
How We Understand the Beats

The Reception of the Beat Generation
in the United States and the Czech Lands

Antonín Zita



FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
MASARYKOVA UNIVERZITA

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Motto:

“There are a number of words used in *Howl* that are presently considered coarse and vulgar in some circles of the community; in other circles such words are in everyday use. It would be unrealistic to deny these facts. The author of *Howl* has used those words because he believed that his portrayal required them as being in character. The People state that it is not necessary to use such words and that others would be more palatable to good taste. The answer is that life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or conforms to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike; we were all made from the same mold but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words.”

Judge Clayton W. Horn, *The People of the State of California vs. Lawrence Ferlinghetti*

Acknowledgements

When I found out I might be able to publish a polished version of my dissertation in book form, I did not yet know the amount of work that was ahead of me. What started as a simple project mostly aimed at addressing a few oversights and trimming off a passage or two eventually became something completely different. About a third of the original text has been excised entirely and in turn replaced with new or significantly updated material. In addition, numerous passages have been reordered, rephrased, and repurposed. Similarly to the way Jack Kerouac had written *On the Road*, I had been driven by inspiration and copious amounts of coffee when writing this book; however, unlike Kerouac's Benzedrine-driven writing sessions, my approach relied on the vast research I had undertaken after finishing my dissertation as a way of putting the text together. The resulting text, therefore, is not merely a slightly refined version of the original text, but rather a substantially improved and therefore, dare I say, brand new text.

As stated above, this research is based on my dissertation *How We Read: The Reception of the Beat Generation in the United States and the Czech Lands*, which itself draws from my master's thesis *Beats Then and Now: The Reception of Beat Generation Literature*. Therefore, I would like to first thank those who made these two research texts possible. For my master's thesis, I wholeheartedly thank all the professors and staff at Texas A&M University and especially Charles Taylor, Jr., C. Jan Swearingen, and David Chroust. I also must thank the Czech Educational Foundation of Texas for awarding me the William J. Hlavinka Fellowship, which allowed me to study at TAMU in the first place. I am also extremely thankful for the guidance of my supervisor Tomáš Pospíšil, who has fostered my interest in learning since my first days of studies at the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts. In addition, I would also like to thank my dissertation supervisors Bohuslav Mánek and Petr Kopecký for providing invaluable feedback on the dissertation, Josef Jařab and Josef Rauwolf for the opportunity to discuss my research with them, and Nigel Marsh for proofreading the text.

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1 INTRODUCTION TO THE BEAT GENERATION

More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth. (Holmes 10)

The definition of the word “beat” above was written by John Clellon Holmes in his 1952 article “This Is the Beat Generation.” Holmes, described in the article’s introduction as the “26-year-old author of the novel *Go*, and therefore one of the generation which he describes” (10), was the first person associated with what would become the Beat Generation to publicly point to the rift between the current and older generations in their life expectations. Holmes makes it clear that labeling an entire generation with a single term is potentially problematic; nevertheless, he argues that the generation that experienced the Second World War, whether directly or indirectly, has something in common. The eighteen-year-old girl caught smoking marijuana, the disillusioned ex-GI who succumbs to the corporate machine, or the secretary pondering whether to sleep with her boyfriend now or wait; these and many others, Holmes claims, are the faces of a Beat Generation (10). While Holmes agrees that the complaint, “Why don’t people leave us alone?” might seem tiring, he claims it is actually a dangerous statement to make when opposed by society’s “enormous effort of righteousness” (10). Holmes’s essay paints a picture of a generation of young people who found out that the society they had been growing up in was simply too distant in its morality and values from their own ideas and dreams.

