ideal.

\textsuperscript{9} The norms of the nuclear family are often characterized as a white, Protestant, heterosexual, married (and monogamous) couple in which the man provided financially for the family while the woman stayed within the domestic realm.
\textsuperscript{10} Medovoi, \textit{Rebels}, 21.
In the earliest years of the Cold War, the Beats (later referred to as the Beatniks) fought a much different fight than the rest of the United States during this time of heightened security and scrutiny of outsiders. While a large portion of America was set on conforming, the Beats were searching for change. Ann Charters describes in the introduction of *Beat Down to Your Soul*:

The times were ripe to change. By the end of the 1950s, the country was experiencing the rumblings of widespread radical dissent, partly as a response to the tumultuous historical events of the Cold War, with the United States' bloody efforts to curtail the global expansion of Communism, and partly as a reaction against self-complacent conformity at home. 12

Beat critic Bruce Cook explained that “if the Beats meant anything to complacent, conformist Eisenhower America, it was change.”13 Rather than strengthening home life, values, and work ethic, the Beats reacted to postwar America through writing, film, eccentricity, and a nomadic lifestyle. Beat poet Kenneth Rexroth explained that "against the ruin of the world, there is one defense--the creative act."14 Their lifestyle was one of writing (both prose and poetry), drugs, unconventional sexuality, instability (as compared to the nuclear family), and critique of the status quo. The Beats were disillusioned after World War II and came to embrace a term that suggested a sort of surrender—one was *Beat* down to his or her soul. They opposed many of the ideals of mainstream

---

society, and visualized a lifestyle “inspired and fervent and free of Bourgeois Bohemian Materialism. A Generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, [and] curious.’”\textsuperscript{15} One might have seen their four-letter word representation (b-e-a-t) as “down and out” but it was, “full of intense conviction.”\textsuperscript{16} This intense conviction for change did not align with the political and social agenda of the United States during a time when the nation attempted to contain any opposition or internal threat to their mission of supremacy over Russian influence.

Containment originally emerged as a global initiative set out by President Harry S. Truman in order to minimize the worldwide spread of Communism. It evolved domestically as a societal and political response to minority groups that were not subscribing to the pro-conformity mindset of the United States during the 1950s and were thus perceived as a threat to the nation’s moral fiber and internal foundation. It projected ideas of American normalcy and established widespread accepted standards of what it meant to be a normal and patriotic American citizen. This establishment of standards can be seen in the domestic anti-Communism that emerged during this period as manifestation of containment. It was presumed that if “subversive individuals could be contained and prevented from spreading their poisonous influence through the body politic, then society could feel

\textsuperscript{15} Charters, “Introduction,” \textit{Beat Down to Your Soul}, xxix.\
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., xxix.
secure.”17 By engraining a negative-view toward Communists (or any enemy to the American agenda) society’s actions could be controlled on an unconscious level in order to combat U.S. enemies.

Containment can be described as not only a foreign and domestic policy but also a “rhetorical strategy that functioned to foreclose dissent, preempt dialogue, and preclude contradiction.”18 Arguably, it is a form of xenophobia, a fear of the other, in which associations with otherness are marked by a feeling of fear, insecurity, and disdain. One important element of the effort to contain the Beats manifested itself in printed media—newspapers and magazines. This manifestation provided a negative interpretation of the Beat Generation that offered an image of the small, relatively obscure group to the nation.

Evidence suggests that the mainstream press during the 1950s painted the Beat Generation in a particular light—lethargic, apathetic, and almost dangerous. In the eyes of the media, the Beats possessed unconventional sexuality, detached and operating outside the margin of mainstream society, and potentially threatened the containment of societal ideals and moral actions within the United States.

This paper answers a number of important questions the journalistic approach toward the containment of the Beat Generation, and how these efforts manifested in printed media. More specifically, it will examine in what ways the press worked to contain the perceived

---

17 May, Homeward Bound, 15.
18 Nadel, Containment Culture, 14.
cultural threat that the Beats represented to mainstream society (specifically between 1950-1959). In addition to the central question of how and why the media handled the Beat Generation, the paper will also explore (to some extent) how the press coverage of the Beat Generation aligned with their actual beliefs and actions and how and to what extent the mainstream portrayal of the Beats contrasted with their self-perception.

An analysis of major and local newspapers, magazines, literature from Beat and non-Beat alike during the 1950s contextualized by the themes of the early Cold War era, narrates a story about the controversial symbols of a new Generation and its critics. The evidence found suggests that negatively framed press coverage of the Beat Generation functioned to contain the perceived cultural threat that the Beats represented to the mainstream culture of United States.
Review of Literature

In researching the press coverage of the Beat Generation and how it related to containment in the early Cold War era, it is important to examine texts focused on media interpretations of minority opinion groups or dissenting groups during the 1950s. The media acted to marginalize said groups labeled as other in the same manner as the Beat Generation was labeled. Other literature researched covered different themes concerning the Beats and the early Cold War including framing, hegemony, paranoia, and fear.

A basis for the study of press interpretations of the Beat Generation is analyzing how the media in the United States handles minority groups. In Silencing the Opposition: Antinuclear Movements & the Media in the Cold War, Andrew Rojecki questions if the news media provided dissenting political movements with a “secure forum for their ideas, whether citizens had the ready access to the media that their government enjoyed.”19 Rojecki’s study serves to contextualize the media as the link among what he refers to as “dissident movements,” citizens, and the government. The citizens or audiences presume that the news media is objective. This presumption is where the media gets its strength and credibility as a guide to the public about how to view or respond to said dissident movements. The pragmatist view of the media that Rojecki

19 Andrew Rojecki, Silencing the Opposition: Antinuclear Movements & the Media in the Cold War (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1.
describes is one in which the news is made and not reported—the world constructed, not chronicled.

The majority of press outlets gave specific frames and labels to the Beats in their reporting that projected them in a negative light, possibly attempting to diminish their validity as a cultural movement, also suggesting that the media are not objective. As Melvin Small argues in *Covering Dissent*, “the media generally do not look favorably upon movements that oppose official policy.”20 Small’s work suggests that because the Beats operated in the margins of society the media responded negatively to their presence. He argues that the media supports “those who operate within the system and denigrates oppositional activities of ordinary citizens.”21 As the Beats could be labeled as unsupportive of the early Cold War agenda, it would stand that the media would “denigrate” their presence. Although neither Rojecki nor Small specifically addresses the Beats in their discussions of press coverage of minority groups, the application of their theories is appropriate to this research.

Another theme that is prevalent throughout the study of the Beat Generation and the press is that of framing. Erving Goffman offers a possible definition of framing as “the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will

21 Ibid., 13.
be induced to have a false belief of what it is that is going on.”  

Goffman explains that a “nefarious plot” is involved to create a falsification of some part of the world. It can be argued that the semi-fabrication or overly heightened images or stories of the Beat exploits can be seen as a form of framing in order to contain the movement from spreading into the realm of acceptable mainstream behavior. Framing defined how the Beats were presented to the American masses. It occurs when the news “necessarily selects facts that support a particular view of the world,” providing the audience with a (possibly unconscious) bounded or framed view of this mediated world. News frames have powerful effects over audience perception and are the backbone of media containment.

The discussion of framing as it applies to minority groups continues with scholar Todd Gitlin, whose analysis of the media’s complex relationship with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the 1960s illuminates media framing of dissenting or minority groups and illustrates the possible relationship of the Beat Generation with the press. Gitlin offers that “audiences with less direct experience of the situations at issue were more vulnerable to the framing of the mass media.” Gitlin’s argument guides one of the background goals of this research—gauging how realistic were the media portrayals of the Beat Generation.

