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Chapter 1

"The Sordid Hipsters of America": Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity

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I

> Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky tacky.
> Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes all the same.
>
> —Malvina Reynolds, *"Little Boxes"*

At mid-century, the cultural fabric of America appeared to be undergoing a profound process of modernization and homogenization and the symptoms—some ominous, some banal—seemed to be manifested everywhere. The reasons seemed complex and broad, involving Cold War politics and post-Taylorist labor practices, altered family structures and housing patterns, religious beliefs and media technologies, the demographics of urbanization and developments in psychology. One result, for a significant minority of Americans, was that the increasing affluence and security of the postwar period was disturbed by—even displaced by—a sense that the range of cultural and personal possibilities had been unacceptably reduced. Perhaps the most recognized reaction, both lauded and condemned, involved the Beat Generation, a small bohemian group that came together in the 1940s and was vaulted from anonymity into the public eye in the 1950s following the highly publicized appearance of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, works that appeared just as a vigorous public debate about conformism was reaching its peak. One reason for this was the attempt by the Beats to explore, adapt, and establish collective heterogeneous spaces based on the examples of marginalized groups whose exclusion seemed to guarantee their immunity from the privileges and perils of mainstream modernity.

These homogenizing tendencies were evident in many spheres of public life. In 1950, the McCarran Internal Security Act and the Subversive Activities Control Act were passed, legislation severely curtailing dissent in America, as Senator McCarthy prepared for more inquisitorial House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings aimed at persecuting those who did not agree with a narrow definition of political reality. Other politicians pondered the creation of a new system of highways that would soon rationalize and standardize the American road and the experiences of its travelers. When it finally became law in 1952, The Federal-Aid Highways Act began a process that resulted in a streamlined, controlled-access grid bearing little resemblance to the vagaries of the idiosyncratic roads that Whitman impressed on the American imagination. The July 13, 1950 cover of *Time* carried a photograph of entrepreneur William Levitt, the man behind Levittown, the Long Island subdivision that defined postwar suburbia and inspired Malvina Reynolds to write "Little Boxes," one of the era's most distinctive pieces of musical social commentary. Other glossy magazines were replete with images of prosperous families enjoying the consumer revolution then in full swing as the modern supermarket and shopping mall were coming into being. In the mid-1950s, Southdale Center, the first enclosed, climate-controlled mall, was opened. Soon Muzak was added too, as marketers and psychologists discovered that the shopping habits, as well as the work habits, of middle America could be manipulated through this new medium. One great publishing success in 1950 was David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, an influential Yale University study of contemporary conformism arguing that the American character—indeed the human character—was entering a new inevitable stage of social evolution marked by a diminution of individuality and difference. Modernity and homogeneity seemed clearly linked.

That same year, by contrast, Kerouac and Neal Cassady were exploring the "fellahin" peasants and teenage prostitutes of Mexico and staying with William S. Burroughs, who was exploring cheap junk (heroin) and researching a "super-drug" reputed to turn people into insects. A couple of years later, Burroughs fatally shot his common-law wife Joan. Cassady, himself a bisexual, became a bigamist in 1950 by marrying his pregnant girlfriend only to leave her a few months later to return to his other wife, while Kerouac was married briefly to a woman whose lover, a friend of Kerouac's, had recently been killed while climbing through the window of a moving New York City subway car. Allen Ginsberg was released from a psychiatric hospital after his involvement with drug addicts and thieves led to his arrest following an accident in a stolen car and the discovery of stolen goods in his apartment. He was about to meet another poet, Gregory Corso, who was completing a three-year term at Clinton State Prison. Even from these few details, it is clear that the contrast between the centripetal social pressure toward control, conformity, and homogenization in the mainstream and the centrifugal, apparently willful eccentricity of the Beats could hardly be more complete. Surveying the era generally, Fredric Jameson has observed "that no society has ever been so standardized as this one, and . . . the stream of human, social, and historical temporality has never flowed quite so homogeneously." Noting the difficulty of locating a "vantage point or fantasy subject position outside the system" from which its homogeneity might be considered, Jameson queries where the non-homogeneous can continue to exist in the modern world (17). One traditional location involves the transformative power of spirituality: "Historically," he points out, "the adventures of homogeneous and heterogeneous space have most often been told in terms of the quotient of the sacred and of the folds in which it is unevenly invested" (22). The explorations of the folds of heterogeneity, of realms of experience outside the sanctioned mainstream, carried out by the Beats included the realm of the sacred of course, but ranged well beyond into a variety of secular cultural spaces that generally remained off limits to conventional citizens.