Yet it was not until 1957 that the Beat Generation became a widespread phenomenon. Two crucial events took place that year. First, Judge Clayton W. Horn famously ruled Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* not obscene. The court decision by Judge Horn was a landmark case not only because the ruling set a precedent for future cases, but also due to the exposure the Beats gained as a result. That is not to say that there had not already been interest in the Beats. For instance, Ginsberg's public reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in San Francisco was certainly a defining moment in the history of the Beat Generation. The reading featured five poets who were relatively unknown at that time – Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder – and who were introduced by Kenneth Rexroth, an older and established poet tied to the San Francisco Renaissance scene. When Ginsberg took the stage and started reading "Howl," it was clear to the audience that "a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases" (Charters xxviii). Ginsberg's poem not only decried the failures and confines of a conformist life in a capitalist society, but for many it also foretold things to come. As Ginsberg biographer Jonah Raskin argues, the reading helped create the conditions that eventually led to both the San Francisco protests against the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1960 and the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley a few years later (7). The event, Raskin continues, was an affirmation of artistic power that defied and eventually won out over McCarthyism, therefore making the reading the most important public poetry reading in twentieth-century America. Still, if it was not for the obscenity trial, Ginsberg would hardly have acquired the status that he had. As Lawrence Ferlinghetti puts it, "Allen was totally unknown until the book was busted" (qtd. in Cottrell 34).

The second milestone of 1957 was Gilbert Millstein's enthusiastic review of *On the Road* in *The New York Times* which made Jack Kerouac famous virtually overnight. Kerouac was more than surprised by the general response to *On the Road* and the excitement it produced; as Kerouac's letters from that period show, he even entered negotiations about a movie adaptation with the Hollywood screenwriter and producer Jerry Wald. While nothing really emerged from their discussions, it shows the sudden publicity and attention that the Beats had gained. The late fifties were then a time in which the Beats were given the utmost attention of the press, media, and general public. Yet the Beats have paid dearly for such attention: the sudden interest also led to sensationalized treatment, and the Beat writers were frequently seen as a novelty rather than serious artists. In addition, it was this sudden attention that Kerouac had difficulties coping with, fueling his alcoholism and eventually leading to his early death; the attention that Burroughs abhorred for most of his life only to gain fame starting in the late seventies; and finally the attention that only Ginsberg, a former market researcher, was able to

handle to such an extent that some critics consider him the only modern poet that ever gained the status of a true celebrity (Bawer 1). While this publicity turned out to be a double-edged sword for the individual Beat authors, it is clear that the Beats as a whole made a lasting impact on American culture.

Naturally, the United States was not the only country where a large rift between different social groups was becoming more pronounced. Soon, most of the Western countries were swept by a wave of youth rebellion and social protests. Though less discernible at first, this discontent was taking place behind the Iron Curtain as well. The Czechoslovak Republic¹ was in the firm grip of Communism, thus making open protest substantially more difficult. The communist takeover in 1948 led not only to a wave of emigration, but also to the tight rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia which essentially controlled the whole public discourse (Šámal, “Cesta otevřená” 583). Importantly, one way of achieving such control was through art.

The government-approved art style of socialist realism, which portrayed the communist country in rosy colors, was omnipresent in the daily lives of the country’s citizens. For Klement Gottwald, President of Czechoslovakia and chairman of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, artists were essentially political propagandists in the service of the country, therefore art should strive to move society toward the communist ideal (qtd. in Kopecký, “Literary America” 67). This view then openly supported works aligned with the Party line while suppressing works deemed deficient. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1950s the Party was slowly losing its control over the Czechoslovaks and by the time the sixties were in full swing, Czechoslovak society was showing a significant turn toward liberalization. For instance, rock and roll music, which was termed “big beat” in Czechoslovakia, was available through numerous foreign radio stations ignoring the closed borders and widely sought after by Czechoslovak youth (Šebo 15). The state, however, did not want to relinquish its powers voluntarily and acted accordingly. For instance, youth sporting long hair, a trend from the capitalist West, experienced substantial harassment for their nonconformist look. This systematic persecution of youth indifferent to the values of Communist Czechoslovakia only mirrors the strategies the regime employed towards anyone dissenting from the official discourse.

