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Beat Consumption: The Challenge to Consumerism in Beat Literature

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*Critics of the Beat generation, from their contemporaries to the present day, often contend that the Beats' opposition to consumer culture was superficial. Writers like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs failed, according to these critics, to present a coherent and principled response to consumerism. This paper, however, argues that while in many ways the Beats continued to participate in consumer culture, they developed a distinct form of consumption—Beat consumption—which attempted to regain sovereignty for the Beat consumer. Through an analysis of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* and *On the Road* as well as several of Ginsberg's seminal works, Beat consumption emerges as a significant concept in the Beat generation's opposition to the status quo. Though the subsequent cultural revolution of the 1960s produced more radical and clearly articulated critiques of consumerism, the struggle of Beats and Beat writers to reclaim commodities and the act of consuming for their own counterculture was not a failed attempt but a first step.*

Readers of Beat Generation literature often perceive in it a common spirit of nonconformity, arguably the most recognizable shared characteristic of Beat writings and the main ingredient of the Beat identity. Early on, Beats like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Lucien Carr developed what they called “the New Vision” to channel this spirit of nonconformity into artistic and literary activity. Though it was “practically impossible to define,” the New Vision was, according to Carr, an attempt “to find values . . . that were valid” by pursuing one’s social, spiritual, sexual, and creative interests independently from the oppressive dominant culture (qtd. in *Charters* xviii). But what exactly was this dominant culture to which the Beat Generation held itself in opposition?

Critics such as Barbara Ehrenreich, Lizabeth Cohen, and A. Johnston argue that the Beats stood in opposition to consumer culture, specifically the consumer culture of the American 1950s. But many, including some of these same critics, have argued that the Beats’ opposition to consumer culture lacked an articulated ideology and thus resulted in

unprincipled rebellious behavior, such as accumulating speeding tickets while criticizing the capitalist system which produced their cars, or competing for acceptance within their alternative social circles while criticizing this same phenomenon as it manifested in suburban conformity.

This interpretation of Beat culture, though valid in some contexts, fails to account for the radical assault on post-war consumer culture that the Beat Generation represented, an assault which, as Johnston puts it, “cleared the ground for the more efficiently publicized ideas of the 1960s” including subsequent critiques of consumerism (104). The Beats may have continued to consume despite their opposition to consumer culture, but they developed a distinctly Beat form of consumption. Beat consumption was thus an attempt to assert their sovereignty as consumers in opposition to both the conformity associated with consumer society, and the very concept of objects as commodities.

In her book *The Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich asserts that the work of Beat writers presented “the first all-out critique of American consumer culture” (52). Consumer culture, however, was not an abstract phenomenon that was unintelligible to mainstream America. It was, according to Lizabeth Cohen, the dominant vision of average Americans who “after World War II saw their nation as the model for the world of a society committed to mass consumption and what were assumed to be its far-reaching benefits” (7). Cohen points to *Life* magazine articles of the post-war period as representative of the optimism with which Americans accepted the emerging consumer economy. “As each family refurbished its hearth after a decade and a half of depression and war,” Cohen writes, paraphrasing a 1947 *Life* article, “the expanded consumer demand would stoke the fires of production, creating new jobs and, in turn, new markets. Mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility designed to provide ‘full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation.’” (113). According to Cohen, this was the dominant discourse of the post-war period, though counter-cultural movements, beginning with “the Beats in the 1950s ... developed identities based on a rejection of mainstream culture built around mass consumption” (113, 11).

Critics have contended that the Beat Generation was more concerned with romanticizing their own withdrawal from consumer society than with theorizing and criticizing the economic and political system that made it possible. Allan Johnston writes that “Beat culture by its very nature lacked the theoretical and social underpinnings to develop the clarified economic or political oppositional stances that appeared in the 1960s.” No writings from the Beat Generation, for example, resembled the articulated political stance of the 1962 Port Huron statement of the Students for a Democratic Society. Citing critic Paul Goodman, Johnston characterizes this “very nature” of the Beat Generation as a commitment to “action, not reflection or comment” (Johnston 104). Kerouac’s *On the Road*, for example, tells the story of several of the most influential Beats, who have either dropped out of or never attended college, forsaking the so-called intellectual sphere in order to pursue personal experiences. They do not identify with any political ideology, and neither the author nor his characters explicitly discuss the possibility that their lifestyle could affect social change.

In this sense, critics like Johnston and Goodman aptly describe the difference between the Beat generation and the 1960s counterculture as a question of the coherence of articulated ideologies, and yet they often overstate the Beats’ naiveté. Johnston’s claim that “[o]nly in retrospect, if at all, did the Beats see their lifestyle ... as a reaction against a seemingly aggressive and stifling social ethos” hardly accounts for the writing of Kerouac

and Ginsberg.¹ These writers may have been less thorough in articulating an ideological response to consumer culture than did the social movements of the 1960s, but they were keen observers of its manifestations and very consciously opposed to it. The Beats were clearly aware of the system of production and consumption that on the production side was demanding ever more alienating work and on the consumption side was threatening individual expression.

In his novel *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac describes a “middle-class non-identity,” his clearest vision of the conformity inherent to consumerism that the Beat generation was attempting to oppose:

[T]he middle-class non-identity ... usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness (39)

The “rows of well-to-do houses” were the hallmark of the suburban landscape that had begun to emerge after World War II. The identical houses arranged in rows, the land standardized into lawns, and the “television sets in each living room” attested that conformity had become an American value. This conformity was not imposed by government regulation, however, but resulted from a consumer economy in which “well-to-do” did not mean distinguished but rather indistinguishable. Kerouac’s description of “everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time” is the very definition of conformity and is directly associated with the television, a new popular commodity which was also, according to Cohen, “a beckoning new frontier for advertising,” contributing to the creation of a society of mass consumption (Cohen 302).