---

23 Ibid., 16.
Generation and how that compared to Beat self-reflection. Another topic explored by Gitlin is mediated images of dissent and how “the media helped *contain* the [SDS] movement in the course of difusing [sic] images of it.” This idea is explored later in the study through *Life* magazine’s coverage of the Beat Generation and the particular photographic choices it makes.

Framing can be considered a tool that furthers the theory of hegemony. Scholar Daniel C. Hallin discusses media coverage during a later period in the Cold War and how it operated to maintain the foundation of American hegemony. Hallin defines Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as power, in liberal capitalist societies that depend little on the state coercing citizens into submission. Rather, power rests:

> on the strength of a world-view, a system of assumptions and social values accepted as “common sense” which legitimates the existing distribution of power... The state plays a role in the propagation of that world-view, but the legitimating cultural system so crucial to political power is maintained largely by private, autonomous, and in many cases “nonpolitical institutions.”

Included in these “nonpolitical institutions” is the mass media. Hallin’s exploration of the media as a hegemonic tool offers a theory of how the power-holders of the United States utilized the press during the 1950s to maintain and further concepts of acceptable mainstream culture while marginalizing groups that fell outside of that realm.

---

25 Ibid., 245.
The news framing of minority groups in the early Cold War era was an attempt at containing their dissenting messages, values, and/or behaviors from undermining the hegemonic ideals of the United States. The Beats lived unconventional lives and had unconventional sexuality, which challenged what was considered normal or acceptable in U.S. society. Containment loyalists viewed the “human body as a metaphor for the national body...gender ambiguity, homosexuality, and Communism were all assaults on the body.”

27 Deviations from the status quo in terms of sexuality, gender, or race did not align with the containment agenda. Joanne Meyerowitz’ explains in, “Sex, Gender, and Reform,” that “the early 1950s conservative politicians and other avid red-baiters attacked not only Communism but also, ‘sex perversion’, which they labeled a moral menace and national security risk.”

28 A richer illustration of this perceived risk forms through an analysis of the printed word that circulated during the 1950s.

A work that contextualizes the study in the McCarthy era and gives insight to the press’ role during the post-World War II “Red Scare” is Edwin R. Bayley’s *Joe McCarthy and the Press*. Bayley’s research on the press coverage of Senator Joe McCarthy’s accusations of Communist infiltration and the State Department’s response shows the close ties

---


held by the press toward the professional ideals during this time. In the month following McCarthy’s famous speech in Wheeling, President Truman held three news conferences, each combatting the McCarthy tirade. During Truman’s first conference, Bayley explains:

Truman said that there was “not a word of truth” in McCarthy’s charges and that the State Department had already answered the charges in detail... This was Truman’s first comment on the McCarthy affair. It was ignored by about 90 percent of the press.²⁹

It appears that early McCarthy-era reporting was poor as many headlines were “inaccurate to the point of contradiction, creating lasting false impressions.”³⁰ Insufficient and confusing stories, many that obscured real news or had “hoked-up leads,” marked the quality of reporting that occurred during the early weeks of 1950. Bayley’s research demonstrates that many in the media either shared the values of the Cold War consensus or were reluctant to criticize McCarthyism due to the political climate of the time. Bayley’s text also aids in understanding the emergence of the Cold War consensus that characterized the American mindset in the early Cold War, as well as how the press contributed to it.

In addition to exploring early Cold War themes as they relate to the study of the Beat Generation (framing, hegemony, containment, fear, and minority groups), it is also important to understand the characteristics, significance, and cultural identity of the Beat writers.

²⁹ Bayley, Joe McCarthy, 39.
³⁰ Ibid., 65.
Many scholars have offered their interpretations of the significance of Beat culture within recent American history. In Blows Like a Horn: Beat Writing, Jazz Style, and the Markets in the Transformation of U.S. Culture author Preston Whaley Jr. discusses the ways the Beat culture utilized the market of mass media to transform U.S. culture. In his writings, he highlights the role of mass media in downgrading the members of the Beat movement as “silly Beatnik caricatures.” Whaley argues that the key Beat-members were more than just artists; they were keen businesspersons who “worked” mainstream publications to increase readership as well as the impact of the Beat movement.

Other scholars like Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson who seek to understand the Beat Generation within their cultural and chronological context, focus on the women of the Beat Generation, interviewing the female writers to understand more fully the many perspectives of the movement. Grace and Johnson’s research is composed mainly of primary material from discussions with the significant female Beat writers and highlights a widely neglected demographic of literary Beats. Looking at the female perspective of the Beat movement aids in understanding what the Beat experience was like for both men and women during the early Cold War era. Moreover, since the Beat women existed in contrast to the stereotypical housewife of the

---

1950s, their experience living in the margin of mainstream society adds to the discussion of containing the nuclear family.

In his work focusing on American, cultural, and gender studies, author Leerom Medovoi addresses the origins of various identities (such as the “bad boy,” “bad girl,” homosexuals) that emerged in the immediate Cold War era. Medovoi discusses the concept of identity in the 1950s across different sectors including television, film, and radio, but asserts that, whereas the Beat writers were not the only rebellious figures of the times, their writing succeeded in laying “claim on the identity narrative of the fifties youth culture, and to name its audience, ‘the Beat Generation.’” Medovoi’s writings take a sociological view at the significance of the Beat writers, analyzing how their work reflected the greater movement in society. This analysis of Beat culture is enriching to the study of the Beat writers and aids in contextualizing the movement within society.

Alan Petigny also writes about America in the early Cold War era in his work *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1955*. Petigny references the Beats alongside the emerging jazz artists of the time, noting artists who influenced the Beats and the different characteristics of Beat poetry such as spontaneity, improvisation, and other literary elements of Beat writing. Petigny and Medevoi touch on similar themes. The former examines the spontaneous elements of Beat poetry. According to Petigny

---

“the basic idea was to get the writer in a cognitive state where his words would flow freely, with as little deliberation as possible...The ultimate objective of the author is to ‘write without consciousness.’”34 The latter also looks at the significance of Beat writing in the Cold War era as it pertains to the liberalizing of Americans in the 1950s.

There are also those who write of the Beats from first-hand experience. In *This is the Beat Generation*, James Campbell provides a contextual and chronological account of significant Beat milestones from 1944-1960 as he travelled with the “founding fathers” of the Beat Generation—Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs.35 Campbell’s history gives insight into what and how the Beats thought about themselves as a cultural and literary movement. Through studying the Beat writers’ self-perceptions, the contrast between the mediated representations and those perceptions is illuminated as the mediated representations attempted to illegitimate Beat writing, whereas the Beats viewed their writing as a significant form of creative expression.

Author Lawrence Lipton writes during the end of the decade in his piece, *The Holy Barbarians*, which is advertised on the cover as “the first complete story of the ‘Beats’-that hip, cool, frantic Generation of new Bohemians who are turning the American scale of values inside out.”36

35 James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999).
36 Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians*, cover.
Lipton discusses the holy barbarians who have come into society “bearded and sandaled” with a message of a revolution of peace and individuality. His quasi-fiction stylized account of the Beats describes them as “barbarians” in a civilized land (the United States) bringing-forth new ideas and new Generations of life. Lipton’s account acts as a rebuttal to the negative press coverage of the Beats during the 1950s—suggesting that the press coverage of the Beat Generation was inaccurate or negatively framed.