Following World War II, critiques of white middle-class America tended to be channeled away from explicitly political ends as discussion of conformism and alienation dominated the cultural agenda. Because the political and artistic ground had shifted so radically, the alternative positions of the 1920s and '30s—particularly the leftist politics and modernist aesthetics that had provided vantage points outside the system—were no longer available. The political left had been effectively routed in America while, conversely, aesthetic modernism had been consecrated as the established position and no longer constituted a radical alternative. Furthermore, while the Civil Rights Movement was gathering force in this decade, few white artists and intellectuals could foresee early in the 1950s the crucial impact it was soon to have. The consequences of women's liberation, the other great social movement of the postwar era, were as yet undreamed of. Despite its historical prominence in Marxist sociology, alienation was articulated primarily not as an economic consequence of capitalism but as a cultural position, a consequence of the homogeneity of modernity. According to Marx, alienation is the inevitable consequence of the capitalist mode of production: Because workers control neither the means of production nor the product of their labor, they cannot find a sense of fulfillment or identity in their work. The only way to rectify this, according to Marx, is through class struggle. While Marxism was not a dominant American ideology in the pre-war period, it—along with a variety of left-wing positions—provided a critical model for the focussing of dissent during the economic upheaval of the Great Depression. As Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyerman observe however, World War II marked a major shift in the spectrum of American social thought: The mobilization of resources, intellectual as well as industrial, for the war effort "had all but eliminated the critical intellectual, drawing even the most disenchanted free floater into supporting the struggle against fascism. Those contexts that had sustained social criticism . . . either disappeared or were transformed into organs of the war effort" (5). National crises such as war tend to dampen the spirit of active debate and the fact that World War II seemed to segue so seamlessly into the Cold War left little room for the development of critical positions.

With the exception of marginal socialist groups, the focus of remaining postwar dissent shifted away from traditional political channels. With so many ideals exhausted by the Depression, eroded by the horrors of the war and the ugly politics of McCarthyism, glutted by the new profusion of consumer goods and lost in the explosion of mass marketing techniques, no cohesive political movement emerged to direct alienation toward positive social goals. Because alienation came to be viewed as an inevitable consequence of modernity itself rather than as the legacy of the contradictions of capitalism, solutions were not readily available. Unlike in the 1930s and in keeping with the Cold War climate, there arose an apolitical dissent based on alienation as a personal or psychological condition rather than as an economic or political category. Political and economic solutions may exist for political and economic problems but if the problem is inherent in the epoch itself, transcending national boundaries and ideological systems, then dissent must—perhaps with a sense of its own futility—seek another route. Lew Welch's "Chicago Poem" poses the problem this way:

> You can't fix it. You can't make it go away.
> I don't know what you're going to do about it,
> But I know what I'm going to do about it. I'm just
> going to walk away from it. Maybe
> A small part of it will die if I'm not around
>
> feeding it anymore.
>
> (*Ring of Bone* 11)

Two related questions arise with some urgency here: What exactly is the "it" from which one must walk away? And where can one walk to? What folds of heterogeneity can provide an alternative habitable space for those who feel impelled by a centrifugal force to walk away?

In the absence of an alternative space structured by some alternative set of conventions, language, and so on, alienation can only lead to an uninhabitable void. From J. D. Salinger's 1951 *The Catcher in the Rye* to John Updike's 1960 *Rabbit, Run*, many novels, constituting almost a sub-genre, explored the alienated outposts of what Alan Nadel has termed America's "containment culture" and looked at the fate of young men—typically this was a young man's genre—who tried to walk away. In both of these novels, the centrifugal movement leads to a non-space as unavoidable as it is uninhabitable: Holden Caulfield's lonely flight leads to a nervous breakdown, and his fantasy of escaping down the road to some pastoral alternative never approaches realization. Ten years later, Updike sent Rabbit Angstrom out on the road, but, with nowhere to go, Rabbit turns back, then runs again, hopelessly and without destination. Narratives such as these proliferated at a stunning rate throughout the period. In the ironically titled *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Richard Yates's suburbanites encounter madness and death in the uninhabitable middle class, while in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Ken Kesey's irrepressible McMurphy ends up lobotomized and dead at the hands of a mental hospital system that is clearly a metaphor for modern society as a whole. *Catch 22*, the title of Joseph Heller's 1961 novel, has entered the vocabulary as a term for an impossible double bind, and Yossarian, his hero, devotes much of the novel to his escape. A few years later, Heller's *Something Happened* (1974) portrayed an even bleaker middle-American way of life. As early as 1944, Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* provided an image of immobility, and, more than two decades later, John Barth's Jacob Horner reached a similar impasse in the appropriately titled *The End of the Road*.