Later in the *The Dharma Bums*, Japhy clarifies the position that the Dharma Bums take against the “middle-class non-identity” associated with consumer culture. Prophesying a “rucksack revolution,” Japhy has a vision of

Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume. (97)

One can see in Ray’s and Japhy’s statements a recognition of the most contentious characteristic of consumer society. Such a society evaluates a person based on his or her role as a producer and consumer, but in such a way that convinces consumers that consumption is the “privilege” of a free person and is thus inherently good. As a result, a culture of passive consumers has emerged in which consumers are unwittingly “imprisoned in a system” of consumerism by a created desire for “all that crap they didn’t really want” and by the need to contribute to production (earning an income) in order to consume.

It is important that Kerouac uses the term “middle-class non-identity” to refer to the most obvious outgrowths of consumer culture. “Non-identity” implies that since consumerism depends on the proliferation of artificial needs created by the superstructure of consumer society, the identities of participants in the system are not authentic. The identity

of a Dharma Bum, and by extension the Beats in general, is therefore formulated as “authentic” in contrast to the “middle-class non-identity” which for the Beats is the logical outcome of consumerism.

If Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* describes the new consumer landscape, then Ginsberg’s “My Alba” describes the new workplace. In this poem, Ginsberg speaks of having “wasted / five years in Manhattan” working in a “serious business industry” (1-2, 20). The poem is awash with images of an alienating, post-industrial labor that supports the apparatuses of mass consumption (e.g. advertising, finance, and investment) rather than the production of real goods and services: “sliderule and number / machine on a desk / autographed triplicate / synopsis and taxes / obedient prompt” (7-11). The only mention of a product of labor is the brief image of “deodorant battleships” (19). The poem clearly associates “unhappy labor” with American consumer culture, a system in which the consumption of cheap goods was, in the context of the cold war, literally defended by the threat of battleships.

For all their disgust, though, Beat writers such as Kerouac, Ginsberg, and William Burroughs show in their work a deep familiarity with American consumer culture. This includes a felt connection and attraction to the products of American factories which offer them a romantic engagement in the American natural and social landscape. The most obvious example of this is the automobile, a product of the American assembly lines which makes possible both the sprawling, car-dependent landscape of suburbia and, paradoxically, the Beat adventures described in *On the Road*. We find in Beat writing an attraction to commodities as sources of potential experience and the means of establishing an identity, and to this extent Beat attitudes toward consumption resemble the attitudes of consumer society. This contradiction in Beat writing, though, should not be read as a mark of hypocrisy but rather as an expression of an ongoing conflict between burgeoning post-war American capitalism and what the Beats saw as authentic American values. For the Beats, consumption—the act of buying goods for personal use²—was not yet indistinguishable from consumerism, the “active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and pre-packaged experiences,” to use R. Boccock’s definition (50). Beat consumption, consequently, was anti-consumerist in that it reflected the Beats’ disenchantment with capitalism, positing a concept of authenticity that challenged the prevailing “economy of symbolic or cultural goods ... aligned sympathetically with Capitalism’s fundamental objective” (Lee 18). Though Beat consumption arguably failed as an anti-consumerist tactic, giving way to the more direct political actions and experiments in radical autonomy of the 1960s, it nonetheless represents an important early critique of post-war American consumerism and a radical opposition to the conformism of consumer culture.

It is perhaps in Kerouac’s novels where the ethic of anti-consumerist consumption is most clearly at work. In both *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac’s narrator frames his story around a subversive hero of the Beat generation: Dean Moriarty in *On the Road* and Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*. In both novels, the somewhat less charismatic narrator admiringly establishes the hero’s identity, paying significant attention to the hero’s possessions, or perhaps more accurately, the objects with which he comes in contact. Emphasizing the way in which the Beat heroes purchase and use objects, Kerouac expresses the energy and enthusiasm with which the Beats approached consumption while at the same time demonstrating their opposition to consumerism.

In *The Dharma Bums*, published in 1958, Kerouac tells the story of his adventures in Buddhism, criticizing American consumer culture more explicitly than he had in *On the Road*, which had been published just the year before. In *The Dharma Bums*, the narrator

Ray Smith intends to emulate the Beat hero of the story, Japhy Ryder (who is based on the Beat poet and friend of Kerouac, Gary Snyder), by escaping society to practice Buddhism. The term “Dharma Bum” refers to this lifestyle—clearly an avatar of the Beat lifestyle—in which one becomes a vagabond in pursuit of a spiritual enlightenment which is usually, though not necessarily, Buddhist in nature (thus the Buddhist term “dharma”).

Lacking the survival equipment which would make this adventure possible, Ray has Japhy help him pick out the right “Dharma Bum” equipment. Chapter 14 of *The Dharma Bums* is essentially a description of three Dharma Bums going shopping, an activity not only common to consumer culture, but central to it. As such, it serves as a clear example of Beat consumption, through which the Beats reproduce certain consumer behaviors while maintaining an oppositional stance to consumerism.

The shopping episode begins with a statement of Ray’s intentions: “I wanted to get me a full pack complete with everything necessary to sleep, shelter, eat, cook, in fact a regular kitchen and bedroom right on my back, and go off somewhere and find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind” (105). There is a certain enthusiasm in his choice of the words “everything necessary” rather than “only what is necessary,” suggesting abundance in an attempt to attain simplicity.

This opening declaration of intentions exposes the essential contradiction of a Buddhist shopping excursion. Ray plans to put “a regular kitchen and bedroom right on my back” and then retreat into the wilderness to “find perfect solitude and look into the perfect emptiness of my mind.” Solitude and emptiness, however, would seem to be undermined by the “kitchen and bedroom” on his back. This creates a dissonance which permeates the shopping experience and signals the unusual nature of the Beats’ form of consumption.