The route to gradual liberalization in the sixties eventually culminated in the political liberalization of the Prague Spring in 1968, yet it was a slow and complicated process. It should not then come as a surprise that the 1965 visit of the Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg, which led to Czechoslovak secret police concocting a plot in order to deport the poet, has had a significant impact on Czechoslovaks. Despite their limited availability in the country, the Beats left a lasting impression

1 In 1960 the country was renamed the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and the name remained in place until 1990. Henceforth, the term Czechoslovakia is used to refer to both the Czechoslovak Republic and the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic.

on Czechoslovak readers. For instance, when Lawrence Ferlinghetti visited the Czech Republic in the late 1990s, he received an ecstatic welcome from the public, which he would not have received if he had not been strongly influential in the sixties.

1.1 The Beat Generation: The Artists and the Term

But who actually were the Beats? In its strictest sense, the Beat Generation was a small group of artists composed of Herbert Huncke, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Lucien Carr, who all first met in New York in 1944 (Charters xv). Soon, the term expanded outside this small social circle: while Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs are understood as the core of the Beats, other close associates include John Clellon Holmes or Gregory Corso. Nevertheless, the term also often includes Kenneth Rexroth, Peter Orlovsky, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufman, Diane di Prima, or Anne Waldman due to personal relationships or artistic affinities. Consequently, deciding on who is a Beat and who is not can be quite problematic. For instance, Donald M. Allen organized the poets included in his seminal anthology *The New American Poetry* into five groups: *Black Mountain Review*, San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat Generation, the New York group, and younger poets with no apparent ties to a single group. However, since poets such as Snyder or Ginsberg belonged to more than one group, trying to come up with distinctly separate groups has only led to confusion. To make matters worse, some, such as Rexroth, later denounced their Beat allegiance, thus muddying the understanding of the Beats as a group of authors even further.

Allen's collection was not the only work which indirectly problematizes the understanding of what the Beat Generation is. Similarly, the first Beat anthology to specifically name the authors as the Beat Generation – *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* (1958) – not only includes the core Beats in its discussion, but also writers who focused on hipsters and had no direct ties to Beats or their writing (Belletto 8). What is more, the canon of the Beats is prone to being continuously expanded. As Kurt Hemmer explains in the introduction to the *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature*, the book contains the work of such figures as Abbie Hoffman, Timothy Leary, or Ruth Weiss as a way to acknowledge all Beat-associated people and artists (xi). To add to the confusion, American media often referred to the Beat Generation as standing in for contemporary American youth, or at least for a substantial segment of it. The complexities of membership of the Beat Generation then show that attaching a label to a literary group affects who belongs to the group as well as the responses the label itself elicits (Challis 2). In other words, the further one gets from “the Big Three” – Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs – and their immediate circle of friends, the more blurred the line between Beat and non-Beat becomes.

The confusion surrounding membership of the Beat Generation is best explained by analyzing the term “Beat” itself. Even when one ignores the use of “the Beat Generation” to delineate a significant portion of the youth, there was still disagreement among the Beats themselves on what the term actually represents. As Jack Kerouac writes in his essay “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” the term “beat” was first mentioned in a conversation with John Clellon Holmes about the Lost Generation and Existentialism; when Kerouac commented that “this is really a beat generation,” Holmes reacted with an enthusiastic, “That’s it, that’s right!” (70). Initially, after being introduced by Holmes, the term not only expressed a general sense of being “beat,” that is “down,” but it also emphasized the experiences of the poor and the marginalized such as drug addicts, homosexuals, or vagrants. In other words, the term reflected a sense of marginalization and rejection by society – a sense of otherness. The image of the outcast certainly had its allure; as Ann Charters points out, the term caught on because it “suggested the arrival of something unconventional and different from the mainstream, marginalized yet possessing potential force and authority” (xx). Jack Kerouac later provided an updated explanation of the term for *Playboy* magazine: although originally standing for “poor,” “down and out,” or “deadbeat,” “Beat” was expanded to include people who have “a certain new gesture, or attitude” best described as “a new *more*” (“Origins” 73).²