For these young men and countless more like them, both literary and real, no fold—sacred or otherwise—could be located in which to find shelter; no habitable space existed outside what Paul Goodman, in *Growing Up Absurd*, referred to as the "closed room" of American culture (160). Such images of enclosure recur frequently not only in the literature but also in studies of social psychology. Psychiatrist Robert Lindner, author of *Rebel Without a Cause* (the study of psychopathology from which the James Dean movie took its title) and *Must You Conform?*, argued that the centripetal cultural logic of postwar America was ubiquitous from childhood on: "You must adjust.... This is the legend imprinted in every schoolbook, the invisible message on every blackboard" (1956, 56). A fierce opponent of this trend, he urged Americans "to break out of the cage whose outer limits men have worn smooth and deeply grooved with their endless pacing" (1952, 196). Not all observers noted the "endless pacing" at the enclosure's edge however. In *One-Dimensional Man*, for example, Herbert Marcuse expressed dismay at the degree to which Americans had accepted the status quo, even querying the continued relevance of the concept of alienation, a concept which "seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them" (11). The result of this identification is not the loss of alienation though, he decides, but actually "constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation" (11) characterized by a loss of the ability to imagine alternatives. This is the condition, a more complex but no less terminal form of Goodman's closed room, whose limits Marcuse interrogates in his influential study. "Thus emerges," he maintains, "a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe" (12).

It seemed impossible "to walk away from it"—to leave the room or the cage—without also walking toward something else, without finding some heterogeneous dimension or space in which to exist, and that space was not readily available. This non-space of hopelessness is evident in a remarkable passage from Kerouac's *On the Road*, but in this classic of Beat sensibility the problem of alienation and cultural space is negotiated quite differently. Sal Paradise, whose name is itself a reference to a space of possibility and hope, finds himself in a darkened skidrow movie theater watching second-run B movies. "The people who were in that all-night movie were the end," Sal observes (243), employing a colloquial phrase connoting cultural terminality:

> There were Beat Negroes who'd come up from Alabama to work in car factories on a rumor; old white bums; young longhaired hipsters who'd reached the end of the road and were drinking wine; whores, ordinary couples, and housewives with nothing to do, nowhere to go, nobody to believe in. If you sifted all Detroit in a wire basket the beater solid core of dregs couldn't be better gathered. (243–44)

The movie experience, the classic American space of entertainment and escape, here has turned into its opposite, a dead-end non-space of emptiness and abjection. As Sal dozes through the movies, his sense of self utterly collapsing, he imagines a fall into a surreal fold in the cultural fabric that few Americans had visited:

> six attendants of the theater converged with their night's total of swept-up rubbish and created a huge dusty pile that reached to my nose as I snored head down—till they almost swept me away too.... All the cigarette butts, the bottles, the matchbooks, the come and the gone were swept up in this pile. Had they taken me with it, Dean would never have seen me again. He would have had to roam the entire United States and look in every garbage pail from coast to coast before he found me embryonically convoluted among the rubbishes of my life, his life, and the life of everybody concerned and not concerned. What would I have said to him from my rubbish womb? "Don't bother me, man, I'm happy where I am.... What right have you to come and disturb my reverie in this pukish can?" (244–45)

The Beat fascination—even identification—with the social "dregs" is radically extended here; indeed Sal identifies not with the modern consumer culture but with its garbage. While his identity seems lost in the show business hallucinations and the filth of the nation itself, this dead-end abjection is transformed by images of birth, womb and embryo. The glimmer of possibility that emerges at this end of the road should not be exaggerated; however, it must be noted that Kerouac recognizes possibility in this heterogeneous space far from the homogeneous surfaces of mainstream America. Caught between the "little boxes made of ticky tacky" and the garbage pail, Sal—unlike Holden or Rabbit—opts for the garbage pail on the understanding that there may be some way through to the other side, whereas the "little boxes all the same" do not allow this hope.