As Dharma Bums, Japhy and Ray are certainly not typical consumers, and their shopping spree obviously does not reflect the “middle-class non-identity” of the suburban. Still, their approach to shopping conforms in many ways to predictable shopping behavior. First of all, Ray’s reason for shopping reflects the stereotype of the “consumer as explorer” who in Alan Aldridge’s definition is “driven by insatiable curiosity ... on a quest for new experiences” (11). New experience is indisputably valuable in Beat culture, and in this shopping episode, Kerouac presents commodities as facilitators for experience. Ray reflects dreamily on his ambition “to be in some riverbottom somewhere, or in a desert, or in mountains, or in some hut in Mexico,” and to “look into the perfect emptiness of my mind and be completely neutral from any and all ideas,” and reveals that, while shopping, “I had all this in mind” (105). In other words Ray’s consumption is directly motivated by his desire for new experiences.

Like the ideal consumer, the Dharma Bums are also bargain hunters. They compare prices and exact pleasure from finding good deals. Ray consistently announces the price of his purchases with a certain amount of pride: he buys flannel shirts “at fifty cents a crack,” and “a nice little canvas jacket with zipper for ninety cents” (106). One can find echoes of this sort of listing of cheap prices throughout Beat literature, especially prices in the cent range. *On the Road* is sprinkled with receipts for clothing and food such as “beautiful steaks for forty-eight cents” (301). Ginsberg’s poem “Havana” employs the same motif: “Cuba Libre 20c,” “catfish sandwich / with onions and red sauce / 20c” (2, 46-8). According to capitalist-consumerist theory, one of the roles of an astute consumer is to pursue low prices, encouraging competition among producers and distributors and thereby contributing to the free-market economy. The Dharma Bums’ search for good deals is thus not intrinsically exterior to the role of a consumer. As I will demonstrate later, however, the appearance of low prices in Beat literature signifies much more than a bargain.

Ray and Japhy also assume the stereotype of “consumer as identity-seeker” (Aldridge 11). The establishment of an identity is the ultimate form of self-expression in Beat culture. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac builds Japhy’s character by providing abundant descriptions of Japhy’s possessions. In the first description of Japhy’s dwelling, Ray pays close attention to how Japhy’s clothes and other possessions reveal his strong identity as a Dharma Bum. He describes Japhy’s “shack,” his straw mats filling in for furniture, his orange crates of books, his “Japanese wooden pata shoes, which he never used,” and finally an inventory of his clothing including six categories such as jeans and turtlenecks. Within these descriptions, Ray associates Japhy’s things with his identity, referring to Japhy’s backpack as “his famous rucksack” and describing Japhy’s possessions generally as “typical Japhy appurtenances that showed his belief in the simple monastic life.” Ray’s use of the words “typical” and “famous” here suggests that his unique “appurtenances,” and unique combination thereof, embody his unique identity.

In admiration of Japhy’s identity, Ray asks him for guidance in “outfitting” for the Dharma Bum lifestyle. At the “huge” Army Navy store in Oakland, Japhy and Ray sort through “all kinds of equipment, including Morley’s famous air mattress, water cans, flashlights, tents, rifles, canteens, rubber boots . . . out of which Japhy and I found a lot of useful little things for bhikkus” (Kerouac, *DB* 106). Ray and Japhy’s task as identity-seekers is to select, from among a disorienting amount of products, those which reflect the identity of a “bhikku,” the wandering holy man in Japanese Zen tradition on which the Dharma Bum identity is partially based.

In their capacities as consumers-as-identity-seekers, the Dharma Bum shoppers are not equal. Morley is a failed identity-seeker and perhaps a failed Dharma Bum, a failure which is symbolically associated with his “famous air mattress.” Earlier in the novel, when the three friends climb a mountain together, Morley annoys both Japhy and Ray by his poor choices in camping equipment. “We sighed when we saw the huge amounts of junk he wanted to take on the climb,” says Ray, “even canned goods, and besides his rubber air mattress a whole lot of pickax whatnot equipment we’d really never need” (40). Japhy explains to Morley that canned goods are “just a lot of water you have to lug on your back,” asserting his superior experience as a mountain climber and therefore his authority on the identity of a Dharma Bum. Despite protests, though, Morley declares “I’m bringing my air mattress, you guys can sleep on that hard cold ground if you want but I’m going to have pneumatic aid besides I went and spend sixteen dollars on it in the wilderness of Oakland Army Navy stores” (40). Morley’s decision proves to be naïve however when they discover that he has forgotten his sleeping bag. Consequently, the other two hikers are forced to share their bags and forfeit their night of sleep which they were “all ready to enjoy . . . so much” (48). Ray concludes the episode accusing Morley of being “the only mountain-climbermountain climber in the history of the world who forgot to bring his sleeping bag” (49). Morley’s consumer choice—spending sixteen dollars for “pneumatic aid” and other impractical equipment—reflects poorly on his identity as a Dharma Bum.³

This event, which establishes Morley’s and Japhy’s contrasting identities as Dharma Bums and abilities as consumers, foreshadows the shopping excursion where Morley’s air mattress reappears. In this scene, Ray has employed Japhy to teach him “all about how to pack rucksacks” and to take him around “outfitting me with full pack,” successfully avoiding the symbols of a failed Dharma Bum—e.g. Morley’s mattress—to find the “useful little things for bhikkus (55, ,104). Consequently, Ray is the ideal consumer as identity-seeker because he models his acquisition of goods on the identity of Japhy, “the number one Dharma Bum of them all” (9).

Thus far the presentation of Beat consumption might seem to accuse the Beats of buying into consumerism. But consumption, though radically changed by the rise of consumerism after World War II, preceded the existence of consumerism as an ideology. Identity creation and the pursuit of experience through the acquisition of goods, after all, were not introduced with the advent of post-war mass markets. Beat consumption diverged from and opposed consumerism in that it was an attempt to navigate back to an authentic form of consumption, liberated from the authoritarian culture of conformity and materialism inherent in consumerism.

