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ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

**REVISITING POSTWAR AMERICA: ‘ON THE ROAD’
TO THE BEATS’ CONSUMERIST CULTURE**

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Keywords: Postwar America, counterculture, Beat movement, Beatnik, consumption, white privilege, racism, feminism, misogyny, Decadence, Bohemianism, Hedonism.

Introduction and context

The Beat Movement started in the 1940s and flourished until the 1960s in America, thus, being witness to the transformations on the socio-political stage during the times after WWII. The Beats' nonconformist lifestyle, appearance, preferences and subversive reaction to the postwar American heyday of mass consumption became the basis for the expanded, upcoming countercultural movements. Considering the implications of the economic boom and the development of consumerism and popular culture, this thesis has focused on the Beat fiction writers' and poets' way of reacting to the values imposed by the mass consumerist culture and the government's Containment Agenda, and their involvement with social issues such as Feminism, minorities' segregation and racism in the complex postwar American cityspace.

The aim of this thesis has been to analyze the construction of the Beat culture and the identities of the writers and poets involved in the Beat literary circles in relation to the mass culture of their era, by relying on an interdisciplinary approach containing cultural and countercultural, identity, social studies, consumption and literary theories. The restructuring of socio-spatial boundaries during the urban revolution of the 1950s' America and the juxtaposition of elitist and populist culture have also been essential elements in the analysis of the Beats' circles. The research has also involved the investigation of the lifestyles of American people and the Beats, alongside their portrayal in the magazine articles. Of great importance to the research has been the close reading of the poems and the bio-fictional works of both male and female, white and African-American writers of the Beat countercultural movement.

Research Objectives and Questions

The main objectives of this research have been:

1. To examine the Beats' lifestyles and literary works in order to reveal to what degree they incorporated the consumerist trend of the 1950s and to identify which products and practices of mass culture they have incorporated in their countercultural ideology;
2. To find out to what extent the Beats identified themselves with low-brow and/or high-brow culture, by looking at the way they were presented in the media and perceived by people in general;
3. To analyze the way in which the Beats used consumption as a tool to assert their group-identity;
4. To investigate the reasons behind the Beats' exclusion of the Beat female writers from their circle and the ambiguous portrayal of women and African Americans in their literary texts;
5. To provide a comparative evaluation of *fin-de-siècle* European and 1950s' American Decadence as a social phenomenon and artistic movement.

One of the most important research questions of this thesis has regarded the Beats' use of products and practices of the capitalist system and in what way they consumed them.

Consumption was a matter of civic responsibility which was propagated in opposition to the Communist material deprivations in the Eastern European block, according to Lizabeth Cohen's views in *Consumer Republic* (2003). As claimed by theorists such as Holbrook (1998), Aldridge (2003) and Stearns (2006), the participants in the Beat movement created a subtle rebellion against the consumption practices which lacked virtue and character, by acting as rebellious, hedonist consumers, using mass-market products only to get access to a certain experience. Although the Beats advocated for an anti-consumerist attitude, in a period when there was no escape from consumerism, they developed their own strategies and consumption practices, juggling with innovative strategies of consumption in order to avoid becoming trapped in the system they strongly opposed.

An important research question concerned the concept of 'white privilege,' which, I argue, has involuntarily shaped the way in which the male Beat writers and poets were perceived by people, especially the few African Americans and female writers belonging to the movement. What led the Beats to write allegedly misogynistic works was their queer sexual orientation and their wish to liberate males from the 'domestication of American men'. Yet, the Beat movement was racially inclusive and appreciative of ethnic minorities. As regards the research question concerning the rebirth of Decadence, the Beats really enjoyed a Bohemian lifestyle and opposed the superficiality and conformity of the contemporary society (Jacques Barzun (2000) and Anne Charters (2003) have largely developed this topic). They also incorporated in their works themes and elements from the Decadent literary movement rooted in the *fin-de-siècle* European and American experimental trend, which was famous for the inclusion of homosexual orientation and addictive consumption of drugs and alcohol.