As these examples show, the coexistence (or as Jameson puts it, the "adventures") of heterogeneous and homogeneous space can be disturbing. As Ginsberg later commented, "we were in the middle of an identity crisis prefiguring nervous breakdown for the whole United States" (Introduction to *Junky*, 1977 vii). This sense of the imminent end of a way of life and of the shared assumptions making that collective way of life possible was articulated as well by Chandler Brossard, who speaks of his Beat-related novel *Who Walk In Darkness* (1952) as a study of how people live "when their sustaining sociological context collapses" (1987, 22). Such a vertiginous moment of self-doubt, of crisis, is the moment when artists and intellectuals can be most influential in exploring and re-establishing a sense of collective identity: Pierre Bourdieu writes of "the labor of symbolic production that poets performed, particularly in crisis situations, when the meaning of the world is no longer clear" (236). In those situations, according to Bourdieu, the task of the poet has been no less than to rename the world. Given the sense of cultural dead end felt by so many, the task of finding a voice was a daunting one. Michael McClure, recollecting the first public reading of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," also connects the sense of crisis and the centrality of poetry in the process of renewal: "The world we tremblingly stepped out into in that decade was a bitter gray one," he recalls. "In all of our memories no one had been so outspoken in poetry before—we had gone beyond a point of no return.... None of us wanted to go back to the... silence, to the intellective void—to the land without poetry.... We wanted voice and we wanted vision" (1982, 12–13).

The Beat sensibility articulated by Ginsberg seemed to offer the means to break out of the cultural enclosure, out of the "closed room" described by Goodman and into a dimension unrecognized in Marcuse's analysis. It is easy to underestimate, decades later, the difficulty of this and the desperation that propelled it. Brossard puts it this way: "Their task—experienced, really, as an aesthetic/moral obligation—was to create a new sensibility and a new language... with which to illuminate the existential crisis of the postwar American in conflict with his society's 'values' which, at best, seemed hypocritical and useless, and, at worst, positively demented" (1987, 8). The emphasis on language is a recurring one, an indication of the need to redefine the world in order to bring about the eventual renewal that Kerouac's garbage pail images point toward. The sources of this new language were not likely to be found in middle America, but in the various wrinkles and folds of the postwar cultural fabric not yet smoothed out by the homogenizing power of modernity.

Anatole Broyard, in a 1948 article on the hipster phenomenon, argued that because he was "opposed in race or feeling to those who owned the machinery of recognition" and thus defined legitimate space, "the hipster was really *nowhere*.... [but] longed, from the very beginning, to be *somewhere*." Anticipating Kerouac's "rubbish womb," Broyard writes that this alienated desire for a habitable space somewhere resulted in "the birth of a philosophy... of *somewhereness* called *jive*" (721). The search for a new and authentic space is closely related to the recurring American impulse to found an identity on the bedrock of the naked self, free of compromising cultural and historical accretions, an Adamic desire for an experience of freedom, integrity, and authenticity generally unavailable within conventional culture. This desire, attested to frequently not only in Beat writing but throughout American literature, is nonetheless inevitably mediated by the social taxonomies and cultural codes that have structured the prior experience of the questing subject. Because culture and history cannot really be swept away, the ideal of free habitable space must to some degree include—albeit in negative—traces of the unfree and uninhabitable space to be left behind. And the establishment of a social space, at least temporarily habitable, requires the presence of social structures of some form—language, conventions, rituals, a mythology and so on—alternative structures Rabbit and Holden are not able to locate.

In contrast to the quests of such solitary figures, the somewhere sought by the Beats was predicated on a subcultural rather than an individual walking away. Even early on, these explorers of hip had a sense of a larger social movement transcending individual alienation and bringing about a new collective space: One of the first published essays on the Beats, John Clellon Holmes's 1952 "This Is the Beat Generation," begins with a teenage dope smoker claiming to be "part of a whole new culture" (10). A few years later, the sense of collective experience was still emerging: Diane di Prima recalls the situation before and after the publication of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl":

> As far as we knew, there was only a small handful of us—perhaps forty or fifty in the city—who knew what we knew: who raced about in Levis and work shirts, made art, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardization of the black argot. We surmised that there might be another fifty living in San Francisco, and perhaps a hundred more scattered throughout the country... but our isolation was total and impenetrable, and we did not try to communicate with even this small handful of our confreres. (1988, 126)

This passage provides a clear description of the heterogeneous folds these small groups had come to inhabit, including references to a number of the cultural markers of distinction establishing their distance from the homogeneous middle. On one level, these criteria—wearing jeans, listening to jazz, and cultivating a distinctive language—seem trivial given the claims made for the cultural importance of the Beats. In fact, Marcuse dismissed them entirely, claiming that instead of generating "images of another way of life" they produced "freaks" (59) whose net effect was affirmation rather than negation of the status quo.