If, during their shopping experience, the Dharma Bums act as consumers, their form of consumption ultimately opposes—however incompletely—the consumer culture of the post-war era. Though Japhy, Ray, and Morley’s shopping experience mimics some of the behaviors common to consumerism, it nevertheless resists it by asserting a value system opposite to the values of consumer society, and by reappropriating commodities for the Beats by symbolically stripping them of their commodity-value.

In his book *Capturing the Beat Moment*, Erik Mortenson writes of a similar relationship between Beat culture and consumer culture in Kerouac’s novels. Mortenson analyzes the Beats’ relationship to regimented time in *On the Road* which the Beats generally see as working to enforce productivity for the benefit of the capitalist system. Describing Dean Moriarty’s opposition to capitalist conceptions of time, Mortenson calls our attention to “the detail to which Dean plans out his actions,” a kind of planning which is unexpectedly “consistent with an inauthentic notion of temporality.” In other words, Dean’s strict scheduling of his time replicates the very notion of time favored by the dominant consumer culture, and which he theoretically opposes. Mortenson argues, however, that “[r]ather than contribute to the American economy, Dean uses time to serve his own ends ... Time does not employ Dean—he employs time” (30). This analysis demonstrates how the Beats often used the same means as dominant culture to arrive at very different ends.

Just like strictly regimented time, shopping is an activity normally associated with consumer culture that the Beats made their own. One of the more straightforward ways in which Beat consumption diverges from consumer culture is that the Beat consumer remains independent of the system of production and consumption. The Beats used many strategies of consumption to resist what Japhy describes as the process of becoming “imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume” (97). They do this most radically, for example, by purchasing the tools of self-sufficiency, as in the case of Japhy and Ray’s outfitting themselves for a retreat from civilization. In effect, they purchase commodities that reduce their dependency on commodities. But usually the Beats did not attempt to retreat from civilization entirely and consequently developed strategies of maintaining independence while still in the territory of consumerism. These strategies included the practice of thrift (e.g. consuming second-hand goods), and that of pursuing intellectual distance from the system through *flânerie*.

The practice of thrift, a common strategy of bohemian culture, allowed the Beats a certain degree of independence from consumerism. Cheap goods have the advantage of meeting needs or facilitating experiences without demanding that the Beat “work for the privilege of consuming.” In other words the Beat consumes only that which he or she can afford to consume without sacrificing time to alienating work for the sake of consumption. This is another explanation for Ginsberg and Kerouac’s attentiveness to cheap prices: it is an indication of the number of days of freedom they had before they would need to find work again in order to pay for their living expenses. The Beats are bargain hunters not

because they believe in the function of competition in a free market, but because they seek independence from a corrupting system. The less they spend, the less they must participate in production.

Of course there were differences of opinion among the Beats about the degree of self-sufficiency and independence from consumer society one could attain. Allan Johnston argues that a dialectic arose between the “East Coast” and the “West Coast” Beats where the East Coast Beats (such as the younger Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs) subscribed to a “need-focused, secular vision of economic realities;” and the West Coast Beats (like Gary Snyder) offered a “spiritualized attempt to escape from economic realities” (104). But both camps were aware of the dangers of the system of production and consumption that was increasing its influence on American society. The father of the East Coast Beats, William Burroughs, offers a discouraging vision of a perfect consumer society: the world of opiates. For Burroughs, opiates and similarly addictive drugs represent the “perfect product” because the addicted client cannot refuse it and “will crawl through the sewer and beg to buy” (xxxix). Critics like Johnston have shown how Burroughs used the drug market as a way to explain “the inevitable decadence resulting from systems of supply and demand” and to explain how consumers, because of their addiction to commodities, became trapped in such a system (Johnston 109).

In response, the Beat attitude was to remain aloof from consumer culture by assuming an intellectual and artistic distance, and by remaining as economically independent as possible. Burroughs famously took up opiate use out of intellectual curiosity about the world of Times Square hustlers and the effects of addiction (Miles 63-4). Furthermore, much of the Beats’ interest in shopping was neither a response to advertising nor an expression of desire for commodities, but rather part of their artistic fascination with the new world that was developing before them. In this respect, the Beats’ played the role of the *flâneur*. Originating in Parisian bohemian culture of the nineteenth-century, a culture on which Ginsberg and Kerouac consciously modeled their own lifestyle, the term *flâneur* refers to the “playful and transgressive figure’ who strolls through the urban scene dispassionately gazing at the commodities on display” (Aldridge 94). In this way, the Beats used artistic interest to remain liberated from the consumerist system while still remaining close enough to observe.

In his “A Supermarket in California,” for example, Ginsberg compares his stroll through a modern supermarket with Walt Whitman’s joyous and omnivorous vision of nineteenth-century America. Addressing Whitman, Ginsberg writes:

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! (1-2)

Ginsberg goes to the supermarket as a poet shopping for images. Here he finds contemporary America—the raw material for his poetry—and in this respect he willfully enters consumer spaces from sheer fascination with the world he lives in and lives to discover. The poet-narrator cannot assimilate to the world of the supermarket, however, and by the end of the poem he leaves, nostalgic for Whitman’s America which no longer exists.

As Aldridge points out, however, much debate has surrounded the *flâneur*’s role in consumerism. Is the *flâneur* a rebel and a threat to consumerism, or just another form of the co-opted consumer? Is the *flâneur* truly detached, or really “in thrall to commodities” like

other consumers? Most theories of the 19th century *flâneur* confirm a true independence from consumerism. Aldridge writes, “The notion of ‘play’ is critical: the playful *flâneur* is in control. He bends the world to his will, extracting self-determined pleasure from it” (98). This could not be more apparent in Ginsberg’s “Supermarket,” in which he writes, “We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier” (7). In an almost overt reference to the arcades (or corridors) of Rimbaud’s nineteenth-century Paris, the two *flâneurs* of Ginsberg’s poem determine their own appreciation of the abundance and variety of commodities in the supermarket without ever “passing the cashier,” or submitting to the will of their consumer context.