The aforementioned scholars produced respected, informative, and insightful additions to the study of Cold War era themes of the fear of the other as well as how the media portrayed various dissenting groups. They provide a solid foundation for applying the concepts of xenophobia, containment and framing to the Beat Generation during the early Cold War era. However, an examination of the negative media portrayal of the Beat Generation and the context in which this occurred, provides a new addition to the discussion of Cold War containment by expanding its focus to the Beats.
Methodology

When approaching the examination of the projections of the Beat writers and poets of the United States by the “mass media” it was necessary to first define the scope and the timeframe of the study. Therefore, “mass media” came to include only print publications (newspapers and magazines) as the research focused not only on Beat portrayals in the media but also how in-tune this was to public opinion. Print publications during this era provide the stages for which the Beat drama unfolded on both a national and local levels. Although containment of the Beat Generation may have also unfolded across the nation on television sets and radio waves, this research focuses on the printed press as it represents a more varied number of voices, locations, and is more accessible to the public than electronic media.

A collection of articles published between 1950-1959 was roughly based on three categories: 1) literary critiques and/or reviews of Beat poetry and prose, 2) discussions of the Beat Generation in terms of their behavior/image in society, and 3) letters to the editor from readers regarding the Beat Generation. These articles were selected based on the subject matter and on the way in which the author framed the Beats—whether negatively (most common) or positively (a rare occurrence). Newspapers accessed through the online research database ProQuest that were used in the gathering of research included many popular (based on circulation and the population of the cities they served)
publications of the 1950s including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. In an attempt to gauge society’s reaction to the Beat Generation on a community level, supplemental “smaller” or local newspapers were used. Magazines that were found in online archives containing articles pertaining to the Beat Generation were also collected and included *Life*, *Time*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Playboy*.

Articles from both forms of publications were examined for framing of textual content, connection to Cold War themes of containment, conformity, framing, hegemony, and xenophobia, and overall significance to the research. Additionally, relevant visual images in the magazines and newspapers were included based on the importance of their contribution in communicating/furthering the media’s concept of the Beats.
Introducing the Beats

In a 1952 article for *The New York Times Magazine* author and Beat contemporary John Clellon Holmes introduced the Beat movement to his readers. Throughout the article Holmes paints a picture of various youths who are all “members” of the new Generation that was associated with the Beat writers:

That clean young face has been making the newspapers steadily since the war. Standing before a judge in a Bronx courthouse, being arraigned for stealing a car, it looked up into the camera with curious laughter and no guilt. The same face, with a more serious bent, stared from the pages of *Life* magazine, representing a graduating class of ex-GI’s, and said that as it believed small business to be dead, it intended to become a comfortable cog in the largest corporation it could find. A little younger, a little more bewildered, it was this same face that the photographers caught in Illinois when the first non-virgin club was uncovered. The young copywriter, leaning down the bar on Third Avenue, quietly drinking himself into relaxation, and the energetic hotrod driver of Los Angeles, who plays Russian Roulette with a jalopy, are separated only by a continent and a few years. They are the extremes. In between them fall the secretaries wondering whether to sleep with their boyfriends now or wait; the mechanic berring [sic] up with the guys and driving off to Detroit on a whim; the models studiously name-dropping at a cocktail party. But the face is the same. Bright, level, realistic, challenging.  

Holmes’ depiction of the youth of the Beat Generation is one of a disillusioned generation, shattered by the harsh realities of the recently ended World War II and the emergence of the atomic bomb. They no longer believe in the idealized vision of the status quo. He characterized them, “as a cultural revolution in progress, made by a post-World War II generation of disaffiliated young people coming of age into a Cold War

---

world without spiritual values they could honor.” In his article, Holmes cites leading Beat Generation figure Jack Kerouac who summed up the population about which Holmes is writing with a simple statement: “Man this is a *Beat Generation*.”

Holmes’ knowledge of the Beats stemmed from his relationship with the writers with whom he had spent much time and even drew inspiration from. The following excerpt for Holmes’ article demonstrates his admiration for the Beats:

> Its [the Beat Generation] ability to keep its eyes open, and yet avoid cynicism; its ever-increasing conviction that the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem; and that capacity for sudden wisdom which people who live hard and go far possess, are assets and bear watching. And, anyway, the clear, challenging faces are worth it.”

Holmes’ article not only introduced the Beat Generation on the grand scale of mass media, but he also drafted one of the few favorable depictions of the Beat Generation that is found in the press. Holmes writes in a sympathetic tone toward the Beats that is unique to the time period but also sparked a heated response from the *New York Times Magazine* readers who were more representative of the mainstream perception of the Beats.

Much of the *New York Times Magazine* readership failed to share the same sense of respect for the movement. In a letter to the editor responding to Holmes’ piece, Miss Taylor Caldwell—a middlebrow author

---

39 Holmes, “This Is the Beat Generation,” SM10.
whose literary taste was representative of the mainstream during the
time of the Beat emergence—wrote:

I think Clellon Holmes gives an entirely fallacious picture of the
present American Generation. He is probably a New Yorker, and so
has absolutely no contact with the rest of the country. I do have
contact, receiving thousands of letters monthly from every state in
the Union. I also travel extensively all over the nation. As a mother
of two married daughters, I am the mother-in-law of two fine young
men, one 36, the other 28. They are the Generation Mr. Holmes
speaks of, and any connection between them and the creatures he
describes is nonexistent.\(^\text{40}\)

Caldwell’s response is representative of the mainstream distrust or
rejection of much of the Beat Generation mentality. This Beat
characterization that Caldwell so adamantly rejected had only recently
emerged in the previous three or four years. The term Beat began
circulating around writing and words of the major Beat founders at the
beginning of 1949, when the word “Beat” acquired glamour, going from a
“despised, Huncke-like condition, a fugitive shifting at best. Beat became
something someone might want to be.”\(^\text{41}\) A term previously used by:

Lowdown blacks, in the spaces between drug-highs and sex highs
and music-highs, Beat packed into its abrupt syllable the
experience of no-money sadness. In its altering usage, however, the
sense changed from passive to active—you weren’t rejected, you
did the rejecting.\(^\text{42}\)

Much of what the Beat writers were “rejecting” was the American literary
movement of the time. Beat literature emerged out of the 1950s as the
outcome of a small group of writers seeking to create a new American

\(^{41}\) Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation*, 78.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 78.
literary movement. The Beats were aware that in order to produce literature significantly different from their “interwar predecessors” they had to begin “inhabiting a cultural and political context radically different... [this was] a novel context that necessitated a revision of the methods of writing, forms of narrative, and the social position of the writer.”

The technique of writing through a spatial practice was a means of exploring and therefore critiquing contemporary culture.

This new literary style manifested itself in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) in which Kerouac’s journey across the United States delves into the exploration and representation of post-World War II America. In a review of *On the Road*, *New York Times* literary critic Gilbert Millstein describes the Beat Generation as, a Generation born disillusioned. “It takes for granted the imminence of war, the barrenness of politics and the hostility of the rest of society. It is not even impressed (although it never pretends to scorn) material well-being (as distinguished from materialism). It does not know what refuge it is seeking, but it is seeking.” Millstein likened Keroac’s work and its relationship to the Beat Generation to *The Sun Also Rises* and its connection to the Lost Generation by claiming:

> Just as, more than any other novel of the twenties, “The Sun Also Rises” came to be regarded as the testament of the ‘Lost

---

Generation’ so it seems certain that “On the Road” will come to be known as that of the “Beat Generation.”