According to Bourdieu however, struggles over social identity, carried out through visible emblems or stigmata of distinction such as clothing or aesthetic taste are "struggles... to make people see and believe... to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definitions of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*" (221). What is at stake here—the making of a subculture—has less to do with any particular or arbitrary surface markers such as Levis than with the establishment of a heterogeneous space by means of a "social act of *diacrisis* which introduces... a decisive discontinuity in the natural continuity" of humanity. In the conformist 1950s, the Levis and work shirts, the art, the jazz, and the dope acted as diacritical markers accenting a separation from middle class identity and the cultural compromises it was believed to entail. The adoption of Beat slang, a hip language marking a very clear subcultural boundary, laid claim to aspects of African American difference—an important claim given the barrier that separated African America from the mainstream in pre-Civil Rights America. From the perspective of the center, the symptoms of Beat identity di Prima lists constitute an inventory of inverse symbolic capital: the appropriation of African American and working class emblems and stigmata associated with lower social ranks, and artistic positions which seemed calculated to fly in the face of common sense. Nonetheless, these were the means employed in the construction of a heterogeneous space outside the one-dimensionality Marcuse deplored.

Di Prima's first attendance at a reading of "Howl" functioned as a ritual of congregation, and she understood immediately the implications of this seminal work for the forging of a collective heterogeneous identity. On an evening of wine and beef stew with a group of friends, she was handed a new book by an unknown poet and she began to read. Ginsberg, she realized immediately, "had broken ground for all of us" (1988, 127). There can hardly be a clearer indication of heterogeneous, even heretical discourse than censorship, and, as its immediate seizure by the police indicates, the ground broken by Ginsberg was indeed a radical departure. This repression only kindled the imaginations of countless young people, of course, whose desire for a space outside caused them to be drawn irresistibly to this siren song of alienation. The appearance of "Howl"—both at the Six Gallery reading where it was first introduced and in its subsequent publication—marked the point at which the diverse subcultural folds began to merge into a much larger whole as countless readers imagined themselves "starving, hysterical naked," lost on "the negro streets at dawn," but among the "best minds of [their] generation." For di Prima and many others, it was a moment of recognition: "[I]f there was one Allen there must be more," she continues, "other people besides my few buddies... hiding out here and there as we were—and now, suddenly, about to speak out. For I sensed that Allen was only, could only be, the vanguard of a much larger thing.... I was about to meet my brothers and sisters" (1988, 127). For McClure, the effect was similar: The finding of a voice and a language constituted an attempt to move outside the postwar cultural enclosure. "[We knew] that a barrier had been broken, 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" (1982, 15). And as it turned out, all this did point to a new phenomenon, the establishment of heterogeneous space with a remarkable power whose apotheosis would not be reached for another fifteen years.

Given the turbulence of their personal lives, it would be unreasonable to argue that the Beats were particularly successful in locating secure and habitable heterogeneous spaces for themselves, but there is no doubt that their trajectory went beyond those of Holden and Rabbit. Nor is there any doubt about the significance of their collective walking away for American culture in subsequent decades as the momentum of dissent and protest gathered, challenging the conventions of both public and private life. While Kerouac alludes to a sense of possibility born from the garbage and dregs of the nation, di Prima confirms the birth of a national subculture rising from the depths of Ginsberg's epic of American alienation. The particular strategies employed in the construction of these heterogeneous folds, however, can only be understood in terms of the problems they were to solve.

II

Works such as C. Wright Mills's *White Collar*, William Whyte's *The Organization Man*, Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and, most importantly, David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* provided the most influential descriptions of the problem of postwar conformism. While the discussions of this new homogeneity were generally presented in terms of the "modern human condition," they nonetheless focused largely on the behavior patterns of a very particular group: middle-class white American men. The class aspect was guaranteed by the discourse's concentration on new bureaucratic conditions of white collar labor. And the new conformists tended to live in suburbs, more or less uniform housing developments erected for the white middle classes that were springing up around all the urban areas. Whiteness was guaranteed simply by the systemic racism of the era: For the vast majority of African Americans, for example, middle-class conformism was neither a threat nor an option. Finally, the individual agency thought to be in jeopardy had not usually been ascribed to women in any case since, as Barbara Ehrenreich has argued, they were considered by nature to be both dependent on men and more responsive to others (33–34).

For the most part, like the problem of modern conformism itself, rebellion was deemed to be "man's work" in this pre-feminist era and so, as Joyce Johnson writes, "we fell in love with men who were rebels.... We did not expect to be rebels all by ourselves.... Once we had found our male counterparts, we had too much blind faith to challenge the old male/female rules" (*Minor Characters*, xv). Traditional "woman's work" remained more or less uncompromised by modern conditions of white collar labor, argues the usually more insightful Goodman, and so women would continue to find fulfillment in child rearing as they always had. The problem would continue to plague men though because there was no longer enough traditional "man's work" to go around (17). In this discourse, the situation of women remained very much a secondary issue. Although the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was imminent, it was still possible simply to elide evidence of women's alienation or to blame it on modernity's erosion of traditional masculinity.