Like Ginsberg’s poet-narrator, Kerouac’s Dharma Bums remain aloof from their consumer context. Characteristically for Kerouac’s narrators, Ray remains insecure about his relationship to consumption until he achieves epiphany with the help of his mentor, Japhy. Ray says,

We were all hung-up on colored undershirts, just a minute after walking across the street in the clean morning sun Japhy’d said, ‘You know, the earth is a fresh planet, why worry about anything?’ (which is true) now we were foraging with bemused countenances among all kinds of dusty old bins. (*Dharma* 106)

Although the Dharma Bums find themselves temporarily “hung up” by consumer anxieties, Japhy reformulates the shopping experience from a Buddhist perspective. This new perspective provides Ray with the intellectual distance needed to act as a *flâneur* rather than as a consumer. The resultant “bemused countenances” signifies aloofness and is used earlier in the novel to explain how the ascetical Japhy has managed to purchase all of his clothes: “Japhy’s clothes were all old hand-me-downs bought secondhand with a bemused and happy expression in Goodwill and Salvation Army stores” (18). This precise combination of “bemused” and “happy” connotes a state somewhere between stupefaction and aloof contentment. Japhy and Ray are stupefied and amused by the variety of commodities, but not “hung-up” on the outcome.

The world of nineteenth-century Paris is not the same world as Ginsberg and Kerouac’s post-war America, however. More recent theories of *flânerie* attempt to account for this difference, often without optimism that the postmodern *flâneur* can achieve true independence from consumerism. According to Aldridge, postmodern *flânerie* “has been expropriated by consumer capitalism so that the postmodern *flâneur* is no more than a seduced consumer” (98-9). In other words, consumerism has gained (and had gained by the time Ginsberg was writing) such a grip on all the factors of American life, that detachment ultimately means passive consent. The playful *flâneur* can no longer assert his or her will simply by not “passing the cashier” because consumerism has become an accepted political ideology which can only be challenged through active resistance. Thus we arrive again at the heart of the criticism of the Beat generation: the playful pursuit of one’s own pleasures, while subversive, nonetheless lacks the coherence and strength to oppose the infiltration of consumerist values into all categories of modern life.

Ginsberg’s “Supermarket,” however, is not simply the celebration of *flânerie* in an age of consumerism. In keeping with one of the central devices of Beat literature, Ginsberg uses the *flâneur* as a poetic persona through which he takes a more active stand against consumer culture. “Supermarket” includes subtle ironies to challenge the romantic understanding of *flânerie* as the self-determined enjoyment of a system one opposes. The poet-narrator strolls down the aisles with the imagined figure of Walt Whitman, tasting

artichokes and possessing “every frozen delicacy,” neither of which have any flavor before preparation. A symbol of the bourgeois diet, the artichoke has very little substance in relation to its price and lends to the reader of the poem not vicarious enjoyment but a taste of the poem’s criticism of the supermarket. Despite the narrator’s exuberant attempt at appreciating the images of the supermarket *au flâneur*, he finds modern American consumerism to be lacking taste and substance.

Indeed, by the conclusion of the poem, the poet-narrator’s veneer of enthusiasm for the images in the supermarket has worn away, and, as critic Thomas Merrill remarks, “[d]espair and nostalgia seem the two alternatives” (67). Ginsberg’s poem despairs for the new America where the unnatural lights are on at night in the “neon fruit supermarket” but the “lights [are] out in the houses.” These are symptoms of a consumer society in which neon lights promote consumption, but outside of consumer spaces human life is conspicuously absent. As a result, the poem expresses nostalgia for Whitman’s “lost America of love” where, in absence of consumer culture, love was not threatened by the artificialities of “neon fruit” and “frozen delicacies” (11).

Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s approach to consumption gives them an intellectual and economic distance from consumer society where they can develop their own values and their own notions of authenticity. Drawing on the tradition of *flânerie* and the benefits of thrift, the Beats imagined a world in which the consumer could maintain a certain degree of autonomy and freedom from the system of “work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume.” Admitting the human need to consume, however, the Beats recognized the impossibility of escape from certain economic realities. Even Beat advocates of self-sufficiency, such as Gary Snyder, conceded that one must participate in capitalism at least insofar as it would allow one to buy food and find place to live. For the most part, however, the Beats consumed goods in order to facilitate experiences, and they were aware of how their consumption necessarily created an identity. Given these economic and social “realities,” the Beats developed a kind of anti-consumerist consumption that reflected their anti-consumerist values. The experiences they sought were “authentic” rather than commodified experiences, which they achieved through a transformation of value-loaded commodities into goods that could be used against consumerism.

For the Beats, consumption is inescapable because desire is natural to humanity. In fact, they saw the consumerist ethic as a suppression of authentic desires which were being replaced with artificial desires. In *The Dharma Bums*, Japhy states “I distrust . . . any kinda philosophy that puts down sex.” For him, the desire for sex is a “real human value,” not something to be repressed, and he accuses the dominant culture of promoting “all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper gray censorship of all our real human values” (31). For Japhy, “real human values” and desires have been replaced with a desire for “all that dumb white machinery in the kitchen” and the “junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage” (102). In other words, Americans were being taught to displace their desire for the natural and “free” pleasures, like sex, onto commodities with no real value, but which demanded participation in the capitalist system.

The consumption of food raises interesting questions for the Beats since eating is an authentic form of consumption which loses its authenticity in a culture of commodities. Hunger and the act of eating when approached with honesty and authenticity, therefore, become transgressive acts in Beat literature. In *The Dharma Bums*, Japhy, Ray, and Morley descend to the nearest town after having climbed a mountain and eat “a raving great dinner.” Ray describes the voluptuous meal in detail, but it is the mountain climbers’ hunger which takes center stage: “We were so honestly hungry it wasn’t funny and it was honest”

(93). The desire to eat is characterized by authentic desire, stripped of all the frivolity of created desire down to the essential relationship between animal and food. Stating that the need for food “wasn’t funny” asserts that at this fundamental level, consumption is not a matter of the enjoyment or entertainment associated with consumer culture. The characters’ hunger is “honest” in this scene because it represents the biological necessity to consume, not a need created by an economic system. The Beats thus succeed in avoiding the inauthenticities of the capitalist system, which creates needs in order to perpetuate the system of consumerism.