Although Millstein recognized Kerouac’s work as a classic, *On the Road* was problematic in that the emerging youth culture that identified with the “characters’ spontaneity and affirmation of life” that it came to define, was “set in defiance of the established social norm of postwar America.”

During a time of conformity and internal containment, the “testament” representing the Beat Generation that stood in defiance of established and mainstream America worked against the U.S. agenda of the 1950s.

Acting in favor of the United States’ agenda of containment, three days after Millstein’s favorable review circulated, the *New York Times* ran an article that framed the Beats much differently by describing *On the Road* as:

> A long affectionate lark inspired by the so-called ‘Beat’ Generation, and an example of the degree to which some of the most original work being done in this country has come to depend upon the bizarre and off-Beat for its creative stimulus.

As he describes the Beats in an almost scoffing tone, it seems that the author scolds American people for producing nothing better than the likes of Kerouac’s *On the Road* in terms of current and “interesting” literature. The review goes further to refer to the style of Beat writing as “enormously readable and entertaining...but one reads it in the same mood that he might visit a sideshow—the freaks are fascinating although

---

they are hardly part of our lives.”47 The fact that these two contradicting articles ran in the New York Times just days apart might be coincidental; however, coincidence or not, they represent various discourses that surrounded the Beats and how some of these discourses worked to destroy any legitimacy of the “defiant” Generation.

The New York Times was not the only major newspaper to run stories dissecting the Beats. In a 1958 Los Angeles Times article, the possible downfall of the Beats is discussed (and almost celebrated) through a brief overview and account of what it is to be a “true” Beat.48 Arguing that by the very nature of labeling, categorizing, and commercialization of the Beat Generations, everything the Beats stand for is in jeopardy of destruction. Serving as a quasi-overview of the Beat movement, the article pinpoints the various elements of style, language, beliefs, and key figures of the movement. When discussing the Beat view of death, the author claims:

The Beat Generation has the belief that death is preferable to life—because in death one is truly left alone. And it’s a new experience. “It’s a way out, the end, man,” a Beatnik said... As a result of their odd antisocial behavior and refusal to engage in any worthwhile pursuit, a sociologist described the Beat Generation as a “cult of useless.”49

---

47 Ibid., BR3.
49 Ibid., TW4.
The article then asserts that “bowery bums, thieves, addicts, and others have found here an intellectual justification for themselves.”

Instead of viewing the Beats as a literary or cultural movement, most major newspapers considered the Beat Generation to be essentially a joke. Although different in geography, both East and West coast publications were unified in the negative coverage of the Beats.

---

50 Ibid., TW4.
**Becoming Beat**

The Beats were not interested in proactive or revolutionary action; rather theirs was a call to detach from mainstream post-World War II culture. As notable Beat writer Gregory Corso said, “[b]y avoiding society you become separate from society and being separate from society is being BEAT.”

An excerpt from Corso’s poem *Power* reveals a new understanding of the term while also rejecting popular understandings or perceptions of power in the United States:

```
Power
What is Power
A hat is Power
The world is Power
Being afraid is Power
What is poetry when there is no Power
Poetry is powerless when there is no POWER
Standing on a street corner waiting for no one is Power...

Power is underpowered
Power is what is happening
Power is without body or spirit
Power is sadly fundamental
Power is attained by Weakness
Diesels do not explain Power
In Power there is no destruction
Power is not be dropped by a plane
```

Corso’s poetry suggested that the horrific atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, still fresh in the American psyche were not expressions of power, and that the United States as a powerful entity is questionable by these standards. Corso, as many other Beat writers,

---


questioned the status quo, rejected a life of normalcy (by 1950s American standards), and sought to find fulfillment through their own standards of living and ideologies.

In the fall of 1958, Kerouac participated in a symposium at Hunter College to enlighten students, community members, and all who attended on the Beat philosophy. In his book, *Reflections of an Angry Middle-Aged Editor*, author and editor of the *New York Post* James E. Wechsler recounted his own experience with the Beat Generation and explained why he found fault with the group. Wechsler had been invited to the symposium at Hunter College in November of 1958 in which he, Kerouac, Kingsley Amis (a British writer) and Professor Ashley Montague (a noted anthropologist) were to speak about the Beat Generation.\(^{53}\)

During the course of the evening, Wechsler and Kerouac have a brief dialogue in which they share their contrasting views:

- **Kerouac:** ...I believe in love, I vote for love.
- **Wechsler:** I believe in the capacity of the human intelligence to create a world in which there is love, compassion, justice, and freedom. I believe in fighting for that kind of world. I think what you are doing is try to destroy anybody’s instinct to care about this world.
- **Kerouac:** I believe in the dove of peace.
- **Wechsler:** So do I.\(^{54}\)

Where the Beat Generation responded to the issues facing society by living love and peace, Wechsler belonged to a former era with different

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 6.
beliefs on the subject—an era that chose to stand up and fight for reform and justice.

Wechsler’s dissatisfaction with the Beats did not focus on their appearance, their poetry, or even their unconventional lifestyle choices; what Wechsler found disappointing with the Beats was their disinterest and apathy in politics. In his reflections of a meeting of the Americans for Democratic Action which occurred shortly after the Hunter College Symposium, Wechsler notes that men "who had the good or bad fortune to become twenty in the 1930’s have been granted a certain immortality by the nonemergence [sic] of younger voices."\(^55\) The younger voices that Wechsler refers to are those of the Beat Generation, whom Wechsler considered an unorganized but bright group of capable young adults who, instead of working toward making significant changes in the United States, opted to detach and live differently.

The voices of what Wechsler considered part of the younger Generation were also not impressed by the Beat Generation. In July of 1958, president of the Gilbert Youth Research Company, Eugene Gilbert published findings of a recent nationwide survey in the *Kingsport Times* titled "What People Think: Today's Young People Don't Consider They Are Members Of So-Called Beat Generation."\(^56\) Gilbert surveyed an unknown number of teenagers asking:

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 14.
1. What does the term "Beat Generation" mean to you?
2. Do you think that you or your friends are part of the "Beat Generation"?
3. Do you think "BEAT" is a good description of your Generation?

Gilbert starts the article by drawing comparisons among the Lost Generation of the twenties to the Beat Generation of the fifties--both products of a post-war emotional letdown. However, the two generations differ in that, whereas the Lost Generation "tried to get as much as it could out of life," the Beat Generation tries to "live life to the fullest, but not enjoy it. The Generation is 'Beat' because it resists any emotional response about anything" (1958). Whereas the adults of the 1950s were skeptical about whatever salvation might be attributed to the Beat cause,
Gilbert's research found that the same went for the vast majority of the teenagers he surveyed.

The article includes some of the Beat-negative survey responses that express sentiments like "to be Beat you must think that the whole rest of humanity is square and you are the only one who knows. It's all nonsense," to statements like "Not my speed...acting like a hood is strictly for the brainless. I think it's disgraceful."