The male orientation of the Beats has often been commented on and in part this reflects the discourses in which it was formed. Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* deserves special attention as one of the catalysts of this discourse. While many aspects of his analysis seem questionable with the benefit of fifty years' hindsight, the book is remarkably insightful not just in its description of the new conformist character, but also in its enumeration of the heterogeneous social spaces remaining relatively unaffected by this new subjectivity. The exceptions comprised social groups who were, for a variety of reasons, outside the reach of the trend and, as a result, maintained what Raymond Williams might have called residual attitudes toward masculinity. Working class men, for example, were less affected: Riesman mentions "miners, lumberjacks, ranch hands, and some urban factory workers" whose "feeling of manly contempt for smooth or soft city ways" (34) is articulated in "their own cocky legends" of masculine heroes. Riesman notes that African Americans and Native peoples seem not yet to have evolved the traits produced by modern life and generally tend to preserve their "older character type" (33). Neither does the model extend to "southern rural groups, Negro and poor white" (32), to many "immigrants to America," or to "minority groups whose facial type or coloring is not approved of for managerial or professional positions" (32). However these exclusions from middle-class modernity were experienced by those who were marginalized by them, this non-synchronicity (to borrow a phrase from Ernst Bloch) opened spaces of possibility in the imaginations of those seeking alternatives.

It is not surprising that these residual spaces offered precisely the heterogeneous cultural folds that the disaffected Beats sought. Anatole Broyard, an African American who "passed" as white, noted the racial element in the hipster persona as did a number of others, most notoriously Norman Mailer, whose peculiar, but widely read analysis of the hipster, "The White Negro," provides a very clear example. Identifying the source of hip as African American, Mailer challenged America's white males to join a heterogeneous racial space of "white negroes." "One is Hip or one is Square," Mailer declares, "one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of the American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society" (313). American mythology once pointed to the western frontier wilderness but, as historian Fredrick Jackson Turner saw decades before—the sense of possibility that once resided there had long since vanished. Turner had defined the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (3) and Mailer relocates this boundary to the major American cities themselves, to the wilderness that, in the eyes of suburban whites, now existed at the urban center. Its natives were the African Americans who came to provide role models for displaced and alienated whites.

While Mailer portrays African American men as brutal psychopaths, not all white imagery manifested this particular form of stereotyping. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise, like Mailer, finds himself "wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough.... I wished I were... anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned." He blames his sense of emptiness on "white ambitions" and wishes he "could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (180). Kerouac's image of African America is as naive as Mailer's is malevolent, and both positions have been dismissed as ignorant of the actual living conditions of African Americans, if not outright racist. Many white readers however, reacting less to the portraits' accuracy than to the sense of possibility they evoked, responded positively to such images of heterogeneity. Notable instances of the adoption of African American culture by the Beats include not only the appropriation of language—which Mailer discusses at length—but also the valorization of jazz, especially bebop, which had been generally inaccessible to white audiences.

African American music had long provided white audiences with images of a zone of pleasure and excitement, risk and emotion, somewhat distanced from their own range of experience. As novelist Nelson Algren put it, "in Negro music, we heard the voices of men and women whose connection with life was still real" (Meltzer 241). By mid-century however, with the enormous popularity of swing and big band styles, white musicians and audiences had domesticated most jazz, narrowing its ability to establish that distance. The emergence of bebop in the 1940s marked a new departure in jazz: With its difficult harmonies, undanceable rhythms, complex solos and eccentric personalities, bebop seemed deliberately to refuse to charm mainstream audiences and consciously to resist popularization. While bebop was gradually assimilated into acceptability, in its early days it flaunted its divergence from the fundamental conventions of popular music and consequently attracted much smaller audiences, very few of whom were white. As Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) has pointed out, this inaccessibility was itself an important factor in attracting an alienated white audience. "The white beboppers of the forties were as removed from the society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice. The... whites who associated themselves with this Negro music identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice. [M]erely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist" (*Blues People* 188).