Charters points out that another reason the term was adopted by many was the fact it could be made to mean anything (xx). However, since the term was open to interpretation, it was also open to exploitation. As a result, the term became used in connection with juvenile delinquency and the Beats themselves were seen as condoning violence. One of the many ways this connection with violence manifested itself was the Albert Zugsmith-produced film *The Beat Generation* released in 1959: in spite of the title, the film is in fact a crime thriller in which a detective searches for a serial rapist. Faced with such sensationalist and frequently exploitative representation in the press and popular magazines such as *Time* or *Life*, Kerouac eventually modified the term as originating from the word “beatitude.” Despite his best efforts to distance himself from the media image of the Beats, the damage had already been done and Kerouac became so disillusioned with the improper use of the term that he eventually stopped using it altogether. The term, in other words, has been used to represent anything from a close-knit group of friends based in New York to a whole generation of people.

Not only is the label rather ambiguous when used to delineate the Beats as a group, but it is also unsuitable as a description of a unified approach to literature. While the Beats often shared certain sensibilities, their writing styles differed

2 Similarly, Gary Snyder understood the label to represent “a particular state of mind” (Charters xvi).

significantly from one another. Kerouac, for instance, tried to advance his writing philosophy dubbed “spontaneous prose,” that is an approach which favored improvisation and free writing. In contrast, Burroughs preferred disjointed narratives that resist a straightforward interpretation, as exemplified by his “cut-up” method which involved inserting scrambled portions of other authors’ texts into his own writing. Finally, Ginsberg’s poetry often mixes cries of social injustice and protest with religious imagery, thus leading Ginsberg to categorize himself as a visionary poet in the tradition of William Blake or Antonin Artaud (Portugés 3). The differences are obvious even when comparing only the Beat poets: apart for their disdain for formalist rules of poetry writing, their approaches to writing vary substantially from one another. As a result, Beat poetry includes Snyder’s eco-consciousness with Eastern influences as well as Corso’s playful portrayal of everyday experiences.

1.2 The Beat Generation as an Attitude

In other words, what the term “Beat” or “the Beat Generation” actually stands for frequently varies from person to person. Nevertheless, there is a shared thread running through the definitions of the term and the various approaches to the Beats: that of communitarian identity positioning itself as the direct opposite of the public. As Barry Miles explains, it was a “fraternity of spirit and attitude” that connected the New York Beats together (*El Hombre* 2). This attitude, Miles continues, was “an adverse reaction to the ongoing carnage of World War II, the dropping of A-bombs on civilian targets, and the puritan small-mindedness that still characterized American life.” The label is, due to its many possible connotations, imprecise, yet it still, in the words of David Sterritt, “suggestively evokes a youth-centered ethos that felt the weight of conventional social norms as a burden at once punishing and exhausting – inflicting on individuals a sense of being both ‘beaten,’ or assailed and tormented, and ‘beat,’ or worn down and defeated” (2). The Beats were driven by a combination of alienation, anxiety, idealism, and intellectualism, and they also rejected conventional social norms, choosing instead to focus on individuals’ ability to define themselves – and their realities – through their choices, decisions, and actions. For example, many of the Beats drew their inspiration from jazz and bebop; this can be seen in their use of hipster slang that evolved in the jazz and bop scenes, their experimental techniques such as Kerouac’s spontaneous prose, and the stylistic similarities between many of the texts and jazz improvisations. It was not just the music, but also the rebellious attitude of many jazz musicians that served as an inspiration to the Beats. As Douglas Malcolm further explains,

[a]lmost as soon as jazz became popular in the early 1920s, young men who considered themselves outsiders identified with jazz musicians' marginal social status in hegemonic white culture. While bop was more complex and the musicians more rebellious than their antecedents, the impulse of these young white men toward jazz had as much to do with ideology as it did with a particular style of music (104).