The corpus of the thesis contains literary works, such as Jack Kerouac's novels and bio-fictions: *On the Road* (1957), *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *The Subterraneans* (1958), William Burroughs' *Junky* (1953) and *Naked Lunch* (1959), Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* (1959) and Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir* (1983). Moreover, poems such as Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), Gregory Corso's "Marriage" (1960) and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Dog" (1958) have also been included in the literary corpus, along with those by the female poets Sheri Martinelli ("Duties of a Lady Female" 1959), Diane di Prima ("The Quarrel" 1961, "The Practice of Magical Evocation" 1959) and of the African Americans Amiri Baraka (*The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 1991) and Ted Joans (*Teducation: Selected Poems 1949-1999* 1999). In order to look at the representation of the Beats in the media, I have referred to magazine articles and narratives published at the time (eg. Guido Bruno's "Anarchists in Greenwich Village," 1916) and interviews of Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac.

Chapters overview

While the theoretical framework has been described in the first chapter of the thesis, the subsequent chapters have been dedicated to the close reading of the texts that supported the analysis of the distinct topics of research: the location of the Beat circles, the construction of

Beat culture, the problem of racial segregation and gender binary in post war America and the Beats' attitude towards it, and the relation between the European literary Decadence and the American Bohemianism as the Beats understood it.

The thesis has been divided into five chapters. Chapter one, titled, "Theoretical Framework," has brought together the works of several theorists and researchers specialized in history, culture, consumption studies, identity and cityspace theories. The aim of the first chapter has been to present the historical background of the 1950s in America and find a link between the construction of individual and collective identity based on consumption practices. To this effect, I have used Tim McNeese (*The Cold War and Postwar America 1946-1963*, 2010) and Mark H. Lytle (*The All-Consuming Nation. Chasing the American Dream Since World War II*, 2021) to discuss the socio-political situation in America after the WWII. They state that people were under great pressure to conform to the American set of democratic values, according to the Containment Agenda, and to oppose the communist values of the Soviet Union. This opposition created an anxiety intensified by the fear of a nuclear war. All these turbulences at the social, ideological and political level slowly destroyed the optimism bought about by the economic boom and the thriving system of work-produce-consume. In addition, David S. Wills's article, "The Beat Generation at War" (2014), for example, analyzes the way the Beat generation reacted not only to the loss of spirituality caused by industrialism and capitalism, but also to the destructions caused by the WWII and to the ongoing Cold War and Vietnam War.

The interrogation of culture has been another line to follow in the present thesis. The works by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse have been essential in the discussion about the shift from the traditional to modern critical theories, which look at cultural products through the lens of their historical context irrespective of political, social or literary constraints. From this perspective, the critical approaches applied to the Beats' literary works acknowledge them as cultural hybrids, because they were looked at as belonging to both populist and elitist culture, in different historical periods. The Beats, as fiction writers and poets, acted as high-brow intellectuals seeking a perfect world of intrinsic, spiritual experience, independent of external, social rules. At the same time, the Beat writers lived and acted as low-brows, with no social and ideological implication. This view of cultural disunity in which elements from high-brow, elitist culture intermingle with lower, populist ones have been supported by recent researchers such as Melba Cuddy-Keane (*Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual and the Public Sphere* 2003) and Gary Burns (*A Companion to Popular Culture* 2016), who consider popular culture an important pillar in the resistance against the elitist condemnation of mass culture.

Historical relativism, as found in Walter Benjamin's and Matei Călinescu's studies, has also been presented in the first chapter, because I consider it to be of great importance in understanding the decadent movement during European *fin-de-siècle* and postwar American Bohemianism. Decadence as a social phenomenon may be seen as duplicitous because it contains both a pessimistic view on society and an optimistic belief in living life to the full in the present, thus referring both to destruction and hope for renewal. Artistic and literary movements during

turbulent historical eras looked at the past by idealizing it and at the present with pessimism and little interest in the future.