The status of food consumption as the antithesis of consumerism is made clearer when, in the same novel, Ray praises his hero Japhy for his unusual concern for food:

Japhy was always so dead serious about food, and I wished the whole world was dead serious about food instead of silly rockets and machines and explosives using everybody’s food money to blow their heads off anyway. (217)

Once again, the consumption of food is not just a “serious” activity, but also a positive and even constructive form of consumption. Japhy’s prioritizing of food contrasts with the priorities of the state to which the Dharma Bums are opposed—the industry of war. What Kerouac seems to be alluding to here is the lack of interest in food caused by both the overabundance of cheap, mass-market food, and the overshadowing of food by the interests of the state in the Cold War arms race. Thus, a return to a “dead serious” interest in food becomes an oppositional move on the part of the Beat generation because it reconnects them with basic human needs.

It is therefore according to this exaltation of basic human needs that the Beats develop their notions of authenticity. This, in turn, provides a rubric for distinguishing Beat consumption from consumerism. Beyond authentic desire stemming from basic human needs, however, there is a notion central to Beat culture of the “authentic” experience. Like authentic desire, authentic experience is rooted in human nature, or that which is fundamental to the individual in contrast to the conventions and decorum of modern American society. The Beats were aspiring to a “New Vision” which involved a kind of transcendentalist faith in the possibilities of personal insight, challenging received values and ideas with self-discovered ones. What made this kind of discovery possible was authentic experience, which often involved challenging oneself physically, intellectually, and emotionally to the point of suffering in order to attain glimpses of truth or moments of epiphany. In this way, authentic experience was opposite to commodified experience, since all experience promised by advertisement was inherently received experience and therefore not authentic.

Most often, authentic experience did not involve the use of appurtenances. Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Neal Cassidy’s famous all-night, psychologically probing chats were not dependent on or facilitated by any commodity. But some authentic experiences were not so independent from the capitalist system. Road trips, the Beats’ preferred path to authentic experience, involved the use of automobiles and the perpetual purchase of gasoline. In such cases, notions of authentic experience quite obviously came in contact with commodified experience, and this use of commodities to pursue authentic experience presented a paradox. Commodities can only provide commodified experiences because the experience promised by the producer has been conceived by the producer. The commodified experience represents the values of the consumer system rather than those of the Beat who buys the commodity, and thus the act of purchasing a commodity is an act of submission to consumerism. On the subject of consumerism in post-war America, Stuart Ewen writes

that “to produce one’s own world was subversive (except where it was legitimized by the ‘do-it-yourself’ industry)” (211). This illustrates the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of consumer conformity: on the one hand American consumers were encouraged to pursue self-interest and to create their own world through consumer freedom which challenged the supposed communist suppression of consumer choice; but on the other hand, the “increased commodification of existence at all levels,” as theorized by the Frankfurt School, ensured that all experience was pre-empted and informed by the industries that sold it to the consumers (Johnston 106).

The challenge for the Beats—especially the East Coast Beats who believed themselves to be subjected to certain economic realities—was to use the products of American assembly lines in such a way that the experience they attained represented authentic rather than commodified experience. Beat consumption was thus an attempt to subvert the tyranny of the commodity by reforming the object in question to serve their own counter-cultural lifestyle. What this involved, in the context of ubiquitous commodification, was a stripping away of the object’s commodity status by reimagining its possibilities and significance or by physically altering the commodity to assert symbolic authority over it.

For the Beats, some goods were already stripped of commodity status. This was the world of second-hand goods, e.g. Kerouac’s Goodwills and the “wilderness of Oakland Army Navy stores” (*Dharma* 40). The use of the word “wilderness” to describe this kind of second-hand store shows the distinction Kerouac made between these stores and department stores. Second-hand goods are more akin to the raw materials of the wilderness than to the commodities sold in department stores because their meaning is not produced and enforced by a world of advertising and consumer illusion. Like the Beats themselves, the second-hand store is marginal, lying outside of the grasp of the consumer value structure. In these spaces, one finds objects which have already been “washed and mended” and eventually relinquished by their former owners whom Ray, from *The Dharma Bums*, imagines to be “all the old bums in the Skid Row universe” (106). This image, though a playfully hyperbolic representation of second-hand markets, shows Ray’s intent to remain outside the capitalist value system. In Ray’s formulation of Beat consumption, the Dharma Bums are even lower on the consumption chain than the “Skid Row universe” and are proud to be there, because at this level the department-store luster of the commodity has worn off and one is left with something closer to a pre-consumerist good.

It is significant, therefore, that the Dharma Bums did not go looking for their sleeping bags and hiking boots at a department store. In his poem “Afternoon Seattle,” Ginsberg describes “department stores full of fur coats and camping equipment” outside which stand “mad noontime businessmen in gabardine coats talking on streetcorners to keep up the structure” (13). For Ginsberg, the image of the department store represents a consumer space in which the Beats are *flâneurs*, not consumers. In these mainstream consumer spaces, camping equipment is shelved next to fur coats whose use-value as insulation is secondary to its value as an indication of wealth and fashion. The camping equipment thus reflects the same subjugation of use-value to commodity-value as the fur coats and consequently does not offer an authentic experience. Marginal consumer spaces like Goodwill and Army Navy stores, in contrast, offer a viable alternative to department stores, for in these second-hand realms the tyranny of commodification is not absolute.