The Beats searched, in Kerouac's words, for a "new *more*," and this took various shapes. These new vistas were often geographical, as many of the Beats, had spent years and even decades living abroad. They were also spiritual, and the "new *more*" in such form could be reached not only through jazz music, but also through sex or experimentation with drugs, both of which were taboo at that time.

Consequently, the Beats decided to form their arguments through a seemingly negative dialectic as a means of opposing conventionality, materialism, repressiveness, regimentation, and corruption with the opposites of these qualities. Their writing protested the conformist malaise of the 1950s United States which, the Beats unanimously argued, crippled the human spirit while promoting superficial concerns such as material well-being. They emphasized otherness and personal exploration over the dull conformity of the current society. Ultimately, "Beatness" became associated not only with a literary movement, but also with an attitude and a set of ideas, feelings and opinions. Therefore, the Beats were seen by many as the spokespeople of those who opposed the values of the society. Bruce Cook confirms the sense of a generation gap by regarding the Beats as his generation because of "the same keen sense of identification with them that thousands of others my [of his] age did" (3). As Holmes further comments on the generational attitude and ideals: "The absence of personal and social values is to [this generation], not a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. *How to live* seems to them much more crucial than *why*" (19).

Simply put, the Beats not only associated themselves with those generally marginalized and even victimized by their societies, but also emphasized breaking away from the values of such society. Consequently, this appealed to the younger generations, which was noticeable at many poetry readings the Beats gave. Bruce Cook recalls that at one such event in early 1959 there were more than seven hundred people in attendance, not only exceeding in every way the expectations of the academic crowd that usually composes the majority audience at such events, but also forcing the event organizers to turn people away due to overcrowding (12). The audience, Cook continues, was both younger and older than the average college student and young teacher, and therefore had "a distinctly non-academic, almost proletarian appearance" (12-13). The audience's reaction was unprecedented: not only did they applaud at the appropriate places, but they also applauded at inappropriate places and did a bit of cheering and stamping, thus

resembling the openness and spontaneity of a jazz concert rather than poetry reading (14).

A similar enthusiastic response occurred during Ginsberg's 1965 visit to Czechoslovakia. As a part of the stay, Ginsberg participated in the King of May elections, traditionally a part of the student-organized Majáles festival taking place on May 1st alongside the official May Day celebration. By coincidence, the 1965 festival was the first Majáles in nine years to be held without direct interference from the state: students taking part in a parade and carrying various slogans is a vital part of the Majáles tradition and these slogans had to be closely regulated, as they were often the products of independent thought and therefore dangerous to the regime (Svatoš 95). While the students participating in the 1965 parade more than enjoyed their recently-gained freedom by carrying various satirical and provocative slogans, the pinnacle of the event, however, was electing Allen Ginsberg the King of May. When reaching the stage in order to make his pre-election speech, Ginsberg was cheered by tens of thousands of people. After chanting a Buddhist mantra while playing small hand cymbals, Ginsberg started to sing "Ať žije král majáles"³ in his broken Czech; after a while, the organizers announced that Ginsberg had been elected the King of May.

The election of an American as the King of May, together with many of Ginsberg's anti-Soviet remarks made during his stay in various meetings with students and Czechoslovak artists, caused a huge embarrassment to the regime and ultimately led to the poet's deportation from the country a few days later. Despite this apparent setback, Ginsberg and other Beats had a substantial impact on life in 1960s Czechoslovakia, and Ginsberg's expulsion by the regime further codified the Beats in the country as standing for personal freedom and resistance against oppression. Among those who hold this opinion is none other than Václav Havel, playwright, dissident, and the first democratically-elected President of Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. As he famously writes in the preface to *Spontaneous Mind*, a collection of interviews with Allen Ginsberg released in 2001, "Beat poetry and prose have most likely been perceived in our unfree conditions as even more rebellious than in the land of their origin" (ix). The encouragement of the Beats to renounce the establishment and pursue individual dreams and goals, Havel continues, took on a whole new level in Czechoslovakia, because it also provided one with "a potential instrument for resistance to the totalitarian system that had been imposed on our existence."