Jazz, with all the complex issues of race that inevitably shaped it, became a central and frequently discussed element in the emerging white nonconformist identity. Early in *On the Road*, for example, during a moment of loneliness and isolation, Kerouac's Sal Paradise makes clear the function of this music in binding together the subculture: "[A]s I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard" (14). The sense of imaginary bop community not only dispels his loneliness, it transforms the midnight urban "jungle" into a space of familiarity, transforms the vast continent into a backyard filled with friends, transforms dispersal and alienation into a unified mental and emotional space. Sometimes cited as the first Beat novel, John Clellon Holmes's *Go* relates this directly to the larger issues of identity: "In this modern jazz, they heard something rebel and nameless that spoke for them," he writes. "It was more than a music; it became an attitude toward life... a language and a costume" (161). The effect was the establishment of the "somewhere" that Broyard saw as the goal of the whole hip movement: Listening to the music of avant-garde African America, Holmes notes, these alienated young people "who had never belonged anywhere before, now felt somewhere at last" (161). While it is certainly true that, as jazz musician Anthony Braxton has stated, "bebop had to do with understanding the realness of black people's actual position in America" (Heble 39), the uses to which bebop was put extended beyond this to include a major and perhaps unintended contribution to the self-fashioning processes of alienated whites, whose knowledge of the actual position of African Americans was often quite limited.

If residual positions based on racial and class exclusions provided one set of heterogeneous spaces, a further category of exception essential to Beat self-fashioning is related to what Riesman, borrowing from Emile Durkheim, called the anomic: that is, the diversity of maladjusted individuals existing beyond—or perhaps beneath—the reach of conformity. "[R]anging from overt outlaws to 'catatonic' types who lack even the spark for living let alone for rebellion," writes Riesman, anomics "constitute a sizable number in America" (290). This category included a variety of eccentrics: drug addicts and transient carnies, homosexuals and fringe artists, criminals and visionaries, misfits of all kinds, and precisely the sort who influenced the formation of the Beat group once Allen Ginsberg, Lucien Carr and Jack Kerouac encountered William Burroughs and Herbert Huncke. Embodiments of Riesman's worst nightmare of anomia, inhabitants of subcultural folds already structured with the crucial elements of language and social conventions, these ambassadors from the marginal social spaces of homosexuality, drug addiction and petty crime presented the possibility of a clear exit from Goodman's "closed room." If African Americans provided a valuable model because the system refused them, anomics were valuable because the system was incapable of assimilating and using them. As Jameson puts it, "To be unique or grotesque, a cartoon figure, an obsessive, is also... not to be usable in efficient or instrumental ways" (101). Strategies of unusability potentially open the door of Goodman's closed room to a freer space, to another social dimension unacknowledged by Marcuse, to "a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed, and human beings grow wild like plants in a state of nature" (99).

It is important to emphasize the sense that these anomic spaces were valuable not solely as spaces of individual eccentricity, but more importantly as sites of reconstructed community. Few figures define anomia as clearly as Herbert Huncke, the man who introduced Burroughs to hard drugs and gave Kerouac the word "Beat." Huncke began at an early age "to drift away from what would have been termed my so-called normal background, my friends in the neighborhood, the nice bourgeois fellows and girls I'd gone to school with" (24–25). And he drifted until arriving in New York, at the subcultural shelter of a social fold populated by Times Square hustlers, prostitutes, addicts, thieves and "perverts." Taking up that seedy lifestyle himself, he comments, "It was the first place I'd found where I felt secure.... I felt as though I blended in" (41). This new sense of community, albeit a community of the social "dregs," to use Kerouac's term, was nonetheless a structured space, a specific fold in the cultural fabric that Huncke slotted into very comfortably. Although his narrative upsets the normal structures of middle class security and lumpenproletarian alienation, Huncke was hardly alone in this inversion.

Burroughs himself, whose trajectory from well-to-do respectable St. Louis to the sordid criminal underworld of Times Square is an exemplary anticonformist narrative, has described in *Junky* his own youthful struggle with conventional life: "I saw that there was no compromise possible with the group" he writes, "and I found myself a good deal alone" (xiii). Burroughs managed to locate some heterogeneous folds before long however: After an aimless and alienated adolescence, he encountered a group of "rich homosexuals" and began to develop a new orientation. It is significant that the experience Burroughs describes has less to do with sexual passion or freedom than with the discovery of community. The people themselves he describes as "jerks for the most part," but what he, like Huncke, discovered was more important: a subcultural alternative to the growing homogeneity of the American mainstream: "I saw a way of life, a vocabulary, references, a whole symbol system, as the sociologists say" (xiii). Similarly, for Burroughs and countless others since, the demimonde of drug addiction offered another structured space, anomic and alienated, but internally coherent and habitable: "Junk is not a kick," writes Burroughs, "It is a way of life" (xvi). As a way of life, junky culture provided a social space structured with rituals, vocabulary, legendary heroes, and so on. As one hip 1963 observer commented, junkies are "the most securely self-assured in-group...with the possible exception of homosexuals" (Jones, *Blues People* 201).

