



## Birth of the Cool: African American Culture and the Beat Identity



Geetanjali Joshi Mishra <sup>a</sup>

### Article history:

Received: 10 September 2016

Revised: 20 October 2016

Approved: 22 October 2016

Published: 1 November 2016

### Keywords:

Jazz;

Jive;

Beat Poetry;

American Poetry;

Harlem Renaissance;

### Abstract

The nativity of Jazz poetry was in ‘jive’ or the language of the colored enslaved Americans, who were forced to learn a foreign language; however these ‘Black’ Americans, found a new form of expression and handled the English language in their own style, Jive was the end result of such an experiment. Even before the Civil war and years after it, these colored people used jive, to express their pent-up feelings amongst themselves, their language became more explosive and provocative and this is what came to be known as the ‘jive’ or ‘hip’ language. My paper focuses on the influence of Jive and Jazz lingo on the Beat Poets movement.

2455-8028 ©Copyright 2016. The Author.

This is an open-access article under the CC BY-SA license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

All rights reserved.

### Author correspondence:

Geetanjali Joshi Mishra,

Assistant Professor Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow, India

Email address: [geetanjali2008@gmail.com](mailto:geetanjali2008@gmail.com)

### 1. Introduction

Though Beat Generation is generally seen as ‘white’ in origin it would be an error to disregard the African American confluence and culture which is a vital aspect and an indispensable part of the Beat identity. African American culture of the Harlem provided a new sensibility to the Beat moment of the 50’s. Despite the fact that Beat Generation is by and large observed as “white” in cause it would be a blunder to neglect the African American juncture and culture which is an imperative viewpoint and a vital part of the Beat character. The Beat Writers were friends with many African American counterparts and their poetry seems to be heavily influenced by Black music and sensibility. The Beats felt one with the black writers of the 50’s. Most of the Beat writers including Ginsberg were gay and were already living a disguised life and hence they could relate their situation to the African Americans. African American culture of the Harlem gave another sensibility to the Beat snapshot of the 50’s. Jazz music and African American sensibility generated a lot of interest among the Beat poets of the age. The music of the Blacks provided meter and rhythm to the poetry of Beat poets. The quality and profundity of expression found in blues and jazz are outstanding given the societal restrictions in which African Americans were compelled to live. African Americans have held an extraordinary place in American culture since the very beginning, their capacity to resist the mistreatment of society and to establish a counter-canon of their own poetry, music, and literature, motivated the Beat poets of the age. The Beats had a tendency to romanticize this

<sup>a</sup> Assistant Professor, Amity School of Languages, Amity University, Lucknow, India

anti-establishment counterculture of the Black, they used their poetry and their music to express their own feelings and outpourings of the heart. As the Beats consolidated components of African American culture into their character, they likewise added to the developing African American culture as it advanced into the Civil Rights Movement. While the American social scene was torn by racial strains as an after-effect of social liberties activism, the Beats and African Americans were converging to make a writing that reflected one culture as well as endeavored to catch the assorted qualities found in America. The racially various group of Greenwich Village in New York, framed and molded by Kerouac and his counterparts, added to the Beat perspective of African Americans. While whatever remains of the nation was energized racially, there was a shockingly tolerant air inside Greenwich Village.

## 2. Research Methods

My paper is a historical study of the 1950's in America and the influence of Jazz music in the writings of Beat Poets. Thus the two major approaches used by me in this research are the Biographical approach and the Historical Approach. I have accessed the archives of the library of 'Naropa University' and 'University of California, Berkley' to gain access to various interviews and voice recordings of Beat Poets and their contemporaries. Apart from these, my reference material is mostly from various books written on Beat Poets.