Similarly to the United States, the Beats represented to Czechoslovaks liberty and new lifestyles; however, these ideas were even more symbolic due to the nature of the totalitarian regime. Thus to Czechoslovaks, the Beats became synonymous with resistance toward authoritative power even more so than to the

3 "Long live the King of May" in English.

American public. The theatre and poetry critic Miroslav Kovařík further explains that the events of the sixties foretold the eventual return of Czechoslovakia into Europe, and the Beats' courage to directly address society's taboos played a vital role in the era's liberal atmosphere ("U kávy").

1.3 Controversies and Criticism

Naturally, the Beat Generation writers were not without controversies; after all, two of the seminal texts – Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* and Ginsberg's *Howl* – faced obscenity charges. As Meagan Wilson elucidates, the former was celebrated as "a work of genius" and "a masterpiece of experimental fiction," but also vilified as "a piece of filth, an exercise in pornography" or "a composition without merit" (98). The common elements of Beat writing, such as homosexuality or drug abuse, were too controversial in the fifties to be ignored, which led many critics to comment on the works' apparent controversies rather than on the literary work itself. According to Ronald Oakley, the writers of the Beat Generation were seen by the public as not only idealizing, but also supporting "society's outcasts and misfits – blacks, drug addicts, prostitutes, bums, migrant farm workers, and petty criminals," and these themes were a direct threat to the safe, middle-class, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant morality of the average American in the 1950s (398).

One of the most scathing critiques of the Beat Generation was penned by the literary critic Norman Podhoretz; the essay title – "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" – already suggests some of the points Podhoretz is about to make. He starts by discussing the bohemianism of the 1920s and 1930s as represented by such figures as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, or Pound, claiming that "[a]t its best, the radicalism of the 1930s was marked by deep intellectual seriousness and aimed at a state of society in which the fruit of civilization would be more widely available – and ultimately available to all" (307). Unlike the bohemianism of the 1930s, however, the bohemianism represented by the Beats is "hostile to civilization" in its worship of primitivism, energy, or "irrationalist" philosophies while at the same time expressing contempt for "coherent, rational discourse which, being a product of the mind, is in their view a form of death" (307–308). Podhoretz argues the lifestyles of the Beat writers – and in effect their writings as well – celebrate criminality, violence, drug addiction, and madness and concludes his essay by explaining that the Beats and their supporters are against intelligence itself (318). Diana Trilling was another voice critical of the Beats. Writing for the same outlet as Podhoretz, the *Partisan Review*, her article on a poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky is especially noteworthy for its chastising tone. Describing the audience of the reading as a "rabble" – and also expressing her surprise

that the auditorium did not smell bad when a single look at the crowd made her certain it would (224) – Trilling’s critique is based mostly on her beliefs about what is allowed and what is not: “Taste or style dictates that most intellectuals behave decorously, earn a regular living, disguise instead of flaunt whatever may be their private digressions from the conduct society considers desirable” (223). The Beats, put simply, were not “proper” enough not only in their writing but also in their behavior, tastes, or preferences, an understanding which had significant impact on discourse related to Beat writing and the Beats themselves. The popular image of the Beats thus portrayed them as a threat to mainstream society who lacked moral values. Importantly, this depiction relies heavily on the ambiguity of the term, thus yet again blurring the lines between specific Beat authors and the segment of society they were supposed to be representing.