The second chapter, “Off the Beaten Path: Locating the Beats,” has aimed to explore the stratified 1950s’ American cityspace, starting from the argument that the city enables collective social experiences and the dissemination of ideas. The Beats, for example, voluntarily chose a number of low-brow places such as San Francisco’s North Beach, Los Angeles’s Venice West and New York’s Greenwich Village not only because life was cheaper in these particular places, but also for their poetry readings and creative meetings which helped change the atmosphere of the place.

Jacques Barzun’s remark on the transformation of the melting pot of the 20th century American society into a salad box, in *From Dawn to Decadence* (2000), has been discussed in connection to the fragmentation of the 1950s cityspace and the rise of racism, separatism and individualism. Lizabeth Cohen’s (2003) exploration of the development of the suburbs has been essential in the discussion on how class and ghettoization affected American society and gave birth to countercultural and liberating movements like the Civil Rights. In Beat literature, space is also related to culture, identity, power and resistance. In Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), the description of space becomes a symbol of control erasure, as it can be seen in the mood change of the characters when they start their journeys. In *The Dharma Bums* (1958), the space itself enables the achievement of high spiritual experiences.

The atmosphere of nonconformity as opposed to discrimination and control, along with the mixture between high-and low-brow culture were seminal in the creation of the Beat counterculture. The Beats’ rebellion attracted scandals and trials, which led to their marginalization (eg. Venice West and San Francisco, where their lifestyle clashed with mainstream journalists’ and conformist neighbours’). Yet, the Beats managed to attract and inspire other artists willing to take part in the collective criticism of 1950s’ conformity and materialism. The unconventional theatrical performances by playwrights who shared non-conformist ideology in *The Living Theatre* and *The Village Voice* newspaper stand proof to the rise and success of the Beat countercultural movement.

In the third chapter, titled “Being Beat,” the focus has been on the portrayal and perception of the Beats’ movement in the 1950s’ America. By analyzing the special issue published in *Mad* magazine in September 1960: “Beatnik: The Magazine for Hipsters,” I have revealed that the denigrating image of the Beatniks was the superficial representation of the artists in the mainstream media. Other instances of such portrayals have been discussed in reference to the *Life* magazine articles, “Their Sheltered Honeymoon” and “The Well-Equipped Pad”, both published in 1959, and to Paul O’Neil’s “The Only Rebellion Around,” included in the November 1959 issue.

This chapter has also focused on exploring the traits of beatific experience and the Beats’ fascination with the cultural inheritance of jazz, as well as with East and Zen Buddhism, in particular. In Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans* (1958), the author’s fascination with African-American culture and bebop jazz has been revealed by linking it to the way the character Mardou

Fox is portrayed and stands as an inspiration for his informal style, spontaneous writing, and recitation with onomatopoeias. Jack Kerouac's devotion to D. T. Suzuki's Buddhist teachings has been as well discussed through the analysis of the novel *The Dharma Bums* (1958). I have highlighted the novelist's anti-war, humane vision of "a great rucksack revolution [...] of young Americans," based on the Zen Lunatics' refusal to settle down in the suburbs and their decision to "go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason" (Kerouac 1959: 97, 98). Philip Whalen's perspective on poetry as the articulation of the process of Buddhist meditation in his interviews included in "About Writing and Meditation" (1991), has also been useful to the exploration of the literary texts, along with other essays containing similar perspectives, such as Gary Snyder's "Note on the Religious Tendencies," 1992.