## 3. Results and Analysis

It was from within this New York community that the Black Arts Movement originated with the influential writer, Amiri Baraka, who began his career there. John Gennari notes in his article, "Baraka's Bohemian Blues," that Greenwich Village played the role of "a kind of downtown Harlem Renaissance on the Lower East Side, with the Umbra writer's collective, Freedom ways magazine, La MaMa Experimental Theater, and the Negro Ensemble Company foreshadowing the full flowering of the Black Arts Movement uptown" (Gennari, 254). Greenwich Village Beats produced a tremendous amount of work which was a result of the multi-ethnicity group. Jon Panish, writer of "Kerouac's The Subterraneans: A Study of 'Sentimental Primitivism,'" clarifies that the 1950s were vital for racial change. Panish states, "The sum and imperativeness of both the white and dark abstract work with these materials amid this decade consolidated with the closeness of this period to the succeeding blast in white and dark social collaboration has incited social history specialists to hypothesize about this current decade's one of a kind qualities" (Panish, 120). In the mid-1950s, the Beats started to collaborate with outside societies, mostly Black in different ways, they felt united and one with the Black community. There were many individuals who shared common interests and had similar lifestyles, they shared their aesthetic expressions and found companions in social gatherings. Amiri Baraka, in 'The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka', depicts the racial structure of the Village, saying, "I could see the youthful white young men and young ladies in their affirmation of frustrate with an "expulsion" from society as being identified with the dark experience. That made us associates of the soul" (Baraka, 112) A typical dissatisfaction with American culture was joining individuals crosswise over social limits, both the Beats and prodigy of Harlem Renaissance shared similar pained, miseries and writing experiences. The Beat poets experienced estrangement from society due to their secret lifestyle and sexual preferences; they could recognize by and by with African Americans. The Greenwich Village provided the Beats with a platform where they could freely recite their poetry and feel liberated with the music of jazz and blues. Both Kerouac and Ginsberg helped establish the poetry scene in New York along with Corso, Snyder, and Kerouac. Their fellowships reached out past racial lines, a declaration to the progressiveness of the Beats.

A case of this multifaceted mentorship is the artist Ted Joans, who is thought to be a Beat essayist. Robert Lee, in his article "Dark Beat: Performing Ted Joans," gives a telling depiction of Joans' association with Kerouac: "Joans talks with the best warmth of the verse and jazz intrigues that, from the beginning, brought him and Kerouac into a nearby, esteemed kinship. Kerouac, as per the Nicosia meet, even components as the pleasant oddity of 'the white trendy person demonstrating the dark one around Harlem" (Lee, 26)

Both Kerouac and Jones made use of the Bebop and Jazz music and inculcated it in their poetry. Joans, in his lyric, "The Sermon," gives a portrayal of Hipsters and demonstrates the African American impact on hip culture: "In the event that you wish to be a sweet offspring of divine insight, DIG JAZZ/bolster its performers, go to all the jazz shows/purchase or cop Dixieland and in addition Bop" (The Sermon). Joans recommended that people looking for African cultural influence should approach it through music. Kerouac seems to take after Joans' directions. One of the major influences on Beat writers was Jack Kerouac and his fascination with music in poetry. Kerouac was inspired by the energetic flavors of bebop and jazz music. Bebop music was the especially

Kerouac's favourite, and he made use of the same in several pieces later. Bop musicians like Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie are mentioned in several Kerouac pieces. Ginsberg additionally served as a coach to African Americans in the Greenwich Village Beat people group, including Joans and, most broadly, Amiri Baraka. Actually, Ginsberg served as Baraka's underlying association with the Beat group. It was Ginsberg who invited Baraka to the group. In his paper, "Howl and Hail," Amiri Baraka depicts his excursion to turning into a Beat, which started when he was released from the U. S. Aviation based armed forces for being "a commie Buddhist shaded person, busted for books and a disturbing threatening vibe to dullness" (Baraka, 114). After leaving the Air Force, he clarifies that "we shot off in joy to the City, the Apple, New York, Bohemia, The Village, to experiment with our horrendous learning on those we were certain wd burrow how overwhelming we had got" (Baraka, 114).