1.4 Understanding the Beat Generation

Despite the marginalization of the Beats by the public and the intellectual community in the 1950s and 1960s, they managed not only to survive but also to prevail (Cook 17). Currently, the Beats seem to be enjoying more attention than ever. Their texts are being released in countless new editions, collections of critical essays on their works are being published, and courses on the Beat Generation are being taught. They have withstood the test of time – something unimaginable for many 1950s and 1960s reviewers – and to a certain extent also entered the canon in both the United States and the Czech Republic. Although enumerating all milestone events would take up a vast number of pages, limiting the overview to the last several years still gets the point across: *Howl* (2010) and *On the Road* (2012) have been turned into major motion pictures with well-known Hollywood actors such as James Franco, Kristen Steward, or Viggo Mortensen; Kerouac’s *On the Road* has been released in its famed original scroll version; numerous new editions of original Beat texts, collections of letters, and critical collections have been published; the European Beat Studies Network has been founded; and Ferlinghetti’s aforementioned visit to Prague was a notable event attended by many dignitaries. In other words, it is safe to say that interest in the Beats is thriving more than ever.

If one accepts Kenneth Rexroth’s premise that against “the ruin of the world, there is only one defense – the creative act,” one observes that Beat works in one way or another contributed in their own ways to stopping the world’s ruin by encouraging the civil rights protests of the 1960s and by inspiring thousands to challenge conformity and stifling social norms (325). Nevertheless, the creative act should not be limited to writing a literary text. As previous pages have already shown, one’s understanding of what the Beats are and what they stand for may have varied substantially from someone else’s: while some point out their

experimentation with drugs and sexuality, others emphasize the Beats' critique of the establishment or their literary experiments. For some, the Beats are literary visionaries, though others might view them mostly as a historical phenomenon. Simply put, while the readings of the Beats share the same subject, they often lead to quite different results, since different readers emphasize different aspects of the Beats. Linguistically speaking, the signifier "the Beats" may signify something else, and this signifying process depends on many factors such as the reader's background or the context of reading. Creating such meaning is ultimately also a creative act, albeit slightly different than what Rexroth originally had in mind.

The above is not to say that two people reading a text have to understand it in a completely different manner. Insisting on such a view would be endorsing a rather nihilistic outlook in defiance of common sense. After all, the very fact that a work of art can resonate for the same reason with readers from entirely different cultural backgrounds and walks of life makes it clear that general agreement on a text's meaning can be reached. Nevertheless, different audiences and different contexts often lead to variations in interpretations – at times rather slight, other times more pronounced. As Justin Quinn notes on the publishing and reading dynamics in Czechoslovakia of the 1950s, claiming that the context of the time did not influence the production and reading of literature seems "intentionally limited and even suspiciously ideological" (108). These different contexts are especially pronounced when dealing with works by foreign authors. The resulting different readings can be grossly oversimplified or even misinterpreted when compared with the work's original context (Zima 164). However, such readings are also often revealing, as they relativize the original context, and thus highlight the openness of the text or its ideology (165). Importantly, providing a comprehensive study of the various interpretations of the Beats and their work by comparing their reception in different contexts is the purpose of this book.

The reception of the Beats is analyzed in two different time periods: the 1950s/1960s and late twentieth century/early 2000s. However, rather than focusing on the reception in one country, the text analyzes the writing dealing with the Beats from two countries: the United States and Czechoslovakia, later the Czech Republic. This approach, a combination of a synchronic and diachronic inquiry, thus also acknowledges the shift toward trans-nationalism in both Beat studies and in American studies in general. Polina Mackay and Chad Weidner explain that the European Beat Studies Network, whose inaugural conference took place in 2012, was formed in order to advance the discussion on the Beats' relations to Europe: the ESNB "fosters dialogue on European influences on the Beats, on Europeans influenced by Beat tropes and esthetics, and on transnational and international approaches to the Beats and their legacy" (221). This recent development in Beat studies, Erik Mortenson points out, thus reflects the shift toward trans-nationalism