While the second-hand market does much of the work of de-commodification for the Beats, no amount of washing and mending can completely remove the consumerist values associated with commodities. The Beat consumer himself must wring the commodity-value out of the product through a process of repurposing. A good illustration of this can

be found, once again, in the Dharma Bums' shopping excursion. At the Army-Navy store, Ray purchases military survival equipment such as a sleeping bag and a nylon poncho, but with a completely different intent than that for which the items were manufactured. Ray purchases this equipment in order to "go off somewhere" and "pray for all living creatures," which he claims is "the only decent activity left in the world." This re-purposing of second-hand military equipment represents the assertion of Ray's will as a Beat consumer by symbolically transforming the competitive survival of the soldier into the peaceful survival of the wandering bum. Whereas the soldier's survival, in the context of the cold war, is a symbol of the survival of capitalism over communism, the survival of the wandering bum is an image of stubborn non-participation in the capitalist system.⁴

For the Beat consumers, it was the reclamation of the automobile that presented one of the greatest challenges—as well as one of the greatest thrills. Hailed as the symbol of American capitalist freedom, the car sat in virtually every suburban driveway after World War II. In fact, the proliferation of the car after the war made suburbanization possible, becoming "an all-out necessity for a suburbanized culture with a corporately engineered predisposition against mass transport" (Ewen 210). One could now work in the city and live in a neighborhood not served by a city bus or streetcar. This led to larger house sizes, increased private land ownership, and fewer shared facilities, and was the context in which modern consumerism developed.

As a key to the new consumer lifestyle, the car was more than the preferred form of transportation. It was a status symbol, representing the successful suburban family which paraded its prosperity around town or on Sunday drives through the country. The Beats were quite conscious that the automobile was intimately associated with the "middle-class non-identity;" but because of the automobile's unparalleled potential for individual mobility in the pursuit of authentic experience, it was central to Beat culture as well. Thus, the battle between the Beats and consumer America for symbolic appropriation of goods was largely fought on four wheels.

The Beats understood that the car was a commodity and in many ways represented consumer society. In *On the Road*, Kerouac observes the link between middle-class conformity and the car: "Every night he drove to work in his '35 Ford, punched the clock exactly on time, and sat down at the rolltop desk" (66). The car is used as an image of conformity as well in Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California," when the poet-narrator strolls, "[d]reaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways." When Japhy, in *The Dharma Bums* lists "all that crap they [i.e. consumer America] didn't really want anyway" he puts cars in with all the other domestic items "such as refrigerators, TV sets, ... certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk" (97).

Japhy qualifies his inclusion of cars in the list of consumerist symbols, however. "At least new fancy cars," he adds, evidencing the Beats ambivalence about what the automobile represented and who had symbolic purchase on this American symbol (97). The car, after all, is central to the narrative of *On the Road*, allowing Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, "hunched over the wheel," to perform "our one noble function of the time, *move*" (133). The car was a key to authentic experience because it presented the Beats with the possibility of leaving the familiar at great speeds. In their "search for authenticity," writes Rachel Ligairi, the Beats' instinct is to "get moving in order to avoid the stasis of the era's social conformity" (144). The car takes on such importance in Beat literature that Kerouac considers the future of America with the following question: "Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" (99). In this formulation, the car is the vehicle for the diverging futures of America, the Beats in one car and the status quo in another.

The Beats, therefore, were involved in a struggle to bend the commodified car to their own will as Beat consumers. Ginsberg devotes his 136-line poem "The Green Automobile" to enumerating the many authentic experiences the Beat car could deliver, thus illustrating the great gap between the "blue cars parked in driveways" of suburban homes and the Beat automobile ("Supermarket" 11). With an intense irrational energy that contrasts with the passivity of the suburban commuter, the Beat hero of the poem would "jump screaming at the wheel" to "pilgrimage to the highest mount" with a true freedom and mobility that exists within consumer culture only as an illusion ("Green" 11, 13). The Beat car is ideally a transgressive force that the Beats can use to threaten consumer culture. In Ginsberg's poem, the recklessness of the Beat car is imagined to be a deadly threat to the status quo: "Then we go driving drunk on boulevards / where armies march and still parade / staggering under the invisible / banner of Reality" (69-72).

Reclaiming the commodity car for Beat culture, however, did not involve a simple tug-of-war between two competing visions of the car with the commodity car on one side and the Beat car on the other. At the same time that the commodity car represented the "middle-class non-identity," it was also widely marketed as a sex symbol, offering the young consumer a symbolic extension of his or her virility and power and a "getaway space" for sexual encounters (Ewen 211). This image of the car appealed quite well to Beats like Neal Cassidy, who famously took full advantage of the car's potential to attract women. Fictionalized as Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*, Cassidy's character, while driving a chartered Cadillac, exclaims, "Ah, man, what a dreamboat.... Think if you and I had a car like this what we could do.... Yes! And girls! We can pick up girls, in fact, Sal, I've decided to make extra-special fast time so we can have an entire evening to cut around in this thing" (230). The car was a sex symbol, not to mention a symbol of many other values that appealed to the Beats such as adventure and rugged individualism. In response, the Beats struggled to reclaim the car not simply by using it differently than most Americans, but by reasserting their sovereignty over the car-as-image and the car-as-object so that the car was at least symbolically under their control.

It is not, therefore, the ends to which the Beats employ the car that represents the Beat car's biggest challenge to consumerism, but rather the relationship they have to the car as an object. As with other commodities, the Beats reassert their sovereignty over the car-as-object so that it is no longer a commodity in the sense that a commodity enforces the values of the system which produced it. The Beat consumer, by owning or using a Beat car, is therefore not a consumer in thrall to consumerism.

For Ginsberg, this was done by claiming the automobile for the Beat imagination. Ginsberg's "Green Automobile" is actually not an object at all, but something like the platonic form of a car, distinguished with capital letters; it is an automobile "which I have invented / imagined and visioned / on the roads of the world" (42-4). The Beat car is not a product of assembly lines, but rather a product of the Beat imagination; not a commodity but rather a poetic concept. The irony is that commodification involves just that: the transformation of a physical object into a symbol in order to increase desire for and dependence on the object. But Ginsberg's Green Automobile originates "purely" in Ginsberg's imagination, rather than in a car commercial, for example, and therefore the significance of the automobile is reappropriated for Beat culture. The process of commodification, then, cannot be used as a technique to force consumerist ideology on the driver of a Beat car, because the Beat is in control of what it symbolizes.