Baraka talks about his experiences in the Greenwich Village, saying "And it was Howl once more. In addition Allen Polite and his accomplices, Cunningham, Cage, Charlip, Czernovitch, RhBlythe, Suzuki, Zen, ladies in dark leggings, Yeats, Poetry Poetry, that brought us gasping into the Village. First bunk 104 E. Third St, \$28 a month 3 rms no warmth, my mom sobbed" (Edwards, 146). The Beat group in Greenwich Village served as a shelter for all rebels and radical young poets of the times. Baraka's involvement with the Beats began even before he ventured foot in Greenwich Village. Baraka was highly influenced by the poetry of Ginsberg, talking about Ginsberg he says "he wrote on a bit of bathroom tissue to Git Le Coeur approaching was he seriously. He [Ginsberg] replied on French bathroom tissue, which is better to write, that he was worn out on being Allen Ginsberg. What's more, sent an expansive enlistment of verse for the new magazine YUGEN. What's more, that started exactly forty years of hookup" ('Howl' and "Hail" 21)? Baraka inferred the title for his magazine YUGEN, which has Japanese inceptions while investigating Buddhism with his Jewish spouse in New York. Regardless of their racial contrasts, the two scholars could meld a relationship that spread over numerous societies. Ginsberg connected with the more youthful Baraka, communicating his disappointment with life and adding to Baraka's magazine. Ginsberg's eagerness to permit his work to be distributed in an African American magazine uncovers the post-isolation mentality that he had. By keeping on relating with Baraka, Ginsberg could encourage Baraka's imaginative capacity furthermore advance Baraka's own tasks. Baraka promptly offers credit to Ginsberg for being a huge impact on his profession. In a meeting with Debra Edwards, Baraka is inquired as to whether he considers Ginsberg an educator, to which he reacts, "No doubt, he was, really, a great instructor" (154). By certifying Ginsberg as an instructor, Baraka was basically affirming the Beats' commitment to the Black Arts Movement. Ginsberg's part as an instructor is regularly strengthened by Baraka in discussions: "In addition to conversing with Allen about Western verse was dependable part of a course" ('Howl' and Hail' 21). Ginsberg, much like Kerouac with Joans, guided Baraka through traditional writing, some of the time even actually taking him to meet fanciful journalists.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ginsberg introduced Amiri Baraka to prominent and established writers, whom Baraka ordinarily would not have been able to meet. By including Baraka, Ginsberg demonstrated that he was able to relate to Baraka through their shared struggles and interests, regardless of racial differences. This shared sense of equality is visible in the way that Baraka describes his friendship with Ginsberg: "For all our endless contention, often loud and accompanied by contrasting histrionics, we remained, in many ways, comrades in and of the word, partisans of consciousness" ('Howl' and 'Hail' 22). Eventually, the two drifted apart ideologically as Baraka became more involved with Black Nationalism. However, the bond that they formed within the Beat culture did not diminish. This was simply because Ginsberg had influenced Baraka immensely on a foundational level. Their ideologies did diverge as Ginsberg continued to promote peaceful resistance, while Barak advocated more violent means, especially after the death of Malcolm X. Despite their differences, the two writers remained in contact as they went separate ways. The mentor-like relationship between Ginsberg and Baraka was possible because of the cultural values that they both shared. Ginsberg and Baraka shared a frustration with American society and desired to resist it in their writing and in their lifestyle. Upon Ginsberg's death in 1997, Baraka explains that the mutual ideology of resistance to an oppressive culture was an important part of his friendship with Ginsberg: "What we uphold is the defiance and resistance of 'Moloch,' in the collective tongue of the multinational multicultural American tongue and voice. What it was I first dug in Howl. And that great line from America. 'America go fuck yourself with yr atom Bomb.' Now that's poetry! And for this sentiment and stance, and revolutionary democratic practice, part of revolutionary art for a cultural revolution." ('Howl' and 'Hail' 23)

**Acknowledgments**

This paper would not have been possible without the kind support and help of two individuals, my Research supervisor and my spouse. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to both. I am highly indebted to Prof Madhu Mehrotra for her guidance and constant supervision as well as for providing necessary information regarding the project. I am also thankful to my spouse, Dr. Ravi Mishra for helping me edit this paper.

**References**

- Baraka, A. (2012). *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Chicago Review Press.
- Beck, A. (2015). The Emerging Spaces of Scottish Drama and Theatre in the 1990s.
- Delgado, G. R. E., Meza, A. K. T., & García, A. E. G. (2018). Resilient Factors in Students with Disabilities. *International Research Journal of Management, IT and Social Sciences (IRJMIS)*, 5(2), 23-31.
- Edwards, D. (1980). An Interview with Amiri Baraka. *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, 146-56.
- Gennari, J. (2003). Baraka's bohemian blues. *African American Review*, 37(2/3), 253-260.
- Gutiérrez, R. B. O., & Moreira, L. M. Z. (2018). The Profile of Executive Secretaries and Their Relationship with Labor Demands. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (IJSSH)*, 2(1), 75-83.
- Panish, J. (1994). Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*: A Study of "Romantic Primitivism". *Melus*, 19(3), 107-123.

**Biography of Author**

Dr. Geetanjali Joshi Mishra is an Assistant Professor of English at Amity University, Lucknow, India. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Lucknow, in American Poetry and has studied 'Spirit' and 'Sexuality' in the poetry of the Beat Generation writers. Dr. Mishra has been a Fulbright Scholar to the US and has served as a Foreign Language Teaching Assistant at Portland State University, Oregon, USA. Her research interests include the aspects of Spirit, Sex, and Body in the works of the Beat Generation writers. She is currently working on 'Aghoris', their rituals, practices, and influence upon the Beat Writers. She has published a number of articles on Beat Literature and attended few International Conferences on the subject. As a member of the European Beat studies, Network Dr. Mishra has also represented India as the sole participant and delivered a lecture at the Brussels Conference 2015.