In their quest to access more elevated spiritual dimensions and find inspiration for their literary works, consumption of substances, like drugs and alcohol, started as a de-materialized practice, like a ritual, and eventually ended up in a type of addictive consumption which could no longer be controlled. Paradoxically, this addiction led the artists participate in the consumerist society surrounding them. Drug and alcohol consumption in the lives and pages of the Beat writers and poets has been revealed in the analysis of the mood and sensations caused by drug use in confessional books, such as William Burroughs's *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*, 1999. William Burroughs' novels *Junky* (1953) and *Naked Lunch* (1959), Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), partially written under the effects of drugs and Jack Kerouac's *Doctor Sax* (1959), written while he was high on marijuana.

In response to the third research question of the thesis, I argue that the Beats reached a compromise over using a number of commodities offered by postwar industry and, thus, they were keeping up with the phenomenon of consumerism in order to survive and stay relevant. "Gas, oil, cigarettes and food," as claimed by Kerouac's character Sal Paradise in *On the Road* (1957), was the indispensable stock of products for their adventures across the country (Kerouac 142). Moreover, the artists chose nonconformist lifestyles, engaging in out-of-marriage, adulterous and same-sex relations, and rejecting mainstream expectations of conformity. This has been revealed by the analysis of Gregory Corso's "Marriage" (1960), in which he calls marriage a "pleasant prison-dream" (Corso 36). Another interesting way in which the Beats delimited their style of consumption was by bargaining and thrift-shopping, deliberately buying second-hand automobiles (Moriarty's "mud-spattered '49 Hudson" – Kerouac 2000: 99), and old washed-out and unsuited clothes. Dean Moriarty's suitcase, for example, was "made out of paper with designs to look like leather," which made it "the beatest [one] in the USA" (Kerouac 2000: 170).

The fourth chapter, titled "White Male Privilege and Beats' Representation," has aimed to offer a response to the research question concerning the situation of women and racial minorities in the portrayals by the Beats in their novels and poems, as well as in the real-life of the Beat social and literary circles. The complex issues of gender binary and racial segregation in postwar American society resulted from the circumstances of war, increased immigration, feminist and anti-slavery movements. The ambiguous outlook on women's and African

Americans' condition has also been analyzed. In this respect, I have looked at a few *Life* magazine articles, such as "The New American Domesticated Male" (1954) and "Changing Roles in Modern Marriage" (1956), which revealed the Beats' wish to free men from any responsibility at home and at workplaces as a reaction to what was considered at the time the domestication of the American male. While the media were promoting the empowering of women in workplaces and the involvement of men inside the household, the Bohemian male Beats opposed this socio-cultural shift, which became also known as the 'feminization of America' (David Savran 1998).

The Beat female artists' perspectives, such as that of Joanne Kyger's in "Poison Oak for Allen" (1996), in which she recounts how they have been excluded from their male counterparts' adventures, have revealed the gender bias in the Beat circles. Diane di Prima's "The Practice of Magical Evocation" (1959) has also been of great importance in the analysis, as it came as a response to Gary Snyder's "Praise for Sick Women" (1958), where the females were seen as weak and impossible to discipline because of their monthly biological infirmity. Besides writing poems, the Beat female writers also produced memoirs in which they described their situation: Bonnie Bremser's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* (1969) and Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir* (1983). In both memoirs, the female writers chose to take part in the Beats' literary movement with bravery, as a way to escape the traditional expectations of young women and pursue their literary ambitions.

Starting from the argument that Neal Cassady took the womanly role of muse and sex-object in the Beat literary circle, the fourth chapter has focused on finding reasons for the Beats' preference for same-sex relations and aimed to connect the male artists' homosexuality to their disregard of females, which caused them to be criticized by feminists. The reason for the Beats' seemingly misogynistic perspective might be connected, I argue, to their postmodernist slant, which made them not only suspend the socially imposed male-female gender binary, but also eliminate the female gender as a form of self-fragmentation (Polina Mackay 2017). The analysis of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), along with Allen Ginsberg's "The Green Automobile" (1953) and "Kiss Ass" (1968) has highlighted the Beats' gynophobia and resistance to heteronormativity, which they saw as strongly connected to the institutionalized capitalist society.