Although most of the teenagers surveyed had never encountered members of the Beat Generation, they had preconceived notions about what it meant to be Beat that they had gained from the media. The few Beat sympathizers tried to enlighten Gilbert and the United States on the topic explaining that being Beat is "getting a charge out of something, anything. The whole idea is to be able to exist without personal attachment. You go just for laughs, but you don't laugh." Fern Stavey, an admitted Chicago Beat teenager argued, "This is a messy world we're stuck with, and the squares don't even know how to make the best of it." According to Stavey, in the Beat formula, "making the least of it emotionally is the best way to make the best of it."\footnote{Ibid., 10.}

Examples of Gilbert's research have been found outside the published study. A sixteen-year-old high school student, Sandra Sciacchitano, wrote about her peers and the Beat Generation in a letter to the \textit{Chicago Tribune} in 1958:
The ‘Beat Generation.’ – that’s what they call us. We are a Generation of war babies who grew into a defiant, anti-intellectual, energetic Generation. And how to we come to be called, ‘the Beat Generation?’ Some little man in a big office looks down and sees us and decides that what this Generation needs is a Beat, something loud and fast—the louder the better, the cheaper the better...but some do not follow.\(^{58}\)

The published statements from youth across the United States are intriguing in that the majority of them reflect negative sentiments about the Beat Generation—sentiments guided by hegemonic and conformist ideology and not formed by personal experience with Beat literature or individuals. In practice, submissions to the newspapers are screened prior to publication, which suggests that the predominantly negative responses posted in the “Letters to the Editors” section were possibly chosen for a specific purpose—to further the newspapers’ agenda.

Cultural containment of the Beats played out on the pages of Gilbert’s study and the *Chicago Tribune* without question.

Attempts to devalue the Beat writers also came from the press’ tendency to link the Generation to juvenile delinquency—a major fear within the conformist society of 1950s America. During this period, major media outlets examined juvenile delinquency as if it were a novel phenomenon in American history.\(^{59}\) During this time, the Children’s Bureau, the U.S. Senate, the Attorney’s General Committee, the American Bar Association, and other private organizations held


investigations into the cause of juvenile delinquency in the United States, some even forming “anti-delinquency” projects.\textsuperscript{60} Articles, films, and books emerged covering the topic of juvenile delinquency including the widely read \textit{Growing Up Absurd} by Paul Goodman. In his book, Goodman explored how contemporary youth were symbols of the failure of modern society. Juvenile delinquents and “Beatniks were society’s failure to provide serious work and social roles for young men.”\textsuperscript{61} According to the social scientists of the 1950s the Beats were flawed youth let down by society. Beats were linked with young adults who were committing crimes and wreaking havoc on their communities.

In an article about growing issues with youth-delinquency in California and the United States, the \textit{Christian Science Monitor} cites Holmes’ review of the Beat philosophy in an attempt to understand why there is such rebellion among the youth of the late fifties:

Is it possible that the root of the trouble is the crying-out of individualism to be recognized as something instead of getting lost in collectivist society? In February’s Esquire, John Clellon Holmes wrote a provocative article called ‘The Philosophy of the Beat Generation.’ Frankly, I’m not sure that I understand everything that Mr. Holmes says... But I’d like to conclude by quoting his final words for their bearing on the California questions I’ve been posing: ‘Their assumptions—that the foundation of all systems, moral or social, is the indestructible unit of the single individual—may be nothing but a rebellion against a century in which this idea has fallen into disrepute.’\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 200.
The article aimed to understand the delinquency in youth. Although this was a prevalent concern in the 1950s, this was not an accepted characteristic of the Beat Generation. In an article published by the *Delta Democratic Times* in 1958, a quotation from Jack Kerouac dispels any connection between the Beat Generation stood for and the claims of juvenile delinquency:

Youthful criminals of today may be using the 'Beat Generation' tag as an excuse for their actions...but the term as I meant it has nothing to do with crime...There is no relation between the pranks of that lonesome, talkative Beat Generation of the '40s and the concerted desecrations of this new delinquency-hounded Generation of '50s. There has always been the criminally insane whether they blame their actions on alcohol, heroin, marijuana or Beatness, the fact remains that they are criminally insane, young or old.63

As part of the already prevalent discourse about the Beats in the earlier years of the Cold War, the *Times* author automatically makes a connection to the Beat movement—a Generation mocked, dismissed, and made the target of suspicion by the mainstream media. Members of status-quo America either disliked the Beat movement as a grouping of delinquent youth in America or questioned and blamed the cultural movement for society’s problems. The relationship between the Beat movement and the mainstream media was contentious. How the media and the masses perceived the Beat movement and how those categorized under that Generation perceived themselves were two contrasting forms.

---

63 “Beat Generation.” *The Delta Democrat Times*, 16 July 1958, NP.
In a historical account of the emergence of the Beat Generation, Steven Watson asserts that:

the Beat Generation is marked by a shared interest in spiritual liberation, manifesting itself in candid personal content and open forms, in verse and prose... The Beats’ identity has as much to do with literary aesthetics as with their collective biography.⁶⁴

As founding Beat writer, Allen Ginsberg explained:

The point of Beat is that you get Beat down to a certain nakedness where you actually are able to see the world in a visionary way... which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul.⁶⁵

In June 1959, Hugh Hefner invited Jack Kerouac to use the pages of Playboy to educate readers on the tenets of the Beat Generation as well as to dissolve any existing misconceptions about himself and the other Beat writers. Playboy was aware of Kerouac’s address at the Hunter College symposium a year prior and requested he submit a statement to the magazine based on his speech.⁶⁶ The opinion piece in Playboy not only stood as a testament of what the Beat movement truly stood for, but it also illuminated subtly deceitful practices of the press used to frame the Beats.

Kerouac begins the article with an apology of his “nutty” appearance on the cover of On the Road. Apparently, he had just arrived in San Francisco after being alone atop a mountain for two months when

---

the photo was taken, and—although he admits to regularly combing his hair—fellow Beat poet and friend Gregory Corso instructed Kerouac to appear otherwise. Corso had taken a silver crucifix off of himself, gave it to Kerouac and said, “Wear this and wear it outside your shirt and don’t comb your hair!”67 The reasoning behind Kerouac’s disheveled look is not as significant to the press’ response to it:

…Finally on the third day Mademoiselle magazine wanted to take pictures of us all so I posed just like that, wild hair, crucifix, and all, with Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg and Phil Whalen, and the only publication which later did not erase the crucifix from my breast was The New York Times, therefore The New York Times is as Beat as I am, and I’m glad I’ve got a friend. I mean it sincerely, God bless The New York Times for not erasing the crucifix from my picture as though it was something distasteful.68

In an obvious form of framing, the press (with the exception of the 

New York Times) removes the Christian symbolism from Kerouac who is the face of the Beat movement.

The deliberate removal of the crucifix from Kerouac’s image acts to solidify his, as well as the Beat movement’s, position outside of acceptable society. Although Kerouac states in the article that he is “not ashamed to wear the crucifix of my Lord,” pairing his image with a cross contradicts the press’ portrayal of the Beats as amoral and delinquent.

---

67 Ibid., 31.
68 Ibid., 31-32.
Kerouac goes on to refute much of what the press published against the Beat Generation crying:

Woe, woe unto those who think that the Beat Generation means crime, delinquency, immorality, amorality... woe unto those who attack it on the grounds that they simply don’t understand history and the yearnings of human souls...