Both of Jones's examples—homosexuality and drug addiction—raise the issue of vocabulary and language as an essential component of heterogeneous collective space, a point also made by Broyard and di Prima, Brossard and Bourdieu. Not coincidentally, then, this centrifugal flight entailed, as a basic aspect of the self-fashioning process, an absorption of the vocabularies of marginalized cultures and subcultures that had developed distinctive dialects both as a way of speaking their own truth and of distinguishing those within community boundaries from those outside. Exiles from the center without visible markers of distinction such as skin color, for example, could rely on coded subcultural language to attest to their outsider position. Of the hipster slang he absorbed from Huncke and others, Kerouac writes: "It was a new language, actually spade (Negro) jargon, but you soon learned it" ("Origins" 60).

In fact, language is of concern in one of the earliest analyses of bohemianism: Henri Murger, describing mid–nineteenth-century Paris, observed that "[B]ohemians speak amongst themselves a special language... a slang intelligent, though unintelligible to those who have not its key" (xliii). This exclusive language was an aspect of Beat culture as well, just as it had been of other bohemian cultures, and in this case the "key" came from some of the lowest social groups these white males could choose to emulate.

Absorbing the coordinates of a different language can entail much more than a superficial use of jargon: "We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories," writes M. M. Bakhtin, "but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view" (271). This new hybrid and centrifugal language provided an avenue not simply for self-expression, then, but also for self-fashioning. Hettie Jones recalls that the Beats were attempting "to burst wide open... the image of what could (rightly) be said" (46) and in doing so, they were both challenging existing ideologies and attempting to bring new, more exploratory ways of thinking into being. As Broyard put it, the function of this language was "to re-edit the world with new definitions... jive definitions" (721), a point confirmed by legendary hipster and jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow, who abandoned white culture in order to live as African American. "Jive," Mezzrow observed, "is not only a strange linguistic mixture of dream and deed; it's a whole new attitude towards life" (220). A number of books included passages written in the hip style, and some—including Mezzrow's autobiographical *Really the Blues*, William Burroughs's *Junky* and Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians*—even provide a glossary explaining the vocabulary for square readers. The presence of these translations serves a double function: While the glossary renders more accessible the language of the alienated subculture, it also—conversely—stresses the distance from the dominant language and the difficulty of crossing that divide.

Americans alienated from the mainstream and seeking to fashion spaces of possibility outside conformism's closed room looked, naturally enough, to those "alien" groups who—for reasons of race or class for instance—had never gained entry to the system. With Riesman's catalogue of exceptions—the racial, the economic, and the anomic—we begin to see mapped out the constellation of marginalized groups that would provide models for this fold in the cultural fabric. Bohemian collectivity was not created *ex nihilo*, but, like the heterogeneous languages with which it re-edited the world, was put together as a bricolage of elements of those alien, excluded, even despised communities existing outside the white middle-class mainstream. Herbert Gold, whose 1956 novel *The Man Who Was Not With It*, is written in a hip style, describes the language as a combination of "the street lingo of various lower depths" (viii–ix). If this is the raw material of the language, it is no less so the raw material of Beat identity in general: African American, Asian and Native cultures, "perverts," drug addicts, carnie workers, and hoboes provided aspects of language, style, and culture allowing alienated Americans to fashion a heterogeneous space distanced from the center.

The effect of this move was to create a new, albeit unstable, sense of community. Beyond this, as Dick Hebdige points out in *Subculture,* such resistance may challenge the inevitability of the dominant culture (89), and this movement did pressure the commonsense underwriting the growing homogeneity. In the postwar period, the Beat movement became one focal point for the exploration of a complex set of cultural constraints, resistances, and desires as a claustrophobic conformity, frequently described in the literature and social commentary of the period, led to an unusual willingness to investigate various folds of heterogeneity that persisted in the increasingly uniform fabric of American modernity. While this essay has focused on the early moments in this trajectory, and thus on the residual and anomic social elements, a number of other areas of heterogeneous experience became important as the movement grew. The influence of Gary Snyder, for instance, brought to the fore alternative religious and environmental perspectives whose long-term effect on American culture is still vital. And the convergence of Beat sensibilities with the emerging political awareness of the New Left led to the unique forms of radicalism and dissent that characterized the later 1960s and early 1970s. It is important to remember, however, the centrifugal force underlying the moment of insight into the folds of American heterogeneity that Kerouac articulated prior to this when, in *On the Road,* Sal Paradise announces, "rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation" (54).