As regards race, the Beat writers have been criticized for their superficiality in the appreciation of ethnic minorities. Norman Mailer, an active member of the Beat literary movement on the San Francisco scene, came up with a more positive perspective on the Beats' relation to the African American community in his essay "The White Negro" published in 1957 in *Dissent*. Moreover, in his article from *Partisan Review* (1958), LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, an important African American member of the Beat circles, declared that there was no trace of racial segregation in the bohemian world of the rebellious artists and the African Americans were welcomed to take refuge from the capitalist and consumerist culture and join the literary movement as artists. Ted Joans and Bob Kaufman are two of the African American Beat poets

who have contributed to the development of the multicultural, Bohemian movement of resistance against the norms imposed by society and its institutions.

In the fifth chapter, titled “The Beats and the Rebirth of Decadence,” I have looked at the way Decadence spread from *fin-de-siècle* France, throughout entire Europe and later to the American continent during the first part of the 20th century. Regarding the historical and political background, during the last decades of the 19th century, with the development of industrialism, the crisis of political liberalism and urban reorganization, European artists, in particular, faced many crises and anxieties which showed similar characteristics with the ones in America during the 1950s. The rise of popular culture enabled the new artistic and literary manifestos, which went against mainstream culture and norms, to be more visible and accessible.

The research question that Chapter 5 has addressed is whether the Beat artists contributed to the resurrection of European Decadence during the mid-20th century. The members of the Beat literary circle reacted against the mainstream morality and materialism of the consumerist middle class and experimented with the limits of human condition in a similar way in which their predecessors did. Taking inspiration from the aesthetes, romantics and modernists whose literary works reveal, at least partially, decadent components, the Beats contributed to the modulation of Decadence into Bohemianism and Anarchism in the post-World War II period.

In this way, the aim of this chapter has been to describe the major literary trends, which developed around the same time in the European artistic centers in France and England against the mainstream cultural trends, in order to find connections to the countercultural movement of the postwar era. The decadent writers and poets took inspiration from Walter Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* (1873) in their focus on the individual’s experiences unaltered by moral and social constraints. Aestheticism and the idea of art for art’s sake as presented in Oscar Wilde’s “Preface” to the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) has also been discussed as a source of inspiration for the decadents’ critique of material opulence and determination to acquire new sensations as a way to escape reality. Edgar Allan Poe’s idea of perversity in *The Imp of the Perverse* (1845) has also been mentioned as a source for the decadents’, modernists’ and postmodernists’ experimentation with morality, especially the restrictive morality of the Victorian times.

These themes, along with the alienation from society as seen in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *Against Nature* (1884), have been revealed as recurrent in the Beat literature of the 1950s and 1960s. As regards literary techniques, Huysmans delivers an insight of the mind of one, single character leading a novel with no plot, in the same way in which Kerouac follows Dean Moriarty’s adventures in the spontaneous prose style, abundant with descriptions. The rise of the female bohemian has also been linked to Decadence. The women writing during the 1890s and 1900s are known to have included in their works decadent themes, such as: sexual excess, rejection of marriage and fascination with spirituality and mysticism, while addressing 19th century Victorian patriarchy and the constraints of women to marriage and child-bearing. During the *fin-de-siècle* period, the British writer Ada Leverson and the French poet Rachilde parodied their male counterparts’ misogynistic works, like Baudelaire’s, in the same way in which Sheri

Martinelli contested the sexism and gynophobia featured in the works of the Beat male writers, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs.

By looking at a few American magazines of the *fin-de-siècle* that revealed the Americans' appreciation of European Aestheticism and foreign spiritual atmosphere, I have attempted to demonstrate that there had been an underlying continuity between the decadent movement of the 1890s in Europe and the States. The magazines on which the research has relied on are: *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* published in 1896 in San Francisco, *The Mahogany Tree*, the first journal in Boston to publish works of art expressing views against industrialism and urbanization, and *The Knight Errant*, from which Charles Eliot Norton's "A Portion of an Address Given in MDCCCLXXXVIII" (1892) and Ernest Francisco Fenollosa's article "The Significance of Oriental Art" (1892) have been of great use.