There were many who did not understand the Beat movement and who associated the writers with what Kerouac laments. According to the Generation that lived before Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, the Beat Generation was a delinquent, laughable, excuse for the next Generation’s literary and cultural movement. For some contemporaries, to be Beat was a mode of attaining a level of “cool,” for some it meant an escape from the status quo of mass society and a way to truly experience life to the fullest extent. The Beats considered themselves artistic visionaries, channeling spirituality, enlightenment, and fulfillment through their various poetry and prose. Whatever the true intentions of the Beat

---

69 Ibid., 79.
Generation, the United States sought to contain the threat that they posed to the foundation of mainstream society.
Containing the American Family

Much of the backlash that the Beats endured stemmed from the American sentiment linked to the success of idealism around the "nuclear" family. In the great Kitchen Debate between Vice President Nixon and the Soviet Union Premier Nikita Khrushchev on July 24, 1959, Nixon not only boasted about the superiority of American appliances but also stressed the importance of the structured American family. Nixon, insisted that:

American superiority in the Cold War rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes. In these structures, adorned and worshipped by their inhabitants, women would achieve their glory and men would display their success.70

The power of the United States then rested in the strength of its familial unit and not the strength of its bombs. When understanding how intrinsically linked the status of the nation and the status of the family were, one is able to see why the Beat Generation’s ideologies that challenged the status quo were marginalized by the mass media.

Many Americans of the early Cold War period not only saw geopolitical standing connected to the moral health of its families, it also feared that with the inevitability of a nuclear bomb came the inevitability of an explosion of a different kind. In an article published in the Journal of Social Hygiene, Harvard physician Charles Walter Clarke warns against the dangers of an atomic attack:

70 May, Homeward Bound, 18.
Following the attack of an atomic bomb families would become lost from each other and separated in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down...there would develop among many people, especially youths...the reckless psychological state often seen following great disasters...Under such conditions, moral standards would relax and promiscuity would increase.\textsuperscript{71}

The Cold War marked a time of paranoia and fear, a fear that was fueled by open discussions of a potential nuclear attack. From this fear came a yearning for structure and upholding the status quo of American society. One is able to trace the pattern between the decade of the 1950s and an adherence to norms in Alan Petigny's discussion of sex and sexuality in the early Cold War years. As Petigny argues:

More single people were having sex. More single women were becoming pregnant and, accordingly, a great deal more children were born out of wedlock. Each of these developments is rightly characterized as antithetical to the socially conservative moral vision. However, at the same time, because of the saliency of certain traditional norms a higher proportion of men were marrying their pregnant girlfriends.\textsuperscript{72}

Although there may have been stark deviations from the acceptable norms of society, people still sought to uphold those "rules" whether or not it was just for appearances. It is evident from what has evolved from the various letters to the editors as well as articles published about the Beats that the members of the Beat Generation did not fall into the category of those concerned with keeping up appearances. As noted in the great kitchen debate, the strength of the

\textsuperscript{71} May, \textit{Homeward Bound}, 90.

\textsuperscript{72} Petigny, \textit{The Permissive Society}, 125.
United States as a nation was dependent on the upkeep of said appearances.

Elaine Tyler May examines the concept of the American family during the 1950s in her text *Homeward Bound*. May addresses issues such as sexual containment, evolving domestic relationships, and the intricate connections between the Cold War and the American family life. May’s text is a standard in exploring containment at the level of family and home—aiding in understanding the mindset and fears of the American family, illuminating how the morals or ideologies the Beats actually threatened through their work.

Containment in the United States came in various forms ranging from political to familial. A major element of containing the family was caging the sexual actions of American citizens. Sexual containment came in the form of gender roles and expectations of marriage—many of which were rejected by those who lived the Beat lifestyle. May describes these expectations further by explaining that:

The sexual containment ideology was rooted in widely accepted gender roles that defined men as breadwinners and women as mothers. Many believed that a violation of these roles would cause sexual and familial chaos and weaken the country’s moral fiber.\(^3\)

The Beat lifestyle included unconventional sexuality, which was practiced by many of the predominant Beat poets and writers. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady all dismissed the notion of traditional love and marriage. Although Kerouac,

\(^3\) May, *Homeward Bound*, 117.
Burroughs, and Cassady were all married at one point in their lives, they rejected ideas of fidelity, monogamy and even heterosexuality.\textsuperscript{74} Carolyn Cassady’s \textit{Off the Road} depicts these rejections as she provides excerpts from husband Neal Cassady’s letter to Ginsberg, "Why don't you come out here? Nice place if one likes it. Be brakie and make lots of money. Or write in attic and make love to my wife and me."\textsuperscript{75} C. Cassady even recounts an incident in which she caught her husband Neal in bed with Ginsberg and another woman. The men of the Beat Generation took different lovers, both male and female, and failed to fit into the American mold. In the 1950s when McCarthyite suspicions seeped into the American mindset, the Beat’s sexuality was yet another target for the negative media portrayal.

Evidence of the Beat bedroom lifestyle emerges in a \textit{New York Times} article in which the journalist, author, and professor Harry T. Moore, reviews Lawrence Lipton’s semi-history of the Beat Generation \textit{The Holy Barbarians}. Moore’s depiction of the Beats shares the negative tone as the majority of press during the decade, including a description of the Beat sexuality. He describes:

most of the floating girls there are sexually available or, as this book puts it, free-wheeling chicks with no cover charge. Deviates are welcome as ‘the Beatest of the Beat’ because illegal sex is a supreme defiance of the squares.\textsuperscript{76}

The publication of *The Holy Barbarians* in addition to the literary reviews about the text confirmed to the American readership of the *New York Times* that the Beats were sexual deviants.

*The Washington Post* ran an article in 1959 examining the Beat Generation and its place in U.S. society. In describing the Beats, journalist Cornelia Newton writes that “they are indifferent to such things as permanent homes, marriage licenses, and knowledge of where their next meal is coming from.”77 Accompanying the allusion to the loose sexual morals of the Beats is a photograph:

![Image](image_url)

*The beat creed includes a disdain for marriage licenses or a permanent pad (home). Few are married, most switch partners whenever the mood hits them.*

Figure 3, “Switching Partners.” An image of the male and female Beat—“most switch partners whenever the mood hits...”

Many of the Beats’ sexual exploits did not comply with containing and preserving the morality of the United States. There were those who feared

---

that breaking sexual containment would weaken the moral fiber of the nation. As May explains:

Many high-level government officials along with individuals in positions of power and influence in fields ranging from industry to medicine and from science to psychology, believed wholeheartedly that there was a direct connections between Communism and sexual depravity.\textsuperscript{78}

One such individual was Senator Joseph R. McCarthy who had “constructed an equation between political and sexual deviation whereby homosexuality was linked to political subversion and penetration from the outside.”\textsuperscript{79} In a response to McCarthy’s call to arms against Communists in the State Department, Senator John Peurifoy announced that, although there were no confirmed Communists, he had found a number of security risks, including ninety-one homosexuals who were forced out of their positions—an announcement that prompted a “Lavender Scare," or widespread fear of the infiltration of homosexuals in the moral fiber of the nation. Arguably, during the 1950s, “many politicians, journalists, and citizens, thought homosexuals posed more of a threat to national security than Communists.”\textsuperscript{80}

The national chairman of the Republican Party Guy Gabrielson shared such sentiments claiming "sexual perverts...have infiltrated our government in recent years," suggesting that they were "perhaps as
dangerous as the actual Communists.” The rationale behind said fears was that strength came in the form of heterosexual, married men who represented maturity and responsibility. Homosexuals or "perverts" as they were referred to in the vernacular of the 1950s had "no backbone" and were susceptible to Communist ploys.