The true Beat car belongs wholly to the Beat imagination. Since the physical car, however, was indeed manufactured in a capitalist system for other purposes than what the Beats had in mind, its physical existence had to be degraded by the Beats in order to reclaim what it represented. Just like the Beats themselves, it had to be “beat.” Reshaping the consumer car into a Beat car had a primarily symbolic purpose, and the process of transforming the car involved its physical destruction. In *On the Road*, shortly after Dean buys his famous ’49 Hudson, Sal remarks that “the heater was not working... The radio was not working. It was a brand new car bought five days ago, and already it was broken” (116). The car was starting to resemble Dean, in other words. But it is not simply the over-stressing of the car’s “one noble function,” to move, that subjects the new Hudson to the Beat ethic: “Dean beat drums on the dashboard till a great sag developed in it; I did too. The poor Hudson... was receiving her beating” (134). By beating the car with their fists, Sal and Dean destroy the newness of the car, that which links it to the world of consumerism, thereby transforming it into a Beat car. It is not simple disregard for the condition of the car that inspires them to break it down, but rather the will to beat out its inauthenticities in the same way that they intend to beat out their own.

In another episode from *On the Road*, a wealthy “Chicago baron” pays Sal and Dean to drive his Cadillac limousine from Denver to the owner’s home in Chicago. The night before they are to return it to its owner, however, Dean and Sal “rushed out in the Cadillac and tried to pick up girls all up and down Chicago”:

In his mad frenzy Dean backed up smack on hydrants and tittered maniacally. By nine o’clock the car was an utter wreck; the brakes weren’t working any more; the fenders were stove in; the rods were rattling.... It had paid the price of the night. It was a muddy boot and no longer a shiny limousine. (241)

When Dean and Sal return it to the “Chicago baron” who lives “in a swank apartment with an enormous garage,” it is no longer the baron’s “shiny limousine,” but Dean’s “muddy boot.” The car is therefore Dean’s creation, transformed by his Beat-ing to such an extent that the baron’s mechanic does not even recognize it. Not only is this destruction of the car a direct challenge to its wealthy owner, who “lived out on Lake Shore Drive in a swank apartment” but it is part of a larger symbolic battle as well (242). The transformation of the car begins with the consumerist car—the car of the baron’s family vacation as well as the symbol of his wealth—and replaces it with the Beat car—a disposable tool for authentic experience and for transgressions against dominant culture. By the time they return the car, it is destroyed physically. Symbolically, however, it has been won for the Beats.

The Beats were not critical of consumer society “only in hindsight.” In fact, they offered a copious and fairly coherent critique of consumerism’s destruction of individual freedoms, especially its destruction of authentic self-expression. In addition to distancing themselves economically and intellectually from the system of production and consumption, one of the solutions they presented in response to the tyranny of the commodity was Beat consumption, or the taking back of consumption for their own radical values, out of the grasp of the ideology of consumerism.

Were they successful? The Beats certainly dealt meaningful blows to the culture of conformity that defined post-war consumerism. Kerouac, one might say, transformed the way Americans think about cars to this day. But therein lies the shortcoming of Beat

consumption. Rather than threatening consumerism, Dean's Hudson, with the popularity of Kerouac's novels, became a valuable advertisement for the car industry, fueling the success of the car-as-commodity. The Beat Generation, and especially Kerouac, failed to anticipate the consumerism of the post-modern era, in which even the most authentic desires and expressions of identity are associated with commodities and commodified experiences.

A decade later, theorists like Herbert Marcuse began to argue that counter-culture could easily be tolerated by, and even useful to, a system as supple and ubiquitous as post-modern consumerism. Beat consumption was a symbolic threat to post-war consumerism, and perhaps even won an important battle by helping dismantle post-war conservative values. But as society became more liberal and desire flooded the open market, no desire could pose a threat to consumerism so long as it resulted in a market transaction. What did the Ford Motor Company care what the Beats did with their cars as long as they bought them? Commodification could not be fought, then, by reappropriating the values of the commodity. In an inescapable system of supply and demand, the freedom to pursue personal desire is not liberation from consumerism.

The Beat Generation gave way to the 1960s counter-culture, which in turn passed into history. Yet despite the many critiques of consumerism and the many solutions offered since then, the beginning of the twenty-first century faces a form of consumerism so advanced and so complex that we may find ourselves feeling nostalgic for the relatively simple and enumerable commodities of 1950s America: Dean's 1949 Hudson, the small suburban homes, the telephones still connected to the wall. Because of consumerism's infiltration of all aspects of modern society, today's counter-cultures rarely seek to oppose consumerism.

Perhaps this is why the Beat generation continues to fascinate us: we want autonomy without having to give up on the things that help us build our identities, that give us pleasure, and that perhaps even provide us with authentic experiences. We have bought into the idea that authenticity can be extracted from commodities because we do not want to admit that our deepest desires and our most personal identities have been anticipated by the consumerist superstructure. This subjugation, after all, must only be true for those who live in "rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time" while we, on the other hand, determine our own values and our own fates. We are still caught in the romantic, yet perhaps impossible, struggle of Beat consumption.

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Endnotes

- 1 In fact, Johnston goes on to qualify this part of his thesis and show that Beats such as Kenneth Rexroth, William Burroughs, and Gary Snyder were quite vocal about their theorizations of American capitalist culture.
- 2 Concise Oxford English Dictionary
- 3 Perhaps this is why Kerouac names this character "Morley" or "More + ly," because he fails to understand the Beat consumer value of simplicity.
- 4 The wandering bum was a central hero of the Beat Generation for it was in this figure that the communitarian spirit of the Great Depression survived unchanged in post-war America.

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