The 'new' Decadence of the modern times during the first decades of the 20th century has been revealed to be a more intense one. I have discussed the affiliation of George Sterling with the decadent trend and the works of novelists, such as the British Ronald Firbank and the American Carl Van Vechten, a supporter of the Harlem Renaissance, who focused on the theme of queerness and homosexuality. As agents of the 'Beat Decadence' of the 1950s, who intersected with Bohemianism and Anarchism, Gary Snyder's *The Real Work* (1980) and Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Poetry as Insurgent Art* (2007) have been essential in revealing the countercultural group's approach to the representation of life through art. To Ferlinghetti, the poet was a "pickpocket of reality" (52) and "a gatherer of the fine ash of poetry" (32), thus revealing his appreciative glimpse to his decadent and modernist predecessors.

The radio and television programmes became popular during the first half of the 20th century and facilitated the manifestation of countercultural movements, transcending the limits of visibility with their hedonistic personal style and decadent way of living. Jonathan Freedman's theories of the commodification of experience in *Professions of Taste. Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (1990) have been applied in Chapter 5 as well, by looking at the way in which the rise of consumerism and popular culture during the 1950s in America led to the reinterpretation of the original, 1890s' ideas of Aestheticism and Decadence.

Conclusions, Contributions, Implications

In conclusion, the objectives of this research have been achieved and the key contributions of the research are:

- the analysis of the subtle implication of the Beat writers and poets in the capitalist system, by embracing the 1950s' inescapable cult of materialism and by adopting a personal, non-conformist consumption practice, which became a mark of their collective identity (rebellious, hedonistic);
- the hybrid status of the Beats as members of both high- and low-brow culture;
- the presentation of the Beat movement as racially inclusive and not misogynistic;

- the implication of the horrific experiences of the two world wars, the pressure put on the nation to take part in the work-produce-consume system and the strict social and moral norms of the Containment Agenda, in the modulation of European literary Decadence into Bohemianism and Anarchism in the countercultural artistic circles of postwar America;
- the acknowledgment of the rise of popular culture and the development of the radio and television, along with the socio-cultural transformations resulting from women's and racial minorities' empowerment movements, which contributed to the increased visibility and accessibility of countercultural groups (the Beats and, later on, the Hippies).

The novelty of this research includes the presentation of the consumerist practices of the Beat social and literary circles which involve both addictive and conspicuous consumption. In addition, the concept of white-male privilege has been discussed in relation to the complex implication of the white male writers (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs), in the 1950s' American society marked by separatism, individualism, misogyny and racism. The condition of female Beats and African American Beat writers and poets have also been presented in connection the concept of white-male privilege. Moreover, the research has revealed how the media's portrayal of the Beats' and their implication into popular culture have been both a facilitator and a destroyer of their movement. The idea of the 'rebirth of Decadence' during the two decades under scrutiny, brought into the limelight by this research, has revealed the connection between turn of the century movement and the post-war countercultural Beatnik trend.

While exploring the reasons for the Beats' complacency, this thesis has managed to grasp the most important historical and socio-cultural aspects of the times when the Beats lived, created and published their works: the rise of consumerism, the general trend of optimism shadowed at times by bomb-panic, women's and minorities' anti-segregational movements. Having revealed American post-war society as one marked by the pressure to conform, by racism and homophobia, the perspectives in the literary works and essays by the Beat women whether white or black have both supported and challenged the movement they decided to belong to. Moreover, the perspective of the members outside the literary circles, who published both denigrating and laudatory magazine articles have highlighted the strong impact which the Beats had on the American society and their influence on, and legacy in, contemporary culture across the world.

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