Examples of this fear can be found in the press, including an article from *The Tuscaloosa News* in 1958 titled, “The Worry Clinic: Fortify Children with Facts.” Written by noted columnist and psychologist Dr. George W. Crane, the article attempts to explain why people become homosexuals and how to combat against children “turning” into gays and lesbians. According to Crane, all humans are homosexual at one point during development—when girls and boys play independently from the opposite sex. However, 90-95% of people evolve from the primitive view (with the 5-10% fixated at the “primitive” form of emotional connection). For a member of the minority percentage experiencing primitive (homosexual) love, Crane suggests that he:

- can grow up to the higher level of heterosexual romance, but he must force himself to do so with as much resolution and will power as a diabetic uses to force himself to omit sugar foods. If a homosexual resolutely dates a desirable member of the opposite sex and acts the role of a normal emotional adult, ultimately he (or she) will feel normal.

---

81 May, *Homeward Bound*, 94.
82 Ibid., 94.
The article suggests that homosexuality is both acquired and treatable—like a disease. By fortifying a child with facts he or she may combat the tricks of homosexuals as well as fight his or her own dysfunctional emotions in order to be normal. According to Dr. Crane’s findings, the lifestyle of many Beat writers was part of the minority group of adults who never evolved past childhood emotions.

It comes as no surprise then, knowing about the unconventional sexuality of the various Beat writers, that the printed press questioned and marginalized the actions of the Beat movement. Their actions exemplified what McCarthy, Gabrielson and much of the United States feared would undermine the moral structure of American society.

Largely, the media portrayed the Beat Generation as one of futility and pointless behavior—living unproductively and not contributing to the betterment of American society. Many primary-source documents from this time reflect this sentiment, evident in newspapers of that decade. The tone of the writers’ text was belittling and ranged in from editorials, advice columns, literary reviews, to actual news stories.

In Ann Landers’ famous advice column a writer under the pen name of "A Voice of the Beat Generation" asks Ms. Landers for help with his/her boredom as a teenager in small-town America. Although the advice given is sound, the tone of the response suggests scorn for those who associate as members of the Beat Generation:
...Offer your services to a volunteer group. Mental hospitals, vets’ hospitals, county homes for the aged -- they all operate on tight budgets and could use the services of people who can work without pay.

Give them a call and find out how exciting life can be for those who are willing to give of themselves. A good look at what goes on behind the doors of institutions may give you a fresh appreciation for the simple blessings of a sound mind and a healthy body.

Your parents don’t owe you spending money, a car and entertainment around the clock. You members of ‘the Beat Generation’ are helping to Beat yourselves. You’ve had the disadvantage of too many advantages. Quit whining about being bored and make yourselves useful.84

The striking point of this column is where Landers discredits the Beat Generation and its philosophy saying, "You members of the 'Beat Generation' are helping to Beat yourselves...quit whining about being bored and make yourselves useful." But were the Beats "whining" about being bored? About society? About life? Although the perspective of Ms. Landers seems to point toward "yes," the Beat writers offered a different interpretation of their purpose.

In an introduction to Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression, Beat publisher and owner of the famous City Lights Bookstore Lawrence Ferlinghetti explains:

The Beats were advance[d] word slingers prefiguring the counterculture of the 1960’s, forecasting its main obsessions and ecstasies of liberation, essentially a 'youth revolt' against all that our postwar society was doing to us.”85

---

The Beats were not crying tears of boredom; they were reacting to and fighting against a society that they perceived as trying to control them. In response to Beat poet Allen Ginsberg's controversial poem *Howl*, Ferlinghetti explains:

...I knew the world had been waiting for this poem, for this apocalyptic message to be articulated. It was in the air, waiting to be captured in speech. The repressive, conformist, racist, homophobic world of the 1950s cried out for it.\(^{86}\)

As opposed to the nostalgic view of the "golden" 1950s that has come to resonate in contemporary U.S. mindsets, the reality of the 1950s is a much different picture.

Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak's *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, offers a more realistic picture of the 1950s, devoid of hula hoops and hot rods. Miller and Nowak explain that although the era was not completely devoid of light-heartedness:

It was more an era of fear than fun. The bomb, Communist spies, and Sputnik all scared Americans. And fear bred repression both of the blatant McCarthyite type and the more subtle, pervasive, and personal daily pressure to conform.\(^{87}\)

This "pressure to conform" as Miller discusses can be summed up in a single word: containment. Conformity was a positive value in a period where society faced threats of external Communist attacks and internal subversion. As Alan Nadel argues in his analysis of postwar containment:

The virtue of conformity--to some idea of religion, to 'middle class' values, to distinct gender roles and rigid courtship rituals--became

\(^{86}\) Ibid., xii.
a form of public knowledge through the pervasive performances of and allusions to containment narratives.\textsuperscript{88}

Beat poetry, prose, and lifestyle challenged ideals of conformity and broke free of the United States' attempts to contain society.

Although the Beats were a "statistically tiny group," their deviation from the projected norm gained them much attention.\textsuperscript{89} The print media acted as a defense against said deviance through their framing of the Beats as a group not to be taken seriously. This strategic framing is evident in the previously mentioned \textit{Life} magazine article "Squaresville vs. Beatsville" in which three high school students invited Lawrence Lipton to their small-town. Images in the article juxtapose the life of the nuclear family against that of the Beats and Beatniks.

In one image, the idealized Midwest family is portrayed, close-knit, smiling, happy, looking over what is assumed to be a family album full of pleasant memories. Looking at the photo more closely, symbols of American ideals are displayed: man's best friend, monogamy (as identified by the husband's wedding ring), bright clean rooms symbolizing a stable home, and the smiling/laughing teenage daughters who enjoy spending time with their parents as opposed to going out and experiencing the potential evils of the world. The other "Beat" image depicts the Beat "family" or group—two men, a woman (marital status unknown), in a Beat pad, complete with canvases, obscure artwork,

\textsuperscript{88} Nadel, \textit{Containment Culture}, 4.
\textsuperscript{89} Miller and Nowak, \textit{The Fifties}, 387.
mattresses on the floor, and a cat. The woman is solemn, holding a child whose paternity is unclear from the image as opposed to the Midwestern family whose familial roles are clearly identified (father, mother, daughters, dog). The lighting of the Beat photo is much darker, the camera angle much wider, and no one is smiling. The items in the background are disheveled, the cleanliness of the barefoot and half-dressed Beats is questionable.

The article concludes with a quotation from Luetta Peters, one of the girls who invited Lipton, explaining that “we [the three girls] know Beatniks aren’t good, but we thought they just dressed sloppy and talked funny. Now we know that they get married without licenses and things like that.”

Peters knows the Beatniks are not good, but how did she form that opinion? The Beats were not good for containment, as the Beat lifestyle was in direct opposition to the projected moral fiber of the United

---

States, and the press reflected this opinion. *Life* issued a full-scale attack on the Beat culture two months after it ran this article.

The most significant piece of journalism in the study of how the Beats were examined and contained by the media came from *Life* magazine in the late 1950s. *Life* was the dominant mainstream middle class medium during the 1950s and was influential in setting standards for “normal” lifestyles and behaviors. Readers mimicked standards of American life in *Life*. On November 30, 1959, *Life* magazine covered the Beat movement in a nine-page spread in which the widely circulated magazine refers to the Beats as “The Only Rebellion Around... But the
shabby Beats bungle the job in arguing, sulking, and bad poetry.”

The Beats are referred to as “the hairiest, scrawniest and most discontented specimens of all time” or “fruitflies... on the grandest casaba of all [that is, the United States].”

According to Paul O’Neill who authored this damning article, the Beat Generation is full of “improbable rebels... who not only refuse to sample the juices of American plenty and American social advances, but scrape their feelers in discordant scorn of any and all who do.”

*Life* magazine scrutinizes Beat culture, the rejection of the mainstream, and the search for freedom. The following passage illustrates this scrutiny:

> There are few Americans today to whom the word Beat or the derisive term, Beatnik, does not conjure up some sort of image—usually a hot-eyed fellow in beard and sandals, or a ‘chick’ with scraggly hair, long black stockings, heavy eye make-up and an expression which could indicate either hauteur or uneasy digestion.

The pages that followed in the article share the same sentiment about the Beat culture, ending with the final line of, “What have we done to deserve this?”

The article in *Life* magazine not only reflected the opinion of a major media outlet in the United States in the late 1950s, but it also gave the American public a chance to respond in the following-month’s issue.

---

92 Ibid., 115
93 Ibid., 115.
94 Ibid., 116.
95 Ibid., 130.
The December 21, 1959, issue of *Life* contained a rich discussion within its “Letters to the Editor” section. Both male and female readers weighed in on O’Neil’s attack on the Beat culture with a variety of responses that illuminated deeper issues with America than just the Beat Generation.

One brief response came from Janet Huebsch of Hortsdale, New York, who shared: “Sirs: The article was truly one of the most entertaining I have read in a long time. It put the ‘Beat Generation’ in its place.” Other responses suggest that there are those who agree with the Beat Generation’s message but find fault in their method. A man from Fort Hood, Texas, responded to O’Neil’s article by saying:

> The Beats have put their finger on what’s wrong with America, but their solutions are as deadly as the situations they abhor. The major Beat trait is not addiction, debauchery, or even bad poetry. It is cowardice, escapism, and the incredible idea that natural and man-made disasters are one and the same. Let us turn to ourselves for the solutions. We need more involvement in the world, not less.96

As the man from Fort Hood displayed, there were those who acknowledged the United States’ faults at the time but found the response by the Beats even more dangerous than the issues they rejected. Clellon Holmes, the man who first introduced the Beats to the *New York Times Magazine*, makes an appearance in the “Letters to the Editor” as he weighs in on the scathing *Life* article. Holmes responds to the piece with:

> Sirs: The Beats dare to say loudly that a society is more than consumer goods and apathy which myopic men all too often take

---
for stability. What they are saying in effect is, “Don’t look now, Big Daddy, but you’ve lost junior.”

A more comical (yet cynical) response came from one Mr. Jerome Bailey in Arlington, Virginia, who wrote, “Sirs: I can’t imagine why the Beats want to have a cat. Cats are the core of conformity. They haven’t changed in centuries and besides, they don’t like marijuana—it makes them sneeze. They also wash themselves.”

The fact that the mainstream press was reporting negative expositions surrounding the Beat movement, writing them off as glorified leeches and junkies, indicates fear of subversion that marked the decade of the 1950s. One of the more notorious Bay Area poets of the Beat Generation, Bob Kauffman, covered a subject matter that reflected distrust and rejection of authority. Kauffman’s attack on authority manifests in the form of a comparison between authority and war. His attacks is three-fold:

He attacks the technolozation [sic] of actual war (its apotheosis being the bomb). He attacks U.S. politics as war on freedom in times of peace—that is, war on minorities and dissent at home and abroad via the rule of law, the HUAC [House UnAmerican Activities Committee], the police, the FBI, the CIA, the State Department, and the Pentagon. And he attacks commercialization as war on art.

Many prominent and significant writers of the Beat Generation—whose topics included subversion, rejection of mainstream culture,

---

97 Ibid., 10.
98 Ibid., 12.
99 Whaley Jr., Blows Like a Horn, 56.
100 Ibid., 56.
disillusionment, promiscuity and individualism—did not support the agenda of mainstream society and the government.

Added to the list of those against the life-style of the Beats was Louis Ginsberg, the father of founding Beat Generation member Allen Ginsberg. In an article circulated by United Press International (UPI) in 1959 with the headline “The Ginsbergs: Press Pants, Get Job, Dad Tells Beatnik Son,” the senior Ginsberg sounds off on the lifestyle of his son and his son’s counterparts. Ginsberg Sr. is quoted as saying, “I disapprove of their way of life. They should press their pants, look decent, and get steady jobs…I’d like Allen to settle down, get married and lead a normal life.”

But what was normal in the 1950s? The mainstream print media projected ideas of chastity, purity, and a strong moral compass, but there might be a more realistic view of society in the 1950s. In Ed Creagh’s article for the Associated Press, “In Defense of Beatniks,” Creagh takes a rare but sympathetic tone toward the Beats. Asking his audience:

> Why do people keep Beating up on the Beatniks? They’re harmless—don’t hurt anybody except occasionally each other. They write, paint, publish, talk and don’t care whether anybody looks or listens. Or if they do they won’t admit it. Male Beatniks wear beards. So did George Bernard Shaw, and so does Santa Claus...Beatniks of all sexes may throw wild parties if by chance they can afford it. So? You should have seen the last 'square' (Beatnik term for nonBeat) party I attended in a supposedly sedate

---

suburb. I doubt if the host has found his way out of the shrubbery yet.\textsuperscript{102}

Even though Creagh’s article defends the actions attributed to the Beatniks, it maintains a subtly comic tone in suggesting the Beats occasionally hurt each other, wear Beards like Santa Claus, and simply throw wild parties. Nonetheless, he places the Beats within the parameters of contained mainstream society, lessening their threat.

Conclusion

The Beat movement emerged during a decade that was marked by increased societal conformity and xenophobia in the United States.

Senator McCarthy had announced in February of 1950 that Communists were knowingly infiltrating the State Department, jeopardizing the stability of the United States. From the resurgence of the Red Scare in America came an even wider fear of the “other” or those who fell outside the parameters of acceptable behavior—Communists, homosexuals, delinquents, civil activists, Rock and Roll, and other dissenting groups. Linked in with these challenged groups were the members of the Beat movement. The Beats embodied much of what the United States leadership during that era tried to sequester—unconventional sexuality, homosexuality, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and a voice that spoke out against mainstream society.

The political and socio-cultural agenda of the United States’ hegemonic powers play out in an examination of major print publications during the 1950s. The political leaders during the Cold War focused on bolstering their international strength through displaying how strong the moral fabric of the American family was. The Beat Generation did not fit in that framework, which suggests a motive for negatively reporting on the Beats. By analyzing both major newspapers’ and magazines’ coverage of the Beat movement, the evidence examined in this paper suggests that the print media utilized strategic framing to shape the perceptions of
American citizens about the Beat movement. Arguably, the evidence gathered suggests that the United States intended to create negative perceptions of the Beat Generation in order to limit Beat influence on mainstream society. In the same manner that the government sought to contain other minority dissenting groups during this timeframe, there is reason to suggest that the Beats were among them—negatively portrayed by the media that inadequately furthered the United States’ agenda.
Office of Research Integrity

December 13, 2012

Anna Jessmer
607 E 40th Street #2W
Kansas City, MO 64110

Dear Ms. Jessmer:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract titled “Containing the Beat: An Analysis of the Press Coverage of the Beat Generation During the 1950s.” After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study is an analysis of publicly available information it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director
Office of Research Integrity

WE ARE...MARSHALL.

401 11th Street, Suite 1300 • Huntington, West Virginia 25701 • Tel 304/696-7320
A State University of West Virginia • An Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer
Bibliography


“Beat Generation.” *The Delta Democrat Times*, 16 July 1958, NP.


Wechsler, James A. *Reflections of an Angry Middle-Aged Editor*. New York: